

Defying the Ripple Effects

Gifted programs remain a high priority in some places despite pressures to divert resources and attention to NCLB's demands

By Linda Chion Kenney

The effort to leave no child behind is a major threat to high-ability students, whose cognitive and affective needs are increasingly falling by the wayside from default, according to gifted education advocates.

They argue that the No Child Left Behind Act, with its unprecedented, high-stakes focus on students performing below grade level, leaves no incentive for going to bat for the child already years beyond grade level in one subject or more.

"We saw it coming five years ago, it doesn't take a rocket scientist," says Jane Clarenbach, director of public education for the National Association for Gifted Children. "The No Child Left Behind legislation has no incentives and no mandates built into it for school districts to do anything with a population at or above proficiency, and that doesn't bode well for gifted education, because if you don't have to count, you don't count, and that's a sorry state of affairs."

The situation has been duly noted by the Davidson Institute for Talent Development, a nonprofit foundation for whom it calls "profoundly intelligent young people." The institute, based in Reno, Nev., was co-founded in 1999 by Jan Davidson, who says that while NCLB "promises that every child will learn how to read by the 3rd grade, it does nothing to ensure that students who already know how to read in kindergarten will continue to learn." For the exceptionally gifted children, Davidson adds, "No Child Left Behind means no child can move ahead."

Colleen Harsin, the institute's director of services, says neglecting the nation's brightest young people by focusing on minimum performance standards means "opportunities for these students are severely limited or nonexistent."

Clarenbach notes that a year after the federal bill was enacted in 2002, Illinois went from spending \$16 million on gifted education to zero. Michigan went from \$5 million to \$500,000 a year.

"What's the ripple effect of that?" Clarenbach asks. "Surely districts can carry on for a little while, but over time, depending on other expenses, gifted education ceases to exist." This becomes even more tragic, she adds, for gifted children who live in poverty or for whom an intellectual exceptionality is masked by a learning disability.

In something of a countering movement, some school districts around the country are refusing to lose their grip, even in the most trying of times for gifted education. The National Association for Gifted Children points to four such districts as representative of those that have continued to support the needs of gifted children. The NAGC says what the districts have in common are school leaders who have gone to bat for bright students and communities that expect nothing less.

These programs, in Cherry Creek, Colo., Madison County, Ky., Rockwood, Mo., and Kerrville, Texas, offer, as Clarenbach puts it, "illustrations of strategies [for] getting kids to do what they're able to do and reach for more." Summaries of what each district is doing

in support of high-ability students follow.

Cherry Creek, Colo.

Shawn Colleary credits his Colorado community for keeping intact initiatives for gifted students, especially the one in his Cherry Creek School District that recognizes students who are "twice exceptional."

Says Colleary, director of gifted education and advanced learning: "In education there's the assumption that if you're the fowl you can't be the fish or if you're the fish you can't be the fowl. But kids can be both. We allow opportunities for kids to be identified as gifted as well as learning disabled."

Cherry Creek uses gifted education dollars to train teachers in the art of differentiation, a classroom methodology that enables teachers to use different content and instructional processes for students at different ability levels. Students demonstrate what they know through the development of different end products, Colleary says, such as a PowerPoint presentation, a short skit, a research paper, a musical composition or a work of art.

"There is the expectation from our superintendent, Monte Moses, that teachers be well versed in research-based instructional practices that help meet the needs of all of our students, including our gifted children," Colleary says.

Cherry Creek teachers are expected to have learned differentiation in college or from continuing education opportunities. Over the course of a year, Colleary's department will provide differentiation training to anywhere from 25 to 50 percent of the district's teachers.

"There's a lot of commonality between what I would do for a gifted kid and what I would do for a special kid or a kid who's a non-English speaker," Colleary says. "By tapping into the strategies and interventions that can work for all kids I'm able to get the message about gifted education embedded in conversations about good instruction for all kids."

Colleary says his district of about 50,000 students, 5 percent of whom are identified as gifted, spends in excess of \$3 million on gifted education, of which about \$350,000 comes from the state. The district's budget of about \$175,000 primarily pays for the training and support of teachers. Coaches from his office model teaching strategies, help teachers plan, observe instruction, give constructive feedback and help find resources for classroom teachers.

