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April 2024

## Exploring school leaders' perceptions of gifted education educator and gifted program evaluation

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### Recommended Citation

Geesa, Rachel Louise and Stith, Krista M. (2024) "Exploring school leaders' perceptions of gifted education educator and gifted program evaluation," *Journal of Organizational & Educational Leadership*. Vol. 9: Iss. 2, Article 2.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.gardner-webb.edu/joel/vol9/iss2/2>

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### **School leaders' perceptions of gifted education educator and program evaluation**

The needs of PK-12 gifted students are unique and require a continuum of gifted education services. In the reality of goal setting, and other priorities of pre-service and in-service educational leaders, gifted education programming often does not receive the amount of attention to best support the needs of gifted students. For example, Callahan and Hertberg-Davis (2013) address the following basic decision-making processes to design an aligned gifted education program: philosophy and definition of gifted education, identification processes, programming and service delivery methods, curriculum and instruction, and program evaluation/needs assessment. It is important for educational leaders to understand these elements of a gifted education program and best practices within the continuum of services.

Through a well-informed understanding of gifted education, educational leaders can serve as the internal evaluators of gifted education programming and are catalysts for program change, but knowing if and when changes are warranted can be ambiguous and complex. The National Policy Board for Educational Administration (NPBEA; 2015) provides Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (i.e. PSEL). Standard 8(b) indicates that educational leaders should “create and sustain positive, collaborative, and productive relationships with families and the community for the benefit of students” (NPBEA, 2015, p. 16). The purpose of this study is to explore PK-12 pre-service and in-service school leaders’ perceptions of gifted program evaluation procedures of gifted education educators and programs, and to better understand pre-service and in-service school leaders’ decision-making processes in the evaluation of gifted education educators and gifted programming.

In this study, a gifted educator is defined as someone who is purposefully assigned to work with gifted or high-ability students. According to NPBEA (2015) PSEL Standard 1(b), educational leaders should work collaboratively “with members of the school and the community

and using relevant data, develop and promote a vision for the school on the successful learning and development of each child and on instructional and organizational practices that promote such success” (p. 9). Both perceptions of pre-service and in-service school leaders are included in this study, as it is critical to have a strong understanding of the knowledge base of aspiring and active school leaders (e.g., principals and school administrators) to best support gifted programs, gifted educators, and students who are identified as gifted or high ability students.

### **Literature Review**

The method of performance evaluation of PK-12 teachers and staff varies from state to state, as well as from district to district; however, school administrators and supervisors are typically required to assess teacher performance based on an agreed-upon district-wide set of criteria (Kusumaningrum et al., 2023; Neumeister & Burney, 2012; 2019). The format used for such evaluations may also be specifically provided by the states through state law, state education departments, counties, local school districts, or even local school district contracts. Although a specific format or evaluative document may be widely used, teachers of specific student populations (e.g., gifted students) are typically not assessed for performance relative to a specific student population (Sayi, 2018). Rather, evaluative criteria tend to be broadly stated, and evaluators (e.g., school principals and administrators) “align the implementation of services with district design” (Neumeister & Burney, 2012, p. 17).

Gifted education educators teach in a wide range of models across diverse types of schools and settings. Programs for PK-12 gifted students might include enrichment, acceleration, pull-out, full-time/self-contained, summer enrichment, advanced placement courses, and homeschooling. Standards exist for teaching in every field, and gifted education is no exception (e.g., National Association for Gifted Children [NAGC], [2019]). Furthermore, Mills (2003)

explained that “teacher personality and cognitive style may play a role in his or her effectiveness in teaching gifted students” (p. 272).

Based on research, scholars suggest that gifted teachers cannot be evaluated using the same instruments and tools as general education teachers because "students with high abilities are as different from the average learner in terms of both cognitive and affective needs as are students qualifying for special education. . . . the area of gifted education should be treated as an area of exceptionality. . . ." (Neumeister & Burney, 2012, p. 64). In contrast, gifted education programs can be evaluated in terms of assuring compliance with the intent of program purposes and goals (Callahan, 2013; Neumeister & Burney, 2012, 2019). In both cases, school leaders reported their perception of the need for more training in evaluating gifted educators and programs for gifted students (Mun et al., 2020).

According to Mun et al. (2020), leaders should practice culturally relevant leadership in gifted education to support each student in meeting their needs “through challenging and appropriate curriculum” (p. 109). By focusing on culturally relevant leadership practices, school leaders may develop and foster a school climate that “provides ample opportunities for students to hone and cultivate their domain-specific talents and ultimately realize their full potential [Horn, 2015; Renzulli, 2012; Rimm et al., 2018; Subotnik et al., 2014]” (Mun et al., 2020, p. 109). The understanding of leaders’ perceptions of evaluation of gifted educators and programs for gifted students may guide discussions and considerations of how change can happen to support all gifted learners and educators, the causes of such change, and the means of effecting change in gifted programs and how they are taught (VanTassel-Baska, 2019).

