

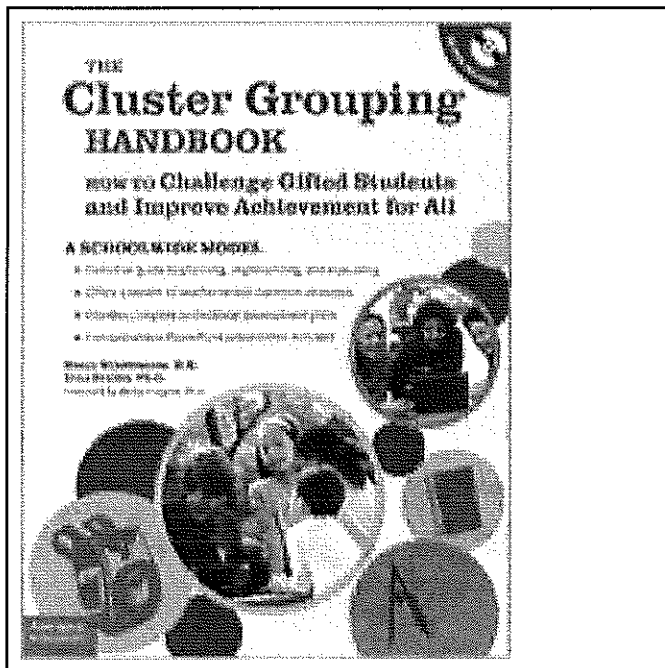
[Home](#) | [Michael F. Shaughnessy Sr. Columnist](#) | **An Interview with Susan Winebrenner and Dina Brulles: The Cluster Grouping Handbook.**

# An Interview with Susan Winebrenner and Dina Brulles: The Cluster Grouping Handbook.

[Michaels](#)

2010-02-26 04:45:00

Font size: 



**2.26.10 - Michael F. Shaughnessy - Our teaching, administrative experiences as gifted program directors, and consultant work guided our efforts in developing The Schoolwide Cluster Grouping Model (SCGM).**

**An Interview with Susan Winebrenner and Dina Brulles: The Cluster Grouping Handbook.**

**Michael F. Shaughnessy**

Eastern New Mexico University,

Portales, New Mexico

1. You have just written a book on "Cluster Grouping." What led you to this approach?

Dina's teaching experience as a gifted cluster teacher combined with Susan's consultant work and previous publications set us on the path to write *The Cluster Grouping Handbook*. We realized that the instructional strategies from Susan's book, *Teaching Gifted Kids in the Regular Classroom*, were just part of the answer. Creating a system where gifted students are grouped together for all of their academic instruction completes the picture. We joined efforts to formally record our ideas and practices into *The Cluster Grouping Handbook*. Our teaching, administrative experiences as gifted program directors, and consultant work guided our efforts in developing The Schoolwide Cluster Grouping Model (SCGM).

2. Your book includes handouts and a CD. What do they contain?

Teachers and school administrators appreciate the ease of having immediate access to the forms in the book, so we included them on the CD. The CD includes interactive lesson plans that teachers use to format their own lessons. Administrators use the forms to implement and evaluate effectiveness of the model in their schools. The CD also provides a PowerPoint presentation to use when sharing information about the SCGM with administrators, school staff members, and parents.

The handouts on the CD are duplicates of those in the book. They include administrative topics such as identification forms, communication to staff and parents, teacher and administrator surveys, and planning charts. The forms from Chapter 5 and 6 are instructional tools that teachers use to differentiate curriculum and instruction in the various grades.

### 3. How does your book specifically help gifted kids?

*The Cluster Grouping Handbook* helps teachers understand the academic needs and affective concerns of gifted students, which when combined with the methods and strategies included in Chapters 5 & 6, prepares them to engage and challenge the gifted students grouped in their classrooms. Of equal importance, the handbook provides principals and school district administrators with tools to successfully implement the model. The handbook informs teachers, administrators, and parents of ways schools can incorporate and integrate the needs of gifted students into the school system. The learning needs of gifted students can then factor into all aspects and functions of the school. In these ways, gifted education becomes part of the school culture.

The current educational climate emphasizes teaching required standards. However, most gifted students have previously mastered the majority of their grade level standards. Those who have not, typically learn new material in a much shorter period of time than others. *The Cluster Grouping Handbook* invites readers to consider the differences between *teaching* the standards and making sure students have *learned* them. We have included strategies that assist teachers in learning how to document mastery of grade level standards before providing direct instruction. This documentation allows students time and opportunity to learn new material that challenges and interests them.

