

**PENNSYLVANIA PUBLIC SCHOOL SUPERINTENDENT BELIEFS AND  
PRACTICES REGARDING SINGLE SUBJECT ACCELERATION  
IN AN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL SETTING**

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A Dissertation  
Submitted to  
the Temple University Graduate Board

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In Partial Fulfillment  
Of the Requirements for the Degree  
DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

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by  
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August 2017

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## **ABSTRACT**

This study was designed to identify factors that might influence Pennsylvania public school superintendents in the decision regarding the potential use of single-subject acceleration as a practice for meeting the needs of students in the elementary setting. The research targeted public school superintendents in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. In Pennsylvania, gifted education is mandated by Chapter 16 of the Pennsylvania School Code, yet acceleration policy is left to the local education agency (LEA), the school district. Since use of single-subject acceleration is not consistent across districts, this study sought to understand how administrators make decisions about using this tool. Previous research identified teacher and counselor perception of acceleration. Because the superintendent is instrumental in developing district policy, this research focused on their perceptions of this one specific acceleration tool.

The research survey was delivered electronically to district superintendents via email using publically available district email addresses. Of the four hundred and ninety-nine (499) state superintendents, 96 returned the survey for a response rate of 20%. The survey included questions for the superintendent about the district's size and its designation as urban, suburban, or rural. The survey also included questions about the superintendent's background in regards to receiving gifted services or training in acceleration as well as the superintendent's perceptions of gifted education.

The survey was intended to address three research questions.

1. What factors impact Pennsylvania superintendents in adopting the practice of single-subject acceleration in their districts?

2. How might the personal and professional background of Pennsylvania superintendents, including experience and training, affect decisions in regard to use of single-subject acceleration?
3. What are superintendent's attitudes about gifted education?

Of the respondents, there were 46 each from suburban and rural districts and 4 from urban districts. The majority of the respondents had under six years of experience and under 250 annual graduates in their districts. Fewer than 20% identified as having been trained in single-subject acceleration, and 51% expressed utilizing single-subject acceleration.

Quantitative survey research results revealed that superintendents in larger districts and suburban districts – characteristics that are confounded – are more likely to utilize single-subject acceleration. Further, superintendents expressed concern with transportation issues and logistical, scheduling, and coordination issues associated with single-subject acceleration.

The quantitative survey results showed few correlations with superintendents' background and utilization of the practice of single subject acceleration. The results, identified, however, indicate that the more training or life exposure regarding gifted education, the greater the support and the lower the concerns with gifted education. Further, those trained in single-subject acceleration were more likely to anticipate support from their boards regarding single-subject acceleration.

Pennsylvania public school superintendents expressed support generally for gifted education even if it were not mandated under Chapter 16. The superintendents

overwhelmingly agreed that the gifted need special attention to develop talents. More than a quarter of the superintendents disagreed, however, that a greater number of children should be allowed to skip a grade however while over forty percent of superintendents express neutrality on that topic. Yet, superintendents responded with disagreement about supporting gifted education in their districts; only 15 superintendents expressed agreeing or strongly agreeing with supporting gifted education in their district. This result, seemingly contradictory with other findings, is worthy of deeper investigation.

Follow-up qualitative research utilized an interview format and targeted survey respondent volunteers. The follow-up interviews were used to gain deeper insight on the survey questions than binary or Likert-scale questions could reveal. The qualitative interviews revealed tremendous weight on organizational dynamics among the superintendent, school board, teachers, parents, and community at large. In regards to single-subject acceleration, interviews highlighted that culture needed to support single-subject acceleration or student need for acceleration must be strongly evident.

This dissertation is dedicated to my family. Joseph, Lydia, and Julia: the three of you are both my inspiration for and distraction from this work. Your different learning needs have enlightened me as a mother and an educator. My mom, Peggy Glasgow, was my inspiration as a lifelong learner and a passionate advocate for students of all needs; she would have loved to see my completion of this work. Mary Jo, you have been a cheerleader from the day I entered this world and continue to do so ceaselessly. Tom, you share my dedication to meeting the needs of all students and developing the next generation. You have supported me in doing so for my students and our children. Thank you to each of you and so many others among my friends and family. Without your inspiration and support, this endeavor would not have been possible.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to my committee. My professor, Dr. Joseph DuCette removed my fear of statistical analysis as my professor. His in-depth review of my dissertation afforded me firm ownership of this paper while keenly questioning and suggesting in an ever-supportive way. As my professor, Dr. Steven J. Gross helped me internalize what it takes to be a democratic, ethical, educational leader; as my advisor, he was an advocate and navigator. The practical aspects Dr. McGinley brought to my tenure in Educational Administration via my principal internship and through this research were a true gift. The hours each put in reading my revisions and helping me to become a better leader beyond this research were immeasurable. I am extremely grateful.

Dr. Frank Gallagher and Dr. Nancy Hacker are two superintendents whom I consider mentors. Their generous sharing of time and experiences benefitted me tremendously as a person, educator, researcher, and leader.

Dr. Ann Shoplik and Tanya Morret shared with kindness and support their wealth of specialized knowledge about both the gifted and acceleration. Their insight at both the national and local level has been an asset to my literature review and research interests. During my lunch with Dr. Shoplik in the fall of 2014, this research topic was borne.

Sue Szczepkowski daily shared her lifetime experience in educational leadership and has been an asset in understanding organizational dynamics and putting it to paper.

To the many others not listed here... friends, colleagues, family... thank you all!

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

### Introduction to the Study

Every school administrator recognizes the responsibility of supporting children who are struggling or falling behind their peers and state expectations for proficiency; responsibility similarly exists to inspire achievement of children who are experiencing success to continue to achieve growth. The Pennsylvania school code dictates such responsibility as law. Chapter four of the Pennsylvania school code dictates high standards for all students. Chapter 16 of the Pennsylvania school code provides for the special needs of students identified as academically gifted. The school code law provides mandates; interpretation and implementation of the laws on a case-by-case basis remains with the local educational agency led by a school superintendent. Ethical underpinnings surrounding equity, equality, and excellence influence administrators who are balancing limited resources for their constituents.

In Pennsylvania, per PA School Code 16.2, acceleration policy is left to the local education agency (LEA) which is typically the school district (“PA Code,” n.d.). Pennsylvania schools generally value local control; the McREL research team found a positive and statistically significant relationship between local district leadership and student achievement (Waters & Marzano, 2006). Because acceleration policy is created by the LEA, some districts utilize acceleration as a tool for meeting the needs of advanced learners, yet others do not. Ann / at the Acceleration Institute at the Belin-Blank Center at the University of Iowa shared that there is a lack of understanding why administrators choose to use or not to use this tool ([Shoplik, personal communication,](#)

2014). Because of this disparity and the lack of information on what drives the decision making, this research is essential to the field of education administration.

The McREL research team also found effective superintendents focus efforts on creating a goal-oriented district with importance on setting, supporting, monitoring and allocating resources toward established district goals (Waters & Marzano, 2006). In a goal-oriented district, superintendents determine how initiatives support or detract from the established goals in their decision making and then proceed accordingly.

This research sought to understand what factors influence school district leaders in their decision making about single-subject acceleration. Single-subject acceleration, also known as content-based acceleration, subject-matter acceleration, and partial acceleration, provides one tool to meet the needs of the advanced learner. Because limited literature exists regarding factors that influence administrators in making use of single-subject acceleration, this research sought to reveal those factors. Decision making often involves factors of determining needs of a diverse population, allocating resources, retaining organizational stability and confidence, balancing ethics, and employing personal beliefs and experiences related to acceleration or gifted education. Therefore, these were some of the factors investigated in the research.

In a world of seemingly infinite needs and wants restricted by finite means, resource allocation requires the discernment of an exceptional leader. For efficiency and economy, schools utilize age-based administrative structures (Morgan, 2006). Although age-based grouping may be efficient for the majority, the age-based process might not meet the needs of all. Students have different abilities that may impact how quickly they

learn material (Goodlad & Anderson, 1987). Non-gradedness intermittently surfaces as a popular solution to this issue, resurging recently in the 1990s; however, the tradition of the graded organization holds firmly at this point (Yarborough & Johnson, 2000).

Despite the overall organization of the school, administrators must determine how to best meet the needs of all students, including those severely asynchronous in an age-based system of curriculum and instruction. Karen Rogers states this succinctly when she asserts grouping options must be identified that match the learners, the attitude of teachers, and the attitudes of administration and the community (Rogers, n.d.).

In addition to balancing resources, administrators must retain the confidence of their constituents. Retention of school board confidence in the school administration impacts support and funding. Steven Gross' metaphor of turbulence applies appropriately to this situation. Whereas light turbulence can reflect a district or system that is innovative and growth-minded, increased turbulence from widespread awareness of a controversial issue can prompt opposition and division (Gross, 2006). Turbulence is most likely to increase where a policy has high incidence, high consequence, or high visibility. Salience is the degree to which a practice is noticeable to others, in this case to peers and the community. Southern and Jones feel that subject-matter acceleration is more salient because of the physical movement of the student between grades on a daily basis opposed to a one-time move to a new grade for full-grade acceleration (Southern & Jones, 2015).

The balancing act of equality, equity, and excellence has a long history (Rambo & McCoach, 2012). Benbow and Stanley quote Thomas Jefferson who said, "there is

nothing so unequal as the equal (same) treatment of unequals (people with differing abilities)” which introduces the issue of equity (Benbow & Stanley, 1996). Equality, borrowing from the math term, denotes and connotes providing sameness of service; equity takes the needs of the individual into account when considering what service the student needs based on background and meeting those needs (Ford, 2015). Students with academic gifts are found in every culture, ethnicity, and socioeconomic group (Loveless, Farkas, & Duffett, 2008; Vantassel-Baska, n.d.). These students often require the consideration of equity. Brofenbrenner (1973) explains as an economist that distributing wealth or income based on equality would simply mean that every person would receive the same amount. Distributing wealth or income based on equality requires ethical considerations. In determining services for students, equality itself is not sufficient. Ethics must be employed and equity must be provided in order that students with unequal backgrounds have equal opportunity.

The debate about the ethics and equity of school-wide student grouping options continues. Jeannie Oakes asserts that there is race and class discrimination associated with homogenous ability grouping and tracking (Oakes, 2005). Van Tassel-Baska asserts that the interests of minority students can be served well through gifted education; however, such service requires more attention to individual differences, not less, and more attention to acceleration and grouping, not less (Vantassel-Baska, n.d.). Heterogeneous grouping with differentiation in content, process, or product can meet a wide variety of needs in single mixed-ability classrooms to promote equity in education (Tomlinson et al., 2003). The core issue is that education must not only meet the needs

of the majority of the students, it must also meet the needs of the atypical student who requires services outside of the system's typical grouping practice.

Shapiro and Stefkovich assert that decision-making involving multiple ethical paradigms should be considered in an increasingly diverse society (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016). Ethics of the profession, care, and justice apply most directly to the issue of acceleration. For the ethics of the profession, The National Association of Elementary School Principals lists its first ethic: "The educational administrator makes the well-being of students the fundamental value in all decision making and actions" ("Statement of Ethics for School Administrators," 1976). ASCD's code for administrators similarly includes, "We expect fairness to be evident in our actions internally and externally. We are equitable in our decisions and mindful of their impact on other groups and people" ("Code of Ethics," n.d.). Per the ethic of care, the administrator is balancing the needs of the school community along with that of the individual. Elementary education is inherently intertwined with care; the ethics of the profession reflect this reality. The school code sets the law for public schools in that state; the law dictates considerations of the ethic of justice. Following multiple ethical paradigms ensures protection of all from many important perspectives. Following the ethic of justice closely to the letter and intent of the law minimizes the risk of due process hearings and lawsuits. School board policies add consideration under the ethic of justice since such policies form a law for the district and must be followed by administration and personnel.

This research did not address implications of different school grouping systems but rather strove to understand administrator decision making for the rare single student

whose learning needs stand outside of the whole. Such students do not fit into the current school system of grouping and differentiation due to their needs being one and half to two years beyond the rest (T. Morret, personal communication, February 1, 2015). Serving such students appropriately can be achieved in a myriad of ways; single subject acceleration is just one tool. In single-subject acceleration, students can be moved into a classroom with older students studying advanced content, or higher-content curriculum can be delivered to students who remain in an age-based classroom (Southern & Jones, 2015). This research focused solely on single subject acceleration where a student moves into a classroom with older students.

### **Problem and Background**

The Acceleration Institute at the Belin-Blank Center at the University of Iowa exists to inform educators, researchers, policymakers, administrators, and parents of the research and best practices concerning academic acceleration (“Acceleration Institute: Researchers,” n.d.). *A Nation Deceived: How Schools Hold Back America’s Brightest Students*, published in 2004, provides meta-analysis on acceleration practices. In 2015, *A Nation Empowered: Evidence Trumps the Excuses Holding Back America’s Brightest Students* provides an update to the original meta-analysis. Although the use of acceleration as a tool for meeting students’ needs increased since *A Nation Deceived*, factors that influenced administrator decision making about acceleration were still not transparent (A. Shoplik, personal communication, 2014).



The review of literature intended to reveal research about how and why administrators made decisions specifically related to single-subject acceleration. Limited research on teacher and counselor perception about general acceleration was identified. Limited research existed regarding administrative decision making factors related to any form of acceleration, yet alone and specifically to single-subject acceleration. The paucity of information revealed an opportunity for this research.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of the research study was to understand, for Pennsylvania public school district leaders, what factors influence decision making about single-subject acceleration. Only one state was selected for research so as to not contaminate findings with differing state policies which differ in regard to mandating gifted education or not, funding gifted education, and setting acceleration policies. This research was intended to illuminate what factors impact administrators' decisions in this realm by studying one state -the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania where gifted education is mandated and unfunded, and acceleration policy is left to the local educational agency, the school district (Pennsylvania Department of Education, n.d.).

