Implementing Enrichment Clusters in a Multiage School:

Perspectives from a Principal and Consultant

by Sally E. Reed and Karen L. Westberg

Does your school provide a full range of gifted education services? How frequently are your students able to explore areas of interest in addition to the basic curriculum expectations? How do you tap the talents of administrators, teachers, and staff members? Do parent volunteers have opportunities to engage students in meaningful learning experiences? Are any of your classes or courses of study student-driven? How does your school collaborate and cooperate around a common instructional strategy? These issues were addressed when enrichment clusters were implemented at Harriet Bishop (HB) Elementary School.

HB School opened in 1996 with an articulated educational model developed collaboratively by the teachers, parents, and the administration. The model includes a mission, set of beliefs, and rationale for the instructional design. While nearly every school district or school has a formal mission, the statements articulated for HB are taken seriously. To support the mission, the students learn through an integrated curriculum using strategies such as differentiated instruction, curriculum compacting, and multiage learning. Teachers at HB are expected to meet the unique needs, interests, abilities, and learning rates, styles, and patterns of all students, from the most challenged to the most capable learners. HB is an elementary school of 700 students assigned to grade K–2, K–4, 1–3, 1–4, 3–6, or 5–6 communities, which are each located around a shared team center. Students remain with their teacher and classmates for 2 years. Because of the multiage communities, the students and staff are comfortable working within disciplines across grade levels.

What Are Enrichment Clusters?

HB adopted the Schoolwide Enrichment Model (Renzulli & Reis, 1997) to help meet the individual needs of students and develop student talent. Enrichment clusters, one component of the model, provide challenging, self-selected, real-world learning for all students (Reis, Gentry, & Park, 1995; Renzulli, Gentry, & Reis, 2003). Enrichment clusters allow multiage groups of students who share common interests to select courses of study from an extensive list of offerings, such as "The Society of Student Statisticians," "The Sports Medicine Institute," and "Young Artists Guild." Students are given the opportunity to work with a facilitator for a designated period of time over a few weeks to pursue topics within the cluster. During the cluster, students and the facilitator pursue challenging learning to produce a product, performance, or targeted service. Enrichment cluster topics are organized around major disciplines, interdisciplinary themes, or cross-disciplinary topics. For example, a cluster entitled "Save the Dolphin Society" focuses on concepts and issues in environmental biology. Another cluster entitled "The Toy Safety Testing Commission" includes topics in physics, consumer science, and economics.

Enrichment clusters are modeled after the way knowledge is acquired, utilized, and produced in the real world. Because the work within a cluster is directed toward the production of a product or service, lesson plans or unit plans are not prepared in advance; rather, the students and the facilitator collaboratively create plans for exploring the topic as the cluster unfolds.

Enrichment clusters have been used successfully at HB since the school opened. In this article we describe the factors that have contributed to their success from the perspective of the principal and the consultant who provided the original training to the staff.

Extending the Pedagogy of Gifted Education to All Students

Enrichment clusters are based on the underlying theory, research, and strategies of the Schoolwide Enrichment Model (Renzulli & Reis, 1997). They use techniques more commonly used in gifted programs to develop the gifts and talents of all students. All students are given the opportunity to acquire advanced-level understanding of the knowledge and methodology used within particular disciplines, develop self-directed learning skills, and pursue authentic problems and products.

Developing the Talents of Staff Members

The implementation of enrichment clusters has resulted in several positive outcomes at HB, including the development of staff members' talents. Staff members have the opportunity to teach something related to their passions. For example, a teacher fluent in French had the opportunity to use her knowledge of the language and culture with students in a cluster, and another teacher with a major interest in environmental science and wildlife facilitated a "Habitat Constructions" cluster for students. Sometimes, staff members select topics for which they have budding interests and welcome the opportunity to explore them further. For example, one teacher at HB who wanted to improve his personal technology skills decided to facilitate "Digital Video Claymation," a cluster in which he and his students would use digital camcorders and editing software to create short films.

Cooks, secretaries, and paraprofessionals also have the opportunity to facilitate clusters, providing them with the opportunity to enhance their skills in working with young people. For example, a secretary taught the "Musical Puppetry Theater" cluster, and a paraprofessional taught a cluster that involved sign language.

By implementing enrichment clusters, teachers experience professional growth in various areas. Teachers at HB have a better understanding of multiage education and differentiation practices, recognizing that all students don't need to do the same thing at the exact same time. As a result of teachers' experiences in clusters, new understandings are transferred to the classroom, where more

open-ended questions and project-based learning are used.

Involving Parents in Meaningful Teaching and Learning

In addition to helping struggling readers, leading Junior Great Books groups, or editing students' writing, parents have the opportunity to be involved in new teaching and learning experiences at HB school. They are given the opportunity to facilitate a cluster or assist a staff member with one. One parent facilitated a cluster on architecture—"The Drafting and Design Guild." Another parent assisted a teacher with the "Map Making With Geographical Information Systems (GIS)" cluster. When parents participate in clusters, they have a better understanding of how children learn at different rates and in different ways. They observe the different approaches to learning that students take. Parents' creativity is also tapped. For example, they find varied resources and learn how to be flexible in their planning. They have a sense of personal accomplishment and satisfaction by making a difference in the lives of children. And, of course, increased parental support for the school and the school district is another benefit, as they learn firsthand the kinds of learning opportunities that occur in schools today.

