Renfroe Middle School Gifted Delivery Models  
Frequently Asked Questions

What caused the change in the delivery model? Were advanced content classes not “working”?

The issue of determining the best delivery model for gifted service has been a topic of interest in Decatur for quite some time. Five years ago, a system-wide stakeholders group studied the issue. At that time, it was proposed to eliminate the advanced content classes to better balance all the classes. At that time we did not have enough gifted endorsed teachers to provide any other model. We underwent an effort to increase our capacity to serve gifted students and offer gifted endorsement courses in the system. As more teachers engaged in this training, we have been able to offer more cluster group service. Over the years there has remained a concern about the effectiveness of the advanced content courses. Student surveys have indicated concerns about the level of work in these courses being very similar to every other course. With the addition of MAP data we have been able to study the efficacy of each delivery model more systematically.

In an analysis of MAP scores for students served in Advanced Content and cluster groups last year for math, reading and English language arts, there was no significant difference in the meeting or exceeding of growth targets for students in any math, language or reading in any of the three grades. Students grew equally in both groups. From this analysis, we concluded that the instruction delivered through Advanced Content classes was no more effective than that delivered through content clusters. By eliminating the advanced content classes, we could greatly improve the composition of all the other content classes. This yields benefits to gifted students for the majority of their day. Therefore, the decision to eliminate Advanced Content in order to offer balanced clusters, collaboration and acceleration in math was based on the fact that we thought the latter models would be more effective overall and offer our gifted students increased benefit and service for their entire school day.

Will Collaboration classes replace Bridges?

No, the Gifted Services Program at the middle and high school is called BRIDGES. Similar to Links, this name symbolizes connections that gifted students will need to make the journey of their educational experience meaningful. Both names are symbolic of the need that gifted students present for extension of learning beyond what is appropriate for typical students of the same age/grade.

How many gifted identified students will be in each Collaboration class?

Six to eight.

Which teacher is accountable when a student is in a collaboration class?

Both teachers share responsibility for providing differentiation, but ultimately, the classroom teacher is the teacher of record.

Will we have cluster groups in multiple classes?
Yes. There will be cluster groups available in all core classes: English Language Arts, Humanities, Math and Science. Students will be assigned to clusters based on their identified area of giftedness. Non-gifted-identified students will also have the opportunity to participate in cluster activities if they wish to do so.

**Why not do accelerated classes in all subject areas?**

Math is a unique subject in that the content changes each year and actually builds one year to the next. If a student has already mastered the content for a particular year before that year even starts, then it is a logical move to let the student move ahead to the next chunk of content. Differentiating in math can involve giving students increasingly complex problems involving the same concept, but ultimately, if a child has mastered the concept at its highest level, their next move should be acceleration.

Other subjects do not lend themselves as well to this same model. English Language Arts (ELA) standards are iterative and barely change in content or substance from one year to the next in middle school. Teachers can differentiate the content, products and processes involved in ELA classes by varying the level of complexity for reading, writing and speaking assignments. But the “content”—the genres of writing and literature and the conventions—do not change from year to year. Social studies and science do not lend themselves to acceleration because both introduce completely new content each year, from world studies to GA history to physical, earth and life science. Skipping an entire year of one of these subjects would mean students miss an entire segment of pre-requisite knowledge, skill and understanding that they will need to succeed in upper level history and science courses.

**Can we not leave out students in the Acceleration model if they have siblings?**

The issue of whether or not students have siblings in the same or the next grade is just one of the many factors that the IOWA Acceleration Scale takes into consideration in helping a group make the best decision for a child. We will use the scale with fidelity and therefore must consider this issue as a critical item.

**Is clustering good for all students?**

Yes. Clustering is a viable delivery model for gifted services and for all students provided that the teachers employing the model use best practices in differentiation. In an effort to support our teachers in their efforts at providing differentiated instruction for all students in their classes, CSD has subsidized gifted endorsement for all teachers who sought it this year at RMS and other CSD schools. RMS currently has more gifted endorsed teachers than any other school in the district and has more teachers enrolled to complete the endorsement this year. For those teachers who are not already gifted certified, we are providing a full-time collaboration support teacher to assist with differentiation in math and ELA.

**How will clustering be done? What are the criteria for participating in the clusters in each subject?**
Cluster groups of gifted-identified students will be present in every class on a team. With the number of gifted-identified students currently at RMS, this approximates to 6 - 8 students in each class. Our average class size is approximately 17 students, so the majority of students in any given class will be either gifted-identified or high-achieving. There is not a criteria for participating in the cluster group. All gifted identified students will be grouped such that a cluster of gifted identified students exists in each class. Teachers may opt to offer this differentiation to any student that demonstrates the ability to participate. This model is very inclusive.

