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THE CLUSTER GROUPING HANDBOOK

>>>Revised & Updated Edition

How to Challenge Gifted Students and Improve Achievement for All

A SCHOOLWIDE MODEL

> Definitive guide to planning, implementing, and evaluating

> A wealth of teacher-tested classroom strategies

> Complete professional development plans

Dina Brulles, Ph.D.
Susan Winebrenner, M.S.
Foreword by Scott J. Peters, Ph.D.

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Some of the information, strategies, and forms in part 2, along with information on students who are twice-exceptional (pages 58–61), are based on material in *Teaching Gifted Kids in the Regular Classroom* by Susan Winebrenner (Minneapolis: Free Spirit Publishing, 2018) and *Teaching Kids with Learning Difficulties in Today's Classroom* (Minneapolis: Free Spirit Publishing, 2014), and are adapted with permission of the publisher.

Material on Depth of Knowledge in chapter 6 is adapted from pages 112–115 and page 139 of *A Teacher's Guide to Flexible Grouping and Collaborative Learning* by Dina Brulles and Karen L. Brown (Minneapolis: Free Spirit Publishing, 2018) and is adapted with permission of the publisher.

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Introduction

The field of education in the United States is coming to the end of decades of reserving advanced learning opportunities only for students who have proven, through some district measure, that they are able to understand material that was designed for older learners. Educators in the United States now realize that the ways in which they have taught gifted students in the past can benefit many other students as well. The current thinking is that rigor must be woven into the majority of school experiences for all students for as much of the time as possible. There is new emphasis on problem-solving in all curricular areas and availability of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) and science, technology, engineering, art, and mathematics (STEAM) experiences for all students. More rigorous standards and learning experiences for all students are becoming the norm.

Dr. Jonathan Plucker, gifted education scholar at Johns Hopkins University, applauds the creation of more rigorous, internationally competitive standards in the United States. He explains that when a "low bar" is used to gauge successful student achievement, gifted students might not experience the rigor they need, and their access to appropriate instructional adjustments may be limited. Plucker says that differentiation strategies must be available to students for whom the learning tasks are not sufficiently challenging (Plucker 2015).

In other words, standards-based learning is not automatically challenging enough for gifted learners, and it may not be challenging enough for other learners either. The National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC) recommends the following interventions with any standards-based curriculum:

1. Provide pathways to accelerate standards-based learning for gifted learners.
2. Provide examples of differentiated task models to address specific standards.
3. Create interdisciplinary product opportunities to elevate learning and address multiple standards from various subject areas simultaneously.

We strongly support increasing access to truly challenging learning experiences not only for gifted learners, but also for students who may not have a history of high achievement. This book will help educators stop worrying about which students are truly gifted and instead concentrate on making all learning opportunities available for all students who can benefit from interacting with them. Any option in this book should be available to any student in any class who can demonstrate readiness for more rigorous learning. Students can, perhaps with some adjustments in the presentation of the material, be successful with the compacted and differentiated teaching techniques that have made this book so popular with the teachers and parents of gifted students.

Consider offering all students the opportunity to grow from where they are, not from where your teacher training courses say students should be. You will not harm a student by offering opportunities to complete more advanced work. Informally assessing all students to determine their entry levels into upcoming standards is just good teaching (Davidson Institute, accessed 2019). You will likely encounter students who are mildly, moderately, or profoundly gifted, and you will discover what instructional methods are most effective for varying levels of gifted ability.

A Note from the Authors About This Update

For this revised and updated edition of *The Cluster Grouping Handbook*, we have refreshed its content for a new age of required standards focused on depth and rigor. Cluster grouping used with gifted-education techniques can benefit not only students formally identified as gifted, but all students. In this second edition, we include updated information on the following topics:

› grouping variations in the SCGM

› building a school culture that supports the SCGM

› using Bloom's Revised Taxonomy to create tiered lessons

› differentiating instruction by developing depth and complexity through the Depth of Knowledge (DOK) framework

› providing ongoing professional training through gifted-cluster coaching, developing a gifted resource site, and using social media

› communicating through cluster-teacher email groups and gifted parent newsletters

› the office's role in monitoring teachers' professional growth

› analyzing achievement data and evaluating programs in the SCGM

Why Meet the Learning Needs of High-Ability Students?

On a day-to-day basis, the highest-ability students usually receive the least amount of their teachers' time. Because of their high test scores and grades, these students are expected to make it on their own or with a minimal amount of guidance.

The inequity of this situation, and what can be lost as a result, is strikingly illustrated by a bell curve showing the percentages of students at different ability levels. The bell curve may create unease among some educators, but we use it for one purpose only: to demonstrate that the learning needs of students at both ends of the learning continuum are identical.

Examine the bell curve in **figure 1**. To teach a class of students, effective teachers usually plan the content, pacing, and quantity of instruction based on what is known about typical students of the age and grade for that class. In a mixed-ability classroom, these are the students in the middle of a heterogeneous group—the students of average abilities on the bell curve. In this same classroom, there are some students who come to the grade level missing many of the basic understandings that typically would have been acquired in earlier grades. These are the students to the left on the bell curve. A third group of students are also part of this classroom: those who are ahead of their grade-level peers in what they know and can do. These are the students to the right on the bell curve.

When teachers discover struggling students in their class—those left of average on the bell curve—they make instant adjustments to their teaching methods. They may slow the pace a bit. They may lessen the amount of work for some students. They may change the methods they use to accommodate the learning styles of struggling students. They may change the way in which they interact with the students and pair them with partners who can work well with them. They may adjust the content to reinforce prerequisite concepts not learned in earlier grades.

