



*Gifted students' learning and
growth ensured by needed
provisions and advocacy*

Report to the State Board of Education

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Background

The State Board of Education created SAC in 1984 to assist in the improvement of gifted education. SAC provides advice to the State Board of Education concerning ongoing and emergent needs and issues related to the education of gifted and talented students in Colorado.

SAC members represent community members, educators and parents from Colorado's state congressional districts. SAC meets four times a year and conducts sub-group meetings to study topics of most interest at the time. SAC members also contribute to the functions of ongoing standing committees: membership, communication and legislation.

The committee collaboratively determines the topics or charges for study and summarizes recommendations for the SBE on an annual or semi-annual basis. In the recent past, SAC provided recommendations for at-risk gifted learners, diversity in the gifted population, a course of study for district inservice programs, lack of qualified personnel, identification and programming, modification of Rules for ECEA, and legislative issues pertaining to gifted learners.

In 2007, the State Legislature passed a law that requires all administrative units and their constituent schools or districts to identify and program for gifted students. This mandate recognized a paradigm shift from voluntary consideration for a student's exceptional talent and potential to required programming based upon data and collaborative decision making among educators and educators. Colorado maintains a line-item in the school finance budget to supplement local AU budgets and program plans for gifted education. AU plans are based upon available resources in each AU and services will vary accordingly.

Introduction

The following report is a summary of current local and statewide topics for which the SAC would like to offer comment and recommendations. Topics were considered relevant given input from the field and a need to increase the capacity of Colorado educators to identify and program for a diverse gifted population. It is a vision of SAC that gifted student education is embedded in the quality instruction of both general and special education, so that advanced programming needs and interests of learners are recognized and nurtured in the P-K- 20 public school system.

Gifted education has an obligation to "discover" students with exceptional potential and/or demonstrated skill and ability. For some children, the area of gifted potential requires more intense services and time to ensure development of the strength area. For other children, the strength area has a natural pathway for development in the P-K-20 system provided that the child's learning environment

supports acceleration, adjusted instructional pacing, rigor, curriculum compacting and family engagement. For additional information about gifted identification, programming elements, program plans and reports, resources and training, see the Colorado Department of Education's Website: <http://www.cde.state.co.us/gt>

A special thank you is extended to State Board Member Jane Goff, who serves as the liaison to the State Advisory Committee. Her insight on current issues guided discussions and raised critical questions for consideration. It is appreciated that the State Board of Education supports an advisory system for thoughtful input.

Demographics of the Gifted Population

This was an area of concern four years ago when gifted students were not reported accurately to the Colorado Department of Education. The SAC made recommendations to broaden identification procedures. A sub-committee worked with CDE for input on new statewide guidelines. Today, the percentage of Hispanic and Native American children and children from poverty identified with exceptional potential increased from a baseline established in 2004 has increased.



Recommendations:

- Promote the identification of exceptional learners in all sub-populations and access to identification procedures for all students.
- Advise CDE to advocate for the recognition of exceptional abilities in assessment and the response to intervention framework for instruction.
- Support legislation that would provide local administrative units with resources to implement evidence based practice and tests used in a body of evidence for identification. SAC suggests that the state moves toward providing resources for local AUs to implement identification, especially in underserved populations where additional data points may be necessary for recognition.

The evolution of the Forward Thinking plan has been of interest to the SAC committee primarily due to its positive focus on support and service and its desire to ensure that gifted students were included in the CDE's vision. Upon review, SAC applauds the overall purpose of Forward Thinking. The goals are worthy targets for improving ways to support districts and impact achievement of all students. The concept of ensuring all children quality instruction, high standards and rigor, and work force ready graduates is commendable. Elements of the plan align closely with the State Performance Plan in Gifted Education. The Gifted Education Unit also aligns its work with the goals outlined in the strategic plan. Professional development and personalized service through a regional support network is provided on a regular basis. Most recently, an intensity of need and service concept will guide further work in the local administrative units.

