

Teachers as Talent Scouts

Joseph S. Renzulli

Originally developed for gifted education programs, the Schoolwide Enrichment Model can be used in an inclusive school that wants to be a laboratory for talent development.

Elaine is a gifted 3rd grader. When many people hear a statement like that, they raise issues of elitism that have long plagued special programs based on narrow definitions, IQ scores, or other measures of cognitive ability. By labeling some students “gifted,” they argue, you relegate all others to the category of “not gifted.”

But suppose you say the following: “Elaine is a 3rd grader who reads at the adult level and has a fascination for biographies about women scientists.” By focusing on the student’s behavioral characteristics, you can make a case for providing the following services:

- Under the guidance of her classroom teacher, Elaine substitutes more challenging books in her interest area for the 3rd grade reader. The schoolwide enrichment teaching specialist helps the classroom teacher locate these books, which are purchased with funds from the enrichment program budget.
- Elaine leaves school two afternoons a month (usually on early dismissal days) to meet with a mentor—a local journalist who specializes in gender issues. The schoolwide enrichment teaching specialist arranges transportation through the parent volunteer group.
- By compacting the curriculum in Elaine’s strength areas (reading, language arts, and spelling), the schoolwide enrichment teaching specialist frees time for her to meet with female scientists and faculty members at a nearby university.

Could then the staunchest anti-gifted proponent argue against the logic or the appropriateness of these services? Essentially, such services become opportunities for developing “gifted behaviors” rather than merely finding and certifying them. And when programs focus on developing the behavioral potential of individuals—or of small groups whose members share a common interest—it’s no longer necessary to group certain student merely because they all happen to be “gifted 3rd graders.”

Tapping Everyone’s Potential

Given the opportunity, students like Elaine can develop gifted behaviors in specific areas of learning and human expression, transcending the idea of giftedness as a state of being. This orientation, the basis of the Schoolwide Enrichment Model, can allow many students—not just those labeled gifted—to achieve high levels of creative and productive accomplishments that otherwise would be denied them through traditional program models.

The instructional procedures and programming alternatives that characterize the Schoolwide Enrichment Model have two objectives:

1. Provide a broad range of advanced-level enrichment experiences for all students.
2. Use the many and varied ways that students respond to these experiences as stepping stones for relevant follow-up.

This approach isn't a new way of identifying who is or isn't gifted. Rather, it identifies how to provide subsequent *opportunities, resources, and encouragement* that will support escalated student involvement in both required and self-selected activities.

True, the model has its roots in special programs for high-potential students. Such programs have proved an especially fertile place for experimentation, because they're usually not encumbered by prescribed curriculum guides or by traditional methods of instruction. Many school improvement concepts that originated in special programs have begun to surface in general education. These include, for example, a focus on concept rather than skill learning, an interdisciplinary curriculum and theme-based studies, student portfolios, cross-grade grouping, and alternative scheduling patterns.

A variety of research on human abilities supports the application of gifted program know-how to general education (Bloom 1985, Gardner 1983, Renzulli 1986, Sternberg 1984). Also, research clearly and unequivocally justifies the broader concept of "talent development" and points to the role that enrichment specialists can play in school improvement.

In addition, the enrichment approach reflects the democratic ideal that schools can accommodate the full range of individual differences. Traditional identification procedures restrict services to small numbers of high-scoring students. Enrichment activities, however, enable schools to help develop the talents of all students who manifest their potentials in many other ways.

Essential Elements

Bringing the Schoolwide Enrichment Model to large segments of the school population requires three components:

1. *The Total Talent Portfolio.* The model focuses on specific learning characteristics that can serve as a basis for talent development. The approach uses both traditional and performance-based assessment to determine three dimensions of the learner—abilities, interests, and preferred learning styles. This information, which focuses on strengths rather than deficits, is compiled into a form called the Total Talent Portfolio (see fig. 1). Schools use the portfolios to decide which talent development opportunities to offer a particular student through regular classes, enrichment clusters, and special services.