### **Definition of Terms**

**Above-level testing** Testing above a level typically implemented based on chronological

age allows differentiation among the highest students' scores, often to determine

placement need or admission to special programs for gifted students. Examples of nationally-normed above-level tests at the elementary level are the School and College Ability Test (SCAT) or Explore Test ([Olszewski-Kubilius, 2015](#)).

**Acceleration** is an intervention to education curriculum that moves a student at a faster rate for the chronological age than typically prescribed. *A Nation Empowered* has identified 20 types of acceleration; these can be used singularly or in conjunction with each other to meet students' needs ([Southern & Jones, 2015](#)).

**Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)** reauthorizes the 50-year-old Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), the nation's national education law signed by President Obama. It places emphasis on both excellence and equity. Although districts are not bound to follow ESEA, federal funding is tied to compliance. ESEA replaced the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) signed under President Bush ([U.S. Department of Education, n.d.](#)).

**Free and appropriate public education (FAPE)** is specifically considered under section 504 of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA); constructed to be intentionally ambiguous, however, it can be a lever for all students. In Pennsylvania, where gifted education is mandated and covered by an IEP (GIEP), FAPE is more of a lever due to the GIEP ([Deal, 2010](#)).

**Gifted and Talented Students** as defined by the ESEA, "when used with respect to students, children, or youth, means students, children, or youth who give evidence of high achievement capability in areas such as intellectual, creative, artistic, or

leadership capacity, or in specific academic fields, and who need services or activities not ordinarily provided by the school in order to fully develop those capabilities.” ([“LAWS & GUIDANCE/ELEMENTARY & SECONDARY EDUCATION SEC. 9101. DEFINITIONS,”](#) n.d.).

**Individualized Education Program (IEP)** is a written, legal document produced by the school district to communicate how education services for a student will be specifically adapted to meet the student’s unique needs typically because of a learning disability ([“Guide to the Individualized Education Program,”](#) 2007). The **GIEP, Gifted Individualized Education Program,** similarly defines the education services for a Pennsylvania student who has been identified as a gifted learner and needs instruction that is adapted or modified. The IEP/GIEP includes specially designed instruction (SDI) which is typically where acceleration plans for the student would be indicated ([Renzulli & Smith, 1983](#)).

**Local Educational Agency (LEA)** is “a public board of education or other public authority legally constituted within a state for either administrative control or direction of, or to perform a service function for, public elementary schools or secondary schools in a city, county, township, school district, or other political subdivision of a state, or for a combination of school districts or counties that is recognized in a state as an administrative agency for its public elementary schools or secondary schools” ([Race to the Top District Competition ...](#)).

**Present Level of Educational Performance (PLEP)** is a summary describing the student's current achievement in the areas of need as determined by an evaluation. It can also be used to determine students' levels for the purposes of acceleration. It is also known in some circles as PLOP, present levels of performance ([Pennsylvania Department of Education Standards Aligned Systems, n.d.](#)).

**Specially designed instruction (SDI)** is the section of a student's IEP or GIEP that indicates modifications or accommodations for a student which the entire educational community is legally bound to provide. This section could include single-subject acceleration as an SDI ([Morret, 2011](#)).

**Social and/or emotional development and adjustment** includes the inter- and intra-personal development of children and their ability to develop positive and rewarding relationships with those around them. It includes the ability to regulate one's own emotion, understand the cues of others, and adapt to a variety of environments ("[Social-Emotional Development Domain](#)," n.d.). A student's well-being in this area often seems a noted concern in considering acceleration even though there are few well-designed studies on either side of the argument. It is a nebulous construct to measure ([Southern, Jones, & Stanley, 1993a](#)).

**Single-subject acceleration** (also called subject-matter acceleration, partial acceleration, or content-based acceleration) is a type of acceleration utilized to move the student faster in a subject rather than in all subjects as with a grade skip. In subject-matter acceleration, students can spend part of their day with an older

cohort, or the students can remain in a same-age cohort and have advanced curriculum brought down (Southern & Jones, 2015).

### **Summary**

This research was designed to identify factors that influence administrator decision making regarding single-subject acceleration and to illuminate how policy makers' or decision makers' backgrounds might influence willingness to implement single-subject acceleration. Learning both *how* decision makers think about single-subject acceleration and *what* those decision makers think about single-subject acceleration in Pennsylvania public education in elementary settings will diminish a gap in the current literature. Such knowledge will contribute to the ongoing conversations of equity and excellence in serving the vast needs of Pennsylvania students.

## **CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

### **Introduction**

Establishing structure for education forms a system for efficiency. Decision making around creating systems, determining when to change a system, and evaluating when to create an exception yet maintain the system fall into the role of the school administrator. Research aimed at understanding the factors that might influence use of single subject acceleration should involve understanding systems and administrator decision making. Why schooling systems exist as well as how administrators make decisions in a world of limited resources using ethics while respecting community norms regarding equity, equality, and excellence create foundations to understanding.

### **History of Schooling and Reform on Decision Making**

Public schooling began in the United States prior to the country being an independent nation. The Town of Boston founded Boston Latin, the first public school, in 1635 (“[BLS History](#),” n.d.). In Pennsylvania from the 1600s through the early 1800s, settler groups typically created the first schools, often around their churches, to preserve cultural ties; the Common School Act of 1834 provided for public schools across the Commonwealth ([Historic Educational Resources | PHMC...](#)). Until the nineteenth century, one-room schoolhouses provided the primary facility for schooling in the United States, especially outside of urban centers ([Leight & Rinehart, 2016](#)). In 1848, Horace Mann helped bring the Prussian model of graded classrooms and standardized curriculum

to Massachusetts which then spread to model school reform across the nation ([“American Public Education: An Origin Story,” 2013](#)).

As education moved from the one-room schoolhouse to specialized, age-based classrooms, more formal systems of how to handle students who did not learn at the same pace developed. In the one-room schoolhouse, migration or the demands of a farming season may have caused inconsistent enrollment population. Students could readily perform either advanced work or remedial work for their age without it being obviously apparent in a mixed-age classroom. Students would overhear recitations of older and younger students; those who required fewer repetitions of recitations could move through more quickly ([Goodlad & Anderson, 1987](#); [Leight & Rinehart, 2016](#)).

In the reformed, grade-based school with age established levels, those falling behind became obvious. Placement in classrooms then became one of the rare places where age mattered more than ability ([Anderson & Pavan, 1993](#); [Assouline, 2015](#); [Goodlad & Anderson, 1987](#); [Yarborough & Johnson, 2000](#)). Through the mid-late 20th century, several efforts to address the issue of specialized needs including gifted education, special education, and ability grouping arose from age-based classrooms.

### **Federal Government Role in Policy and Decision Making**

State and local governments are primarily responsible for the implementation of education in the United States. In 1791, the 10<sup>th</sup> Amendment, defining powers not assigned to federal government nor prohibited by states were reserved to the states (U.S.

Constitution). Education was not outlined as a federal power and was therefore left to states. Career and technical education, deemed important to the progress of our nation, prompted the Morrill Act of 1862, also known as the Land Grant Act, to establish colleges to support vocational training and education in the fields of agriculture, home economics, mechanical arts, and other technical fields (*Colleges of Agriculture at the Land Grant Universities*, 1995). The federal government has maintained formal involvement in education since 1867 when it created the original Department of Education to gain information to help states create effective school systems since the federal government wanted to influence education agendas to meet national needs. World War II and the Cold War prompted an increased and changed focus of national education agendas (“LAWS & GUIDANCE/ELEMENTARY & SECONDARY EDUCATION SEC. 9101. DEFINITIONS,” n.d.). The Cold War and the launch of Sputnik spurred federal involvement in education with the passage of the National Defense Education Act ([Sputnik Spurs Passage of the National...](#)). Federal involvement continued with the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965.

More recently, the federal government created the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 “to close the achievement gap with accountability, flexibility, and choice, so that no child is left behind” in the United States. The act, signed into law in January, 2002 by President George W. Bush, consisted of ten titles, each comprised of parts and sections. NCLB Act Title I, Part G, sections 1701 through 1707 form the Access to High Standards Act. These sections provide provision for raising the bar for all students and specify focus on increasing the number of Advanced Placement (AP) courses, raising the percent of students taking the AP test following the course, and utilizing AP coursework



to increase enrollment and shorten the time and expense with pursuing a bachelor's degree. NCLB Part G Section 1704(a) provides provision for reimbursing fees associated with advanced placement (AP) test taking for low-income students ("No Child Left Behind Act 2001," n.d.). Dr. Susan Assouline, in a *Nation Empowered*, has stated that participation in AP courses "mushroomed" and that the online availability of such coursework has been an asset to rural districts (Assouline, 2015). This act created a mandate founded on shared beliefs of equity in education.

Most recently, President Barack Obama signed into law Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in December, 2015. The ESSA reauthorized the 50-year-old Elementary and Secondary Schools Act of 1965 and authorized changes that would override NCLB in education reform. ESSA removed federal interventions based on one high-stakes test and instead allowed states to develop multiple-measure identification measures, particularly for the bottom five percent of schools. ESSA "requires—for the first time—that all students in America be taught to high academic standards that will prepare them to succeed in college and careers," (<http://www.ed.gov/essa?src=rn>). The word ALL substantially differentiated this act from prior federal acts. Whereas NCLB created a floor by which states and school systems identified and remediated (under)achievement, ESSA allows room for breaking through the ceiling of achievement measures by indicating that all students should have high academic standards. Doing so noted that both equity AND excellence are important in education for all students.

The federal government currently contributes nearly 11% of the national education budget for elementary and secondary education in a role of covering critical national needs (“Federal Role in Education,” n.d.).

### **State and Local Role in Policy and Decision Making**

Despite federal acts that link compliance to federal funding, states and local governments have primary responsibility for education policy and funding in the United States. Therefore, state regulation holds primary influence on local implementation. Pennsylvania, the focus of the study, mandates but does not fund gifted education. The Commonwealth leaves acceleration policy creation to the local education agency (“Support for Gifted Programs vary greatly from state to state,” n.d.).

The Pennsylvania Code drives the Commonwealth’s governing laws on education. The PA Code Title 22 for Education, Part 1 State Board of Education, dictates public school educational law in Pennsylvania. The state law provides meeting all students’ needs with a year growth in Chapter 4.2 where it states (underline & italics added for emphasis) “The purpose of this chapter is to establish *rigorous academic standards* and assessments, applicable only to the public schools in this Commonwealth, to facilitate the improvement of student achievement and to provide parents and communities a measure by which school performance can be determined.” Chapter 4.4 General policies (b) further addresses the ability to differentiate among students’ needs where the law explains, “It is the policy of the Board that local school entities have the

greatest possible flexibility in curriculum planning consistent with providing quality education.” Chapter 4.11 Purpose of public education (b) dictates no limit to what the district should provide for achievement in stating, “Public education prepares students for adult life by attending to their intellectual and developmental needs and challenging them to achieve at their highest level possible.”

22 PA School Code Chapter 16 addresses gifted learners separately and distinctly from 22 PA School Code Chapter 4. Specifically, 16.41 General policies (3) mandates that schools, “Provide opportunities to participate in acceleration or enrichment, or both, as appropriate for the student’s needs.” These opportunities must go beyond the program that the student would receive as part of a general education” (“PA Code,” n.d.).

Columbia Teachers College, under the direction of Paul Mort, completed educational diffusion studies in the 1920s and 1930s concluding that local control – as opposed to federal or state control – over school financial decisions led to the most innovation. Unfortunately, the studies also revealed that “the single best predictor of school innovativeness was educational expenditure per pupil” with the average school lagging as much as twenty- five years behind the best practice (Rogers, 1995). The superintendent relies upon the district’s school board for budgetary support of initiatives and for overall support of the superintendent’s position and role. The publically elected school board of citizens, who may have no professional background in education, is the reigning governance of the school (“A Guide for School Board Candidates in Pennsylvania,” n.d.). The superintendent must obtain and maintain confidence of the board. For the public - and thus the governing board - to have confidence, straying too

far from expectations based on the school board members' schooling experience can prove difficult. Juggling innovation and expectations requires a delicate balance. Weick asserts that reflections should focus on how outcomes differed from expectations instead of being diametrically opposed (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005). Behaving in a manner consistent with the constituents' expectations increases confidence.

Administrators need to maintain legitimacy and support while evolving their organization. The McREL research team identified four major characteristics of superintendents who positively influence student achievement. A major finding related closely to this research revealed effective superintendents create goal-oriented districts. Five district-level leadership responsibilities provided support to that major finding. Goals created collaboratively with all stakeholders, including the school board, formed one responsibility. Board alignment and support of district goals formed another responsibility (Waters & Marzano, 2006). Therefore, supporting the norms of the community in creating, monitoring, and devoting resources toward goals is critical. Further, balancing equity, equality, excellence – and the ethical lenses that influence such – impact the superintendent's decisions. District leadership – the role of the superintendent in the Pennsylvania public schools – clearly holds the potential for positively impacting student achievement (Waters & Marzano, 2006). Thus, understanding superintendent decision making regarding single-subject acceleration holds merit.

Literature does not identify the prevalence of the use of single-subject acceleration in Pennsylvania. Nor does literature identify the factors that influence the use of single-subject acceleration.

