

Best Practices for Determining Eligibility for Gifted Programs

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IN THIS BRIEF | WHAT CONSTITUTES “GIFTEDNESS” | LIMITATIONS WITH CURRENT SYSTEM | UNDERREPRESENTATION ISSUES
| UPDATED PRACTICES FOR DETERMINING ELIGIBILITY

Districts often spend a sizeable amount of resources on programs for students that require additional supports due to learning difficulties or disabilities. However, in recent years the literature has begun to emphasize the benefits of identifying “gifted” students as well, and providing them with tailored learning opportunities^[1,2]. While there is no widely accepted definition for giftedness, many schools across the country are considering how they can implement such programs in their own districts to further develop students with exceptional academic capacity^[1].

CURRENT IDENTIFICATION SYSTEM

The National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC) has stated that many districts utilize parent and teacher referrals when championing high achieving students^[3]. Following a referral, students are then formally assessed, which typically involves the administration of an IQ assessment such as the Wechsler’s FSIQ test^[4]. Following the passage of the Marland Report in 1972 which called for professional input in the identification of gifted students, school psychologists (experts in administering assessments) have become instrumental in this process^[2]. Many schools now require that referrals from a parent or teacher be sent to the school psychologist for testing. This usually includes the psychologist administering an IQ test and comparing the student’s score to the standard, global benchmarks^[2]. Students whose IQ ranks at the 98th or 99th percentile on these assessments are then considered gifted and recommended for programs^[2].

LIMITATIONS WITH CURRENT SYSTEM

These longstanding identification methods have recently faced scrutiny and criticism due to striking limitations. Assessments completed using the Weschler’s FSIQ have recently been determined to be innately flawed due to inflexible and fixed cut-off scores^[2]. Following this finding, it was discovered that approximately 20% of students are missed by the current system because those who would have scored highly on gifted assessments are never referred for them^[4]. Further, school psychologists - the experts that many districts rely upon for administering and scoring gifted assessments – reported in 2011 that their graduate programs did not provide them with adequate training to accurately assess these high-achieving students^[4].

In addition to these findings, it was also uncovered that the majority of students that are negatively affected by these limitations come from traditionally underrepresented student populations. These include those that are culturally, linguistically, and/or economically diverse (CLED), as well as students identified as “twice exceptional”^[4]. The term “twice exceptional” refers to students that are highly knowledgeable but are not typically regarded as gifted due to a physical, mental, or emotional disability^[4]. This is problematic for many reasons, but largely because of the stark growth of CLED and twice-exceptional student representation in schools in recent years. Indeed, the 2010 census predicted using demographic projections that over 50% of American children will come from diverse families in 2020^[1]. As such, districts must acknowledge this discrepancy in gifted assessment and develop innovative ways to nurture high-achieving academic talent from all students.

CLED STUDENT UNDERREPRESENTATION

Researchers found that a primary cause of underrepresentation in gifted programs for both CLED and twice exceptional students is a lack of educators of color^[5]. As previously mentioned, the most common identification processes require a teacher or parent referral, and due to a lack of teachers of color in many school districts, students of color are less frequently referred for gifted assessments^[5]. This was explained by one author, who described that “teachers of the same race as their students are more likely to perceive their students favorably than teachers of a different race”^[5]. CLED and twice-exceptional students are also frequently underrepresented in gifted programs due to poor school conditions in low-income communities, insufficient funding for gifted programs at schools with higher populations of minority students, a lack of cultural knowledge by educators, and even familial living conditions^[5].

For many individuals living in poverty, nutrition is a major concern, which has been found to have implications for reduced academic achievement^[5]. Additionally, higher-income parents have been found to speak with more complex conversational patterns at home, further developing their children’s language capacity in ways that are not always present in lower-income households^[5]. Students who come from lower-income families also often lack access to the range of extracurricular educational opportunities that their higher-income peers receive^[4]. Due to these systemic and cultural

problems, teachers frequently overlook the potential of CLED and twice-exceptional students^[5].

UPDATED PRACTICES FOR ELIGIBILITY SCREENING

CHANGES TO TESTING PROCEDURES

Improved methods of determining eligibility for gifted programs include creating pathways that encompass diversity and inclusion^[2]. The NAGC suggests that the traditional method of using FSIQ test scores is too stringent in determining eligibility. They have recently introduced new methods of identification using tests provided by Wechsler's Intelligence Scale for Children, fifth edition (WISC-V) with more flexible guidelines^[2]. There are seven tests under the WISC-V that are recommended for schools to identify gifted students, including the Verbal Expanded Crystallized Index, Nonverbal Index, Expanded Fluid Index, Full Scale IQ score, General Ability Index, Expanded General Ability Index, and the Quantitative Reasoning Index^[2]. The authors argue that teacher referrals may still be used with caution to reduce overlooking potentially gifted students^[2]. Instead of relying on self-report, a useful tool to aid in data-based referrals is the Teacher Observation of Potential in Students (TOPS) - a tool that assists teachers in systematically observing and recording academic strengths of students^[2].