### **Conceptual Frameworks**

National gifted education standards for educators and programs serve as the conceptual frameworks for our study. The National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC; 2014)

developed a set standards in gifted education for all pre-service and in-service PK-12 educators. The *Knowledge and Skill Standards in Gifted and Talented Education for All Teachers* (NAGC, 2014) are not solely for gifted education educators, as general educators, specialists, leaders, and school and district administrators should be able to recognize and support gifted students throughout the PK-12 learning experience.

When school stakeholders are able to refer to these standards as a guide for gifted education in PK-12 schools, the needs of gifted or high-ability students may be better met through gifted education resources, programs, educators, and specialists. According to these knowledge and skill standards (NAGC, 2014), all educators should be able to:

1. Understand the issues in definitions, theories, and identification of gifted and talented students, including those from diverse backgrounds;
2. Recognize the learning differences, developmental milestones, and cognitive/affective characteristics of gifted and talented students, including those from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, and identify their related academic and social-emotional needs;
3. Understand, plan, and implement a range of evidence-based strategies to: Assess gifted and talented students; Differentiate instruction, content, and assignments for them (including the use of higher-order critical and creative-thinking skills); and Nominate them for advanced programs or acceleration as needed. (NAGC, 2014, paras. 1-3)

Additionally, the NAGC and Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) provide the *NAGC -CEC Teacher Preparation Standards in Gifted and Talented Education* (NAGC & CEC, 2013) for pre-service and in-service educators and educational leaders to consider. Within the curricular content knowledge standard, the NAGC and CEC (2013) described that “beginning gifted education professionals design appropriate learning and performance modifications for individuals with gifts and talents that enhance creativity, acceleration, depth, and complexity in

academic subject matter and specialized domains” (p. 3). The NAGC and CEC (2013) also provide an instructional planning and strategies standard as “beginning gifted education professionals select, adapt, and use a repertoire of evidence-based instructional strategies to advance the learning of gifted and talented students” (p. 5).

In addition to standards for educators, the NAGC (2019) published a set of gifted education program standards. The *2019 Pre-K-Grade Gifted Programming Standards* NAGC, (2019) include six standards: 1) Learning and development; 2) Assessment; 3) Curriculum planning and instruction; 4) Learning environments; 5) Programming; and 6) Professional learning. These standards are designed to guide educators and leaders to provide specialized programs and services for PK-12 gifted learners. Through understanding of the knowledge and skills gifted education educators should have and services gifted education programs should provide PK-12 gifted or high-ability students, school leaders and administrators may be better prepared to evaluate gifted education educators and programs.

### **Research Questions**

We investigated the following research questions in this study:

1. In what ways do pre-service and in-service school leaders perceive gifted education?
2. In what ways do pre-service and in-service school leaders perceive gifted *educator* evaluation?
3. In what ways do pre-service and in-service school leaders perceive gifted *program* evaluation?

### **Methods**

As a mixed methods study, we collected qualitative and quantitative data from pre-service and in-service school leaders to answer our research questions. Information about participants, instruments, data collection, and data analysis are included in the following subsections.

## **Participants**

Thirty-six participants who completed the entire survey included pre-service and in-service school leaders from the master's and doctoral degree programs in educational administration and supervision, and/or building- or district-level administrator licensure programs at one mid-sized, midwestern university. Survey participants comprised of 10 educational leadership graduate candidates and 26 alumni in the Department of Educational Leadership. Gender identity included 47.22% identifying as men, and 52.78% identifying as women. Data regarding participants' schools and certified gifted or high-ability teachers, coordinators, and specialists are included in Table 1. Twenty-three participants were currently school or district leaders. Seven of the survey participants chose to partake in interviews. Three interview participants were educational leadership graduate candidates and four interview participants were alumni of the Department of Educational Leadership.

**Table 1**

*Participants' school information*

School variables	%
<b>Current school level</b>	
Elementary	25.58
Middle school/junior high	25.58
High school	23.26
Other (e.g., PK-8, PK-12, etc.)	25.58
<b>School size</b>	
250 or fewer students	2.94
251-500 students	23.53
501-750 students	32.35
751-1000 students	2.94
1001 or more students	38.24
<b>Urbanicity</b>	
Rural	27.78
Suburban	50.00
Urban	16.67
Unknown	5.56

