

*Gifted Education
as a Catalyst for
School Improvement*



It's Time to Come in From the Trailer
and Lead the Race to the Top

Sally Krisel, Ph.D.



I'm a sports fan. How about you? For years I cheered my children's soccer teams and protested what I was sure were missed offside calls, and more recently I marveled at the skills and speed of the world's best soccer players during the 2014 World Cup. On a beautiful fall Saturday afternoon, you are likely to find me in the University of Georgia football stadium, enjoying the competition along with 92,000 other screaming fans. With varying degrees of frenzy, most Americans love athletics. We appreciate excellence on the field, in the pool, on the court, and on the track. And we support the long-term dedication of time and resources it takes to achieve athletic excellence. Why, then, have we, as a society, had a harder time openly embracing and celebrating the development of intellectual and creative talent?

Perhaps the answer lies in some vague (I would suggest *misguided*) discomfort related to our nation's egalitarian roots—ambivalence about supporting special programs for gifted students as a reflection of the traditional struggle between an aristocratic elite and our belief in democracy (Gallagher, 1979). Supporters of gifted education counter with the argument that there is something decidedly unfair about not providing *all* children—including those with extraordinary ability—with equal opportunity to develop their gifts and talents. A second argument, one that we as advocates for gifted learners must make strongly enough to be heard in the large arena of school reform, is that by investing heavily in the kinds of programs that promote exceptional performance from gifted students, we may indeed be showing the way to much-improved educational experiences (and achievement) for all children. And that argument may be the one that at long last helps us put the spotlight on gifted education in a way that allows all educators and other

stakeholders to recognize its valuable role, not only in meeting the needs of gifted learners, but also as a catalyst for achieving school-wide excellence.

Let's return then to our sports analogy. On a recent Saturday morning, my husband was watching a telecast of the Tour de France just before he left for a 40-mile bike ride with the local cycling club. Although he is in better shape than many middle-aged men, I can assure you that my husband will never be a contender for a yellow jersey in the Tour de France! He will never even compete in the local criterium. But as he strapped on his strong, light-weight helmet and clipped into the pedals of a bicycle that not too many years ago would have been a design used only by elite competitive riders, I thought how weekend athletes have benefited from the tremendous expertise that has been applied to shaving seconds off the times of world-class riders. Innovative technology, new training techniques, better understanding of the role of nutrition in peak performance—all those things that are first used with

elite athletes to take them to new levels of performance eventually are adopted to some degree by many enthusiasts of the sport. And what happens then? The floor of performance is raised and those who coach elite athletes continue to innovate to find the new ceiling.

That, I maintain, is the unique contribution that gifted education can—and should—be making to school improvement efforts in this country. It is time for gifted education specialists to come in from the trailer back behind the school or the isolated classroom at the end of the hall to take a place at the leadership table. Our message? "Friends, over the years we have shown how certain instructional strategies—constructivism, problem-based learning, and authenticity, for example—employed in an environment with high expectations and a high degree of personalization, can result in improved engagement, motivation, and achievement for our most able learners. We are not backing away from our commitment to providing those kinds of experiences for students with gifts and talents. In fact, we want you to lock arms with us to provide even more. But in return, we'd like to work with you on ways we might adopt and modify, if necessary, those same strategies for use with *many* more students. We believe, in fact, that gifted education may be our best secret weapon for promoting school-wide excellence."

THE TIME IS NOW

It has been estimated that in the last 40 years, our nation has spent \$3 trillion on school improvement efforts, most of which concentrated on structural changes (e.g., year-round schools, block scheduling) or instructional approaches associated with remedial education (Renzulli, 2011). Can we look back at all those years of diligent efforts by well-meaning educators and not wonder, "How's this plan working out for us?" From where I sit, in

most cases the honest response must be, “Not so well.” Isn’t it time to try a fundamentally different approach?

