



Advocacy for Gifted and Talented in New York

Blending a Middle School Magnet Program for Gifted Students with a Regular Middle School

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School after school across this country is faced with the challenge of providing programs that serve the needs of their gifted population and have the support of the district faculty and staff. In the past, programs for the gifted often became isolated and separate from the rest of educational programming (Feldhusen 1992; Borland 1996; Tomlinson et al. 1996). School districts relied on providing one type of program for all students identified as gifted; the pullout or resource room model was the most common (Treffinger 1991). Gifted students were limited to the services provided by the resource room. The curriculum and activities of the program had little or no relationship to the rest of the student's educational program.

The 1990s brought with them a rethinking of the concept of giftedness and the development of a new paradigm for delivering services to gifted students (Feldman 1991; Treffinger 1995; Borland 1996; Callahan 1996; Renzulli and Purcell 1996). In this new paradigm, students are given a variety of choices and opportunities for developing and nurturing their varied talents and abilities. The instruction and services are matched to the specific talents and abilities of the individual student (Shore et al. 1991). Educators of the gifted have been given the challenge of providing appropriate programs for gifted students while building partnerships with regular education programs (VanTassel-Baska 1993; Tomlinson et al. 1996). Schools continue looking for ways to effectively serve the needs of their gifted students while blending their program with the regular school program (Treffinger 1982).

Webster Intermediate School (near Houston, Tex.) is an example of a blended program that has put into practice many of the ideas promoted in the new paradigm of gifted education. In the spring of 1995, the Clear Creek Independent School District was in the process of developing a magnet program for its gifted middle level population. This magnet was designed to function as a comprehensive program for gifted students by providing services in all content areas, giving opportunities for ongoing interdisciplinary research, and including a component on the affective development. In addition, the magnet needed to attract bright students from the newer campuses in the district to an older school that serves a culturally diverse, low socioeconomic status population. The board of trustees for the school district stressed their desire that this program would not only serve the gifted but also benefit the regular Webster Intermediate student population. An examination of the program after its first year of operation provides a clear picture of how to design a program for the gifted that has a positive impact on an entire school.

The Program Design

The magnet program is designed for gifted students in grades 6-8. The morning starts with a non-graded multiple-choice block of time. Some students pursue independent study, while others work on areas of interest in small groups. The middle of the day is set aside for electives. The afternoon is filled with the core content area classes.

The schedule for each student is very flexible. Last October several students in the seventh grade algebra preparatory class requested a regular algebra class. A test was given to any student in the school who wanted to try for the algebra class. Nine students qualified. When these students moved into a regular algebra class, sixth graders in the school were encouraged to apply for the algebra preparatory class. Changes were made in the schedule of any student who qualified for either of the moves.

The facilitator of the magnet program for the gifted set up support groups that met throughout the year to discuss issues related to giftedness. The purpose of these groups was to gain a better understanding of giftedness and to solve some of the problems encountered through related issues that arise in or out of school.

The teaching staff for the magnet program for the gifted represents the five core areas of English/language arts, science, social studies/history, mathematics, and technology. Each teacher provides classes within his or her area of expertise as well as several electives. All are also involved in interdisciplinary teaching and team for special projects with teachers from the regular school faculty.

Integrating the Magnet Program and the Regular School Program

The easiest and most obvious place to begin the integration of the two groups of students was through music and art electives. Fifty percent of the gifted students in the magnet program became members of the school band, 24 percent joined the school orchestra, and 30 percent became active in the art department's activities.

Teachers from the regular school faculty and the gifted magnet staff offered elective courses that were open to students from either group. Entrance was by interest and prior knowledge. Some of the electives that attracted a mix of gifted and regular students included environmental science, car repair, mystery reading and writing, marine biology, and self-powered vehicles.

In the content areas, students are placed at the level most appropriate for their abilities. A student in the magnet program does not have to be accelerated in every course, only those for which he or she has the ability and chooses acceleration. Students from the regular student body who have the ability for acceleration in specific content areas can choose to be in the accelerated class even though they are not identified as gifted.

There are also cooperative learning situations where students from the magnet program and students from the regular student body work together, but with different responsibilities. One example of a joint project involved a class on trials and the jury system, and their impact on society. The students studied jury cases in light of the U.S. Constitution. They also learned about the investigative process that must precede a trial. A detective added to the study by sharing the importance of accuracy in investigations and the skills that produce the best investigative work. The history and theater arts teachers cooperated in this venture. The theater arts students acted out a crime, while the students studying the investigative process tested their investigative skills. Together they discussed the portrayal and the investigation.