Teachers make these necessary adjustments because the students' learning needs *differ from the average.* Now imagine folding the bell curve in half, left to right. You will see clearly that gifted students are as far removed from average on the right side of the curve as are struggling students on the left side. This fact alone provides a clear justification for the same intervention to accommodate their needs—an adjustment of pacing, content, workload, and approach to teaching

FIGURE 1 **Percentages of Students at Different Ability Levels (Based on IQ Scores)**

AVERAGE

| 2.5% | 13.5% | 34% | 34% | 13.5% | 2.5% |

| 55 | 70 | 85 | 100 | 115 | 130 | 145 |
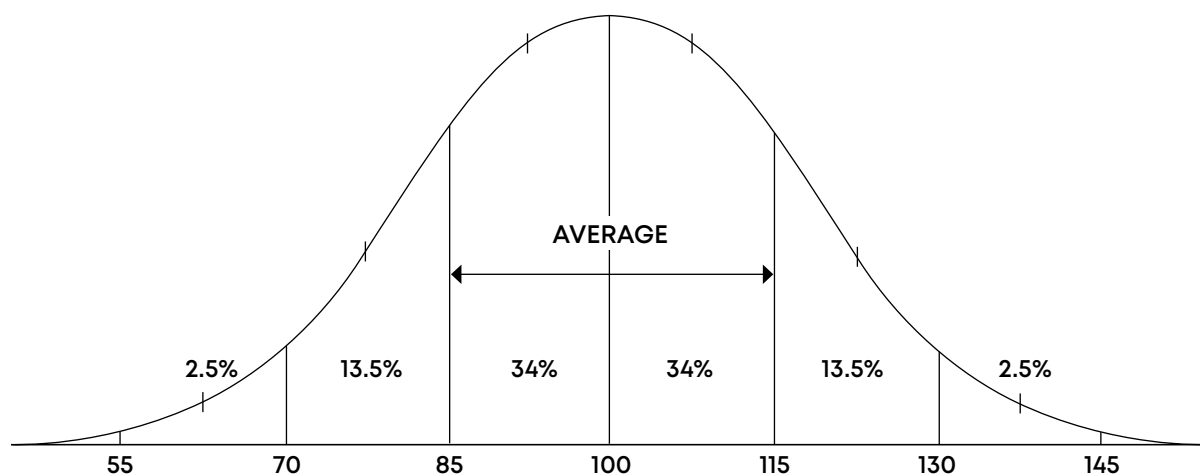
and learning. Gifted students need a faster pace, less practice with grade-level standards, an understanding of their independent work style, a teacher who is comfortable acting as a guide and coach, and opportunities to work with partners who have similar learning ability, style, interests, and preferences. They need this not because they are gifted, but because they are *not average.*

Grade-level standards describe what typical students should be able to learn at a certain age. When we accept the fact that gifted children are able to learn at levels that exceed their chronological age expectations, we immediately understand why grade-level standards must be adjusted for them. We do this because gifted students, like students who struggle to meet the standards, diverge from the norm.

Meeting the Needs of All Students: The Schoolwide Cluster Grouping Model (SCGM)

This book presents a unique approach to help schools meet the needs of all students, including those who are gifted. It is called the Schoolwide Cluster Grouping Model (SCGM). The practice of

cluster grouping students has become the most commonly used method for serving gifted students throughout the country. This has occurred most likely because the method can provide full-time academic services to gifted students without major budget implications, and it has the potential to raise achievement for all students in the grade levels that are clustered.

With the SCGM, educators group gifted students into classrooms based on their abilities, while placing all other students according to their achievement levels. Cluster grouping with the SCGM is different from other cluster grouping methods because the SCGM carefully structures classroom compositions with two main goals: (1) to ensure a balance of abilities throughout the grade level *without returning to the practice of tracking* and (2) to reduce the learning range found in each classroom.

Figure 2 on page 4 shows an example of how these two goals can be accomplished by dividing the students at a given grade level into five groups. (For a more detailed explanation of forming clusters and placing them in classrooms, see chapter 1.) In the chart, Group 1 are the identified gifted students, who will be clustered together. Group 2 are high-achieving students who are not gifted but are very capable learners. These students will be clustered and placed in the classes that do not

have the gifted cluster. (Clustering gifted students and high-achieving students not identified as gifted in separate classrooms is a key component of the SCGM that has been shown to expand academic growth for both groups.) Group 3 are students with average* academic performance. These are students who typically perform at grade level. Group 4 are students whose performance is below average. These are students who typically perform below grade level. Group 5 are students who produce work that falls considerably below grade-level expectations, or those with significant learning challenges. Students who are identified as twice-exceptional—those who are gifted and also have a learning challenge—are placed in Group 1. So are identified gifted students who are not fluent in English. As shown in figure 2, typical gifted-cluster classrooms will include students from Groups 1, 3, and 4; the other classrooms at the grade level will include students from Groups 2, 3, 4, and 5. Ideally, no classroom will include both gifted students *and* students who perform far below average, so the achievement range in all classrooms will be narrower than that of a randomly heterogeneous classroom.

How does this type of clustering differ from tracking? The two main differences are that, in the SCGM, all classes are heterogeneous, and they provide all students a varied curriculum. Teachers offer opportunities for moving faster or going deeper into the curriculum consistently to the entire class, which means there are times when some students in the gifted-cluster group (Group 1) will be experiencing differentiation and times when they won't. There are also times when students not identified as gifted can benefit from available differentiated learning opportunities.

This is different from a tracking system, in which all students are grouped by ability for much of the school day and are rarely exposed to learning experiences that extend their expected achievement ranges. In a tracking system, students are assigned a set curriculum based on their ability level, and they generally do not veer from that curriculum. With schoolwide cluster grouping, every class in the grade level has students with a range of learning abilities and achievement levels. In order to reach that range, teachers naturally have to modify or extend the grade-level standards.

In the SCGM described in this book, all classes have high-performing students. While one or two classes have a cluster of gifted students, all other classes have a cluster of high-achieving students who, while not identified as gifted, can easily serve as positive academic role models. In a cluster model, learning opportunities are open to all students in the class, and teachers use their students' entry points, or readiness, to determine levels and pace of curriculum. Teachers are

Classrooms	Group 1: Gifted	Group 2: High Achieving	Group 3: Average	Group 4: Below Average	Group 5: Far Below Average	Totals
A	6	0	12	12	0	30
B	0	6	12	6	6	30
C	0	6	12	6	6	30
Totals	6	12	36	24	12	90

FIGURE 2 **Example of Classroom Compositions for the SCGM (for a Single Grade Level)**

*The term *average* is relative and refers to what is average for a school's specific population.

trained in differentiation and curriculum compacting, students receive ongoing assessment, and the results of schoolwide cluster grouping are continually evaluated.

