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Collective Impact: What Does It Mean for Educational Leaders?

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Abstract

Due to local, state, and national accountability measures, school reform efforts have become critical of many legislative agendas. Local community members are getting off the sidelines and becoming part of the game to support local schools districts to become part of the solution. Across the United States, Collective Impact models, which propose bringing stakeholders together in pursuit of a common goal, have rapidly gained momentum across the United States as a major element in school reform efforts. This commentary explores how the concept of Collective Impact is leading to increased student outcomes and making a cultural change on local communities.

Key Words

school reform, school culture, collective impact

Over the past decades, community leaders interested in driving and supporting social change have sought approaches that bring stakeholders together in pursuit of a common goal. In response to persistent social problems, achievement gaps, and a disconnect between action and data, there has been an explosion of interest in one specific model—Collective Impact—that proposes to address all of these concerns.

Kania and Kramer (2011) have defined Collective Impact as "the commitment of a group of important actors from different sectors to a common agenda for solving a specific social problem" (p. 36). Because it brings together leaders across several sectors, including education, health, business, and nonprofit organizations, Collective Impact has been proposed as a comprehensive solution to complex problems. In relation to education reform, this model has been suggested as a way to "move the needle" on a wide array of outcomes, from kindergarten readiness to third-grade reading proficiency to college graduation rates.

Rodney Thompson, one of this article's authors, had the pleasure of meeting Jamie Vollmer as he discussed his book, *Schools Cannot Do It Alone: Building Public Support for America's Public Schools*. In that book, Vollmer passionately described the multitude of social responsibilities with which legislators and bureaucrats have burdened school systems—often without proper funding or adequate support. At the same time, federal and state governments continue to invent new accountability measures to determine the "success" of our schools and students, such as the Every Student Succeeds Act, which was passed in 2015.

School boards and educational leaders working with limited revenue streams often face difficult decisions—choosing between hiring a literacy coach or a school resource officer, for example. We have been witnesses to the frustration of these leaders as they attempt to implement mandatory reforms and provide access to an expanded curriculum that is much more than just reading, writing, and arithmetic. For instance, school budgets must be stretched to meet requirements such as providing healthcare services and swimming lessons, while school and district leaders simultaneously face punitive damages for students who cannot master the skills required to succeed on standardized tests. As the title of Vollmer's book (2010) proclaimed, "Schools Cannot Do It Alone!"

In this article, we address how Collective Impact models can change the status quo for our schools—and what educational leaders can do to enact meaningful social and educational change. First, we provide an overview of current research. Then, in order to illustrate how the model functions in various stages of implementation, we present a discussion of three different communities (Cincinnati, Nashville, and Charleston), which are at various stages of the Collective Impact implementation process. Finally, we discuss the challenges and opportunities that these models provide—and how they might be able to address the growing needs of our communities, schools, and students.

Review of the Literature

Kania and Kramer (2011), who first proposed the term Collective Impact, lay out five conditions for the success of community-based change efforts: a common agenda, shared measurement systems, mutually reinforcing activities, continuous communication, and backbone support organizations (p. 39). Although all five conditions are important, at the heart of Collective Impact is the idea that in order to create meaningful change, partners

need to establish continuous communication— as well as trust, respect, and shared goals—in relation to the most critical needs in a given community. Weaver (2014) argued that there is a more fundamental condition: "The issue being tackled has to be perceived as either urgent or important to the community. This can be challenging, as there is so much 'noise' and so many important issues out there in communities" (p. 12).

There is an abundance of evidence that leaders from various fields have embraced Collective Impact as a framework for bringing together diverse stakeholders in support of a common goal. Kania and Kramer's introduction to Collective Impact, published in the Winter 2011 edition of the *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, has received more than 300,000 page views, more than any other piece in the magazine's history (Gemmel, 2014, p. 3). Further, Collective Impact conferences, online discussion boards, and other data sharing initiatives have allowed thousands of organizations to share strategies, information, possibilities, and pitfalls.

Community organizations concerned with broad-based educational reform were among the first to adopt this model, and its popularity has grown from there. For example, Strive Together, a national Collective Impact network that has a goal of improving student outcomes, counts more than 9,400 organizations among its partners. Strive Together takes a "cradle to career" approach in which children and adolescents are tracked based on six indicators—kindergarten readiness, third-grade reading, middle grades math, high school graduation, post-secondary enrollment, and post-secondary attainment (StriveTogether, "Cradle to career student roadmap," n.d.).

In order to continually evaluate the effectiveness of its Collective Impact network, Strive Together encourages all partners to provide data relating to student outcome indicators. Although many of the Cradle to Career Network partners are in the early stages of implementation, the data from more established partners has established a promising profile that supports the partnership's desired outcomes. For example, the Strive Partnership, located in Cincinnati and Northern Kentucky and deemed the "flagship partnership" of Strive Together, reported that 91% of student outcome indicators are improving for students, kindergarten readiness is up 13 points to 75%, and fourth grade reading achievement for Cincinnati Public School students is up 21 points to 76% (StriveTogether, "Results," n.d.).

Other programs that have centered on community engagement, such as the Harlem Children's Zone (Dobbie & Fryer, 2011), have also sought to involve a variety of stakeholders in order to address a comprehensive set of indicators. However, what sets Collective Impact apart from previous frameworks is a focus on shared measurement—partners must agree upon how to continuously collect, analyze, and share data so that they can provide the most meaningful information about progress. As Rose (2014) pointed out, "The challenge here is on agreeing which indicators to adopt, how to generate and monitor this data in a timely way, and, perhaps more importantly, understanding how each partner's actions and interventions will impact those indicators" (p. 80). So, as the number of Collective Impact communities continues to grow, school and community partners will need to make a concerted effort to develop common forums and methods for sharing and mining data on outcomes.

Collective Impact Communities

In this section, we present a discussion of three communities—Cincinnati, Nashville, and Charleston—which have adopted Collective Impact models, but are in very different stages of implementation. Cincinnati has been operating a comprehensive community partnership program for decades. In this community, Collective Impact partners built on the existing framework to establish a set of indicators, create collaborative programs to address targeted community issues, and regularly and consistently inform and mobilize the community in order to keep the momentum going (Rospert, 2013). Nashville, which established a community partnership in 2005 and adopted several components of the Collective Impact model in 2012, is currently working to operationalize and build capacity for data collection and analysis.