It is, I believe, that deficiency view (i.e., reform efforts that start by looking at what’s wrong with children, what students do not do well) that limits their success. Yet for decades we have persisted in trying to improve schools by hammering away with prescriptive, didactic approaches to teaching and learning. So imagine my surprise and delight when in 2006 a courageous young superintendent came to me and, in essence, said this:

As a nation, we have a fundamental decision to make. We can continue to endure a culture of adequacy created by remediation-based reform efforts and a narrow focus on the most easily tested academic content and skills; we can continue to use instructional practices and design assessments with our most fragile learners in mind, causing great frustration and anger for our most able learners and their families. Or we can begin to envision a culture of excellence—one marked by enrichment, creativity, disciplined inquiry, high expectations, calculated risks, support for innovation, celebration and a focus on unlimited potential of all. I have become convinced that we will never have the schools we want for our children if all we can do is focus on adequacy. Will you bring everything you know about gifted education and help me apply it as appropriate to 27,000 children in Hall County Schools, a highly diverse school system in North Georgia? (W. Schofield, personal communication, March 18, 2006)

Oh, my goodness! Now imagine how quickly I resigned from my position as State Director of Gifted Education to roll up my sleeves and see if an approach I had come to believe in strongly could really be done (i.e., that an awfully lot of what we have discov-

ered to be best practice with gifted students is really just good teaching and might be used, with modifications, of course, to promote excellence in our schools).

Even if our only concern were the high-ability children already selected for special program services, this would have been a refreshing approach from a district leader. But when we consider the challenges presented by rapidly changing demographics in this country and escalating economic competition from many countries around the globe, we should hear an urgent call to try to develop in many children the brainpower that we may have once believed to exist innately in only a few. For example, looking only at measured IQ as an indicator of potential, the 25% of the population in China with the highest IQs would be greater than the total population of North America; and in 2011 China became the world’s top patent filer, surpassing the United States as it steps up emphasis on creativity and innovation (Yee, 2011). So to some degree it is a numbers game.

mance and mounting competition in a global economy, is the time to pose these questions: What if the best way to improve our schools is to focus on excellence, not adequacy? What if schools could help their students climb way beyond proficiency by focusing on engagement and rigor? What if the answer is to *pull from the top* of the school improvement mountain we see before us, rather than hammering away relentlessly at the bottom? What if the strategies we have used to create high-ceiling, highly personalized learning environments for gifted students can be modified in pace, complexity, and level of support to help many more students achieve at levels we never dreamed possible?

ONE DISTRICT’S PULL-FROM-THE-TOP APPROACH

Those were the questions we kept in mind as we began to strategize ways to take a proficiency view of students and apply some of the knowledge from gifted education to an entire school district. The

We believe, in fact, that gifted education may be our best secret weapon for promoting school-wide excellence.

As a nation, we can no longer afford to overlook or fail to develop the advanced abilities of any of our children. DuFour and Eaker (1998) recognized this crucial need when they said, “In today’s Information Age . . . educators must operate from the premise that it is the purpose of schools to bring all students to their full potential and to a level of education that was once reserved for the very few” (p. 62).

So now, as we face increasing demands to improve student perfor-

mountain-climbing metaphor continued to work as we thought of an “adequacy plateau” created by the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) era, during which low-performing students made significant gains toward meeting minimum standards, but gifted students languished (Loveless, 2008). Gifted students could reach that acceptable progress plateau with little more effort than respiration, but all too often there were no guides (well-trained teachers and high-end programs with ade-

quate resources) to show the way to much higher levels of achievement, to high-altitude, even *peak performance*, if you will.

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There is, of course, the inequity and personal tragedy of failing to challenge and provide appropriate support for our most able students to climb beyond the adequacy plateau. But the second part of that metaphor was our belief that we were actually causing a bottleneck of sorts. Perhaps far more students could climb higher if someone first showed the way, demonstrated what real excellence looked like and what it took to achieve it. As long as that minimum-standard plateau seemed like the destination of our climb, gifted students stalled there and no one else could even see beyond them to the higher peaks. We needed some “Sherpa programs” as guides to the highest quality educational programs so we could use them to inspire and pull students upward—first our gifted students and, in time, many more who would follow.