<b>Student population: Percent of students with free or reduced meals</b>	
Less than 25%	29.41
25% to 50%	44.12
51% to 75%	8.82
More than 75%	17.65
<b>Student population: Percent of students of color</b>	
Less than 25%	44.44
25% to 50%	33.33
51% to 75%	5.56
More than 75%	11.11
Unknown	5.56
<b>Student population: Percent of English language learners</b>	
0 to 5%	64.71
6 to 10%	11.76
11 to 15%	5.88
16 to 20%	2.94
21% and more	14.71
<b>Student population: Percent of gifted or high-ability learners</b>	
0 to 5%	27.78
6 to 10%	30.56
11 to 15%	19.44
16 to 20%	8.33
21% and more	8.33
Unknown	5.56
<b>Number of full-time certified gifted or high-ability teachers, coordinators, and specialists</b>	
0	19.84
1 to 2	38.60
3 to 4	11.82
5 and more	29.74
<b>Number of part-time certified gifted or high-ability teachers, coordinators, and specialists</b>	
0	91.21
1 to 2	2.93
3 to 4	2.93
5 and more	2.93

*Note.* There were 36 total participants. Some participants did not respond to all of the items, but we included their responses to the items they completed.

Table 2 includes information about interview participants' educational leadership degree program status, current position, and current school level.



**Table 2**

*Interview participant information*

Participant	Educational leadership degree program status	Current position	Current school level
Participant 1	Graduate candidate	Multi-classroom leader	Elementary
Participant 2	Alum	Principal	Elementary
Participant 3	Alum	Special programs coordinator	PK-12 (District-wide)
Participant 4	Graduate candidate	Spanish education instructor	K-12
Participant 5	Alum	Principal	Middle
Participant 6	Alum	Principal	Middle
Participant 7	Graduate candidate	Assistant principal	Elementary

**Instruments and Data Collection**

Participants (i.e., pre-service and in-service educational leadership graduate candidates and alumni) were recruited via e-mail from one midwestern state’s Department of Educational Leadership e-mail lists of current graduate candidates and alumni from the past ten years in educational administration and supervision, and/or building- or district-level administrator licensure programs. Participants completed one electronic, anonymous survey via Qualtrics, which consisted of closed-ended (e.g., Likert-scale and multiple choice-based) and open-ended questions. Survey items focused on topics, such as personal knowledge of topics for gifted and talented and high-ability students; acquisition of knowledge of gifted and talented and high-ability students; formal training experience in gifted education; knowledge and responsibilities associated with gifted and talented and high-ability programs; and perceptions of gifted and talented and high-ability evaluation systems. Participants completed the survey in 15-30 minutes.

At the end of the survey, participants had an option to participate in an individual, confidential interview. Interview participants were contacted via e-mail by the first author to schedule interviews, and seven survey participants committed to participating in individual interviews. Interview participants were interviewed by the first and/or second author via WebEx or phone. Interview questions are included in Table 3. Each interview was audio-recorded, and lasted up to one hour.

**Table 3**

*Interview protocol*

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Number	Question
1	Tell me about your school's gifted or high-ability program.
2	What factors have influenced your school's gifted or high-ability program?
3	What were you taught in your school administration program regarding how to run a gifted or high-ability program?
4	What are the goals for your school's gifted or high-ability program? How do these goals align with schoolwide goals?
5	What are barriers for your school's gifted or high-ability program?
6	At what level (i.e., school, district, state) are most decisions made regarding gifted or high-ability education?
7	What are overarching benefits/detriments, if any, for having a gifted program within your school?
8	What have been your experiences with gifted or high-ability education? Include any experiences from your current school and outside your current school. How do those experiences influence your role or future role in running a gifted or high-ability program?
9	What is your perception of the buy-in for the type of gifted or high-ability program you have from stakeholders?
10	Has there been a time where you had to make a decision that could be perceived as beneficial for a gifted or high-ability program?
11	Has there been a time where you had to make a decision that could be perceived as detrimental for a gifted and talented or high-ability program?
12	As a trained school educator or administrator, what are the three most important elements you feel are needed to further strengthen your school's gifted and talented or high-ability program?
13	Do you have anything else you would like to add?

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## **Data Analyses**

Thirty-six participants completed all or part of the survey. The confidential survey data were analyzed as aggregate data. The seven audio-recorded interviews were transcribed via Otter.ai. We coded the interviews through three rounds of coding (i.e., open coding, axial coding, and selective coding) to determine emergent themes from the data (Saldaña, 2009). The two authors and one graduate assistant initially coded interview responses individually. During regular coding team meetings, we shared individual codes, discussed discrepancies, and developed consensus regarding codes to ensure inter-coder reliability throughout the three coding rounds. Examples of open codes included: gifted education program development, gifted education program evaluation, gifted education professional learning, educational leader decisions, and educational leader goals. Examples of axial codes included: gifted education-related decisions and goals, gifted education program development and evaluation, and gifted education educator and program evaluation processes. Five emergent themes were identified, and these themes are further described in the findings section.