What the Research Says About Cluster Grouping

Research documenting the benefits of keeping gifted students together in their areas of greatest strength for at least part of the school day supports the philosophy behind schoolwide cluster grouping (Brulles 2005; Kulik and Kulik 1990; Rogers 2002; Pierce et al. 2010; Brulles, Cohn, and Saunders 2010). Moreover, the research suggests that all students, including those categorized as average and below average, thrive when placed in heterogeneous classes according to the guidelines of the model (Gentry 1999; Brulles 2005; Pierce et al. 2011; Brulles, Saunders, and Cohn 2010).

The SCGM is an inclusion model that integrates students with exceptional learning needs into mixed-ability classrooms and expects teachers to provide appropriate differentiation opportunities for any students who need them. An inclusion model has already been in use for many years as a method of providing special education services to students who have been identified as having exceptional educational needs. However, it is only when a class has a noticeable group of gifted students—a cluster—that teachers will be most likely to accommodate *their* exceptional educational needs. When there are only one or two gifted students in a class, teachers tend to assume the students are learning as long as they are getting high grades. As a result, teachers may minimize or overlook gifted students' need for expanded learning opportunities. Teachers are also likely to count on these students to help other students with their learning, a practice that robs gifted students of opportunities to move forward in academic areas.

Cluster grouping requires that teachers differentiate instruction. Differentiation occurs when teachers modify the curriculum and their instructional methods in response to the needs, strengths, learning styles, and interests of individual students so that *all* students have an opportunity to learn at their full potential. To be successful, the gifted-cluster teacher must have ongoing training in how to teach high-ability students in the cluster model (Winebrenner and Devlin 2001; Brulles 2005; Brulles, Saunders, and Cohn 2010). The SCGM creates a setting for providing appropriate instruction that is feasible for teachers and for enhancing the likelihood that differentiation will take place.

The SCGM: Who Benefits, and How?

The SCGM offers an educational approach that benefits all stakeholders in the school community — students, teachers, administrators, and parents. Grouping gifted children in a regular classroom can provide academic, social, and emotional advantages to the students and make teaching gifted students more manageable for teachers. Gifted students feel more comfortable when there are other students like them in the class. They are more likely to choose challenging tasks when they can do that work in the company of other students. Teachers attuned to differentiating instruction are more likely to provide appropriate learning opportunities for gifted students and for other students as well. The school is able to provide a full-time, cost-effective program for gifted students, since their learning needs are being met every day. Parents who are satisfied that their children are experiencing consistent challenge at school are more ready to work cooperatively with the school and the teachers and less likely to remove their children from their schools in search of a better option.

Benefits of the Schoolwide Cluster Grouping Model

› serving the learning needs of gifted students in a full-time program that delivers consistent curriculum compacting and differentiation opportunities without major budget implications

› grouping gifted students together in otherwise heterogeneous classes with a teacher who has special training in how to meet their unique learning needs

› facilitating the emergence of new academic leaders in classes that do not contain a gifted cluster

› providing another component to existing services available for gifted students in the school

› improving support to classroom teachers from special education and gifted support staff who have fewer teachers' schedules to work with

› improving student performance by communicating higher expectations for all students, by reducing the range of achievement and ability in all classes, and by providing staff development in gifted education for all teachers on staff

› increasing gifted-education opportunities for primary-grade gifted children, for gifted students who are not fluent in English, and for gifted students who may not be experiencing success in school

› increasing overall achievement at the grade levels that use cluster grouping

› raising expectations for all students by opening access to classroom opportunities historically reserved for identified gifted students only

› retaining families who may otherwise, as a result of feeling that their gifted children's needs are going unmet, choose to remove their children from the school and place them in a different school or provide homeschooling

Impact of the SCGM on Gifted Students

Gifted students who are clustered demonstrate high achievement because they experience more consistent challenge in their learning activities. Their scores on achievement tests show forward progress—rather than lost ground, as has been the case in some schools where gifted students are not placed in clusters or are not consistently challenged in other ways.

When gifted students are purposefully clustered in otherwise heterogeneous classes, rather than split up so that each class has one or two gifted students, teachers are much more likely to notice their learning needs. They also enjoy more attention to their social and emotional needs because of the specialized training the teachers receive.

Cluster grouping also makes it more likely that gifted kids will work to their full potential and take advantage of available differentiated learning opportunities, because they will have other students to work with on these advanced learning tasks. Having serious competition from other students like themselves, they begin to develop more realistic perceptions of their abilities and to better understand and accept their learning differences. With so many opportunities to work and learn together, gifted students become more comfortable working at extended levels of complexity and depth in a given subject or topic. Their willingness to take risks in learning experiences increases when they spend time with others who share the same interests, have similar abilities, and can also benefit from the available differentiation opportunities.

Impact of the SCGM on English Language Learners

Cluster grouping offers exciting opportunities for schools to meet the needs of gifted English language learners (ELL students). When gifted students are served only in a pull-out model, gifted students who are not proficient in English are

frequently kept out of gifted services because they cannot work at the same pace and level as the gifted students already proficient in English. With cluster grouping, extended learning opportunities are available in the regular classroom. When ELL students with high learning potential are present in classes that offer consistent challenge, they make faster progress attaining English fluency and academic achievement.

A significant increase in achievement in students of different ethnic groups can also be expected from using cluster grouping (Brulles 2005; Brulles, Saunders, and Cohn 2010). These findings result from classes in which teachers can be more focused and effective in their teaching. Another reason for the achievement gains is that gifted-education training required for gifted-cluster teachers helps teachers set high expectations for *all* students—and students respond positively to these high expectations.