EXAMPLES OF SHERPA PROGRAMS

Our first “Sherpa” was the International Baccalaureate (IB) Program, chosen because it met both criteria for our pull-from-the-top strategy: First, it had the power to immediately provide far more rigor for our gifted students than we had ever asked

of them. Secondly, IB had the potential, in time, to influence the quality of education for many more students.

At that time we could not promise our high school students, even our gifted ones, a world language course until they were sophomores—a rather low plateau indeed! But to gain approval for three IB Diploma Programmes, one of them offering the Bilingual Diploma, we knew we would have to expand our world language offerings aggressively, including coursework in middle school. This led to the creation of a PreK–8 Dual Language Immersion Charter School and PreK–12 Mandarin Chinese classes throughout the district. There were only about 60 gifted and other highly motivated students enrolled in the inaugural IB classes, but the effect of the insistent pull from the top proved to be tremendous. Training for IB teachers that spread to their other courses, improved vertical alignment of curriculum, more teacher collaboration, and stronger efforts to recognize and develop academic talent among our large Hispanic population—all because the focus was on excellence, not adequacy, and the adoption of a strengths-based, proficiency view of students.

Another example of a strategy initially intended to provide more challenge for gifted students that we were able to use successfully with a much larger group of students was acceleration. As we worked to prepare more students for success in the IB Diploma Programme, we worried about how the number of required courses would limit their ability to take elective courses in areas of interest. In other words, we did not want students who were committed to IB to have to sacrifice their love of music, drama, or athletics in order to fit all the academic courses they needed to earn the Diploma into a 4-year program of study. The solution was to offer more high school courses to middle schoolers.

We already offered a few—math, English, physical science, and, more recently, Spanish and Mandarin—to our most advanced students. But, in keeping with our belief that many of the strategies once reserved for gifted students might be used to improve engagement and achievement for many, we both expanded opportunities for gifted students and adopted another strengths-based strategy for all.

Hall County Schools now offers 27 Carnegie unit (high school) courses, including Advanced Placement (AP) Statistics, on our middle school campuses. Gifted learners, many of whom leave middle school with six or more high school credits, are able to move on to more challenging coursework whenever they are ready; and, by doing so, they create room in their high school schedules for more electives, as well as additional Honors, AP, IB and dual enrollment courses.

But acceleration in areas of strength and interest is not just for our gifted students. In fact, 75% of Hall County middle school students leave eighth grade with at least one high school credit. Imagine a seventh grader who is struggling in math. We might be able to say to him, “Hey, I know you are having a tough time in your math class this year, but I’ve noticed that you are really into technology. What do you think about taking Computer Applications as a high school course next year? You could also take the high school Health & PE course for your other connections class in eighth grade. I think you would do well in both, and you could enter high school with a couple of credits.” Confidence booster? Motivator? You bet! And then, if that young man fails freshman math, often a gatekeeper course for further high school success, we can say to him, “No problem. Remember you already have some high school credits, so we have wiggle room in your schedule. You don’t even have to go to summer school. We’re going to

get you right back on track to graduate with your class.”

Whether students are currently performing below, at, or way above the achievement levels of their classmates, we believe that by capitalizing on each individual’s *strengths*, we can promote engagement and achievement. Again, a strategy that was once associated almost exclusively with gifted education programs is the key for student success and total school improvement.

Hall County’s next pull-from-the-top strategy was to focus on students’ passions, and the Sherpa developed to take the lead for this approach was the Honors Mentorship Program (HMP), an honors elective for high school juniors and seniors with advanced abilities and interests. The program provides highly motivated, mature students with career mentorships designed around their interests in specific fields or careers. Selected participants are matched with professionals who serve as mentors by providing real-life career experiences, including the latest information and technology in the field, that go well beyond what high schools are capable of delivering in a classroom setting. HMP students study with area doctors, veterinarians, engineers, lawyers, journalists, and a variety of other professionals.

The concept of authentic intellectual work (Newmann & Associates, 1996) is central to the year-long in-depth learning of HMP students. The curriculum, using the Parallel Curriculum Model (Tomlinson et al., 2002) as a framework, requires students to construct knowledge, demonstrate in-depth understanding of important disciplinary concepts, and elaborate on their understandings in a professional-level presentation. The HMP experience has a clear connection to students’ lives outside of school and calls on them to be increasingly more like experts in the field.

