

Purposeful

Professional

Development

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# Planning Positive Experiences for Teachers of the Gifted and Talented

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aximum academic achievement for gifted and talented students can only be accomplished when teachers are given the tools, support, and training needed to strengthen instructional skills and develop knowledge of the social and emotional needs of the students they serve (Feldhusen, 1997). Providing meaningful professional development to develop or enhance these skills is a challenge for administrators responsible for the planning and implementation of training experiences for teachers of gifted students.

As Dettmer (1998) wrote, “Educators are lifelong learners who continue studying their content areas and honing their instructional skills long after they complete the teacher preparation program” (p. 1). She added that, unfortunately, staff development tends to be regarded by too many educators as “irrelevant, time wasteful, poorly presented, and lacking in follow-up assistance” (p. 3). Therefore, in spite of the importance of professional development, teachers do not always accept mandated in-service sessions with enthusiasm. Research by Joyce and Showers (1988) indicated that all teachers can learn powerful and complex teaching strategies if they participate in well-designed staff development. As a result, planners of professional development must investigate models and designs that can provide educators with a variety of worthwhile opportunities to enhance their knowledge and skills (Glickman, 1996; Schlichter, 1986).

## Background

An understanding of the importance of initial and continuing professional development for teachers of the gifted and talented led to the adoption in November 1996 of the Texas State Plan for the Education of Gifted/Talented Students (Texas Education Agency, 1996). This plan built upon the previous state plan adopted in 1990 and provided guidelines for districts and campuses to refine services for gifted and talented students in five areas. The areas addressed are (a) provisions for student assessment, (b) program design, (c) curriculum and instruction, (d) professional development, and (e) family/community involvement.

Although each of these five areas is important when planning and implementing a quality program for gifted and talented students, the area of profes-

sional development has become a major point of consideration for administrators responsible for the implementation of gifted programs. In addition to 30 hours of initial awareness training, the plan requires that teachers who provide instruction and services for the gifted receive a minimum of 6 hours annually of professional development. An overview of options for the initial 30 hours of awareness training in gifted and talented education and for the 6-hour annual update are illustrated in Figures 1 and 2. This training can be accomplished through participation in professional development programs or college courses in the areas defined.

## Setting

Like other school districts in Texas, planners of professional development for a large school district south of Houston struggled with the task of offering quality professional development programs that met the Texas state guidelines and the expectations of the teachers participating in the training. The district's gifted and talented program was established in 1979 and currently services 9% of the district population, which is just over 30,000 students. Offering professional development opportunities and maintaining records of teachers' gifted and talented training is a major responsibility for the district's gifted program coordinator. In an effort to better understand the teachers' perceptions of the gifted and talented regarding their professional development, a study was conducted to explore the types of professional development training opportunities available to practitioners in the field and the knowledge and skills gained through in-service training that have been successfully implemented in the classroom.

Teachers with the Texas state recommended training of a minimum of 30

hours of gifted and talented awareness professional development and those teachers who had obtained a gifted and talented endorsement certification from the state of Texas were included in the study. The reporting mode of choice was the case study, which is ideally suited for inquiry that seeks to discover multiple realities that cannot be fully resolved through a traditional quantitative study (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). Specific objectives were identified:

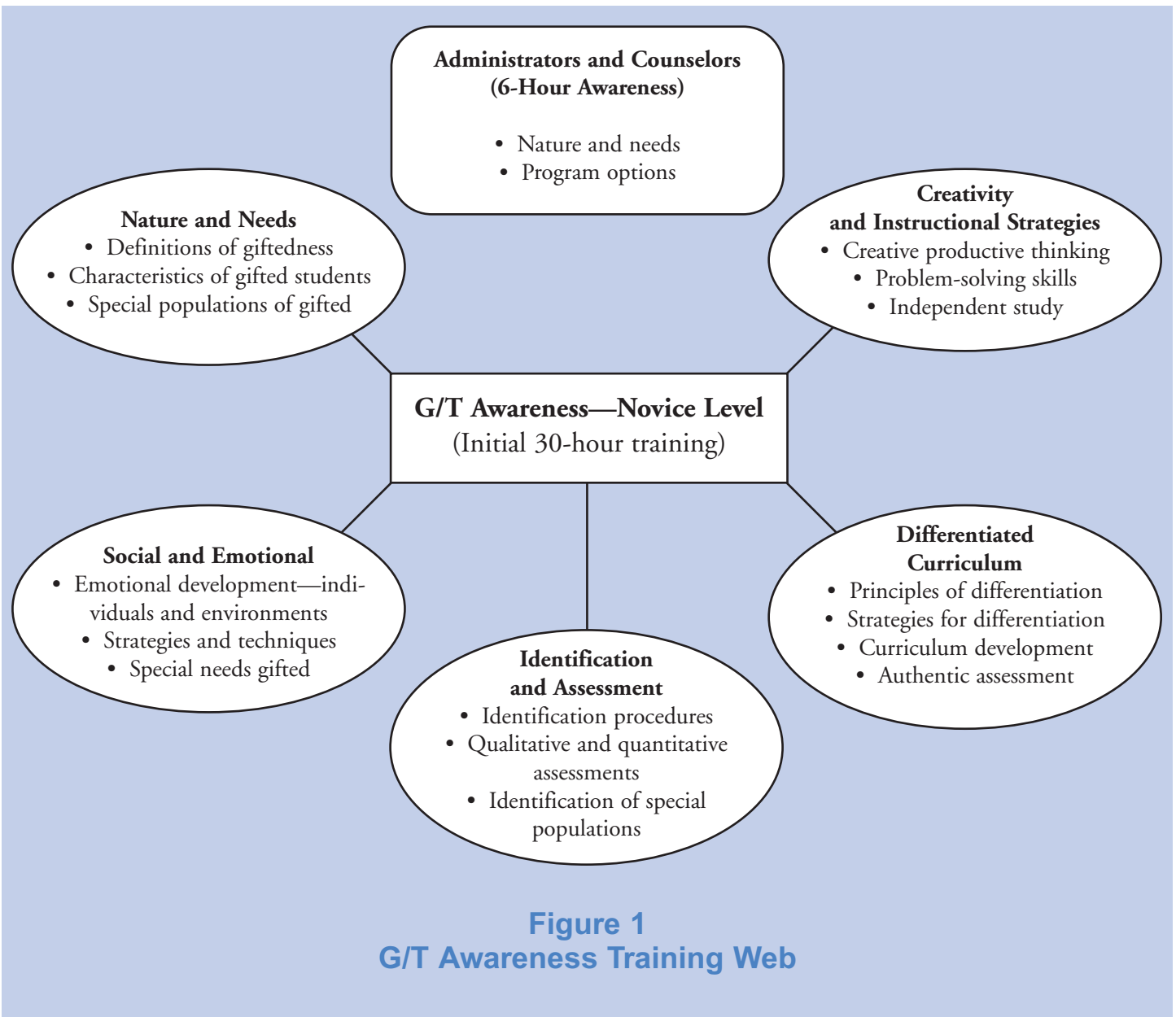
1. to describe the types of gifted and talented training of middle school teachers of the gifted as a means of gaining an understanding of the knowledge and skills presented to the teachers through professional development opportunities;
2. to investigate areas of strength and weaknesses in training as perceived by the teachers; and
3. to analyze outcomes of knowledge and skills observed in the classroom gained from professional development opportunities.

Criterion sampling consisted of identifying teachers within the context that held a minimum of 30 hours of training, an endorsement in gifted and talented education, or both. Teachers participated in campus-based workshops, district workshops, state and national conferences, and university endorsement courses. Also interviewed for this study were the G/T middle school magnet liaison, the district G/T coordinator, the district director of staff development, the counselor for special needs G/T, and a G/T magnet campus administrator.