Developing Students' Interests and Using Student-Driven Instruction

State and federal mandates have resulted in more time spent on basic subject areas in recent years, limiting the opportunities for exploration of student-driven topics of interest. Phenix (1964), professor emeritus of curriculum from Columbia University, wrote, "People learn best what they most profoundly want to know. Hence, the materials of instruction should be selected in light of students' real interests" (pp. 345–346). When students participate in enrichment clusters, they are highly motivated and excited about learning. This is evidenced by the fact that HB has fewer school absences on enrichment cluster days!

Students' enthusiasm for activities done in their clusters extends to other activities and experiences, as well. Students involved in a newspaper cluster became interested in creating video stories, which were integrated into HB's weekly broadcast to the classrooms. Four students who took a cluster on Web design won an award for the Web page they created. Students in a sign language cluster performed a poem at a monthly breakfast meeting of local business and city leaders. Students in a technology cluster learned a variety of software programs and became the "Technology Troubleshooters" for teachers and administrators.

Developing a Collaborative Culture Focused on Talent Development

When everyone in the school focuses on learning new content and skills and on developing a product or service related to what interests them, a collaborative culture is formed. Colleagues engage in more dialogue with each other, asking what each is doing in their clusters and offering ideas, suggestions, and resources. Before each new cycle of clusters, the principal and enrichment specialist ask teachers to increase the challenge level, the higher level thinking, inquiry-based teaching strategies in their new clusters. They ask teachers to take risks and try different teaching strategies.

This collaborative culture extends to the students, too. They discover that other students throughout the school have similar interests, and they have a sense of camaraderie with others. Students enjoy seeing their cluster classmates in other settings, such as in the lunchroom, at other schoolwide events, on the playground, and at the bus stop.

Everyone is working on something with a commitment to increasing his or her knowledge base. Students and facilitators are engaged in purposeful and productive learning.

Lessons Learned

Enrichment clusters have been implemented successfully for several years at HB. While each school must find its own way when implementing an innovation, the lessons learned at HB may be helpful to others who are interested in implementing clusters.

First, we advise teachers and principals to provide ongoing training on enrichment clusters. An orientation was conducted the first year, but ongoing training on the purpose and design of enrichment clusters is provided. At meetings before each enrichment cluster cycle, teachers are reminded to design a cluster that includes higher level thinking, inductive pedagogy, advanced content, and adherence to Renzulli's Golden Rule of Enrichment Clusters: "Everything in the cluster must be directed toward the development of a product or delivery of a service." Staff members know that an activity or a club is not a cluster, that learning a series of skills is not a cluster, and that "learning all about . . ." is not acceptable. The staff members are expected to raise the bar each time. The academic rigor in the enrichment clusters at HB has increased steadily over the years.

In addition to providing ongoing professional development, the following process is used for implementing enrichment clusters at HB School (Renzulli, Gentry, & Reis, 2003):

1. Students' interests are assessed.
2. A summary of students' interests are shared with the staff and parent volunteers, now to be called "facilitators."
3. Facilitators think about potential clusters by responding to key questions.
4. Facilitators write titles and descriptions for one or two potential clusters.
5. The enrichment specialist and principal review and, if necessary, revise the descriptions and titles.
6. A brochure with cluster descriptions and registration information is sent home with students.
7. Students are assigned to one of their cluster choices (if they don't return the registrations within 2 weeks, they are assigned to clusters).
8. Each cluster facilitator gets a class list and room assignment and then writes a "welcome letter" to the students who will be in the cluster.

The Parent-Teacher Organization underwrites the cost of consumable materials for clusters, but if the end product of a cluster is nonconsumable, the students must pay a fee.

The teachers at HB have experimented with the scheduling (the number of sessions per week and number of weeks) of enrichment clusters. The preferred schedule now is two cluster sessions per week for a 6-week period.

The cluster sessions culminate in an open house, which is attended by nearly every parent. At this event, students demonstrate in some manner what they have been doing. For example, a dance choreography cluster may perform an original dance in the gymnasium, the products from the "Escher Art Guild" may be displayed in a hallway, and students participating in the "La Societe des Estudiantes Francaises" may perform a skit or songs in French.

The open house is not, however, the only audience or outlet for cluster end products. Additional outlets or audiences are sought for the products or services. For example, a few years ago, students in a painting cluster decided that their work should be exhibited in a coffee shop where they had seen a display of local artists' work. They wrote a letter to the manager of the Crema Café in Minneapolis, and he agreed to have a showing of their work, which was entitled "13 Drawings, 13 Children." Invitations were distributed widely for the opening reception of this event.

What are the outcomes that one might expect after using enrichment clusters in a school? Their implementation at HB has resulted in the provision of a full range of gifted education services; opportunities for students to pursue areas of interest; a vehicle for tapping the talents of administrators, teachers, and staff members; opportunities for parents to have a meaningful role in enhancing the learning of students; and the creation of a collaborative culture centered around talent development. GCT

References

Phenix, P. (1964). *Realms of meaning*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Reis, S. M., Gentry, M., & Park, S. (1995). *Extending the pedagogy of gifted education to all students* (Research Monograph 95118). Storrs: The National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented, University of Connecticut.

Renzulli, J. S., Gentry, M., & Reis, S. M. (2003). *Enrichment clusters: A practical plan for real-world, student-driven learning*. Mansfield Center, CT: Creative Learning Press.