Given this positive focus, SAC was concerned about certain language in Forward Thinking suggesting that goals and efforts would address the needs of gifted learners to a lesser degree. This could be remedied by simple revision of the original document.

Recommendations for the Implementation of Forward Thinking Elements:

- Include the needs of students with exceptional potential when considering closing the achievement gap. Some gifted learners require interventions to reach proficiency; others require strategies to reach a goal of two or more years beyond grade level in an area of strength - a confirmed strategy in curriculum studies. Gifted learners may be at-risk of not reaching potential.
- Find resources to sustain programs like USTARS, a K-2 science supplement, providing high level work for all students and opportunities to observe exceptional performance and begin working to "close the achievement gap"
- Integrate instructional and behavioral needs of gifted learners in the routine implementation of a response to intervention support system.
- Verbally support the notion that in Colorado, "all" means all students, including those who may have needs beyond the immediate scope of grade level expectations.
- Help to eliminate the myth that gifted learners will make it on their own.
- Recognize districts that are disaggregating data for all state categoricals and analyzing growth data by those categories.
- Promote among leadership the need to review gifted learner growth in terms of keeping up and moving up; and when necessary provide other assessments to report growth in particular curriculum.
- Revise the language in the introductory Analysis page of Forward Thinking to represent all students.

- In Colorado resources may be targeted for struggling learners; however, this does not eliminate the need to target some resources for students with advanced, Tier II and III programming needs.

Accreditation

The new accreditation process follows the theme to provide support and service to the districts most in need throughout the state. Members reviewed the new accreditation process through the lens of gifted student education. The exceptional ability student or gifted student is a state categorical as defined in law supported in accreditation and the Exceptional Children's Education Act.

The targeted focus in accreditation is on performance of low-socio economic students and minority students, a misunderstanding about monitoring the gifted student as a state categorical sub-group was reported by SAC members. There is confusion in some AUs about the inclusion of gifted learners when monitoring achievement and growth. It is not uncommon for the federal categoricals to overshadow state categoricals. However, this does not eliminate the responsibility for disaggregating data for exceptional ability learners and setting goals for improving achievement and reducing disparities in reported data. It is an aim of SAC that a seamless system of accreditation and accountability integrate state and federal for monitoring student achievement and school improvements.

Recommendations:

- Ensure that districts disaggregate data of exceptional ability students as they do with other student groups
- Provide districts with gifted learner CSAP achievement data and Colorado Growth data, as is provided for special education and ESL students.
- When a district is in needs of assistance, inquire about the details in their improvement plan regarding gifted learner achievement.
- Suggest that the administrative unit's gifted education director be a part of conversations and goal setting in the accreditation process
- Use growth data to analyze progress
- Promote off-level or alternative and performance assessments when gifted learners ceiling state level tests
- Encourage post secondary/concurrent enrollment options for gifted learners for continuous learning and rigor
- Recognize districts with a high degree of advanced coursework and acceleration methods at the elementary, middle school and high school levels.

Colorado Growth Model and Gifted Learners

Gifted educators are celebrating the new Colorado Growth Model. In combination with the implementation of the gifted mandate and the new growth model, schools around the state are now taking a serious look at how identified gifted learners are growing academically. Gifted studies show that it is most often the gifted learner who does not make adequate academic growth, thus initiating questions about curriculum, pacing, instruction and affective needs. If a student is scoring advanced, it is often the assumption the student will stay at advanced each year. Without a rigorous and challenging curriculum, we observe that this is simply not true.

