

# Expanding

**expectations  
for students  
through accelerated  
schools**

BY SANDRA P. BYRD  
AND CHRISTINE FINNAN

**W**hat does accelerated learning mean? For scores of disadvantaged and at-risk

students involved in the Accelerated Schools Project, it means a deeper understanding of a subject and higher achievement. For teachers, it means a school culture where collaboration is the norm, a sense of moral purpose drives their work, and they are learning nearly as much as the students they teach.

The National Center for the

SANDRA P. BYRD is an assistant professor at the University of North Carolina, Asheville, and director of UNCA University School Teacher Education Partnership. You can contact her at the Department of Education, University of North Carolina, Asheville, One University Heights CPO #1950, Asheville, NC 28804, (828) 251-6959, fax (828) 251-6883, e-mail: sbyrd@bulldog.unca.edu.

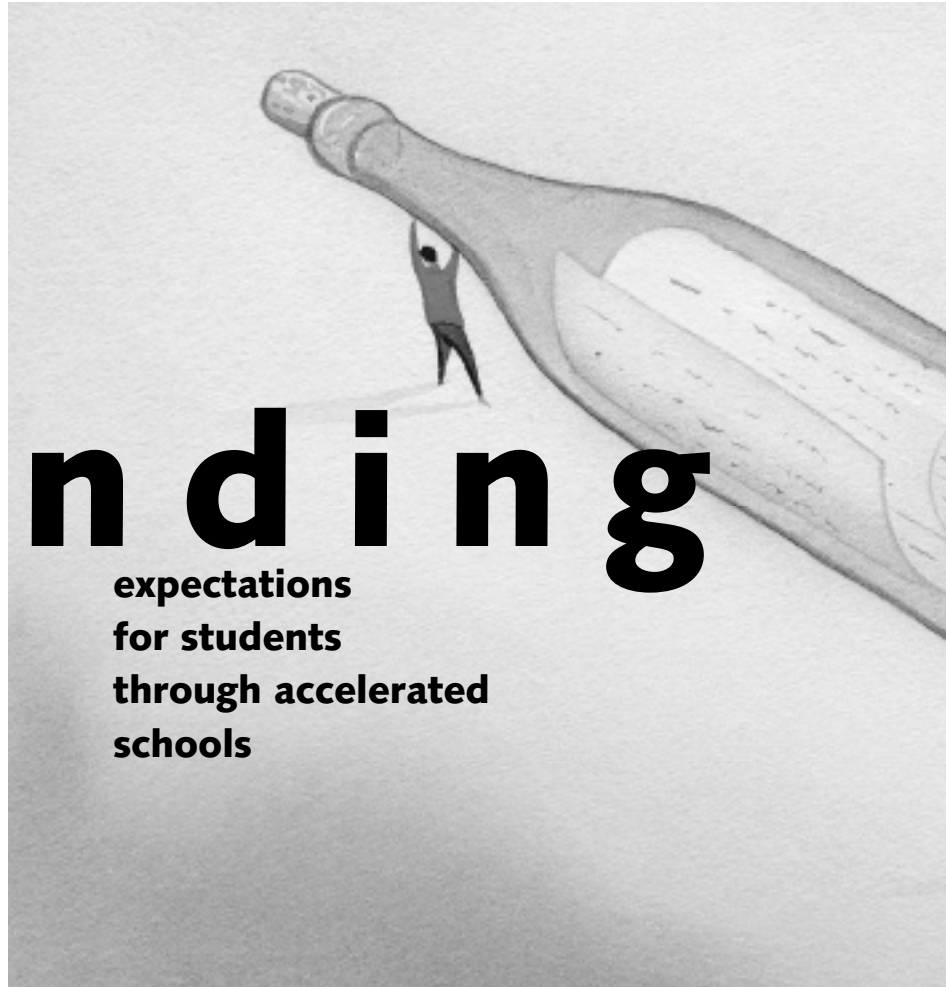
CHRISTINE FINNAN is an assistant professor at the College of Charleston and director of the South Carolina Accelerated Schools Project. You can contact her at the School of Education, College of Charleston, 66 George St., Charleston, SC 29424, (843) 953-4826, fax (843) 953-1994, e-mail: finnanc@cofc.edu.

Accelerated Schools Project works with schools across the country to change their approach to educating economically disadvantaged students. The project is based on the belief that accelerating the learning of all students, especially those at risk of failure, will bring all students into the academic mainstream by the end of

elementary or middle school (Levin, 1986, 1991, 1998). The Accelerated Schools Project philosophy emphasizes students' capacity to learn.