Impact of the SCGM on All Students

Students at all ability levels benefit from the SCGM because in this model, teachers receive more training in how to differentiate the curriculum and the pacing for all types of students, placing learning success within the reach of all. In addition, the SCGM motivates gifted and high-achieving students to work more independently and allows them to spend more learning time on activities that interest and challenge them; this, in turn, opens up more time for teachers to spend with those who need additional assistance.

As teachers become more adept at recognizing giftedness in their students, the number of students they nominate for gifted testing increases yearly in schools that use the SCGM. This is especially noticeable in classes that do *not* have the gifted cluster, demonstrating the benefit of clustering high-achieving children who are *not* identified as gifted in separate classrooms. These classroom structures provide opportunities for the high-achieving students to thrive and emerge as new academic leaders.

Research shows that implementation of the SCGM allows for consistent and comparable levels of achievement growth among students who are not identified as gifted. A 2012 study showed similar achievement gains for general education students (those not identified as gifted) regardless of their placement in a gifted-cluster classroom or another class in the grade level (Brulles, Peters, and Saunders 2012). These results may be attributed to the fact that in the SCGM, classes have a slightly narrowed range of achievement and ability levels.

Achievement Advisory

The SCGM has the potential to significantly improve academic achievement for all students, including English language learners, students from diverse cultures, high-achieving students, and average and below-average learners. Several studies analyzing academic achievement of students in schools that use cluster grouping yield similar results. Marcia Gentry, Mary Rizza, and Steven Owen report statistically significant academic achievement gains in math and reading in a three-year longitudinal study for students in grades three through five (Gentry, Rizza, and Owen 2002). These findings are supported by the research of Dina Brulles, Rachel Saunders, and Sanford Cohn, who analyzed student achievement in mathematics for eleven subgroups at all ability levels in a diverse urban elementary school that used a comprehensive cluster grouping model (Brulles, Saunders, and Cohn 2010). The latter research showed statistically significant achievement gains in mathematics for students regardless of perceived ability levels, gender, ELL status, or ethnicity. Research conducted by Dina Brulles, Scott Peters, and Rachel Saunders shows comparable achievement gains for gifted and nongifted students in this model (Brulles, Peters, and Saunders 2012). (For more details from these studies, see chapter 8.)

Impact of the SCGM on Teachers

Student achievement is positively correlated with effective teaching. The SCGM allows teachers to be more effective because teachers are teaching classes with a smaller range of learning levels. The system provides opportunities for teachers to respond more readily to the needs of all their students, to challenge gifted students clustered together in mixed-ability classes, and to engage in practices that lead to improved academic achievement for students not identified as gifted working at or above grade level. As a result, over time with the SCGM, more students in a school are identified as high achievers and fewer as low achievers.

For a school that already has a pull-out program for gifted students, the cluster model makes scheduling out-of-class activities easier. The resource (pull-out) teacher has to work with only one or two classroom teachers' schedules per grade level instead of the schedules of all the teachers at a particular grade level. The gifted-cluster teacher, whose gifted students venture to another classroom for pull-out services, understands that while they are gone, students who remain should be experiencing activities that reinforce standards the gifted students have already mastered. Therefore, when the gifted students return from the pull-out program, they do not have any missed work to make up, and the teacher does not have additional planning and record keeping that typically comes with makeup work.

When the SCGM is implemented with the goal that all teachers will eventually receive the related staff development, over time it is possible to ensure that all teachers who wish to teach a classroom with a gifted cluster will have that opportunity. At the same time, teachers and students in all classrooms benefit from the teachers' facility with differentiating the curriculum to meet students' varied learning needs.

Impact of the SCGM on Administrators

Schools that use the SCGM find that they can still offer valuable services for their gifted students even with tight budgets or lack of political support. This helps administrators assure parents of gifted students that their children's learning needs will be served. Cluster grouping actually provides full-time placement and service for gifted students in the schools *without* the cost of creating and maintaining a separate gifted-education program. Gifted education becomes part of the school culture.

When schools take the time to implement the SCGM strategically, carefully planning the groups for cluster classrooms, training as many teachers as possible to implement gifted-education strategies, educating parents about how their children's school experience will be affected, and conducting ongoing student assessments and program evaluations, the result is a cohesive and budget-friendly schoolwide approach to gifted education that brings the school community together as it raises student achievement levels.

Impact of the SCGM on Parents

Providing a cluster grouping model announces to the community that the school is committed to recognizing and serving its gifted students and enhancing achievement opportunities for all students. As parents of gifted students come to understand how clustering affects their children's learning opportunities, they see that the school is providing full-time gifted services, that teachers are responding to their children's needs, and that their gifted children spend time learning with other students of similar ability. Parents of students *not* identified as gifted are also likely to appreciate the opportunities the clustering arrangements and differentiation strategies afford their children. When these parents become

familiar with the research that shows how the SCGM facilitates the emergence of new leaders in classes that do not have a gifted cluster, they may realize that, for the first time, their children have more opportunities to demonstrate academic leadership. Many students have had this very positive experience as a result of schoolwide cluster grouping.

About This Book and Digital Content

Directed toward administrators and teachers, *The Cluster Grouping Handbook* offers information that will be useful to other school personnel and to parents as well. The book contains precise descriptions of how to develop and maintain a Schoolwide Cluster Grouping Model, specific guidelines administrators and teachers can follow, and suggested criteria for analyzing the level of success of the model in schools. This book gives special attention to how schools can empower gifted English language learners and enfranchise them in gifted-education services. It also includes resources to help parents of gifted and high-achieving students find specific information that will improve their advocacy for the learning needs of their children. Examples throughout the book come from teachers the two authors have worked with, including many examples from the Paradise Valley School District in Arizona, where Dina Brulles works.

Placing gifted students into cluster groups within heterogeneous classes is only the beginning of the SCGM process. Educators must use effective teaching strategies for these students, and administrators must effectively supervise the students and teachers in the gifted clusters. How can schools construct and support the cluster model to serve the learning needs of gifted students effectively and improve achievement for other students as well? What are the critical components of a comprehensive cluster model? What

methods can teachers and administrators use to gauge the effectiveness of the SCGM? The mission of this book is to answer these questions.