The State Advisory Committee applauds the overall merits of the growth model, while suggesting important points in relation to gifted learners:

- Assist districts in exploring why gifted learners who are accelerated may not be demonstrating growth on the Colorado Growth Model
- Ensure that stakeholders realize that additional data (e.g., district, classroom, performance data) complementing the Colorado Growth Model may be necessary to describe growth and achievement
- Request districts to use off-level testing to report academic achievement to the student and parents that aligns with actual instructional or course level (e.g., curriculum based assessment, district criterion assessment)
- Ensure that future state assessment tests contain more high-level, advanced questions to provide a more accurate measurement of advanced learners.
- Advocate for state funding to schools who demonstrate high growth of students to ensure districts can provide instruction and personnel for continuation of advanced programs
- As the Colorado Growth Model develops include means to disaggregate gifted learners by area of giftedness to match the way districts report locally and to CDE (e.g., math, reading/writing, and other)

Response to Intervention

The development of RtI in Colorado includes all students in need of instructional support and interventions to facilitate learning and growth. In past years, SAC provided CDE with input for RtI documents and development of talking points for RtI and Gifted Education. Reports indicate that gradually the needs of exceptional ability students are being included in districts' systemic methods to provide quality instruction, assessment, problem solving and progress monitoring and family engagement.

In November of 2008, SAC along with the Colorado Special Education Advisory Committee met to discuss the common issues and concerns of gifted and special needs students. One topic addressed the use of RtI for not only the struggling learner or those considered for learning disability identification, but also for the gifted learner. The intensity of tiered programming options vary among diverse gifted learners as it will for other unique learners. SAC recognized that districts seem more resistant to include parents in gifted identification and advanced learning plan development compared to the strong, historical parental involvement experienced in special education. Since gifted education across the state is reforming, stakeholders may not yet clearly understand gifted categories and the requirement to match student need and interest to the intervention or programming option.

Recommendations:

1. Provide resources for implementing Colorado's model of RtI that includes all students in need of support
2. Dispell the notion that RtI is a "special education only" initiative
3. Encourage differentiated instruction in quality core instruction and curriculum
4. Advocate for RtI as a means to collect a body of evidence demonstrating exceptional ability/talent especially in areas of low socio-economics and high minority populations
5. Advise CDE to support gifted learners through an RtI framework, including academic and affective needs in a tiered system of instruction and assessment
6. Provide educational leaders with adequate information about the systemic nature of RtI – its relevancy to all students – its foundation for LD eligibility
7. Recognize the work of districts that are implementing comprehensive RtI systems including targeted data and needs of unique learners

Parental/Family Engagement

The voice of parental advocacy resides in the membership of SAC. It was concluded that with the advent of the mandate to identify and program for gifted learners in every AU, more communication and partnerships between parents and educators is positive, proactive action. Because some parents may be hesitant to speak-up in fear of judgment or assumptions about their gifted child, it is in the best interest of the gifted learner that districts include the parent community. Involvement in advanced learning plan reviews, instructional decisions and assessment analysis, as well as school activities are rich opportunities to build strong partnerships.

Recommendations:

- Advocate for parents as leaders in their child's education
- Recommend schools and districts to sponsor SENG (Social Emotional Needs of the Gifted) trainings in facilitating parental support groups.
- Require gifted advisory boards, councils or steering committees in each district
- Ensure that RtI includes parents of gifted learners (and a gifted education resource person) when their child is involved in the problem solving process
- Require that the "Colorado" meaning of RtI as a systemic instructional support system for all students is clearly articulated to parents, teachers and administrators
- Suggest districts interact with parents of gifted learners in routine, planned methods
- Promote district partnerships with a local affiliate to the Colorado Association of Gifted and Talented
- Encourage districts to seek opportunities to work with parents as a team to ensure academic success and creative productivity
- Ask parents of gifted learners to serve on relevant statewide committees

Qualified Personnel

Qualified personnel mean a licensed, content endorsed educator who has an endorsement or higher degree in gifted education; or who is working toward an endorsement or higher degree in gifted education.