Finally, Charleston is in the process of developing its own version of Collective Impact; while frameworks are in place for Charleston area partners to work together to make progress on indicators, there is extensive work to be done on developing and organizing structures that will support collaborative community efforts. It is our hope that these examples will illuminate how Collective Impact models develop over time—and underline the need for educators and educational leaders to take an active role in these partnerships.

Greater Cincinnati Strive Partnership

Although there are several communities that have introduced elements of Collective Impact, Liebman (2013) suggested that the "Greater Cincinnati Strive Partnership is perhaps the best example of an effort to define a target population and coordinate services in a strategic way to make sure everyone receives the services they need to succeed" ("Making purposeful efforts" section, para. 2). According to StrivePartnerships (2015), a group of

community leaders united to improve educational outcomes in the Greater Cincinnati area, the goal was not to launch another educational program, but to form partnerships, establish desired outcomes, and work collectively to positively impact school reform in the Cincinnati metropolitan area ("About the partnership," n.d.). Today, the leadership committee is comprised of school superintendents, college presidents, bank presidents, and CEOs of major corporations and non-profits.

Bornstein (2011) attributed the successes of the Greater Cincinnati Strive Partnership to powerful communication and collaboration within the data-sharing system. Partners have established common goals and concentrated their analysis efforts on the data linked to the agreed-upon goals. The emphasis on a variety of data, covering outcomes from early childhood to adulthood, allows for organizers to reasonably apply secured resources to keep the initiative on track.

Kania and Kramer (2011) stated that while there were many obstacles and deeply rooted institutional barriers faced by the urban areas of Cincinnati and Northern Kentucky, even the initial efforts and strategies were successful. The 2014-15 Strive Cincinnati Partnership Report identified six community level outcomes (kindergarten readiness, early grade reading, middle grade math, high school graduation, postsecondary enrollment, and postsecondary completion) that the organization members have determined to be key indicators of educational success.

Since the Collective Impact model was first implemented in 2006, there have been significant gains across all six indicators, including a 9% increase in kindergarten readiness, an 11% increase in high school graduation rates, and a 10% increase in

postsecondary enrollment (StrivePartnerships, 2015). Currently, the partnership effort is focused on channeling resources to areas identified by key data indicators as most promising as a means for assuring sustainability.

Alignment Nashville
In 2012, the "Music City" launched its own version of Collective Impact. Alignment Nashville, which is currently spearheaded by a Board of Directors including Nashville's mayor, the CEO of Nashville Public Television, industry leaders, university presidents, and parents, has brought leaders from middle Tennessee together to engage in conversations about how to improve educational outcomes for communities, districts, and schools. Today, Nashville is gaining national attention for its efforts to spark community engagement and development. Nossett (2014) listed several recent accolades for the city of Nashville: ranked as one of the top five regions for job growth, one of the best places for a technology start-ups, and referred to by GQ as "Nowville."

In 2011, the Ford Motor Company Fund and Community Services named Nashville as a Ford Next Generation Learning Hub (Ford Partnership for Advanced Studies, 2011). As only one of seven distinguished communities in the country to receive this recognition, Nashville has begun to offer professional development for other communities planning educational reform efforts through the collaboration of community, business and educational leaders. According to the Ford Partnership for Advanced Studies (2011), "Alignment Nashville was established in 2005 as a nonprofit organization that seeks to align the services, programs and resources of community organizations to positively impact the Nashville community by helping our public schools succeed and our youth live healthier lives" (para 7).

Like Cincinnati, Alignment Nashville has developed a distinctive model of Collective Impact that brings together community leaders, non-profits, and the Nashville school system to classify and address the city's most persistent educational and health-related needs. Educators have played key roles in developing the Nashville-specific model. As a result of the alliance and in an effort to make progress towards college readiness outcomes, the Nashville school district (MNPS) developed the Academies of Nashville, a concept that is now recognized by educators across the country as a model program to promote college and career readiness (Alignment Nashville Annual Report, 2014, p. 4).

Since Nashville's Collective Impact model was first established in 2012, there has been substantial movement on several key indicators. For example, high school graduation rates have increased from 76.6% to 81.3% in just three years, a gain of nearly 5% (Alignment Nashville Annual Report, 2015, p. 18). High school attendance rates have increased from 89% to 93%, and there were 11,000 fewer disciplinary incidents in 2014-2014, as compared to 2011-2012 (p. 18). As a result, 77% of Metro Nashville Public School employees report an atmosphere of trust and respect within their schools, an 11% increase from 2012.

Alignment Nashville also tracks progress and reports on short-term, mid-term, and long-term outcomes. The Nashville Alignment teams, which are groups of leaders from education, non-profits, industry, and academia, provide a structure for collaborative work on common goals and determine key indicators and timelines. For example, the Learning Technology Alignment Team has met the short-term outcomes (e.g., "At least 75% of participants in community awareness campaign sessions report increased understanding of

digital literacy,") as well as the mid-term outcomes (i.e., a 25% increase in number of MNPS students that are digitally literate)" (Alignment Nashville Annual Report, 2014, p. 37). Currently, in conjunction with other alignment teams, members of the Learning Technology Alignment Team are working towards several long-term goals: increasing high school graduation rates, increasing college readiness rates, and increasing career readiness rates.

This organizational structure is typical of Collective Impact communities which have moved into the "sustaining" stage (Edmondson & Hecht, 2014)—after tackling issues of how to structure the Collective Impact teams, stakeholders begin working on developing outcome indicators and ways of tracking and measuring progress. Then, in a recursive process of data collection, evaluation, and program development, teams assess and adjust their progress. This dynamic model allows for constant collaboration and movement towards an ambitious reform agenda. The main goal for the Alignment Nashville teams at this point in their development is to build and sustain community support as stakeholders work towards achieving the long-term outcomes.

Charleston's Tri-County Cradle to Career Collaborative

A more recent Collective Impact effort has been initiated in the Charleston, South Carolina region. The Tri-County Cradle to Career Collaborative (TCCC) serves not only Charleston County, but also the neighboring counties of Berkeley and Dorchester. In a recent press release, TCCC proclaimed to be a community-wide movement focused on improving the quality of life of its citizens and its workforce through education by collectively aligning resources and working toward common goals (Tri-County Cradle to Career Collaborative, 2015, p. 1).