### **Gifted Education Legislation and Its Influence on Decision Making**

Gifted education formally originated in 1868 when St. Louis's superintendent created systemic policy in his public schools to meet the needs of gifted students and presented such to the National Education Association in 1872 ("A Brief History of Gifted and Talented Education," n.d.; Henry, 1917). Gifted education took root after the widespread adoption of Horace Mann's introduction of the chronologically-aged-based classroom ("[American Public Education: An Origin Story](#)," 2013). When in a one-room schoolhouse, teachers more readily paced curriculum at students' or groups' mastery rates. Students could learn from all going on in one room: their instruction, overhearing review of less advanced students' recitations, and the preview of more advanced students' recitations (Goodlad & Anderson, 1987; Leight & Rinehart, 2016). In an age-based classroom with standardized curriculum, teachers presented one level of curriculum which might not fit the mental age for all students despite the consistent chronological age placement. The tension of chronologically-aged-based versus mental-age-based placement occurred after the reform (Goodlad & Anderson, 1987).

Gifted education never has been federally mandated. In 1958, the United States Federal Government made its first foray into supporting gifted education with the United

States National Defense Education Act which passed as the first large-scale response of the federal government in response to Soviet Union's launch of Sputnik. The U.S. Senate had been divided on providing funding to education, but the Cold War provided the impetus for supporting low-cost student loans for secondary education particularly in math, science, and foreign languages in order to maintain the United States' position of power in the world ("Sputnik Spurs Passage of the National Defense Education Act," 1957).

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) enacted by Congress in 1975 mandated national special education protection. Although gifted education sometimes falls under the administration of special education departments at the state level, gifted does not fall under protection of IDEA ("Building the Legacy: IDEA 2004," n.d.). The federal government leaves implementation of gifted to the states since the state and local governments are primarily responsible for education in the United States ("Federal Role in Education," n.d.).

In 1988 under the Elementary and Secondary Schools Act renewal, the federal government created the Jacob K. Javits Gifted and Talented Students Education Program which directed federal money toward gifted education. The Javits grants typically support underrepresented students in gifted and talented education ("Jacob K. Javits Gifted and Talented Students Education Program," n.d.). In keeping with federal involvement in education, the Javits grants correct what the federal government deemed a national issue; in this case, the national issue existed in identifying and serving those typically underrepresented in gifted and talented education services to promote equity.

In 1989 in Pennsylvania, Chapter 14, Act 48 in 1989 provided for gifted education in the Commonwealth. In 2000, Chapter 16 provided gifted education a separate code, which outlined mandates for supporting - but not funding - gifted education (Pennsylvania Association for Gifted Children, n.d.). Chapter 16 outlined the criteria for receiving services as “outstanding intellectual and creative ability the development of which requires specially designed programs or support services, or both, not ordinarily provided in the regular education program (22 Pa. Code §16.1). Chapter 16 clarified “a person with an IQ score lower than 130 may be admitted to gifted programs when other educational criteria in the profile of the person strongly indicate gifted ability. Determination of mentally gifted must include an assessment by a certified school psychologist” (22 Pa. Code §16.21(d)). The law supports multiple criteria for identification and thereby allows for districts to provide for equity, and not simply equality, in determination of students’ gifted educational needs.

There are five different outcomes of how states currently handle gifted education; states differ in policy regarding whether they mandate gifted or not and whether they fund gifted or not. Each state is categorized by gifted policy in the table below.

Table 2.1: State Policies for Gifted Education

	<b>Funded</b>	<b>Partially funded</b>	<b>Unfunded</b>
<b>Mandated</b>	(4) Florida Georgia Iowa Oklahoma	(24) Alabama Arkansas Colorado Hawaii Idaho Indiana Kansas Kentucky Louisiana Maine Minnesota Mississippi Nebraska Nevada New Mexico North Carolina Ohio South Carolina Tennessee Texas Virginia Washington West Virginia Wisconsin	(9) Alaska Arizona Delaware Maryland Montana New Jersey Oregon Pennsylvania Rhode Island
<b>Unmandated</b>	(0) none	(5) California Missouri North Dakota Utah Wyoming	(9) Connecticut District of Columbia Illinois Massachusetts Michigan New Hampshire New York South Dakota Vermont

(“Support for Gifted Programs vary greatly from state to state,” n.d.)



The conversation about acceleration has been active for 90-plus years. Terman and his colleagues cited benefits from acceleration including earlier career or military entry, improved motivation and work habits, and savings to families and/or taxpayers (Southern et al., 1993a). Similar to other attitudes in education, acceleration has mirrored the culture and needs of the larger society. In the great depression, acceleration fell out of favor to keep children in school and out of the shrunken workforce (Southern, Jones, & Stanley, 1993b). Further, developments in child psychology theory after the 1920s increased focus that gifted students should stay with age peers. Such thinking negatively then impacted the popularity of acceleration (Southern et al., 1993a).

Some view acceleration as an intervention to speed up a child's program of study. Others believe the educational intervention merely provides appropriate curriculum acceleration to meet the rapid rate of the child's cognitive development, academic levels, and needs (Benbow & Stanley, 1996; Southern et al., 1993a; Vantassel-Baska, n.d.). Ultimately, these decisions are left to state policy. Based on Pennsylvania School Code Chapter 16, the local education agency (LEA), typically the school district, determines acceleration policy (PA Code). Therefore, this research investigated school district superintendent beliefs about single-subject acceleration.

Acceleration provides one tool to meet the needs of advanced students, and it received the spotlight a decade ago in *A Nation Deceived: How Schools Hold Back America's Brightest Students* (Colangelo, Assouline, & Gross, 2004). *A Nation Empowered: Evidence Trumps the Excuses Holding Back America's Brightest Students*, published in May 2015, provided the ten-year follow-up to the original meta-

analysis. The recent publication of *A Nation Empowered* states that, despite the consistent research on the positive effects of acceleration when used for students who are ready, changing anti-acceleration attitudes continues to challenge those seeking such educational reform (Assouline, Colangelo, & Vantassel-Baska, 2015). Dr. Jonathan Plucker from the University of Connecticut notes that policymakers have become more open to acceleration; he noted that change among policymakers can take a decade or more so that any movement demonstrates a positive sign (Assouline, 2015). Cuban's research reveals shared beliefs are implemented with most fidelity (Cuban, 1990). Changing beliefs takes time. Both Tanya Morret, Pennsylvania's Statewide Gifted Liaison at the Capital Area Intermediate Unit and Pennsylvania Department of Education, and Ann Shoplik, Administrator for Acceleration Institute and Research at the University of Iowa Belin-Blank Center, expressed in personal correspondence that administrators are not yet implementing acceleration at the level evidence-based research on this practice would suggest; therefore, perhaps mitigating decision making factors that impede developing shared beliefs have not been sufficiently revealed (T. Morret, personal communication February 1, 2015; A. Shoplik, personal communication, November 15, 2014).

In keeping with eleven states in the nation, Pennsylvania assigns acceleration policy determination to each local education agency (LEA)

([http://www.davidsongifted.org/db/state\\_policy\\_pennsylvania\\_10039.aspx](http://www.davidsongifted.org/db/state_policy_pennsylvania_10039.aspx)).

Pennsylvania School Code Chapter 16.41.b.3 states districts should, "Provide opportunities to participate in acceleration or enrichment, or both, as appropriate for the student's needs. These opportunities must go beyond the program that the student would

receive as part of a general education”

(<http://www.pacode.com/secure/data/022/chapter16/chap16toc.html>).

Currently, states hold different policies regarding content-based acceleration, or single-subject acceleration. Eight states have policies that specifically allow for single-subject acceleration and allow for accelerated middle school coursework for graduation credit; these states are Alabama, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Ohio, Oregon, South Carolina, and Washington. Wisconsin specifically allows for content-based acceleration but does not allow for middle school accelerated coursework for graduation credit. Two states, North and South Dakota, specifically do not allow for content based acceleration. The remaining 38 states leave the decision to the local educational agency (LEA), typically the school district. Among those 38 states, however, several states specifically have a policy allowing for middle school accelerated coursework to count for graduation credit. Those states deferring to the LEA but maintaining a policy allowing for middle school accelerated coursework for graduation credit are Alaska, Florida, Kansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Texas, and West Virginia ([State Acceleration Policy](#)).

Debates of excellence versus equity can create competing agendas. Benbow and Stanley acknowledge that this balance has created one of the most difficult tensions permeating society and schools; schools must eliminate the incompatibility of equity and excellence and focus on both simultaneously and synergistically ([Benbow & Stanley 1996](#)). During some eras valuing excellence, education sought to create individuals who could compete at the highest levels – such occurred in the 1920s, 1950s, and 1980s. During these times, the qualities of orderliness, efficiency, and productivity

dominated education as a tool for individual competition. Other times, education sought to create access and opportunities for the poor, minorities, and others deemed outsiders - such occurred in the 1930s, 1960s, and 2000s. Those eras focused on equity in connecting schools to the community, closing achievement gaps, and forwarding social justice initiatives (Cuban, 1990). Discussion surrounding gifted education waxed and waned while the politics of education swayed between conservative values and liberal values. Yet as Benbow and Stanley assert, these agendas need not compete but can rather collaborate in meeting students' needs to provide equity.

With the conversation of excellence and equity has been the conversation of ability grouping or tracking. Research showed that only the highest quartile of students, particularly those with gifted identification, benefitted from homogeneous grouping (Kulik & Kulik, 1992). Policymakers at every level must juggle resources and needs, and thus the discussion of how to best group students continues. Because the research investigated the intervention for the rare student, already one and half to two years advanced, the practices of differentiated instruction, ability grouping, and tracking are not considered relevant to the literature review.

Related to my research by the overlap in discussion between acceleration and gifted, Lindberg studied the attitudes of Minnesota superintendents toward gifted students and factors influencing these attitudes. The study results indicated, "Mild to moderate support for funding, with women superintendents perceiving themselves as gifted more than male superintendents and showing greater support for gifted education." Factors that predicted support of gifted education included "Superintendents who had education or

training in gifted education were more supportive toward giftedness and gifted education, less negative about gifted education as being elitist, and more positive toward acceleration of gifted students” (Lindberg, 2015). The Minnesota research focused on gifted generally rather than single-subject acceleration specifically; yet, the Lindberg study relates highly to this research.

More directly related to the use of acceleration, Cornell et al. identified general hesitancy among educators to employ acceleration despite research supporting otherwise. Three possible explanations are proposed by the researchers. First, the researchers assert that educators might be under- informed regarding the research. Second, the researchers attribute that policies, personal sentiment and tradition might trump empirical evidence. Finally, the researchers propose that possibly educators may not value positive effects that research reveals about acceleration (Cornell, Callahan, Bassin & Ramsay, 1991).

In addition to being a tool for impact in rural areas, acceleration can be a tool for minority students. + Lee, who studied teacher perceptions and student achievement for thirty minority students in an accelerated math classes, found teachers to be wary and cautious with the use of acceleration. The study found that the presence of “like-minded intellectual peers in the advanced class strengthened positive self-image of students; yet teachers had not believed acceleration warranted and held low awareness of how such classes underserved minorities.” (Lee et al., 2010, p. 203).

As I planned to identify whether notable differences existed in acceleration use in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania among urban, suburban, or rural districts,

investigating specific literature based on acceleration use in different environments was relevant. Howley studied acceleration strategies in rural West Virginia districts. Identified reasons for neglecting acceleration use included concern for negative impact on students' emotional development, belief that acceleration will disrupt curriculum delivery, fear of generating widespread parent request, and the logistics of scheduling concerns (Howley, 2002).

Neihart asserts that among the hundreds of studies on socio-affective impact of acceleration, only a small number indicate any concerns. The primary socio-affective concern appears to be a decline in academic self-concept; some attribute this to a realistic readjustment in understanding one's academic capacity in the bigger world (Neihart, 2007).

This research sought to determine what factors influence the gatekeeper's decision making process for or against the use of acceleration in an environment of limited resources and competing agendas. Many people have input to the decision process for student acceleration. The teacher might identify students, the parents provide affirmation by way of approval, and the administration must support the teacher and principal in their recommendation. This study focused on the superintendent since formal and informal policies stemming from this leadership can facilitate or prevent the use of acceleration (Siegle, Wilson, & Little, n.d.). In one study of American School Counselor Association (ASCA) member counselors, over a third of respondent counselors did not know if the district had an acceleration policy, even though acceleration conversations and decisions often involved the counselor. Policy aside, the

counselors' concerns focused upon perceived negative factors of social and emotional development influencing acceleration decisions. The counselors would turn to test scores, future performance expectation, and social emotional function for data points in making decisions even though the majority report no formal training in gifted education. Among those with some gifted education training, a small percentage had discussion or training in acceleration (Wood et al., 2010).

### **On-Site Influence on Policy Implementation**

Federal and state acts and codes, local school boards and their curriculum, and administration at the school level have tremendous impact on policy and planning. On the front lines of implementation, the teacher stands alone in the elementary classroom. The decoupling of administration from teaching protects teachers in classrooms from scrutiny and protects the confidence in the institution from external constituents (Spillane et al., 2002). Throughout school reform, shifts occurred between conservative values prioritizing individual performance and liberal values prioritizing minorities, poor and other marginalized groups to serve all of society well (Deschenes, Cuban, & Tyack, 2001). Through these shifts, education provided the key to upward vertical social mobility.

Since policies consistent with previous agendas or shared beliefs on behalf of the agent enacting the change are more likely to receive adoption, the community and teachers need involvement and voice in the decision making process. This retains the

community's confidence to ensure implementation at the front lines in the classroom (Cuban, 1990; Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, 2002). Schools, more than other organizations, manifest a culture of resistance to change due to the age of most school systems compared to corporate environments; trying to force the change can create even more resistance (Evans, 1996). In organizational culture that encourages ongoing sense-making, action can follow understanding very cyclically (Spillane et al., 2002).