ADDRESSING SYSTEMIC AND CULTURAL CONCERNS

Another approach is to accommodate to the specific needs of CLED students to reach their full potential so that they are considered for gifted programs^[2]. In a study by Mun et al. (2021), researchers gathered feedback from teachers about maintaining equity in identification of gifted students. One teacher spoke about how the hardships faced by students with low-SES become obstacles to exhibiting their full potential. Sharing that "...sometimes that hard background kind of masks their abilities. So, we've been working really hard to help them overcome that"^[1].

Recommending and assessing a larger number of students would result in more CLED students being included in these programs^[4]. As previously mentioned, FSIQ test scores are compared to the global IQ score which has implications for overlooking some students due to the school's overall quality and IQ capacity^[4]. A solution for this would be to compare test scores locally between students at the same school, which would provide higher equity in assessment^[4]. In addition to changes in testing, diversifying the teaching workforce would greatly benefit CLED students as they will have a greater chance of being referred into appropriate programs^[4].

DISTRICT-LEVEL CONSIDERATIONS

A multifaceted approach to district-level reform shows promise in mending the achievement gap and addressing the underrepresentation of CLED students^[1]. The literature describes core competencies that can address these largescale issues, such as building systemic capacity, developing effective instructional leadership, refocusing the school organization, establishing policy coherence, and maintaining an equity focus^[1]. Systemic capacity refers to an

organization's ability to work together toward a common goal^[1]. In further developing systemic capacity, districts work together to change institutional practices, processes, and ultimately, beliefs^[1]. Instructional leadership includes a coalition of efforts through planning and communication and would require district leaders to focus their efforts across the entire district^[1]. Refocusing the organization means leaders would need to reevaluate the core values of the district, assuring that the structures in place to ensure good educational programming are aligned^[1]. Establishing Policy Coherence requires incorporating policies into the district's approaches and goals to achieve resource alignment^[1]. Lastly, maintaining an equity focus requires the district to identify past inequities within the system and to address the injustices of exclusion of CLED and twice-exceptional students^[1]. Programs moving toward equity should place diversity of both experiences and backgrounds at the forefront, and incorporate culturally inclusive teaching methods, professional development for teachers on the needs of diverse gifted students, and implement culture-fair identification techniques^[1].

INCORPORATING RTI

Response to Intervention (RTI) is a widely-used and effective educational intervention system that includes universal and targeted screening, as well as resource allocation for students that require supplemental academic supports^[6]. While popular for addressing academic deficits, the traditional 3-tiered RTI framework was amended by one public elementary school to also include gifted students which they referred to as the "diamond model"^[6]. Built on top of RTI practices, the Diamond model consists of 5 tiers (one general education, two "intervention", and two "enrichment") that serve to "(a) provide academic stimulation for high achievers, (b) allow a flexible intervention structure for those who struggled academically or behaviorally, and (c) permit students who exhibited more complex combinations of strengths and needs (e.g., those with learning disabilities or autism spectrum disorders) to remain academically engaged throughout the school day"^[6]. This model can be applied to more schools across the country – many of which already utilize RTI – as an effective addition to the identification of high-achieving students and the implementation of thriving gifted programs.

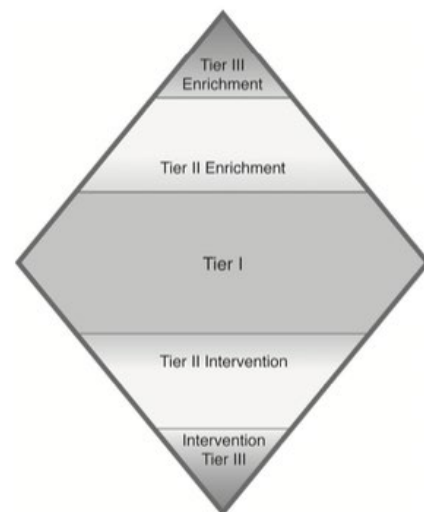


Figure 1: Diamond Model^[6]

FUNDING FOR GIFTED PROGRAMS

While the federal government does not provide specific funds for gifted and talented programs, education for gifted students is commonly funded with money allotted by the state^[3]. Many states only offer gifted education in communities that can provide services without the help of the state or federal government, which is mostly higher-income communities^[3]. However, the NAGC has pushed for federal funding through the Jacob K. Javits Gifted and Talented Students education Act, which uses its resources for identifying and supporting minority, CLED, and twice exceptional students who are underrepresented to reduce the achievement gaps and provide equal educational opportunities.

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