

# **Wavelength**

*A newsletter for advocates of gifted children in Florida*

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## ***Questions about Gifted? Ask an Expert!***

You are invited to participate in *FGN Experts Online* from January 26 to 31 with author and consultant **Carolyn Coil**.

*Experts Online* will feature national and statewide experts in educating and parenting gifted learners who will be available to answer your questions at scheduled times throughout the year. Simply visit FGN Forums and post your questions to the *Experts Online* section. Our visiting professional will be happy to provide answers.

The first Expert Online is Carolyn Coil, educational consultant and author with Pieces of Learning ([www.piecesoflearning.com](http://www.piecesoflearning.com)), a leading publisher of resources for the gifted. In addition to being a well-known author and consultant, Carolyn has strong ties to Florida and has been a long time consultant to and friend of FGN. See her article on *Flexible Grouping* on the cover of this issue.

This first session of *Experts Online* is open to anyone who registers for the FGN forums and is appropriate for both parents and teachers. Most of the future EOL sessions will be available only for members of FGN.

Information on upcoming *Experts Online* will be "advertised" through the FGN newsletters, website, forum page, and sent out to those who are subscribed to the *FGN Alert*.

Contact Terry Wilson for any questions or suggestions regarding *Experts Online* at:

[twilson@floridagiftednet.org](mailto:twilson@floridagiftednet.org).

# ***Flexible Grouping: It's More Than Just Moving Their Seats!***

***By Carolyn Coil, Educational Consultant***

## **Why Flexible Grouping?**

Parents often ask me what they should look for when evaluating a good classroom and learning environment for their gifted child. While there are many answers to this question, one of the major indicators is the use of flexible grouping. This is one of the strategies your child's teacher should be using every day. It is a basic teaching strategy for differentiating instruction.

Why do children need to be grouped for instruction? The realistic answer is that individualizing for every student in every subject area every day is simply not feasible. Therefore, one of the best and most practical ways to differentiate is through flexibly grouping students in a variety of ways, changing groupings as learning needs dictate. Even if your child is in a class designated as advanced, honors or gifted, the class may still have children with differing abilities, learning styles and needs. For this reason, all teachers need to use the flexible grouping strategy.

When using this strategy, teachers should think of any instructional group as changeable, not permanent. Flexible grouping means planning for students to work together in a variety of ways and configurations depending on the classroom activity and desired learning outcomes.

One key to flexible grouping is to make sure students aren't in the same group for every classroom activity. When this happens, students can easily become categorized into the 'smart group', the 'dumb kids', the 'nerds', etc. The danger in grouping without much flexibility is that students get into one group and stay there, even when the group is inappropriate for their needs. Sometimes it is easier for teachers to keep students in the same groups for a long period of time. However, doing this usually isn't the best strategy for meeting individual needs.

Successfully grouping students so that learning is enhanced does not happen automatically! It takes planning and good classroom management. Sometimes teachers put students in groups but don't plan the group process well enough. As a result, the grouping strategy doesn't work so they decide that whole class teaching is the only option. On the other hand, teachers who plan well for flexible grouping report successes in student achievement and an improvement in student attitude and motivation.

## **Ways to Group Gifted Students**

### ***Homogeneous / Ability / Cluster Grouping***

Gifted students need time to work together. Homogeneous grouping is usually the best way for this to happen. This type of grouping brings together students of similar abilities, readiness, learning style and/or interest. It is best to use when skills or prior knowledge are needed in order for the group to function well.

A specific type of homogeneous grouping is called cluster grouping. In this grouping arrangement, a cluster of gifted students is assigned to be in the same classroom with the same teacher. Cluster grouping works best when a group of five to eight gifted students are clustered in one classroom with a teacher who has had training in how to teach these students. Cluster grouping allows gifted students to learn from one another, do extensions of the regular classroom work, and work on suitably challenging tasks.

### ***Heterogeneous / Mixed Ability Grouping***

This type of grouping puts together students of differing abilities, levels or interests. It works best when reading level, math proficiency, or other specific skills are not involved. It is beneficial for gifted students to understand and work with all other students and it can improve socialization and understanding between them.

Heterogeneous grouping works well for small group discussion, role-playing and group projects promoting creativity. Participation can teach gifted kids skills in delegation, leadership and sharing.