Studies recognize that trained teachers in gifted education have a higher academic effect on gifted learner achievement than other teachers. Qualified personnel inspire and facilitate learning by understanding the education needs and learning requirements of these students. Qualified personnel respect creativity, imagination and out-of-the-box thinking through higher order thinking skills embedded in content and assignments. Qualified personnel are aware of the social and emotional needs of gifted learners.

In Colorado, few educators have an endorsement or higher degree in gifted education compared to special education and ESL fields. Institutions of higher education are in a process of cultivating new programs in gifted education. It is a challenge to recruit qualified personnel when federal funds are targeted for teachers of other at-risk populations.

Recommendations:

- Approve/investigate ways to provide educators with incentives to earn a gifted education endorsement or higher degree
- Encourage the sharing of a portion of funds targeted for professional development or incentive programs for teachers of at-risk students

- Require that every administrative unit should hire/retain at least one qualified person to manage and improve the gifted education program
- Require educators who work in specialized gifted programs to have or be working towards an endorsement or higher degree in gifted education
- Request information about qualified personnel in district data collections
- Work with institutions of higher education to provide more approved programs in gifted education and opportunities to take coursework

C-GER: Colorado Gifted Education Review

SAC provided input for the development of the concept and procedures used in a statewide monitoring system for gifted education. Monitoring or the review process collects evidence that gifted education program plan elements are implemented in administrative units. This review process is a condition of statute being implemented after the 2007 legislation. C-GER is a 4 year cyclical process that includes: self-evaluation by the AU, review of budget proposal, feedback session on end-of-year report, technical assistance as requested/needed, and an on-site review to set collaborative priorities for improvement.

Recommendations:

- Ensure that CDE has resources to fulfill monitoring requirements set in law
- Post administrative unit program plans on the Web for open communications, sharing of resource ideas and stakeholder information
- Inform educational leaders about the C-GER process
- Support C-GER as one way to demonstrate a support and service system for building quality instructional programs for gifted learners in every administrative unit

Legislation

Several issues related to the education of gifted students were identified: 1) strategies for accelerating high ability learners do not allow for seamless transition in educational planning for many; and 2) Colorado funding for education in general and gifted education in particular is inadequate. SAC members offered suggestions to improve the broad base language of the new concurrent enrollment legislation and is encouraged by its potentially positive benefit to gifted learners.

Recommendations:

- Include the needs of the exceptional ability learner in legislative priorities
- Support legislation that benefits gifted learners and a need to move seamlessly through the P-20 educational system

- Advocate for a state supported residential high school for students with outstanding potential in math and science
- Influence legislators to sponsor quality policy for advanced learners
- Build coalitions with other educational advocates, organizations and agencies to assure adequate and equitable funding for education

Ongoing Needs

Two years ago, SAC asked AUs what their top priorities were in gifted education. Qualified personnel, professional development, and funding were the top three priorities. A recent random check with gifted education directors affirmed that these issues remain as high need, as well as an expression to continue the support and service function of the regional network system.

Recommendations:

- Advocate for funding resources
- Include gifted education in the resources, procedures and communication fostered by the Department
- Ensure that CDE has adequate resources to administer gifted education and provide technical assistance
- Include teachers of gifted learners in programs that provide resources for developing quality teachers, especially those serving gifted learners in low-socio-economic conditions and in high under-served populations.
- Weave the message of “all” students into statewide initiatives recognizing learner diversity, abilities and needs across the population of all students.

Celebrations

The State Advisory Committee is grateful for the opportunity to be a voice for the education of high ability, gifted learners. Recent activities influenced policy and state guidelines and procedures. The State Board of Education liaison, Jane Goff, is a key member of the Committee offering advice and providing thoughtful responses to SAC inquiries. Members, representing citizens across the state, are valued for their interest and dedication to the work of SAC. Most importantly, we celebrate the opportunity to meet with State Board members and uplift important topics related to gifted student education. We are hopeful that the SBE will be an advocate for broadening the scope of educational initiatives to include all students who could/should/would attain remarkable accomplishments in P-20 public education.