## **Evaluation Model**

We referred to Stufflebeam's (1983) context, input, process, and product (CIPP) evaluation model throughout this study. This CIPP model includes the four elements which embody the acronym: context (e.g., goals, background), input (e.g., material, time), process (e.g., teaching and learning), and product (teaching quality, learning benefits) (Aziz et al. 2018; Stufflebeam, 1983). The CIPP model guided our analysis in consideration of these four elements in teaching and learning for gifted education.

## **Findings**

Quantitative and qualitative data are included in the findings of this study. Survey data related to pre-service and in-service school leaders' perceptions of gifted education evaluations

are included in Table 4. The five emergent themes found in the qualitative data. Data are discussed in the following subsections.

**Table 4**

*Pre-service and in-service school leaders' perceptions of gifted education or high-ability evaluations*

Likert scale items	<i>N</i>	Mean	Standard deviation
1. To what extent do you believe the evaluation ratings you have submitted are an accurate reflection of your gifted education or high-ability educator's performance? Scale range: 1 = Not at all to 5 = A great extent	35	3.43	0.99
2. To what extent do you believe the evaluation process can help the gifted education or high-ability educator to develop professionally? Scale range: 1 = Not at all to 5 = A great extent	35	3.37	0.99
3. How do you perceive your evaluation-related interactions with your gifted education or high-ability educators? Scale range: 1 = Not useful at all to 5 = Extremely useful	34	3.06	1.03
4. What is your overall perception of the gifted education or high-ability educator evaluation system? Scale range: 1 = Extremely inappropriate to 5 = Extremely appropriate	35	3.71	0.91
5. How well-prepared (by your college/University training) do you feel to help your gifted education or high-ability educator meet the highest expectations of the evaluation system? Scale range: 1 = Not well at all to 5 = Extremely well	35	2.51	1.00
6. How well-prepared (by your current employer) do you feel to help your gifted education or high-ability educator meet the highest expectations of the evaluation system? Scale range: 1 = Not well at all to 5 = Extremely well	36	2.47	1.01
7. How well-prepared (by your state department of education) do you feel to help your gifted education or high-ability educator meet the highest expectations of the evaluation system? Scale range: 1 = Not well at all to 5 = Extremely well	36	2.19	0.94

*Note.* There were 36 total participants. Some participants did not respond to all of the items, but we included their responses to the items they completed.

## **Quantitative Data**

A descriptive analysis through surveys and content analysis of interview questions were completed to better understand participants' perceptions of gifted education educators and evaluation of educators. From the survey data, 19.84% of participants indicated they had no full-time personnel with certificates/licensures in gifted education while 80.16% of school leaders had one or more certified/licensed personnel at their school. The majority of participants indicated they were *somewhat confident* to *very confident* (55.56%) about their knowledge of gifted educator responsibilities. Additionally, 42.32% of participants indicated the evaluation process can *somewhat* help the gifted education educator develop professionally, while 57.71% of participants indicated the evaluation process can help in a *good amount* or *great extent*.

Based on the interview data related to perceptions of gifted educators and educator evaluations, participants shared barriers of gifted education educators providing gifted services for students. The lack of educators with gifted experience who can enhance gifted programs was a strong theme that emerged from the data sets. As shared by Participant 1, "I think we could do more, but right now, time and people are our biggest problem. We just don't have the number of adults to be able to service our high-ability students more intensely." Interview participants also indicated a need to provide quality professional development in gifted education as general education teachers often were not trained to differentiate curricula.

We completed a descriptive analysis through surveys and content analysis of interview questions to better understand participants' perceptions of gifted education programming and evaluation of current programming. Participants indicated they were *moderately knowledgeable* to *very knowledgeable* about gifted grouping (82.87%), overall gifted student needs (82.86%), and acceleration (82.87%). In contrast, participants indicated having *no knowledge* or being *slightly knowledgeable* about curriculum compacting (23.53%), pull-out and specialized

programs for gifted learners (28.57%), and gifted education state policies and laws (25.71%).

While 25.00% of participants indicated they did not feel well at all to help these educators, the majority of participants felt *moderately well* (44.44%) in supporting gifted education educators.

Based on findings from the interviews, interview participants shared their responsibilities to contribute to the services for students who are identified as gifted or high-ability in their schools or districts (e.g., making decisions on acceptance for entrance into gifted services, communicating with stakeholders, and providing direct instruction).

### **Qualitative Data**

Five themes emerged through our qualitative data analysis. These emergent themes include: 1) School leaders are well-informed of gifted education development and evaluation, but approaches are diverse; 2) School leaders lack opportunities for gifted education professional learning; 3) School leaders find data drives gifted education-related decisions and goals for educators and programs, but school culture can blur policy; 4) School leaders experience challenges in providing gifted students with appropriate services in present programs; and 5) School leaders believe gifted programs and educator evaluation processes should improve to better support students.