Like Cincinnati and Nashville, TCCC uses data and focused community collaboration across a continuum from "cradle-to-career" to build and implement strategies that will facilitate widespread systemic change. The overarching goals are increased student success and economic prosperity for the region. *As Anita Zucker, Chair and CEO of The InterTech Group, stated, "for the first time leaders from our region's top businesses, school systems, colleges and universities, foundations, not-for-profits and governments have agreed to align our efforts to ensure every child in the tri-county region will graduate from high school prepared for either further education or employment in the modern workforce" (*Tri-County Cradle to Career Collaborative, 2015, p. 2).

Just as successful Collective Impact models in Cincinnati and Nashville have utilized major players in the community to gain credibility, Charleston has followed suit. For example, based upon their ongoing commitment to early childhood development and their engagement with many organizations currently working in that sphere, Trident United Way was selected to serve as the convening partner for the Kindergarten Readiness network. Likewise, the Charleston Metro Chamber of Commerce, which has experience in working with workforce readiness and experiential learning opportunities in high school, was selected as the convening partner for the High School Graduation network.

A key focus for communities beginning to implement a Collective Impact model is figuring out who needs a seat at the table. For the TCCC, prominent local executives working in or retired from industry sit on the board and help to structure committee efforts within the organization. For example, Geoffrey L. Schuler, the Chairman of the World Trade Council and a retired Boeing Executive, serves as the

convener for the "math pathways" initiative, which aims to connect high school and college initiatives to prepare students for the modern workforce. Educators and senior administrators from five universities and four public school districts serving the Charleston area play a critical role on this collaborative team.

As is the case with other Collective Impact communities that are in the early stages of sustainability, the Tri-County Cradle to Career Collaborative (TCCC) began by determining its initial focus—kindergarten readiness and high school graduation rates—from a review of several data sources. The need for focused efforts around these two milestones was based upon the 2015 Regional Education Report, which indicated that 24% of local kindergarteners are not proficient in vocabulary and 40% are not proficient in social and emotional development. Although high school graduation rates have improved in recent years, the report also showed sharp contrasts in rates between racial/ethnic and socio-economic groups (Tri-County Cradle to Career Collaborative, 2015). TCCC has set ambitious long-term goals: to increase overall kindergarten readiness from 40% to 85% and to increase on-time high school graduation rates from 84% to 95% by 2025.

In order to achieve these goals, TCCC plans to align networks of support from educators, administrators and leaders from business, non-profit, civic, health, government, faith-based, and philanthropic organizations to analyze what's working well in and out of the classroom. Then, teams will begin to identify unmet needs and recommend strategies to grow or adapt existing programs or to develop new programs. As John Read, CEO of Tri-County Cradle to Career (TCCC) in Charleston, SC has stated, "TTCC is not a program, but a disciplined and data-based process of facilitation, supporting organizations that have

common interest and a need to work together if results are to be achieved" (personal communication, September 1, 2015).

What Does Collective Impact Mean for Superintendents?

As the initial reports from the Greater Cincinnati Strive Partnership and Alignment Nashville demonstrate, Collective Impact models have led to significant progress on a wide array of outcome measures. As a result of the growing interest in these reform efforts, superintendents in communities without functioning Collective Impact models may become interested in spearheading a large-scale community reform effort. However, after processing the mass synchronizations of numerous organizations, outcome measures, data sharing initiatives, and resources, questions start to emerge: Does my community have the resources to sustain a Collective Impact model? Who will organize or manage Collective Impact models in my community? Will my community members choose to participate? At this point, the path of least resistance for district and school leaders is to say, "This sounds great, but Collective Impact will never work in my environment."

The reality is that many school districts are already utilizing some of the strategies that make Collective Impact models so powerful. Although not all communities will have the resources to sustain a partnership that mirrors the efforts of Greater Cincinnati or Nashville, what they can do is involve all stakeholders to determine key outcome indicators. Just as successful Collective Impact partnerships have done, superintendents can work with partners to select a set of short-term (e.g., a 25% increase in college and career coaching programs) and long-term indicators (e.g., increasing high school graduation rates from 85% to 95%, ensuring that 90% of 3rd graders are on grade level). Then, partners can work together to

create a system for measuring, sharing, and tracking benchmark data.

We realize that we are not describing new concepts—most school districts have already established short- and long-term goals through strategic planning or the school renewal process. However, the key contribution of Collective Impact models is asking community members and leaders to play a key role in shaping goals and outcome measures. Prior to school leaders developing strategies to achieve these goals, the community must first agree on the desired results and plans.

After the indicators have been established, organizations or groups can align their resources to support school improvement efforts. For example, if a local church wants to have a hunger drive, the food could be distributed during the week of standardized testing to increase third-grade reading scores. Likewise, leaders of industry interested in recruiting and maintaining a 21st century workforce could coordinate with school leaders to track and monitor postsecondary attainment and retention rates. District leaders, with the help of coordinated volunteers, can manage these activities without an official Collective Impact label. The critical component of these efforts to build and sustain systemic change is to establish and monitor progress towards common goals.

Moving Forward

As with any burgeoning social improvement agenda, there are many questions left unanswered: What is the long-term prognosis for Collective Impact? How can we utilize existing resources and data sources to track the effectiveness of Collective Impact models? Which partners should (and can) take the lead role on particular initiatives, such as improving high school graduation rates? What is the role of individual families and community members? How do partners keep the momentum rolling on Collective Impact—ten, fifteen, and even fifty years after implementation?

Despite the barriers to implementation and sustained progress, the initial data from established Collective Impact partners present impressive evidence of the model's potential for moving the needle on a variety of indicators. Further, it is clear that in a world of increasing accountability and diminished resources, our children and our schools need every bit of support that they can get. For too long, schools have been both isolated and isolators. Collective Impact proposes a vision (and an organizational structure) that includes all stakeholders as essential components of social change. We believe that this represents a key step towards making schools and communities places in which all students can thrive.

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Using Whole School Cluster Grouping to Differentiate Instruction More Effectively in Elementary Schools: A Guide for Administrators and Teachers

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Abstract

Given the wide range of ability (academic, linguistic and cultural) in classrooms differentiated instruction is often difficult to manage. District and building level leadership can play an important role by providing the vision and support needed to implement Whole School Cluster Grouping (WSCG), the innovative scheduling approach described in this paper. This paper describes the wide variation in grouping practices across schools and the challenges that continue to exist when differentiated instruction is not managed with fidelity. It then describes how WSCG, a scheduling approach that was developed to serve gifted students, can be used to provide the "good stuff" to all students. Finally, it presents a three step process, with illustrative examples, that administrators and teachers can use to identify, manage, and evaluate the effectiveness of the approach.