For the actual implementation of any initiative, teacher training and building upon shared beliefs provide the cornerstone. Lipskey purports that public service workers, such as teachers, in effect become street level bureaucrats by acting with substantial and discretionary authority on the front lines of policy implementation (Lipskey, 2010). To support implementation from these "street level bureaucrats," newer teachers need instruction, and older teachers need to understand why yet another new idea reigns. Many argue reform has been cyclical with the pendulum swinging back to nearly the same place which can make teacher support difficult; teachers might doubt why they need to jump on the latest bandwagon (Anderson & Pavan, 1993). Since reforms are adopted with fidelity into classrooms where they are intended when they are based upon shared and enduring beliefs, transforming enduring beliefs must occur (Anderson & Pavan, 1993; Cuban, 1990, 2012). Although single-subject acceleration leaves the school's overall grouping practices intact and therefore is not systemic reform, a teacher may not have experience utilizing single-subject acceleration.

Spillane et al. describe that a teacher's positive or negative experiences frame the engagement and acceptance of reform ideas. Sense-making describes shared dialog that



looks back at situations and decisions in a cycle of how to look forward. Considering if shared beliefs are important for organized action should precede action (Spillane et al., 2002; Weick et al., 2005). Implementing new practices might be treated similarly as overall reform. Since a classroom teacher maintains influence on the social culture of the classroom and the assimilation of a student of a younger age, obtaining the front-line support provides a foundation for success. Therefore, building upon shared beliefs of equity for all students aids acceptance at the classroom level in the practice of utilizing single-subject acceleration.

### **Summary**

There are many people involved in the decision of single-subject acceleration. The teachers who witness student capacity are on the front line. Policy within the LEA and standard benchmarks to assist teachers and counselors with identification can facilitate decision making on the part of teachers and help families understand the possibilities and guidelines.

In creating policy, the leader must consider many ethical lenses in decision making. In public schools, adherence to the dictates of the laws avoids litigation and maintains confidence. Thus, the ethic of justice dominates decisions. In addition to the ethic of justice, the ethics of care, critique, and the profession require consideration and may challenge the ethic of justice in some cases (Shapiro & Stefkovich,

2016). Operating from the ethic of care in a world of limited resources requires a triage-like attendance to students' needs.

Allocating limited school resources to handle all in the best interest of the community requires keen leadership. Providing resources toward one initiative could limit resources to a different initiative. Following the values and norms of the community maintains confidence and support from the citizens and school board for the superintendent who must balance the needs of students not yet proficient with state expectations against students who test well beyond state requirements for proficiency. Doing so requires considering ethics of equality, equity, and excellence. Obtaining more resources requires justifying the needs of the district against the limits of the taxpayers. A superintendent's priority is not an easy choice: underperforming students, typical students, over-performing students, or taxpayers.

In years past, national laws created a focus on the underserved and underperforming student groups with high-stakes intervention if targeted groups did not attain minimum performance; such a mandate essentially dictated the focus of triage. Recent changes to legislation are addressing the learning needs of all students, and with this change, educational leaders have more variables to consider in their balancing act of resource allocation. Learning what factors influence the decision makers in utilizing the tool of acceleration for the most advanced learners therefore proves both timely and important.

## CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

### Introduction

*A Nation Empowered: Evidence Trumps the Excuses Holding Back America's Brightest Students* highlights acceleration options and many studies of their longitudinal impact on the students receiving acceleration. Benbow and Lubinski at Vanderbilt University lead some of this most prominent research as they continue the work begun by Stanley at John Hopkins in 1971. The Study of Mathematically Precocious Youth (SMPY) follows five cohorts of 5,000 mathematically gifted students over fifty years to analyze the impact of interventions on trajectories. This research studied the impact of students receiving acceleration, not the decision making of acceleration use.

Where studies were found that researched opinions about acceleration use, they focused on teacher or counselor perception instead of the district's lead administrator's perception. A Minnesota study by Lindberg surveyed administrator attitudes toward funding and curriculum for gifted education. No research was found of administrators' opinions of acceleration as an educational intervention. Per Ann Shoplik, Administrator for Acceleration Institute and Research, at the Belin-Blank Center in the University of Iowa, a paucity of research exists to identify the factors that influence administrator decisions to utilize acceleration (Personal Communication, November 15, 2014). The survey used in this research aimed to understand what administrators think about single-subject acceleration as well as identify factors and background that may impact how they make decisions or create policy for single-subject acceleration.

This research utilized Creswell's sequential explanatory strategy in quantitative dominant, mixed methods research (Cresswell, 2009). A quantitative survey was administered electronically to all Pennsylvania public school district superintendents. Administrators completing the survey were asked if they wanted to volunteer to be contacted for a follow-up interview that was built upon initial quantitative results. The interviews' purposes were to clarify and to expand upon any questions that remain after the survey data were analyzed.

### **Research Questions**

This research was divided into two components: surveying Pennsylvania public school superintendents on factors that might influence their adoption of acceleration practice and ascertaining the background of the administrators. The research was designed to understand how factors and background might influence administrator decision-making as they consider proposals for implementing single-subject acceleration in the elementary setting. For the purposes of this study, single-subject acceleration was defined as the accelerated movement of a student in one specific area of content, rather than in all subject-matter areas, such as skipping of a grade level ([Southern & Jones, 2015](#)). For example, a 5<sup>th</sup> grader who takes mathematics with 6<sup>th</sup> graders, yet remains in 5<sup>th</sup> grade for all other classes, would be experiencing single-subject acceleration.

To this end, research questions focused on three main areas:

1. What factors impact Pennsylvania superintendents in adopting the practice of single-subject acceleration in their districts?
2. How might the personal and professional background of Pennsylvania superintendents, including experience and training, affect decisions in regard to use of single-subject acceleration?
3. What are superintendent attitudes about gifted education?

The survey collected information on superintendents' perceptions of the gifted, gifted education, and acceleration for gifted students to ascertain if those beliefs relate to beliefs and decision making about single-subject acceleration. Many of those questions were based on the research of Francois Gagné and his colleagues as those questions have been incorporated by researchers for over thirty years in the field of gifted education and acceleration. I felt they provided a common foundation for my research that could potentially provide comparison more readily to other studies in the future if needed.

The third question, not the intended focus of the study, was documented nonetheless. Responses were a byproduct of learning whether superintendent attitudes about gifted would be correlated with attitudes about acceleration. Inasmuch as this information was gathered from Public School Superintendents from the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, documenting results was a relevant and important reporting outcome of the research.

## **Data Gathering**

The quantitative survey included a series of binary, multiple choice, and Likert-scale questions to ascertain attitudes and practices of Pennsylvania superintendent administrators in regard to elementary grade single-subject acceleration. The open-ended question at the end of the survey allowed for more input if respondents were interested. The research surveyed school superintendents in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. The quantitative research, sent via email, preceded qualitative research interviews.

Several researchers and studies informed the questionnaire. The seminal work of Gagné and his various colleagues, Nadeu in particular, on teachers' attitudes toward gifted children provided foundation toward other studies informing this questionnaire. McCoach and Siegle's revised edition of Gagné and Nadeau's survey – *Opinions about the Gifted and Their Education* – contributed to Lindberg's research in Minnesota determining superintendents' perceptions of the gifted and of gifted education. This study was designed to contribute to the body of research in gaining information about Pennsylvania superintendents and how their perceptions might impact their willingness to implement single subject acceleration.

Dissertation committee members included three Temple University Staff: a Senior Associate Dean of Assessment and Evaluation, a Professor of Education Leadership and Policy, Organizational, and Leadership Studies; and an Associate- Professor of Educational Leadership and Policy, Organizational, and Leadership Studies. The Assistant Professor recently held the position of Superintendent of Schools at a Pennsylvania suburban school district. The committee members contributed to the

development of the quantitative survey. Following the committee's approval of the survey, two active Pennsylvania suburban school district superintendents and a teacher who was formerly a lawyer provided feedback on the survey. Temple University IRB approved the research on February 20, 2017.

I forwarded the informed consent and disclaimers containing the survey link to the statewide gifted liaison for the Pennsylvania Department of Education and Capital Area Intermediate Unit. The state liaison forwarded the research, using Temple IRB-approved emails, to the gifted liaison at each intermediate unit on February 23, 2017. Roughly half of the intermediate unit gifted liaisons forwarded the survey to the superintendents for public school districts within their jurisdiction over the following week. The emails from the intermediate unit gifted liaisons, therefore, should have reached two hundred and thirty two (232) of the Commonwealth's four hundred and ninety nine (499) district superintendents.

I responded to the shortfall in distribution by creating a superintendent email database. I downloaded a list of superintendents for the State and their district website from Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) Educational Names and Addresses (EdNA). From each district's website, I then sought the email of superintendents associated with intermediate units which have a policy of not forwarding research requests. Based on the EdNA download of only the non-participating intermediate units, two hundred and sixty-eight (268) superintendents did not receive the survey via the intermediate unit. I located emails for all but fifty seven (57) of those superintendents.

I generated a mail merge to customize each email with the superintendent's name and district. I directly emailed the informed consent and disclaimer to two hundred and

eleven (211) superintendents on March 6, 2017. Because of the reporting features in the Google Application “Yet Another Mail Merge” used for the email customization, I learned that one hundred and forty-three (143) recipients opened the email and fifty-four (54) of the recipients clicked the survey link.

I performed a reminder email, also customized with superintendent name and district, eliminating those noted as “bounced” or “clicked” on the original email report. Of the one hundred and forty nine (149) sent, sixty-one (61) recipients opened the emails. Eighteen (18) recipients clicked to take the survey. The survey closed on March 16, 2017 for statistical analysis utilizing SPSS and Minitab.

At the completion of the survey, respondents could volunteer for a qualitative research interview and simultaneously enter a drawing to win one of ten \$25 Amazon gift cards. Three superintendents volunteered for this. All three received an Amazon gift card on April 3, 2017. I conducted qualitative interviews with each as well.

Also at the completion of the survey, respondents could fill out a separate Google Form only to enter a drawing to win one of ten \$25 Amazon gift cards. Three superintendents entered the drawing; all three received the gift card on March 25, 2017.

The qualitative interviews provided further depth to the quantitative survey results. The questions, although developed in advance of quantitative results, were further informed by findings from the quantitative survey. The qualitative research aimed to identify how administrators facilitate identifying students’ PLEP to determine placement; for example, it is informative to know if the school administers an above-level test, uses a universal screening tool, or relies on teacher assessments and observations. The research was intended to reveal more specifically what exposure the administrator



has had to the experience of directly or indirectly implementing single-subject acceleration and what training or research the administrator has done on the topic as well. A major result of the research was to ascertain how training and background impacted administrator willingness to consider single-subject acceleration. The questions asked evolved as themes arose from superintendents.

There was incentive for survey participation in the form of potential selection for an Amazon.com gift card. Ten \$25 gift card incentives were to be provided based on random drawing from all respondents. Respondents who were interested in winning a gift card were required to provide a name and email for the gift card to be sent. In the end, I sent only six gift cards as those were all who entered the lottery. Three of those entered only the lottery without volunteering for an interview. The other three were superintendents who volunteered for the interview and were therefore automatically enrolled in the gift card raffle.

### **Data Analysis**

The research followed Creswell's mixed methods sequential, qualitative first method. Quantitative data were collected and analyzed first. SPSS and Minitab were used for data analysis and to create a graphic representation of survey results. Qualitative data were coded from interviews per Tesch's eight-step method (1990) utilizing the traditional method of allowing the codes to emerge during the data analysis. Creswell (2009) guides the qualitative research and analyzing results of the study.

## **Limitations**

In order to separate factors influencing single subject acceleration from state policies regarding gifted education or acceleration policy, only one state was surveyed. This research surveyed only Commonwealth of Pennsylvania public school superintendents; caution surrounds extrapolating this research to other states, particularly states with different laws regarding gifted education or acceleration use.

Every public school superintendent received the survey either forwarded from the intermediate unit or emailed directly by me. Non-response bias could impact survey results of the quantitative survey. The capability to skip any question could provide a response bias among responders. Qualitative research interviews were held with volunteer respondents from the quantitative survey. Purposeful sampling from survey respondents only could bias qualitative research. Although I intended to interview two superintendents in each urban, suburban, and rural districts selected between those who use acceleration and those who do not, the volunteer pool did not allow for such. I was able to interview six superintendents. Three were from rural settings; three were from suburban settings. Three had utilized single-subject acceleration; three had not.

Because of their policies, Philadelphia and Pittsburgh School District superintendents were not specifically pursued. These largest school districts in the state nonetheless were included in the email invitation to the survey. The Philadelphia School District's (PSD) Office of Research and Evaluation's Research Review Committee (RRC) limits all doctoral research to studies that align with the district's anchor goals. Similarly,

Pittsburgh Public Schools (PPS) requires that all research benefit PPS initiatives. These cities have their own internal review boards that could impact negatively the timeliness of this research if this avenue had been specifically pursued. I have no way of knowing if they responded to the survey.

## CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

### Descriptive Data

Of the four hundred and ninety- nine (499) state superintendents, 96 returned the survey for a response rate of 20%. Since not every respondent answered every question, the sample sizes for the analyses will vary although the differences are small.

Descriptive data on the 96 respondents are presented in Tables 4.1 to 4.3.

Table 4.1: Location of the District

Location	Frequency	% of Sample	% Population Distribution
Urban	4	4.2	3.2
Suburban	46	47.9	41.8
Rural	46	47.9	34.9
Town	n/a		20.1

Table 4.2: Years of Experience of Superintendent

Years of Experiment	Frequency	% of Sample	% Population Distribution
0 – 5	52	53.6	n/a
6 – 10	27	27.8	n/a
11 – 20	14	14.4	n/a
21+	1	1.0	n/a
Missing	3	3.1	n/a

Table 4.3: Annual Graduates of District

Number of Graduates	Frequency	% of Sample	% Population Distribution
Under 100	30	30.9	33.5
100 – 250	25	25.8	40.4
251 – 500	31	32.0	18.8
501 – 750	5	5.2	4.8
751 – 1000	1	1.0	2.1
1001 +	1	1.0	0.5
Missing	4	4.1	n/a

As shown in the above tables, the respondents were from suburban or rural districts, were generally new in their jobs, and administered districts that were relatively small. Pennsylvania districts are categorized as urban, suburban, rural, or town. As the survey did not offer the category of “town”, I combined town and rural state demographics for the sake of comparison. Towns are not near urban centers; although larger than rural school districts, towns are located in more rural regions of the state.