Some educators ask students who have learned the material to teach those who haven't. This may be appropriate occasionally but should be done sparingly. You don't want your gifted child to spend most of his time in school as the peer tutor for his classmates.

While heterogeneous grouping has many benefits, it can also lead to problems. Often these problems occur when a gifted student does most of the work on a group project but the entire group gets the same grade. This typically creates a great deal of resentment but, more importantly, if only one child is doing the work, the others are not learning.

### ***Individualized Instruction/Independent Study***

**Individualized instruction** is a planned series of instructional activities or tasks that paces an individual student as he learns a portion of the curriculum. Each activity generally teaches another step in learning a specific skill or process. Individualized instruction is often used to teach reading, math or foreign language. It can be done with pencil/paper learning packets or through computer assisted instruction. This approach is helpful to gifted students because it allows them to learn at their own pace.

**Independent study** gives the student a choice in selecting a topic of study. It generally involves researching a topic in depth and then demonstrating learning in some way through a product, oral report or other performance.

Both independent study and individualized instruction work well when students are allowed to explore their own interest areas. Both teach independent learning, organizational skills, time management, and the development of individual responsibility – all important skills for gifted students to have! Both must be monitored so that students don't procrastinate and put off doing anything until the last minute. Finally, student work should be evaluated using rubrics, checklists or some other type of assessment.

### ***Pairs/Partners***

I'm sure you've heard the saying "Two heads are better than one". That is not only true of adults but for children, too. Pairs or partners can be homogeneous or heterogeneous depending on the goal of the learning activity. Whether it is editing another student's paper or brainstorming a list of ideas, two students are generally more productive and learn more than just one student working alone.

In a large group it is easy for one or two students to 'hide' and not really participate. In a partnership this is impossible! Partners must interact with one another, sharing thoughts and ideas. Be aware if your gifted child is constantly partnered with the same student, especially if that student needs continual academic help or is a behavior problem. This is acceptable occasionally but should not be a permanent arrangement.

### ***Whole Class Instruction***

People are sometimes surprised that I include whole class instruction as a viable grouping pattern for gifted kids. It works well in many instances. It is efficient and effective when the teacher is presenting new content everyone needs to know. It is the best approach to use when the teacher is doing a highly motivational activity that all students are interested in.

Like all other grouping patterns, whole class instruction has both advantages and disadvantages. It is good for many types of audio-visual presentations, for initial instruction and for some enrichment activities. Teachers should use whole class instruction when they have guest speakers and when they have classroom celebrations. However, make sure whole class instruction is not used constantly in your child's classroom. Your gifted child should not be required to sit and listen to instruction on skills and knowledge he or she has already mastered.

### ***Concluding Thoughts***

You might ask, "So, what's the best type of group for my gifted child to work in?" My answer is simply, "It depends!" First find out the reason your child is doing the activity. Then evaluate if he or she is in the most appropriate type of grouping for this learning goal to be met. If so, flexible grouping is working well. If not, share

this article with your child's teacher and work together to establish a plan to group all students effectively and in such a way that all will become excellent learners and successful achievers.

### **About the Author**

*Carolyn Coil is an educational consultant and author with Pieces of Learning ([www.piecesoflearning.com](http://www.piecesoflearning.com)), a leading publisher of resources for the gifted. Her most recent book, published by Pieces of Learning, is Successful Teaching in the Differentiated Classroom. Carolyn teaches graduate level courses on gifted education and presents workshops for teachers and parents nationally and internationally. She is the mother of two gifted sons and has five young grandchildren. For more information about her books and workshops, log onto her website ([www.carolyncoil.com](http://www.carolyncoil.com)). To schedule a workshop or for more information about costs and availability, call Pieces of Learning at 1-800-729-5137.*

### **Meet the FGN Board**

#### **Terry Wilson**

Terry is the principal founder of the Florida Gifted Network and a nationally-recognized tireless advocate for gifted children. She has two adult gifted children and enjoys kayak fishing in her free time. She lives in Lakeland. For more information about Terry, see p. 5.