## Emergent Themes

### *Know Me, Know My Needs*

A primary theme prevalent in the data relating to the content of the staff development experiences deals with the

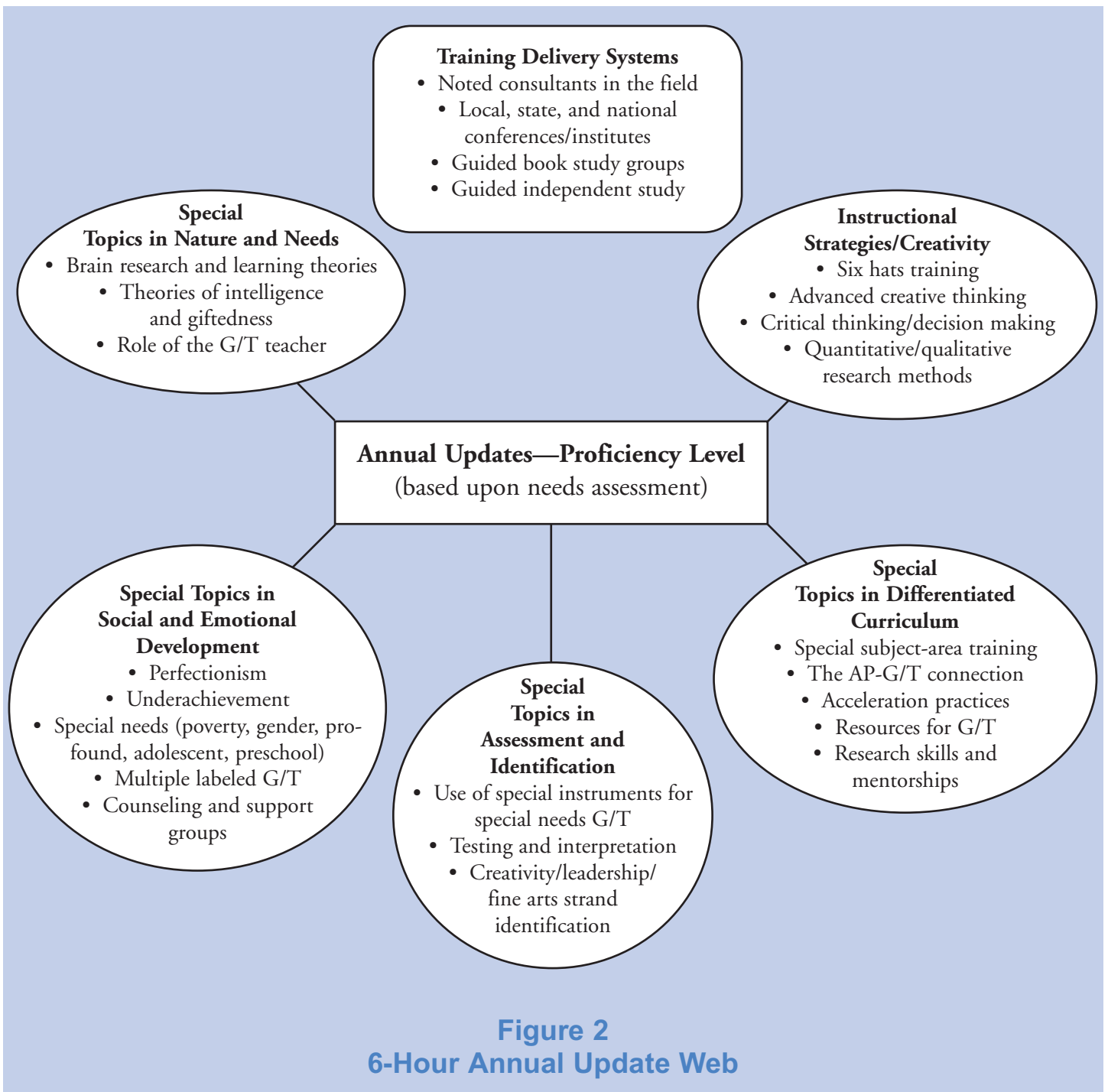


teachers' desire for professional development directors to plan for a variety of knowledge and skill levels. Just as inappropriate as treating all students the same in the classroom is the notion of "one-size-fits-all" training for adults. Identification of specific learning needs is a concept that is ingrained in assessment techniques used with students, but is often ignored when planning learning experiences for teachers. Most textbooks and curriculum guides contain examples of pretests to be given to students to

