

Exceptional Gifted in West Virginia: Reflections of a Teacher of the Exceptional Gifted on the State Program

Dr. Patricia Coon
West Liberty University

Abstract

Who are the students who qualify as Exceptional Gifted in West Virginia? In West Virginia, Policy 2419: Regulation for the Education of Exceptional Students, defines giftedness and delineates the criteria for eligibility. Identified Gifted students are served in grades 1-8; Exceptional Gifted students are served in grades 9-12. To understand what is exactly meant by this policy, one must first understand the definition. Giftedness refers to exceptional abilities and the potential for achievement that requires specially designed instruction and/or services beyond those provided in the general education classroom instruction (Policy 2419, 2017). In eighth grade in West Virginia, if a student who is gifted is underachieving, has a disability, is culturally and/or socioeconomically disadvantaged, and/or psychologically maladjusted, he may qualify for services in high school to keep him connected to school and to graduate. This paper explores the identification process for Gifted and Exceptional Gifted in West Virginia, as well as a teacher's reflections on how to best serve these students through a program that is tailored to their specific needs, which can also serve as ideas for other programs of this nature.

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Definition and Steps in the Initial Identification Process

In West Virginia, Policy 2419: Regulation for the Education of Exceptional Students defines giftedness and delineates the criteria for eligibility. Identified Gifted students are served in grades 1-8; Exceptional Gifted students are served in grades 9-12. To understand what is exactly meant by this policy, one must first understand the definition. Giftedness refers to exceptional abilities and the potential for achievement that require specially designed instruction and/or services beyond those provided in the general education classroom instruction.

To identify a child as gifted in West Virginia, several factors are needed. First, an eligibility committee determines that a student is eligible for gifted services in grades 1-8 when certain criteria are met. One criterion is general intellectual ability of the student. General intellectual ability must be a full scale at the 97th percentile rank or higher on a comprehensive test of intellectual ability with consideration of 1.0 standard error of measurement at the 68% confidence interval. Second, at least one of the four core curriculum areas of academic achievement must be at the 90th percentile rank or higher as measured by an individual standardized achievement test. At least one of the four curriculum areas of classroom performance can be demonstrated at exceptional functioning, as determined during the multidisciplinary evaluation (Policy 2419, 2017).

The final criterion is that there is a need for specially designed instruction and/or services beyond those normally provided in the general classroom. Differentiated instruction for students who are gifted may include enrichment of the content emphasizing the development of higher level thinking. This includes critical thinking, creative thinking, and problem solving skills, and/or acceleration of content while the student remains in the chronologically appropriate grade (Policy 2419, 2017). Related services can also include guidance, counseling, and other services that are not provided in the general classroom (Policy 2419, 2017).

Identification of Exceptional Gifted Status

Before the end of the 8th grade, a student in the gifted program in West Virginia will be re-evaluated to determine if he/she is an Exceptional Gifted student. A review of existing data will include evaluations and information from the parent, current classroom-based assessments and observations, and observations by teachers and other related services providers. Based upon that review, and any other additional data, a student may qualify for special education services from grades 9 through 12 if he or she meets one or more of four criteria. First, he or she would meet the eligibility criteria for one or more of the disabilities as defined in the section for Exceptional Gifted, Grades Nine through Twelve in Policy 2419. For example, the student is gifted and learning disabled, in a wheelchair, and/or visually impaired. Second, he or she may meet the definition for economically disadvantaged. This can be determined by whether a student is on free or reduced lunch or other information provided by the parents or school. Third, the student may meet the definition for underachievement. This takes into consideration the student's ability level, educational performance and achievement levels. For instance, a student may have the ability to be performing well in math and science based upon his or her identification scores for giftedness in those areas, but is receiving Ds and Cs in those areas. Fourth, a student may meet the definition for psychological adjustment disorder as documented by a comprehensive psychological evaluation. For example, this could mean that the student is gifted, but suffers from depression, which affects his or her ability to successfully complete classes to graduate from high school (Policy 2419, 2017).