#### **Megan Carella**

Megan is a past president of the Citrus Organization for the Gifted and a member of the Citrus County School District's Gifted Advisory Council. She has two sons: DJ, a senior at Davidson College, Davidson, North Carolina, and Colin, who is in 6<sup>th</sup> grade at Lecanto Middle School, Lecanto, Florida. Accredited in Public Relations, Megan is public relations specialist for VITAS Innovative Hospice Care.

#### **Tom DeMonbrun**

Tom hails from Okaloosa County, where he has served as a parent representative on the Ruckel Middle School Advisory Council, the Florida Association for the Gifted, and his district's Parent Advisory Group for Gifted Education. Tom is FGN's representative to Coalition for the Education of Exceptional Students (CEES), a position he's held since 2002.

#### **Susan E. Gregory, Esquire**

Susan resides in Sarasota. She has two daughters who attend Pine View School for the Gifted. Susan has been a staunch advocate for gifted education for the past 11 years on local as well as state-level task forces and workshops. She served as the president of the Pine View Association, Pine View's parent-led organization, for six years. She currently serves as its treasurer, as well as the legislative activist for the parents and administration at Pine View. Susan is a graduate of Stetson Law School and is a practicing attorney with Icard, Merrill, Cullis, Timm, Furen & Ginsburg, P.A.

#### **Jennifer Martin**

Jennifer is the former chair of the Gifted Advisory Council of the Broward County Schools. She assisted in changing a subcommittee of the ESE Advisory Council to its own permanent Advisory Council. The Council has representation on Broward school district committees and reports directly to the School Board and superintendent.

#### **Cindy Gustafson**

Cindy is the founder of PAGES (Partners Allied for Gifted Education and Support) of Hernando County and currently serves on its board. She is also a member of the gifted advisory council of Hernando County's fulltime K-8 gifted center, the Quest Academy for Gifted Education, and has served on the county's gifted task force as well as the state's gifted advisory committee. She has two daughters: Olivia, a junior at Springstead High School, and Emily, a freshman currently enrolled in Springstead's new International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme.

#### **Carolyn Hutchins**

Carolyn has been a board member of FGN since its inception, and last year founded the Brevard Gifted Network. She became involved with gifted issues in Florida when her elder son, now a sophomore at the University of Florida, was not yet in kindergarten. At that time, she assumed co-leadership of the Brevard County group "Advocates for Challenging Education," which was instrumental in helping establish the county's first International Baccalaureate program. Carolyn's younger son and only daughter are now a junior and freshman, respectively, in Rockledge High School's AICE program. The Advanced International Certificate of Education (AICE) is an advanced academic pre-university curriculum for students who are working towards Advanced (A) and Advanced Subsidiary (AS) Level qualifications.

**Dr. Shari Valencic**

Shari is a career educator of gifted students as well as a parent of two gifted daughters. She is currently teaching one of two fulltime gifted programs for first grade students in Sarasota County, at Venice Elementary School. Shari is well-known as a teacher trainer and professional development course author in the field of gifted education and presents annually at state and national education conferences. She is also the facilitator of the teacherelc.com and vu-topia.com websites, specializing in gifted education electronic professional learning communities.

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\*FGN founding member

**A+ Advocate**

**FGN Director's Devotion to Gifted and Talented Children Recognized with National Award**

FGN Director Terry Wilson's 23-year mission of advocacy and support for gifted learners was recognized at the National Association for Gifted Children's (NAGC) 55th Annual Convention, held recently in Tampa. Terry received the prestigious NAGC Community Service Award, awarded annually to an individual or group in recognition of contributions that benefit the development of gifts and talents in young people.

"Terry is our state's policy expert, staying on top of developing legislation, learning about the legislative agendas of policy makers, interpreting proposed legislation and potential pros and cons of the verbiage, and communicating this information with others who are similarly interested and seek this critical information," said Elizabeth Shaunessy, Ph.D., assistant professor and program coordinator for the University of South Florida's Gifted Education Program. "She embodies the can-do spirit of our democracy and shows on a daily basis that one voice can make a tremendous difference."

Terry's journey began as did that of most parents. When she saw that her gifted kindergartener was not being placed in an appropriate gifted education program, she did what most parents do – she advocated in the school and the school district for her child.