The survey responses in general are less suburban and more rural than the State demographics. Potentially consistent with that finding, the survey responses represent districts with a smaller number of graduates than the State population overall. These differences are relatively small, and the general distribution reflects the State without major discrepancy. Pennsylvania does not provide statewide data on superintendents’ years of experience for comparison.

### **Data on Single-Subject Acceleration**

Table 4.4: Did Superintendent have Training in Single-Subject Acceleration

Training	Frequency	% of Sample
Yes	19	19.6
No	76	78.4
Missing	2	2.1

Table 4.5: District Utilization of Single-Subject Acceleration

Utilization	Frequency of Utilization	% of Sample of Utilization
For Any Subject	49	51.0
For Math	47	48.5
For English Language Arts	22	22.7
For Science	2	2.1
For Social Studies	8	8.2

Table 4.6: Initiation for Considering Single-Subject Acceleration

Initiation	Frequency	% of Sample
A Screening Test	30	30.9
Teacher	41	42.3
Counselor	26	26.8
Parent	40	41.2

As shown above, fewer than 20% of the superintendents have had training in single-subject acceleration. About half of the districts allow single-subject acceleration, with most of this in math and to a lesser extent English Language Arts. Finally, districts allow consideration for single-subject acceleration to emanate from multiple sources.

### **Quantitative Research Findings for the Major Research Questions**

The quantitative research revealed insight to three questions. First, does the personal and professional background of the superintendent impact the use of single subject acceleration? Second, what district factors influence the consideration of single subject acceleration? Third, what are superintendent attitudes about gifted education?

#### ***Findings with Superintendents' Background Characteristics***

A series of chi square analyses were conducted to ascertain if any of the superintendents' background characteristics impacted the use of single-subject acceleration. Each of these is presented below.

Table 4.7: Years of Experience as a Superintendent

Years of Experience	District Does not Use Single-Subject Acceleration	District Uses Single-Subject Acceleration
0 – 5	29	23
6 – 10	12	15
11 – 20	6	8
21+	0	1

Chi Square = 2.31, p = .510

Table 4.8: Training in Single-Subject Acceleration

Training	District Does not Use Single-Subject Acceleration	District Uses Single-Subject Acceleration
No	41	35
Yes	6	13

Chi Square = 3.04, p = .081

Table 4.9: School Attended Offered a Gifted Program

School Had Gifted Program	District Does not Use Single-Subject Acceleration	District Uses Single-Subject Acceleration
No	28	28
Yes	19	21

Chi Square = .058, p = .809

Table 4.10: Elementary School Maintained a Gifted Program, but Superintendent did not Participate

Participation	District Does not Use Single-Subject Acceleration	District Uses Single-Subject Acceleration
Did not Participate	31	34
Did Participate	16	15

Chi Square = .129, p = .719

Table 4.11: Superintendent Participated in Gifted Program

Participation	District Does not Use Single-Subject Acceleration	District Uses Single-Subject Acceleration
Did not Participate	38	45
Did Participate	9	4

Chi Square = 2.47, p = .116

Table 4.12: Family Members Participated in a Gifted Program

Family Members Participated	District Does not Use Single-Subject Acceleration	District Uses Single-Subject Acceleration
Did not Participate	30	30
Did Participate	17	19

Chi Square = .069, p = .792

As shown above, none of the superintendents' background characteristics had a significant impact on the use of single-subject acceleration. As shown in Table 4.8, more than twice as many districts whose superintendents had training used single-subject acceleration, although this does not attain the typical .05 level of significance.

### *District Characteristics*

Chi squares were also used to ascertain if district characteristics impacted the use of single-subject acceleration. These results are presented in Tables 4.13 to 4.16.

Table 4.13: District Location

Location of District	District Does not Use Single-Subject Acceleration	District Uses Single-Subject Acceleration
Urban	3	1
Suburban	15	31
Rural	29	17

Chi Square = 9.658, p = .008



Table 4.14: Number of Annual Graduates

Annual Graduates	District Does not Use Single-Subject Acceleration	District Uses Single-Subject Acceleration
Under 100	20	10
101 – 250	12	13
251 – 500	10	21
501 – 750	2	3
751 – 1000	1	0
1001 +	0	1

Chi Square = 9.39, p = .094

Table 4.15: Districts Implements Universal Screening Tools

Uses Universal Screening Tools	District Does not Use Single-Subject Acceleration	District Uses Single-Subject Acceleration
No	31	31
Yes	14	14

Chi Square = 0

Table 4.16: District Has a Board-Approved Acceleration Policy

Has a Policy	District Does not Use Single-Subject Acceleration	District Uses Single-Subject Acceleration
No	11	6
Yes	35	36

Chi Square = 1.306, p = .253

As shown above, there is one significant result: district location. As shown in Table 4.13, suburban districts are far more likely to use single-subject acceleration as compared to rural districts.

***District Superintendents' Attitudes toward Gifted Education***

The superintendents were asked several questions relating to their attitudes towards gifted education. Their responses to these questions are presented in Table 4.17 and 4.18.

Table 4.17: Attitude Questions Derived from the Work of Francois Gagné on Gifted Education

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Mean
(1)A greater number of gifted children should be allowed to skip a grade.	8	25	37	15	4	2.80
(2)A greater number of gifted children should be considered for single-subject acceleration.	4	7	6	41	31	3.99
(3)If gifted children were not mandated in Pennsylvania under Chapter 16, I would still support it.	4	5	12	41	27	3.92
(4)The gifted need special attention to fully develop their talents.	1	1	5	42	40	4.34
(5)In general, I support gifted education in my district.	10	39	24	12	3	2.53
(6)When the gifted are put in special classes, the other children feel devalued.	17	30	22	17	3	2.54
(7)Gifted children could become vain or egotistical if they are given special attention.	17	34	18	16	3	2.48

More than a quarter of the superintendents disagree that a greater number of children should be allowed to skip a grade (Question #1), another form of acceleration than the focus of this study. This may provide insight to superintendents' beliefs surrounding the efficacy of acceleration although it may be reflective of other beliefs as well. Over forty percent of superintendent, however, remain neutral.

Superintendents express support for gifted education (Question # 5) even if not mandated under Chapter 16, with a mean of 3.92 and only nine (9) superintendents

answering “strongly disagree” or “disagree”. Overwhelmingly, superintendents agree that gifted students need special attention to develop their talents with a mean of 4.34, the strongest result on the survey (Question # 4). Superintendents disagree with statements that devalue special services for gifted students for their impact on the gifted or on other students. This disagreement further demonstrates their support for gifted education services.

Yet, superintendents respond with disagreement about supporting gifted education in their districts; only 15 superintendents express agreeing or strongly agreeing with supporting gifted education in their districts (Question # 5). This seemingly contradictory result is worth noting.

The superintendents’ answers to questions about the district and the way district characteristics impact single-subject acceleration are presented in Table 4.18.

Table 4.18: Attitude Questions Original for this Study on Single-Subject Acceleration

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Mean
(1)Financial implications of single-subject acceleration are a concern to me.	15	26	12	20	6	2.62
(2)Transportation issues associated with single-subject acceleration are a concern to me.	1	4	14	51	19	3.93
(3)Logistical, scheduling and coordination issues associated with single-subject acceleration are a concern to me.	6	23	14	42	3	3.15
(4)Curriculum gaps (missing important ideas and development gaps in knowledge) that could emerge from single-subject acceleration are a concern to me.	10	27	13	34	5	2.97

Table 4.18, continued

(5) Student social/emotional development is a deterrent to my staff in the decision to utilize single-subject acceleration.	4	28	23	29	5	3.03
(6) If single-subject acceleration were utilized for some, I have concerns that many parents would want their child considered, even though it might not be an appropriate placement.	4	29	17	30	9	3.12
(7) My school board would support subject-specific acceleration.	0	0	23	49	16	3.92
(8) My district's use of single-subject acceleration can arise from a variety of different initiators.	1	2	21	49	16	3.87
(9) Students, other than those already identified as gifted, should be candidates for single-subject acceleration.	1	4	11	48	25	4.03
(10) In general, I support single-subject acceleration for my district.	1	4	10	50	24	4.03

In general, the data in Table 4.18 indicate a large degree of uncertainty about single-subject acceleration as many of the means are in the 3.0 to 3.5 range. In contrast, a majority of respondents agree that transportation issues concern them. Similarly, more respondents agree that logistical, scheduling, and coordination issues are a concern. On the other hand, the superintendents are not worried especially about the financial implications of this process. The last four question results demonstrate general support for gifted education and for single-subject acceleration.

## Secondary Research Questions

A series of analyses were conducted relating the superintendents' responses to the attitude, demographic, and district characteristic questions. Each of these is briefly reviewed below.

### *Correlations with Superintendent Background Characteristics*

Pearson correlations were computed relating the superintendents' background characteristics and attitudes. These results are presented below. To reduce the number of results presented, only significant correlations are listed.

#### A. Years of Experience

None of the correlations were significant.

#### B. Training in Single Subject Acceleration

There was one significant correlation: Superintendents who had training agree more with the statement "My school board would support subject-specific acceleration" ( $r = .296$ ,  $p = .008$ ).

#### C. School attended did not offer a gifted program

There were three significant correlations: Superintendents where the school they attended did not offer a gifted program agreed more with these statements:

In general I support gifted education ( $r = .272$ ,  $p = .010$ ).

Financial implications of single-subject acceleration are a concern to me ( $r = .258$ ,  $p = .015$ ).

Logistical, scheduling, and coordination issues associated with single-subject acceleration are a concern to me ( $r = .325$ ,  $p = .002$ ).

D. Superintendent was identified and participated in gifted program in elementary school.

There were three significant correlations. Superintendents who participated in gifted education while in elementary school disagree more with the following statements:

When the gifted are put in special classes, the other children feel devalued ( $r = -.256$ ,  $p = .016$ )

Financial implications of single-subject acceleration are a concern to me ( $r = -.220$ ,  $p = .038$ )

Logistical, scheduling, and coordination issues associated with single-subject acceleration are a concern to me ( $r = -.260$ ,  $p = .015$ ).

E. Family Members who Participated in Gifted Education

There was one significant correlation; Superintendents who had a family member who participated in a gifted program agreed more with the statement: Gifted children could become more egotistical if they are given special attention ( $r = .275$ ,  $p = .010$ ).

Overall, while there are some significant correlations, they are few in number, and even those that are significant are relatively small. The results overall indicate that the more training or life exposure to gifted education, the greater the support and the lower

the concerns. Further, the more training, the more support the superintendents expect from their boards which is an essential element of organizational dynamics. The mere length of tenure in the role, without the background of training or personal exposure to gifted education, does not impact superintendent beliefs in a statistically significant way.

### *Correlations with District Characteristics*

A similar set of analyses was conducted looking at district characteristics. These results are presented below:

#### A. District Location

One-way ANOVAs were computed comparing the districts in terms of their location. Since there were only four urban districts, the ANOVA is somewhat problematic. Analyses run with and without these three districts, however, were identical. There were two significant results.

“If gifted education were not mandated in Pennsylvania under Chapter 6, I would still support it”

Urban	3.25
Suburban	3.47
Rural	2.78

$F = 4.713, p = .011$

“Students, other than those already identified as gifted, should be candidates for single-subject acceleration”

Urban	3.75
Suburban	4.28
Rural	3.83

$F = 5.34, p = .002$

As shown above, superintendents in suburban districts are in greater agreement with both statements. In general, this is the same pattern throughout most of the attitude questions. That is, suburban superintendents are more favorable to gifted education and single-subject acceleration as compared to superintendents from urban or rural districts.

B. Number of Graduates.

There were three significant correlations:

In general, I support gifted education for my district ( $r = .273, p = .012$ )

Financial implications of single-subject acceleration are a concern to me ( $r = .272, p = .012$ )

If single-subject acceleration were utilized for some, I have concerns that many parents would want their child considered, even though it might not be an appropriate placement ( $r = -.228, p = .035$ ).

The correlations with the number of graduates indicate that superintendents in larger districts are more supportive of gifted education and single-subject acceleration. There is a confounding factor, however: larger districts are more typically suburban. This is shown below:

Table 4.19: District Location and District Size

	Urban	Suburban	Rural
Under 100	1	4	25
101 - 250	0	11	14
251 – 500	2	23	6
501 – 750	1	4	0
751 – 1000	0	1	0
1001 +	0	1	0



Essentially, therefore, this finding replicates the one above. That is, superintendents of suburban districts are more supportive.

C. District Implements Universal Screening

No significant correlations

D. District currently maintains a board-approved acceleration policy.

No significant correlations.

### **Qualitative Research Findings - Survey**

Thirteen (13) respondents to the quantitative survey replied to the short open-response question. Of the thirteen open-response replies, several had comments on the relationship between gifted education and acceleration. The most consistent finding among six (6) of the respondents addressed using caution in connecting gifted identification with the need for acceleration. Four (4) responses indicated that acceleration should be available to all students in a school, not only those identified as gifted; rigor of curriculum and mass customized learning pairs each student with the proper placement and pacing. The statements and associated coding are detailed in Appendix H.

### **Qualitative Research Findings - Interviews**

Respondent volunteers from the quantitative research survey generated five (5) qualitative interview participants. To clarify specific information following quantitative

analysis, I requested one additional interview with a local superintendent known to utilize single subject acceleration. Therefore, there were six interviews conducted.

