

Making a Place for Gifted Education: Learning from States that Maintain Gifted  
Education Programs Despite Academic and Economic Pressure

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## Abstract

As the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act (2001), which includes expectations for Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), is constantly on the minds of state and local leaders, gifted programming has seen a decrease in the United States. In the difficult economy, limited resources are being funneled towards those students who need to increase their test scores to make AYP. This thesis will examine the model states of Kansas, Iowa, Oklahoma, and Arkansas that have managed to provide mandated and funded gifted programming while excelling in their AYP and managing the strains of tight state budgets.

Making a Place for Gifted Education: Learning from States that Maintain Gifted  
Education Programs Despite Academic and Economic Pressure

Few would argue with the idea that all students should be given the opportunity to learn to the fullest extent of their potential. They should receive challenging, purposeful education that leads to intellectual growth at a pace appropriate to their needs.

Unfortunately, in a difficult economy, state and local policy makers are forced to tighten their budgets in all areas, including education. Additionally, states and local school districts have to meet expectations in an increasingly standards based educational system. With the federal No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, schools must make adequate yearly progress or face strict sanctions and interventions (Seimer, 2009). States and local districts have made decisions to focus their limited resources on ensuring that students pass these high stakes tests (Beisser, 2008). This focus has required schools to concentrate on raising the performance of students who are on the border of passing the standardized tests demonstrating school progress. Therefore, programs and funding for gifted education are increasingly being cut from school districts in order to provide extra assistance for other groups of students (Seimer, 2009).

Statistic pages developed by the National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC) (2009) indicate that every state puts some amount of control in the hands of the local school districts to develop and/or administer gifted education programs for students needing them (National Association for Gifted Children [NAGC], 2009a). The extent to which states put control of gifted education programs in the hands of the local districts varies widely from those that set up no state funding or mandates, such as New Hampshire and South Dakota, to those, such as Louisiana and West Virginia, who lay out

defined plans and monitor the programs, leaving local districts mainly with the expectation to carry out the programs (Zirkel, 2010). Very few states, however, have defined and specific standards, funding, and enforcement policies for gifted education. Furthermore, the federal government puts no mandates on states or school districts to provide gifted education as it does for special education. The lack of standards reduces the accountability of schools to provide their students with the opportunity to learn to the extent of their potential. Without accountability, some schools may provide excellent gifted programs, while other schools may provide very little in the way of gifted education. The National Association for Gifted Children (2008b) acknowledges that “because of the lack of federal leadership in gifted education, there is a disparity of policies and services between states, districts, and even schools in the same district” (para. 4). Furthermore, “gifted and talented students have needs that require specialized services and corresponding teacher training” (para. 4). Rather than following the trend of the federal government and ignoring gifted students at the state level, state legislatures should set standards to ensure that all students receive an equal opportunity to receive an education that meets their needs. While no child should be left behind, neither should a child be limited by lack of attention to academic gifts.

As school achievement becomes increasingly dependent on meeting overall curriculum standards, the temptation to ignore gifted education has become widespread. Standards must be enacted to protect the gifted students’ right to learn. Some states, such as Kansas, Iowa, Oklahoma, and Arkansas, have made gifted education a priority despite the financial and academic pressures they face. States can learn how to balance

expectations and budgets from the success of these role model states in order to provide mandated and standardized programs for their gifted students.

### **Gifted Education and Adequate Yearly Progress**

Originally passed in 2001, the No Child Left Behind Act focuses “on steady academic gains for students who are below proficiency in math and reading” (Seimer, 2009, p. 540). Contrary to the intent of the act, Beisser (2008) states, “since this law was passed, it is apparent that the focus of many schools in the United States has shifted toward providing time, attention, resource, and policies in the direction of students scoring under the 40% level of achievement in reading and mathematics” (p. 1). With the regulations placed on the educational system by the federal No Child Left Behind Act (2001), many states have pulled their attention from gifted students to focus on those who are not passing standardized tests. Schools whose students do not earn high enough scores risk “governmental sanctions impacting school funding and parental choice to choose a different school” (Beisser, 2008, p. 1). States such as Kansas and Iowa, however, continue to serve the needs of their gifted students while maintaining and even excelling in their adequate yearly progress (AYP). Studying the success of these two states in maintaining quality gifted education programs while remaining well above the national average in their AYP will provide an imitable guide for states striving to do the same.