Key Words

leadership, scheduling, grouping, differentiated instruction, elementary school

Ever since the demise of the one room schoolhouse educators have grappled with the best way to group students for effective teaching and learning. Even though learners progressed at varying rates administrators across the globe continue to group students by chronological age and grade level. In the United States students with exceptionalities are either evenly assigned to different classes to maintain a heterogeneous mix or grouped together because of labels that assume they share similar abilities. Because neither approach is ideal district and building administrators still have to identify the best way to harness the benefits of like ability grouping while maintaining a culture of learning that supports diversity.

This paper recommends that the Whole School Cluster Grouping approach (WSCG), where all students are assigned with some of their intellectual peers (clusters), yet still in a classroom that mirrors some of the variance present in the whole grade level, should be used to differentiate more effectively in elementary classrooms. The term WSCG has been used to distinguish it from the work of Gentry and Mann's (2008) *Total School Cluster Grouping* and Winebrenner and Brulles's (2009) *Schoolwide Cluster Grouping*, which have many similarities.

Rather than distinguish between the two approaches, it builds on the similarities and describes how building level leadership teams can work together to implement this approach. To provide context, the paper begins with a brief overview of popular grouping practices and how differentiated instruction is provided when like or varied ability grouping is employed. It then describes the origin of WSCG, which was initially devised to meet the needs of gifted students. It then outlines how teams that include administrators, teachers,

counselors, Title I instructors, and gifted support teachers can work together to create, manage and sustain cluster classrooms that support a higher level of differentiated instruction. It concludes with a description of how teams can evaluate the effectiveness of WSCG.

Considering Alternatives to Popular Grouping Practices: A Call to Action

While teachers in the United States are still responsible for making most of the decisions in their classrooms, administrators often decide initial student placement.

As soon as the population of a particular grade level reaches a tipping point with more than one section, administrators are faced with the decision of how to assign students in a way that will allow for the highest level of student success. Should classrooms be balanced so that all ability levels are represented, reducing the time that exceptional students can work with intellectual peers? Should classrooms include students who have been ranked in some way and grouped by similar abilities, resulting in some classes with a concentration of average students, others with highly able students, and still others with struggling students? If so, for how long? Should they be grouped together, all the time in every classroom, or grouped together some of the time (core) and then intermingled with their age-mate peers for classes like physical education or music? Grouping practices vary from school to school based on answers to these questions.

Given the wide variation in grouping practices across schools (Collins & Gan, 2013) it is important that district and school leaders evaluate the benefits and weakness of each approach and the extent to which consistency or autonomy should be given to building leaders across individual districts. While the former

could limit innovation, the latter could result in a backlash from parents who perceive one way is better than the other.

The literature on the benefits of like ability grouping is conflicted (Kulik & Kulik, 1984; Rogers, 1991; Slavin, 1986). Kulik and Kulik's work (1984) suggests that like-ability grouping supports gifted learners without adversely affecting the rest of the students. Slavin's (1986) synthesis of the literature, two years later, contradicted this work and suggested minimal and even negative improvement on academic achievement for whole classroom like-ability groups. Several years later Rogers' (1991) study of high ability learners revealed an increased effect size for achievement, as well as increase in positive self-concept, when grouped together for sustained periods.

Varied-ability grouping at the elementary level is supported in the literature as a viable grouping strategy that supports student achievement. With the release of No Child Left Behind in 1991 varied-ability grouping increased in popularity. It was presumed that this approach would reduce the growing achievement gap, a phenomenon that was emerging not only for students identified with a disability, but also with students from diverse backgrounds. Lou, Abrami, Spence, Poulsen, Chambers and Apollonia's meta-analysis of twelve studies (1996) shows that while student achievement overall was slightly higher for some homogeneous classrooms over heterogeneous, it was not the case in all studies and for all subgroups of students. Slonaker, a great proponent of varied-ability grouping, (2013) supports the elimination of "low level" math classrooms, which negatively affect historically underrepresented populations and are often placed in like-ability classrooms.

Informed by the literature described above, and the benefits and disadvantages outlined in Table 1, school administrators in the United States, over the last several decades, have grouped students either by like-ability or varied-ability, at the start of the school year.

Table 1

Benefits and Disadvantages of Like and Varied-Ability Grouping in Elementary Classrooms

Like-Ability Classroom		Varied-Ability Classroom	
Benefits	*Disadvantages*	*Benefits*	*Disadvantages*
Promotes whole class instruction, supporting a guaranteed and viable curriculum	Lack of Academic role models in lower ability classroom	Academic Role Models for struggling students	Varied sizes of within-class groups may make differentiation difficult to accomplish
Resources easier and more efficient to schedule	Sets up or maintains an achievement gap, teachers may have lower expectations for classes of lower ability	Microcosm of grade level range, providing broader picture of abilities to inform teacher expectations	Limits social interaction with like-ability peers when small numbers of like-ability peers exist
Long Term acceleration	Does not take into account a student's prior knowledge, assumes all learning is new	Balanced Abilities, more normal distribution	Acceleration is difficult to manage
Minimizes planning time for teacher	Less variability for social interaction over time	Supports Between Grade Grouping	Increases planning for the teacher
Allows students to work with intellectual peers	Sets up a potentially tracked secondary experience	Supports Within Class Grouping	Wide range of abilities, sometimes results in teaching to the middle

District leaders need to shift away from scheduling approaches that produce a "tracking effect" (Collins & Gan, 2013), which can be detrimental to student success (Betts & Shkolnik , 2000, Lavrijsen & Nicaise, 2016, Slonaker 2014,) in favor of approaches like WSCG, described in the section that follows, that align more closely with the following ELCC Standard Elements that were developed to guide the preparation and practice of district leaders:

> ELCC 2.1: Candidates understand and can advocate, nurture, and sustain a district culture and instructional program conducive to student learning through collaboration, trust, and a personalized learning environment with high expectations for students.
>
> ELCC 2.2: Candidates understand and can create and evaluate a comprehensive rigorous, and coherent curricular and instructional district program.
>
> ELCC 5.1: Candidates understand and can act with integrity and fairness to ensure a district system of accountability for every student's academic and social success. ELCC 5.5: Candidates understand and can promote social justice within the district to ensure individual student needs inform all aspects of schooling. (National Policy Board for Educational Standards, 2011)

WSCG is cost effective because the composition of classes can change without an investment of additional funds. District leaders who are committed to promoting academic and social success for all students could begin by identifying and supporting progressive building school leaders who are willing to pilot the approach. After evaluating the effectiveness of the approach they could consider deepen the impact of the innovative approach by implementing it across the district for systemic change.