#### ***School leaders are well-informed of gifted education development and evaluation, but the approaches are diverse***

Participants indicated they were well-informed of the overall vision and goals of gifted education across their respective schools and districts. They comfortably answered identification practices, instructional and curriculum offerings, teacher assignments, resource allocation, policy development, and alignment with district-wide objectives.

Some interview participants explained they were less likely to be involved in the day-to-day management of gifted education programs within their districts if they do not offer high-

ability programming in their schools. For example, Participant 1 shared, “We also do high-ability testing and if they test high-ability, then they have the opportunity to go to the high-ability school. And then transportation is provided that way.” In this type of case, school leaders may assess the effectiveness of gifted education programs on a broader scale, considering district-wide outcomes, budgetary implications, and compliance with state and federal regulations.

Participant 2 explained,

This probably speaks to every building level administrator as you are so busy with the day-to-day, also with case conferences, in and out of school suspensions, discipline behavior, parents, just evaluation observations . . . all that stuff you have to do. It can be hard to be proactive, anyway, as an administrator and focus on larger goals that you want to work on. And I would imagine then even harder would be to work on a population that already seems to be doing okay.

Participants indicated they often evaluate program development at the school level, looking at student performance, parent and teacher feedback, and the overall impact on the school community. Participants’ descriptions of what they looked for varied, however. While most of the evaluations are internal, some schools hire external evaluators. According to

Participant 3,

We did a program review for our elementary programming that we have for high-ability students. We actually brought in two professors. . . . They did a program review for us. And that's really what kind of jump-started or got us going with improvements or seeing where we were doing well.

Some participants shared that they work closely with teachers, parents, and students to ensure that gifted programs meet the specific needs and aspirations of the school's community.

Participant 5 was in a unique position as an administrator and a parent of a gifted child in the district. Participant 5 explained,

A lot of our communication and the way we talk . . . about our programming with families is impacted by families, their names, and the things that they do and do not understand, the questions that they have. . . . I'm also a parent in this district, so I have a son who's in our elementary school. . . . It's been a good experience for me as an administrator to experience the parent side of that, as well. . . . So, for my own approach, my own experience with my son is a factor that's impacted how I administrate it within the realm of my own influence.

Some other participants expressed different personal experiences within gifted education.

***School leaders lack opportunities for gifted education professional learning***

Several school leaders (Participants 1, 3, 4, 5, 6, and 7) shared that their own formal training in educational leadership, and subsequent professional learning once they became school administrators, was lacking in the field of gifted education. Participant 5 explained,

I don't think I had very much [professional learning in gifted education] at all. . . . What I remember picking up and the things that I use day-to-day are things I picked up on the job. I do not use or recall much of anything from my training program.

Participant 7 indicated that they had to seek “outside schooling” to receive dual qualifications of gifted education with another education license. Participant 2 was in a unique position in that they were a high-ability teacher prior to becoming a school leader, but expressed that even as a classroom teacher, they were “not given a choice” and “thrown to the wolves” with the expectations to teach multiple gifted courses.

School leaders may not prioritize providing professional development for educators regarding gifted education due to various reasons (e.g., lack of teacher pedagogical knowledge,



limited resources, competing priorities, and a focus on standardized testing and curriculum).

According to Participant 1,

I don't think that teachers know how to teach our high-ability students. I think a lot in the past . . . has just been giving them more work, and that's not what a high-ability program is and they are just not aware of it. . . . By utilizing professional development through the district or going and even seeing the high level in the classroom, doing observations is something that I've been doing, but I haven't been able to get my teachers there.

Participant 6 shared there is a “stigma” that creates barriers to professional learning, such as when their high-ability teacher in the building teaches 13-14 students and the general education teacher next door is teaching 31-34 students.

Participant 3, however, is proactive in professional learning for teachers. Participant 3 explained

We have in our mission and vision to have exceptional educational experience for all. . . . If we tie that into our goals for high-ability, we, during that program review, uncovered that we needed to provide more professional development for our teachers in the area of high-ability. . . . We were hoping . . . to actually get teachers certified to have a license to teach high-ability students, so we've put a lot of money from our grant that we get from the state towards funding.

***School leaders find data drives gifted education-related decisions and goals for educators and programs, but school culture can blur policy***

School leaders use data-driven decision-making in the realm of gifted education because it allows for informed, evidence-based choices that can optimize resources and outcomes. By collecting and analyzing data on student performance, teacher effectiveness, and program efficacy, school leaders can better identify gifted students, tailor instructional strategies, and

allocate resources for gifted education programs more effectively. Participant 1 shared that “effective and timely data analysis” is a critical element to a strong gifted program to “identify the students quickly, instead of having to wait in order to say, ‘Oh my gosh, this child's not growing, why are they not growing?,’ but by the time they figure that out, it's too late.”