### **Kansas**

Kansas has developed mandated and specific regulations to ensure gifted students receive the programs they need to excel, while maintaining exceptionally high yearly progress scores on the Kansas Statewide Assessments. According to the U.S.

Department of Education, in 2008, 88% of the schools in Kansas met adequate yearly progress (U.S. Department of Education, 2008b). This percentage far exceeds the national average of 70%. The National Association for Educational Progress (NAEP) also reported higher than average test scores in math and reading for both the fourth and eighth grades (reported in U.S. Department of Education, 2008b). While maintaining excellence in test scores, Kansas has found a way to mandate programs for gifted students.

Kansas defines the term “gifted” in its Kansas Administrative Regulation (K.A.R.) 91-40-1 (cc) (2008) as such: “Gifted’ means performing or demonstrating the potential for performing at significantly higher levels of accomplishment in one or more academic fields due to intellectual ability, when compared to others of similar age, experience, and environment” (Kansas State Department of Education, 2008b). Using this definition, the state mandates that local school districts identify gifted students through evaluations which “include a variety of assessment tools and strategies to gather relevant functional, developmental and academic information” (Kansas State Department of Education, 2007a, p. 3). Kansas is clear as to which students should be identified as gifted and eligible for services: those students with high academic ability. Having a clear and focused definition of gifted provides the state with a manageable task in providing services for qualifying students.

Once students are identified as gifted, they are given most of the rights given to students with disabilities, including the right to specialized education. Identification mandates and program mandates are in place to ensure the quality instruction of gifted students. Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) are required for gifted students, and

if specified in these programs, “each gifted child shall be permitted to test out of, or work at an individual rate, and receive credit for required or prerequisite courses, or both, at all grade levels” (p. 103). Students do not have to sit bored in class learning material they have already mastered, or could master at a much faster pace. Additionally, “each gifted child may receive credit for college study at the college or high school level, or both” (Zirkel, 2005, p. 104). In order to save money, Kansas has determined that all tuition fees related to earning college credit must be paid for by the student. This regulation demonstrates a way in which Kansas has not allowed tight finances to interfere with promoting challenging educational opportunities for gifted students.

Another important aspect of Kansas’ gifted education legislation is the requirement that teachers of gifted students meet specific standards regarding their knowledge and performance in teaching gifted students. Teachers of gifted students must meet eight standards in both knowledge and performance covering the “philosophical, historical, and legal foundations” of gifted education, “learner diversity”, “multiple methods of assessment”, “curriculum and instruction” for gifted education, “learning environments” and “learning experiences” for gifted students, “skill development” methods, “communication and collaboration”, and “professional and ethical behavior” (Kansas State Department of Education Teacher Education and Licensure Team, 2007b, pp. 175-179). Setting standards for the teachers of gifted students benefits the students by “ensuring that the top learners in our society are adequately identified and nurtured in the context of school settings” (VanTassel-Baska & Johnsen, 2007, p. 1). These standards also level the playing field across a state, ensuring that teachers are adequately prepared to teach gifted children in all school districts.

Research by the NAGC's shows that only 8 states affirmed that general education teachers were required to have training on the nature and needs of gifted students (NAGC, 2009a). The remaining 42 states either did not reply (the case for four states) or do not require general education teachers to have any training in gifted education (the case for the remaining 38 states) (NAGC, 2009a).

The problem is that gifted children have unique needs that should be met by trained educators. It is important for a teacher to know how to handle not only gifted students' academic needs but also their social and emotional needs (Delcourt & Goldberg, 2007). For gifted students, "normal challenges may be qualitatively different from others' experience and also sometimes hinder task accomplishment" (Peterson, 2009, p. 281). The National Association for Gifted Children recognizes the importance of having teachers trained for the academic and non-academic needs of gifted children, as indicated by the standard headings for teacher knowledge and skill standards: "foundations", "development and characteristics of learners", "individual learning differences", "instructional strategies", "learning environments and social interactions", "language and communication", "instructional planning", "assessment", "professional and ethical practice", and "collaboration" (NACG & CEC, 2006, pp.1-5). These standard headings reflect the importance of individuals specifically trained in the various aspects of teaching gifted children. Not only must they be knowledgeable in gifted instruction, but also in the unique characteristics and learning patterns of the gifted. Teaching gifted students requires competency in all of the named areas. Kansas' standards for teachers of the gifted align closely with these NAGC headings, ensuring that the teacher is adequately trained to teach gifted children.

