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# Increasing Diversity in Gifted Education Programs in Virginia

2017 REPORT

VIRGINIA ADVISORY COMMITTEE FOR THE EDUCATION OF THE GIFTED (VACEG)

VIRGINIA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

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## Introduction

In July 2015, the Virginia Board of Education charged the Virginia Advisory Committee for the Education of the Gifted (VACEG) with investigating best practices for approaches to the identification of gifted students that better promote equity and opportunity across all student demographic groups. The following areas of investigation were noted:

- Gifted student identification models that satisfy the requirements for best practices in accordance with the regulations and demonstrate exemplary services in identifying gifted students, especially in the middle school grades, to promote equity and opportunity across all student demographic groups.
- Information on identification processes gathered through school division site visits in order to conduct interviews, observations, and research.
- Programs, policies, or procedures that are in place as support mechanisms for the identification models.
- Outstanding factors that promote equitable identification processes in specific school division settings.

This document was designed to assist school divisions in reviewing their gifted program's process of identification to develop practices that promote equity across all demographic groups. In developing this document, VACEG researched multiple school divisions across the Commonwealth and found many areas that supported diversity in identification. In order to promote equitable identification practices, the committee found that school divisions should be aware of multiple areas or categories that impact the gifted identification process. The five major categories were: referral process, talent development, changes to identification practices, professional development, and parent education.

## Research and Data Collection

The VACEG brainstormed various ideas about the charge they were given by the Board of Education. The committee decided to send a survey to gifted education coordinators from each school division to ascertain their insights with regard to issues of diversity in their gifted education program. The survey asked coordinators for progress in identifying diverse populations of students for each division's gifted education program. Of the 132 school divisions, 103 gifted education coordinators returned electronic survey results. The VACEG also reviewed student enrollment data over a three-year period for each school division. School divisions that showed an increasing trend in diversity were marked for further investigation. Investigations took the form of phone interviews, document investigations, and/or site visits.

Enrollment data from 2012-2014 were obtained from Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) records on the number of students in gifted programs and the number of students across each division disaggregated by ethnicity and special populations (i.e., English as a Second Language (ESL), disadvantaged, disabled, and migrant). In order to understand trends in gifted identification, percentages were calculated by subgroup in the gifted population (e.g., all gifted Hispanic students) and were compared to the percentage of the same sub-group in the overall population of students (e.g., all Hispanic students). The VACEG discussed using Dr. Donna Ford's Equity Index, which is based on the U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights' 20 percent equity threshold rule, to determine a reasonable goal for showing increasing diversity in gifted populations. School divisions that showed increasing levels of identification, either over the three-year data period or a representative increase in the last year, were designated for further investigation. The 27 divisions that met the criteria varied in

geographic location and included both rural and urban populations.

Finally, the 27 divisions were examined for strong alignment in one or more of the ethnicity and special populations categories. Fourteen (14) divisions were highlighted under ethnicity and thirteen (13) divisions were highlighted under special populations. Since no divisions showed strong identification alignment with large numbers of students under the category of migrant, that category was dropped from the special populations list.

For the 27 school divisions identified, investigations included phone interviews, document investigations, and/or site visits. Seven school divisions were chosen for site visits, which included conversations with gifted education teams, local advisory committees, resource teachers, parents, and/or administrators. Based on all of the information gathered from the 27 school divisions, the VACEG organized the data into five areas of focus: referral process, talent development, changes to identification practices, professional development, and parent education. Each area was reviewed for consistencies and differences and then findings were summarized. Specific school division names were not used in this report, as the intent of the report was to highlight practices that are making a difference, not specific divisions.

### **Increasing Diversity: Referral Process**

Establishing an equitable referral process is an integral part of increasing diversity in gifted education. Many schools use quantitative measures to universally screen students such as administering the Cognitive Abilities Test (CogAT) or Naglieri Nonverbal Ability Test (NNAT) across a single grade level. However, more diverse programs incorporate qualitative data into the screening processes such as the use of U-STARS TOPS folders (a checklist of behavioral indicators of giftedness developed by the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill). In some divisions, collaboration between gifted resource and classroom teachers enables both professionals to document anecdotal notes as valuable additional evidence. This documentation is maintained from year-to-year on all students to allow for decisions based on longitudinal data.