Characteristics of the students who are Exceptional Gifted consist of a wide range of gifts, talents, and accompanying factors that impede their progress and success in school. They can be easily bored, frustrated, and defensive. Some carry guilt and insecurity from failure that is debilitating and self-destructive. They are familiar with their labels, and feel powerless and clueless as to where to start. Students who are Exceptional Gifted can appear odd in behavior, and may isolate themselves from peers or be disruptive out of sheer frustration. It is as though they forgot they were gifted, and need to revisit their gifts again.

Services for Exceptional Gifted Students

Once a student is eligible as Exceptional Gifted in West Virginia, the IEP team develops an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) for high school services. If the student is not eligible as Exceptional Gifted, the IEP team writes a four-year plan that appropriately addresses the student's educational needs. The four-year education plan replaces the Individualized Student Transition Plan (ISTP), and includes honors, Advanced Placement (AP), and/or International Baccalaureate (IB) classes that must be provided for the student in grades 9-12. The implementation and annual review of the four-year plan is required by the district, and includes the student, parent, and a school representative (Policy 2419, 2017).

The student who is identified as Exceptional Gifted has an IEP that is written for each year of his or her high school program. This plan is designed to address his or her giftedness, as well as one or more of the factors that related to becoming identified as Exceptional Gifted. Because such children are considered to be at-risk, the teacher of record works with the student, his or her classroom teachers, and often related service personnel to bridge the gap between school and successful completion of classes. This is highly individual to the student involved.

Necessary Collaboration between Gifted Teachers and Other Teachers

When developing a program for the student who is identified as Exceptional Gifted, one must consider what programming options should be made to address his or her specific needs. When I was hired for the position as teacher of the Exceptional Gifted, there was nothing in place to direct me, and I was simply told that Exceptional Gifted students could be at risk for dropping out of high school. At that time, I also remembered working with many of the students that I had identified in eighth grade as Exceptional Gifted, and the IEP goals and objectives I had written for an unnamed teacher who would take over the student's IEP services once he or she moved on to the high school.

A thorough analysis of the IEP file for the student who is Exceptional Gifted will provide the teacher with information regarding when the student was identified, and his or her academic record and scores to date. The cumulative file is another source of information, and will provide ideas as to where to start when working with the student (Assouline, Nicpon, & Whiteman, 2010). Additionally, the teacher of the Exceptional Gifted will need to begin a dialogue with the regular education teachers who will have the student in their classrooms and any other relevant personnel, such as special education teachers and occupational therapists, because they all need to be aware of the mitigating factors that have contributed to the student being identified as Exceptional Gifted.

Interventions that Support Exceptionally Gifted Students

If the student is Exceptional Gifted with a disability, he or she is usually served by a special education teacher. Response to Intervention (RtI) is an excellent model to use when working with a student who is Exceptional Gifted, whose needs are both remedial and advanced (Pereles, Omdel, & Baldwin, 2009). A course like Learning Strategies can be built into his or her schedule, to work with the special education teacher to remediate and assist him or her in classes. If more time is designated, he or she may even meet with the special education teacher for a collaborative content class, or for a special education class such as reading or math. Also, if speech therapy or occupational therapy is needed, he or she may also receive support services in those areas.

If a student is Exceptional Gifted and economically disadvantaged, he or she may need to overcome learned helplessness, which is the feeling that he or she is powerless over circumstances, and there is no hope, even when strategies are put into place (Mueller, 2005). It may take time for the student to trust others, depending upon how dire are the circumstances, such as homelessness, lack of basic needs, or having to take on roles in the home that are well beyond his or her years, such as raising siblings, cooking, and cleaning. It is very important for the student who is economically disadvantaged to begin to understand that he or she does have the intelligence and self-will to overcome his or her circumstances, and having some successes in school can make a difference in his or her outlook for the future (Slocumb & Payne, 2000).

