

Accelerated Learning and Enhanced Instruction

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Washington state's laws around highly capable programs are deceptively open-ended. Unlike in other states, there are no explicit qualification criteria, no mandated tests, and districts have quite a bit of latitude in designing a program that meets their students' needs. However, that flexibility does come with some important requirements. While Washington doesn't legislate the specifics, there are guard rails in the law that govern which services are provided, regardless of how that is accomplished.

The first sentence of RCW 28A.185.020 states:

“The legislature finds that, for highly capable students, access to accelerated learning and enhanced instruction is access to a basic education.”

There's a lot going on in that simple statement. Taken together, this statement lays out several clear tests we can use to assess whether a school district's highly capable services are meeting state law or not. Let's unpack it bit by bit.

Starting at the end, highly capable services are part of **“basic education”** in Washington state. That means that highly capable services are not a choice program, or a “nice to have.” All school districts are required to offer highly capable services, just like special education. So, highly capable services must be provided during the regular school day, not after or before school. As a basic education program, districts are required to provide any needed transportation for students. The statute goes on to say that school districts must identify students for highly capable services in grades K through 12, and must “prioritize equitable identification of low-income students.”

Let's come back to the middle of the sentence. These five words pack in a lot of meaning: **“accelerated learning and enhanced instruction.”**

“Accelerated” means that learning is occurring at a faster pace and/or at a higher grade level. Students who qualify for highly capable services are often already working one or more grade levels ahead of their age mates, and we want schools to be meeting them at their current readiness level. Note that accelerated learning does not mean greater volume of work within the same standards, but moving students forward to new standards that they have not yet mastered. Washington state expects highly capable students to be experiencing accelerated learning. One of the longest running studies on this population, the Study for Mathematically Precocious Youth, quantitatively demonstrates that acceleration is the single most important indicator of success for highly capable students, even decades into their adulthood.

“Learning” is a word that is easy to skip over. But it reminds us that highly capable students should be actually learning something at school. So often these students already know the grade level content before they even walk in the door in September. Just meeting grade level standards is not enough – the law says that highly capable students need to be learning. Every student deserves to learn something new in school, every day.

“Enhanced” could mean different things in different contexts. However, enhanced does NOT mean “enrichment” or “creative thinking exercises,” as is often assumed. To be clear, all of our state’s students deserve enrichment and creativity in their schooling; this should not be a unique feature of highly capable services. Rather, “enhanced” should refer to the depth and complexity of the curriculum offered to highly capable students. Not only should they be working on accelerated standards, but the classwork supporting those standards should be at a greater level of depth and complexity. Without that additional depth, these students will work through even accelerated standards much faster than typical students. In math, this might mean more complex problems to solve using the relevant standards. In history or science, this might mean going into greater detail in the curriculum topics. In Language Arts, this might mean reading higher level books and a deeper level of text analysis.

“Instruction” is a particularly powerful word in this statement. It means that highly capable students need to be receiving direct instruction from their teacher, and not be asked to fill their time with independent projects or independent study of the next level textbook. Just like all students, highly capable students deserve instruction from a certificated educator that is matched to their readiness level.

The last word that glues it all together is **“and.”** This powerful little word reminds us that we must legally provide both accelerated learning AND enhanced instruction, not either or. It is not enough to only provide enhancements to the grade level curriculum; the curriculum must also be accelerated. It is not enough to provide accelerated curriculum for the student to self-study; instruction must also be provided.

Putting it all together, we can paint a picture of what types of highly capable services are not supported under Washington state law:

- Providing only differentiation, whereby students complete “challenge” or “extension” assignments on the grade level curriculum. This does not meet the test of “accelerated learning.”
- Requiring students to meet a higher set of expectations or more rigorous grading rubrics on the grade-level standards similarly misses the point, and risks overwhelming students with expectations they may not be developmentally ready to meet, and may be beyond the instruction they were given. Grade-level standards are defined by the common core state standards and should not be altered for highly capable students. However, highly capable students may need to be assessed against above grade-level standards, as their level of acceleration requires.

- Providing highly capable services as a part-time pull-out program sometimes comes in the form of providing “enrichment projects” or “creative problem solving activities” that are separate from the common core curriculum standards, and hence meet neither test. While these enrichment programs may be beloved by parents, students, and teachers, this is neither accelerated learning, nor is this enhanced instruction.
- It is similarly problematic to expect highly capable students to participate in after school programming such as math or science olympiads, Destination Imagination, Future Problem Solvers, First LEGO League, or any of the other myriad afterschool programs and contests that exist. While these are all valuable activities, they should be available to all students, not just highly capable students. Furthermore, extracurricular programs should never be expected to serve the role of a basic education program, which must be delivered entirely during the regular school day.

While districts have latitude in determining how they will provide highly capable services, and how they will match those services to the needs of each student, the law provides substantial requirements about the fidelity of those services. It is a tall order for districts to meet the law and provide “accelerated learning and enhanced instruction” to their highly capable students, especially given current staffing and funding realities.

In particular, it’s unrealistic to ask an individual teacher to deliver this level of accelerated services for highly capable students in the context of a heterogeneous classroom, given today’s class sizes. This is an unreasonable expectation to put on classroom teachers who are already stretched much too thin. At absolute minimum, teachers need the support of a co-teacher or a highly-trained instructional aide, as well as have access to a well-indexed library of accelerated curriculum materials to draw from. That level of staffing would be nearly impossible to support in today’s funding climate. It’s just not credible to believe this approach could work at scale without substantial additional resources.

Despite this reality, several districts in our state have been trying to make highly capable services work in their neighborhood schools, and have poured years of professional development and curriculum gathering into the effort. However, particularly at the elementary level, this is proving to be a difficult nut for districts to crack and meet the state law requirements with any fidelity at scale. I have yet to talk with a Washington state district who is satisfied with their neighborhood school highly capable services. An individual school may rise to the challenge, often with the benefit of strong leadership, several excellent teachers, and additional funding sources. But these are the exception, not the rule.

So, it is no surprise that the districts in Washington state with the most robust highly capable services offer the majority of their services in the context of self-contained highly capable classrooms, full grade level acceleration (“grade skipping”), and/or subject acceleration. These are also the most cost-effective and resource-efficient ways to provide the state-mandated services of “accelerated learning and enhanced instruction” with fidelity.