Kansas has managed to provide a system of identifying gifted students, providing them with services comparable to those provided for any other exceptional student, and administering those services through teachers who are trained to teach gifted children, all while maintaining exceptionally high AYP scores. Due to the success in Kansas, it would be beneficial to look at some of the strategies used to ensure its schools meet AYP expectations.

Each state must determine how a school receives and maintains accreditation. The Kansas State Department of Education has decided that “each school shall be assigned its accreditation status based upon the extent to which the school has met the performance and quality criteria established by the State Board” (Kansas State Department of Education, 2008a, p. 8). Schools meet the criteria by “[meeting] the percentage prescribed by the State Board of students performing at or above the proficient level on state assessments or having increased overall student achievement by a percentage prescribed by the state board. . .” (Kansas State Department of Education, 2008c, p. 8). That is, Kansas requires that each school meets the yearly proficiency or improvement standards set by the state in order to retain accreditation. Not only must schools submit their overall data, but also data from subgroups within the schools. Schools must employ teachers with licenses and certifications in the subjects they teach, track attendance and send it to the state, and set high academic standards to be met for students to graduate, including four credits of secondary English, three credits each of secondary Social Studies, Science and Mathematics, one credit of secondary physical education and fine arts, along with an additional six credits of electives (Kansas State Department of Education, 2005). Teachers must undergo training about the state

curriculum and assessments, and the state requires that every school have a technical assistance team “to assist the school in meeting the performance and quality criteria established by the state board” (Kansas State Department of Education, 2005, para. 7). Based upon the fulfillment of these requirements, “a written recommendation regarding the accreditation status to be assigned to each school shall be prepared annually by the state department of education” (Kansas State Department of Education, 2008c, p. 36). If a school loses its full accreditation, it must meet all requirements for two consecutive years to regain full accreditation. If a school does not meet requirements for five years, the school loses all accreditation and undergoes state sanctions (Kansas State Department of Education, 2005). In order to ensure quality education of all of its students, the state of Kansas has ensured that every school be accountable to the state, following the state educational mandates and improving education for all. While the federal government does not mandate special education for gifted students, Kansas ensures that its gifted students receive special education by maintaining school accountability first and foremost to the state. In doing this, 88% of the Kansas schools met their necessary adequate yearly progress in 2007 and did not face the consequences passed down from the federal level for those schools that do not (U.S. Department of Education, 2008b).

Another area in which the citizens of Kansas demonstrate commitment to the educational needs of all students is in its Kansas Improvement Notebook (2008b), which is a document “offered as a resource to all Kansas school districts and schools to support their work in developing and implementing systemic improvement” (p. iii). The fourth stage in the Kansas Improvement Model states that schools should “[d]etermine a manageable set of specific measurable attainable results-orientated and time-bound goals

that will become the focus of improvement efforts district wide and/or school wide. This includes establishing priorities for improvement efforts based on the needs of *all* students” (italics added, Kansas State Department of Education, 2008c, p. 2). In the sixth stage, schools are to “develop and implement an improvement plan(s) that addresses the learning needs of *all* students within [m]ulti-[t]iered [s]ystems of [s]upport” (italics added, Kansas State Department of Education, 2008c, p. 2). These Multi-Tiered Systems of Support include the core belief that “every child learns and achieves to high standards” (Kansas State Department of Education, 2008c, p. 10). The Kansas Department of Education’s core belief is evident in statements made in the Kansas Improvement Notebook, which states that “every child will be provided a rigorous and research-based curriculum, and every child will be provided effective and relentless teaching” (Kansas State Department of Education, 2008c, p. 10). Furthermore, school administrators must give themselves a timeline to complete these stages and demonstrate these beliefs and are accountable to the state to show how they fulfill the requirements of each stage. A quality education is ensured for all students through both the accreditation of schools and the school improvement plan in Kansas.

### **Iowa**

Iowa is another state that has been able to provide a mandated and funded gifted education program despite the pressure of NCLB and AYP. In fact, according to the US DOE Educational Progress Report, in 2008, 93.4% of Iowa schools made AYP, one of the highest percentages in the nation. Additionally, Iowa’s fourth and eighth grade students scored above the national average in reading and mathematics achievement (U.S. Department of Education, 2008a). Like Kansas, Iowa has been able to develop and

maintain a structured and mandated gifted education program while still meeting the expectations of NCLB and AYP.