The book is arranged in three parts:

Part 1: Implementing the Schoolwide Cluster Grouping Model (SCGM). Chapter 1 provides a summary of the SCGM along with detailed information on how to start and maintain a Schoolwide Cluster Grouping Model in your school, with special attention to forming the groups. Chapter 2 details suggestions for building and maintaining support for the SCGM. Chapter 3 presents and discusses both typical and atypical characteristics exhibited by gifted students and suggests specific strategies for identifying students for gifted-cluster groups. Chapter 4 focuses on factors to consider when staffing gifted-cluster classrooms; it also describes the roles and responsibilities of key gifted-education staff within the model.

Part 2: The SCGM in Action: How to Compact and Differentiate Curriculum for Advanced Learners. Part 2 will be especially helpful to classroom teachers. It consists of two chapters that explain and illustrate specific methods for compacting and differentiating the curriculum in order to challenge gifted learners appropriately. The chapters address strategies that will be effective when students have already mastered the curriculum (chapter 5) and when content is new (chapter 6).

Part 3: Sustaining the SCGM. Chapter 7 describes ongoing professional development plans for all staff members working in the SCGM. Chapter 8 offers information about ways to evaluate the model so it can be as effective as possible. It describes the kind of data schools will need to collect from the start of the school year, so educators may find it helpful to read this chapter as the SCGM is getting underway each year.

Throughout the book you will find highlighted information for special audiences and issues. "Supervisor Spotlight" sidebars offer administrators tips and reminders for generating and sustaining support for the SCGM and monitoring

how it is being implemented. "Achievement Advisory" sidebars hone in on ways the model can support academic progress for students. The book includes reproducible informational handouts and planning forms, often at the ends of corresponding chapters, and in the downloadable digital content. For information on how to access the digital content, see page PNT.

At the back of the book, you will find information for parents along with a listing of references and recommended books, organizations, websites, and other resources related to each chapter's topic. A glossary of terms related to education—particularly gifted education—is provided as well. Finally, in addition to the book's reproducible handouts, the digital content contains a PDF presentation useful for introducing and explaining the SCGM to the school community.

Let's get started!

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Implementing the Schoolwide Cluster Grouping Model (SCGM)

At the heart of the SCGM are three essential strategies:

- identifying and placing all students in heterogeneous classes that have a slightly narrowed range of student abilities

- ensuring that gifted students experience consistent curriculum compacting and differentiation opportunities

- providing appropriate professional development for staff

To put this model in place in a school or district involves a broad-based, nonlinear process. The four chapters in part 1 combine to lay the groundwork for this process. Chapter 1 details classroom structures and student placement. Chapter 2 describes a two-year timeline for implementing the SCGM. The timeline integrates identification, placement, and staffing with a plan for training teachers in the model and in differentiation strategies, for bringing parents on board, for implementing and maintaining the model over time, and for incorporating ongoing evaluation of how the model is supporting gifted students and raising overall student achievement. Identification of gifted students is the focus of chapter 3, along with information about gifted children's behavior and social and emotional needs. Chapter 4 presents three key staff positions for the model and provides information about selecting teachers for the gifted-cluster classrooms.

1

What Is the SCGM?
How Does It Work?

GUIDING QUESTIONS

› What are the components of the SCGM?

› Exactly how should students be grouped in classes to realize the benefits of schoolwide cluster grouping?

› How does the SCGM fit with other gifted-education services?

› How does it fit with other classroom inclusion models?

› Why are identified gifted students and high-achieving students not identified as gifted placed in different classrooms?

› What do parents need to know about the SCGM?

› How can school planners determine whether and when to initiate the SCGM?

Most educators choose careers in education because they care deeply about helping students learn and grow. In today's world, administrators and teachers alike face an almost overwhelming task to be accountable to students, to the communities they serve, and to the performance mandates in place through state and federal education legislation. All educators are acutely aware of the challenges entailed in balancing the needs of teaching the curriculum; reaching diverse learners below, at, and above the norm; and raising the overall rankings of the school as demonstrated in benchmark assessments. Can a model that focuses on gifted students really improve teaching and achievement levels for the broader student population? This chapter will help you understand the SCGM and the role it can play in bringing about this balance.

Overview of the SCGM

The effectiveness of the Schoolwide Cluster Grouping Model depends on the integration of five key components:

1. **Schoolwide implementation.** The SCGM involves the entire school community, including administrators, teachers, professional support staff, students, and parents.

2. **Placement of students.** With the SCGM, all students are grouped into clusters based on their ability and achievement level. The clusters are then placed in classrooms with carefully structured compositions to ensure a balance of abilities throughout each grade level and a learning range within each classroom that is narrower than in a typical heterogeneous classroom.

3. **Classroom strategies.** Teachers use differentiation methods that vary the content, pace, process, products, and learning environment for gifted students and for other students who also benefit from these opportunities. Ongoing assessment and identification of student strengths, abilities, and performance allows teachers to differentiate flexibly and effectively and ensures that all students make continuous progress.

4. **Professional development.** In the SCGM, staff training ensures that teachers learn to recognize gifted behaviors and to differentiate instruction to accommodate the exceptional educational needs of gifted students (students who learn at levels significantly beyond grade-level expectations). When teachers receive appropriate, ongoing training, the SCGM creates an environment that addresses the social and emotional needs of many gifted learners.

5. **Evaluation.** Data collection and evaluation of student and teacher growth are essential. Careful monitoring of progress in the SCGM can demonstrate that cluster grouping is being used effectively, and it can facilitate ongoing success with the model.

The focus of this chapter is on the first two components—understanding the schoolwide structure of the model and configuring the placement of students into cluster groups and classrooms.

A Word About Educational Terminology
Throughout this book, the term *cluster grouping* refers to the Schoolwide Cluster Grouping Model (SCGM). For definitions and explanations of other terms, refer to the glossary on page 246.