One young man, Jesús, worked with an area pathologist to study MRSA, an antibiotic-resistant staph

bacteria that had caused infections in a number of schools across the state. After studying the bacteria in the hospital lab for most of the year, Jesús met with our school system custodial staff to make sure we were using disinfectants that were effective with that particular bacteria strain. He then produced (in both English and Spanish) high-quality brochures to send home with students about the dangers of MRSA and how to minimize the risk of infection. Jesús clearly embraced the concept of authentic intellectual work and achieved the kind of peak performance we want for gifted students.

In the first year of the HMP, however, we saw clearly how we needed to provide more opportunities for high-ability students to develop the skills of self-direction and independence in pursuit of their own learning goals. A number of the high-achieving students who had been selected for the program struggled when they were given the freedom to demonstrate their learning with products of their choice. Most had spent the first 10 years of their academic lives learning to follow directions and cranking out papers or other projects that met (may have even exceeded) the teachers’ requirements for the assignment. But these carefully crafted papers with the correct formatting or safe projects, no matter how attractive, did not represent real excellence *for those students*. When they were expected to learn and demonstrate their learning like practicing professionals in their fields, they were forced out of their comfort zones, some for the first time. Hallelujah, we thought! At last these students are experiencing the supported struggle that is required to achieve at the highest levels.

To further support that climb to the top, the next year we extended the rope of the HMP Sherpa by adding an Honors Directed Studies Program for 9th and 10th graders. Directed Studies uses the Autonomous Learner Model (Betts, 1985) to provide gifted

students with a balance of teacher-directed and independent activities to build a foundation for lifelong learning. Course goals include understanding giftedness, talent, intelligence, creativity; discovering learning styles and developing learning skills; organizational strategies and intrapersonal skills; and researching and presenting guided and independent enrichment projects in areas of individual interest. Directed Studies students, most of whom continue into HMP, develop key skills for working in groups and individually to create a variety of advanced products. By Year 3, Honors Directed Studies was offered to high-ability middle school students.

Those first HMP “climbers,” despite experiencing the discomfort of not knowing the answer, of suddenly facing a level of challenge to which they were not accustomed, also reported an enthusiasm and joy in learning that they had not experienced in a very long time. Passion and interest play key roles in sustaining talent development (Csikszentmihalyi, Rathunde, & Whalen, 1993), and research continues to support the importance of balancing challenge

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and enjoyment in motivating children to continuously develop their talents (Csikszentmihalyi, Rathunde, & Whalen, 1997). It is that practice of tying the content and skills we’ve been charged with teaching to what

our students love already that is the key to using this approach successfully with a wide range of students.

Habitat High and Hospitality High, for example, are two Career Technical Education Programs in Hall County that also use the Parallel Curriculum Model and the concept of authentic intellectual work, cornerstones of HMP, to engage students in meaningful ways and, by capitalizing on their passions, promote achievement. Habitat High students master high-level academic standards in mathematics and economics while gaining on-the-job experience in all facets of home building. At 7:00 in the morning, you will see students who otherwise may have dropped out of school at the worksite, learning the skills and work habits of professionals, and by lunchtime they are back in the classroom, succeeding because the academic challenges have greater relevance. Since the program began in 2007, Habitat High students have built 11 homes for area families in need.

Similarly, Hospitality High, a partnership between Hall County Schools and Lake Lanier Islands Resort, gives students with an interest in the hospitality industry hands-on, professional-level experience. Students rotate between a variety of internship experiences at the resort (e.g., desk operations, human resources, marketing and event planning) and classroom instruction that makes connections between the professional roles and academic content. In the Habitat High and Hospitality High programs, you will see a diverse group of students—some academically gifted, some with special needs—working side by side, all of them challenged to achieve excellence in their areas of interest.