2. *Curriculum modification techniques.* The Schoolwide Enrichment Model relies upon a curriculum that challenges all students to learn, offers a number of in-depth learning experiences, and injects enrichment opportunities into the school's regular activities. Modifying the curriculum typically involves the following procedures:

Abilities	Interests	Style Preference	Style Preference	Style Preference	Style Preference
<i>Maximum Performance Indicators</i>	<i>Interest Areas</i>	<i>Instructional Styles Preferences</i>	<i>Learning Environment Preferences</i>	<i>Thinking Styles Preferences</i>	<i>Expression Style Preferences</i>
Tests • Standardized • Teacher-made Course grades Teacher ratings Product Evaluation • Written • Oral • Visual • Musical • Constructed (Note differences between assigned and self-selected products) Level of participation in learning activities Degree of interaction with others	Fine arts Crafts Literary Historical Mathematical/logical Physical sciences Life sciences Political/judicial Athletic/recreation Marketing/business Drama/dance Musical performance Musical composition Managerial/business Photography Film/video Computers Other (Specify)	Recitation and drill Peer tutoring Lecture Discussion Guided independent study Learning/interest center Simulation, role playing, dramatization, guided fantasy Learning games Replicative reports or projects Investigative reports or projects Unguided independent study Internship Apprenticeship	Inter/Intra Personal • Self-oriented • Peer-oriented • Adult-oriented • Combined Physical • Sound • Heat • Light • Design • Mobility • Time of day • Food intake • Seating	Analytic (school smart) Synthetic/creative (creative, inventive) Practical/contextual (street smart) Legislative Executive Judicial	Written Oral Manipulative Discussion Display Dramatization Artistic Graphic Commercial Service

Figure 1. Dimensions of the Total Talent Portfolio

Curriculum compacting. Through this process, schools eliminate repetition of previously mastered material, upgrade the challenge level of the regular curriculum, and provide time for enrichment and acceleration activities (Reis & Renzulli, 1992). In many ways, curriculum compacting is simply common sense—it imitates the pattern that teachers naturally follow when individualizing instruction or teaching without textbooks.

The first step in curriculum compacting is to define the goals and outcomes of a particular unit or segment of instruction. Next, teachers determine which students have already mastered most or all of a specified set of learning outcomes. They also identify those who are capable of mastering the outcomes in less time than their peers. Lastly, in place of the material that's already been mastered, the school provides more challenging and productive activities. These may include content acceleration, individual or group research projects, peer teaching, or involvement in non-classroom activities. All the options give students some freedom to decide how they'll pursue a particular topic.

Textbook analysis. The textbook *is* the curriculum in the overwhelming majority of today's classrooms. Despite much rhetoric about school and curriculum reform, that situation isn't likely to change soon. As a result, modifying the curriculum will necessarily involve an in-depth analysis of current textbooks, followed by a "surgical removal" of repetitious drills and practices.

Both the analysis and subsequent surgery reinforce the idea that "less is better" when it comes to content selection. The first step in the process might best be described as "textbook triage": Grade-level teams examine each instructional unit and eliminate the material that needlessly repeats skills and concepts covered previously. Teachers then decide which material is necessary for review and which is important enough to cover in either a survey or an in-depth manner.

Expanding the depth of learning. This third procedure for modifying curriculum is based on the work of Phenix (1964), who found that focusing on representative concepts and ideas is the best way to capture the essence of a topic. Representative ideas—themes, patterns, main features, sequences, and organizing structures—often serve as the basis for interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary studies.

Beyond those concepts, in-depth learning requires increasingly complex information that move up the hierarchy of knowledge: for example, from facts to trends and sequences, to classifications and categories, to principles and generalization, and then to theories and structures. The dimension of learning commonly referred to as process or thinking skills is another form of content. These skills form the cognitive structures and problem-solving strategies that endure long after students have forgotten the facts or trends.

Lastly, in-depth learning involves the application of methods to problems. In other words, the student takes on the role of firsthand investigator rather than the more passive learner of lessons.