determine the students' level of understanding previous to instruction. It is uncommon, however, for planners of professional development to preassess perceived needs of teachers and then to preassess skill levels. Teachers described the frustration of attending a workshop that is a repetition of knowledge and skills covered in previous experiences. Determining the needs of the workshop attendees must be considered prior to planning the professional development experiences. When teachers' needs are

not preassessed and varying levels of knowledge and skill are not considered, the workshop is perceived as having little value or transferability to the teachers.

Experiences were shared during the interview process that related opportunities for the teachers to evaluate their personal level of expertise (see Figure 3) and participate in experiences based upon the information gained through the use of the Professional Development Competencies Checklist. Providing a menu of choices from which a teacher could select during a



**Figure 2**  
**6-Hour Annual Update Web**

planned staff development day was described as highly motivating. Several teachers shared their excitement upon discovering professional development days that offered a variety of topics focusing on multiple expertise levels. In addition, teachers completed an evaluation of all professional development experiences to

assist the coordinator in planning future programs (see Figure 4).

***Practice Makes Perfect***

A second theme to consider is the teachers' desire to practice new concepts in an environment free from evaluation.

Modeling and role-playing during the workshop experience should lead to opportunities in the field to practice new skills through peer-coaching relationships. It is then important to provide a format for workshop participants to meet as a follow-up to the initial training to discuss their experiences in applying new

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skills and knowledge. Activities should include experiences other than the typical workshop format, including study groups, action research, independent study options, and observations of successful practices. Teachers were also positive regarding experiences that allowed for opportunities to leave the workshop with something tangible that could be implemented in the classroom immediately.

### *The Guide on the Side vs. the Sage on the Stage*

In addition to the content and process of professional development experiences is a theme relating to the presenters' conducting the staff development experiences. First, it is important that the presenter has recent, real-world experience regarding the concepts being covered in the workshop. Presenters remaining in touch with current issues and trends and sharing actual classroom experience are perceived positively by teachers.

Presentation style is another issue relating specifically to the presenter or workshop leader. Each teacher interviewed indicated that the least favorable format for a workshop is one where the presenter lectures to the audience or does not include a variety of activities to encourage audience participation. Participants need time to reflect and relate the concepts shared during the workshop with personal experiences. Interviews with teachers of professional development experiences and a review of evaluation documents confirmed the notion that the "guide on the side" can be the expert teacher next door or any trusted professional who can serve as a coach or mentor.

### *Choose a Plan, Any Plan*

A previous theme described the importance of understanding the exper-

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Campus: \_\_\_\_\_ Grade/Subject: \_\_\_\_\_

Please rate your personal level of knowledge and skill of the following objectives:

1. Understanding of the history and leaders of the field.  
novice.....proficient.....expert
2. Understanding of basic terminology in the field.  
novice.....proficient.....expert
3. Understanding of theories and models of intelligence.  
novice.....proficient.....expert
4. Understanding of the theories and models of giftedness.  
novice.....proficient.....expert
5. Understanding of the characteristics of the gifted.  
novice.....proficient.....expert
6. Understanding of the characteristics of a successful teacher of the gifted.  
novice.....proficient.....expert
7. Understanding of issues relating to identification.  
novice.....proficient.....expert
8. Understanding of special populations of gifted.  
novice.....proficient.....expert

I have received (please circle) 0 3 6 12 15+ hours of training in this area.

Area(s) of interest: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

### Figure 3 Professional Development Competencies Checklist on Nature and Needs of the Gifted and Talented

tise level and needs of the teachers when planning training in gifted education. A final theme relates to the planning process and revolves around discussion

of the district's responsibilities in designing a plan for staff development. Teachers expressed the importance of knowing in advance what to expect and

Training Session: *Assessment Workshop*

Directions: For each topic listed, please indicate your level of competence, **before** this training session, and **now**, by placing an X in the appropriate box. Use the following ratings:

- U = Unfamiliar      I don't really know anything about this topic.
- AW = Awareness    I've heard of this concept, but I have very little knowledge or understanding of it.
- K = Knowledge      I am familiar with this concept, and understand it; however, I don't routinely apply it.
- AP = Application    I am able to apply this concept to my work.

