

1. Are there any accelerated/special programs available for K-8th grade students who are advanced in reading and math? What can I do to see that these opportunities are made available to my students?

Reading- In elementary schools, students in advanced level reading groups use above grade-level texts to work on literature interpretation and analysis. They participate in the Junior Great Books program and the William and Mary program, including instruction on the William & Mary research model and the opportunity to apply that model to explore authentic issues. Additionally, elementary students also have daily writing instruction and work on at least one extended writing piece (taken through the writing process) each quarter.

At the secondary level, students with advanced level language arts skills or who demonstrate the potential to perform at advanced levels are placed in GT English and reading classrooms or in GT clusters and refine their understanding of the processes and skills of English language arts by using texts of greater sophistication and challenge. Instruction is based on the more challenging instructional pathways described in the curriculum guides and also include work with Junior Great Books and William and Mary programs. Writing instruction remains an important component of English instruction with greater focus on the persuasive and informational modes.

It is important to note that NO MCPS reading/language arts program is restricted to only GT identified students. For more information on these programs visit the AEI website: <http://www.mcps.k12.md.us/curriculum/enriched/>

Math- A year's acceleration is available at every grade level. This means the curriculum guides allow, for example, a 3rd grade student to do 3rd and 4th grade math. However, this may not be the ideal situation for every student who is advanced in math. Schools also have the option to place students in higher grade math classes. This means that by the time a student is in middle school, the student could be enrolled in a high school-level math course such as Algebra 1 or even geometry. Students should always have the opportunity to compact on grade level curriculum, if ready, in order to work on more accelerated or enriched work. There are anchor activities, which are ongoing assignments that students can work on independently throughout a unit, grading period or longer, in at least 3 units of every curriculum guide that provide additional acceleration and enrichment. Schools can also sponsor before or after school enrichment clubs such as Math Olympiad and chess clubs. Before or after school enrichment clubs are often sponsored by teachers, other school staff, and/ or parents.

To ensure these opportunities are available, speak with your child's teacher, team leader or appropriate resource teacher or Accelerated and Enriched Instruction Support Teacher (AEIST [middle schools]). If opportunities are not available, speak with school administrators.

2. What grouping practices (in-class, across grade, homogeneous, etc.) does MCPS have available to meet the needs of students who learn at an accelerated pace?

In organizing classes for instruction, students are often assigned to an instructional group based on a prerequisite level of experience in school, ability level or achievement in a subject or specific skills, or other predetermined criteria that are predictors of success. According to Policy IOA, Gifted and Talented Education (MCPS, 1995), highly able students should have the opportunity to work in homogeneous groups (e.g., students working at a similar level), heterogeneous groups (e.g., students working at multiple levels), and individually depending on the content area and task involved. Moreover, the policy states that students achieving at the highest level must not be isolated from each other. Determining the instructional setting for a student, whether homogeneously grouped with similar ability level peers, heterogeneously grouped with mixed ability level peers, or working independently, should always increase the student's opportunity for success. Additionally, no grouping plan should be static; rather, it should promote flexibility to meet students' changing needs and achievement.

When a school offers a sequential range of courses or an advanced placement course, students should be encouraged to participate in the class for which they show readiness on the basis of prior achievement or potential. When establishing groups, a number of criteria directly related to the instructional objectives of the subject will be considered, such as:

- Special needs, interests, and aptitudes of students.
- Recommendations of teachers, counselors, and parents.
- Past achievement of the student indicated by grades, standardized achievement tests, or courses completed, recent verbal and nonverbal ability scores.
- Scores on diagnostic and criterion-referenced tests prepared and administered by the local school academic department.
- Portfolios or work samples.
- Requests of students.

(MCPS Regulation IHB-RA: School Academic Grouping Practices, 1995)

3. When and how are children screened for Gifted and Talented Programs? What is the percentage of students who are usually identified?

In spring of second grade, all students in MCPS are screened for Gifted and Talented attributes. Multiple sources of information are gathered for each student, including math and reading levels, teacher and parent surveys, and results from standardized assessments. Screening is conducted by a gifted and talented committee at every elementary school. Membership includes the principal, teachers, counselor, resource teacher, ESOL teacher, reading specialist and other school based personnel. This committee meets in late spring to review data and make recommendations about instruction and identification.

The purposes of this multi-step process are to:

- recognize those students whose performance, motivation, or potential ability indicates the need for accelerated and enriched instruction; and,
- Match student strengths with instruction and programs that will support and extend these strengths.