Data-driven decisions can enable school leaders to identify achievement gaps, evaluate the impact of existing gifted programs, and make necessary adjustments to ensure that gifted students receive appropriate challenges and support. Moreover, this approach helps in advocating for gifted education initiatives, securing funding, and demonstrating accountability to stakeholders. Ultimately, data-driven decision-making empowers school leaders to create an equitable and enriched learning environment for gifted students.

Participant 4, however, shared frustration with school culture in identification practices, and indicated that

I support the data. I provide my opinion with it. And it's... it is the principal who signs off on it. So, I do think that a lot of these decisions are being driven by parent request and not data supported. . . . That's just a culture that's been allowed to persist.

Participant 2, likewise, shared data-decision making as a negative experience and explained that Northwest Evaluation Association (NWEA) student assessment data solely were used for identification purposes one year. According to Participant 2,

That was detrimental for the whole identification process, and it hurt my data tracking of how those kids were learning. . . . I wasn't involved in that decision and I made it clear as that as I went along how stupid that was, and then we went back.

Participant 7 shared a similar story with parents being able to petition the way into the high-ability program.

***School leaders experience challenges in providing gifted students with appropriate services in present programs***

School leaders encounter challenges in providing appropriate services for gifted students within existing programs due to a combination of factors. Limited resources (e.g., budget constraints and insufficient staff) often hinder the development of specialized programs. Participants 1, 2, 3, and 5 shared these school-level difficulties. At the district level, Participant 4 expressed that pressure to meet standardized testing requirements and address the needs of a diverse student population can make it difficult for school leaders to allocate time and resources for gifted education. Participant 4 explained, “there's a ‘Grand Canyon,’ between mid- to low-level learners and those high-ability.” Additionally, Participant 7 shared that the school “pulls from the bottom up” and so gifted or high-ability students are not as high of a priority in school intervention services as other students may be prioritized.

There can also be resistance to change and concerns about perceived inequalities among students. According to Participant 5,

I suffer as it relates to what I call kind of a bumper sticker culture of high-ability kids in our community. That is something that is hard for me to work with because this isn't about a privilege or an honor. This is about meeting your kids' needs where they are. . . .

That, for me, becomes a barrier at times when a label might be in place.

Stakeholders within the ecosystem can also lead to barriers of gifted program development. Participant 2 shared that new colleagues in a decision-making role negatively impacted the gifted education culture of the school. Participant 3 shared how parents or caregivers may advocate for their children to receive gifted education services. According to Participant 3,

I feel like the detriments that we have is there's definitely. . . . I feel like some elitism. . . . I feel like our parents, not understanding the difference between high achievement and gifted they . . . feel like their child should always be in the gifted program, whether or not the data really supports that.

Overcoming these challenges requires a commitment to recognizing the unique needs of gifted students, allocating resources strategically, providing professional development and professional learning to school stakeholders, and fostering a supportive educational environment that values gifted education alongside other educational priorities.

***School leaders believe gifted education programs and educator evaluation processes should improve to better support students***

Participants described specific priorities schools should have for school leaders to better meet the needs of PK-12 gifted students. Participants indicated that gifted education programs should prioritize equitable identification, differentiated instruction, and a broader range of enrichment opportunities while addressing the social and emotional needs of gifted education students. Additionally, participants expressed advocacy for gifted educator evaluation processes that emphasize multiple measures, alignment with student outcomes, professional growth, fairness, and transparency. Participant 1 shared,

Each student is required to grow a certain number of points throughout the year. . . . That is regardless of where they fall on the learning continuum. . . . Then, our school goal is by proficiency. So, both of those . . . really have an impact with our high-ability students. Those proficiency levels, if they don't continue to stay in those proficiency levels, then we won't meet the goal and/or the students don't grow. Then, we're not meeting the teacher evaluation growth goals, either.

Participants indicated that improvements in gifted education programs and educator evaluation processes are essential to create a more inclusive and effective educational environment, ensuring that all students, including those who are gifted, receive the support they need to thrive academically and emotionally.

### **Discussion**

Gifted education is a specialized field within the realm of education, aimed at meeting the unique needs of intellectually advanced students in a variety of educational disciplines. The success of gifted education programs often depends on the perceptions and support of school leaders, including principals and school administrators. Based on our findings from quantitative survey data and qualitative interview data, we answer the three research questions regarding pre-service and in-service school leaders' perceptions of gifted education in the following subsections.

