

## All Gifted Is Local

Without federal guidance, no two districts deliver gifted education services in the same way

By Jane Clarenbach

Parents regularly call the national Association for Gifted Children asking where they should relocate in order to find appropriate services for their gifted children. Given that services are not available in all 14,000 school districts, gifted learners are wholly dependent on superintendents and other passionate advocates who recognize their needs. To paraphrase the late Tip O'Neill, all gifted is local.

More than three million academically gifted and talented students attend the nation's schools, a number that increases as we scan for other categories of giftedness, such as creativity, artistic expression, leadership or musical talent. Gifted students, who represent a diverse cross section of backgrounds, ethnic groups and socioeconomic levels, differ from others of their age group in terms of learning style, depth and complexity of understanding and potential. All 50 states recognize these students in state policies and acknowledge their learning needs may often be beyond the scope of the regular classroom.

Yet most gifted students receive most of their K-12 education in a regular classroom with teachers who have not been trained to teach high-ability students. With much of the nation's attention currently focused on raising student performance to meet proficiency standards, it is difficult to create a sense of urgency for the needs of gifted students because so many of them are already scoring well above average on standardized tests.

One of the most commonly heard refrains is that "these students will succeed anyway." This persistent myth—that gifted students will achieve high grades and test scores, be accepted into the nation's most selective universities and go on to great achievements, all without the benefit of strategies tailored to meet their learning needs in K-12 education, is just that—a myth.

The tragedy is that for many gifted students, much of the time they spend in school is squandered. They already have mastered the material and are marking time until they are allowed to skip a grade or are permitted to take college-level courses. According to the National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented, gifted elementary students have mastered between 40 and 50 percent of the school year's content in several subject areas before the school year begins. As they progress through school, many underachieve, failing to develop the study skills and persistence necessary to succeed in challenging coursework, as everything comes so easily to them at first.

For those from families who can afford it, gifted students escape the monotony by attending private school or weekend and summer programs. In addition, a growing number of gifted children are home-schooled, allowing them to move ahead at their own pace or to pursue interests in depth. However, many more gifted students come from families who cannot afford to purchase private services. They are dependent on the public schools to meet their educational needs. When school leaders fail to encourage and inspire gifted students to achieve at the highest levels, they are also unwittingly ignoring family and community needs.

### A Rationale

As school leaders know, children arrive at their doors with varying degrees of readiness and a wide range of experiences. Few, if any, support a one-size-fits-all instructional program. Gifted education programs and services are those modifications to the regular education program that allow advanced students to make learning progress every day.

"Implicit in the construct of learning is that some new knowledge results," says Jay McIntire, superintendent in Wiscasset, Maine, and a proponent of specialized programs for high-ability students. "If we don't differentiate and provide experiences across all instructional levels in our classes, some students will not learn anything new. We have well-established programs to make sure students who are struggling have opportunities to learn. Gifted education, in my opinion, is part of the same effort."

The gifted student population is itself diverse, with variability in intensity, maturity, risk-taking, creativity and degree of giftedness, among other traits. Appropriate services are equivalent to a life preserver; the opportunity to spend time with others who are sufficiently similar in ability, interests and maturity provide the first true peer context and allow students to flourish.

"We commit so many resources at the elementary level because we know that for all students, the early years of education are critical," Peter Gorman, superintendent of the Charlotte-Mecklenburg, N.C., Public Schools, says. "An average child who can't read by the end of 3rd grade is unlikely to catch up later. A gifted child who has become bored because school isn't challenging enough is unlikely to have a change of heart in high school.

"In both cases, students don't reach their full academic potential, and that's not good for kids. We try to find our gifted students in the early grades and nurture them, so they can flourish all through school and into college," says Gorman.

Doris Kurtz, superintendent in New Britain, Conn., sums up the reason to provide gifted education services: "The education enterprise is about taking children from where they are to where their effort and abilities can take them."

### Attracting Support

The number of ways gifted learners can be served in a public school classroom varies widely. In fact, services along a continuum is a more apt description, varying from state to state, district to district and sometimes even from one school building to the next.

To be successful, gifted education should not be viewed as a separate, stand-alone, isolated program for "those students." Rather, gifted education strategies and teacher training, ideally, are incorporated into the district's overall goals and budget.

"I see our district with one focus—and that is to provide quality services for all learners. Raising the bar of expectations for gifted students helps all students," says Dale Brown, superintendent in Warren County, Ky.

In districts grappling with student achievement and other poverty-related issues, gifted education services have helped overcome low expectations. In New Britain, Conn., where 68 percent of students qualify for the federal lunch program, Kurtz says, "One of the goals in our district is to engage poor and minority students in rigorous academic pursuit and to help them and their parents realize that they, too, are gifted and talented."