The Iowa DOE has established a clear definition of what kind of student qualifies as gifted. In Iowa Code 257.44:89, “‘Gifted and talented children’ are those identified as possessing outstanding abilities who are capable of high performance. Gifted and talented children are children who require appropriate instruction and educational services commensurate with their abilities and needs beyond those provided by the regular school program” (Iowa Department of Education, n.d.b, para. 1). In particular, “gifted and talented children include those children with demonstrated achievement or potential ability, or both, in any of the following areas or in combination: general intellectual ability, creative thinking, leadership ability, visual and performing arts ability, and specific ability aptitude” (Iowa Department of Education, n.d.c, p. 1). Defining which students qualify as gifted is the first step necessary to providing them with beneficial instruction.

Using the definition as the criteria, Iowa also sets up a mandated method for gifted student identification. Iowa requires that “systematic and uniform identification procedures” be used in identifying gifted students (Zirkel, 2005, p. 100). Furthermore, identification must be purposeful, and it must be for the sake of appropriate program placement. In identifying gifted students, multiple criteria must be used and these criteria must include both subjective and objective data (Zirkel, 2005).

After identifying those students who are gifted, the next step is to mandate gifted programming. Iowa requires that “[b]oards of school districts, individually or jointly with the boards of other school districts, shall annually submit program plans for gifted

and talented children programs and budget costs to the department of education and to the applicable gifted and talented children advisory council” (Zirkel, 2005, p. 100). That is, every school district must offer a gifted education program which must be submitted and approved by the state department of education as part of the schools’ comprehensive school improvement plan. In order to get approved, plans must fully address gifted and talented programming as stated in Iowa Code 12.5(12):

The comprehensive school improvement plan shall include the following gifted and talented program provisions: valid and systematic procedures, including multiple selection criteria for identifying gifted and talented students from the total student population; goals and performance measures; a qualitatively differentiated program to meet the students' cognitive and affective needs; staffing provisions; an in-service design; a budget; and qualifications of personnel administering the program. Each school district shall review and evaluate its gifted and talented programming. (Iowa Department of Education, n.d.a, p. 1)

Iowa law outlines the permissible forms of gifted education allowed, ensuring that students are exposed to concepts, content, and skills not available in the typical classroom (Zirkel, 2005). In addition to the school districts’ plans for providing gifted education programs, personalized plans must be written for each student identified as gifted and receiving gifted services. These plans must be reviewed regularly and must include background data, a list of all gifted services received, a description of services being given, and a description of any supportive assistance provided by the regular teacher (Iowa Administrative Code, n.d.).

In order to ensure the quality of the educators for gifted students, Iowa also requires teacher candidates to have “beginning teacher competencies in meeting the needs of exceptional learners, the handicapped and the gifted and talented” (Davison, 1996, para. 2). Teachers must be qualified to teach exceptional students. In addition to college preparation, schools are expected to provide for their teachers “a staff development plan for personnel responsible for gifted and talented programs” (Zirkel, 2005, p. 102). Professional development directly related to gifted education is essential for teachers to stay up to date with effective ideas and programs for exceptional students.

The state of Iowa has taken further ownership of its vision to educate all students by providing a funding system for gifted education programs. This funding is specifically designated: “The purpose of the funding is to provide for identified gifted student needs beyond those provided by the regular school program” (Iowa Department of Education, 2007, para. 2). Funds for gifted education programs can be used for gifted education teachers, gifted education supplies, gifted education staff development, or other materials or resources directly related to gifted education services (Iowa Department of Education, 2007). Any funds designated for gifted education but not spent, must roll over to the next year and may not be used for anything other than gifted education programming (Iowa Department of Education, 2007). Every year, school districts must provide the state with their expenditures, outlining where gifted education funds have been spent. This system requires local districts to provide at minimum, 25% of the funding for gifted programming. A maximum of 75% of program costs is provided by the state. The amount made available by the state has increased slightly every year (Iowa Department of Education, 2007).

As with Kansas, it would be beneficial to look at what those in Iowa are doing that results in notably high test scores while maintaining a developed and defined gifted education program. Iowa is a state with a clear vision for its education system. This vision is evident in Iowa's school accountability system, which requires each school district to submit a Comprehensive School Improvement (CSI) Plan, and also in the recently passed Core Curriculum, which aims to develop students' higher level thinking skills.

