Creating School Programs for Gifted Students at the High School Level:

An Administrator's Perspective

by Timothy Gilson

After almost 20 years in public education, I often think about having the fortunate opportunity to work with the most talented students. Did I adequately serve their needs, both as a teacher and as their principal? Were they challenged? The growth of gifted and talented programs in our schools has certainly helped bridge the answers to these questions but, honestly, is it enough? As an administrator, I struggled with four key concepts of challenging my most capable students. The first area dealt with the proper identification of students into any type of gifted and talented (GT) program. Many studies exist to shed light on the most effective and equitable way to identify students. Unfortunately, not all parents would agree with that endless data! The second area dealt with the inevitable task of working with teachers to provide them with the most effective types of professional development, the type that can support their need for ideas and methodologies to best work with their most capable students. Not only can unchallenged students become bored and apathetic (even those who are gifted), but they also can lose their willingness to challenge themselves to do better things. The third area dealt with the effective college planning and support needed when working with some of my finest students and their parents. Although I was always fortunate to have very willing and knowledgeable guidance counselors, I had to remember that they dealt with the chronic

and often repeated social issues that plague American high schools. Thus, their time was very limited. Couple that with a recommended student-to-counselor ratio of 350 to 1 (Iowa Department of Education, 2008), and the building principal often becomes the adult whom students seek out for assistance. The final area I struggled with was gauging the overall effectiveness of the program I was expected to facilitate. The success of any program can only be ascertained by providing a series of quality assessments and evaluation procedures designed to provide the feedback necessary. As students begin to compete to an even greater degree with their counterparts across the ocean, today's administrators must find ways to adequately and effectively answer these questions so that the brightest and most capable students are challenged to their fullest potential. Can educators afford not to?

Identification of Gifted Students

The identification of the most capable students always has been a challenge for school leaders. Although most states mandate that districts use multiple measures to identify students qualifying for gifted and talented programming, the issue often becomes that of defining and interpreting those "multiple measures." To further complicate the issue, the trend toward uniform identification procedures certainly has evolved over time. Very few educators continue to adhere to a straight IQ or purely academic definition of giftedness. Identification procedures must allow at least minimal forms of subjectivity so that the programs are not limited to abilities that can be measured only by objective tests (Renzulli & Dai, n.d.).

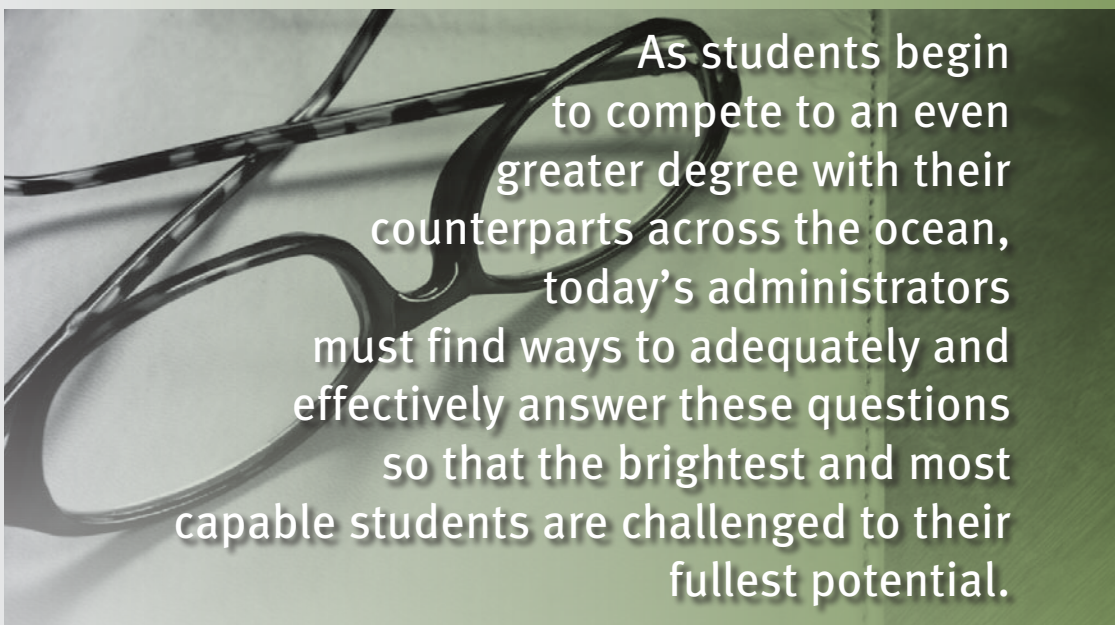
The identification procedures typically utilized in educational settings include grades, teacher nomination, achievement test scores, intelligence tests, parental nomination, and self- or peer nomination. These procedures usually are rank scored by a selection committee, administrator, or GT coordinator. The scores then are combined with a variety of assessment strategies that are much more objective in nature. These combined scores provide the information necessary to nominate gifted children for inclusion in the school's GT program (Finn, 2001).

