

IDENTIFICATION FOR GIFTED SERVICES: WHY IDENTIFY?

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Why identify for gifted services? The answer is quite simple. State law requires that educators do. Student Assessment, Section I of the Texas State Plan for the Education of the Gifted/Talented (State Plan; Texas Education Agency [TEA], 2019) states,

2.16 Students in grades K-12 shall be assessed and, if identified, provided gifted/talented services (TEC §29.122 and 19 TAC §89.1(3)) (Texas State Plan for the Education of the Gifted/Talented, 2019, p.5).

In fact, there are 29 components to this section that guide gifted/talented identification, procedures, and progress monitoring, and define how and when students are identified, offered services, and assessed according to district policy that complies with these requirements (TEA 2019, pp. 4-6).

In order to understand the Assessment section within the State Plan (TEA, 2019), the Accountability¹ column may be divided into the following categories:

- Identification: Processes and Data (What and How), Parental Input
- Post Identification: District Responsibilities: Policies and Processes

This article reviews the identification process and data, parental input, the what, the how, and the why. Post-identification will be explored in a future article. The process includes

¹ This article only addresses the rules under the Accountability, not the Exemplary recommendations.

both qualitative and quantitative measures that allow a look into students' achievement, critical thinking, and creative thinking skills, as well as how their abilities are perceived by their parents and teachers. The process is supported by policies and procedures found both in the State Plan and local policy.

Or, perhaps, identification is not so simple. Although educators follow the laws and guidelines from the State Plan (TEA, 2019), educators realize there is more to identification than checking the boxes. The State Plan's 29 descriptors offer districts the ability to match the law and rule to local needs. For example, portions relating to identification procedures indicate what must be done, but how the district accomplishes the requirements is left up to the needs of the populations in that district.

Identification: The How and Why

In addition to Student Assessment 2.16 quoted above, 2.22 says,

In grades 1–12, qualitative and quantitative data are collected through three (3) or more measures and used to determine whether a student needs gifted/talented service.
(TEA, 2019, p. 6)

Student Assessment 2.1: outlines which qualitative and quantitative measures are left up to the district:

Written policies on student identification for gifted/talented services are approved by the district board of trustees and disseminated to all parents (19 TAC §89.1). (TEA, 2019, p. 4)

Each district develops a set of written policies adapted by local educators and the

local Board of Education, which are then entered into board policy (EHBB; Legal and Local in your district’s Board Policy Handbook, available online at each district’s website). These policies state what and how identification occurs.

Identification: Qualitative and Quantitative Measures

As districts determine qualitative and quantitative measures, the basis for each will be the purpose for identifying students for gifted services. For the quantitative measures, Texas districts generally rely on some form of cognitive measure, achievement, and/or, in some cases, a commercial product, such as MAPS (NWEA, 2023) or Star Renaissance (Renaissance Learning, 2023). More often than not, the cognitive measure is nonverbal and/or in the home language of the student following the requirement that, “Students are assessed in languages they understand or with nonverbal assessments”, (State Plan, 2.19, p.5). Tests of creating thinking, such as the Torrance Test of Creative Thinking, Figural (Scholastic Testing Service, 2023), may be included to assess creative abilities. Student portfolios address both critical and creative thinking.

Parent questionnaires and teacher behavioral checklists meet the criteria for qualitative measures. For example, Scales for Rating the Behavioral Characteristics of Superior Students (SCRBCSS; Renzulli et al., 2010, 2013) may be a part of the identification process. The SRBCSS have been researched, and the reliability and factorial validity of the scales are adequate for identification purposes (Renzulli et al., 2010). It is important to remember that behavioral checklists are more accurate and valid when teachers are provided professional learning regarding characteristics of gifted learners (Johnsen, 2013).

For a full list of both qualitative and quantitative measures access TEA’s (2013) G/T equity website. This website provides information about options for all students, including CLED (culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse) students. Scoring from these measures are then plotted on a matrix or student profile (see discussion below).

Another way of thinking about identification and why districts identify for services is through case studies of students referred to the process. Districts, such as Northside Independent School District (2023) in San Antonio, have adopted this approach to identification by exploring all aspects of a student's abilities when making a decision about identification for gifted services.

During a 2023 TAGT gifted conference presentation, Northwest ISD educators (Brown & Burleson, 2023) shared the following insights into their development of a case study process for identification. The district recognized that their G/T identification was declining while the district itself was growing. They determined that case studies offered better identification practices and alignment their program services and assessment ((Brown & Burleson, 2023). Once the new perspectives for identification were accepted, they began these practices:

- one testing window for each grade,
- placement decision meetings with district staff over Zoom,
- local norms,
- students as individual cases studies (author's emphasis),
- special needs, circumstances considered,
- appeal process documented in district plan, and
- identification aligns with program services (general abilities).