#### **Research question 1: What are pre-service and in-service school leaders' perceptions of gifted education?**

School leaders recognize the importance of gifted education programming, but often face challenges in policy development and reform. As reported by participants, many school leaders lack the decision-making capability and are accountable to district policies. Participants shared that improvements are needed to better support gifted students and ensure that programs are equitable and effective. Addressing these challenges and aligning policies with the needs of gifted learners are critical steps in enhancing gifted education programming in schools, however. School leaders' perceptions can influence the development and reform of policies related to gifted education.

Pre-service and in-service school leader participants expressed concerns and challenges related to resource allocation in the context of gifted education. While they recognized the

importance of providing appropriate services for gifted students, they often faced limitations due to budget constraints, insufficient staffing, and competing priorities within their school districts. Some participants highlighted the difficulty of justifying resource allocation for gifted programs when faced with pressure to meet standardized testing requirements and address the needs of a diverse student population. Despite these challenges, school leaders recognized the need for equitable resource allocation to meet the unique needs of gifted learners and advocated for improvements in this aspect of gifted education programming.

Pre-service and in-service school leader participants expressed varying perspectives on equity and inclusion in the context of gifted education. While some leaders recognized the importance of ensuring equitable access to gifted programs for all students, other school leaders acknowledged challenges in achieving this goal. Concerns were raised about the potential for gifted education programs to inadvertently perpetuate inequalities if not carefully managed. Some school leaders emphasized the need to differentiate instruction and provide enrichment opportunities that address the diverse needs of gifted learners, including their social and emotional well-being. However, there was also an awareness of the tension between promoting equity and responding to parent, caregiver, and community pressures for gifted program placement. Overall, school leaders recognized the complexity of achieving equity and inclusion in gifted education and sought to identify a balance between meeting the unique needs of gifted students while ensuring fairness and access for all students.

School leaders recognized the significance of effective communication with parents, caretakers, and teachers regarding gifted education programs. Participants emphasized the importance of clear and transparent communication to ensure that all stakeholders are well-informed about the goals, processes, and expectations of gifted programs. Some pre-service and in-service school leaders mentioned that their communication strategies were influenced by

feedback and input from families and teachers, striving to address their questions and concerns. Additionally, the experience of one school leader, who was also a parent of a gifted child in the district, provided a unique perspective on how parent or caregiver involvement and understanding can impact administrative decisions.

Overall, school leader participants believed that open and collaborative communication was crucial in building trust, garnering support, and aligning the goals and aspirations of all involved parties with the gifted education programs. According to NPBEA (2015) PSEL Standard 8, *Meaningful engagement of families and community*, “effective educational leaders engage families and the community in meaningful, reciprocal, and mutually beneficial ways to promote each student’s academic success and well-being (p. 16). It is critical for school leaders to work with school and community stakeholders to collaborate and communicate with a common interest in better meeting all students’ needs. School leaders may consider working with advisory boards to develop platforms for regular stakeholder dialogue and feedback to share resources, information, understandings, and knowledge about gifted education and ways to improve current gifted programming.

**Research question 2: In what ways do pre-service and in-service school leaders perceive gifted educator evaluation?**

In this study, we conducted a descriptive analysis of survey data and content analysis of interviews to gain insights into how school leaders perceive and evaluate gifted education. The perceptions of pre-service and in-service school leaders regarding gifted education are multifaceted. The survey and interview data provide valuable insights into the perceptions of pre- and in-service school leaders, and findings indicate that many schools may lack specialized personnel dedicated to serving gifted students. These findings align with past work of VanTassel-Baska and colleagues (2008), and Peters and Jolly (2018). More recently, Gubbins

and Hayden (2020) shared that educators “lack essential knowledge, skills, and confidence” (p. 510) to provide high-quality gifted programming. However, on a more positive note, more than three-fourths of the participants in our study reported having one or more certified/licensed gifted education educator, highlighting the commitment of many schools to addressing the needs of gifted learners.

Another significant finding is that the majority of participants felt somewhat confident to very confident about their knowledge of gifted educator responsibilities. This suggests that a substantial number of school leaders have at least a moderate understanding of the roles and responsibilities of educators in gifted programs. However, there is room for improvement, as nearly half of the participants may require additional support or training in this regard.

The qualitative interview data shed light on several critical themes related to gifted education. One prominent theme was the barrier of providing gifted services due to a lack of educators with gifted experience. Participants expressed the need for quality professional development in gifted education, as many teachers were not adequately trained to differentiate curricula for gifted students. Participants also revealed varying levels of knowledge in specific areas of gifted education. While pre-service and in-service school leaders shared knowledge about topics such as gifted grouping, overall gifted student needs, and acceleration, they reported limited knowledge about curriculum compacting, pull-out programs, and state policies and laws related to gifted education. This finding emphasizes the necessity of ongoing professional development and learning to equip educators with the skills and knowledge required to effectively meet the needs of gifted learners.