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LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE CLIMB

When Superintendent Will Schofield first invited me to join him and the many dedicated educators in Hall County in an effort to improve schools by turning the traditional reform recipe upside down and creating programs that focus on children's talents and interests instead of what they don't yet do well, I jumped at the chance. I did tell him, however, that either we would demonstrate that this was the way to create the kinds of schools we want for all our children, from the most gifted to the most fragile, or we may have to sneak out of town in the middle of the night. I was only half joking. Thankfully, we are still there. But it is a fair question to ask us now, "How's this plan working out?" From where I sit, the honest response must be, "We know we don't have all the answers, but we are awfully pleased with the results so far."

In 2006, when we began this climb, only 13 of our 32 schools were making Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), the metric of success in the NCLB era; 3 years later, without engaging in drill-and-kill test prep but focusing instead on the pull-from-the-top strategies as described here, all of them were making AYP. Now we are not celebrating adequacy. That was never the goal. But it is an unavoidable part of the accountability equation, so our goal was to get that

monkey off our back so we could focus on the more important indicators of success.

Mr. Schofield often reminds the Hall County Schools team that, yes, we want our students to do well on state and national tests, but the test in which we should be most interested is the "Dinner Table Test," the one administered each night when families sit down for supper and Mom or Dad asks, "What did you do in school today?" We pass the Dinner Table Test when the student's eyes light up and he or she says, "Oh, wow, you wouldn't believe what we did in science (or math or reading or music) today! And I can't wait to get back there tomorrow to do it again! Will you take me to school early?"

We are beginning to understand that joyful learning is not a "fluffy" educational goal. Content standards are more challenging than ever. The competition our children will face, not just in school, but also throughout their adult lives, is formidable. To prepare them for the world in which they will live, we must create schools that are capable of inspiring gifted students to achieve at levels we have never known, and we must learn to extend the pedagogy we once reserved for the gifted, modify pacing, complexity, and scaffolding as needed, to enable many more of our students to excel. The rigorous education that will be required to transform our schools in this way must also be joyful and engaging enough that students will stick with us long enough to climb way beyond that plateau of adequacy.

CONCLUSIONS

Some might wonder if this intentional extension of gifted education strategies to promote total school improvement might not diminish our ability to meet the needs of students with gifts and talents. I don't believe so. I have been a gifted education advocate a very long time, and I have never

seen a really good gifted program in a bad school. A genuine commitment to educational excellence encompasses a commitment to excellence for children who are gifted.

Eight years after deciding to take this counterintuitive approach to school improvement, 21 of Hall County's 33 schools offer programs with deep roots in gifted education. Families may choose from the dual-language immersion charter school or the IB Diploma Programs described above. There are three Schoolwide Enrichment Model schools; a STEM high school; a fine arts academy; an innovative middle school for children who love art, science, and technology with a working museum where students host more than 1,500 visitors a year . . . and the list goes on. More than 500 teachers have added gifted certification as part of their charter or program of choice pledge to inspire and challenge students by focusing on their strengths and interests and to bring authenticity to the classroom. In these schools, more gifted students have been identified and are being served in a greater variety of ways.

I don't think they show a lot of mountain climbing on ESPN, so we will have to leave our overworked Sherpa metaphor. But the next time you are watching elite athletes perform, take a moment to reflect on all that had to happen along the way for that athlete to reach the level where we can sit and admire a dazzling performance. Undoubtedly, that individual was born with exceptional psychomotor ability. In early childhood, I suspect, someone—a parent, a teacher, a coach maybe—noticed the child's delight and grace in movement, and the child began to understand that his or her special abilities were valued. Specialized training, targeted just above the young athlete's current level of development, and opportunities to hone his or her skills alongside other youngsters with similar abilities and

interests, helped the individual maintain that early passion and continually improve.

Then think of how we might provide a similar path to amazing performances in the arenas of academic and creative achievement for our most able students *and*, in a parallel way, for those who, while they may never be elite scholars or artists, can undoubtedly achieve more than we once thought possible when they have access to the know-how traditionally used with gifted students—for example, challenging curriculum made relevant by tying it to students' strengths and passions, authentic problem-based learning, and a high degree of personalization. Those understandings and the pedagogical expertise of gifted education professionals are important elements that are too often missing in conversations about school reform. It is time to come to the table for that conversation. It is time to bring out the secret weapon.

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