Has the cluster model been used before?

Yes. The cluster model is currently one of the delivery models used at RMS in all four subjects and in all CSD elementary schools. In the elementary schools, the bulk of gifted services are delivered through cluster and collaborative models in heterogeneously grouped classrooms.

What is the difference between clusters, last year and this?

There will be more evenly distributed clusters and a gifted collaborator will be added to provide resources and support. Cluster grouping is one of the two models we used for gifted delivery last year. This year we will add the collaboration model and an option for acceleration in math.

How is being served in clusters not “less” than being served in an Advanced Content class?

This question rests on two shaky assumptions. Assumption 1: That Advanced Content classes have a separate curriculum from the rest of the classes at RMS. In Math and English Language Arts, both classes are based in the exact same standards as the rest of the courses at RMS. Where these classes were differentiated to include more complex reading content, math problems, projects, assessments, etc., those same options were made available to students being served in clusters and to high achieving students who are not officially identified “gifted.” Therefore, insofar as there is Advanced Content at RMS, students will continue to receive it through their cluster groupings. Assumption 2: Advanced Content placement is sufficient differentiation for gifted students. Advanced Content classes do not automatically differentiate for the needs of the students enrolled in them. Even in a group of students identified with strengths in a certain subject, there exists a wide range of abilities, learning styles and interests among the students. Teachers differentiate in these classes just as they do with cluster groups. Our new math model will allow a number of students who were previously being served in Advanced Content to accelerate at the pace they’re capable of. It is the overwhelming consensus of the math teachers that the rest of the students who would have been served in Advanced Content will be even better served in a cluster grouping with other peers (both gifted and non-gifted) who share a strength in that area but are not ready to accelerate an entire grade level.

Isn’t there variability in how well teachers are able to differentiate for students’ learning? How can we better control for this variability?
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Yes. Variability in teacher effectiveness is a factor that extends beyond just instructional know-how. Student and parent satisfaction with their teachers can vary based on teacher personality, his or her ability to motivate or engage students, his or her classroom management style, or even the parents’ or students’ expectations for what a class should look like.

Teachers at RMS and all our schools vary in all of these areas. In terms of pedagogical effectiveness, though, teachers at RMS are well-equipped to differentiate for their students. In the last four years, several changes have taken place at RMS to facilitate the ability of all teachers to effectively differentiate instruction:

1. 40% of RMS teachers have obtained the gifted endorsement. Teachers successfully completed five college-level courses in order to be endorsed. The decision to have teachers pursue gifted endorsement was based on the belief that training in differentiation (a major principle of gifted instruction) would benefit all students at RMS.

2. The implementation of the International Baccalaureate framework has increased teachers’ effectiveness in differentiation in a number of ways. First, teachers in an IB school (and hence, RMS) are expected to teach common units at grade level subjects. This expectation has translated into common collaborative planning time (90 minutes per day) for all teachers at RMS. Two days per week of planning time are set aside for same-subject pairs to plan together, and many teacher pairs spend even more time than this collaborating to create common lessons, assignments and assessments. Collaborative planning greatly increases the quality of instruction because teachers share ideas for differentiation and collaborate to create those products jointly. Teachers have also been allotted in the past two years five full days of vertical planning (facilitated by the IB Coordinator/instructional coach) in which subject-area teachers collaborate to vertically align the curriculum in order to ensure that the complexity of student work and the expectations for student work increase over time. This helps to eliminate repetition across multiple years and helps to establish criteria for excellence and proficiency in and across subjects.

The IB framework demands a level of rigor and relevance in work that might not exist without it. Conceptual lenses are used to focus units and create interdisciplinary connections for students. IB assessment tasks for each unit in each subject have IB-developed criteria that must be met by all students, but they allow for variation between basic, proficient, good, very good and excellent work. What’s more, IB demands that assessment tasks be open-ended, allowing students multiple ways to show what they know, what they understand, and what they can do. Differentiation by learning style and interest is embedded in almost all IB assessment tasks.

3. The addition of staff to support instructional planning and implementation began with hiring a full-time instructional coach four years ago. With the adoption of the IB framework, the coach became the instructional coach/IB coordinator, and this support position assists all teachers in planning and implementation of the Georgia Performance Standards (the curriculum) and the IB framework. She spent years teaching gifted middle and high school students, as well as undergraduates who were aspiring secondary teachers. In addition, she worked for four years at the Talent Identification Program (TIP) at Duke University both as an instructor and an on-site administrator in their London
program. She’s also coordinated gifted services in middle and high schools where she’s taught. The instructional coach has, therefore, a long history of commitment to serving the needs of gifted students. She also spent four years conducting educational research at the Learning Systems Institute at Florida State University, particularly in content area literacy. The job of the coach/coordinator is to help support the teachers in delivering high quality instruction for all students, and her background experiences equip her to assist through planning, modeling and coordination of differentiated instruction.