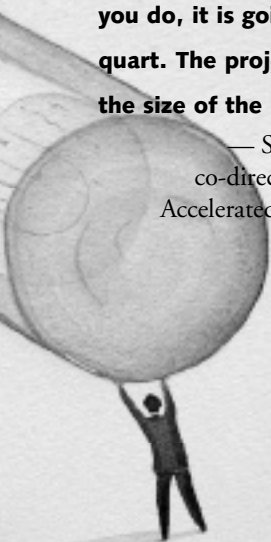
Acceleration tends to be associated with bright children and teaching content faster. Accelerated schools try to engage children so they understand why they are learning. That doesn't mean that the focus is on going faster. It means expecting more of yourself than you ever dreamed possible.

Simeon Slovacek, co-director of the Los Angeles Accelerated Schools Center, said simply changing expectations changes results. "How one



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Accelerated Schools Center



defines capacity is frequently related to a measure of content such as, ‘How much does a bottle hold?’ she said. “A quart holds a quart, and it does not matter what you do, it is going to hold a quart. The project redefines the size of the bottle. ... (For example), in California, the language and English standards for kindergarten students include knowing the alphabet and sounding out letters, knowing the physical orientation of a book and how you would go through a book. The standards do not include reading a book. However, because of teachers’ expectations, most kindergarten stu-

dents (in accelerated schools) are reading books. The statewide standards say that the capacity of the bottle should be tiny. But because of high expectations, the capacity of the bottle was changed” (S. Slovacek, personal communication, January 14, 2000).

How effective has the Accelerated Schools Project been? Data from 15 interviews, a questionnaire, this author’s direct involvement in providing professional development to a project school, and more than 5,000 pages of primary and secondary source documents indicate that the Accelerated Schools Project has helped initiate and sustain change in student outcomes and change in schools (Byrd, 2000).

### ACCELERATED SCHOOLS PROJECT

Henry Levin, a professor of education and economics at Stanford University, began the Accelerated Schools Project in 1986 as a pilot program aimed at economically disadvantaged children in public schools. Levin’s research had found that efforts to remediate students actually slowed their academic progress. Levin believed that by using instructional strategies previously reserved for children identified as gifted and talented and providing equal access to and deeper engagement with enriched learning experiences, schools could alter many students’ rate of learning.

The project has grown to serve more than 1,000 schools in the United States and a number of schools in other countries (Levin, 2001). A national center coordinates 11 U.S. regional satellite centers located in universities and colleges, schools, district offices, and state departments of education. The satel-

lite centers provide technical assistance, training, and continuous follow-up by trained coaches.

According to Levin, this project represents “a constant dance among theory and practice, experimentalism and observation, and reflective feedback and reformulation within a democratic context” (H.M. Levin, personal communication, December 2, 1999).

### AN ACCELERATED SCHOOL

The Accelerated Schools Project is research-based on two levels: 1) in the development of a democratic philosophy and guiding principles that provide the rationale for reform, and 2) in the application of a deliberate process that uses collaborative and informed decision making to transform the school.

To become an Accelerated School, 90% of the school community must agree to support project affiliation. The school community includes teaching and nonteaching staff, plus a representative sample of other school community members. The entire school community follows a specific process, first examining the school’s status through a process called taking stock. The school community then creates a shared vision of the school, compares it with the present, and identifies challenge areas.

The project’s focus is both organizational and programmatic change. The project aims for a collaborative school culture where cadres, a steering committee, and a School as a Whole committee allow representative mem-

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## Student achievement in the Accelerated Schools Project

These have improved in the project:

- Student achievement on standardized tests
- Student discipline
- Student attendance

While student populations in most participating schools reflect challenging demographics, six satellite centers show positive changes in student outcomes.