The school was also part of a NASA (National Aeronautics and Space Administration) endeavor labeled SAXophone, which linked students from around the globe together through the use of technology. Each month there was a different project assigned by NASA. The students who were interested in the project signed up to work for the month with the teacher assigned to the project. On a designated day students traveled to NASA to link up with students from across the United States

plus a few foreign countries. Since the projects were quite varied, students from both the magnet and the regular student body signed up throughout the year. Some of the projects were as follows:

- * A discussion of different types of government and legislative bodies
- * A study in characterization, plot, and the use of metaphor using the novel *The Giver* by Lois Lowry
- * A study of imagination featuring the book *The Merlin Effect* by Tom Barron
- * A simulation in global terrorism where different sites were assigned different roles in a global terrorism event
- * An international concert in which students from around the world perform the same musical selection simultaneously through a satellite hookup.

Whole School Opportunities

An effort was made by the administration and teachers of both the magnet and the regular school to plan events that would include everyone. The goal was to help all students in the school feel like one student body and one school. During the first year, three special events were held as well as numerous assemblies and school sharing times. The following special events were very effective in promoting a oneness in the school.

Fine Arts Show

At the end of the first six weeks of school, the students put on a fine arts show. Students from both the magnet program and the regular school population participated. It was a show by students for students. Some students exhibited works of art, while others shared original compositions or participated in small stage performances. The band, orchestra, and choir all performed. Students could witness and appreciate the diversity of the student body. They cheered for each other and clapped enthusiastically. This event, held early in the year, helped tremendously to merge the magnet with the regular student body.

Marvelous Monday

The facilitator of the magnet program for the gifted took on the responsibility of organizing enrichment seminars for the entire student body. Every teacher from the regular program and the magnet program designed a seminar that could be offered during a Monday afternoon to a small group of students. Parents and resource people from outside the school were also enlisted to offer high-quality seminars that covered a variety of interests. The goal was to offer seminars that would mix the magnet and regular school students through a shared interest. The topics ranged from "Learning Basic Latin" to "Creating a Data Base on the Computer."

Go Texas Day

In late January, a special day was planned to acquaint the students with the history and culture of Texas. It served as a culmination for the students who had spent the first part of the year studying Texas history. Students took part in large and small-group activities that included a cowboy author, a Native American explaining the culture and food of Native Americans in the early days of Texas and now, and close-up experiences with a variety of live animals from farms and ranches. The day ended with a school-wide assembly of music and dance representing the various cultures of Texas.

Program Results

Each year students in the state of Texas are given the TAAS (Texas Assessment of Academic Skills) Test as a measure of their academic achievement. Prior to the magnet program, the percentage of students passing the TAAS was between 65 and 75 percent. At the end of the first year of the magnet program, the scores (excluding the scores of the magnet program students) were 80 percent and above. The reasons for these academic jumps can be found in the following comments of the teachers:

"The gifted magnet students have added a positive attitude toward learning to our school."

"The gifted magnet has invigorated and revitalized our school."

"The gifted magnet program has inspired more innovative teaching in all our classrooms."

"The gifted magnet students bring a contagious excitement for learning and thoughtful interactions to the electives."

An analysis of the results of a year-end survey mailed to the parents of students participating in the gifted magnet program revealed strong support for the program. None of the parents felt their child had a weakened program because of the blending of the magnet and the regular school program. In fact, many parents felt this was the strength of the program, as some of their comments so indicate:

"Our child likes the flexibility to participate in activities that involve the whole school."

I am glad to see students have the opportunity to exchange classes for the gifted with regular classes. I am glad to see that there is not a universal schedule for the students in the magnet program."

"The magnet program has provided gifted students with challenging academics without isolating them from regular students."

"I like the movement of students between gifted classrooms and regular classrooms when it is appropriate."

Conclusions

The magnet program for the gifted at this middle level school has illustrated in a real way that such a program can be a part of a regular school program without sacrificing excellence for the gifted students or lessening the quality of the regular school program. A program for the gifted that is planned for widespread effect can benefit all the students in a school, not just the identified gifted students. This is the result of moving the focus from serving the gifted students to providing a variety of quality learning opportunities.

Any student who has the interest, knowledge, and skills necessary may choose one or more of these opportunities. In addition, the magnet program integrated components into their program that allowed for attention to the affective development of the gifted students and opportunities for independent study. This endeavor is an example of a program that is driven by student needs, not schedules or teacher needs.-B