3. *Enrichment Learning and Teaching.* The third component needed to put the Schoolwide Enrichment Model into practice is based on the ideas of a philosophers and researchers ranging from William James and John Dewey to Howard Gardner and Albert Bandura. The work of this small but influential group, coupled with our own research, has given rise to the concept of enrichment learning and teaching. Four principles define this concept:

- Each learner is unique. Therefore, all learning experiences must take into account the abilities, interests, and learning styles of the individual.
- Learning is more effective when students enjoy what they're doing. Therefore, learning experiences should be designed and assessed with as much concern for enjoyment as for other goals.
- Learning is more meaningful and enjoyable when content (for example, knowledge) and process (for example, thinking skills) have a real problem as their context. Therefore, students should have some choice in problem selection, and teachers should consider the relevance of the problem for individual students, as well as authentic strategies for addressing the problem.

- Enrichment learning and teaching focus on enhancing knowledge and acquiring thinking skills. Therefore, *applications* of knowledge and skills must supplement formal instruction.

Implementing the Model

Numerous research studies and field tests in schools with widely varying demographics (Renzulli & Reis, 1994) have yielded both research support and practical suggestions for schools wishing to implement the SEM. Here's how the model operates within three types of structures.

1. Regular curriculum. The regular curriculum encompasses the school's goals, schedules, learning outcomes, and delivery systems. Whether traditional, innovative, or in transition, the regular curriculum has one predominant characteristic: Authoritative forces (policymakers, school councils, textbook adoption committees, state regulators, and so forth) have made it the centerpiece of student learning. Our goal with the Schoolwide Enrichment Model is to influence rather than replace the regular curriculum. Still, introducing the model can substantially change content and instructional processes in three ways:

- Through curriculum compacting and modification of textbook content, the required material challenges students at different levels.
- Selected, in-depth learning experiences replace the content that's been eliminated.
- Enrichment activities are integrated selectively into regular curriculum activities (Renzulli 1977).

2. Enrichment clusters. Enrichment cluster bring together nongraded groups of students who share common interests. Like extracurricular activities and program, such as 4-H and Junior Achievement, the cluster meet at designated times and operate on the assumption that students and teachers (or community resource people) want to be there.

Enrichment clusters place a premium on the development of higher-order thinking skills and the creative and productive application of these skills the real-world situations. As a result, the learning environment supports the development of self-concept. To put it another way: *Every child is special if we create conditions in which that child can be a specialist within a specialty group.*

Enrichment clusters revolve around major disciplines, interdisciplinary themes, or cross-disciplinary topics. A theatrical/television production group, for example, might include actors, writers, technical specialists, and costume designers. Clearly the clusters deal with how-to knowledge, thinking skills, and interpersonal relations that apply in the real world. Student work is directed toward producing a product or service. Instead of lesson plans or unit plans, three key questions guide learning:

- What do people with an interest in this area—for example, filmmaking—do?
- What knowledge, materials, and other resources do we need to authentically do activities in this area?
- In what ways can we use the product or service to affect the intended audience?

Schools use enrichment clusters to varying degrees. The Webster Elementary School in St. Paul, Minnesota, for example, has a broad array of interdisciplinary clusters every day. The Southeast School in Mansfield, Connecticut, offers enrichment clusters once each week; teachers and parent volunteers jointly teach the clusters. The superintendent of schools, who is also a licensed pilot, organized one of the most popular clusters: Flight School.

3. Continuum of special services. Although enrichment clusters and the modifications of the regular curriculum help meet individual needs, a program for talent development still requires supplementary services. These services, which challenge the students capable of working at the highest levels of their special interest areas, typically include individual or small-group counseling; direct assistance in facilitating advanced-level work; mentor relationships; and other programs that connect students, families, and out-of-school resources or agencies. (Figure 2 illustrates the continuum of services by education level.)

The schoolwide enrichment teaching specialist—or a team of teachers and parents—has responsibility for providing options for advanced learning. One schoolwide enrichment teaching specialist in Barrington, Rhode Island, estimates she spends two days a week serving as a resource to the faculties of two schools; on the other three days she provides direct services to students.