SATELLITE CENTER	NUMBER of schools in project ('98-'99)	CHANGES IN STUDENT OUTCOMES
Louisiana	48	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• An Accelerated Schools Project goal of increasing academic achievement in half of participating schools was exceeded by <b>22%</b> in 1996-1997. In 2000, 75% of participating schools increased academic achievement by more than 50%.</li> <li>• Louisiana Board of Education chose the Accelerated Schools Project in 1999 in the top <b>18</b> of 266 projects, based on student achievement, student discipline, and parental involvement. (<i>Questionnaire</i>)</li> </ul>
Missouri	165	<p>From 1990 to 1998, students in accelerated schools who scored in the top two quintiles of the Missouri Mastery Achievement Test averaged gains of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>4.3%</b> per year in math, compared with <b>2.6%</b> for the state.</li> <li>• <b>1.7%</b> per year in reading, compared with <b>1%</b> for the state.</li> <li>• <b>4.7%</b> per year in science, compared with <b>2.6%</b> for the state.</li> <li>• <b>4%</b> per year in social studies, compared with <b>2.8%</b> for the state. (<i>Questionnaire</i>)</li> </ul>
North Carolina	17	<p>In a 1998-1999 evaluation report of accelerated schools (Donley &amp; Johnson, 1999), End-Of-Grade (EOG) math and reading scores were used to monitor student academic progress.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In <b>48%</b> of all comparisons at all schools at all grade levels, changes in EOG scores at accelerated schools were more positive than at other schools in their counties.</li> <li>• 3rd-grade reading scores increased from 30% to <b>34%</b>.</li> <li>• 3rd-grade math scores increased from 16% to <b>30%</b>.</li> <li>• <b>Middle grades</b> showed similar gains.</li> <li>• <b>Black students</b>, particularly boys, showed noticeable gains on EOG. (<i>Donley &amp; Johnson, 1999; Questionnaire</i>)</li> </ul>
Ohio	35	<p>Kinder Elementary, an accelerated school beginning in 1997, was compared with comparable non-accelerated schools. At Kinder:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>4th-grade proficiency subtests</b> (1997-1998) were highest of all schools, while expenditures were less per pupil and teaching staff was less experienced.</li> <li>• <b>100%</b> of 4th graders passed writing (1998-1999).</li> <li>• <b>88%</b> passed reading, <b>94%</b> passed math, citizenship, and science (1998-1999).</li> <li>• <b>Scores</b> were highest in the district.</li> <li>• Passed <b>5 out of 5</b> of areas on state report card, the only school in the district to do so.</li> <li>• Had the <b>lowest</b> average student IQ in the district based on MAT 7. (<i>Questionnaire</i>)</li> </ul>
South Carolina	34	<p>In a 1998-1999 EIA Program and Budget Annual Review, an analysis of Total Battery scores as measured by MAT 7 indicates that in accelerated schools:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>55%</b> of grade levels tested showed gains from 1997.</li> <li>• <b>64%</b> showed gains from 1995.</li> <li>• <b>71%</b> of 1st grades gained in reading.</li> <li>• <b>87%</b> of 2nd grades gained in reading.</li> <li>• <b>65%</b> of schools reported the number of students identified as gifted and talented increased since joining the Accelerated Schools Project.</li> <li>• <b>53%</b> reported a decrease in the number of students identified for special education services.</li> <li>• <b>59%</b> reported a decrease in the number of students retained. (<i>Questionnaire</i>)</li> <li>• <b>90%</b> of schools reported increases in % of students at all grade levels meeting standards in math and English/language arts. (<i>Palmetto State Achievement Challenge Test</i>)</li> <li>• <b>Higher scores</b> on standardized tests were reported for students of teachers implementing powerful learning strategies, compared with those whose teachers had lower levels of implementation. Study by Anderson Research Group (<i>Finann, Schnepel, &amp; Anderson, 2003</i>)</li> </ul>
Texas	52	<p>At Burleson Elementary School: <i>In the 4th year as an accelerated school...</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>60%</b> of 4th graders passed the reading portion of the TAAS.</li> <li>• <b>63%</b> passed the math portion.</li> </ul> <p><i>Compared with the 3rd year when...</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>22%</b> of 4th graders passed the reading portion of the TAAS.</li> <li>• <b>23%</b> passed the math portion.</li> </ul> <p>At Martin Elementary School:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Test scores for Hispanic students increased from <b>8%</b> pass rate on all tests to <b>57%</b>.</li> <li>• For economically disadvantaged students on all tests, the pass rate went from <b>8%</b> to <b>55%</b>. (<i>B. Hammill, personal communication, November 23, 1999</i>)</li> </ul>

## Philosophy of accelerated schools

The Accelerated Schools Project is a complex philosophy. The process schools use is in opposition to prevailing cultural beliefs about the nature of knowledge, how teaching should occur, and how children should learn. The project takes a different approach to answering fundamental questions about teaching and learning:

### **What are the conditions under which most students learn?**

Learning is more likely to occur in schools that are participatory and inclusive rather than passive and remedial; in classrooms organized so students and teachers work collaboratively; and where there are timelines for meeting goals of higher achievement.

### **What is the learner capable of learning?**

Remedial programs typically underestimate a student's capacity to learn and the rate at which students can learn. Accelerated schools data show that a student's rate of learning is alterable through enrichment and deeper, rather than remedial, learning.