Iowa's Comprehensive School Improvement Plan demands a thorough reflection of current programs and requires schools to be proactive in improving, not only test scores, but the overall education for all students. The high demands stem from the plan's goal: "The intent of the CSI Process [is] to promote excellence by continuously improving the internal workings of Iowa's schools through the collaborative alignment of local visions, goal, programs, and school initiatives" (Schneider, 2006, p. 225). Requiring CSI Plans improved the accountability of schools in achieving continual improvement in all areas of education: "In 1999, Iowa's mandate for gifted programming was strengthened in two ways: (a) the inclusion of [Gifted/Talented] programming, K-12, into districts' CSI Plans, and (b) the provision of state funding" (Schneider, 2006, p. 225). Iowa gave credibility and importance to gifted education by including mandates for it in its overall educational plan. Iowa's vision is to educate all students with excellence. The state's vision leaves no place for ignoring the needs of any group of students, so it requires plans that address the educational needs of all students.

Though the Comprehensive School Improvement Plan held every school accountable for improvement, Iowa furthered that accountability for meeting the

educational needs of all students through the recently established Core Curriculum.

Passed in 2007, Iowa's Core Curriculum is meant to "identif[y] Iowa as a state that values high expectations for all students and all educators" and encourage "a common goal with the same priorities" among the educators and citizens of Iowa (Iowa Department of Education, 2009, p. 8). Iowa's Core Curriculum exists to "improve achievement of all students" (Iowa Department of Education, 2009, p. 1). The Curriculum "provides the processes and establishes the urgency to set higher expectations and infuse more challenging and meaningful content into classroom instruction" (Iowa Department of Education, 2009, p. 2). The key to the Core Curriculum is that it "is not course-based, but rather is a student-based approach that supports high expectations for all students" (Iowa Department of Education, 2009, p. 4). Every student is meant to be challenged under this Curriculum. To make this a reality, "the Core Curriculum provides all schools with the three essential characteristics of a quality instructional program: 1) a guaranteed and viable curriculum, 2) data-driven processes, and 3) practices and methodologies that are evidence-based" (Iowa Department of Education, 2009, p. 4). The goal is "to focus the curriculum on higher order thinking skills and increase the cognitive demands placed on students" (Iowa Department of Education, 2009, p. 3). In doing this, the curriculum "promotes student learning through the development of conceptual understanding and application of knowledge" (Iowa Department of Education, 2009, p. 6). For example, in math, the focus "shifts from memorizing and practicing facts and procedures to understanding and applying concepts, practices, and facts" (Iowa Department of Education, 2009, p. 6). Further shifts from lower level to higher level thinking skills occur in literacy, science, social studies, and 21<sup>st</sup> century skills. Correctly,

Iowa recognizes that a Core Curriculum will be beneficial to student growth in the classroom only if teachers are properly prepared to deliver the curriculum. Therefore, professional development is incorporated into the educational framework as well.

Iowa's vision to cultivate the academic development of all students is evident in its academic accountability and curriculum plans. Keeping this vision at the forefront of the educational system requires that all students be given a challenging education, including those who are academically gifted.

### **Conclusion**

What unites these two states and their successful gifted education programs is a shared vision to provide challenging, quality education to every student. With a philosophy that every student should receive an opportunity to grow academically, education becomes student centered and the focus remains on the students rather than on the external progress expectations. In the case of Kansas and Iowa, focusing on the achievement of each and every student allowed the AYP requirements to be met.

In order to effectively teach all students, teacher preparation was recognized as an area that needed attention. Both Kansas and Iowa mandate that teachers receive training in specific needs of gifted students both in college and in ongoing in-service development sessions.

Both states require the writing of individualized education plans, ensuring that individual gifted students have their own unique needs recognized and met. These two states have made use of IEPs, which are traditionally used for special education students, to ensure that gifted students receive the programs they need. Elizabeth A. Siemer (2009) addressed the benefits of using IEPs for gifted education, stating that "an IEP allows for

an individualized curriculum that can be particularly useful for students who do not fit the typical educational mold. Gifted children whose educational needs were addressed through an IEP anecdotally report overwhelming success” (p. 547). IEPs would not be difficult to add into gifted education programs, as they are already widely used for special education (Seimer, 2009). By having a vision that every student will have quality education provided by quality educators using quality programs and by keeping that vision at the forefront of all policies, these two states have been able to excel in their adequate yearly progress goals and provide mandates for the provision of special education for their gifted students.