Principals need to understand basic tenets of gifted student identification because whether or not they are directly responsible, it often is assumed that they are. I found myself explaining to parents that although their son or daughter did not qualify for the school's GT program, it certainly did not mean that their child was not intellectually gifted. Further complicating the identification process is the issue of sibling comparisons that both educators and parents often make. As noted by Finn (2001), when "one child in a family is gifted then it is more likely than not that all family members, including the child's parents, are of equally high intelligence, i.e. 'gifted'" (para. 1). Although this fact sometimes can cause difficulty in objective identification, the focus must remain on the individual student.

Professional Development

Once proper identification, based on multiple measures, is obtained, administrators must effectively and professionally work with classroom teachers to design and implement teaching strategies that facilitate continuous growth for the most talented students. The challenge to classroom teachers is to design a learning environment where students can fully develop their abilities and interests without losing their sense of membership as part of the class (Parke, 2000).

In order to best accommodate the needs of the most able students, educators must understand the characteristics that define those students. Gifted and talented students potentially differ from their classmates on three key issues: (1) the pace at which they learn; (2) the depth of their understanding; and (3) the interests that they hold



(Maker, 1982). Based on that knowledge, educators must strive to create flexible pacing strategies within their curriculum. These pacing strategies might include compacted courses, advanced-level course selection, early entrance, credit by examination, telescoping, and dual enrollment (ERIC Clearinghouse on Handicapped and Gifted Children, 1989; National Association for Gifted Children [NAGC], 2004).

Compacted courses imply that two or more individual semester-long classes are combined into an abbreviated time period. In this strategy, students who demonstrate previous mastery spend less time with the regular curriculum and more time with extension and enrichment opportunities (Winebrenner & Berger, 1994). Advanced-level course selection is facilitated merely as the name implies. Students are enrolled in courses normally taught at higher grade levels. The strategy of early entrance is yet another approach used to foster a more challenging environment for the most talented students. Here, students enter elementary school, middle school, high school, or college earlier than the age usually prescribed. Regardless of the age of the individual, the effort is such that the students are taking classes at more than one level of education (e.g., middle school students also take a freshmen science course). Telescoping curriculum is a type of compacting typically designed for mathematics acceleration, due in large part because of the logical approach of the instruction. The entrance into college earlier than what is typical often is referred to as dual enrollment, where students actually are obtaining credits from both institutions. Sometimes referred to as contracted classes, this type of dual enrollment requires that institutions of higher education collaboratively work with school districts to form 28E agreements. These "sharing" agreements allow properly certified high school teachers (those with master's degrees) to teach college-credit courses that have been developed by the institution of higher education. Thus, upon completion of a semester, students in contracted classes have earned both high school credits toward graduation and college credits that can be used to "jumpstart" their postsecondary education. These students can then bypass introductory-level classes in college, and save both time and money. Their opportunities to obtain life directions also are greatly increased. This is a tremendous opportunity for parents and students, as well as a much more financially responsible decision by school districts than the typical postsecondary enrollment option requirement placed on districts. The final example of flexible pacing is credit by examination. In this strategy, students enter an advanced-level course or receive credit upon satisfactory completion of an exam tailored to assess their knowledge in the entry-level coursework. An example that falls into this category is Advanced Placement (AP) options; a curriculum initiative that by 2005 had grown to include more than 1.2 million students (Marklein, 2006). By 2006, 2.3 million AP tests were given, which accounted for a 200% increase since 1995. Not only have these tests increased in sheer numbers, but there is solid data to support the benefits they can have on students' postsecondary success. In the largest study ever of the impact of AP courses on college success, researchers found strong evidence of benefits to students who participate in both AP courses and exams in terms of higher GPAs, credit hours earned, and 4-year graduation rates (Mathews, 2007).