**When should students learn?** Students should learn reasoning and critical thinking along with basic

skills, engaging in higher levels of thinking throughout their schooling. Traditional practice has been to emphasize lower-level skills prior to more advanced skills, which frequently results in the exclusion of higher-level skills, especially for economically disadvantaged students (Means & Knapp, 1991; Finnan & Swanson, 2000). As students encounter new material that they do not know how to process, this approach becomes increasingly problematic (Singham, 1998).

### **What constitutes a learning experience?**

The Accelerated Schools Project defines powerful learning as authentic, learner-centered, continuous, interactive, and inclusive. For example, "In a 4th-grade class, the students create their classroom rules. The teacher encourages critical thinking by asking divergent questions. The children are involved with a real problem which cuts across multiple disciplines and standards and increases student engagement and motivation" (P. Soler, personal communication, January 7, 2000).

### **Where and by whom should decisions about learning be made?**

The Accelerated Schools Project follows a clear and systematic process for school-based decision

making that includes setting priorities based on study and analysis of why problems exist in a school, then developing action and evaluation plans to determine the outcomes of decisions made.

### **How can a learning organization be structured so that the organization's norms and practices sustain continued improvement?**

The Accelerated Schools Project is committed to developing democratic schools. The schools' internal governance system helps develop informed decision makers who use forums for discussion and inquiry. In addition, the project's national governance structure helps with policies and strategic plans to promote a cohesive set of beliefs.

### **How do adults best learn so that the project's philosophy and process become part of their individual and collective way of thinking about schools and learning?**

Adults learn the project's concepts, skills, and assumptions through work that is relevant to their needs. Training sessions are interactive, relevant to school needs, and active. Professional development is tailored and frequently offered on-site.

bers of the entire school community to control, plan, design, and evaluate their own educational activities and outcomes. The school community continuously collects data about the causes of problems and possible solutions, and then assesses the results of actions taken. The principal facilitates this inquiry process. This process builds governance capacity at the

school, reversing the traditional school organization in which authority flows from the central office to the principal, teachers, support staff, and finally to students and parents.

## **SUSTAINING CHANGE**

The sustained success of the Accelerated Schools Project could be due to building capacity for school-

based decision making, a sense of moral purpose in teachers' work, and the project's commitment to ongoing professional development.

Many school reforms endorse site-based management. However, Levin (1991) found most schools weren't specific about what changes needed to be made in a decentralized school organization and what was needed to

support those changes. The Accelerated Schools Project has a well-defined structure that builds capacity at the school level through a unity of purpose and an accountability system for monitoring results.

Another reason the Accelerated Schools Project has sustained effectiveness could be what Michael Fullan refers to as “moral purpose and change agency” (Fullan, 1993). Many individuals with whom we interacted held a deep conviction, almost a missionary zeal, that they could change schools and classrooms. These individuals expressed a moral purpose in their work: to change schools through building a democratic community focused on the strengths of students and parents, rather than on the perceived deficiencies associated with economic disadvantage. They don’t subscribe to the idea that something is wrong with economically disadvantaged children and it’s the school’s job to fix the defects. They recognize that grouping disadvantaged students marginalizes them.

Finally, project sustainability is associated with extensive, continuous professional development.

The Accelerated Schools Project outlines professional development offerings in a Basic Partnership Agreement. For the first three years, satellite centers provide a minimum of nine days of training, monthly meetings to a coaching or leadership team, and national and regional conferences/workshops. The school-based team, in turn, returns to the school and trains the remaining teachers, staff, and parents.

Training is provided in the following areas: the philosophy of the Accelerated Schools Project, powerful learning, governance, vision development, taking stock, and inquiry. As schools integrate the Accelerated Schools Project into their culture and routines, the satellite center provides professional development focused more on specific areas of need.

Satellite centers provide professional development to affiliated schools in additional areas such as literacy, mathematics instruction, gifted and talented strategies (e.g., critical thinking, differentiating instruction), working with children in poverty, and parental involvement.

In addition, professional learning occurs through the ongoing, collaborative research conducted by cadres. All teachers are members of small working groups or cadres formed around identified challenge areas. The cadres research problems at the school, identify solutions to the problems, and learn enough about the selected solution to present it to the rest of the school community. Once a school decides to adopt a solution identified by a cadre, coaches provide staff development at the school level to implement the solution. Key to teachers’ professional learning is that it frequently occurs during the school day, while students and teachers are engaged in the learning process.

#### A NEW LEARNING ORGANIZATION

Implementing both decentralized and centralized strategies suggests that the Accelerated Schools Project is evolving into a learning organization that understands “how to achieve control without controlling” (Senge, 1990, p. 287). Students choose to learn. Teachers, parents, students, and administrators choose to alter the organizational features of the school and how they perform their roles. As a result, improved student achievement has been sustained in most accelerated schools.

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