Placing Students in Cluster Groups

Cluster grouping occurs when a group of gifted students is placed with groups of other students in a mixed-ability classroom. Ideally, a group of four to ten identified gifted students, usually in the top 5 to 8 percent of achievement potential of the grade-level population, is clustered in a classroom with a teacher trained in how to teach students with exceptional abilities. If a grade level has more than ten gifted students, two or more classrooms may serve as gifted-cluster classrooms.

On page 16, you will find a chart that offers an example of student classroom placements using the SCGM. Prior to placing students into classrooms, educators must assign all students within a grade level to one of the following categories:

Group 1, Gifted. Students in Group 1 are identified as gifted by local criteria, because they have the highest ability in the grade level. This group includes gifted students who are nonproductive or underachievers, culturally diverse learners, English language learners (ELL students), and twice-exceptional students.

Group 2, High Achieving. Group 2 students are highly competent and productive, are working to the fullest extent of their abilities, and are not identified as gifted.

Group 3, Average. These students achieve in the middle (average) range compared to others in their grade level.

Group 4, Below Average. The students in Group 4 may struggle with math or reading and score slightly below grade level, but they can achieve at grade level with some support.

Group 5, Far Below Average. These students struggle with most subject areas and score significantly below proficiency levels on standardized tests.

Educators can determine assignments to the groups by formal and informal gifted-identification procedures. These may combine standardized test scores with teacher or parent observation and other anecdotal data. (Chapter 3 gives a thorough explanation of gifted-identification procedures.) In the SCGM, ability testing is the most significant tool for identifying gifted students. Group 1 includes all students formally identified as gifted, regardless of their achievement levels, including twice-exceptional, ELL, culturally and linguistically diverse, and underachieving gifted students. Group 1 would likely include the top 5 to 8 percent of students in your school in terms of ability or learning potential. Achievement data from the local school population determines student placement into the other four groups. Groups 2 through 5 would include all other students, clustered according to achievement levels. The term *average* in reference to student achievement is relative; it refers to what is average for a school's particular population.

The school's grade-level structure and population influence the number of gifted-cluster classrooms at each grade level. Following is a suggested placement chart. This chart offers an example of three classroom compositions for the SCGM in a single grade level with a total of ninety students. Later in the chapter, you will see several examples that show how the configuration changes based on the number of classes and number of gifted students in a grade level.

The numbers in this chart represent general guidelines, and you should change them according to your school's particular needs. There is no arbitrary limit to the number of gifted (Group 1) clusters your school should have. If your school has identified a large number of gifted students in a given grade level, you can create another cluster. Unless the number of identified gifted students in your school is very small, the SCGM guarantees that there will be no classes in which only one or two gifted students find themselves without a community of other gifted students.

Purposeful Placement of All Students in All Classes

Historically, many districts have spread their gifted students throughout each grade level by placing one or two in each classroom. This is problematic because each teacher ends up with such a small number of gifted students that she or he may not feel the urgency to provide consistent curriculum compacting and differentiation opportunities. Even if the teacher understands gifted students' learning needs, participates in professional gifted-education learning opportunities, and offers extended learning activities, the gifted students have little incentive to partake of those activities if few other students (or none) are doing similarly challenging work. Most students do not want to be observed or perceived as different—it makes them feel uncomfortable.

FIGURE 1-1 **Example of Classroom Compositions for the SCGM (for a Single Grade Level)**

Classrooms	Group 1: Gifted	Group 2: High Achieving	Group 3: Average	Group 4: Below Average	Group 5: Far Below Average	Totals
A	6	0	12	12	0	30
B	0	6	12	6	6	30
C	0	6	12	6	6	30
Totals	6	12	36	24	12	90

In the SCGM, gifted students are clustered together at each grade level. Teachers and principals determine placement of *all* students into *all* classrooms at each grade level, with a goal of creating a balance of abilities and achievement across the classrooms. With this model, if six identified gifted students are entering a grade level that has three classrooms, they are assigned to one teacher, rather than being split up among all available classes. As soon as the gifted students' (Group 1) placement has been determined, students from Group 2 are placed in the other two classrooms. Next, students from Groups 3 and 4 are placed in all three classes. Finally, those from Group 5 are placed in the classes that have Group 2 students. When the grouping is finished, one classroom will include students from Groups 1, 3, and 4 while the other two classrooms will include students from Groups 2, 3, 4, and 5. This creates classrooms where abilities are well mixed, yet the range of student achievement levels in each classroom is narrowed.

A Word About Labels

In this book, we use terms such as *gifted-identified, nonproductive, high achieving,* and *below average* to categorize students' abilities and learning levels. The terms are not intended to stereotype students but rather to give educators readily understandable descriptions that will help them determine placement of students in the cluster classrooms.

When there is a need to create a second gifted cluster at a given grade level, the eligible gifted-cluster students can be placed according to areas of strength. For example, gifted students at a given grade level who have high ability in math can be placed with the gifted-cluster teacher who specializes in teaching math.

Schools with one classroom (or section) per grade level can still implement critical elements of the SCGM, such as learning about the needs of gifted students, using differentiated instructional strategies, and flexibly grouping students for instructional purposes. However, these schools cannot follow the model completely, because the single classroom would contain the full range of ability and achievement levels in the grade level.

When there are no gifted-identified students in a grade level, a gifted-cluster teacher should still be designated for that grade level. This teacher should be invited to participate in the gifted-cluster teacher meetings and other relevant professional development. Having a teacher at every grade level with training or experience in gifted education encourages discussions about the needs of gifted students during grade-level meetings, team planning, and curriculum adoptions. Additionally, when gifted-identified students enroll during the school year, they can be placed with a teacher who has participated in the gifted-cluster teacher training.

Grouping Variations in the SCGM

Establishing the number of gifted-cluster classes at a grade level and then placing students into the various classes involves weighing and balancing various criteria. The number of gifted-identified students and the number of classrooms at each grade level are the primary factors that determine the number of gifted-cluster classes needed in each grade. Because these numbers change yearly, the number of gifted-cluster classes in a specific grade level may also change from one year to the next.