### 4. Your book includes "professional development plans" Why were these included?

The success of any gifted program relies on the training and experience of the teachers providing services. Schools should not simply group gifted students together without providing ongoing teacher preparation. Cluster teachers must understand the learning and affective needs of gifted students. Professional development that aligns with the school's gifted population increases teachers' awareness of the students' needs. When that training correlates with the school's adopted curriculum and state academic standards, teachers can more easily differentiate instruction and make the curricular adjustments their students need. Schools should offer a variety of professional development opportunities to meet the varying needs of their teachers, just like we provide options and varied levels of challenge for our students. The professional development methods we suggest in Chapter 7 should be ongoing, meaningful, and interactive, varied in formats and topics, building camaraderie and support among staff members.

### 5. How do you go about convincing administrators that this system works? Do you have any data that shows the model is effective?

We convince them by showing need. Chapter 3 shows administrators how to determine if changes to their gifted programs are necessary. If what schools are currently doing is effective and adequate, then no change is needed. To determine the need for change, administrators should answer the following questions:

- Are all your gifted identified students being served?
- Does your gifted population reflect that of your school population?
- How much of gifted students' academic instruction time is differentiated on a daily basis? A weekly basis?

Schools commonly identify only those students their programs are equipped to serve. Instead, schools should consider creating gifted services that reflect the needs of their gifted populations. When people conclude that what they are doing is not serving all their school's gifted students they need to explore other options. Many schools are turning to the SCGM to provide gifted services, or supplement existing programs, because the model can serve all gifted students, and can be implemented at no significant cost. In this way, schools are enfranchising all their gifted students in all grade levels. Moreover, gifted students can receive differentiated instruction in every content area along with their peers on a daily basis. Once again, teachers need training in gifted education and differentiated instruction for this to occur effectively.

In Chapter Eight we describe ways schools can track the efficacy of the model, and we provide evidence of how the model successfully enfranchises all gifted students. Additionally, Dina has an article coming out next fall in a gifted education research journal that shows the differences between academic achievement of gifted students in the cluster model, and gifted students in regular classrooms. There is also a second upcoming article that shows academic achievement of gifted and non-gifted students in cluster classes and in regular classes. Research from several doctoral studies on cluster grouping also shows the efficacy of the model.

#### 6. How do you ensure that all students make annual yearly progress?

The likelihood of gifted students making annual yearly progress greatly increases in the SCGM. Gifted cluster teachers must provide ongoing formal and informal assessment to determine students' learning needs. Teachers learn to flexibly group students according to readiness, interests, and learning styles, which increases student engagement and learning. Gifted students make more progress when allowed to work at their challenge levels with intellectual peers, and also when they have opportunities for self-directed learning.

The Response to Intervention Model (RTI) that schools use for teaching struggling students incorporates a similar philosophy. Teachers are encouraged to:

- Assess the student's entry level with the designated standard
- Choose a method of teaching that is highly likely to move the student forward with this standard
- Apply the method
- Assess the degree to which the method has worked
- Repeat the process

If all students—including gifted students—participated in a similar process, they would all make consistent

academic growth.

7. Who publishes your book and where can interested individuals get a copy?

*The Cluster Grouping Handbook* is published by Free Spirit Publishing at [www.freespirit.com](http://www.freespirit.com). There is also a graduate level online course that we designed to go with the book. Knowledge Delivery Systems (KDS) produced a 20-segment experience that describes the model and demonstrates effective strategies in cluster classrooms. There are separate panels of parents, teachers, and administrators who discuss their experience with the model. Schools can use the video course as a site-based professional development program. Individuals and/or schools that are interested may purchase the complete series or individual segments. You can request to experience a sample a segment of the course at [www.kdsi.org](http://www.kdsi.org).

On Susan's website, [www.susanswinebrenner.com](http://www.susanswinebrenner.com), you will find additional information on cluster grouping, and a link to cluster grouping practitioners with phone numbers that will help you connect with an administrator or program director who cluster groups. If your school fits that description, please forward that information to Susan and she will add the information to the network. On Dina's website, [www.giftededucationconsultants.com](http://www.giftededucationconsultants.com), you can access other articles on cluster grouping, view sample professional development plans, and find additional resources to help implement and support The Schoolwide Cluster Grouping Model in your school or district.

The authors can be contacted electronically at : Susan Winebrenner, [susanwinebrenner86@gmail.com](mailto:susanwinebrenner86@gmail.com) and Dina Brulles at [dbrulles@gmail.com](mailto:dbrulles@gmail.com)