WSCG: Understanding, Managing and Sustaining Cluster Classrooms

There is evidence to show that differentiation, while long hailed as beneficial practice for student learning, is difficult to manage in the elementary classroom when a wide range of abilities are present. This has prompted a large majority of administrators in the United States to experiment with two options: (1) grouping students by ability and providing teachers with training on how to work with specific like-ability groups or (2) varying the ability across all the classrooms and instructing teachers on how to differentiate instruction for all ability groups. WSCG marries both grouping practices by maintaining some diversity within a narrowed range.

Additionally, it gives administrators an opportunity to shift from grouping students by ability and aptitude data, to using achievement data that better informs instructional practice.

Understanding evolution of WSCG

There is evidence to show that successful implementation of differentiated instruction falls short, especially in terms of meeting the needs of high ability learners (Missett, Brunner, Callahan, Moon & Azano, 2014).

Students who are gifted may find themselves a "party of one or few" among the class, which decreases the likelihood teachers will make the investment in planning that is necessary. This, according to Tieso (2003),

results in independent exploration or low level drill and practice type activities. To minimize marginalization of the gifted learner administrators in the United States have experimented with different regrouping practices. The most prevalent is a pull-out service, a type of short term between-grade grouping option. It temporarily relocates gifted students during regular instructional time to engage in enrichment activities.

Administrators have also scheduled gifted learners together in a classroom for increased opportunities to work collaboratively during within class grouping. This practice increases the likelihood of implementing differentiation for the gifted learners and is referred to as cluster grouping.

Gates (2011) and Rogers (2007) describe a process where administrators group students of the highest ability (often just students identified as gifted), which could be a few students or a whole class, depending upon the percentage of students identified as gifted in a particular grade level. If the cluster was small enough, they could be paired with either above average ability students or a more heterogeneous group. Bear (1999) and Brulles (2005) found that either way proved successful for non-gifted learners when teachers received targeted professional development to implement strategies that would allow for acceleration and/or enrichment.

There is evidence to show that creating classes with lower levels of dispersion of scores or ability improves achievement outcomes for students (Collins & Gan, 2013). Schools that employ WSCG, minimize the occurrence of stratified classes by strategically scheduling clusters (groups) of students together to avoid a

total like-ability grouped classroom. Teachers can plan for differentiated instruction more effectively because they are focusing on fewer ability groups than typical in a traditional classroom. This approach eliminates the perceived social status or stigma of being grouped solely by label or similar ability and supports learning across multiple ability levels (Gentry & Mann, 2008; Winebrenner & Brulles, 2009).

Gates (2011) and Necciai (2013) support classrooms with a narrowed range without creating classrooms that are predominantly high or low ability cluster. In a WSCG model administrators facilitate a process where all students are assigned to a cluster at the end of the year that reflects their achievement level.

Table 2 illustrates how this can be done in a school with six sections of second grade; with each section accommodating 20 students. Cluster 5 represents the highest ability learner and 1 represents the lowest ability learners.

As evident from Table 2, even though the 120 second grade students have been grouped into five different ability group clusters (1, 2, 3, 4, & 5) each section/room includes only 3 of the 5 groups. The cluster with the highest population across the grade level, Cluster 3, is a part of every classroom. Each section/room has only one of the top two clusters (4 & 5) and one of the bottom two (1 & 2) clusters. Students of above average ability (4) are dispersed among classrooms without the highest ability level (1, 2, & 3) to work with like ability peers, as well as interact with lower achieving students. Low ability clusters (1 & 2) are interspersed with average (3) and above average clusters (4).

Table 2

WSCG: Sample Breakdown

Cluster/ Group	Room 1	Room 2	Room 3	Room 4	Room 5	Room 6	Total Students
5	6	4	0	0	0	0	10
4	0	0	4	6	4	4	18
3	9	10	12	10	10	8	59
2	5	6	4	4	0	0	19
1	0	0	0	0	6	8	14
	20	20	20	20	20	20	120

Note: Adapted from "The Cluster Grouping Handbook," by S. Winebrenner & D. Brulles, 2009, p. 14, Minneapolis, MN: Free Spirit Publishing.

Managing WSCG: Using a Three-Step Process to Create Cluster Classrooms

Based on the work of Gentry and Mann (2008), Gentry, Paul, McIntosh, Fugate and Jen (2014) and Winebrenner and Brulles (2009), who have contributed significantly to our understanding of the process, administrators can use a three step process. See Figure 1) described below to plan for WSCG.

Figure 1. Managing WSCG: using a three-step process to create cluster classrooms

Step 1: Administrators determine cluster identification

Cluster identification can be done in many different ways. Administrators can use the example presented in Table 3 to guide their thinking about cluster identification. Identification is often based on primary and secondary characteristics, which could be operationalized as students' abilities and academic performance.

Administrators can begin the process by identifying key pieces of data in both math and literacy at each grade level that will help inform cluster placement. The data must be discriminating enough to distinguish among the five ability levels. It is recommended that the data be a combination of benchmark and summative data, using diagnostic data only if necessary because of the time it takes to administer, and establish consistency across a district with multiple elementary buildings.

Administrators begin by defining the clusters that contain students who are the furthest outliers from the grade level mean.

As evident from Table 3 Cluster 5 includes students with the highest ability, strong in both math and literacy, and are most often likely to be gifted. Cluster 1 includes students with the most discrepant below grade level abilities in both math and literacy. This group also includes many students who may be identified with special needs (though not necessarily all).

By limiting the classrooms that have Clusters 1 and 5, often each about ten percent of the population, the administrator can allocate resources more efficiently to assure both clusters are getting additional support beyond the classroom teacher from specialized personnel.