Student populations vary widely from school to school and from grade level to grade level. This variability may call for flexibility and creativity in assigning students to classrooms. The first consideration is the number of classes in a grade level. From there, factors that influence the number of gifted-cluster classrooms and student placements are as follows:

- only one or two classes in a grade level
- few gifted-identified students in a grade level

- too many gifted students for one gifted-cluster classroom
- multi-age classes
- high numbers of both gifted and very low achieving students in a grade

The text and tables that follow provide examples of ways to place students in these scenarios (Brulles and Winebrenner 2011; Brulles and Brown 2018).

THE NUMBER OF CLASSES IN A GRADE LEVEL

The number of classes in each grade level affects the ideal number of gifted-cluster classes to create. The more classes in each grade level, the greater likelihood that an additional gifted-cluster class will be needed. As a general guide, consider the following table:

Classes per Grade Level	Gifted-Cluster Classrooms
2–3	1
4–5	1–2
6–8	2–3

The following scenarios describe placement variations that consider the number of gifted students, the number of classes at each grade level, and other factors.

FEW STUDENTS FOR ONE GIFTED-CLUSTER CLASSROOM

When a grade level contains zero to three gifted students, include some high-achieving students along with the gifted students in the gifted-cluster classroom, as in the following table. This table shows a recommended cluster grouping for a grade level with fifty-five students, among whom are only two gifted-identified students. Remember, the purpose is to create a balance of ability and achievement levels in all classes in the grade, without too wide a range in any particular classroom.

TOO MANY GIFTED STUDENTS FOR ONE GIFTED-CLUSTER CLASSROOM

A large number of gifted students in one class sometimes causes a challenge for the gifted-cluster teacher. When a gifted-cluster classroom has more than ten gifted students, the teacher may spend less time and attention on each gifted student. When a grade level has that many gifted students, educators may want to divide the gifted students into two gifted-cluster classrooms. When there are enough gifted students to form two gifted-cluster classes, there are usually two or more other classrooms in the grade level where high-achieving students are grouped apart from the gifted students. This careful placement ensures a balance of ability and achievement levels in each classroom, without too wide a range in any particular classroom. This balance is critical for implementing and sustaining an effective cluster model.

When educators are dividing gifted students into two gifted-cluster classrooms, they can place the gifted students into the classes based on their learning strengths in math or reading. In Classroom A, gifted students who are strong in math are placed with a teacher who specializes in

FIGURE 1-2 **Recommended Cluster Grouping for Grade Level with Few Gifted Students**

Classrooms	Group 1: Gifted	Group 2: High Achieving	Group 3: Average	Group 4: Below Average	Group 5: Far Below Average	Totals
A	2	7	12	7	0	28
B	0	9	12	2	4	27
Totals	2	16	24	9	4	55

FIGURE 1-3 **Recommended Cluster Grouping for Grade Level with Many Gifted Students**

Classrooms	Group 1: Gifted	Group 2: High Achieving	Group 3: Average	Group 4: Below Average	Group 5: Far Below Average	Totals
A	9	0	11	7	0	27
B	10	0	10	8	0	28
C	0	12	9	0	5	26
D	0	11	10	0	5	26
Totals	19	23	40	15	10	107

math. In Classroom B, the gifted students who are strong in language arts are grouped together with a teacher who specializes in language arts. Similarly, in Classrooms C and D, the students in Group 5 (Far Below Average) are placed according to their needs, which are addressed with relevant resource assistance in those classrooms.

MULTI-AGE CLASSES

Multi-age classes provide an ideal placement for gifted students. In multi-age classes, all students work at varying challenge levels within the same content areas. The teacher provides ongoing formative assessment for all students to create flexible learning groups. This routine practice of pre-assessing students' entry levels in the content areas is ideal for the gifted students in the class.

Figure 1-4 demonstrates how a small school with one and a half classrooms of third grade and one and a half classrooms of fourth grade provides services for its gifted students in the SCGM. The school created one third-grade class, one fourth-grade class, and one multi-age class with both third and fourth graders. The multi-age class is the gifted-cluster class for grades three and four. The school placed high-achieving (Group 2) students in each grade in the other two classrooms.

LARGE NUMBERS OF BOTH GIFTED AND VERY LOW STUDENTS IN A GRADE

Occasionally grade levels will have very large numbers of students who fall into Groups 1 and 5. This scenario necessitates placing some of the students

FIGURE 1-4 **Recommended Cluster Grouping for Multi-Age Classes and Related Grade-Level Classes**

Classrooms	Group 1: Gifted	Group 2: High Achieving	Group 3: Average	Group 4: Below Average	Group 5: Far Below Average	Totals
Grades 3–4 Multi-Age	3 third graders 7 fourth graders	0	4 third graders 6 fourth graders	3 third graders 5 fourth graders	0	10 third graders 18 fourth graders
Grade 3	0	11	10	3	3	27
Grade 4	0	10	11	3	3	27
Totals	10	21	31	14	6	82

in Group 5 into a gifted-cluster class. Assistance from a resource teacher helps the gifted-cluster teacher in that class, who is working with the full range of abilities in one classroom. (Some principals find that the cluster grouping model facilitates the scheduling of resource teachers, because students receiving resource assistance are also clustered.)

When it is necessary to combine students in Groups 1 and 5 in the same class, place both groups of students according to areas of need, such as mathematics. The following table shows how one school divided its large number of students in Groups 1 and 5 in one grade level. The school separated the students in these two groups according to the students' areas of strength or need—in this case, mathematics. The principal then placed the group of students with math strength or need in Classroom B, with a teacher who enjoyed differentiating in math.

Configuring the Cluster Classrooms

Ideally, educators work as a team to create classroom compositions. Teachers from the sending grade levels work with the building principal and the gifted-education specialist or coordinator (when one exists), with assistance from a special education teacher as needed. The placement team can use color-coded cards that represent each of the five SCGM student groups with a designated color. Before the placement meeting, each sending classroom teacher assigns students to the appropriate card colors based on their ability or achievement levels, writing one student's name on each card. (Alternatively, the teachers can use colored dot stickers in conjunction with the school's existing student information cards.)