Cherry Creek voters declared at the polls in November 2005 they would forego a tax refund to continue funding for gifted education and other defined needs. "There's always been a high expectation in our community for keeping the spotlight on gifted education, to make sure we're meeting the needs of these kids," says Colleary, a 26-year district veteran. He notes that 12 years ago a group of parents started the Challenge School, a standalone magnet program for advanced learners in kindergarten through grade 8. Children apply for admission and upon acceptance their per-pupil funding follows them to the school.

Colorado does not mandate gifted programs but provides some funding for them at the state and local levels. Cherry Creek weighs the needs of gifted children against all the other demands competing for these limited dollars. Gifted expenditures include differentiation training, pull-out programs, specialized classes, flexible grouping and purchase of more complex materials, Colleary says.

"No Child Left Behind has been good for the masses, but I think it probably has been a detriment for the upper-end kids," Colleary says. "One of the great myths is the assumption bright kids will make it on their own. The reality is that the upper-end kid is probably the easiest group to move forward, but they do need the support and they do

need the focus. Bright kids need instruction like anybody else.”

Madison County, Ky.

Vickie Moberly, the gifted education coordinator in Madison County, Ky., is aware of the myths that gifted children “will get it on their own” and that if you’re gifted in one area, you are gifted in all areas. In reality, she says, “these students have huge challenges because they do think differently and they approach things differently.”

In the 10,000-student Madison County schools in central Kentucky, Moberly, with the support of Superintendent Mike Caudill, says she finds it imperative “to keep the needs of gifted and talented students in the public eye.”

The school district teams with the Madison County Business Education Partnership to run a youth leadership initiative. Gifted and talented children, identified as early as the 4th grade, are invited to apply at the end of the 10th grade.

“In its first incarnation, as a program with Leadership Madison County, it was not for gifted students, it was for any student in any high school,” Moberly says. “In its reincarnation, now in its third year, the program was redesigned specifically to address gifted education students within the community.”

Strengthening the cause for the leadership program was a consensus among business leaders, school district officials and educators from two nearby colleges that the “brain drain” had to be confronted.

“There was a concern in the community that many students who might be termed the ‘best and the brightest’ were often choosing not only to go away to college but also to not come back after they completed their postsecondary education,” Moberly says. “We felt we were losing a lot of our students with the most potential to give back to the county. They were electing to go elsewhere and not come back, except for visits.”

The Madison County Business and Education Partnership is a committee through the chamber of commerce. Each year, up to 35 juniors are selected for the Youth Leadership Madison County program, which consists of a “challenge course” orientation at Eastern Kentucky University followed by daylong seminars every other month centered on themes, starting with “The New Economy.” Other themes center on arts and entertainment, government and health and wellness. Moreover, each class is required to complete a community service project.

Students are released during the school day for the program, but they do not receive high school credit. The school district provides transportation and funding for the orientation session, but all other costs typically are incurred by people in the community, who “donate their time and effort and provide lunch and materials,” Moberly says.

The underlying hope is that the students will discover, as Moberly puts it, “that they don’t necessarily have to leave their hometown if they don’t want to because they’ll see the opportunities available here.”

Rockwood, Mo.

The view of education in the Rockwood, Mo., school district is that to be educated, one must become a creative producer.

That thinking carries over into the assessment of students judged to be gifted. As the district defines it, giftedness is about “creating products, and not just a high IQ,” says Craig Larson, superintendent of the 22,000-student system of 30 schools in a western suburb of St.

Louis.

About 10 years ago, the district instituted the Center for Creative Learning, a standalone elementary school where about 1,200 gifted students in kindergarten through grade 5 spend one day a week. Essentially, gifted students in their home schools compact five days of learning into four days, then spend the fifth day at the center. There, under the direction of Linda Smith, the center provides “a completely different learning experience,” Larson says.

The morning class centers on a theme or topic of personal interest. Two or three shorter enrichment courses in the afternoon aim to elicit active involvement, such as an archaeological dig on campus. “All the learning is about producing or creating something,” Larson says. Morning classes typically are grouped according to age, he says, while afternoon courses typically comprise students from different grade levels.