The percentages of students identified GT in MCPS in second grade in the past three years:

2003-2004	44.5%
2004-2005	33.8%
2005-2006	39.5%

4. My child was just identified as GT by his school. What happens now? Should I expect any changes to the instruction my child will be receiving?

All classroom teachers are notified of students who are identified GT. Whenever discussions and decisions take place about providing accelerated and enriched instruction, such as placement in the William and Mary Reading program or an above grade level math class, students' identified strengths should be considered.

Students do not have to be identified GT in order to be placed in these programs. In addition, identification as GT does not guarantee placement in any particular program. The goal is to match student strengths with instruction and programs that will support and extend these strengths.

5. I'm not sure that my children are being challenged to their full potential. Whom do I talk to in the school about my concerns? What should I do if I feel the school is not being responsive to my concerns?

You should arrange for a conference with your child's teacher. Bring completed work samples from school that indicate that your child is not being challenged (for example, pages and pages of math work with similar skills where your child got all or almost all the answers correct) as well as work samples that your child completed independently that demonstrate his/her strengths.

Listen carefully to what the teacher has to say, as the problem could be a lack of communication between parent and teacher, rather than lack of challenge. Take notes during the conference. If decisions are made, you can request a copy of the action plan outlining the steps to be taken.

If these conferences are not satisfactory, arrange to meet with a school administrator. Bring work samples and your notes from the conferences. It is most important to let the administrator know that you want to be supportive and help in any way that you can, rather than be adversarial.

6. I am concerned that my child is only being taught to write BCR's (Brief Constructed Responses). What writing instruction is available in elementary, middle and high school beyond just learning to write a paragraph?

The MCPS Reading Language Arts and secondary English curriculum requires a substantive approach to writing development, including full development of extended writing through the writing process from drafting of ideas to organization of thoughts to final editing and proofreading. From elementary to high school, teachers organize writing instruction using the 6-Traits writing approach, teaching students to use their understanding of writing traits to compose and revise their writing. Instruction should not be limited to paragraph responses. At the elementary level, during the ninety minutes reading/language arts block, there is time for writing in response to reading as well as instructional time focused on writing development. The time dedicated to writing is to be spent on developing original narrative and expository works, with a minimum of one extended writing response per quarter. At the middle and high school levels, writing instruction is directly taught in English but is also expected throughout the disciplines. In the MCPS English curriculum, writing instruction moves beyond the BCR and targets extended writing to prepare students for success in honors and AP classes. During every unit in their middle and high school English classes, all students are expected to compose multi-paragraph essays for a variety of purposes, including persuasion, research, and textual analysis.

7. I have a concern that the books assigned to my children in reading are way below the level my children can understand. What tests are given to my children to determine their appropriate reading level? How do teachers determine exactly what books to teach based on my child's test results?

A variety of tests are available for schools to use to determine or confirm a student's reading level. For example, in grades K-2, all students are administered an in-depth, one-on-one diagnostic reading assessment three times a year. This assessment is called the Primary Reading Assessment. This assessment helps the teacher determine each student's reading level. In grades 3-8, students take a multiple-choice reading comprehension test on-line three times a year. This assessment is called Measures of Academic Progress in Reading (MAP-R). This assessment provides information about students' reading levels. Additionally, schools may opt to use other popular reading assessments such as Qualitative Reading Inventory (QRI) and Diagnostic Reading Assessment (DRA) to determine students' reading levels. Progress monitoring tools can also be used by teachers to help identify reading levels. However, it's important to stress that reading level alone is not the sole determinant for selecting the text used for instruction.

There are many reasons for selecting text for instruction. For example, a text may appear easy on the surface, but depending on the lesson focus the text may be very appropriate. For example, consider the Green Book, which is an easy reading level, but conceptually, it is a much more complex text. Essentially, teachers look at the characteristics of readers at different levels and select the text that is deemed most appropriate for matching text to reader and for teaching the lesson focus.

In addition to selecting challenging texts for students, teachers also select appropriate instructional strategies to guide students' understanding of the big ideas and issues raised by these texts. Teachers also foster the development of students' critical thinking through the high level questions they pose to guide student discussions and through the follow-up writing tasks they assign.

Teachers can differentiate reading instruction by selecting different texts for different reading levels. Another way teachers can differentiate reading instruction is by using the same text, but selecting different instructional strategies, questions, and/or written responses for different groups of students.