	Before Training				After Training			
	U	AW	K	AP	U	AW	K	AP
1. The purposes for assessing gifted children.								
2. Types of assessment instruments and selection criteria to meet individual student needs.								
3. Factors that may hinder appropriate assessment or prevent a student from reaching his/her potential.								
4. Using portfolios to assess students.								
5. Using rubrics to strengthen assessments.								
6. Identifying the type of data collected to assess giftedness in students.								
7. Providing equal access to programs for all gifted and talented students including special needs/special populations of gifted.								
8. Interpreting and communicating assessment results from both qualitative and quantitative measures to other professionals and parents.								

Comments: \_\_\_\_\_

**Figure 4**  
**Workshop Evaluation Form**

their role in the process. It is also imperative that all efforts are made by planners of professional development experiences to present to teachers a clear message connecting objectives with district, program, and workshop goals. Presenting a cohesive message requires a great deal of planning, research, and collaboration on the part of the professional development planners and the presenters.

### The Real World

Using the knowledge gained from the qualitative study, the next step was to see if the emergent themes could be applied to a real-world situation to encourage more relevant staff development. As with many professional development experiences, few teachers made a meaningful transition between what was learned in the in-service and what was implemented in the classroom. "Slick" workshops entertained teachers; but, when the day was over, the same teachers went back to their classrooms, shut the door, and continued using the same teaching techniques that were used before. As this qualitative study revealed, something needed to be done to bridge the gap into the real world.

According to Dettmer and Landrum (1998), staff development

requires the establishment of goals, local leadership, extensive involvement of school administrators, careful planning based on needs assessment data, collaborative decision making to build ownership, design of appropriate in-service opportunities and further experiences to address perceived needs, and long-range evaluation of effects. (pp. 9-10)

With this in mind, a survey was administered to all 31 schools in the district to provide a local needs assessment. The



answers to the questions varied widely, and teacher needs were as varied as the number of fish in the Gulf of Mexico. The key point that stood out from the local needs assessment was that teachers wanted individuality as indicated in the theme “Know me, know my needs.” With 3,000 teachers on staff ranging in experience from first day on the job to more than 30 years of experience, providing individualized staff development is extremely challenging. The following describes one district’s attempt to move from a one-size-fits-all model of staff development to a more versatile approach that focused on the goal of increasing teachers’ knowledge.

Using the models of staff development outlined by Guskey (2000), a new model for the 6-hour update was designed to maximize individuality and choice. In addition to the traditional training/workshop model, the mentoring model and observation/assessment model are embedded in the district G/T program through the use of gifted and talented specialists available on each campus. The following additional modes of delivery were analyzed and staff development offerings designed:

1. individually guided model;
2. development/improvement process model; and
3. inquiry model.

### *Individually Guided Model and Study Groups*

Although some teachers prefer the 6-hour traditional workshop, the offerings under this model enticed many of the teachers to try a new mode of experiencing staff development. To meet these teachers’ needs, a book study, video study, and personal growth plan were offered to help them obtain the 6 hours of credit.

The book study offered teachers the chance to explore a topic in greater depth.

The format was kept simple. Teachers were allowed to choose from a list of books on gifted education topics by noted authors in the field of gifted education, or a teacher could propose his or her own book. The study design was totally open ended, but approval from the gifted coordinator was needed before earning professional development credit. The only stipulations on the book study were that the study group must involve more than one person and the topic must focus on gifted education. During the first pilot year, around 50 teachers took advantage of the book study opportunity. After 3 years of implementation, more than 200 K–12 teachers had participated in a teacher-directed book study. The studies the teachers designed were creative and led to an increased knowledge in the field.

