

# The NUTS & BOLTS of CLUSTER GROUPING



## WHAT IS CLUSTER GROUPING?

Cluster grouping is a school-wide approach to delivering full-time services to highly capable learners in a general education classroom and has the potential to boost the achievement of all students.

The cluster grouping model clusters students based on a student's documented performances and abilities. It also narrows the range of skills in every classroom making it easier for the teacher to differentiate their instruction. For more information on what cluster grouping is and why we do it, click [here](#).



## WHAT DOES CLUSTER GROUPING LOOK LIKE?

The key to cluster grouping is to get a balance of cluster groups in each class. Here is a visual example of how we would try to balance each cluster of students in a classroom while narrowing the range of skills in each classroom:

	Cluster 1: Highly Capable; Non-Spectrum	Cluster 2: High Achieving	Cluster 3: Achieving at Grade-Level	Cluster 4: Achieving with Support	Cluster 5: Struggling to Achieve
Classroom A	6*	0	12	12	0
Classroom B	0	6	12	6	6
Classroom C	0	6	12	6	6

*\*Highly capable students who are twice exceptional are placed in this cluster after consulting with the SPED team.*

Ideally, clusters two and five are placed in classrooms that do NOT have cluster one students in it. The cluster group model can have many benefits for all types of learners and for teachers when done well. Below are some of the most commonly reported benefits of separating these clusters of students in our mixed-ability classrooms:

- Every classroom has a narrower the range of skills making it easier to implement differentiated instruction and address every student's needs.
- The highly capable have greater access to their intellectual peers, destigmatizing participation in differentiated learning activities, are more likely to engage in differentiated learning opportunities.
- Separating the highly capable and the high achieving ensures that every classroom has academic leadership, making the high achieving more likely to be recognized for their skills and talents as well.

## HOW DO WE CLUSTER STUDENTS?

Students are grouped into the five clusters below based on a student's classroom and assessment performances and a teachers' professional judgment:

<p><b>Cluster 1:</b>  <b>The Highly Capable</b></p>	<p>The Highly Capable group are students who have been formally identified as being a highly capable student. These students have been formally identified because they have demonstrated consistently above-average reasoning AND/OR above-average academic performances in math AND/OR reading. This group will include students from a low socioeconomic background, English language learners, and the twice-exceptional students (i.e., highly capable students who have an IEP or 504 plan). This group will also include the highly capable who are currently underachieving or non-productive*.</p>
<p><b>Cluster 2:</b>  <b>The High Achieving</b></p>	<p>The High Achieving group are students who have not been formally identified as being a highly capable student either because they have not yet been referred, or because they have not yet met the criteria used to identify highly capable students. These students will perform in the average to above-average range in reasoning, math, and/or reading. However, their "above-average" performances may be inconsistent. These students are typically very productive, working to the fullest extent of their abilities.</p>
<p><b>Cluster 3:</b>  <b>Achieving at Grade-Level</b></p>	<p>The Achieving at Grade-Level group are students who perform in the average range. They may occasionally perform at the slightly above average range if working on something in which they have a personal interest, or who may occasionally perform below average if working on new or unfamiliar material. These students need few, if any, accommodations or interventions to master grade-level standards.</p>
<p><b>Cluster 4:</b>  <b>Achieving with Some Support</b></p>	<p>The Achieving with Support group are students who consistently perform below grade-level Expectations and who may occasionally meet grade-level expectations. These students can access grade-level materials and meet grade-level standards if there are appropriate scaffolding and interventions incorporated into the instruction. The need for these interventions is consistent, and the interventions could be academic and/or behavioral.</p>
<p><b>Cluster 5:</b>  <b>Struggling to Achieve</b></p>	<p>The Struggling to Achieve group are students who are significantly below grade-level in reasoning, academic ability, and productivity. These students will struggle to access grade-level instruction even with scaffolding and interventions. The need for these interventions is consistent, and the interventions could be academic and/or behavioral.</p>

*\*Labels such as "non-productive" and "high-achieving" are not used to type-cast students, but rather to provide readily understood descriptions that may help in determining a placement of students in a school-wide cluster grouping model.*

There are some special considerations to make when determining which cluster a student should go into:

- Highly capable students should be placed in cluster one even if they struggle to be productive in class, have intense social and emotional needs, or necessitate behavior interventions.
- English language learners who are formally identified as highly capable are placed in cluster one.
- Twice-exceptional students, or those who are both identified as a highly capable learner and who are being served with an IEP or 504, are placed in cluster one if the SPED team determines that classroom is the least restrictive environment.
- Keep an eye to your school population and the possibility of unconscious biases when assigning students to clusters. Strive for representation of ethnic groups similar to your school's population, particularly in cluster one, two, and five.
- Remember, clustering these students is a subjective process, based on the assumption that previous trends in these students' performance will likely continue the following school year. Try to develop contingency plans as a school and/or as a grade-level team for the possibility that some students may need to be re-clustered mid-year as their needs change.