### **Gifted Education and Funding**

With the struggling economy, states are forced to tighten their budgets wherever they are able. In many states, such as California, Illinois, and Michigan, funding for gifted education programs has seen a decrease in the past decade as states are forced to reduce spending in education (NAGC, 2009a). Financially speaking, the purpose of funded programs should not be to give more of a school’s or state’s finite resources to a certain group over another, but to provide each student with an equal opportunity to be met where he or she is and challenged to advance in his or her education. For gifted students, specific funds are necessary to provide teachers, materials, and programs suitable to ensure an equally challenging educational opportunity. Many states, however, are struggling financially, and when it comes to balancing budgets and administering educational funds it is tempting to overlook students who are already succeeding but are perhaps not being challenged. According to a study published in 2006, “given the emphasis on high-stakes testing and scarcity of funding, many states without strong policies in gifted education have

seen the elimination of programs” (Brown, Avery, VanTassel-Baska, Worley, & Stambaugh, 2006, p. 2). To ensure gifted students have the resources necessary to remain challenged in the classrooms, states need to strengthen their gifted education policies.

At the federal level, the Jacob Javits Gifted and Talented Students Education Act (1988) provides limited funds for research in gifted education. Individual schools’ funding must come from state and/or local levels. NAGC’s Gifted by State report shows that many states are decreasing funding for gifted education and many others provide no funding whatsoever at the state level (National Association for Gifted Children, 2008). Without state funds, state standards for gifted education cannot be enforced. Without enforced standards or mandates at the state level, gifted education programming is left to individual school districts, resulting in varied levels of support and unequal opportunity “dependent on the ability and desire of a school district to fund gifted and talented education programs with local school dollars” (National Association for Gifted Children, 2009b, p. 2). There are, however, some states that have managed to balance the needs of gifted students within tight financial budgets. Baker and McIntire (2003) point out that “ultimately, it is the role of state legislatures to establish what constitutes a ‘suitable’ or ‘thorough and efficient’ education for children within their borders and to ensure that local school districts have access to the necessary resources to provide such an education” (Baker, McIntire, 2003, p. 1). The legislatures in states such as Oklahoma and Arkansas have accepted that in order for districts to provide gifted students with a suitable education, mandates and funding programs must be established at the state level. Other states can follow the lead of these states to ensure gifted students receive a suitable education.

**Oklahoma**

Oklahoma funds a developed, mandated gifted education program which all school districts must follow. In Oklahoma, the gifted are “those children identified at the preschool, elementary and secondary level as having demonstrated potential abilities of high performance capability and needing differentiated or accelerated education or services” (Oklahoma State Department of Education, 2009, p. 6). To further clarify, “‘demonstrated abilities of high performance capability’ meant those identified students who score in the top three percent (3%) on any nationally standardized test of intellectual ability” (Oklahoma State Department of Education, 2009, p. 6). Additionally, students are gifted if they “excel in one or more of the following areas: (1) Creative thinking ability, (2) Leadership ability, (3) Visual and performing arts ability, and (4) Specific academic ability” (Oklahoma State Department of Education, 2009, p. 6). School districts are required to “identify children in capability areas by means of a multicriteria evaluation” (Oklahoma State Department of Education, 2009, p. 6). This type of evaluation prevents a student from being denied gifted services because of a lack in a single area.

The state holds districts accountable, not only for identifying gifted students, but also for providing services for gifted students. Each school district is required to submit an annual Gifted Education Plan (GEP) to the state. The state reviews the plan, and if it meets all of the state mandates the state approves the plan for implementation. GEPs must include many components:

- (1) A written process for assessment and selection of children for placement in gifted and talented programming options.
- (2) A description of programming

options and curriculum which demonstrates that the curriculum is sequential and is differentiated from the normal curriculum in pace, breadth, and/or depth. (3) Criteria for evaluation of the gifted child educational programming. (4) Evidence of participation by the local advisory committee in establishing goals, planning, child identification process and program evaluation. (5) Required competencies and duties of the staff for gifted and talented child educational programming. (6) A budget for the district gifted and talented child educational programming. (7) Gifted Child Count as required by the State Department of Education. (Oklahoma State Department of Education, 2009, p. 7)

While the state requires a detailed Gifted Education Plan (GEP) to be written and submitted by each district, the district is given the opportunity to meet the needs of gifted students in the way they see fit, as long as the manner of deliverance allows for all portions of the required GEP to be met. According to the Annual Report on Gifted and Talented Education for 2009, 199 districts incorporate IEPs, 306 incorporate enrichment classes, 342 allow for independent studies, 177 allow for continuous progress, and 296 offer individualized instruction. Many other options such as concurrent enrollment and cluster grouping among others are used as well, and many districts incorporate multiple methods of administration into their plan for gifted education (Oklahoma State Department of Education, 2009).