An example of implementation by a group of teachers began with the formation of a study group of 15 educators at one district intermediate school. In addition to the readings and small-group discussions, the activity culminated with dinner at a local restaurant, where the educators met in smaller groups to discuss ideas from the book. Another group consisted of two kindergarten teachers interested in the topic of meeting the needs of gifted students in the regular classroom. They designed their credit hours around reading the book and implementing the strategies in the classroom. Other groups preferred to read a book and have several small-group discussions. A short evaluation form was required, which included documentation of reading time, discussion time, and important items learned from the experience. A major hurdle in this type of staff development is establishing trust with the teachers. As professionals, participants were expected to report their study and discussion hours honestly. When teachers are trusted, the respect is returned, and it was found that the majority of participants spent more than the required 6 hours completing the study.

Teachers love the freedom of the book study and meeting at convenient times, including conference periods, after school, or on weekends.

The video study grew out of the success of the book study. In the gifted program office, there were several quality videos on gifted education and strategies to use with gifted students. Unfortunately, the only person who had ever seen most of the videos was the gifted program coordinator. So, a video study was designed where teachers could earn gifted staff development credit by watching a video on gifted education strategies and applying the strategies in the classroom. The teacher documented the strengths and weaknesses of each strategy and noted what worked best with the gifted children in his or her classroom. Most of the videos were short, ranging from 30 minutes to 1 hour. This was the perfect amount of time because teachers could easily watch the video during their conference period or after school.

The hard part was implementing the strategies in the classroom. One particular video was only 30 minutes in length, but showed a variety of teaching and grouping strategies that worked well with gifted students. Of interest was the teacher response to the implementation of the strategies. Teachers who were already familiar with strategies described in the video had no problem implementing the strategies and reported back on their documentation sheets comments including “wonderful” and “I noticed that these kids are becoming more confident. . . . I will definitely use it again.” Other teachers had a harder time incorporating the strategies into their daily lesson based upon individual viewing of the video. One teacher remarked, “I don’t know if I can do this. Maybe just sitting in a 6-hour workshop would have been easier!” However, the results were exactly what administrators want from effective staff development: a positive

change in teacher behavior. Every teacher who participated in the video study reported such a change and indicated that they had experienced success with the strategies and would continue to use them in their classroom.

The benefit of both the book study and the video study is that teachers are able to have the freedom of choice in topic. Because teachers are involved in choosing the topic, they are naturally more interested than when they are forced to attend a 6-hour workshop just to get the credit hours.

A personal growth plan was an option for teachers who did not want to participate in either the book study or video study experience. The concept is simple: The teacher sits down and develops an individual plan to gain in-depth knowledge in a certain area of giftedness. The final product varies depending on the need of the teacher and individual design. Some complete traditional classes or take graduate-level classes at the local university. Another might read several books on a topic and write a research paper about what he or she has learned. One teacher wanted to help an underachieving gifted child, but felt she lacked knowledge on the topic. Her personal growth plan included researching the topic and keeping a journal of the strategies she used to help her student. Her log was beneficial to herself and the student and helped her to gain an expertise in the subject area that she now uses to help other teachers in the same predicament. The personal growth plan had to be preapproved by the gifted education coordinator to count for credit, and, once again, the majority of teachers spent many more than the minimum 6 hours needed on their project.

### ***The Development Improvement/ Process Model***

A major goal of effective staff development is to provide in-depth knowl-

edge on a topic that influences teacher behavior. Unfortunately, many of the traditional workshops offered fall short of this goal. Knowledge may be gained, but few teachers change their behavior. The theme of "Practice makes perfect" was the main goal under this model.