The addition of a full-time gifted collaborator (see other questions related to collaborative model) for next year will further increase the level of support that teachers receive in planning and delivering differentiated instruction.

4. The introduction of MAP data has greatly impacted the ways in which teachers are able to view their classes for purposes of differentiating by readiness. All content area teachers use MAP reading data to differentiate the reading content in their classes. $10,000 worth of “leveled” reading resources for science and social studies were purchased last year to support teachers in this effort. Digital resources like World Book Explorer and Netrekker allow teachers to generate differentiated readings with a few keystrokes. Media specialists and the coach/coordinator assist teachers in pulling together these resources as needed for units. ELA teachers also differentiate novel studies by both interest and reading level, and thousands of dollars have been spent in the last several years expanding our offerings of ELA fiction and nonfiction titles.

5. The introduction two years ago of Response to Intervention (RtI)—a decision-making framework for supporting students though individualized intervention and data collection to monitor progress—has demanded that all teachers gain new skills in providing and documenting differentiated instruction for students in their classrooms.

6. Finally, the new teacher evaluation system that we will use in CSD next year requires that every teacher have a Professional Growth Plan for the year that has three goals for professional growth, one set by the district, one set by the individual teacher. RMS’s school goal for individual teachers is as follows: “I can use diagnostic, formative and summative assessments to plan for differentiated instruction.” Teachers are required to provide evidence of consistently differentiated instruction by way of classroom observations (both formal and informal, by internal and external evaluators), lessons plans, and examples of student work.

Does RMS believe that gifted students should get different and not more work?

A resounding yes! At the core of our school’s belief is that “different” is the heart of differentiation. More is just more. Traditionally, though, parents and schools have often equated more with better: more homework, more words on vocabulary lists, more math problems, more grammar in isolation, etc. were thought to equal more rigor. These ideas have been soundly trounced in the educational research of the past fifty years, and RMS already employs practices that reflect our belief in what research and professional expertise tell us. We assign homework judiciously (reading and practice in math that’s already been “taught” every night, other classes as appropriate) because the best
research on HW indicates that more than an hour per night for middle school does not increase student achievement but can increase family conflict and decrease students’ motivation to engage in school. We try to coordinate across teams when projects or writing assignments are due so that students are not overloaded with multiple at-home assignments at once.

In classes, differentiated content is “different,” not “more.” That said, if a student is given a more complex task or assessment by his teacher as part of a gifted contract, it will, by definition, demand more of the student intellectually than the assignment that is deemed more suitable for students who aren’t as capable. Therefore, students who are unwilling or unmotivated to “stretch” themselves with more complex tasks may have the feeling that they are having much demanded of them.

**How will Collaboration be done?**

The gifted collaboration teacher, Ms. Sullivan, will work with ELA and math teachers who are not already gifted endorsed. She will work with one math teacher at each grade level and one ELA teacher at each grade level. Since both math and ELA teachers collaborate to plan units and lessons at all three grade levels, by extension, Ms. Sullivan will work to plan, gather resources, and assist in small group instruction for 12 total teachers. Her focus this year will be on ELA and math because these are the two areas in which our gifted students have indentified strengths. Our focus this year is on developing units for both ELA and math that have clearly differentiated processes, products, and content for the cluster groups. Once these units are developed and resources gathered, the goal is for Ms. Sullivan to begin work next year with the science and social studies teachers.

We will also contract with Carol McCullough, former gifted coordinator in the City Schools of Decatur, to help Ms. Sullivan and the teachers develop the resource toolboxes, tiered lessons and other materials needed to provide systematic differentiation across these classes.

**How will separate lesson plans look?**

Teachers will systematically plan their lessons to address the goals that they set for individual gifted students in their student contracts. During the first few weeks of school, the gifted collaborator will meet with each student to identify personal goals for the year. She will also contact the parents to communicate what the student identified goals are and discuss the parents goals for their child. All of this information will be used to develop a contract that will guide the differentiation and lesson planning for the year. For example, if a student wants to grow in their ability to write, then the teacher will plan for him or her to be able to create products that involve writing.

