

What the Research Says About Acceleration Versus Remediation

For decades, academic acceleration programs in schools were synonymous with gifted and talented education. They were offered only to students who had been identified – primarily through testing – as academically “gifted” and therefore needing a more advanced and enriched curriculum than other students. Conversely, remedial education emphasized basic skills for students who had failed, or were in danger of failing, courses, grade levels, or assessments. As evidence has mounted that traditional remedial education has been largely ineffective, programs aimed at improving outcomes for low-achieving students have begun to adopt features of academic acceleration models such as highly-engaging curricula, small class sizes and a faster pace of instruction.

Research into the benefits of remedial education, which has also been called compensatory education, shows no generic answer about its effectiveness that can be separated from program type. Title I of the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) created the first federal aid program for poor children and was widely expected to close the academic achievement gap (Vinovskis, 1999). The most comprehensive federally-mandated [evaluation of the effects of Title I](#), known as the *Prospects* study, concluded that it failed to achieve this goal (Puma, 1993), although some other studies have shown modest positive effects of the program or suggested that the gap might have grown even wider in its absence.

One of the most common types of remedial education, the traditional summer school, is widely derided and viewed as punitive but is [not often studied](#), and when it is, results are mixed. A policy ending social promotion in New York City public schools in 1999 led to an additional 21,000 students participating in mandatory summer school during the first year and much larger increases in subsequent years. The value of that program, and of others like it, [remains unclear](#): while some students do pass tests they had previously failed after participating in summer school, attendance, morale, and goals are often vague.

The concept of remedial education has now shifted to higher education; a literature search on the subject reveals a succession of studies of the use of remediation for incoming college students whose academic foundations are deemed too weak to begin taking credit-bearing classes.

In the late 1980s, a group of academics from Stanford founded the Accelerated Schools Project as an alternative to remedial schooling for historically underserved children who were struggling academically. Henry Levin, the group’s head, identifies two features that distinguish accelerated schools in his paper, [Accelerated Schools for At-Risk Students](#): a “systemic underlying approach” that takes into account a broad array of learning influences, and a clear set of accelerated goals. Other notable aspects of the acceleration model are high expectations, engaging content and a faster pace, all in contrast to remedial programs. The paper highlights research into accelerated models, such as that of the Yale Child Study Center, that showed positive results.

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A [review of research](#) conducted by the Center for Public Education identifies a number of features of high-performing, high-poverty schools that are consistent with the acceleration approach: high expectations for students, increased time, capable and caring teachers, school leadership, and ongoing diagnostic assessment. In a [report](#) conducted by RAND for the Wallace Foundation, the authors examine the benefits of summer learning programs for children. They find that most of the programs in the study do lead to measurable academic improvement, but also that there is considerable variation based on specific program characteristics. The program attributes most closely associated with positive effects are small classes, individualized instruction, and parental involvement.

Puma, M. J., United States., Abt Associates., & United States. (1993). Prospects, the congressionally mandated study of educational growth and opportunity: The interim report. Washington, DC: U.S. Dept. of Education.

Vinovskis, M. (1999). Do Federal Compensatory Education Programs Really Work? A Brief Historical Analysis of Title I and Head Start. *American Journal of Education*, 107(3), 187-209. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/stable/1085662>