To increase teacher implementation of concepts earned, teachers were given another option to earn 6 hours of G/T credit. This option included attending a 3-hour workshop on gifted education strategies to be used in the regular classroom with the option of earning another 3 hours of credit by implementing the strategies in the classroom. Like the video study, teachers had varying degrees of success in implementing the strategies. One specific workshop focused on designing learning bulletin boards for gifted children that highlighted the creative productive thinking strategies and the unit the teacher was addressing. After the workshop, several teachers designed wonderful bulletin boards that helped to individualize learning in the classroom. These teachers laminated the bulletin board pieces so they could use them again and began to design a bulletin board for each unit of study. Although only one bulletin board was required, the teachers saw how the strategy was effective in meeting gifted students' needs in their classroom. On a less positive note, several teachers remarked that they did not want to have to do any "work" related to staff development. Again, several teachers noted that it was much easier to sit in a 6-hour workshop and get G/T credit than to actually have to apply anything that was learned to the regular classroom.

### ***Inquiry Model***

A new way to obtain staff development credit planned for the upcoming school year is based upon the design and implementation of action research with

gifted students in the classroom. The beauty of action research is that a single individual or an entire group of teachers can undertake the process. Teachers are encouraged to select a problem or question in the area of gifted and talented education, review the supporting literature, outline and implement a plan of action, and document the results. This format, as well as those previously described, meets the need to provide freedom of choice to teachers in selecting activities they would like to pursue to earn gifted staff development credit while allowing them to become reflective in their practice.

## **Study Recommendations**

Based upon the lessons learned from this study, it is recommended that any model of staff development for teachers of the gifted embraced by a school district should contain the following elements:

1. Administrators must align professional development goals and objectives with district goals and objectives.
2. Professional development experiences should target small teams of teachers grouped by teaching area, discipline, and grade level with common interests and responsibilities.
3. Professional development must match training with the teacher's expertise level.
4. Planners of professional development must select presenters with recent, practical experience.
5. Programs must balance theory with knowledge and skills immediately transferable to the classroom.
6. Presenters should limit the lecture style of presentation and incorporate a variety of activities and opportunities for discussion into the format.

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## Guided Attention for Gifted Exploration

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previously withheld from them in approaches such as “When you get older, you will understand why we want you to try out this or that activity.”

Although *Mind Fields* and the Chuck E. Cheese and pillbug experiences had sent up red flags to my thinking regarding our day-to-day tasks as parents of potentially gifted youth, they served usefully to highlight how critical it is that we manage to become mentors and backstage guides as our youth unravel the mysteries of each new task. The critical part of the strategy is empowering the child. When the adult sincerely seeks understanding along with the child, the adult conveys that it is interesting to him or her, too: “I like the way this

machine helps you do a somersault just like you do in gymnastics” or “I didn’t realize pillbugs have gills, but also a breathing mechanism so they don’t have to live in a water environment.” When the adult leaves the power of direction and rate for such inquiry in the senses and mind of the child, rather than taking charge of the pace and direction of the exploration, the child is empowered.

This, then, is how I suggest we can balance a culture of distraction: by suggesting appropriate levels of attention at appropriate times; by guiding exploration of the increasingly enriched sources we can find; and by prompting and participating in gifted reflection about the exciting outcomes of our exploration. “Grant me intention, pur-

pose, and design—That’s near enough for me to the Divine . . .” and for us, as parents, to bring about the optimal development of the extraordinary potential waiting to be awakened in our children’s daily environment. **GCT**

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7. Planners of professional development should offer opportunities for reflection and feedback through follow-up experiences on the same topic.
8. Administrators should provide opportunities for teachers to collaborate with peers and mentors to incorporate new concepts.
9. Program planners should incorporate the expertise of district staff.
10. Planners of professional development should consider alternative forms of professional development, such as book studies, teacher inquiry, and peer coaching.

Setting the standard for excellence in professional development should never be compromised. Participants in gifted program staff development are best served in a collaborative atmosphere where they are involved in self-assessment of needs, goal planning, selection of materials and facilities

appropriate for adults, and reflection with supportive feedback and follow-up. Teachers of the gifted and talented must be given opportunities to participate actively during staff development, integrate new ideas with existing practices, and personalize for their own classroom the information shared during professional development experiences. When professional development experiences are meaningful and transferable, the knowledge and skills attained will lead to enhanced teaching practices resulting in quality instruction for gifted and talented students. **GCT**

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