Then she did more. She joined a newly formed gifted parent group in Polk County, where she served as a board member for 11 years and president for six. During that time, she also served on a county task force for gifted education and helped persuade the district to start its first International Baccalaureate program. She assisted with the development of an after-school program devoted to leadership development of youth.

Then she did more. She took over as director of Parents for Able Learner Students (PALS), the statewide resource and advocacy organization now known as the Florida Gifted Network (FGN). As FGN director, Terry helped expand the organization's advocacy efforts and initiated legislative e-mail alerts, online discussion forums and a website.

Then she did more. She assisted in the start-up of an organization that hired a lobbyist in Tallahassee to work on behalf of gifted education. She served on numerous statewide tasks forces and workgroups charged with re-writing the definition of and identification criteria for entrance into gifted education programs. She participated in the initial statewide blueprint for improving accountability for gifted programs.

In 2007, Terry spearheaded advocacy efforts to block legislation that would have effectively ended the identification, services, administrative protections, and funding for high school gifted students. And, in 2008, she assisted in achieving positive changes in a legislative bill designed to revamp gifted education in Florida.

She currently serves on the board of directors for the Coalition for the Education of Exceptional Students (CEES), a statewide organization which advocates for appropriate legislation and funding for all exceptional student education programs, including gifted.

"Terry has made a huge difference in the lives of countless gifted students over many years both by advocating for them at the state level and by heading the Florida Gifted Network providing information and resources throughout the state," said Educational Consultant and Author Carolyn Coil.

## ***Parent Affiliate***

### ***Duval County's Challenge Every Child***

Website: [www.challengeeverychild.org](http://www.challengeeverychild.org)

Contact: Julia Burns, <mailto:challengeeverychild@gmail.com>

**Challenge Every Child** is a just-formed group of parents, teachers, and interested citizens in the Jacksonville area supporting educational excellence for Duval County's gifted and talented students. Their mission is *to advocate for high achievement and high standards for all students and to maintain quality accelerated education.*

Their 50 founding families currently represent a dozen elementary, middle, or high schools from all over the county. Members are strongly encouraged to have a presence at school board and other education meetings.

The next meeting of CEC is tentatively scheduled for January.

#### **What are their beliefs?**

· **Excellence benefits all.** Promoting high achievement and high standards for every student benefits all students and the whole community. For our community and our country to progress, we need not only proficiency but excellence.

- **Instruction should be matched appropriately with skill level.** Equity in education does not mean having the same program for every student. Education must recognize the unique learning needs of gifted and talented students who require more challenge than what is offered by standard curriculum.
- **Gifted and talented students thrive when grouped with peers of like ability.** Research shows that gifted and talented students need to spend time learning with students of like ability.
- **Diversity is one of the benefits of magnet schools.** Magnet schools attract children from all socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds. The diversity of the student populations enhances the learning environment and creates a culture of respect.
- **Schools should help all students move forward.** School reform efforts to reduce the achievement gap are important. Implementation of these reforms must ensure that no high-performing child is held back and that every child is challenged. All students, whether low-performing or high-achieving, deserve the opportunity to be challenged and to move forward.
- **Magnet schools promote the academic success of those previously underrepresented in gifted and talented education.** Helping all students maximize potential requires challenging students who have previously been overlooked in gifted and talented education programs, including gifted and talented children from low-income families.
- **We cannot afford to lose high-performing students.** We cannot afford to lose our most skilled students. If high standards are not maintained in academic magnet schools, we will lose gifted and talented children to private school or home school.
- **High-performing children from low-income families will suffer most without accelerated programs.** If accelerated programs for high-performing students erode, gifted and academically talented children from lower-income families will suffer the most because they may not be able to afford private school.
- **Meeting the needs of gifted and talented students does not hinder improved performance for all.** Magnet programs for students who need extra challenge do not hinder our efforts to lift all performance in Duval County. All children and all schools can improve and move forward as we expand excellence and work together to challenge all students.

## ***Gifted Issues***

### ***What We Know About Academically-Talented Students:***

#### ***A Sample of CTY Findings***

This document presents some of the major findings from the Center of Talented Youth's (CTY's) array of research projects over the past 25 years. More detailed information on the research is available on the CTY web site at [www.cty.jhu.edu](http://www.cty.jhu.edu).