8. In High School, students may sign up for honors or AP level courses but in Middle School, students are placed in classrooms with a mix of students who are assigned GT and standard levels for a subject. Since they are all in the same classroom, are there different expectations for the pace of instruction and amount of material which will be taught to the students assigned to the different levels?

There are different expectations for students working at an advanced level. In mathematics, there are different courses for students working above grade level. In English, science, and social studies schools choose to create homogenous classes or heterogeneous classes. In either setting, MCPS curriculum guides set expectations and provide direction for students working above grade level. The recent Middle School Reform Initiative noted a need to improve direction for advanced instruction in English, science, and social studies and, as a result, Guidelines for Advanced Instruction are being developed by the Department of Curriculum and Instruction and AEI. These guidelines will describe to parents and teachers what students working above grade level should be receiving regardless of the class setting. The Guidelines are being developed and reviewed this year and will be ready for implementation in Fall 2008.

9. My elementary school children are in a mixed ability classroom for the majority of their school day. How can I be certain that the pace and content of the instruction provides my child with appropriate challenge in all subject areas?

In mixed ability classrooms, students should be regrouped into small, flexible groups for reading instruction (three or more groups in grades K-2, and at least two or three groups in grades 3-5).

Many schools choose to regroup all students in a grade level for math instruction, based on ability. It is important that these groupings be kept flexible, and that teachers use pre-tests or other data to determine how the groups are formed.

For science and social studies instruction, teachers should differentiate the instruction based on content, process and/or products for highly able students. That means that highly able students should receive:

- access to more advanced content in the subject being studied, and/or
- provocative, abstract, complex and engaging questions and assignments that require students to compare and contrast, create, evaluate the content, and/or
- choices about the products that they create as a result of their learning.

10. What training is available to teachers in the area of gifted education and differentiation? Who administers the training? How often is it made available? Is it ever required or is it always optional?

Some of the trainings, programs, and courses offered by the Division of Accelerated and Enriched Instruction and/or the Office of Organizational Development for MCPS teachers and specialists are:

Addressing the Needs of the Highly Able Math Student: MA-68

This course is designed to support teachers in the acceleration and planning for mathematics instruction and to provide a rigorous mathematics program for highly able students. Participation is open to elementary teachers, math support teachers and staff developers.

The Math Labs Classrooms Program: Observing Differentiated Instruction

Funded by Educational Foundation grants, the Math Lab Classroom program is a professional development opportunity for classroom teachers and staff development teachers. The Math Lab Classroom teachers have agreed to invite observers into their classrooms to see how they effectively manage differentiated math instruction.

Differentiation for Middle School Social Studies, Science, and English Teachers (Course # 50486)

Participants analyze data to inform instruction, determine readiness, grouping, etc. Participants learn about Spencer Kagan's first principles of brain-friendly instruction, create an authentic assessment to evaluate mastery of an indicator, and identify and apply strategies and processes that support differentiated instruction. Participants also develop differentiated lessons.

Reading Language Arts Lesson Integration: RD-40

This 2-credit course is designed to support teachers as they guide all students to reach high performance standards in reading/language arts. Participants learn ways to integrate best practices from research-based programs like Junior Great Books and William and Mary into the balanced literacy classroom.

William and Mary Reading (Grades 2-5)

In this training, participants receive an overview of the William and Mary Language Arts Program and explore ways to implement a grade level unit in a balanced literacy classroom. The session focuses on the program's teaching models, assessment component, and recommended texts. Participants receive a teacher manual and student literature for classroom use.

Jacob's Ladder Program (Targeted Grades: 3-5)

In this training, participants learn how to use the Jacob's ladder scaffolds to assist students with accessing William and Mary materials. Participants are also given time work with colleagues to plan integration of one or more of the "ladders" into literacy instruction.

Junior Great Books (K-8)

In this two-day training, participants learn strategies for refining and extending students' critical reading and comprehension skills through use of the Shared Inquiry Model.

Teachers leave the workshop prepared to implement the Junior Great Books Program with their students.

Using Centers for Differentiation (K-12)

Participants receive an overview of differentiation and discuss ways to use selected differentiated strategies in their classrooms.

Differentiation and Rigor (K-12)

Participants experience a variety of examples of rigorous tasks and strategies and make curricular connections.

All trainings are offered at least twice per year. Trainings may be required/requested by principals. For more information on these programs visit the AEI website:
<http://www.mcps.k12.md.us/curriculum/enriched/>