Of the six interviews, three (3) were conducted on the phone and three (3) face to face, to illuminate depth and breadth beyond the survey. I focused on identifying additional themes and delving deeper on survey findings. To this end, a basic qualitative analysis fulfills the purpose of the research intent (Creswell, 2009).

All superintendents spoke to math being the most straightforward subject to accelerate through a curricular path or individually utilizing single-subject acceleration. They spoke to the ease identifying the student's level and knowledge in the subject of math. A rural superintendent spoke of the need in his district to accelerate select students into accounting III, metal shop, or wood shop beyond curricular offerings. In these cases, the student often performed an independent study within a larger beginner class in order to maintain class sizes at an affordable level. A suburban superintendent spoke of his district's use of acceleration to place autistic students of high academic level into the workplace with a large data-analysis company.

Three (3) of the six (6) superintendents spoke to resistance or potential resistance from the teachers and/or union in utilizing acceleration in a manner that involves using distance (cyber) learning or changing class sizes. Two of the superintendents spoke to curricular changes in general causing resistance from the teachers and union. Another superintendent reported teachers finding logistics of acceleration to be cumbersome. One superintendent shared that initiatives undertaken schoolwide, such as mass customized learning, depend upon the implementing teacher to occur with intended fidelity. This

finding consistent is with organization research highlighting decoupling in education discussed in Chapter Two.

Three (3) of the six (6) superintendents spoke to gifted identification as a factor, but not a determinant, in any acceleration or advanced placement. Superintendents spoke to a variety of metrics used to determine placement including Dibbles, PVAAS/PSSA, CDT, NWEA MAP, and 4Sight. As one superintendent noted, “Using testing you are already familiar with when making changes is more helpful than changing (testing metrics) everything at once.”

One superintendent spoke of preferring a procedure for acceleration rather than a board-approved policy. He expressed that implementing a policy creates unnecessary debate and limits creativity in meeting students’ unique needs. He works with a school board that does not require micromanagement of district happenings. One survey finding revealed that among districts that had used acceleration, the Likert scale showed more agreement that the school board would be less likely to support acceleration in the future. The superintendent who prefers procedure to policy for acceleration surmised that this resulted from a very involved board, perhaps from small and/or rural districts where the board involvement might permeate every decision. He expressed that much depends upon the culture of the school board.

Three (3) of the superintendents spoke specifically to the culture of the school board being paramount in achieving progress with acceleration. Two (2) other superintendents spoke to the culture of the community, closely linked to the elected school board, creating motivation or interest in acceleration. The superintendents felt that the perception of turbulence concerns associated with acceleration far outpaced the

reality of such turbulence that would actually exist. Those superintendents felt that acceleration decisions made by teachers and administrators based upon quantitative metrics allowed for solid decision making that could be clearly communicated to diminish any turbulence.

Only one superintendent spoke to social-emotional concerns with acceleration. He said that someone one year younger had been asked to a formal dance due to sharing a class with an older cohort. He said this caused a stir, but he didn't see the issue being a concern.

The qualitative interviews revealed tremendous weight on organizational dynamics among the superintendent, school board, teachers, parents, and community at large. The culture of these groups and their interactions seem to hold tremendous impact on implementing any initiative. In regards to single-subject acceleration, interviews highlighted that culture needed to support single-subject acceleration or student need for acceleration must be strongly evident. Without either or both of these factors, the superintendent holds little impetus to prioritize innovation in this arena when there are so many demands upon the resources of time and money of all involved in public education.

## CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

### Introduction

The research, designed to identify superintendent and district characteristics that might influence the utilization of single-subject acceleration, revealed implications for practice and opportunities for further research. As no previous research on this topic exists in the literature, opportunities abound for future research beyond this initial study.

### Discussion of Findings

#### *Superintendent Background Impact on Single-Subject Acceleration*

With the research, I intended to identify whether background factors impact Pennsylvania superintendents in adopting the practice of single-subject acceleration in the school district. Although there were only a few relationships with superintendent background characteristics, there were several interesting findings. Generally, these findings reflect consistency with the limited research results available in literature on gifted education or acceleration. Gagne and Nadeau identified predictors toward positive attitudes toward the gifted. The higher the socio-economic status and the more contact with the gifted, the more favorable the attitudes (1985). Begin and Gagne specifically identified having gifted friends and family, having contact with gifted students, participating in a gifted program, and having perceived knowledge of giftedness increased positive attitudes about the gifted (1994). Gagne's work informed the research, and much of these findings were consistent with Gagne's findings.

Superintendents who had training in acceleration agree more with the statement "My school board would support subject-specific acceleration". This demonstrates that

training might create a positive impact on superintendents' willingness to create innovation in this arena in collaboration with the school board. This is consistent with Lindberg's finding of Minnesota superintendents that "Superintendents who had education or training in gifted education were more supportive toward giftedness and gifted education, less negative about gifted education as being elitist, and more positive toward acceleration of gifted students" (2015, p. v). Although Lindberg studied gifted generally and this study focused upon single-subject acceleration, the findings are generally in agreement that training creates a more positive attitude and understanding for the somewhat related topics of single-subject acceleration and gifted services.

Superintendents who attended a school that did not offer a gifted program agreed more with three statements. First, there was more agreement with the statement, "In general I support gifted education." Second there was more agreement with, "Financial implications of single-subject acceleration are a concern to me." Finally there was also more agreement with, "Logistical, scheduling, and coordination issues associated with single-subject acceleration are a concern to me." The second two statements, although not in direct opposition to the first, demonstrate some hesitancy about single-subject acceleration use by superintendents who themselves did not attend a school that had gifted education. Superintendents who participated in gifted education while in elementary school demonstrated more complete support for gifted education.

Superintendents who participated in gifted education while in elementary school disagree more with the following three statements. First, "When the gifted are put in special classes, the other children feel devalued." Second, "Financial implications of single-subject acceleration are a concern to me." Third and finally, "Logistical,

scheduling, and coordination issues associated with single-subject acceleration are a concern to me.” These three findings, written in a double negative because of the survey format, demonstrate support from superintendents who participated in gifted education while in elementary school. This research builds upon that of Lindberg who studied Minnesota superintendents. Lindberg found that superintendents who believed themselves to be gifted showed greater support for gifted education (2015).

Superintendents who had a family member who participated in a gifted program agreed more with the statement, “Gifted children could become more egotistical if they are given special attention.” When this finding was discussed with one suburban superintendent who utilizes single-subject acceleration, the superintendent attributed this concern as something that should be resolved as a “parenting issue” and not a concern of superintendents.

### ***District Characteristics Findings***

Whereas district characteristics were secondary to superintendent background in my mind for this research, the district characteristics analyzed from survey data reveal insight to single-subject acceleration use. Connection exists between district location and use of single-subject acceleration; similarly, connection exists between location and support of gifted education. Further, district size relates to district location per this research. A paucity of research on district characteristics and use of single-subject acceleration prevents my comparison to prior findings.

The quantitative Likert-scale data revealed that suburban superintendents are more favorable to gifted education and single-subject acceleration as compared to

superintendents from urban or rural districts. I find rural superintendents expressing less favor to single-subject acceleration which is intriguing as suburban superintendents frequently lead larger schools. Larger schools more easily can accommodate grouping practices, and, therefore, suburban schools might have less need for single-subject acceleration. As Howley states, small districts may not have the students or resources to develop full programming for gifted students (2009). Benbow and Glass calculate for Iowa that statistically two or three students per grade level per district might qualify as gifted (1992). The fact that suburban superintendents would indicate more favor for gifted education does not surprise me for the same reason. Suburban, and, therefore, often larger schools have more gifted students. Having more gifted students, as would be found in a larger district, facilitates meeting student needs easier because of the ability to serve a group. A collection of gifted students more readily supports student teacher ratios.

The correlational finding with the number of graduates indicates that superintendents in larger districts are more supportive of gifted education and single-subject acceleration. There is, however, a confounding factor as larger districts are more typically suburban.

Suburban districts report utilizing single-subject acceleration at twice the rate of rural districts. In the qualitative research interviews, rural districts spoke to more difficulty having many levels because of small class sizes, so it would seem single subject acceleration could be a tool to provide differentiation. Howley focused her West Virginia research on less affluent rural schools in particular utilizing the strategy of single-subject acceleration to meet the ability and achievement needs of gifted learners



(2002). The survey results of the relative underuse of single-subject acceleration in rural areas, therefore, warrants a closer look in conjunction with Howley's positive findings for the rural demographic of schools.

### *Qualitative Research Findings*

Of the thirteen open-response replies, several respondents had comments on the relationship between gifted education and acceleration. The most consistent finding among six (6) of the respondents addressed using caution in connecting gifted identification with the need for acceleration. Four (4) responses indicated that acceleration should be available to all students in a school and not only those identified as gifted; rigor of curriculum and mass customized learning pairs each student with the proper placement and pacing. This focus speaks to the desire for excellence and equity for all as well as pragmatic awareness that, just as acceleration practice would not advantage all gifted children, some children not identified as gifted would benefit from a form of acceleration. This sentiment mirrors the research of Benbow and Stanley that equity and excellence should not be viewed as competing agendas; equity and excellence should receive focus simultaneously and synergistically (1996).

The qualitative interviews reveal tremendous weight on organizational dynamics among the superintendent, school board, teachers, parents, and community at large. The culture of these groups and their interactions seem to hold tremendous impact on implementing any initiative. This is consistent with the research of Weick, Sutcliffe and Obstfeld: behaving in a manner consistent with constituents' expectations increases confidence and support. Straying too far from school board members' own schooling or

expectations can create difficulties for the superintendent's leadership (2005). Rogers asserts that each school must identify grouping options that meet the needs of the learners, attitudes of teachers, and expectations of administrators and community members (2007).

The McREL research identified superintendents who positively influence student achievement. Goals created collaboratively with all stakeholders was one responsibility of superintendents expecting to positively influence student achievement. Supporting the norms of the community in creating, monitoring, and devoting resources toward goals also contributes to success (Waters & Marzano, 2006). The superintendents interviewed discussed following these norms.

### **Limitations**

The research has limitations that require caution concerning interpretation and application to policy. The research's limitations, however, often reveal opportunities for future research.

The research exclusively surveyed public school superintendents in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. Pennsylvanians value local school district control with much decentralization from the state compared to other states in the nation. Pennsylvania mandates, but does not fund, gifted education. Generalization of this research to other states or countries, especially where gifted education policy or funding differ, should be approached with caution. On the other hand, opportunities to repeat this research in another state results from this limitation. Repeating the research in another state, ideally one that has similar policy of gifted being mandated but not funded, could reveal whether

the result would be duplicated. Similarly, repeating research in a state with differing policies, particularly if results have been duplicated in another state with identical policies, could reveal impact of gifted policy on the use of single-subject acceleration.

The research garnered a twenty percent (20%) response rate. Only forty nine (49) of the respondents reported utilizing single-subject acceleration. When this sample intersects with other factors that might have small samples, such as those having received training in single subject acceleration, it is difficult to obtain statistical significance that would be easier to obtain with a larger sample. Therefore, caution should be exercised especially where significance has not been identified with background or factors. Findings should be considered more valid than where correlation or findings have not been identified.

The small number of responses from superintendents at urban districts prevents any generalization to an urban setting. Although the data were analyzed with and without urban responses with no impact found on the overall analysis, specific application of findings to this group should be avoided. There are only sixteen (16) districts classified as urban in Pennsylvania. Of these sixteen (16) districts, two (2) are “city: large”, two (2) “city: mid-size”, and the remaining twelve (12) “city: small”. To gather information on these school districts, individual personal contact would seem the best avenue.

In designing the survey, I failed to offer “town” as a location designation. The survey only offered the selection of urban, suburban, or rural. Given that the location revealed research findings, I should have collected the most specific location data possible by using the twelve urban-centric codes classified by the National Center for

Education Statistics (NCES). The survey flaw of only collecting three locations which didn't directly align to NCES codes then puts location data into question.

Another limitation of the survey was associated with the qualitative interviews. Selection of qualitative interviews was from superintendent volunteers from the quantitative survey only. This limited pool of volunteers could create a selection bias by convenience sampling. A random sampling from rural, towns, suburban, and urban would have been preferred.

### **Implications on Practice**

There are many groups for whom this research information is relevant to practice, implementation, or policy formation. Some of these groups are within Pennsylvania and others are more national.

The Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) should understand the different concerns facing different types of districts in meeting the needs of all students. PDE should be aware of the extent that districts located rurally might encounter or perceive different obstacles than districts located in a suburban region in considering any practice that might benefit students. PDE can be a source of support and problem-solving. "The Pennsylvania Department of Education's (PDE) mission is to lead and serve the educational community to enable each individual to grow into an inspired, productive, fulfilled, lifelong learner... it has always been the belief of PDE... in order for students to achieve, the appropriate supports and services must be made available to everyone tasked with the responsibility of getting those students to proficiency and beyond" (PDE, 2007).

Metacognitive consideration of the results by superintendents looms paramount. Research results reveal inconsistencies between beliefs and practice. Perhaps such inconsistencies demonstrate a leader truly serving the districts' agendas rather than the leaders' personal agendas. Or, perhaps the leader feels constrained by resources and forces in the district. Whatever the cause of inconsistencies, the results warrant superintendent personal reflection. Research further reveals differences between suburban and rural use of single-subject acceleration. This difference necessitates reflection on practice by the superintendent on whether students' needs drive practice or whether students' needs are fit into district practices. This research impacts programs training superintendents: academic institutions offering a superintendent letter of eligibility and superintendent professional groups.