Table 3

Cluster Identification Figure: An Example

Category	Primary Characteristics	Secondary Characteristics
Cluster 1: Far Below Average (M) and Below Average (R)	Struggling in math *and* reading	● Often students identified with a disability and have most intense needs ● Makes little progress, significant skill deficits in BOTH areas ● Struggles overall with work ethic, self-discipline, task commitment, and/or study skills
Cluster 2: Below Average (M) or Below Average (R)	Struggling in math *or* reading	● Few students identified with a disability but have less intense needs ● Makes progress, skill deficits significant in ONE area ● Struggles overall with work ethic, self-discipline, task commitment, and/or study skills
Cluster 3: Average	On Grade level. Making good annual progress in line with the standards	● Likely not to include identified students ● Makes good progress, struggles at times, but is capable of "catching back up" when setbacks occur with support from teachers, parents ● Somewhat consistent in work ethic, self-discipline, task commitment, and/or study skills
Cluster 4: Above Average (M) or Above Average (R)	Strong in math *or* reading	● Few students identified as gifted but with less intense needs ● Makes advanced progress in ONE subject Area ● Strong independent learner, high levels of task commitment, strong study skills, flexible thinker, makes connections among content areas, problem-solver
Cluster 5: Highest	Strong in math *and* reading	● Often students identified as gifted and have most intense needs ● Makes advanced progress in BOTH subject areas ● Strong independent learner, high levels of task commitment, strong study skills, flexible thinker, makes connections among content areas, problem-solver

Note: Based on the "Total school cluster grouping and differentiation," by M. Gentry, K.A. Paul, J. McIntosh, C.M. Fugate, & E. Jen, 2014, p. 32, Waco, TX: Prufrock Press.

As described above in Table 3, Clusters 2 and 4 represent a slightly larger portion of the grade level, and students may have more variance between their abilities in math and literacy. Cluster 4 is made up of students who are above average in either math or literacy, while Cluster 2 consists of students who are somewhat discrepant below grade level in either math or literacy.

It is helpful to document the areas that may be strength or a weakness if the grade level will have multiple sections comprised of Clusters 2 or 4. For example, it may be beneficial for a Cluster 4 student who has a relative strength in literacy to be clustered with other students who share this strength, as opposed to the Cluster 4 students who have a relative strength in math.

In the sample breakdown above, Table 2, there are four classrooms that have Cluster 2 students. To assist in planning for differentiation, it may be prudent to schedule the Cluster 2 students who have a designated weakness in math together and enlist some help, if available, of additional personnel. The end result is a strategic placement of students so that they can get both the benefits of a varied-ability classroom, and concentrated support that may be possible in a like-ability classroom.

Finally, the largest population of students (see Table 2) at any given grade level are the students of average ability from Cluster 3, which will be part of every classroom. The current high quality grade level curriculum and instruction is most likely the best fit for these students' needs.

Regardless of entering cluster number for any student, teachers practice consistent pre-assessment to monitor background knowledge and understanding on a unit by unit basis, so a student is not limited by an entering achievement level.

Administrators who require that pre-assessments align with unit objectives will allow teachers to determine if students need additional challenge or support in literacy or math throughout the year; this facilitates movement of students in and out of small groups for any given unit or task assignment.

Step 2: Teachers place students into cluster
Once administrators have defined the characteristics of students to be included in each cluster and identified extant data that can be used for decision making, it is time to engage teachers in the student placement process. This can be done in isolation by individual teachers or by a placement and scheduling team, using a collaborative grade level process. Either way, teachers assign students a cluster number based primarily on the characteristics defined for that cluster (see example presented in Table 3) as well as their professional opinion.

Next, the team considers extant datasets for literacy and math and, with administrative guidance, interprets how that data guides student placement. Ideally student data should support initial teacher placement, but if it does not then other factors should be discussed. If a teacher rates a student higher than the data suggests, and the choice is average, above average, or high above average, placement should be weighted more by teacher perception. When considering a low or below average placement (and data conflicts), the recommendation is to place the student where he/she is most likely to get support if needed. Placement within a cluster is not permanent, it can change annually, allowing student growth and maturation to occur.

Step 3: Scheduling teams create cluster classrooms

Elementary scheduling involves more than just classroom placement of students. A cadre of personnel is needed to provide supports to students with specialized needs (English Language learners, students in need of Title I services, Speech and Language support, etc.). Therefore, students' needs can be met more fully when building leadership teams drive the process.

Administrators may consider adding other specialists to the process, especially if they have access to information that will aid potential mid-year identifications (students for whom specially designed instruction is suddenly deemed necessary requiring additional services and/or personnel) or move-ins (new students). For example, administrators who include Counselors, Title I Instructors, and Gifted Support teachers, etc. can gain critical insight as to students who may not be identified yet, but may need services later in the following year. Teams that analyze move-in trends can anticipate "spaces" for incoming students that will maintain the integrity of the clustering.

One goal of WSCG is to assure student access to ability peer groups in each class. When dispersing clusters among the classrooms, careful consideration is given first to rooms with Clusters 1 and 5, and then the rest of the grade level is planned. In the example provided earlier (see Table 2) the administrator decides that the 120 students will be placed in six classrooms, with 20 students per classroom. In order to maintain strategic grouping there are only three possible cluster configurations. Table 4 below describes the possibilities. The first Classroom Type will have the lowest ability students, option two is a classroom with the highest ability cluster; and the final option, Classroom Type 3, has neither the highest or lowest ability group.

Table 4

Cluster Configurations

Classroom Type	Clusters
Type 1: Outlier Group with the Lowest Ability Level	**1**, 3, 4
Type 2: Outlier Group with the Highest Ability Level	2, 3, **5**
Type 3: No Outlier Groups	2, 3, 4

The number of sections that will have a Cluster 1 or 5 group will be depend upon the total number of students in that cluster in a grade level and/or the number of classrooms.

Table 5 below identifies the type of classroom configuration found in each room. Winebrenner and Brulles (2009) suggest a 3 to7 rule. As per this rule, if there are less than three students of a cluster, they are all placed together, if there are more than seven they can be assigned to two classes which is illustrated in

Table 5 for Rooms 1 and 2. Gentry, et.al (2014) suggest an alternative approach. They recommend that administrators use percentages to guide the number of sections include Clusters 1 or 5.

For example, in a grade level that has five sections, one classroom might have all of the highest cluster and one section would have all of the lowest cluster. In their version of the model, cluster groups 1 and 5 within a classroom can be higher in number.