New Britain serves disadvantaged gifted students through Scholastic

Academy, a program for K-3 students with potential but who lack the vocabulary and other experiences to demonstrate their abilities. The students receive accelerated curriculum to bridge the preparation gap. The results are impressive: Scholastic Academy's 1st graders scored an average of 23.8 on a state reading assessment. The district average was 12; the state expectation was 18.

The strategy of high expectations has resulted in another benefit — newfound support for the public school system. "We were losing many of our brightest students to private and magnet schools out of district. What was a hemorrhage is now a pin prick," Kurtz says. New Britain spends \$780,000 on its gifted education program — 100 percent of which are local dollars. The state provides no funding to support gifted education services.

In other school districts, some outside support or instigation is needed to launch or expand gifted education programming. In many cases, harnessing the energies of a local parent group helps the school board see the benefits of providing gifted education services. In other cases, gifted education services are part of a communitywide initiative.

Carrol A. Thomas, superintendent of the Beaumont, Texas, Independent School District, points out that local businesses are supportive of the gifted education program because it prepares students for the various occupations needed in area industries. Once that relationship was established, the business community now provides internships and acts as mentors for students. Collaboration with the community provided additional opportunities for the students. Lamar University partners with the Beaumont schools on a program that focuses on finding advanced science potential among economically disadvantaged students. Local medical facilities provide students at the Central Medical Magnet High School with hands-on training by participating in clinical rotations.

Thomas also proudly points to the Ozen Magnet High School, where students focus on fine arts, technology and engineering and where students may graduate with up to 24 college credit hours earned via distance learning with Lamar University. Like New Britain's Kurtz, Thomas leads a socioeconomically diverse community where high expectations yield results: 71 percent of the students at Ozen are from low-income backgrounds.

Also like New Britain, funding for Beaumont's gifted education services comes from local dollars. Less than 10 percent of the \$3.5 million gifted education budget, which serves approximately 10 percent of the district's 19,500 students, comes from state gifted education funds.

## Program Traits

Like other programs and services, quality gifted programming requires careful planning, support and evaluation. The services should be responsive to students' needs. Just as a physician prescribes medication only after first investigating a patient's symptoms and medical history, effective gifted education services require an assessment of the strengths, needs and history of the students in the school or district to determine the resources needed to challenge their specific student population.

"We are constantly evaluating services to meet diverse needs," says Brown, the Warren County, Ky., superintendent. "I feel that our district strives to keep gifted education always open to the changes necessary to improve services."

For example, as part of a five-year professional development commitment, the role of curriculum coordinators has been reconfigured to include services to gifted students. The 12 elementary curriculum

specialists are either certified or working toward certification in gifted education. Previously the elementary schools shared three gifted-certified teachers.

Another recent development is the formation of a gifted education school committee in each of the district's 18 schools. "This decision has placed responsibility and accountability for services at the school level. There is a greater awareness and sense of urgency to identify and provide services appropriately. Communication between community, school and home has greatly enhanced the opportunities for these students," says Brown.

Although no two school districts deliver gifted education programs or services in the same way due to variables such as ages of students served, content-area focus, available resources and population demographics, the foundation of gifted education is the belief that student learning should be calibrated to the child's abilities and interests rather than the child's age. For high-quality programs and services, this belief becomes a reality through a range of service delivery options to accommodate individual learning differences.

Many of these delivery decisions are necessarily influenced by district and classroom size, teacher training, proximity of school buildings and community and state resources. However, with careful planning combined with creativity and a commitment to child-centered decision making, most school districts can offer a mix of enrichment and differentiation, acceleration and counseling and guidance services. Together with the teaching staff, a district might provide the following: enrichment, differentiation, acceleration and targeted guidance and counseling.

Enrichment activities support the academic needs of students by offering activities based on students' interests and learning strengths. Depending on the district and school, pull-out programs allow students, individually and in small groups, to explore open-ended learning activities and questions. In other cases, coursework may be augmented with experiences designed to build advanced skills or expose students to opportunities in a specific field or discipline. For example, a high school student particularly interested in biology may meet weekly with a mentor at the local pharmacy to identify and practice skills and experiences that he is likely to need as he considers careers in health care. Services may be offered during the school day or before or after school.

Differentiation strategies are based on regular pre-assessments to adjust the lessons to what the students already know. Curriculum compacting allows teachers to eliminate material that students have already mastered, leaving time for independent investigations in areas of interest or opportunities to explore the mastered material in more depth or with added complexity.