If a student is Exceptional Gifted and is underachieving, he or she may need to develop real world connections to learning, and have opportunities for exploring interests and expanding upon strength areas. For example, careful selection of classes each year could assist in determining a focus and a direction for post-secondary education. Structure and support are very important interventions, and must be tailored to the student's specific needs (Hoover-Schultz, 2005). Time management, study skills, and organizational skills can provide routine and comfort for students who have experienced a chaotic family and/or school life up to the point of intervention.

If a student is Exceptional Gifted and psychologically maladjusted, he or she may be suffering from depression, a behavioral disorder, or another psychological issue. These factors could be preventing him or her from reaching his or her potential (Assouline, et al., 2010). Depending upon the condition, the student may be seeing a therapist outside of the school environment, and possibly taking medication to assist in coping. Additionally, cognitive behavioral therapy may be used, by the student, the therapist, teachers, and parents.

The programming options I developed to service the Exceptional Gifted were called the "Exceptional Gifted Program in Monongalia County." They were designed to meet the needs of the students who are Exceptional Gifted, and included an Individual Perspective and a Group Perspective. The Individual Perspective consisted of completing Interest and Learning Styles Inventories in an effort to understand and expand upon the students' strengths and to increase areas that would enhance their classroom performance.

The Career and Mentorship Unit (described in the "Exceptional Gifted Program in Monongalia County") provided opportunities to learn about careers through a vocational evaluation through the Monongalia County Technical Education Center (MTEC), West Virginia University Career Services Center, and other options that produced detailed information and counseling about career development and preparation. After consideration of the results, each student could choose a career area and be matched with a mentor in the local area to learn more about the field of interest and what is needed presently in high school and college to attain that career.

Consultative Services were provided which included each student being monitored throughout the semester, regarding grades and progress related to his or her IEP goals and objectives. Interventions were planned as needed. Juniors and seniors were asked for permission to include a representative from the West Virginia Department of Rehabilitative Services (WVDRS), to determine eligibility for grants and loans for college, and transitional services from high school to post-secondary education.

The Individual Perspective consisted of one-on-one and behind-the-scenes work with the student, parent, teachers, counselors, and sometimes the principals. I traveled between the two area high schools, and had a student at Chestnut Ridge Hospital. And even with a relatively small population of about 20 students as a half-time teacher, it took time to plan, execute, and address IEP goals and objectives within that framework.

In the Group Perspective (described in the "Exceptional Gifted Program in Monongalia County"), the students met in their respective grade levels, and selected a community project to work on as a total group. After meeting with the Teen Court representative and the director of the Cooper's Rock Mountain Lion Sanctuary, the students selected the sanctuary. They

volunteered their time outside of school to clean, paint, and maintain the sanctuary. The students also wrote grants, and set up a fund-raising website for the sanctuary. They put together a picture and written folder of their accomplishments, and their interest in the project was sustained over several years by their own choice. Service-learning was a powerful factor in connecting the students who are Exceptional Gifted to their own learning. While the students participated in community service, they evolved and became more motivated to achieve and plan for their futures (Lewis, 1996).

It was interesting to watch the dynamics of the students' reaction to the Group Perspective, as they became a fierce support system for one another, and often encouraged each other to work harder, be more confident, and stretch their limits. This also occurred when the students from different schools in the county came together for their shared community service-learning project.

Teen Court in Monongalia County was another option by which the students who were Exceptional Gifted could choose to participate in as a juror, bailiff, defense or prosecuting attorney. The students were made aware of when Teen Court met and how they could volunteer their time to work in that system.

Students who were Exceptional Gifted were encouraged to consider joining the Health Sciences and Technology Academy (HSTA) at the high schools in Monongalia County, which was, and still is, housed at West Virginia University. It is program for ninth through twelfth graders in science and math, and can lead to college support if the students were active members throughout high school.

All students who were Exceptional Gifted could share input with the teacher of Exceptional Gifted, which could become a part of his or her Individual Perspective or Group Perspective. For example, one student decided to take a Virtual School course through the West Virginia Department of Education over the summer to make up a class that he had failed in ninth grade. He was one of the first students to do so, and now it is standard practice throughout the county.