Table 5

Sample Breakdown with Cluster Configuration

Cluster	Room 1	Room 2	Room 3	Room 4	Room 5	Room 6	Total students
5	6	4	0	0	0	0	10
4	0	0	4	6	4	4	18
3	9	10	12	10	10	8	59
2	5	6	4	4	0	0	19
1	0	0	0	0	6	8	14
	20	20	20	20	20	20	120
	Type 2	Type 2	Type 3	Type 3	Type 1	Type 1	
	2. 3. **5**	2. 3. **5**	2. 3. 4	2. 3. 4	**1**. 3. 4	**1**. 3. 4	

Note: Adapted from "The Cluster Grouping Handbook," by S. Winebrenner & D. Brulles, 2009, p. 14, Minneapolis, MN: Free Spirit Publishing.

Once Clusters 1 and 5 are placed, administrators and teacher teams determine if further delineations of Clusters 2 and 4 are possible or necessary.

When grade levels are larger, and allow for more classes that have Clusters 2 and 4, considering the predominant strength or weakness may help group students more effectively for differentiated instruction and allow for additional support or challenge where it is needed the most (math vs. literacy). If numbers are too small for multiple sections, grouping by cluster number alone is recommended.

Finalizing an individual student's placement in classrooms and communicating how this is accomplished should be done with care. Administrators and teachers may transfer students between classrooms under special circumstances, based on behavior concerns or to provide access to related services.

To ensure that each classroom retains the right mix of students in the different clusters, changes should be made only between students who share the same cluster numbers. While it is acceptable to provide parents with information about how classrooms are scheduled, scholars recommend that administrators and teachers emphasize the temporal nature and purpose for the clusters number (Gentry et.al, 2014; Winebrenner & Brulles, 2009).

If administrators entertain requests from parents, they should only consider changes that will not adversely affect the diversity in each classroom. Administrators who have experimented successfully with WSCG recommend new students be assured temporary placement on the first day of attendance, but

finalized only after data has been collected, if necessary, and analyzed.

Cluster determination is used for scheduling, and, once completed it should be eliminated from the record. Subsequently, teachers should use more current and frequently collected data to focus on where students are functioning in relation to current unit or lesson level objectives, in order to support differentiation for all levels of learners.

Sustaining WSCG: supporting students and teachers

While differentiation has been a mainstay of professional development sessions, implementation is often difficult. Tomlinson (2010) identified five non-negotiables that must be part of any successful differentiated classroom: supportive learning environment, high quality core curriculum, on-going formative assessment, flexible grouping, and respectful tasks. This does not change with WSCG, but is actually made easier. Brulles and Winebrenner (2009) and Gentry et.al (2014) indicate that teachers in schools where WSCG is employed, can focus on the five non-negotiables more easily because of decreased ability range. Additionally, with a narrowed range, administrators can provide teachers with professional development that helps them to focus on the specific techniques that support the learners in their classrooms.

For example, they can provide teachers with professional development on strategies like Most Difficult First or Alternative Tasks that increase complexity if they have Cluster 4 or 5 students in their classrooms (Brulles, cited in Azzam, 2016). Similarly, they can provide teachers who have Cluster 1 or 2 students with professional development on targeted interventions like direct and explicit instruction in more discrete literacy skills.

In the long term, administrators should provide teachers with training on how to work with all students, regardless of the types of clusters they have been assigned (Brulles 2005; Gentry & Owen, 1999; Necciai, 2013).

District and School Leaders' Role in Evaluating Effectiveness of WSCG

The goal of WSCG is to maximize learning for all students while minimizing or even eliminating any negative consequences. While exceptional students still may require additional supports, the process for identifying them is time consuming, a strain on available resources, and can result in non-identification. Without identification, potentially exceptional students are prevented access to additional scaffolds, supports or challenge.

With WSCG, schools are no longer saving the "good stuff" for just identified students. Instead teachers provide rich, varied, and supported learning opportunities that promote a growth mindset in all students. For continuous improvement district and school administrators and teachers may consider partnering with universities to design evaluative action research that focusses on the following:

● Developing systematic procedures to evaluate the composition of clusters annually. Necciai's (2013) four-year study which focused on teacher perceptions involving three elementary schools in a large, urban district confirmed that the number of high and above average learners actually increased while lower ability students decreased after revisiting cluster placement. Additionally, standardized tests revealed overall student growth.

● Monitoring teacher practices by establishing a concrete set of expectations for classroom management and lesson plan design. Monitoring implementation encourages teachers to collaboratively plan, individually

self-reflect, and offer peer-to-peer observations.

● Designing and implementing action research or experimental studies to determine if student achievement is being enhanced. Using a case study approach and action research involving 3,716 students, Brulles et.al (2012) and Peters, Brulles, and Saunders (2012) found that when cluster grouping was employed growth was similar for gifted and non-gifted math students. Substantial pre and post-test math results showed increases for all grades studied (2-8) and increases were realized whether students were placed in a class with a gifted cluster or not.

Conclusion

Popular grouping practices in the United States have evolved over the last few decades as differentiated instruction became more popular.

This paper describes how WSCG, which began as a strategy to support gifted students, can used to differentiate instruction across a wide range of ability groups in a thoughtful and purposeful manner.

The three step process, described in this paper, helps to reduce the range of diversity in each class by limiting it to three clusters, as opposed to five.

In addition to eliminating the perceived social status or stigma of being grouped solely by label or similar ability it supports learning across multiple ability levels.

More importantly, the narrower range provides students in each classroom with access to academic, linguistic and cultural diversity. It also it makes it easier for teachers to manage differentiated instruction.

The success of this scheduling approach will rest on administrators and teachers' ability

to work together to identify, manage, and evaluate the effectiveness of cluster grouping on an ongoing basis. Continue improvement can be built into the process by partnering with universities to design evaluative and/or action research that evaluates the outcomes of cluster grouping for all students.

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Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis

Written by Robert Putnam
Reviewed by Art Stellar

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Some authors are good at telling stories. Some provide solid content adding to the knowledge base. A few enable their readers to draw meaningful conclusions from their work. This author, Robert Putnam, does all three in a highly readable book that brings into focus the impact of economic inequality and related national trends, much like his seminal work *Bowling Alone*.

Our Kids is a great book for educators who observe these trends every day as it will enable them to understand what is happening and why it is occurring. Sociologists and others interested in public policy will find meaning in the demographic movements, especially related to socioeconomic implications. Local, state, and Federal educational policy makers and lawmakers should read this book to gain an appreciation for the complexity of the widening of class inequity as it influences individuals, families, and communities.