Another key differentiation strategy is flexible grouping, which enables teachers to group students of similar interests, performance levels or learning styles to complete a learning activity designed with this purposeful grouping in mind. The activity can be completed cooperatively or independently.

Tiered assignments is a differentiated instructional strategy in which all students work toward the same goal, but activities are geared toward each student's level of understanding, prior knowledge or readiness to learn.

Acceleration moves a student through the curriculum at an age that is earlier than typical. Grade-based acceleration options move the child ahead according to his or her ability. Strategies include early entrance to kindergarten, multi-age or cross-grade grouping, single-

or multiple-subject acceleration, grade skipping or early graduation.

Content-based acceleration strategies step up the curriculum taken, but not necessarily the grade. These options include distance learning, Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate programs or concurrent enrollment in high school and college. Like other learning options, high-quality acceleration services are based on finding the best match between the curriculum and students' abilities and readiness. Depending on the school district, an 8th grader ready for calculus could be placed in a class of other 8th graders also ready for calculus, could travel to the local high school to take the calculus class with high school students or might take an online calculus course, monitored by the resource teacher in the middle school computer lab.

Targeted guidance and counseling strategies can benefit special populations of students, and gifted learners are no different. Students and their families profit from opportunities to explore common social and emotional characteristics and concerns associated with giftedness as well as suggestions for self-advocacy and educational planning. Additionally, offering early college and career counseling is especially important to gifted students who often struggle with the wide range of choices available to them or those who will be first-generation college attendees.

Connecting any quality gifted education program or service with gifted students are teachers trained to meet their needs. In many states, teachers who spend a substantial portion of their time with gifted students must have received a certificate or endorsement in gifted education. In other states, school districts depend on in-service training to ensure that teachers have the knowledge and skills they need to meet the range of student needs in their classrooms. No matter where the training occurs, it is critical that teachers be able to recognize individual learning differences and are equipped with numerous classroom strategies to respond to those differences.

"I believe any teacher evaluation system should place some expectation on teachers that they differentiate instruction for the range of students in their classes, including for students with gifts and talents," says Wiscasset's McIntire.

Ideally, every school district also will have gifted education experts as well as counselors available to regular classroom teachers for consultations and referral.

## Starting Points

No matter the budget size, school leaders considering gifted education programming should use performance information already available to make gifted education-related decisions. "Unless we regularly track student performance against state or national norms and have a system for program and staff evaluation, we will not be able to plan quality programs," says McIntire.

"As a small rural district, our options are limited compared to what larger districts are able to provide, although programming for gifted students must be woven throughout our curriculum," says McIntire. "However, I would teach every regular education teacher to compact curriculum, and I would have sufficient resources to make online courses available to students who are ready to advance beyond the capacity of the district to teach them."

New Britain's Kurtz, who heads one of the poorest districts in Connecticut, says a lack of resources should not be prohibitive for a school district considering developing a gifted education program. "Any size district with any size budget can do it by redeploying and

reallocating existing resources. Being creative is what it takes, along with a focus on what is best for each child."

Providing gifted education services has necessitated a thorough review of the district's curriculum offerings. "Having a very successful middle school program has caused the high school to evaluate their programs because students reported that the high school honors program was less challenging than their middle school gifted program," Kurtz says.

Brown, superintendent in Warren County, Ky., encourages new superintendents to evaluate their existing program against the National Association of Gifted Children's "Pre-K-Grade 12 Gifted Program Standards." He also suggests soliciting input from stakeholders on the program's perceived strengths and weaknesses to determine essential needs and to secure the resources to meet those needs. "I also encourage programming that requires the staff to step out of their comfort zone for the good of their students," he says.

Beaumont's Thomas urges superintendents considering gifted education programming to keep five goals in mind:

- Look for gifted students in every subgroup in the district;
- Provide gifted education professional development for all teachers;
- Design a curriculum that provides depth and complexity in all subject areas;
- Encourage parent involvement; and
- Include community members and business professionals in the program planning.

## A Low Standard

Since Sputnik, the nation has recognized the need to cultivate its brightest students. However, federal policy fails to support that goal in spite of the fact we cannot make substantial progress on a state-by-state basis.

Although scattered programs and grants from outside sources support advanced students, the current federal emphasis on proficiency, taken to its logical extension, would result in a nation of competent adults. While competence is surely a solid goal for most Americans, striving for average sets the bar too low in our schools. We have an obligation to the high-achieving students in our classrooms, just as we do for the child who is on grade level or below grade level.

The nation needs highly skilled professionals in every field. Individual excellence requires different preparation — not only for the students but also for the teachers whose awesome responsibility it is to guide learners from novice to expert.

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