This district now employs a case studies approach in order to understand the characteristics their gifted students bring to the services. For the specific information about the their process, contact Vivian Burleson or Roxane Brown here [<https://www.nisd.net/district/advanced-academics/gifted-talented>].

Identification: Why

Why use these measures for identification? The idea of why the district is identifying students, beyond the requirements by state law and State Board of Education Rule, is found in research that examines characteristics that guide differentiated services. For example, gifted students learn more quickly and have greater depth of knowledge in their areas of interest. In addition, they are creative thinkers and solve problems in innovative and unusual ways. The identification measures found in Davidson Institutes's (n.d.) website allow educators insight into the students' abilities.

TEA (2023) also offers lists of characteristics under the section "Educators: Curriculum and Instruction: Educator Resources Supporting Equity in G/T Services" and provides appropriate instructional avenues that lend themselves to culturally responsive teaching.

The Curriculum & Instruction Section of the State Plan (TEA, 2019) instructs, "Districts meet the needs of gifted/talented students by modifying the depth, complexity, and pacing of the curriculum and instruction ordinarily provided by the school" (pp. 9–11). Access this section to understand the implications of identification, the why of identification.

Identification: Kindergarten, The How and Why

In addition to the requirements above, specific criteria for kindergarten students are set out in the State Plan (TEA, 2019) as these:

- 2.20 All kindergarten students are automatically considered for gifted/talented and other advanced level services (p.5).
- 2.21 At the kindergarten level, as many criteria as possible, and at least three (3), are used to assess students who perform at or show the potential of accomplishment relative to age peers. (p. 5)

An important step in meeting Student Assessment as defined in the State Plan (2019),

Section 2.20 is for teachers to be well-versed about characteristics of young gifted children through focused professional learning sessions. One way for administrators to follow-up professional learning is through observations, as teachers offer critical and creative thinking activities for all their students. By noting students whose thinking is consistently beyond their peers, teachers make professional decisions about referral for assessment. Another alternative is for the local GT teacher or coordinator to bring guided activities into the classroom or provide them for the teacher to share for all students to complete. Local GT personnel evaluate students' responses to multiple activities in order to refer students who would potentially benefit from gifted services.

One example of the screener lessons approach comes from Brown & Burleson (2023). The GT department follows this plan for identification of kindergarten students:

- Screener lesson for all students: Whole group, led by campus GT Specialist with skill focus of analogies, classification, number sense
- Screener modeled after CogAT practice activities: verbal, quantitative, nonverbal
- Screener format: Google Form, taken on student iPads, self-scoring
- Other criteria considered: Texas Kindergarten Entry Assessment (TX_KEA), MAP Math assessment (top 10% of grade level)
- Recommendations based on teacher and/or parent observations (Brown & Burleson, 2023).

This example defines how one district ensures that all kindergarten students are considered for further assessment. When making decisions related to the rules and the example provided above, they ensure that the process also reflects the needs of the local school and community. As educators observe students in this process the need for differentiating services is noted.

Kindergarten Identification: Why

Why identify at such a young age? Young gifted children exhibit characteristics at an early age. Among some of their characteristics as identified by Carol Story (2013) are as follows:

- using a large vocabulary and creating metaphors and analogies,
- demonstrating a long attention span,
- beginning reading at an early age,
- exhibiting curiosity,
- sharing a sense of humor with others, learning rapidly and easily,
- attending to detail, and
- displaying a good memory.

Kindergarten students who show some or all these characteristics require a differentiated curriculum from that of the typical kindergarten student. Identification for services allows them to grow academically at a pace that meets their learning needs.

Identification: District Populations

Another important focus on identification relates to the following:

- 2.24 Access to assessment and, if needed, gifted/talented services is available to all populations of the district
- 2.25 The population of the gifted/talented services program is closely reflective of the population of the total district and/or campus (19 TAC §89.1(3)). (TEA, 2019, p. 6)

As districts and campuses meet these requirements, one resource that facilitates understanding is found on TEA's (2023) GT equity website as noted above. This website

presents the following wealth of information to guide districts in this effort. They are categorized in this way:

- barriers to identification,
- culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse (CLED) students;
- characteristics of English learners;
- characteristics of twice-exceptional (2e) learners;
- gender-based considerations, including gender development differences; and
- nature and nurture.

