

Legislative Budget and Finance Committee
The Status of Special Education for
Gifted Students in the Commonwealth

Report Presentation by Dr. Maryann Nardone at December 10, 2013, Meeting

Good morning. House Resolution 2013-139 directed the Legislative Budget and Finance Committee to study the status of special education for gifted students in Pennsylvania public school districts. Gifted students have been found to have an advanced capacity for processing information quickly, learning rapidly, and reasoning well. They have also been found to be highly diverse and to have widely varying interests and strengths.

In Pennsylvania, the Public School Code includes “gifted” within the definition of “children with exceptionalities.” To be identified as “gifted” in Pennsylvania, a school age student must demonstrate outstanding intellectual and creative ability and also require specially designed instruction not ordinarily provided through a district’s regular or special education program.

We found that 4.3 percent of Pennsylvania’s public school population in 2009-10 was identified as gifted, which is in line with expectations, as nationally between 3 and 5 percent of the overall student population is identified as gifted or talented.

Pennsylvania's approach to gifted education often mirrors the approach of states nationwide and it is one of 30 states with a mandate for gifted and talented education, for identification, services, or both, according to the National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC).

Parents of gifted students in Pennsylvania responding to an LB&FC survey reported that their children in elementary school typically receive enrichment services (i.e., activities that add or go beyond the existing curriculum, according to the National Association for Gifted Children), with those in middle and high school more likely to have opportunities for accelerated learning (i.e., a strategy of progressing through education at rates faster or ages younger than the norm, according to the National Association for Gifted Children). These approaches are consistent with the approaches taken in many other states for gifted children in these various grade levels.

According to the parents responding to our survey, 83 percent of their children in elementary grades received gifted services through part-time pull-out classes, 61 percent of their children in middle school received gifted services through ability grouping or special classes of homogeneous grouped students, and 71 percent of their children in high school received services through Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate programs.

More than half (53 percent) of the parents responding to our survey reported they are satisfied with the gifted education services their children now receive, with 38 percent indicating they are not satisfied. Both groups expressed concern about the limited time their children spent in gifted classes. Parents, however, differed in their views about the gifted service models they prefer for their children, with some preferring pull-out programs and others preferring accelerated learning and increased linkage of gifted services to the school's core curriculum.

Our study also found that Pennsylvania is similar to most (37) other states in that it does not require colleges and universities with teacher training programs to include specific gifted education requirements in their programs. However, Pennsylvania is among the minority of states (21) without a specific gifted teaching certificate and/or endorsement requirement for professionals working in specialized gifted programs. The Pennsylvania Association for Gifted Education (PAGE) is concerned that without a specific gifted teaching certification requirement, especially in this time of tight budgets, school districts may assign educators with no gifted training and no training in core subject areas (e.g., English/Language Arts, Mathematics, Science, Foreign Languages, Music and Art, and Social Studies) to provide the school's gifted services.

The Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) does, however, offer certain online professional development continuing education related to gifted education, and is proceeding to include gifted education in its Pennsylvania Inspired Leadership Program (PIL). PIL is designed to provide required professional development for school leaders such as principals, and others whom research has shown are key to improved school performance.

The Pennsylvania State Board of Education's regulations also permit the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE), if requested, to approve short programs (12 credits) to be offered by baccalaureate and graduate degree granting institutions, alone or in co-operation with other institutions, that lead to a Professional Endorsement Certificate. PDE reports, however, that no institutions currently offer such a program for gifted education.

With regard to teacher qualifications, we recommend that PDE consider encouraging the development of a Program Endorsement Certificate in gifted education; consider revising its current policies to require those working in gifted education to hold instructional certificates in core subject areas such as math, English, or the sciences; and explore options to facilitate additional online professional development for gifted educators.

Pennsylvania also differs from most states in that its approach to serving gifted students is strongly influenced by approaches used in special education services for children with disabilities. Some advocates for gifted children have been reluctant to modify state regulations they view as possibly offering protections similar to those provided in federal law and regulations for children with disabilities. State Board of Education regulations, for example, require public schools evaluate their students for eligibility for gifted services when requested by parents even if there is evidence from prior testing or other performance data that the child is not likely to be gifted. Each evaluation can cost over \$2,000, and Pennsylvania is one of only six states that require evaluation based only on a parent's request.

In addition, public school districts with rigorous and advanced curriculum offerings to promote critical thinking (e.g., subject integrated classes) and creativity (e.g., project-based learning to solve real world problems) as part of their "regular" curriculum are still expected to comply with highly detailed requirements for evaluations and individual plans for gifted students (GIEPs). For school districts that provide advanced "regular" curriculum offerings that meet the needs of most gifted students, the development of individual GIEPs may not be necessary for all students.

We recommend the State Board of Education revise its regulations regarding required evaluations that place costly and unnecessary burdens on school districts.

We also recommend that PDE, which currently grants waivers for “experimental programs,” consider granting waivers to school districts that demonstrate their advanced “regular” curriculum can meet the needs of gifted students.

With regard to funding, Pennsylvania public school districts expend over \$110 million annually for gifted education services—an amount over and above districts’ expenditures for basic education for these students. With about 70,000 gifted students statewide, this equates to about \$1,600 per gifted student statewide. It is not possible, however, to tell how much of this funding is from the state’s Basic Education appropriation, the state’s Special Education for Exceptional Children appropriation, or from local sources. The 2007 costing out study requested by the Pennsylvania General Assembly found that school districts do incur certain added costs when educating gifted students with additional costs on the order of 20 to 60 percent. In recognition of these additional costs, therefore, we recommend the General Assembly continue to allow school districts to use the existing state Special Education for Exceptional Children appropriation for gifted education services.

We thank the Pennsylvania Department of Education and the State Board of Education for assisting our work. In particular, we thank the leadership and staff in the Office of Elementary/Secondary Education’s Bureau of Teaching and Learning and Bureau of Special Education, and PDE’s Office of Administration’s Center for Data Quality and Information Technology.

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