

Meeting the Enrichment Needs of Middle School Students

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One of the main tasks of adolescence is to achieve an identity—not necessarily a knowledge of who we are, but a clarification of the range of what we might become.

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In an effort to infuse a broad range of highly challenging learning experiences into their programs, many middle school have adopted the National Research Center on Gifted and Talented’s Schoolwide Enrichment Model (SEM). Through a “continuum of services” approach, the SEM provides numerous enrichment and acceleration alternatives that are designed to accommodate the academic strengths, interests, and learning styles of all middle-level students. By labeling services rather than students, it allows for a less restrictive identification process than the traditional approach of only labeling a few kids as gifted.

The model is flexible enough to allow each school to develop its own unique program based on local resources, student populations, school leadership dynamics, and faculty strengths and creativity. Although the SEM is based on successful practices that originated in special programs for gifted and talented students, its major goal is to promote both challenging and enjoyable “high-end learning” across the full range of school types, levels, and demographic differences. The model is not intended to replace or minimize existing services to high achieving students, but to integrate these services into “a-rising-tide-lifts-all-ships” approach to school improvement. With the SEM, creative teaming efforts that involve the entire faculty and enrichment specialists. These are the three major components that make up SEM:

The Total Talent Portfolio (TTP)

The Total Talent Portfolio (TTP) is a vehicle for systematically gathering, recording, and using information about student’s abilities, interests, and learning style preferences. Students and teachers cooperatively review and analyze best-case samples of students’ work, as well as information resulting from interest and learning styles assessment scales to make meaningful decisions about necessary curricular modifications and enrichment opportunities.

Part of the process involves helping students develop skills for evaluating portfolio items according to their own set of internal criteria and developing procedures for examining portfolio items according to both their own set of external criteria of teachers and other students. Students achieve autonomy and ownership of the TTP by assuming major responsibility in the selection of items to be included, maintaining and regularly updating the portfolio, and setting personal goals by making decisions about items that they would like to include in the portfolio at some future

point in time. Although the teacher should serve as a guide in the portfolio review process, the ultimate goal is to turn portfolio management over to the students.

Curriculum Modification Techniques

The second component of the Schoolwide Enrichment Model is a series of techniques that are designed to assess each student's mastery level of regular curricular material; adjust the pace and level of required material to accommodate variations in learning; and provide enrichment and acceleration alternatives for students who have, or can, easily master regular material faster than the normal pace.

For individuals and for small groups of students working at approximately the same level, teachers conduct a systematic modification process called curriculum compacting. This three-step process consists of defining the goals and outcomes of a particular unit of study; determining and documenting which students have already mastered most or all of a specified set of learning outcomes (or are capable of mastery at an accelerated pace); and providing activities for students to pursue during the time gained by compacting the regular curriculum. Students can accelerate their own learning, undertake individual or group research projects, help teach their peers, or participate in out-of-class or non-school activities. Curriculum compacting is easy for teachers to learn and implement at all levels.

A second modification procedure that permits widespread adjustments to the regular curriculum is to examine textbooks and workbooks in order to determine which parts, especially repetitive practice material can be removed. Based on the "less is better" approach this technique promotes greater depth of learning by providing time for the direct teaching of thinking skills. It also permits curriculum differentiation emphasizing problem-based learning and the use of thematic and interdisciplinary units. In-depth learning requires students to move up the hierarchy of knowledge from facts to principle generalizations, and theories. These skills and problem-solving strategies will endure long after students have forgotten the factual material that is the focus of so much traditional learning.

Enrichment Learning and Teaching Through Enrichment Clusters

Enrichment learning and teaching strategies are designed to actively engage both teachers and students. Although enrichment learning and teaching can be integrated with the regular curriculum, we have found that creating a special place in the schedule is the best way to guarantee that every student will have an opportunity to participate.

Enrichment clusters are **non-graded** groups of students who share common interests, and who come together to pursue these interests during specially designated time blocks usually consisting of one-half day per week. There is one "golden rule" for enrichment clusters: *Everything students do in the cluster is directed toward producing a product or delivering a service for a real-world audience.* This rule ensures that students learn only relevant content and use only authentic processes to create a product or develop a service.

Middle-school enrichment clusters have played the stock market, designed and planted a cactus garden and created an editorial board to learn how to evaluate and edit manuscripts for a literary magazine. Students enter a cluster based on interests and other information gleaned from their Total Talent Portfolios. Common goals make cooperation a necessity, and divisions of labor within the clusters allow for differentiated levels of expertise and involvement, varying levels of challenge, and different leadership roles. This type of learning environment is highly supportive of individual differences and, therefore, promotes the development of self-concept, self-efficacy, and positive feelings that result from being a member of a goal-oriented team. To put it another way: *Every child is special if we create conditions in which that child can be a specialist within a specialized group.*

Inside an Enrichment Cluster

Enrichment clusters can revolve around major disciplines, interdisciplinary themes, or cross-disciplinary topics. A theatrical/television production group, for example, might include actors, writers, technical specialists, and costume designers. Within such a cluster, students direct their how-to knowledge, thinking skills, and interpersonal relations toward producing a product or service. Instead of lesson plans or unit plans, they are guided by six questions.

- What do people with an interest in this area—for example, filmmaking—do?
- What products do they create and/or what services do they provide?
- What knowledge, materials, and other resources do we need to authentically complete activities in this area?
- What methods do they use to carry out their work?
- How, and with whom, do they communicate the results of their work?
- In what ways can we use the product or service to affect the intended audience?

Recently, a number of schools have begun experimenting with an expanded enrichment cluster concept called the Academies of Inquiry and Talent Development (AITD). With AITD, students and teachers who share a common interest in a curricular area (e.g. science, literature, or math) are clustered over the three or four years that they are in middle school. We have found that strong associations develop between and among both students and adults, due to their common interest and collaboration in developing a product or a service.

Sources for Additional Information on the Schoolwide Enrichment Model

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