#### **Ability Grouping and Acceleration**

- Ability grouping has been shown to be an appropriate and effective way to meet the academic needs of highly able students.
- Many highly-able students have never been placed in ability-grouped classes in their regular school despite the fact that the majority of the students report that they learn more when grouped with like-ability peers.
- After attending a CTY summer course in math and/or science, the majority of students were appropriately placed in an advanced-level course at their home school, a finding that has been consistent over 15 years. The overwhelming majority of these students earned an A or B in the advanced-level "placement" course.

- Acceleration has been shown to be an appropriate practice for meeting the needs of academically talented students, as a way to keep these students motivated and appropriately challenged.
- There is no evidence to support the notion of negative social and emotional consequences of acceleration for talented students as a whole.

### **Parents**

- Most academically talented students have positive feelings about their families.
- Although parents of academically talented students generally have high expectations for their child to achieve, students report that they can meet these expectations and do not feel unduly pressured.
- Sixty percent of parents of academically-talented students emphasize internal (i.e., relative to the individual) standards or both internal and external (i.e., relative to peers) standards for academic success. A focus on internal standards such as enjoyment, attaining personal goals, or trying one's best can weaken feelings of pressure to perform at a high level.
- Few parents have an achievement goal (for their children) that focuses only on competence and attainment of socially set standards (e.g., high grades and high test scores). Children of this minority are more likely than other academically talented children to be overly concerned about mistakes, parental expectations and criticisms, and they have more doubts about their actions.

### **Social, Emotional, and Personality**

- Most academically-talented students feel socially successful and happy with their friendships.
- Academically-talented students have a variety of friends.
- Most academically-talented students are satisfied with their physical abilities and physical appearance.
- Encouraging high standards for gifted students does not promote the development of negative forms of perfectionism. CTY students look very similar to a national comparison group of students in terms of the incidence of perfectionism.
- Academically-talented students do not report lower social self-perceptions overall than other adolescents. However, high verbal students may be at some risk for social problems because as verbal ability increases so do the students' feelings of being unpopular.
- The majority of students report a social benefit, as well as an academic benefit, from taking a CTY summer course with other academically talented students. Many of the students maintain long-distance relationships with other CTY students long after the program.
- When compared to normative groups of adolescents, highly able students are more open to new experiences and details, like to play with ideas, and are more intuitive.
- These differences were also found in a group of gifted Irish adolescents.
- Not all gifted students are alike in their learning styles.
- When compared to a normative population of adolescent women, highly able young women more frequently express a preference for making decisions through rational analysis and objective standards.

### **Self-Perception, Motivation, and Metacognition**

- Academically-talented students vary widely in their beliefs about intelligence; students' views of the stability of intelligence parallels a normal distribution, with high school students more likely than elementary students to believe that intelligence is stable.
- Not all gifted students are alike in their use of metacognitive learning strategies. The more students endorse an achievement goal of mastery (i.e., want to understand the material rather than just perform well), the more likely they are to use self-regulated strategies.

### **Gifted Students with Learning Disabilities**

- Despite common perception, there are a number of gifted children who have a specific learning disability or attention problems. They are often not identified in their school and are often underserved. With appropriate accommodations, and interventions, they are able to reach their full potential. Educationally-disadvantaged students can learn at a fast pace and increase their aptitude and achievement test scores.

### **Under-Represented Students**

- Under-represented students who attend CTY summer programs make similar achievement gains as other CTY students.
- Under-represented students sometimes have specific skill/knowledge gaps that can be addressed with targeted, accelerated instruction that allows them to move ahead academically and excel at a high level.
- In specially-targeted programs that are supplementary to their regular school program,
- Under-represented students who attend CTY courses perform academically as well, if not better, than their gifted and talented peers.
- Under-represented students who attend CTY courses go on to attend highly competitive colleges and universities.

### **Benefits of the CTY Summer Experience**

- Exposure to academic challenge and high quality of instruction are frequently reported by CTY students and their parents as benefits of taking a CTY course.
- Achievement gains have been reported by instructors and documented via pre-and post-assessment methods.
- Many students who take a CTY summer course are eventually accelerated in their schools' curriculum.
- Opportunities to be with other bright students and friendships with such students are frequently reported by CTY students and their parents as benefits of taking a CTY course.

