

Revisiting the *Gifted in the 21st Century Task Force Report*

WHERE ARE WE NOW?

By Eric Calvert

In 2002, then State Superintendent of Public Instruction Susan Tave Zelman convened a gifted education task force to conduct a comprehensive review of the state of gifted education in Ohio, identify improvement opportunities and barriers and make action recommendations to the State Board of Education.

Eight years later, current State Superintendent Deborah Delisle is preparing to convene a new gifted advisory council to address the implications of a new education funding model and develop gifted performance indicators for districts. Given the 21st century theme of this issue of the *OAGC Review*, this is an ideal time to revisit the *Gifted in the 21st Century Task Force Report*, recognize areas of progress, identify persistent challenges and reflect on lessons learned as the state embarks on a new era of reform.

Below are the seven key findings of the 2002 *Gifted in the 21st Century Task Force Report*, copied verbatim, along with a brief assessment of progress related to each finding. You can find the report at www.oagc.com/files/Gifted21stCenturyreport.pdf.

Finding 1: Policy. *Policies at both the state and local levels should promote educational opportunities for children who are gifted. Many local board of education policies present barriers to best practices in the education of children who are gifted. Further, some state procedures and other policies may be detrimental to the provision of services for these children.*

Most progress in this area has related to academic acceleration. Whereas in 2002 most districts had policies against acceleration, the adoption of an acceleration mandate in 2005 and the subsequent adoption of a state model acceleration policy in 2006 pushed schools and the state to reexamine policies on early admission to kindergarten, grade promotion and retention, prerequisites and high school graduation. (Recent data, however, also show that although access to acceleration has improved, progress has not been universal. This suggests that a strong policy in support of acceleration is an essential, but not by itself sufficient, ingredient for progress.)

More recently, a provision in the Ohio Core Standards legislation has directed the ODE and the State Board of Education to develop a credit flexibility plan and required districts to provide options for students to earn credit based on demonstration of mastery (rather than seat time). Although credit flexibility is not specifically a gifted education policy, it has great potential to benefit gifted students. Although the state and many districts have been allowed to provide educational options provisions on the books for years—allowing students to earn credit through mentorships, internships, independent studies, educational travel and online programs—few students been encouraged to take advantage of the flexibility allowed. State policies related to funding, assessment, accountability, educator qualifications and data reporting were still based on the assumption that all students would learn in the same way in the same place at the same time (and for the same amount of time), making it difficult even for schools that wanted to provide flexibility to do so. The credit flexibility mandate is now

forcing a (sometimes stressful) reexamination of the entire web of policies and assumptions that govern how we “do” high school. Time will tell whether the credit flexibility initiative receives the attention and support it needs at both the state and local levels to be a transformational reform effort or whether it will remain merely a niche initiative benefiting a handful of students while leaving the factory model in place for the vast majority. The credit flexibility policy mandate takes effect in the fall of 2010.

Educators concerned about gifted students have also struggled to draw attention to the powerful influence of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) on state and local policies and priorities. Because the incentives and penalties embedded in NCLB focused so heavily on schools leading students to basic proficiency and provided few rewards for schools that helped students go above and beyond the minimum standards, curricula and programs emphasizing acceleration and talent development became a lower priority, a situation that contributed to stagnation in many districts and to a scaling back of gifted services in many others. On a positive note, the ODE and the state board deserve credit for lobbying then Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings to allow states to replace school evaluation systems based on “absolute proficiency” with “growth models,” arguing that the absolute proficiency models fail to encourage schools to help those students far below—and those already far above—the proficiency threshold. State leaders should build on this going forward by enhancing and expanding tools that help educators use value-added data to make informed program choices and better differentiate curricula to meet the individual needs of students.

Finding 2: Accountability. *Currently, schools are not held accountable for ensuring children who are gifted are served according to their needs. There is no system in place to ensure these children reach their full potential. Ohio’s report card system, while addressing district results in proficiency, does not specifically address children who are gifted. In addition, the Ohio the Ohio Department of Education (ODE) has not yet addressed the gifted population in the state accountability system or in the guidelines and subsequent documents from the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (No Child Left Behind). If Ohio is to enter the 21st century as a leader in gifted education, accountability for all children, including children who are gifted, will need to be an integral component of all policy and accountability decisions.*

Unfortunately, to date, Ohio has made little progress in this area. The performance of gifted students as a subgroup is not a factor in the school rating system, and the availability of data on the performance of gifted students by school and district is very limited. It is possible, using the interactive local report card system, to see the number and percentage of students identified as gifted by racial and economic subgroup as well as the number and percentage of these students who are deemed “proficient” on state assessments, but it is impossible to access data on the number or percentage of students receiving gifted services or on gifted student achievement beyond binary “proficient” or “not proficient” numbers. However, Superintendent Delisle and the State Board of Education have been given a golden opportunity to change this in the form of language in the school funding reform law requiring the creation of a “performance indicator” for gifted education. The gifted education task force now being convened will be charged with making recommendations on

this indicator and should strongly consider including as factors data related to the percentage of gifted students served, achievement measures of gifted students and local progress toward reducing racial and economic disproportionality among students identified as gifted and receiving gifted services as well as toward narrowing the upper achievement gap between the highest-performing deciles of white and minority students and economically disadvantaged and non-economically disadvantaged students.