The schoolwide enrichment coordinator in the LaPorte, Indiana, School Corporation developed a Parent-Teacher Enrichment Guide that describes opportunities in the city and surrounding area. Direct assistance often takes the form of encouraging students, faculty, and parents to participate in programs such as Future Problem Solving, Odyssey of the Mind, and Model United Nations, in addition to essay, mathematics, and history contests sponsored at the state and national levels. Typically, schoolwide enrichment teaching specialists also make arrangements for students interested in summer programs, on-campus courses, special schools, theatrical groups, scientific expeditions, and apprenticeships.

Elements of Reform

The public education system is slowly but surely deteriorating into a massive warehouse of underachievement, unfulfilled expectations, and broken dreams. Yet current reform policies and plans don't appear much different from traditional top-down patterns of school organization or linear/sequential models of learning. If traditional methods have failed to change schools substantially, different models deserve a look. To achieve school improvement, any new model must deal effectively with the three major dimensions of schooling—the act of learning, the use of time, and the change process itself.

Act of learning. Organizational and administrative structures such as vouchers, site-based management, school choice, ungraded classes, parent involvement, and extended school days are important considerations. They don't, however, directly address how to improve the interaction among teachers, students, and the curriculum.

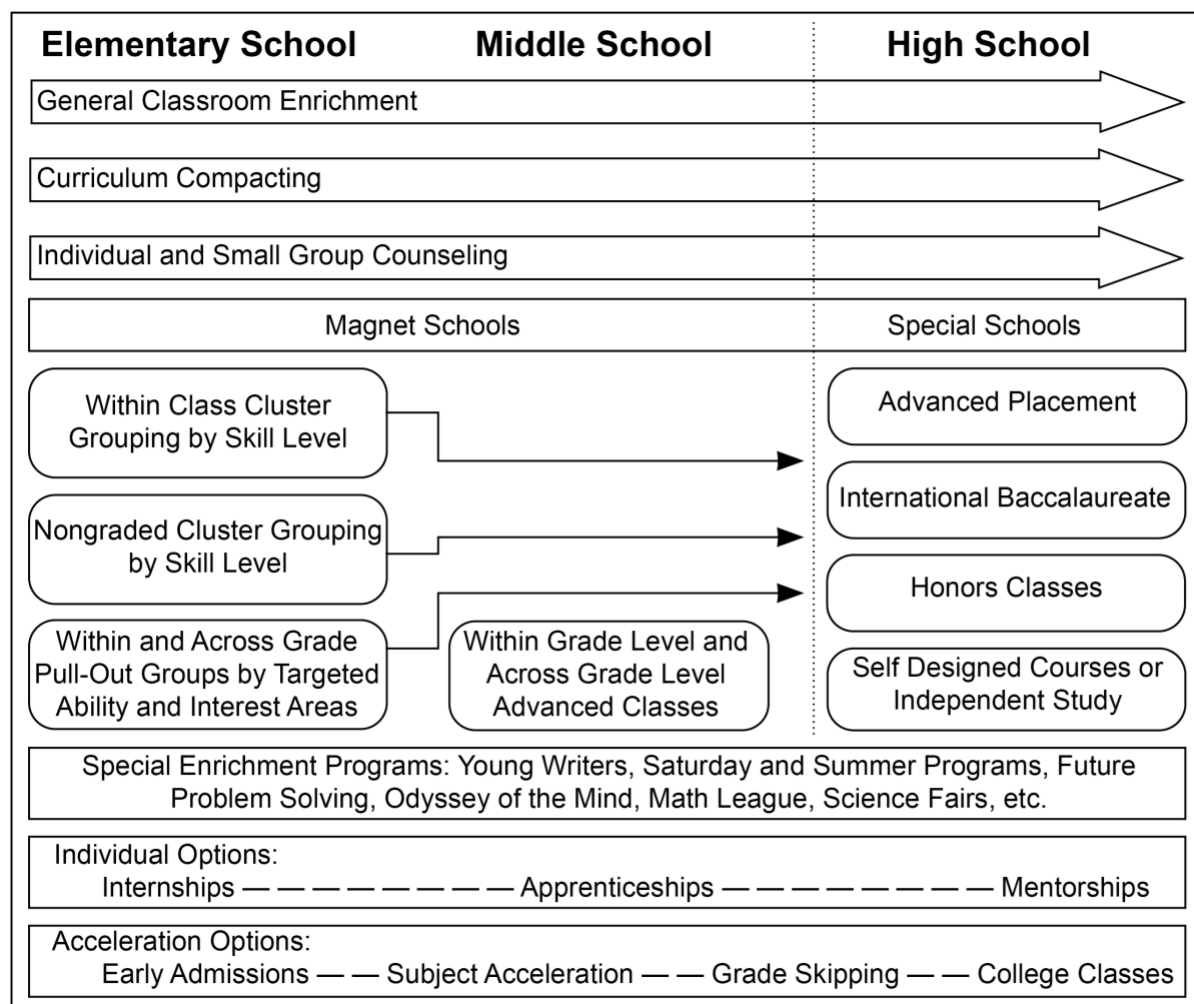


Figure 2. The Continuum of Services for Total Talent Development

The Schoolwide Enrichment Model places the act of learning at the center of any recommendations for school improvement. For example, the model looks at the learner's current achievement levels in each area of study, interest in particular topics, and preferred styles of learning (Renzulli 1992).

Use of time. Educators and laypeople alike are well acquainted with the typical pattern of school organization. Schools teach the major subjects (reading, mathematics, science, language arts, and social studies) five days per week, with special subjects (music, art, and physical education) offered once or twice a week. We've become so accustomed to the rigidity of this schedule that even the slightest hint of changing it meets with a storm of protest from administrators and teachers: "We don't have time *now* to cover the regular curriculum." "How will we fit in the specials?" "They keep adding new things, such as drug education, for us to cover."