Nationally, about 5 percent of a population is determined to be gifted, Larson says. But through his district’s TREASURES approach, that percentage is about 15 percent, which accounts for the title behind the acronym: “To Recruit Educate and Serve Under-Represented Exceptional Students.”

Larson says that while his district is mostly middle- to upper-middle class, many students transfer to Rockwood schools from the St. Louis city schools. Of those students, about 85 percent qualify for free- or reduced-price lunches. The district aims to identify at least 5 percent of those students as gifted, Larson says.

“We look at several criteria, but we can’t ignore a whole set of criteria because it would jeopardize our funding,” Larson says, noting the mix of standardized tests and counseling sessions with kids and families.

Missourians are concerned about a new finance formula that no longer provides separate funding for gifted education, Larson says. Overall, “it provides the same amount of money as before, but it used to be after money for everything else you applied for gifted education and other programs,” he says. “Now there is no additional money. So now it’s hard for districts that are struggling to meet the mandates of No Child Left Behind. There’s pressure to take the money you would have spent on gifted education to help lower-performing students to avoid being cited for failing to meet adequate yearly progress.”

So how does Rockwood respond to the pressure?

“We have so many parents involved in gifted programming that the school board and I would be ill-advised if we tried to divert significant money away from the gifted program or change it in any significant way,” Larson says. “We’ve been doing it long enough that people can see what kids are able to do in middle and high school because they have this program in elementary school.”

Kerrville, Texas

Superintendent Dan Troxell says he works with his school board in central Texas as “a team of eight” and that together they take a broad view of the No Child Left Behind Act.

So broad, in fact, that they call it something else.

“Here, it’s ‘No Child Left Unchallenged,’” Troxell says. “We changed that because (leaving no child behind) really isn’t our goal. What we’re really about is maximizing the potential of every child.”

The Kerrville Independent School District serves a rural community of 20,000 about one hour west of San Antonio. The district’s 10 campuses house roughly 4,900 students, about 7 percent of whom are

identified as gifted.

In putting together its gifted offerings, the community established an Advanced Academics Committee of about 40 community members. The group traveled the state to look at exemplary gifted education practices.

Troxell is a firm believer in providing extracurricular opportunities to help students go beyond where they are. An example is the mock trial program in high school, comprised of many students recognized as gifted and talented, through which successful Kerrville teams have made it as far as the nationals.

Challenge Labs for elementary school students were established three years ago, Troxell says. All students, including the non-gifted, are given a pretest on Monday that covers the work the teacher expects to cover that week. If, through the pretest, which can be written, oral or a demonstration of a new skill, the student shows mastery of the planned work, that child is sent to the lab, which is run by a full-time certified teacher, for enrichment activities.

Also, gifted students are invited to "lunch bunch" gatherings designed to give the advanced student a chance to feel at ease with his or her abilities. "At least once a week kids get pulled to get help with the emotional part of being gifted," Troxell says.

This assistance is carried over into the middle grades, where Friday social pull-outs also aim to address the affective concerns of giftedness. Also the lunch bunch group has a one-hour study group each week designed to give gifted kids concentrated instruction on study skills and organization strategies, says Ellen Williams, senior director in advanced academics.

"Gifted kids go to elementary school and it's easy and they 'already know it,'" Williams says. "They don't learn how to study. We want them to hold on to their giftedness but learn the study skills that are necessary to achieve in public education and go on to higher education."

In addition to the lab and pull-out sessions, Williams says her district employs cluster-grouping in core classes at every grade level, which doesn't carry any additional costs. The Challenge Lab costs about \$175,000, including teacher salaries, computers and materials, "which benefits all students, but provides an additional resource for gifted students." In addition, the district provides about \$11,000 for the support of teachers, including instructional supplies, workshops and consultants.

Troxell supports the pull-out concept, especially in this era of high-stakes testing. As he puts it: "If the child already has the information and knows the skills that will be tested, why are you going to give them more of that (pre-testing instruction)? Why not move them beyond that?"

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