

*Data-Driven Decisions in Gifted Program Management*

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This year the Center for Gifted Education undertook three local district gifted education program evaluations, two in Virginia school divisions and one in South Carolina. The privilege of having a first-hand look at the successes and difficulties involved in implementing gifted education programs in three savvy districts gave us deeper insights into the problems and challenges faced by our field. Not many districts risk having external evaluators examine their programs in depth, and those that do tend to be fairly sophisticated with able leaders who are interested in strengthening accountability to policy makers and program stakeholders. While such openness, high profile status, and resource availability are probably atypical of most gifted programs, the issues these programs must address in moving gifted education to higher levels of excellence are shared by many and reveal the complexity of the tasks at hand.

The methodology employed in these evaluations drew on multiple data sources in order to illuminate the strengths and weaknesses of these programs. Data collection strategies included questionnaires (n = 5841) for students, parents, and teachers (in two of the sites) and classroom observations (n = 171) using a structured observation form, focus group interviews (n = 64 groups) with students, parents, teachers, and administrators, and document reviews (n = 58) in all three of the sites. One site provided data on Advanced Placement (AP) scores and Preliminary Scholastic Assessment (PSAT) scores for students that had matriculated through the elementary and middle school gifted education program. These data were analyzed for trend performance.

Although the program models used in these districts varied from part-time pull-out to cluster grouping in the regular classroom to center-based programs for the gifted, there were common threads in our assessment of the issues needing attention as well as in some of the strengths apparent across sites. We saw evidence that districts had become more expansive in their identification of eligible students and that the program development emphasis was beginning to shift to the areas of curriculum and assessment.

Standards-based reform has clearly heightened the role of curriculum in meeting the needs of all learners including the academically advanced. Even in program models designed to focus on enrichment services, there is a need to show alignment between the district's standards of learning and the services that are delivered to gifted students. VanTassel-Baska (1988) has long recognized that "curriculum experiences for gifted learners need to be carefully planned, written down, and implemented in order to maximize their potential effect" (xiv), but the documentation of the ways in which instructional activities support student learning has now become a clear priority in gifted program development. **Even in programs that have had enviable curriculum units in place for several years, there is a need to rethink the focus and structure of these units in keeping with content standards and cognitive learning theory advances.** This emphasis on documenting the curriculum forces educators to think more deeply about differentiation. While we have always grappled with the hard questions about what we expect gifted students to know and do and how we will systemically assess their

progress, the requirements for interfacing and communicating with general education, to clarify points of convergence and divergence, have never been more rigorous and consequential.

This focus on curriculum development work gives us an opportunity to think through how we collect and use data for decision making. As the task demands for student learning become elevated, the assessment strategies used to measure growth become more complex. **Performance-based assessment has become increasingly important in assessing learning because it aligns the assessment protocol with higher-order content standards.** Performance-based assessments tend to provide more open-endedness in eliciting student responses and allow for greater demonstration of problem-solving and reasoning skills as applied in specific disciplines. Performance assessments are also more difficult to construct, administer, score, and validate.

These features have two pivotal consequences. **First, assessment must become more central to curriculum and program planning.** Curriculum, instruction, and assessment form a golden triangle and must be accorded equal weight in the design and implementation of services. Just as we can no longer rely on textbooks as the preordinate materials used in learning, we can no longer rely on traditional standardized tests as the sole barometer of achievement. We may have known this for some time, but we have only recently come to understand the impact of this on time, talent, and other resources.

**The second consequence is that we must become more economical in how we use data.** Data that teachers collect to assess student progress must also be analyzed to determine curriculum strengths and weaknesses. This requires aggregating the data differently, for instance, through the use of item analysis techniques, to provide formative as well as summative information. We also need to integrate our assessment strategies across grade levels so that we can begin to document program impacts. Student achievement is at the heart of student learning, but it is also a vital component of program accountability. One of the biggest challenges we face is establishing the empirical database that allows us to determine whether our programs are making a difference within and across the K-12 spectrum. Even the most sophisticated gifted programs represent fledgling efforts in terms of collecting and reporting student impact data based on performance, rather than mere perception.

**This increased emphasis on curriculum planning and student assessment as linchpins in delivering high quality services requires enhanced program management capacity.** One of the observations that struck us across all three programs was the inordinate amount of time and attention that is allocated to the identification dimension of programs, leaving few resources, fiscal or human, for other critical program functions such as curriculum design, staff development, and program evaluation. This is not a criticism of managers of gifted education programs; it is a revelation of how little investment we make in quality programs for academically able students and how unrealistic our expectations are.

**There are also reasons for optimism in gifted education, based on these evaluations. At the program level, there is greater awareness of the need for service options.** Local gifted programs, in medium to large-size districts, must offer more than one alternative to meet the diverse needs of high ability students. These options should include different grouping arrangements because one model cannot be responsive to all community needs and values. Districts that offer choice to academically advanced

students and their parents engender community support. At each of these sites, the districts had moved to an expanded menu of options for gifted and talented learners, although not all options were under the purview of the gifted program coordinator.

**Another positive development is the impact of the NAGC standards in communicating gifted program expectations.** These standards speak to the breadth of program functions as well as to the comprehensiveness and articulation of services across the system. They address instructional as well as counseling services. Coupled with the literature on best practices, they provide benchmarks for program development for the field. They are forcing us to ask harder questions of ourselves and to recognize that there is much left to be done.

**A final positive finding worth sharing is that the quality of staff in gifted programs is highly regarded by most constituencies.** Students, parents, teachers, and administrators tended to comment favorably on the level of professional working in the program, whether it was a cluster teacher, a gifted education teacher, or gifted education program staff member. In general, in our classroom observations, we, too, saw mastery of good teaching practice and attention to differentiation for gifted learners. We also observed program leaders who were dedicated, hard working, politically astute, and forward thinking. The districts received no surprises from the evaluation report and used it to crystallize a plan of action that focused on a program development agenda. We have learned much from these three evaluations about the state of the art in gifted programs as well as about the use of various data sources to assess the effectiveness of these programs. The dynamism of quality program development that always includes a healthy emphasis on program evaluation was in evidence at each site and may be considered to be a model for other program developers.

### **References**

VanTassel-Baska, J. (1988). *Comprehensive curriculum for gifted learners*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon Inc.