This research impacts programs, organization training curriculum, and instruction staff in best practices. This research further impacts organizations such as associations for gifted students and acceleration practices studying and advocating for best practices for high-achieving learners. These would include the National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC), Pennsylvania Association for Gifted Education (PAGE), and the Acceleration Institute at the University of Iowa among many others. Superintendents who had training agree more with the statement, "My school board would support subject-specific acceleration." Further, although not statistically significant, superintendents with training in acceleration report utilizing single-subject acceleration at nearly twice the rate of those superintendents who had not received training. Training in the practice of single subject acceleration showed only a positive impact on superintendents' perception and use of single-subject acceleration.

Principals exert significant influence on practices in their districts, even in highly centralized districts. Therefore, this research is relevant to principals in understanding concerns impacting their superordinates in supporting the practice of single-subject acceleration. Hart and Ogawa assert that a principal's ability to enact change is enhanced by the support of the superordinates (1987).

Classroom teachers see student performance on a continual basis. Their insights and recommendations for student placement must, therefore, command respect. Understanding the greater dynamics in their district can build teachers' sensemaking and shared beliefs regarding policy and therefore enable teachers to properly promote potential interventions.

Guidance counselors maintain a broad role in meeting students' needs. Guidance counselors have a diverse role because students' needs are not distinctly social, emotional, or academic. Guidance counselors gaining insight to the perception of single-subject acceleration in their district and across the state holds value. Guidance counselors' knowledge of beliefs and concerns in their district can facilitate advocacy on behalf of students' needs. Guidance counselors understanding the beliefs that are shared among teachers, administrators, and the board enables guidance counselors to better navigate organizational dynamics without causing undo turbulence.

Response to Instruction and Intervention (RtII) specialists live on the front-line of evaluating individual students' needs. As they collect and analyze metrics for students, RtII maintains a unique role in initiating identification of students for whom single-subject acceleration might be appropriate. The National Association for Gifted Children recommends that RtII have adequate room to demonstrate above-grade level

performance. They further recommend that progress monitor to document mastery and need for “compacted or replacement curriculum,” (NAGC). To that end, understanding perceptions and possible obstacles better enables the RtII specialist to facilitate single-subject acceleration as an intervention when warranted.

As the researcher, this study directly impacts my personal practice. Single-subject acceleration represents only one of countless interventions for students of all abilities. As an educational leader, I will need to discern and support my district as a whole while meeting unique students’ needs. Learning to support the right intervention for the right student, while maximizing the benefit to that student and minimizing impact to other students, necessitates my care and reflection. Discerning where to develop policy, where to craft written procedure, and where to leave decisions to decentralized schools will be critical. Minimizing turbulence by developing shared beliefs will allow me to best obtain support of the teachers, union, parents, community, school board, and other constituents. Doing so requires balance, care, and attention to all ethical lenses.

### **Future Research**

This research investigating Pennsylvania school leaders’ influence on the use of single-subject acceleration addressed a topic not yet covered in literature. The findings reveal opportunities for follow-up. Both deeper and wider research on this topic should be pursued in Pennsylvania.

Should the research be repeated or expanded, the researcher should directly email all superintendents rather than using a multi-step intermediate unit distribution.

Receiving support and distribution by PASA, Pennsylvania Association of School Administrators, would be most desirable in disseminating research if possible.

In response to findings, subsequent research should fulfill two main objectives. First, pursue broader information on how superintendent decision making relates to personal beliefs. Second, pursue deeper information on district characteristics that influence practices regarding single subject acceleration. For both objectives, the researcher seeks a higher response rate than the 20% obtained.

On the Likert Scale research, superintendents expressed support for gifted education, even if not mandated under Chapter 16. Yet, superintendents also disagree with supporting gifted education in their districts. Future research should reveal insight on what seems to be an inconsistency between personal beliefs and professional priorities. Consideration should be made to whether the superintendent feels constrained by resources or community culture.

On subsequent surveys, questions should address superintendents' perceptions regarding teacher support and union support for single-subject acceleration. Several administrators noted resistance from either or both of these groups during the qualitative research interviews; additional research might reveal more about the type and extent of teachers and impact.

Literature and qualitative research interviews spoke to student grouping options. This research intended specifically to study the rare cases where the student's present level exceeded his or her grade by 1.5-2 years and not address the school as a whole. Nonetheless, the topic of grouping arose on the survey open response and the qualitative interviews. The personalized learning movement has been facilitated by digital tools that



allow educators to better target interventions and also allow students to move through the curriculum at their unique pace (Gates Foundation). One principal spoke to moving his entire school at students' unique levels and paces; if the school has such a plan in place, the need for single-subject acceleration falls within that. Other principals spoke to vertical teaming and rigorous curriculum for all. To this end, even though this research is to study students outside of the district's curricular offerings, follow-up questions might query the availability of whole-school cluster grouping, vertical teaming, and ability-based subject grouping to understand how single-subject acceleration fits in the larger plan.

Gathering superintendent's gender and educational attainment might provide insights when analyzed against Likert Scale questions and should be added on any follow-up survey.

Results reveal differences between the setting of the school – urban, rural or suburban. A follow-up survey should, at the very least, include the eight metro-centric locale codes used by National Center for Education Statistics (NCES); these would further differentiate district characteristics. I recommend collection of more detailed district information by using the NCES twelve urban-centric two-digit locale codes.

Several of the qualitative research interviews emphasized the importance of culture of the community and the school board influencing the use of acceleration. Therefore, the region or intermediate unit location should be gathered and analyzed. There are eight regions and twenty-nine intermediate units. Intermediate unit level data would be ideal if anonymity issues did not interfere.

Because of the emphasis on culture in the research interviews, I recommend collecting additional socioeconomic data on respondents' districts. At the minimum, the percentage of students in the district receiving free or reduced lunch provides insight to the socio-economic status of the district families. Information such as percent of households with high-speed internet, educational attainment of persons with children under 18, and unemployment rates could provide additional insight on districts' demographics. Similarly, per pupil spending should be obtained in future research.

The initial survey revealed that among those who had reported receiving training in acceleration, use of single-subject acceleration nearly doubled when compared to those who had not received training. The small sample, however, prevented statistical significance. Further research with a larger sample of superintendents who have either received training or utilized single-subject acceleration proves necessary to determine if correlation exists between the two. Additional research should further determine whether training led to use of single-subject acceleration or whether the need for single-subject acceleration prompted training.

### **Conclusion**

This research convinced me that more should be learned about the differences in intervention strategies used – including single-subject acceleration – across the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. The results in this preliminary study open a window to learning more about differences between urban, suburban, town, and rural school districts. I intended this research to learn if and how superintendent backgrounds impacted decision making regarding single-subject acceleration. I have learned that

differences in district characteristics have equal, if not greater, impact from the quantitative survey.

Further, the culture of the teachers, union, community, and school board have a significant impact on programming and interventions according to the qualitative interviews. The limitations of this study, the differences from previous studies, and insights of new learning demand further research. Future research should not only delve deeper on topics exposed through this study, but also on a broader application outside of the state.

I have further learned that the decentralized control of school districts in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania differs from other states and could certainly make the applicability of this research to other states limited. Originally, I approached applicability to other states as a caution because of gifted policy and funding alone; I now realize the complexity of differences across states transcends that one policy.

Should I have the good fortune to continue this research and work, more political science and organizational dynamic philosophies should provide a foundation for analysis. Clearly, the superintendent does not act as an independent agent in the district. No matter what the superintendent's personal beliefs, the dynamics of the state policy and community culture hold major impact on initiatives.

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## APPENDIX A

### EMAILS SENT TO SUPERINTENDENTS VIA INTERMEDIATE UNITS

PRIMARY EMAIL CHAIN (*sent as soon as IRB approval is received*):

From Jill Vizza to Tanya Morret, Capital Area Intermediate Unit and PDE Gifted Liaison:

Tanya, Thank you for your willingness to disseminate my research questionnaire through the state. I appreciate your willingness to send the email below to the gifted liaison at each intermediate unit. When my dissertation defense is complete, I will share the approved information to you regarding practices in our Commonwealth. Best regards, Jill

From Tanya Morret to Gifted Liaison at each Intermediate Unit:

Please copy and paste the following email (ensuring that the survey remains linked in your email) and send it to each superintendent in your intermediate unit. Thank you for your assistance in getting this survey into the hands intended. This survey intends to forward research regarding gifted education and single-subject acceleration in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. Findings will also be shared back to me.

Email from Intermediate Unit Gifted Support Liaisons to superintendents:

I am writing to request your participation in an important and brief survey. This anonymous survey regarding single-subject acceleration in your district supports the research of Jill Vizza, doctoral candidate at Temple University. Survey completion should take no longer than 10 minutes; to thank you for your contributions to educational research in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, you will have the option at the end of the survey to enter a raffle for one of ten \$25 Amazon gift cards. Should you have any questions, please contact the researcher, Jill Vizza, at 215-872-3763 or [jill.pinnola.vizza@temple.edu](mailto:jill.pinnola.vizza@temple.edu). Please click THIS LINK to respond to the survey.

## APPENDIX B

### EMAILS SENT TO DIRECTLY TO SUPERINTENDENTS

For the database I built for the Intermediate Units that would not forward the survey, this email was sent to superintendent emails:

Dear (personalized name),

As a doctoral student researching use of student acceleration practices by school leaders in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, I **request ten minutes of your time** to complete my survey. Your experiences as Superintendent of (personalized school district) are critical to my research.

As a small thanks for your valuable time, at the end of the *anonymous* survey, I will separately collect information in a different form to raffle ten \$25 Amazon gift cards if you are interested.

Please [click this link](#) or open the attachment to read the consent and begin the survey. The survey link is at the bottom of the consent.

Results will be available this summer, and I will share the results back to you as well as to Tanya Morret, Gifted Liaison for the Capital Area Intermediate Unit.

I am most grateful to you for sharing your experiences with me via this anonymous research survey.

With gratitude and best regards,

Jill Vizza

Candidate for Doctorate in Educational Leadership, Temple University 2017

#### REMINDER EMAIL SENT BY ME:

Dear (personalized name),

Last week, I wrote to request your participation in my doctoral research. This anonymous survey should take you no longer than 10 minutes. Your experience at (personalized school district name) is very important to my research. The working title of my dissertation is *Pennsylvania Superintendent Beliefs and Practices Regarding Single-Subject Acceleration in an*

*Elementary Public School Setting.* If you have taken time to complete this survey, please accept my sincere thanks.

This will be my last email to you. My survey will close in one week on March 17th. Please [click here](#) for the approved/stamped informed consent. The link to the survey is at the bottom of the consent page.

I appreciate your consideration in contributing to this research that will be shared in aggregate via my dissertation and also directly to PDE and the Acceleration Institute at the Belin Blank Center at the University of Iowa.

With gratitude and best regards,

Jill Vizza

Temple University Doctoral Candidate August 2017



## APPENDIX C

### IRB APPROVED INFORMED CONSENT AND DISCLAIMERS

Temple IRB Approved  
02/20/2017

#### INFORMED CONSENT AND DISCLAIMERS:

This study involves quantitative research. The research is being conducted by Jill Vizza, Doctoral Candidate at Temple University under Principal Investigator Joseph DuCetta, Ph.D, Senior Associate Dean of Assessment and Evaluation at Temple University College of Education. The title of the research study is: Pennsylvania Public School Superintendent Beliefs and Practices Regarding Single Subject Acceleration in an Elementary School Setting.

The purpose of the research is to learn more about the topics of both gifted education and academic acceleration in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. Your contact information is not necessary to contribute to the survey. At the end of the survey, you will be provided with the opportunity to redirect to another site and enter a raffle for one of ten \$25.00 gift cards from Amazon.

Please know:

- The directions and questions explain this research study to you.
- You volunteer to be in a research study.
- Whether you take part is up to you.
- You can choose not to take part in the research study.
- You can start the survey and choose not to complete it.
- Whatever you decide, it will not be held against you.
- By completing this survey, you are not waiving any of the legal rights that you otherwise would have as a participant in a research study.
- By completing this survey, you document your permission to take part in this research.
- You will be asked if you are willing to be contacted for a recorded interview lasting approximately minutes; the interview is not required in order to complete the survey or enter the raffle.

You may refuse to take part in the research, refuse to answer any individual question, or exit the survey at any time without penalty. Submitting the survey confirms consent.

The estimated duration of your study participation is ten minutes. The study procedure consists of answering binary and Likert-scale quantitative questions. The reasonably foreseeable risks or discomforts consist of using your valuable time. The benefit you will obtain from the research is knowing that you have contributed to the understanding of this topic in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania and the possible chance to win a \$25 Amazon gift card should you choose to enter the raffle. Please contact the research team with any questions, concerns, or complaints by calling 215-872-3763 or emailing [jill.pinnola.vizza@temple.edu](mailto:jill.pinnola.vizza@temple.edu).

This research has been reviewed and approved by the Temple University Institutional Review Board. Please contact them at (215) 707-3390 or e-mail them at: [irb@temple.edu](mailto:irb@temple.edu) for any of the following: questions, concerns, or complaints about the research; questions about your rights; to obtain information; or to offer input.

**Confidentiality:** To the extent allowed by law, we limit the viewing of your personal information to people who have to review it. We cannot promise complete secrecy. The IRB, Temple University, and other representatives of these organizations may inspect and copy your information.

By clicking on the link to the survey below, you are confirming your informed consent, per above criteria, to participate in this survey:

Survey Monkey Link: <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/Vizzaresearch>

## APPENDIX D

### INFORMED CONSENT AND DISCLAIMERS

#### **INFORMED CONSENT AND DISCLAIMERS:**

This study involves quantitative research. The research is being conducted by Jill Vizza, Doctoral Candidate at Temple University under Principal Investigator Joseph DuCette, Ph.D, Senior Associate Dean of Assessment and Evaluation at Temple University College of Education. The title of the research study is: Pennsylvania Public School Superintendent Beliefs and Practices Regarding Single Subject Acceleration in an Elementary School Setting.

