

Grade Acceleration Benefits Learners and Schools. Why Is It so Rare?

New York City Mayor Bill De Blasio is making headlines suited for satire. A commission he assembled recently released a report [recommending](#) the elimination of gifted programs in order to reduce inequality – a remedy of Harrison Burgeron proportions. Unfortunately, as a general nationwide trend, public schools have already neglected the top students in favor of an egalitarian appearance, and New York stands ready to increase this worrying trend.

Skipping a Grade Has Become Less Common

One particularly neglected aspect of gifted accommodations is grade acceleration, or what most call “skipping a grade.” Much like other areas of educational choice, it is often opposed without much merit. Critics are often concerned with social stigma and children not fitting in or receiving equal treatment. However, many of these concerns are unfounded, and a rather large body of research shows that for children performing above grade level, either full grade or partial, moving up is a better fit both academically and socially.

Since No Child Left Behind (NCLB) was [passed into law](#), some suspect there has been a [decrease](#) in grade acceleration. This makes sense from an institutional perspective. Testing drives resource allocation and thus shifts attention away from those who perform better toward those who may struggle.

Additionally, moving kids up appears risky to teachers and administrators who rely on high passing levels to secure

funding and gain prestige. Schools have incentives to focus on bringing the worst-performing students to grade level while also enjoying the safety of students who find the material easy. Teachers aren't intentionally holding kids back, but the incentives they face fail to encourage a bolder approach to education.

Though some of the declines in grade acceleration have been anecdotal, it appears full grade acceleration has indeed become a rare thing, with an estimated one percent of students moving ahead, as [reported](#) by [The Acceleration Institute](#). My own family's experience matches this speculation. Discussing grade acceleration with local elementary school officials revealed an unfamiliarity with the process even though they expressed an openness to the idea and ultimately were fantastic to work with through the process. No one in the room – not the classroom teacher, special education teacher, or administrator – had ever advanced a child.

Grade Acceleration Should Be Promoted

Despite the rarity, grade acceleration has been shown to be an effective way to challenge students, respect choice, and save public funds. In a meta-analysis of [grade acceleration](#) studies? – ?a study of the studies? – ?the authors found:

that acceleration had a positive impact on high-ability learners' academic achievement.

Not only did they see positive academic results but “the social-emotional development effects appeared to be slightly positive,” as well.

The social and emotional aspect is an important dimension usually assumed as evidence against acceleration. But, as described above, it has been grossly exaggerated. Children who

skip grades adjust socially, some improve in their peer relations, and others struggle regardless of their grade. This has been a persistent myth – one that causes hesitation in parents and teachers.

De Blasio's commission inadvertently highlights the tension public institutions, in this instance schools, face. Schools are asked to reconcile various public policy goals: reduce inequality, increase education, improve teachers, provide job security, etc. These are impossible tasks, often because the designers lack the relevant information to achieve those ends and often respond to public incentives instead of the concerns of parents and students.

This tragedy is compounded by the fact the number of students performing above grade level has been severely underestimated. Johns Hopkins [released a report](#) suggesting partial or full grade acceleration is appropriate for a significant portion of students. Examining students in three states – California, Wisconsin, and Florida – researchers found:

that 20-40% of elementary and middle school students perform at least one grade level above their current grade in reading, with 11-30% scoring at least one grade level above in math.

While calling for more research, the authors suggest that given the evidence:

between 15% and 45% of students enter the late-elementary classroom each fall already performing at least one year ahead of expectations.

In a classroom of 30 kids, that would be a minimum average of four-and-a-half kids accelerated every year.

Gifted Students Drop Out

Unfortunately, and unmentioned by De Blasio's commission, which is concerned with the disparate impact of gifted programs – a significant portion of gifted students eventually drops out. Some studies [suggest](#) as much as 4.5 percent of those who drop out would be considered gifted. Gifted but at-risk students often come from the lower end of the economic spectrum, which contributes to their premature exit from school.

Instead of punching a ticket to the middle class, if they manage to graduate and enter college, these students are held at grade level, often bored and faced with higher opportunity costs than their relatively well-to-do peers.

Though there are many other contributing factors to this complex issue, the commission and other like-minded individuals would more effectively narrow the perceived gap by expanding gifted programs to include acceleration and focusing on individual educational progress over achieving the appearance of equality.

Grade acceleration is a readily available, comparatively cheap, and underutilized tool for helping some disadvantaged students get out of school faster while avoiding the stigmatization that comes with dropping out. This is particularly [relevant](#) if one finds the signaling model of education persuasive, which is to say the degree matters more than the actual intelligence or human capital accumulated. Missing out on that piece of paper is costly.

School Choice

School choice has grown in some places and in a variety of ways. Different forms of charter schools have popped up where permitted, and educational savings accounts have gained some

political traction with a lot of room for utilization. Vouchers, either as a state subsidy or tax rebate, have been introduced in some states or locales. From this standpoint, there has been an increase in school choice over the past quarter-century or more, though there remains a lot of ground left to cover. Where tested, most choice programs have shown [positive results](#), test scores remain as good as or better for many school choice programs, the [schools save money](#), and [civic engagement](#) may even increase and criminal activity [decrease compared](#) to the public alternatives.

Yet, we have inadvertently ignored the needs of a significant portion of school-aged children, narrowing choice for many and leaving them in a rigid system that leaves many unfulfilled. This need not be the case. Parents and educators can identify children who excel and are bored in class and adopt a plan to challenge and push them. Speaking from experience, many teachers are open to these possibilities, and proactive parents can do a lot to get the ball rolling. Most school districts have regulations in place, largely unused, that dictate the process for grade acceleration.

Though this is a tiny part of the larger school choice picture, it can make a difference for many students if parents, educators, and policymakers are willing to step outside their comfort zone and embrace a view sympathetic to grade acceleration.

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This article was originally published on [FEE.org](#). Read the [original article](#).

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