### **About the Johns Hopkins University Center for Talented Youth (CTY)**

CTY conducts the nation's oldest and most extensive academic talent search and offers educational programming for students with exceptionally high academic ability. CTY parallels, and complements, a gifted child's regular school experience. CTY's programs and students have been profiled in *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The New Yorker*, and other premier American publications.

*(From Gems of AGATE 32-2; July 2008; Reprinted with permission, Gems of AGATE gratefully acknowledges Dr. Carol Mills, Director of CTY's Research and Diagnostic Counseling Center; Dr. Linda Brody, Director of the Julian Stanley Study of Exceptional Talent; and CTY Research Psychologist Dr. Karen Mickenberg.)*

## ***Legislative Alert***

### ***An Overview of the Latest Issues and Concerns in Florida Gifted Education***

***By Terry Wilson***

#### **ADVOCACY UPDATE: *Changes Ahead***

Gifted education in Florida is again facing many challenges. With the extreme statewide budget shortfall, several Department of Education (DOE) initiatives, and a soon-to-be-filed gifted and talented student education bill, you can be sure that many changes to gifted education identification, funding, and services are on the near horizon.

FGN is working hard for you and your gifted children. Please be prepared to respond quickly to *Alerts* and calls to action. Only with **your** help will these changes become positive ones for Florida's gifted children.

As the January 4th *FGN Alert* indicated, the fiscal situation in Florida is grim. To read the full *Alert*, go to [www.floridagiftednet.org](http://www.floridagiftednet.org). Be sure to sign up for the *FGN Alerts* while you are on the website or the direct link for subscribing to the *Alert* is **HERE**.

FGN has been monitoring the two-week special session of the legislature that was called to cut the budget for this fiscal year, which includes cuts for this school year. We will provide a summary in an upcoming *Alert*. FGN is also making plans for action for the regular legislative session, which begins in March and promises to produce many additional budget and program cuts.

#### **Gifted and Talented Education Bill to be Introduced**

Representative John Legg (R-Pasco), the current chairman of the House PreK–12 Education Policy Committee, indicated to FGN his intention to file a bill related to gifted and academically talented students. Many of you will remember that Rep. Legg filed a gifted/talented bill last year which passed in the House, but failed to pass in the Senate.

FGN board members met with Rep. Legg's legislative assistant this past October to reiterate key concerns and our interest in again working with Rep. Legg in the 2009 legislative session. More information on this bill will follow in an upcoming *Alert*.

#### **FL DOE Initiatives**

- New "plan" for gifted education - DOE staff have been tasked with developing a State Plan for Gifted. A consultant has been hired to develop a draft plan.
- Administrative Rule Changes - DOE has again started the process of revising the gifted eligibility rule. (The current rule is **HERE**.) It is our understanding that DOE is waiting on the passage of Rep. Legg's bill during the regular legislative session in order to align the gifted rule with the bill.
- Response to Intervention - DOE is currently implementing a systemic change for the general education classroom, with implications for currently identified and yet-to-be identified gifted students. Response to Intervention (RtI) is an approach to "ensure highest possible student achievement in both academic and behavioral pursuits." RtI was originally developed to assist special education students, but Florida and other states have decided to include gifted students in the approach, which provides students with increasing levels of support based on their assessed needs. As with many educational innovations, RtI provides both opportunities and concerns for gifted education and gifted students. Representatives of FGN and the Florida Association for the Gifted were on a conference call with DOE officials late last year to seek clarification on the implications of RtI on gifted education identification, services, and funding. Read more about Florida's RtI program **HERE**.

Additional information on Florida's plan for gifted, the upcoming gifted and academically talented bill, rule changes, and RtI will be provided in upcoming newsletters, *Alerts*, and on the website.

To read about 2007 and 2008 advocacy efforts and to learn more on the history of the past two year's legislative actions link to the *Legislative Recap* on the FGN website.

### ***Make Waves ... Join Us!***

A membership application & renewal form can be accessed **HERE**.

***Wavelength*** is the bimonthly advocacy newsletter of the Florida Gifted Network. It is distributed to registered members of the group, as well as other gifted education advocates throughout the world. Contribution and advertising opportunities are available. Please contact editor Dr. Shari Valencic at <mailto:sharivu@comcast.net> for more information.