Actively promoting an open-access referral process, whereby classroom teachers, parents, students, or community members recommend students for gifted identification, contributes to more diverse referrals. Effective communication and publicizing information is key to including multiple stakeholders in the referral process. Faculty and staff meetings specifically addressing underrepresented populations in the referral process serve as an effective practice. For example, one division hosts a luncheon lab and addresses topics like 'the referral process' and 'what is giftedness in our division?'. Dedicated parent and community meetings specifically address the referral and identification process. Some meetings are part of a back-to-school night, while other meetings are part of a Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) event.

Success is notable when using a holistic approach in the review of referrals to remove factors such as poverty and twice exceptionality that traditionally tend to remove students from consideration. Individual student circumstances and life experiences are carefully weighed as various factors that could negatively impact collected data. Insights from a school psychologist also prove helpful in understanding assessment measures.

### **Increasing Diversity: Talent Development**

One popular strategy for increasing the diversity of students in gifted education programs across the Commonwealth is the use of a talent pool process. A talent pool provides high-ability students an environment that appropriately engages, develops, and nurtures individual talent through the use of strategies, practices, and tools that support gifted learners. This environment provides a setting for students to grow in their abilities, with the potential to be identified as gifted. Like the term “talent pool,” some divisions also use the term “monitor status” as a designation for students who do not meet the criteria for official identification. It means that the students show enough potential indicators of giftedness to warrant some supportive curriculum and instruction as a means of gathering more data on that student's ability to perform on above grade-level tasks. Some talent pool selection processes are enhanced through the use of local norms and percentages of diverse populations during the selection screening. Talent pools often have labels such as Young Scholars or Emerging Scholars Initiative, while other divisions choose not to label these programs.

Popular screening instruments to create talent pools are the CogAT, NNAT, and U-STARS TOPS folders. Some divisions generate locally developed teacher observation instruments to gather more than a single snapshot of a child's abilities, particularly in the visual and performing arts programs. Such instruments also build a teacher's knowledge base in recognizing potential characteristics of giftedness. One division's gifted coordinator remarked that her staff members shifted their focus to view students as ‘at-potential’ rather than ‘at-risk’. They are consequently providing a foundation for nurturing, recognizing, and responding to the needs of children from educationally vulnerable populations.

In divisions with more diverse populations, talent development programs are designed to fill the content exposure and academic experience gaps for potential gifted students. Many programs focus on critical thinking skills, enriching experiences through hands-on learning, and academic vocabulary. The classroom environment within these programs is nurturing, and the instructional techniques emphasize teacher or peer modeling. One frequent approach to curriculum design for talent development programs is to incorporate a project-based model and/or problem-based model. These models provide more opportunities for all students to advance their critical thinking skills, encourage areas of interest, and build their talents.

In addition, students with high potential need role models to further their talents. Peer modeling, an important component of intellectual development, is accomplished through careful program planning. In divisions with designated resource teachers, there are often collaborative teaching models, not only serving the students, but also developing teacher capacity for working with at-potential gifted students. Other divisions make effective use of cluster grouping models. Some divisions place talent pool students in classrooms with gifted students and provide pull-out services for both groups concurrently. Other divisions provide pull-out or push-in services particularly targeting the talent pool students to help close experience gaps.

One division has developed a three-tiered approach to curriculum in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) that not only serves students, but also helps in the identification of students for the talent pool. Tier I of the STEM curriculum is delivered through the general education classroom to all students. Tier II is a pull-out instructional model that includes both students identified for gifted services and students who show potential for needing the same services. Students who excel in the hands-on STEM curriculum at the Tier I level are added to Tier II with students already identified as gifted. Tier III provides an Individualized Educational Plan (IEP) with specific goals for developing the talents of each student.

An important component of successful talent development programs is effective communication with parents. Some divisions have a booklet or document that is given to parents to outline the expectations of the talent pool or to explain monitoring status in relationship to gifted service options, as well as a time frame for reevaluation for gifted identification. If the decision to place the child in a talent pool precedes official referral for gifted education services, the division's policies and procedures for identification need to be transparent.

