



## Individual Differences Part 2

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Often the question is asked, "What can a Christian school do in making provision for individual differences in learners?"

In Part 1, we addressed the concern of "retention and promotion" and made several suggestions for Christian schools for assisting students to be successful. In Part 2, we would like to make some recommendations concerning the other end of the learning spectrum – the fast learner.

### Fast Learners

How can Christian schools challenge students who are fast learners? Schools who are alert to individual differences will quickly identify students who learn faster than normal expectations. Planning for these students requires extra effort. Consider the following strategies.

**Avoid busy work.** When students have completed regularly assigned work, avoid assigning busy work. Rewarding working faster with more time consuming work results in productive time being wasted and the gifted students adapting to mediocrity. Not only should they be rewarded for finishing quicker, but they should be rewarded for finishing with correctness.

**Prepare enrichment opportunities.** Arranging rewarding enrichment opportunities requires careful preplanning on the part of a teacher. Assign a special teacher the responsibility of designing and supervising individual enrichment projects. This will help avoid using valuable time of the classroom teacher whose primary responsibility is toward 25 to 29 other students who have not yet mastered the content. When the budget does not allow for a special teacher, train teacher aides or a team of volunteers this task.

**Organize a peer tutoring program.** Enhance the success of a peer-tutoring program. Those students who learn fast can be taught to pass this skill on to other students.

When establishing a peer tutoring program, consider the following three simple principles.

1. Identify the exact purpose of the program and clearly communicate the program to everyone involved; tutor those tutored, teachers and parents.
2. Before a tutor assumes tutoring responsibility, they should have mastered the basis of the subject to be taught.
3. A reward system should be in place to acknowledge the tutor's work. At the high school level, academic credit is an appropriate reward.

**Offer Cross-Grade, Fast-Track and Honors Classes.** Consider implementing these programs in place of a Gifted/Talented program. In the Christian school community, most parents feel their child is gifted and talented -all children have strengths and positive attributes. To some extent the cross-grade, fast-track and honors program helps reduce this challenge.

In elementary, a cross-grade program allows students at one grade level to move to a higher grade for certain subjects based on their level of mastery. This is very easy when certain subjects can be scheduled during the same time period, for example, all Math is taught at 9 a.m. This allows a second grader to attend a third grade Math class.

Whereas, a fast-track program is for students that have demonstrated an ability to move ahead at a faster pace in the curriculum as determined by the qualification process. The majority of the curriculum in a fast-track class is identical to the curriculum of the other classes

in the same grade level. The difference is that the fast-track class will move through the curriculum a bit faster (hence the term "fast-track"), and will explore some other enrichment areas as time permits. Because the class moves at a faster pace, it is a good match for students that work quickly and proficiently. It is usually not a good match for very bright students that are meticulous in their work. (See Implementing a Fast Track Program.)

Honor classes usually start at the sixth grade. Multiple criteria provide the basis for placement. This might include achievement scores, available ability tests, teachers' ratings, and demonstrated student performance.

**Provide accelerated courses.** Accelerated courses allow advanced students to proceed through the same content at a faster speed. However, do not skip content steps, especially when the material skipped is prerequisite to subsequent work.

**Offer Advanced Placement and On-line courses.** Advance-placement (AP) courses as well as on-line learning opportunities at colleges and universities will help challenge faster and brighter students. Through college-level AP courses, students can enter a universe of knowledge that might otherwise remain unexplored in high school; through AP Exams, students have the opportunity to earn credit or advanced standing at most of the nation's colleges and universities. These AP courses allow students who desire to be challenged academically to explore the world from a variety of perspectives, most importantly their own, study subjects in greater depth and detail, and assume the responsibility of reasoning, analyzing, and understanding for themselves.

## Curriculum Development

Providing for both the slow and fast learner requires continued curriculum development. This includes a careful evaluation of the current curriculum being offered in the school as it relates to established goals and objectives; it includes developing new designs, and implementing and evaluating curriculum.

Although much of the content that is taught in the Christian school is the same year after year, various factors demand additions or modifications to the existing curricula. These in-

clude: shifts in student achievement levels, societal conditions, advancements in technology, curriculum innovations, expectations of accrediting associations and state mandated competency testing, to name a few. For example, a few years ago most Christian schools had no need to include sex education, AIDS awareness and drug education as part of the curricula. Today, these programs are not only a requirement of many states but an absolute must to provide the knowledge students need to live free of these destructive devices. Furthermore, students in Christian schools are being bombarded by a host of ungodly influences feminism, materialism, homosexuality, unwholesome media, (television, movies, video), pornography, New Age, for which the church, parents and Christian school need to combat. The Christian school curriculum needs to address these issues.

A final example of the need for curricula development centers around advancements in technology. Computer technology is becoming a very real part of everyone's life ...today, computers are a vital ingredient in the learning experiences of any career. Those graduating from our Christian schools need to be computer literate so they will have the same opportunities as their public school counterparts: to be successful in a computer rich society, full of mini-computers, desktop computers, laptop PC's, notebook PC's, tablets, cellphones and other technologies.

Computer literacy needs to be a vital part of the Christian school curricula. Without this literacy, Christian school students "will find themselves becoming more dependent, not just on computers, but other people - those who have access to computers and know how to use them.

My prayer for Christian schools and their administrators and staff is "Father, provide each administrator and teacher Your wisdom in developing educational goals, measurable objectives, and supporting programs so every student is given the opportunity to develop to the full potential imparted by their Creator. Let each school clearly know the curricula plans and programs You desire. Let any idea that would exalt itself above Your perfect will for this school be brought down. Provide the staff needed for every grade level and for every subject."

Ultimately, the purpose of the Christian school curriculum should be the fulfillment of 2 Timothy 3:17: "*That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works.*"