Another student who was Exceptional Gifted would not have graduated with her peers, because she was a half credit short in Art. Because of the Exceptional Gifted teacher's close collaboration with each student's teacher every year, we were able to negotiate an independent study half credit in Art for this student, and it was approved by the principal. This was an empowering moment for the student, because she realized that her future was not hopeless and that many people cared about her and her progress to graduate.

Important Networking for Teachers of the Exceptional Gifted

In addition to working closely with the teachers of the students who were Exceptional Gifted, there were times when networking with other staff was needed. The nurse was a very important resource for students who had some serious situations occurring at the home, and would come to school ill or exhausted. Close relationships with each student's counselor kept them on track with graduating on time. It sometimes involved building a schedule that was challenging, yet with teachers who were empathetic to a very bright student with many layers of issues that could look like laziness, and were anything but laziness (VanTassel-Baska, 2003).

Developing a strong relationship with parents of students who were Exceptional Gifted was another key factor. Advocacy for their child was integral in the child's successes (Trail, 2012). There was one set of parents that refused to allow their son to take medication for his Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD), convinced that he could "make it" without medication. It took many phone calls, meetings, and persuasions to convince the parents to at least visit their doctor to discuss the idea of trying medication again. After a decision to try medication again, the student's ability to concentrate was evident in his grades, which improved greatly and he sustained them over time.

Sadly, not all students who are Exceptional Gifted have parents that are supportive, or even interested. They can be fighting poverty, drugs, alcohol, and other issues. I once asked the students what was one of their first profound memories, and one tenth grade girl said, "I was nine when my father went to jail." It's hard to concentrate on school when your world is in disarray and your basic needs may be in jeopardy. Sometimes, as a teacher, it was more important to be a good listener, instead of proceeding with a lesson.

Teacher of the Exceptional Gifted Reflection and Conclusion

Over the four years that I served in this role as teacher of the Exceptional Gifted, all but one of my students graduated. The student's mother pushed her out of the house the summer before her senior year when she turned eighteen, believing that her daughter could work, live in an apartment, and complete her studies to graduate high school. Even more appalling, the student was eligible for Social Security benefits, and the mother didn't even take her there to set them up. It was an accident waiting to happen, and it did. It still bothers me to this day that a bright, creative, but depressed young woman fell through the cracks, and I couldn't help her.

When you work with the students who are Exceptional Gifted, you wear many hats. You advocate for a student who is sometimes difficult to find anything good about, because he or she can test and push your limits with negative moods and lack of trust. I once stopped a session because one of the students was sabotaging the lesson. I simply looked at her and asked her if she realized what she was doing. After a long staring contest, she hung her head, and said she was sorry.

The students who are Exceptional Gifted are one of the most confounding populations that I have ever had the privilege to work with, and they deepened my understanding of their complexities and the dichotomy of their conditions. They were a challenge, a gift, and will always remain entrenched in my heart.

The Exceptional Gifted Program was developed to meet the need of the students who were identified as Exceptional Gifted in Monongalia County. It was based upon the relevant research for this population, and continually revised and adjusted to meet the students' specific and individual needs.

Future considerations can include developing identification programs in earlier grades, possibly as early as elementary school, to prevent and/or serve students who are gifted and may show signs of becoming Exceptional Gifted. Gifted programs could become more inclusive at earlier stages to address students who are gifted and disabled, demonstrating signs of underachievement,

need support for low socioeconomic impacts, or have psychological issues. Perhaps then there would be more success in reaching each individual's true potential, a goal all of us wish for each student.

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About the Author

Dr. Patricia Coon received her Secondary English Education Degree from Florida Atlantic University in 1978, teaching students who are gifted until she retired in 2010. She earned her Master's Degree in Gifted and Special Education from West Virginia University in 1984, and her doctoral degree in Educational Psychology from West Virginia University in 2013. Patricia developed and taught gifted coursework for West Virginia University for seven years, until 2009. She has been at West Liberty University since 2010, where she is currently an online adjunct for the College of Education. Patricia's research interests include service-learning, gifted underachieving, and gifted with disabilities.