The purpose of the research is to learn more about the topics of both gifted education and academic acceleration in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. Your contact information is not necessary to contribute to the survey. At the end of the survey, you will be provided with the opportunity to redirect to another site and enter a raffle for one of ten \$25.00 gift cards from Amazon.

Please know:

- The directions and questions explain this research study to you.
- You volunteer to be in a research study.
- Whether you take part is up to you.
- You can choose not to take part in the research study.
- You can start the survey and choose not to complete it.
- Whatever you decide, it will not be held against you.
- By completing this survey, you are not waiving any of the legal rights that you otherwise would have as a participant in a research study.
- By completing this survey, you document your permission to take part in this research.

You may refuse to take part in the research, refuse to answer any individual question, or exit the survey at any time without penalty. Submitting the survey confirms consent.

The estimated duration of your study participation is ten minutes. The study procedure consists of answering binary and Likert-scale quantitative questions. The reasonably foreseeable risks or discomforts consist of using your valuable time. The benefit you will obtain from the research is knowing that you have contributed to the understanding of this topic in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania and the possible chance to win an Amazon gift card should you choose to enter the raffle. Please contact the research team

with any questions, concerns, or complaints by calling 215-872-3763 or emailing [jill.pinnola.vizza@temple.edu](mailto:jill.pinnola.vizza@temple.edu).

This research has been reviewed and approved by the Temple University Institutional Review Board. Please contact them at (215) 707-3390 or e-mail them at: [irb@temple.edu](mailto:irb@temple.edu) for any of the following: questions, concerns, or complaints about the research; questions about your rights; to obtain information; or to offer input.

**Confidentiality:** Personally identifying information will not be collected. Information may be shared at your will, not connected to the survey, for the raffle or to volunteer for a follow-up interview. Efforts will be made to limit the disclosure of your personal information, including research study records, to people who have a need to review this information. However, the study team cannot promise complete secrecy. For example, although the study team has put in safeguards to protect your information, there is always a potential risk of loss of confidentiality. There are several organizations that may inspect and copy your information to make sure that the study team is following the rules and regulations regarding research and the protection of human subjects. These organizations include the IRB, Temple University, its affiliates and agents, its affiliates and agents, and the Office for Human Research Protections.

**Survey Monkey Link:** <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/D3JGWLK>

## APPENDIX E

### QUANTITATIVE QUESTIONNAIRE

#### **SURVEY:**

For the purposes of this survey, single-subject acceleration is defined as the accelerated movement of a student in one specific area of content, rather than in all subject-matter areas, such as skipping of a grade level (Southern & Jones, 2015). In subject-matter acceleration, as defined in this study, the student would spend part of the day with an older cohort of students. This form of acceleration is also known as subject-matter acceleration, content-acceleration, and partial acceleration. For the purposes of this study, a 5<sup>th</sup> grader who takes mathematics with 6<sup>th</sup> graders, yet remains in 5<sup>th</sup> grade for all other classes, experiences single-subject acceleration.

#### *Background Questions*

1. My district would be considered (NOTE: Official District classifications are listed on the NCES ID database)
  - a. Urban
  - b. Suburban
  - c. Rural
  
2. My total number of years' experience as a superintendent, including time in districts other than my current district, is:
  - a. 0-5 years
  - b. 6-10 years
  - c. 11-20 years
  - d. 21+ years
  
3. The typical number of annual graduates in our district from all high schools combined is:
  - a. under 100
  - b. 100-250
  - c. 250-500
  - d. 500-750
  - e. 750-1000
  - f. 1000+
  
4. I have had training in the implementation of single-subject acceleration:
  - a. Yes
  - b. No

5. My district has utilized single-subject acceleration in elementary grades (K-5 or K-6) during my tenure.
- a. Yes
    - i. select all subjects where single-subject acceleration has been utilized.
      1. Math
      2. English Language Arts
      3. Science
      4. Social studies
    - ii. Initiation for considering single-subject acceleration in my district can begin with (select all that apply)
      - A screening test
      - Teacher
      - Counselor
      - Parent
      - Other (specify if you can)
  - b. No
6. My district implements universal screening tools which identify students working above grade level in content knowledge.
- a. Yes
  - b. No
7. My district currently maintains a board-approved acceleration policy:
- a. Yes
  - b. No
8. Please check any that apply:
- a. The school I attended as a student did not offer a gifted program to my knowledge.
  - b. My elementary school maintained a gifted program, but I was not identified to participate.
  - c. I was identified and participated in a gifted program in my elementary school.
  - d. I have family members who were identified and participated in a gifted program in their school.
9. Below are statements Francois Gagné and other educational researchers have used to survey opinions related to gifted education. In addition, there are some statements that are original to this research. Please indicate your level of agreement with each statement:

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
A greater number of gifted children should be allowed to skip a grade.					
A greater number of gifted children should be considered for single-subject acceleration.					
If gifted education were not mandated in Pennsylvania under chapter 16, I would still support it.					
The gifted need special attention to fully develop their talents.					
In general, I support gifted education for my district.					
When the gifted are put in special classes, the other children feel devalued.					
Gifted children could become vain or egotistical if they are given special attention.					

10. Below are statements original to this research about single-subject acceleration. Please indicate your level of agreement about each statement:

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
Financial implications of single-subject acceleration are a concern to me.					
Transportation issues associated with single-subject acceleration are a concern to me.					
Logistical, scheduling, and coordination issues associated with single-subject acceleration are a concern to me.					
Curriculum gaps (missing important ideas and developing gaps in knowledge) that					

could emerge from single-subject acceleration are a concern to me.					
Student social emotional development is a deterrent to my staff in the decision to utilize single-subject acceleration.					
If single-subject acceleration were utilized for some, I have concerns that many parents would want their child considered, even though it might not be an appropriate placement.					
My school board would support subject-specific acceleration.					
My district's use of single-subject acceleration can arise from a variety of different initiators.					
Students, other than those already identified as gifted, should be candidates for single-subject acceleration					
In general, I support single-subject acceleration for my district.					

Please add any comments you desire on the above or other topics related to gifted education or acceleration:

Would you be willing to be interviewed via telephone or in person at your convenience and preference at a later date?

1. Yes – (redirects to [Google form](#) to collect information separately)
2. No

Thank you for your participation in this survey. If you would like to be entered for the chance to win one of the \$25 Amazon gift cards, please enter your information on [this form](#) where identifying information is collected separately from your responses.

## APPENDIX F

### QUALITATIVE RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Interview questions and conversation were initiated from the following prompts:

**For those who utilized single-subject acceleration:**

- Thank you for responding to my survey. I understand how many demands you have on your time. I am very grateful for your support for my research.
- You mentioned your district utilized single-subject acceleration. Please roughly estimate your district's frequency percentage of using this tool.
- (If respondent indicated "yes" for training) Could you tell me about the training you have received in acceleration practices?
  - Did this training impact you when faced with the decision to utilize acceleration?
  - What part of the training did you find most relevant?
  - Is there anything important that you think administrators should know as someone who has utilized single-subject acceleration in their district?
- Please elaborate on the factors that impacted decisions to utilize single-subject acceleration.
  - Is there a district acceleration policy?
  - How was the first decision to utilize single-decision initiated and evaluated?



- Please describe your district’s decision-making process for single-subject acceleration including who had input, what assessments were used, and any other relevant considerations.
- Were there ethical considerations when employing single-subject acceleration? If so, could you describe these?
- Were there any turbulence concerns in the community of which you were aware that resulted from using single-subject acceleration?
- Could you share anything you found to be positive or negative to your district from utilizing the tool of single-subject acceleration?
- Overall, how would describe your district’s experience in using the tool of single-subject acceleration if you were talking to an administrator who has not used it?
- Has utilizing single-subject acceleration had any impact on classroom grouping practices, curriculum scope and sequence, or differentiation?
- Is there anyone I should visit to learn more about my questions?

**For those who had not utilized single-subject acceleration:**

- Thank you for responding to my survey. I understand how many demands you have on your time. I am very grateful for your support for my research.
- You mentioned you did not utilize single-subject acceleration in your tenure. Was it ever considered? If so, could you tell me more about that process?
- (if considered and not utilized) Please elaborate on the factors that impacted decisions to not utilize single-subject acceleration.

- Is there a district acceleration policy?
  - Who had input, were assessments used, and were there other relevant considerations?
  - Were there ethical considerations in this decision? If so, could you describe these?
- 
- (if considered and not utilized) Has not utilizing single-subject acceleration had any impact on classroom grouping practices, curriculum scope and sequence, or differentiation?
  - If they indicated “yes” for training: Could you tell me about the training you have received in acceleration practices?
  - Is there anyone I should visit to learn more about my questions?

## APPENDIX G

### REPLIES FROM QUANTITATIVE SURVEY OPEN RESPONSES

Coding Key for quantitative survey open-response replies:

1. Gifted.
2. Appropriate placement and packing opportunities school-wide for all.
3. Rigor of general curriculum.
4. Single-subject acceleration.

<b>Comment</b>	<b>coding</b>			
A student may be identified for gifted and choose not to participate.	1			
Gifted services in the Pennsylvania are considered a special education service. As such, they should receive it when they demonstrate that the regular education program is not meeting their needs. We have some parents who obtain outside evaluations to get their child into a gifted program only to find that they are struggling with the gifted curriculum.	1			
I am concerned about the focus on gifted education and would encourage you to move beyond gifted as the defining criteria. If mastery were the basis of moving on I think you would see some gifted kids slow way down and reg ed kids move past them. The current gifted nomenclature does not seem to recognize large problems with gifted education in the area of merely accomplishing goals, never mind, acceleration. Gifted education needs to do more to help identified students actually learn to overcome failures and take risks--even more than accelerating kids based on something both as malleable and as flawed as IQ testing. (Most districts use a variety of measure to evaluate whether a student could be considered for gifted) Most districts overweight IQ, in my humble opinion.	1	2		
I feel that ALL students should be able to work to their highest potential at their own individual pace. Blended Learning Programs will address this issue.			2	
I strongly feel that all students should have customized learning and the mobility for acceleration or remediation, not just gifted.	1	2		
I think every district should have exposing more students to more rigorous academic classes as a goal. Gifted should incorporate much more than a student's ability to participate in competitions and events, it should mean enrollment in specialized classes at higher reading or math computational levels, possibly involving college curricula.	1	2	3	4
I would encourage you to think beyond gifted learners as the sole focus on single-subject acceleration. In the Central York School District, we have embraced mass customized learning and believe all learners are gifted in	1	2		4

something and not so in other things. It is the very nature of learners, whether young or old. Happy to share more if you would like.			
I've been in my district less than a year so the practices don't align with my beliefs. I have been involved in acceleration. I think a big factor is level of rigor of the general curriculum.		3	4
Once gifted students reach high school, I don't believe they need a period to attend a gifted seminar. Many gifted students are challenged through the rigors of AP and Advanced Classes offered at the high school.	1	3	4
Single subject acceleration has been the norm, but I am not sure is the answer to ensure that students' needs are met. I believe that gifted education can benefit from a general discourse about how it can be best structured so that all children within a school benefit.	1	2	
Single subject acceleration will be explored in the upcoming school year and there will be a pilot program. Not part of your survey - I was not in the "gifted" program while I was in school but I was in a district where they had single-subject acceleration and I was accelerated in elementary school for one subject. In middle school I was accelerated in two subjects which became three subjects in 9th grade and enabled me to take a variety of accelerated courses in my final high school years (no dual enrollment was offered at that time). Single-subject acceleration was alive and well in my elementary experience 1980s. Because of my unique experiences, I advocate for this in my current district and position. It takes time to facilitate a successful program and we are excited about the upcoming pilot. Single-subject acceleration was my parents' choice for me and I am grateful or the opportunity.	1		4
We focus on going deeper for students who have demonstrated mastery of the particular topic at hand, not going faster with them.		3	4
We initiated advanced placement three years ago. At one point, 48 students were receiving instruction in a grade level above their recognized level in Math and/or ELA. Twelve sixth grade students were transported to the Junior Senior HS for instruction. However, due to the scheduling of classes and limited staff, the program was discontinued.			4

## APPENDIX H

### QUALITATIVE INTERVIEW CODING

R1	R2	R3	R4	R5	R6	Code
N	N	Y	N	Y	Y	Single subject acceleration utilized?
R	R	S	S	S	R	Location (U= urban, S= Suburban, R=rural)
Y		Y		Y		Teacher/union pushback
Y			Y		Y	Cultural norms and expectations
		Y				Equity and excellence
	Y	Y	Y			Gifted as factor but not determinant
	Y					Logistical concerns
Y						Scheduling concerns
		Y	Y		Y	School board support or concern
		Y	Y			Turbulence in community or with parents
				Y		Vertical alignment
Y						Class size
		Y			Y	Policy and/or procedure
	Y			Y		Testing, evaluation, and/or metrics
			Y	Y		Social emotional needs
Y	Y	Y	Y			Curriculum rigor for all

Additional relevant comments:

R2 - Moves teacher to meet student needs rather than students between buildings. Spoke to creating a new curricular track. "Using testing you are already familiar with when making change is more helpful than changing everything at once.

R3 - Considers himself "Chief Alignment Officer".

R4 - Using whole school cluster grouping, learning management systems, analytics system, all can move at own pace not just select few. This also should allow proper placement and pacing, not just proper placement.

R5 - Believes turbulence concerns and social emotional concerns to be overstated.

R6 - Acceleration policy is restrictive. A written procedure allows you to adapt to each child's needs more creatively. There aren't many students like this and they need customization. The ability for a superintendent to do this has to do with school board's level of involvement.