According to NPBEA (2015) PSEL Standard 7(f), educational leaders should “design and implement job-embedded and other opportunities for professional learning collaboratively with



faculty and staff” (p. 15). Moving forward, program decision-makers may consider the following approaches to support this gap in gifted education skills and knowledge for all educators:

- collaborate with gifted education specialists,
- develop a gifted education committee,
- provide access to online resources,
- conduct peer observations and feedback routines, and
- establish gifted education professional learning communities.

**Research question 3: In what ways do pre-service and in-service school leaders perceive gifted *program* evaluation?**

While many school leaders are confident in their understanding of gifted educator responsibilities, there is room for improvement in supporting gifted program evaluation practices. As shared by Neumeister and Burney (2019), “districts have an ethical responsibility to conduct formative program evaluations to ensure that the programs they have developed for their gifted and talented students are grounded in best practices and are meeting the cognitive, social, and emotional needs” of gifted students (p. 3). To better meet the needs of gifted learners, schools should invest in recruiting and training educators with specialized expertise in gifted education who can collect and analyze data to inform program impacts and recommendations. Furthermore, addressing gaps in knowledge about specific aspects of gifted education (e.g., curriculum compacting and state policies) should be a priority for professional development initiatives. Overall, the findings suggest that pre-service and in-service school leaders recognize the importance of gifted education, but require more support and resources to optimize programs and services for gifted students.

School leaders expressed varying perspectives on gifted program evaluation. While some school leaders acknowledged the importance of evaluating gifted programs, emphasizing data-

driven decision-making as a critical element in program success, others voiced frustrations regarding evaluation practices. Some believed that decisions related to gifted programs were influenced more by parent or caregiver requests and school culture than by objective data regarding student identification processes for gifted education services. In some instances, external evaluators were brought into the school to assess program effectiveness. These differing viewpoints suggest that school leaders recognize the significance of program evaluation, but may encounter challenges related to data usage, decision-making processes, and the influence of school culture. Overall, there appears to be a desire among school leaders to improve the evaluation of gifted programs, possibly by increasing the reliance on objective data and reducing the impact of subjective factors.

### **Implications**

When researchers, practitioners, and educators have a better understanding of school leaders' perceptions of gifted education programming, real-world program applications and implications may benefit the fields of gifted education and educational leadership (e.g., informing policies, practices, and support systems related to gifted education). School leaders' perceptions can influence the development of policies and reform policies related to gifted education. In this study, we identified some gaps and challenges in pre-service and in-service school leaders' knowledge and understanding of gifted education educators' roles and the needs for gifted education programming. This information may be useful to educators of pre-service and in-service school leaders and policymakers as they consider how to design more effective and equitable practices and policies in gifted education.

When school leaders and other school stakeholders have a better understanding of gifted education, more informed decision-making, further equitable and inclusive programming, and better outcomes for gifted students may occur. Additionally, knowledge of the roles of gifted

education educators and program support development of pre-service and in-service leaders is necessary to guide them on how to make informed and shared decisions for gifted education programming throughout PK-12 schools. Lastly, findings from this study may guide future research priorities in the fields of gifted education and educational leadership to better support, guide, and inform school stakeholders in providing inclusive, appropriate, and rigorous learning opportunities to students who are identified as gifted or in high-ability programs.

### **Limitations**

In this study, we focused on pre-service and in-service school leaders' perceptions of gifted education educator and program evaluation in PK-12 schools. The survey was distributed to graduate candidates and alumni from one midwestern university in the Department of Educational Leadership. Due to the limited scope of the study (i.e., participants from one university), more data from participants from various universities throughout this Midwest state, the United States, and/or among other nations may provide a broader perspective of state, national, or international school leaders' perceptions of gifted education.

Additionally, in our study, 36 participants completed the anonymous survey. Out of these 36 survey participants, seven participants agreed to participate in the optional, confidential interview. We recognize that data from more survey and interview participants may be useful in better understanding the perceptions of pre-service and in-service leaders in various types of schools.

Lastly, we identified five emergent themes during the qualitative data analysis. We recognize that there may be more themes that may emerge by additional coders.

### **Conclusion**

Involvement with gifted education programming might be perceived as less critical to goal setting and other significant responsibilities by some school leaders, however, school

leaders serve as a keystone in the provision of gifted education services in schools and districts. From our research, we gained examples of how the school culture related to gifted education and the implementation of educational strategies that align with gifted education programming standards can be impacted directly by school leaders. Our research also indicates that some school leaders lack confidence in evaluating gifted education educators and the gifted education program due to lack of training and knowledge of gifted education educator roles and gifted educational programming. Thus, it is important for school leaders to be well-informed of best practices of gifted education through pre-service and in-service school leader academic programs and professional learning opportunities to be able to identify how they can better support an aligned gifted program to meet the needs of all PK-12 gifted students.

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