Finding 3: Services and Identification. *Currently, districts are not required to offer any services to children who are identified as gifted. A recent survey indicated that during the 1998–99 school year, of the 236,804 children identified as gifted in Ohio, only 103,087, or 43.5 percent, were receiving any kind of service. Of those receiving services, only 41,245, or 40 percent, were receiving services through state funding. Without a system that supports acceleration, differentiation options and other appropriate services, the probability increases that children who are gifted will become alienated from school.*

It is critical to accurately identify children's gifted areas to know what services to provide. Ohio Administrative Code § 3301-51-15 requires districts to identify gifted students in the areas of superior cognitive ability, specific academic ability, creative ability and visual and performing arts ability. Even though Ohio has mandated that districts identify children from kindergarten through grade 12, too little emphasis has been placed on the early identification of children who are gifted. In addition, many special populations go unnoticed in the identification process. Without attention to these underrepresented populations, appropriate services cannot be planned or provided.

Although some progress has been made in the area of identification (approximately 50,000 more students are now identified as gifted in Ohio now than were identified a decade ago), the news on service is mostly bad. In a recent presentation to the State Board of Education, Associate State Superintendent Jane Wiechel reported that only about one in four students identified as gifted receives any form of service—a major step in the wrong direction. Furthermore, minority and economically disadvantaged students continue to face a double whammy. Not only are they less likely than white, Asian, and non-economically disadvantaged peers to be screened and identified as gifted, those who are fortunate enough to be identified as gifted are still less likely to receive gifted services than nonminority and nondisadvantaged peers. This is particularly troubling, as ODE data on OAT (Ohio Achievement Test) and OGT (Ohio Graduation Test) achievement clearly show that gifted students who do not receive services perform at lower levels than students who are served; a recent report by the Center for Evaluation and Education Policy featured in *Education Week* also shows that the achievement gap between Ohio's highest-performing black and white students has grown substantially over the last decade.

The inclusion of language related to early entrance to kindergarten in the state acceleration policy has focused some additional attention on young gifted students, and the ODE recently has made efforts to reach out to early childhood educators, day care providers and parents to raise awareness of the needs and characteristics of young gifted children. State law, however, does not recognize giftedness among students below grade K, and although educators and policy makers at all levels are recognizing the importance of enrichment for children from birth to the start of formal schooling, efforts to identify and cultivate talent

have been limited. Some schools also remain hesitant to screen students in the early grades for gifted identification, arguing that early screening results in overidentification. Nonetheless, a handful of school districts (including Superintendent Delisle's former district, Cleveland Heights–University Heights) have found providing enrichment to young students and training to early grades teachers to be a promising strategy for reducing racial and economic disproportionality in gifted education. As the achievement gap widens each year students are in school, delaying serious identification efforts until students are in 3rd or 4th grade means missing the best opportunity to identify students from many underrepresented populations.

Guidelines and procedures for identifying students in the visual and performing arts have also been streamlined since 2000, and a coalition of gifted and arts educators has been working to identify and develop curriculum resources for creatively and artistically gifted students. There are some hopeful signs, however, that state leaders (including Governor Ted Strickland) are recognizing the value of cultivating creativity and artistic talent, both for students and for the economy. The loss of funding for the Summer Honors Institutes for gifted students was another setback for arts-related opportunities, as several host universities offered immersive programs in theater, dance, music performance and recording and multimedia production. This is another area in which the credit flexibility initiative will be helpful. Already, university-based and professional arts organizations such as the Wexner Center and BalletMet in the Columbus area are exploring ways to connect their outreach and education missions to credit flexibility opportunities.

Finding 4: Educators Who Serve Children Who Are Gifted. *Current teacher preparation programs in Ohio do not require any coursework in differentiated instruction, assessment or appropriate service options for children who are gifted. According to Passow and Rudinski (1993), most states acknowledge the crucial role of teachers in the identification and education of the gifted and the need for providing staff development. Without adequate knowledge, attitudes and skills, teachers are unable to provide differentiated instruction to children who are gifted. From the results of the Ohio Survey on Gifted Education, Joyce Van Tassel-Baska (1997) found that staff development on the needs of gifted students was often infrequent or nonexistent for Ohio teachers.*

At the policy level, this is another area in which the state has seen limited progress. The state updated standards for university programs preparing gifted education specialists to align with NAGC and CEC standards. Additionally, the federal Higher Education Act enacted last year included language requiring that training in the needs and characteristics of gifted students be included in preservice teacher preparation programs. However, there has been little apparent activity at the state's higher education institutions and little leadership on the part of the board of regents to ramp up gifted training outside of gifted intervention specialist endorsement programs.