Putnam reveals a country divided by a society that is becoming increasingly two tiered without a significant or viable middle class. The number of families in poverty, per traditional definitions, is steadily getting larger. Ironically, the number of families considered to be well-off is also slowly expanding. The gap between these upper-class families and the truly economic elites is widening. The gap between the poor and the really wealthy has never been greater, according to the numerous statistics presented throughout this book. Some analysts consider race and ethnic background to be the drivers of this trend. This author acknowledges the correlation of race and ethnic background with one's future socioeconomic status, although he views the primary causal factor for success as family income. Achieving the American Dream of improving one's status in life has become nearly out-of-reach for those living in poverty.

Historically in the United States, education and hard work were viewed as the roads to a better life. Working harder is still an overall key, except the lower one starts on the economic ladder, the more difficult it is to reach the middle rungs, let alone the top. There are only so many hours in a day and menial labor jobs are fewer and fewer with income often only covering expenses. Hard work was and is more of a factor for those in the shrinking middle class or in the upper financial levels than those in the lower income levels.

From the days of Horace Mann, and perhaps earlier, education has been the recognized best path for realizing the American

Dream. Possessing a high school diploma has become a minimum requirement for most jobs. A college degree has been the real ticket to success, although that that is less true today than decades past. Nevertheless, education remains a viable means for reaching success in this country.

Completing high school is more of a struggle for the poor, as dropout figures show. Being accepted into a college program, paying for college, and graduating is more of a burden for many families of limited means. Thus, education, while still a launching pad, is less accessible for those in poverty. The poor must deal with multiple distractors to getting a good education.

And it is not just money; it is also the lack of support systems that encourage educational advancement. While money can buy tutors, pay for tuition, etc., there have also been friends, family and community norms that were prevalent in the past that have helped students overcome barriers. The author shows in individual case studies and from scholarly research that such support systems for the promotion of education are eroding across the country, especially for those living in poverty.

The author begins with his own high school graduating class in Port Clinton, Ohio—a rather typical small Midwest town. He documents the transition of a place where when he was growing up economic class did not permanently determine an individual's projected path in life.

Community residents were mindful of the needs of others and everyone monitored the children. Parents expected their offspring to have better lives than they experienced. These attributes did not dominate Port Clinton as he returned as a scholar/author.

He found that the gap between those with money and those just getting by had widened with less contact between these two segments of society in what was still a small town. Families had become more fragile. Community spirit had dissipated. Besides reviewing the overall picture of Port Clinton, he sought answers by intense examination of a few individual students representing different layers of the community.

This approach is what makes his book come alive to the reader. He is an exceptional writer who describes his subjects in a way which relates their human struggles and captures the attention of the reader who wants to know what happens next.

Sprinkled throughout the text are quotes, statistics and graphics demonstrating that the various trends in Port Clinton parallel the rest of the country. However, to ensure that Port Clinton is not an anomaly, he invokes his research and writing style practices in several other places across the United States—Bend, Oregon; Atlanta, Georgia; Orange County, California; and two economic divergent communities in the Philadelphia area.

Starting with Port Clinton, his focus was on Families, then in order: Parenting, Schooling, and Community in the order of the communities.

Putnam has done an excellent job of providing solid content and captivating personal accounts to construct a view that as income gaps have grown, more and more children have less opportunity for achieving the American Dream.

Unlike many others with a political agenda, he does not suggest that the wealthy are villains striving to keep the masses at bay.

Instead he suggests that all people have similar pragmatic concerns about helping their own. What is missing is the cultural glue and support mechanisms that assist everyone regardless of class.

The author, in describing his own ascent from a modest background, credits hard work and education as influencing factors. He admits that his own personal view, before this research project, was: "If I and my classmates could climb the ladder, I assumed, so could kids from modest backgrounds today. Having finished this research, I know better." (p. 230) In the opinion of this reviewer, that's the feeling he is trying to stir among the readers of this book.

Chapter six has the vexing title "What Is to Be Done?". There is a plethora of programs offered about what could be done. Some have results. Some have promise. What is missing is an over-arching framework or alignment that connects the dots between the problems, outlined so well in the first five chapters, with researched solutions.

The last page reminds us of the individualist tradition in America contrasted with the also popular and more generous communitarian tradition in this country. The author's last words are these: "…America's poor kids do belong to us and we to them. They are our kids." (p. 261)

This last statement and the entire book will resonate with superintendents and educators everywhere, as well as parents and school board members. It would make a great gift for motivating group discussions, especially if the conversations centered upon the question of "What Is To Be Done?"

Reviewer Biography

Art Stellar is vice-president of the National Education Foundation and CyberLearning. He is also a consultant with Cenergistic the leading energy conservation company helping schools save energy dollars. Stellar has received three of AASA top awards: "Distinguished Service Award", "Dr. Effie Jones Humanitarian Award "for promoting diversity and reducing equity gaps and "Leadership for Learning" for advancing student achievement and reducing gaps between student subgroups. He has served as a superintendent for 25 years and became a life member of AASA in 1972. The Horace Mann League elected him president, as did ASCD and the North American Chapter of the International Society for Curriculum and Instruction. He can be reached at artstellar@yahoo.com or at 828-764-1785.

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Below are themes and areas of interest for publication cycles.
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10. Curriculum and instruction
11. School reform policies
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Length of manuscripts should be as follows: Research and evidence-based practice articles between 2,800 and 4,800 words; commentaries between 1,600 and 3,800 words; book and media reviews between 400 and 800 words. Articles, commentaries, book and media reviews, citations and references are to follow the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association*, latest edition. Permission to use previously copyrighted materials is the responsibility of the author, not the *AASA Journal of Scholarship and Practice*.

Potential contributors should include in a cover sheet that contains (a) the title of the article, (b) contributor's name, (c) terminal degree, (d) academic rank, (e) department and affiliation (for inclusion on the title page and in the author note), (f) address, (g) telephone and fax numbers, and (h) e-mail address. Authors must also provide a 120-word abstract that conforms to APA style, six to eight key

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- City, state: publisher, year; page; price
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Spring	October 1	January 1	February 15	April 1
Summer	February 1	April 1	May 15	July1
Fall	May 1	July 1	August 15	October 1
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Additional Information

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