In addition to communication, a school division should be mindful of external perceptions. A gifted program should proportionately reflect the diversity of the community. An example of one division that has effectively addressed this perception concern did so through carefully creating identification guidelines that focus on each subgroup within its population. Through consultation with a university, the division developed a program to specifically increase the number of referrals from underserved populations. The consultant recommended that the division administer the CogAT to every first-grade student in the school division so that there was a common measure from which to develop local norms. The top ten percent of each subgroup were referred for gifted screening. For example, the top ten percent of African-American students in the verbal or quantitative category would be identified for talent development, the top ten percent of the Hispanic population in those areas, etc. The division also screened for poverty. They did not screen for twice exceptional learners, because this does not fit a statistical model. Once identified for talent development, these students receive enrichment from the gifted resource teacher assigned to the school.

### **Increasing Diversity: Changes to Identification Practices**

School divisions across the Commonwealth have updated their identification process in a concentrated effort to understand the whole child. Collaborative teamwork is necessary to examine multiple criteria in the identification process to ensure students' needs are met for advanced academic opportunities beyond the general classroom curriculum.

A number of divisions are working to expand the variety of components they consider as part of the identification process. In addition, some school divisions have developed a more flexible process to ensure a more equitable consideration of previously underserved populations. Employing multiple criteria, considering a variety of testing instruments, and implementing identification safety nets further improve the identification process.

The [Virginia Regulations Governing the Education of Gifted Students](#) require multiple criteria to identify gifted learners (please refer to Regulations for a detailed listing of the criteria). Identification criteria may include teacher/parent checklists, nationally normed test scores, grades, portfolios, observations, and student interviews. One criterion that has become more popular is the student interview. It is especially helpful if a student possesses strong verbal abilities, but may not test well. The interviewer observes and records the student's responses in writing. The responses are evaluated for the use of advanced vocabulary, the ability to convey thoughts verbally, and other demonstrated gifted characteristics.

Based on best practices as identified by the National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC) and the Virginia Regulations, it is important to review data collection for an equitable procedural approach to identification. Members of identification committees should be trained on the characteristics of gifted learners and the holistic approach to gifted identification that the school division has embraced, with special focus on the identification of underserved populations within the division. This approach focuses on the whole child, as well as examining data from multiple sources and perspectives as noted below:

- Checklists with multiple criteria used by teachers who have received training on recognizing

- giftedness in underrepresented populations;
- Checklists that parents and family can use to assess their children in their homes and in community settings;
- Valid and reliable assessment instruments for gifted students;
- Student interviews;
- Evaluation of work samples.

The selection of testing instruments is also highly important, as many tests used to determine giftedness may be biased towards certain groups of students. There are a variety of testing instruments used across Virginia to identify gifted students. Many school systems find the use of nonverbal instruments to be beneficial in identifying giftedness in underrepresented populations. Some of the most commonly used nonverbal tests include NNAT-3, Universal Nonverbal Intelligence Test-Second Edition (UNIT-2), and Raven's Progressive Matrices.

School divisions must take a close look at students who narrowly miss being identified as gifted and provide a safety net in the identification process to assist in their development. These safety nets allow school divisions to look beyond the original criteria. A few of these safety nets include:

- Allowing a previous year's teacher or another staff member who has worked with the student to complete a teacher recommendation form, if other criterion is supportive.
- Permitting an alternate test to be used if it better matches the learner's profile.
- Providing a talent development program that allows for students who have demonstrated high academic performance in grades or through testing, to be placed in a cluster group with identified gifted students and monitored throughout the year.

### **Increasing Diversity: Professional Development**

National research has found that adequate professional development is central to the effectiveness and success of a gifted program. The NAGC recommends that divisions and schools provide teachers with professional development training that stresses the learning characteristics of underrepresented gifted populations, awareness of cultural differences, understanding of students with multiple exceptionalities, and the use of equitable and non-biased assessments. Another essential component of identifying underrepresented gifted students is training teachers to recognize their own biases, enlightening them about local communities, and recognizing how talents appear in various cultures. In order to adequately review the identification process, data disaggregation at all levels of the identification process is an essential component of effective professional development.