FIGURE 1-5 Recommended Cluster Grouping in a Grade Level with Many Students in Groups 1 and 5

Classrooms	Group 1: Gifted	Group 2: High Achieving	Group 3: Average	Group 4: Below Average	Group 5: Far Below Average	Totals
A	10	0	10	8	0	28
B	7	4	10	0	6	27
C	0	11	6	3	5	25
Totals	17	15	26	11	11	80

FIGURE 1-6 Sample Completed Grade-Level Data by School Chart

Current Grades	Group 1: Gifted	Group 2: High Achieving	Group 3: Average	Group 4: Below Average	Group 5: Far Below Average
Kindergarten	2	18	36	17	9
Grade 1	5	16	35	21	8
Grade 2	7	21	32	15	5
Grade 3	8	18	28	16	10
Grade 4	15	20	34	12	9
Grade 5	10	22	25	13	6
Grade 6	9	21	33	13	5
Grade 7	9	19	36	12	7
Grade 8	10	23	31	13	8

Working in grade-level teams, teachers can use school achievement data to indicate the numbers of current students in each SCGM group, using the "Grade-Level Data by School" reproducible chart on page 33. **Figure 1-6** is a sample completed version of this chart.

Using this data, teachers can recommend classroom compositions. At the placement meeting, the placement team combines colored cards for the entire grade level into classrooms following this process:

1. Place all gifted-identified (Group 1) students into designated gifted-cluster classrooms.

2. Cluster high-achieving (Group 2) students into classrooms that have not been assigned a gifted (Group 1) cluster.

3. Distribute average (Group 3) students evenly in all classrooms.

4. Distribute below-average (Group 4) students evenly in all classrooms.

5. Place far-below-average (Group 5) students in the classrooms that have not been assigned a gifted (Group 1) cluster.

It is wise to place one or two more students in the gifted-cluster class(es) than in the other classes, to leave a bit of space in the other classes. This way, new students from Group 2 or Group 5 who enroll during the year will automatically be placed in the classes that have more room and will not be mistakenly placed in the gifted-cluster classroom. See the following table in **figure 1-7**.

FIGURE 1-7 **Sample SCGM Classroom Composition Planning Form**

Classroom (grade, teacher, or other identifier)	Group 1: Gifted	Group 2: High Achieving	Group 3: Average	Group 4: Below Average	Group 5: Far Below Average	Totals
A: Grade 3	5	0	13	5	0	23
B: Grade 3	0	8	10	0	4	22
C: Grade 3	0	7	11	1	3	22
D: Grade 4	9	0	12	6	0	27
E: Grade 4	0	10	11	2	3	26
F: Grade 4	0	9	10	3	4	26
G: Grade 5	10	0	13	6	0	29
H: Grade 5	0	11	12	2	3	28
I: Grade 5	0	11	11	2	3	27
J: Grade 6	8	0	15	8	0	31
K: Grade 6	0	9	15	2	4	30
L: Grade 6	10	0	13	3	4	30
M: Grade 7	9	0	14	8	0	31
N: Grade 7	0	10	13	2	5	30
O: Grade 7	0	11	12	1	6	30
P: Grade 8	9	0	11	9	0	29
Q: Grade 8	0	9	10	4	4	27
R: Grade 8	0	8	11	4	5	28

The configurations shown for grades 6, 7, and 8 in figures 1-6 and 1-7 show how classes in these grade levels might be arranged for K–8 schools. Middle schools that serve grades 6 through 8 or grades 7 and 8 vary drastically in how teams are formed. The numbers of grade-level sections, courses offered, subject areas in which they cluster, schedules, and so on influence how students are grouped. Many middle schools cluster group for English, history, and science and then group according to readiness levels for math.

After the class lists have been assembled, teachers should carefully review them for appropriateness. If it appears that any student placements should be changed, strive to make sure that the trades between classes swap students from the same groups. (For example, exchange a Group 2 student in one classroom for a Group 2 student in another classroom.)

Special Considerations

The following students require special attention when educators are determining classroom placement:

- Gifted students who are nonproductive (underachieving students with high academic ability) are placed in Group 1.

- Students who are both gifted and ELL (English language learners) or former ELL are placed in Group 1.

- Twice-exceptional gifted students—those identified as gifted who also have an IEP (individualized educational program) for special education—are placed in Group 1.

- Students not identified as gifted who have learning disabilities or challenges that significantly compromise their learning ability are generally placed in Group 5, as are students who are scoring well below proficiency levels on standardized tests.

- Ideally, Groups 2 and 5 are placed in classrooms that do *not* have a Group 1 cluster.

While most of the gifted-cluster students are likely in the top 5 to 8 percent of ability in the grade-level population, some may not be achieving at that level. All gifted-identified students at each grade level should be placed into Group 1 regardless of their achievement levels. This placement allows all gifted students access to teachers who have specialized training in gifted education. Working with teachers who understand the unique learning and behavioral characteristics of gifted students can help nonproductive gifted students, as well as gifted students with other types of learning challenges, achieve at higher levels.

Gifted-identified ELL students have the ability to become advanced learners, and therefore benefit from being in a gifted-cluster group. The faster pacing, advanced expectations, and consistent opportunities for higher-level thinking appear to help these students make better progress in their learning than they might make in a class without a gifted cluster (Brulles 2005). For related reasons, twice-exceptional gifted students should also be placed in a gifted cluster.

It is important to note that generally, no high-achieving students—those with above-average performance who are not identified as gifted (Group 2)—are placed into the classrooms with gifted students. The SCGM attempts to separate these two groups because placing clusters of above-average students into the classrooms *without* the gifted clusters ensures academic leadership in every class. Some parents and teachers mistakenly believe that gifted students are needed in all classes as positive learning role models for other students. On the contrary: Because gifted students process information differently from other kids in their class, they are often ineffective when they try to help others learn. Research shows that the difference in learning levels between students should not be too great for a student to be considered an effective role model to another student (Schunk 1987). Students whose performances are higher than average are academic role models for average learners. Average-level students are academic role models for each other and for lower-than-average learners.