After combing through the abundance of information in these areas, the website gives specific information about Assessment. This section contains the following:

- types of assessment and assessment providers,
- assessment barriers,
- assessment equity,
- universal screening,
- finding EL gifted students, and
- additional resources.

Identification Equity: Why

All these resources reflect current research and best practice. Most sections offer a video or in-depth look into the topic. Using these, while keeping in mind local populations and community, will lead to identification and appropriate curriculum that best reflects the nature and needs of the district's gifted learners.

Identification: The Final Details

Once data is collected, these criteria (TEA, 2019) are applied:

- 2.26 Final determination of students' need for gifted/talented services is made by a committee of at least three (3) local district or campus educators who have received training in the nature and needs of gifted/ talented students and who have met and reviewed the individual student data (19 TAC §89.1(4)). (p. 6)
- 2.27 The selection committee is formed of members who have completed training as required by 19 TAC §89.2. (p. 6)
- 2.28 A balanced examination of all assessment data collected through the district's gifted/ talented assessment process is conducted and used by the selection committee. (p.6)
- 2.18 Based on a review of information gathered during the assessment process, students whose data reflect that gifted/talented services will be the most effective way to meet their identified educational needs are recommended by the selection committee for gifted/talented services. (p. 5)

It is essential that the committee convened to identify students are well-versed in characteristics that reflect differing academic and social/emotional needs than their age peers. How does this committee make these vital decisions?

Matrix, Profile, Case Studies

A variety of considerations must be given attention when deciding how to identify. First, there is a process to be determined. The State Plan (TEA, 2019) requires multiple measures, and the TEA's (2023) equity resources offer what an identification matrix as one

way to complete the identification process. Others may call it a student profile.

In years past, a matrix was a form that offered points based on a student's scores on achievement, academic, and/or creative, tests and parent and teacher input. Each were assigned points that were tallied with a predetermined number called a cut-off score. Any students whose score fell above that number were identified for services; any below were denied. After that method was determined to be indefensible, districts began to use a student profile, which is what TEA (2023) defined as an identification matrix.

The student profile/matrix provides more leeway in evaluating students' scores in that scores near the "District Line" allow for professional decisions be made about the needs of each student. Unfortunately, if the assessment committee is not well-versed in characteristics of the gifted, especially the twice- and thrice-exceptional students, even with this process, many students may not gain access to appropriate services.

To circumvent some of the mistakes of the methods above, districts employ a case study approach to identification, such as that noted above in Brown & Burleson (2023). Although testing measures and behavioral checklists for parents and educators are included, they may find insightful information from portfolios, interviews, universal screening, and/or local norming procedures to consider in an individual student's case. All available information is gathered and considered to determine which educational services are appropriate for the students.

Identification: Parental Input

Parental input is central to the identification process. To that end Student Assessment in the State Plan (TEA, 2019) lists these five responsibilities:

- 2.2 Referral procedures for assessment of gifted/talented students are communicated to families in a language and form that the families understand or a translator or

interpreter is provided to the extent possible. (p. 4)

- 2.3 Referral forms for assessment of gifted/ talented students are provided to families in a language and form that the families understand, or a translator or interpreter is provided to the extent possible. (p. 4)
- 2.4 Families and staff are informed of individual student assessment results and placement decisions as well as given opportunities to schedule conferences to discuss assessment data. (p. 4)
- 2.5 An awareness session providing an overview of the assessment procedures and services for gifted/talented students is offered for families by the district and/or campus prior to the referral period. (p. 4)
- 2.6 All family meetings are offered in a language families can understand or a translator or interpreter is provided to the extent possible. (p. 4)

The district makes every effort to inform parents of the fact that services are available for gifted learners. This is accomplished with notes home with all students and information in campus marquees and websites, along with statements in newspapers and campus newsletters. Districts should have interpreters, both language and sign, ready for any parents who may come forward to ask questions. In addition, local educators familiar with the cultural differences found in their district are accessible to answer any questions from parents that make clear the intentions of gifted services that may contradict some cultural norms. A simple way to accomplish these criteria is to convene a parent meeting for all students who are referred to services.

Conclusion

Educators of the gifted should look beyond the requirements—the state law and State

Board of Education rule—when identifying students as gifted. The article guides readers to websites and districts that facilitate an identification process that is defensible and valuable for all learners. Using the how and what of the State Plan’s Student Assessment section (TEA, 2019), leads Texas educators to the why of identification which provides significant identification information to best meet students’ learning and social-emotional needs and to provide an environment in which they thrive and grow.

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