Although teachers must understand the benefits of flexible-pacing strategies, the concept of differentiated instruction is highly successful for working with students of any educational level and intelligence. The idea of differentiating curriculum and instruction for gifted students is certainly not new to educational leaders. However, the steps to accomplish this teaching approach often are taken arbitrarily and with little uniformity or research support. Differentiated curriculum is not piling on more work for the most able students (Hess, 1999). A critical piece of this belief is to understand that as students master a particular unit, they need to be provided with more advanced learning activities, not more of the same activity. They need to be challenged and encouraged in their need for a deeper understanding and expansion of ideas (Partnership for Learning, n.d.). Teachers must establish a climate where students question, exercise independence, and use their creativity in order to expand their learning potential (Berger, 1991). Teachers also must strive to create assignments that call for original work, self-initiated projects, and experimentation (Torrance & Goff, 1990). It is the role of the administrator to work with teachers to observe, coach, and improve their teaching. However, this type of professional development is only one method used to improve instruction. Administrators also must work diligently to seek out various workshops within the school district, course offerings at neighboring colleges or universities, and professional meetings or conferences. Although all of these approaches to differentiation are additional work that keep a teacher's life routine; nonetheless, they should be expected endeavors in which all quality educators take part.

College Planning

The third struggle principals encounter when working with their most gifted students is effective college

planning. The building-level administrator must work collaboratively with the school counselor to provide an environment where students have a solid knowledge base and developmental program to help guide their decision making. This collaboration must include the awareness that many gifted students have a wide variety of interests. By focusing too early on one academic area, they may miss opportunities in other areas of their talent. A developmental program must certainly involve cohesive work with middle school counselors that broadens their students' knowledge in self-awareness, career awareness, study skills, and time management. Following this work into high school, administrators must empower their staff to help 9th- and 10th-grade students identify goals. Subsequently, by 10th grade, students become more aware of how their academic subjects, values, and goals relate to careers. In the final 2 years of high school, students must be presented with opportunities for mentor relationships, internships, and other forms of job shadowing. Although these types of activities become even more difficult to justify in an environment of high-stakes testing and increased academic core requirements, to do nothing in this arena is to do students an injustice to their future.

Program Effectiveness

A final, yet critical, component of any GT program is assessing the success and quality of the program. How do administrators truly know whether or not the program is meeting the goals of the students? To adequately answer this question, the evaluation process must focus on the goals, objectives, and strategies for gifted and talented students. The overall quantity, quality, and appropriateness of the programs and services must be assessed, and the data made public to the program decision makers. Attention in the evaluation must be paid to multiple indicators, including mastery of content, demonstration of higher level thinking skills, achievement in the specific program area(s), and affective growth. These data must be obtained from valid and reliable instruments, procedures, and information sources.

Conclusion

The concept of advancing the intellectual capacity of my brightest students often was a daunting process. From the often subjective process of identification, to the professional development activities required of teachers, to the expectation of effective college and career planning, and finally to the overall assessment of the program itself, I typically found myself in arenas where my comfort level was certainly stretched. However, as the expectation of educators continues to expand, the academic potential of the brightest students must effectively and consistently be challenged. GCT

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