Findings of this report indicate a variety of delivery modes for professional development throughout Virginia. Several divisions provide specific professional development opportunities in gifted education such as webinars, online courses, and discussion boards for administrators, teachers, and staff. Other divisions host workshops for administrators, teachers, and staff at both the building and division levels on a variety of gifted education topics. Train-the-trainer sessions, peer coaching models, grade level meetings, and book studies are among some of the different ways information is communicated and disseminated. A variety of modes for delivery of local gifted education content allows for teacher flexibility, teacher reflection, and collaboration. Finally, several school divisions also support teacher and administrator participation in gifted education endorsement programs through universities and colleges and at state and national gifted conferences. School divisions typically implement a combination of several professional development opportunities.

### **Increasing Diversity: Parent Education**

Parent education has a significant role in increasing diversity within gifted education programs. Parent education informs parents about the gifted identification process, gifted curricula, extension and enrichment opportunities, as well as effectively advocating for their gifted child. In the statewide survey, school divisions mentioned a variety of effective practices being implemented to increase parent education of gifted students, services, and policy.

One best practice for increasing diversity is the Gifted Education Advisory Committee. Although an advisory committee is not required by the Virginia Regulations, survey findings indicate that it is an authentic means of connecting with parents and generating a broad spectrum of advocates and stakeholders. The recommendations of the Advisory Committee's annual review of the local gifted plan are reported directly to the division's school board, and therefore can greatly impact practice and policy.

Providing parents with informational sessions is another best practice; these sessions may be both formal and informal in delivery and may be tailored to meet the unique needs of culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse populations. The survey highlighted one division's formal parent workshop session that included a keynote speaker who focused on the unique needs of underrepresented populations. Parents were given the opportunity to attend additional breakout sessions on topics such as twice-exceptional learners, underachieving gifted learners, and giftedness and English language learners. Other divisions utilize their Parent Teacher Associations/Organization meetings as settings for formal information sessions on topics such as gifted characteristics and distinguishing between gifted and high-achieving students. Informal parent information sessions prove to be equally effective outreach methods. Some divisions host daytime coffee, an afternoon chat and chew, or an easily accessible drop-in parent information center located within the schools.

The practice with the broadest potential for parent education is the parent communiqués via traditional and virtual formats. The survey reveals the impact of one division's ability to reach their diverse population through the translation of its gifted education newsletter in four different languages. Several divisions also use automated telephone communication to inform parents of available opportunities and events targeted for gifted learners. Multiple divisions provide copies of their local gifted plan, referral forms, and parent checklists in multiple languages. In addition, technology provides divisions with unique opportunities to reach all parents through gifted education websites, gifted education blogs, and multiple social media platforms.

Increasing diversity through parent education is paramount to the effort to reach a broad spectrum of students in need of gifted education services. By empowering and informing parents, they can effectively advocate for the needs of their children. The practices revealed in the survey illustrate the varied approaches that divisions use to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse population of learners.

### **Summary**

Identification and placement should be a comprehensive process set by the local school division that encompasses procedures, materials, and personnel for successful identification practices across schools and student groups. Implementation of this process with fidelity is critical for the integrity of the gifted program. The research for this report showed that many school divisions were taking positive steps in the identification of students, leading to more equitable representation in gifted programs.

Five areas of focus were included in this report as best practices to the approach of identification of gifted students for equity and opportunity across all demographic groups. Each of these focus areas shared useful examples that are currently implemented in school divisions throughout Virginia. Shared



practices across all focus areas highlight the importance of a holistic approach to gifted student identification including using qualitative data, as well as increasing collaborations, communications, and multistakeholder input and involvement. In terms of the referral process, divisions should consider how they could involve more stakeholders and more decision-making evidence into the process. Next, talent development is a strategy that can help shift our understanding of students from 'at-risk' to 'at-potential'. This can be accomplished through the design of instruments and programs that universally fosters talent for all students. Then, changes to identification practices should include expanded processes with multiple criteria from multiple sources, as well as instruments that reduce bias. In order to successfully address identification practices, professional development is necessary to provide a divisionwide understanding of underrepresented gifted populations and the ways to support student success. Lastly, through parent education opportunities, diverse populations can become more aware of services and policies related to gifted education. It is up to each school division to identify those best practices that can be implemented in their division to increase the diversity in their gifted education programs.