The state has, however, witnessed a large-scale effort to develop capacity of in-service educators to address the needs of gifted students in the form of Project I-GET-GTEd, an ODE-led initiative that equips district- and ESC-based gifted specialists to facilitate training regular education teachers, school psychologists, counselors and administrators using materials developed

by national experts and delivered using a Web-based learning management system in a format aligned to federal standards for high-quality professional development. Over the last three years, thousands of educators in nearly every county of the state have participated. Sadly, the U.S. Department of Education's Javits Gifted and Talented Education Program, which provided the funding that enabled the creation of this popular and cost-effective program, is at risk. The Obama administration (like the Bush administration before it) is recommending its elimination. In the past, funding has been restored by Congress over the objections of the White House; but because the budget deficit is near the top of Republican priorities and because several key gifted advocates on the Democratic side of the aisle are departing, the odds of the program's survival this time seem long.

Finding 5: Funding. *Ohio school districts vary widely in the options and services available to children identified as gifted. Those with more local resources are able to offer additional services, in contrast to districts that depend on state dollars alone. Even with local dollars, however, only 8 percent of districts reported that all of their identified gifted students were receiving services during the 1998–99 school year. Van Tassel-Baska (1997) reported: “State funding is pivotal to maintaining gifted programs in the state of Ohio.”*

As previously discussed, funding for gifted services remained essentially flat for most of the first decade of the 2000s. However, significant increases for gifted education are promised in the school funding reform plan passed in July. If fully funded, the new evidence-based model will finally provide the fiscal resources needed to fully serve Ohio's gifted population once the gifted intervention specialist and professional development components are fully phased in by the end of the 2010s—if districts broadly embrace cost-effective service options such as acceleration and cluster grouping of gifted students in content-based programs. To ensure that this occurs, the state should adopt a phased-in service mandate in which the percentage of gifted students served in each district is required to grow each year in line with the increases to the gifted teacher funding element. Initially, this would mean a minimum of 20 percent of gifted students receiving services. The statewide average of the percentage of gifted students served in each district is already over 25 percent; this goal is realistic today, would give districts ample time to thoughtfully plan and scale up service offerings in upcoming years and would result in slow but sure progress toward the ultimate goal of addressing the learning needs of every gifted student in Ohio's public schools.

Finding 6: Leadership. *The ODE currently funds two consultants for gifted education. To build capacity for the task force's recommendations, it is critical for additional staff to be funded to serve Ohio's school districts. Technical assistance, policy review and development, professional development and accountability are critical activities of state leadership.*

ODE staffing levels for gifted education have risen and fallen with the economy, climbing from 2.0 FTE when the task force report was published, to a peak of 5.5 FTE. Currently, the state employs two full-time gifted consultants, two half-time intermittent consultants and a college intern. The state is undertaking a new educational funding model, revising academic content standards, developing performance-based assessments, addressing 21st Century Skills, reforming accountability processes, developing guidance for credit

flexibility implementation and gearing up to manage Race to the Top initiatives (all of which have major implications for gifted students)—not to mention important gifted-specific initiatives like revising funding rules, developing gifted education performance indicators and sustaining Project I-GET-GTEd without federal dollars. It is clear that a return to higher staffing levels is needed if the state is to avoid missed opportunities and unintended consequences for gifted students in the new generation of policies and programs. (See 2002 task force report finding #1.)

Finding 7: Families and Community. *VanTassel-Baska (1997) recommends stronger parent involvement in local programming in Ohio districts. Families and community are an integral part of all children's education. It is imperative that the ODE and local districts acknowledge the importance of families in the entire process of educating our children who are gifted.*

Some important initial steps have been taken to promote greater involvement of families and communities in gifted education. For example, the last revision of the gifted education operating standards added language requiring districts to provide a copy of a gifted student's WEP to his or her parents, and the state model acceleration policy requires districts to allow parents to participate in the acceleration evaluation and planning process. The ODE has also taken steps to reach out to parents of young children on gifted issues with assistance from its family and community engagement coordinator and to parents who speak languages other than English by translating frequently accessed documents into foreign languages commonly spoken in the state. Increased funding for gifted coordinators should also help build capacity at the local level for family engagement over time. Two parent organizations (in addition to the OAGC) currently have representation on the new gifted education task force.

Increasing community involvement is another area in which the credit flexibility initiative could be helpful for gifted students at the secondary level. The gifted operating standards explicitly allow gifted coordinators to facilitate mentorship and internship experiences for gifted students, and the credit flexibility policy allows students to earn credit for mentorships and internships aligned to academic goals. The stage, therefore, is set for leaders and experts in local businesses, governments, community groups and arts organizations to work directly with gifted students and extend their learning beyond the walls of the school.

A parent's involvement in his or her child's education is ultimately a matter more of personal responsibility more than of state or local policy, but policy can help responsible parents play a stronger and more effective role. This starts with providing access to more and better information about what and how gifted students are doing in school. Expanding screening efforts and communicating results would yield helpful information to parents on their children's needs and abilities. A quality gifted education performance indicator would help parents of gifted students understand and support district improvement efforts. Finally, requiring and providing basic training on characteristics of gifted students and appropriate educational strategies for classroom teachers, whom parents rely on for guidance and who serve as the primary points of contact between families and schools, is perhaps the most important step that state and district leaders could take to help parents help their gifted children attain their goals and achieve to their full potential. 