

**Beyond Universal Screening: Practices and Attitudes  
that Promote Equity in Identification for an Accelerated Program**

Austina De Bonte  
Executive Summary

Note: Even if you think you know which school district I studied, please do your part to keep this school district's identity anonymous in the research community. Thanks!

Equitable identification of students for advanced education programs is an urgent problem nationwide. While there are many suggested techniques for equitably identifying students, such as universal screening, local norms, and multiple measures, some school districts are finding that these best practices do not always produce the expected results.

This qualitative case study described the journey of Blockbridge (pseudonym), a school district in Washington state, that at first did not see much benefit from universal screening alone. As this district refined their practices over seven years, they achieved and sustained a more than 16x increase in identification of low-income students, multilingual learners, and students with disabilities for the district's accelerated programs in grades 2-8, and a 7.6x increase in identification of Black, Indigenous, and Hispanic students. Twice-exceptional students on Section 504 Plans and students who had ever been identified as multilingual were proportionally identified district-wide; however, despite this remarkable growth, some demographic groups still remained underrepresented.

This case study described the detailed practices, beliefs, and attitudes of district leaders, program administrators, principals, and teachers that led to these results, including the tremendous overall growth in the program, and the challenges that this growth surfaced. Key themes that emerged were (a) identification featured universal screening; static, group-based local norms; and OR-rules with multiple pathways; (b) services featured math acceleration and self-contained classrooms with high variability in service levels and models; (c) professional development was scarce and optional; individuals relied heavily on their personal experience; (d) equitable representation improved significantly in many ways but disproportionality remained; (e) identified students were achieving at high levels regardless of identification criteria used; (f) the change was driven top-down; team was empowered and felt a moral imperative; (g) debates about overidentification surfaced differing definitions of highly capable; and (h) despite a broad desire to meet every student's individual needs, many questions arose on how to accomplish that goal.

Blockbridge offered a rich case study of a public school district that put forth significant effort towards equitable identification in the context of a primarily acceleration-based highly capable program for students starting in second grade. Blockbridge implemented many of the best practices that are recommended in the research literature: universal screening, local norms, and multiple pathways. Blockbridge found important equity benefits in using OR-based combination rules, as well as static, group-based local norms for low-income students and multilingual students. Strong leadership support, supportive laws, and a sense of moral imperative to find every student drove the administrative team to successfully implement a substantial change of practice, and to sustain that effort to continually improve toward their goal of equity.

Although Blockbridge achieved remarkable success in growing their identification rate of twice exceptional students, low-income students, and multilingual students by 16x, and growing their identification rate of historically underrepresented racial/ethnic groups by 7.6x, they did not achieve full proportionality in all areas. They did, however, achieve full proportionality with students who had ever been identified as multilingual, as well as students who had a Section 504 Plan; White, Asian, and Two or More Races students were also well represented. In the process, the overall program grew by 4x, identifying 28% of the district's total enrollment for services in either math or reading or both subjects. These identified students were performing well in the highly capable program, surprising many that such a large proportion of students could be successful in accelerated coursework that featured high school algebra in sixth grade for math-qualified students.

The tremendous growth of the highly capable program created tensions along many axes, however. From debates about overidentification and test preparation to questioning the definition of highly capable and the self-contained service model, the fact that the program became so big and so visible attracted the attention of the entire school district. Deep differences in opinion combined with the fact that most faculty had never received any training about the needs of highly capable students or the goals of the program created a great deal of conflict, particularly around the philosophy of inclusion. Participants proposed alternate service models and debated what was reasonable for teachers to be able to provide for highly capable students, all while agreeing that every student deserved to have their individual needs met, and to experience challenge at school. But ultimately, there was no consensus on what model would work better or what Blockbridge's next steps would be.

There are important lessons to learn from Blockbridge, both in terms of what identification practices may be most effective to identify historically underrepresented groups of students, as well as the potential implications of those greater levels of identification that will require proactive planning of service models and professional development.

**Read more at <https://tinyurl.com/BeyondUniversalScreening>**

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