**What is the plan for the students who cross the street to the high school?**

The group of 12 - 14 students who will go to the high school four days per week to take Accelerated Math I will be escorted initially by an RMS adult as they cross the tracks to go to the high school. If the students need to cross back over the tracks to come back to RMS for sports, clubs, walking home with friends, etc., the crossing guard will be on duty to assist them. Attendance is taken each day using a common reporting system in Infinite Campus. If a student is reported “absent” in the system
by the receiving teacher and that student was not absent earlier in the day at RMS, someone from RMS will immediately be dispatched to investigate the whereabouts of the student. If we find that a student deliberately used this opportunity to “skip” school, it could jeopardize his or her chance at continued participation.

**Will there be only 8th graders in the Accelerated Math I class or ninth graders, too?**

DHS has reserved a number of slots in one period for us next year. All of the 8th graders coming from RMS will be in that same class. There may also be some ninth grade students in that class. Similarly, the students who are being accelerated in grades six and seven will be attending classes with students a grade higher chronologically.

**If my child did not meet the criteria set, and I have not been contacted, is there any way to request my child being accelerated?**

No. We set the criteria using multiple measures and selected the very highest math students. If your child did not meet the criteria, they did not meet the criteria.

If you are interested in acceleration for your child, there is a process in the [pupil progression plan](#) that involves the regular classroom teacher collecting data on your child's classroom performance, conducting and monitoring specific interventions in the general classroom prior to discussing the possibility of completing the IOWA acceleration scale. The entire process takes about six months from the first documented intervention in the classroom to having the appropriate data to make the decision. Please refer to the [pupil progression plan](#) for the details of this process.

**Have we asked the kids what they think about their gifted services?**

Yes, we have. We survey all of the gifted-identified students each year to gauge their satisfaction with the instructional experiences they’re having in both Advanced Content and cluster settings. The middle school surveys indicate many perceptions, including: many students do not want more work, some students want more work, many students don’t think their advanced content class is any different than the regular classes, many students enjoy the challenges that their teachers give them via contract in cluster groups (although some do not want this additional work), and many students would like more interesting electives. A more comprehensive analysis will be available in the fall.

**How is MAP data used? Do we use multiple measures to determine placement? Why so many measures?**

MAP data is one of several measures that we use to make decisions for students at RMS. The criteria for math acceleration include multiple MAP administrations, multiple CRCT administrations, and an IOWA Acceleration Scale (which includes student interview, parent interview, teacher interview, and IQ test). Identification for gifted services has always used multiple measures, and one of those (ITBS) was replaced by MAP. Many parents in the SLT listening session expressed concern that a single
measure was being used to determine placement. In CSD and at RMS, we never use less than three pieces of data to support any major decision about the best course of action for a student.

Still others, though, wondered about why so many measures are needed to make the decision about accelerated math. Best practice in education (and most other fields that require decision-making) dictates that multiple measures be used to “triangulate” the data in order to make a sound inference about what it tells you about a student. Multiple achievement measures (MAP, CRCT, classroom assessments) are available to us, so we use them all to help us paint a picture of a student’s strengths or weaknesses. What’s more, there are other factors (maturity, commitment, motivation) that impact student performance, and these factors aren’t captured by traditional achievement assessments. We are committed to making the best decisions for our students, ones that neither they nor their parents and teachers will regret. To do that, multiple sources of data are necessary.

Has MAP changed in significance? How do we set goals for MAP scores?

MAP replaced ITBS as the nationally-normed achievement test that we give all of our students each year. It has no more significance than ITBS did in terms of making gifted placement decisions. However, MAP has several major advantages over other assessments that we use in measuring student achievement, so it has become the most important standardized assessment for teachers of math, ELA and other subjects in determining the best instructional plan for their students. The biggest difference between MAP and other assessments (like CRCT) is that it measures growth over time, and growth is the goal for every student every year. By administering MAP multiple times per year and over multiple years, we gain clarity regarding how students are growing as a result of our instructional programs.

Goal-setting in MAP has become an important way for teachers to help students begin to take ownership of their own learning. We not only share students’ MAP data with them, we have them set goals for their own growth and plan strategies for how they’ll attain those goals. Every student has an expected growth target each year based on their initial fall score. Depending on where a student starts, expected growth can vary anywhere from 2 RIT to 15 RIT. The expected growth is calculated based on fall to spring growth, so after students take the MAP in winter, they review their scores to see if they are on track to meet their target for the year. If a student has already met or exceeded his yearly target by winter, he may decide to set a new, more ambitious goal. Likewise, if a student has “dipped” he talks to his teacher about why that may have happened and strategizes for how to make his goal for yearly growth. Since MAP goals are differentiated by student, goal-setting helps students to focus on their own growth rather than comparing themselves to other students. Furthermore, conferencing and goal-setting afford teachers the opportunity to talk with each child about his or her learning in a structured way.