By unquestioningly accepting the elementary and secondary school schedule, we lose sight of what happens at the college level. There, where material is ordinarily more advanced and demanding, we routinely drop from meeting five times per week in class to three times (and

sometimes even two times). Plus, adhering to the “more time is better” argument ignores research to the contrary. For example, international comparison studies report that 8 of the 11 nations that surpass U. S. achievement levels in mathematics spend less time on math instruction (Jaeger 1992).

The Schoolwide Enrichment Model addresses the issue of time by selectively borrowing one or two class meetings per month from each major subject area. This approach guarantees that a designated time will be available each week for advanced-level enrichment clusters.

The change process. Schools are being bombarded with proposals for change, which range from total systemic reform to tinkering with bits and pieces of subjects and teaching methods. Often the proposals seem little more than lists of intended goals or outcomes, with limited direction provided.

Worse yet, policymakers and regulators continue to beam mixed messages to schools at an unprecedented rate. One state, for example, mandated a core curriculum for students—but then evaluated teachers on the basis of generic teaching skills that had nothing to do with the curriculum. Advocates of site-based management encourage teachers to become more active in curriculum development; yet these same schools are rated on the basis of test scores tied to outcome-based competencies specified by the state.

One recent study (Madaus 1992) showed that the most widely used tests measure low-level skills and knowledge. The same study reported that teachers and administrators believe the tests force them to compromise their ideals about good teaching—they feel pressured to emphasize the material covered on the tests. In another study (Olson 1992), researchers asked teachers to evaluate school-reform initiatives in their school. They replied, “There’s nothing but chaos. Our best strategy is to ignore them, close our doors, and go about our business.”

The Schoolwide Enrichment Model takes a gentle and evolutionary approach to change. In the early stages of implementation, minimal but specific changes are suggested for existing schedules, textbooks, and curricular activities. These strategies have already demonstrated favorable results in different types of schools and with groups from varying ethnic and economic backgrounds.

Starting Points

Effective and lasting change occurs only when it’s initiated, nurtured, and monitored from within the school itself. External regulations and remedies seldom change the daily behaviors of students and teachers. Nor do they deal effectively with solutions to internal school problems (Barth 1990).

The change process recommended in the School Enrichment Model begins with an examination of the major factors affecting the quality of learning in a school. These factors, may be internal (within the school) or external, but all inter-relate. For example, an internal building principal may be externally influenced if central administration makes staffing assignments; state regulation, or districtwide textbook policies may externally influence the internal curriculum. The Schoolwide Enrichment Model doesn’t replace existing structures but rather seeks to

improve them by concentrating on the factors that have a direct bearing on learning. Evaluations indicate that the model is inexpensive to implement and has a common-sense practicality that appeals to professionals as well as laypeople (Olenchak and Renzulli 1989).

Think of an automobile as a metaphor for the Schoolwide Enrichment Model. The school is the car's body—preferably a Porsche—and the principal is the driver—preferably as bold and daring as Mario Andretti. The faculty represents the engine, loaded with power and constantly being tuned-up to become as efficient and effective as possible. Members of the enrichment teams serve as the spark plugs, bringing energy to all activities. And the Schoolwide Enrichment Model specialist is the ignition and the distributor, initiating new developments and directing the flow of resources and energy to appropriate places.

That automobile performs well on the track known as “special programs”—but the model operates equally well in all schools that wish to be laboratories for talent development.

References

- Barth, R. S. (1990). *Improving schools from within: Teachers, parents, principals can make a difference*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Bloom, B. S. (Ed.). (1985). *Developing talent in young people*. New York: Ballantine Books.
- Gardner, H. (1983). *Frames of mind: The theory of multiple intelligences*. New York: Basic Books.
- Jaeger, R. M. (1992). 'World class' standards, choice, and privatization: *Weak measurement serving presumptive policy*. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Francisco, April 20–24 1992.
- Madaus, G. F. (1992). *The influence of testing on teaching math and science in grades 4–12*. Boston College: Center for the Study of Testing, Evaluation, and Educational Policy.
- Olenchak, F. R., & Renzulli, J. S. (1989). The effectiveness of the Schoolwide Enrichment Model on selected aspects of elementary school change. *Gifted Child Quarterly*, 33(1), 44–57. <https://doi.org/10.1177/001698628903300106>
- Olson, L. (1992). Fed up with tinkering, reformers now touting 'systemic' approach. *Education Week*, 12(1), pp. 1, 30. <https://www.edweek.org/education/fed-up-with-tinkering-reformers-touting-systemic-approach/1992/09>
- Phenix, P. (1964). *Realms of meaning: A philosophy of the curriculum for general education*. New York: McGraw Hill.
- Reis, S. M., & Renzulli, J. S. (1992). Using curriculum compacting to challenge the above-average. *Educational Leadership*, 50(2), 51–57. http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational_leadership/oct92/vol50/num02/Using_Curriculum_Compacting_To_Challenge_the_Above-Average.aspx
- Renzulli, J. S. (1977). *The Enrichment Triad Model: A guide for developing defensible programs for the gifted*. Mansfield Center, CT: Creative Learning Press.
- Renzulli, J. S. (1986). The three-ring conception of giftedness: A developmental model for creative productivity. In R. J. Sternberg & J. E. Davidson (Eds.), *Conceptions of giftedness* (pp. 332–357). New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Renzulli, J. S. (1992). A general theory for the development of creative productivity through the pursuit of ideal acts of learning. *Gifted Child Quarterly*, 36(4), 170–182. <https://doi.org/10.1177/001698629203600402>

- Renzulli, J. S., & Reis, S. M. (1994). Research related to the Schoolwide Enrichment Model. *Gifted Child Quarterly*, 38(1), 7–19. <https://doi.org/10.1177/001698629403800102>
- Sternberg, R. J. (1984). Toward a triarchic theory of human intelligence. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 7(2), 269–316. <https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1017/S0140525X00044629>

Author's note: The Javits Act Program, as administered by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Educational Research and Improvement, supported the work reported here. The opinions expressed in this article don't reflect the position or policies of the Office of Educational Research and Improvement or the U.S. Department of Education.

Joseph S. Renzulli is Director of the National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented, University of Connecticut, 326 Fairfield Rd., U-7, Storrs, CT 06269-2007.