The state also plays a role in gifted programming by developing educational programs for the gifted, determining appropriate assessment and evaluation procedures to be used by school districts, enforcing the compliance of districts with gifted education mandates, setting procedures for identifying and developing programming for gifted

students, providing inservice training for those involved with gifted education, offering assistance for schools developing programs, and completing auditing of gifted programs (Oklahoma State Department of Education, 2009). The state must also ensure the integrity of the gifted program, imposing penalties on noncompliant districts. Districts forfeit twice the funding that they would gain if students identified as gifted do not receive sufficient gifted programming.

Oklahoma has managed to provide a mandated, monitored gifted education program that requires every district to provide for the particular needs of gifted students. Oklahoma State DOE states that “students are identified because they have specific educational needs” and has made sure that the state program not only ensures student identification but also provides “assurance that the design of gifted and talented programming provides for the unique needs of each child” (Oklahoma State Department of Education, 2009, p. 10). In order to do this, the Oklahoma Legislature has designed a funding system to provide school districts with financial assistance in meeting the gifted education mandates. In 2008, Oklahoma provided districts a base compensation \$7,685 per student (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). In addition to this base payment, Oklahoma has developed a state aid formula which provides districts “a weight of .34 for each student identified and served in gifted and talented education” (Oklahoma State Department of Education, 2009, p. 4). This means that districts received an additional \$2612 for each identified gifted student who was receiving gifted programming. The state has encouraged districts to “combine funds appropriated for this purpose with funds available from all other sources, federal, state, local or private, in order to achieve maximum benefits for improving education of gifted and talented children” (Oklahoma State

Department of Education, n.d., para. 5). While Oklahoma provides a solid base of funding for districts, additional support should be raised at the local level or through state or federal grants. Additionally, in order to meet tight budget requirements, Oklahoma has placed a limit on the number of reimbursable gifted students.

According to the Annual Report on Gifted and Talented Education, “the number of identified students for which a district will receive reimbursement will be limited to: those students scoring in the top three percent (3%) on any nationally standardized test of intellectual ability, and those students identified by multiple criteria; up to eight percent (8%) of the total average daily membership of the school district for the preceding year” (Oklahoma State Department of Education, 2009, p. 7). By funding gifted education based on a certain percentage per gifted student, as the base funding for all students increases, so will the gifted funding, allowing for increased cost of programming. Oklahoma, while providing the basic financial support for districts to meet the mandated gifted education requirements set in place by the state, has still managed to keep a rein on its budget by encouraging districts to apply for additional grants or setting up local funding and placing a reasonable cap on reimbursement. Rather than eliminating gifted program funding, other states could use Oklahoma as a model for how to provide the necessary funding for mandated programs while maintaining spending responsibility.

### **Arkansas**

Since the passing of the 1984 Standards for Accreditation of Arkansas Public Schools Act, Arkansas has mandated that all public school districts must provide a gifted education program (Arkansas Department of Education, 2009). In Arkansas, “gifted and talented children and youth are those of high potential or ability whose learning

characteristics and educational needs require qualitatively differentiated educational experiences and/or services” (Arkansas Department of Education, 2009, p. 4). Gifted students can be identified through their “above average intellectual ability, task commitment and /or motivation, and creative ability” (Arkansas Department of Education, 2009, p. 4).

Once identified by this definition, gifted students are entitled to gifted programming in each school district. Arkansas has minimum standards which all districts must meet or exceed. These standards cover requirements for community involvement, professional development, personnel, identification, program options, curriculum, and evaluation in detail, ensuring quality gifted programs for students. Included in the standards is that a minimum of 2.5 hours per week of direct gifted instruction must be provided during the normal school day (Arkansas Department of Education, 2009). That is, time must be spent specifically and directly instructing gifted students every single week.

In order to ensure the quality of districts’ programs, Arkansas Standards for Accreditation “require that each school use procedures to evaluate the effectiveness of educational opportunities provided for gifted and talented students” (Arkansas Department of Education, 2009, p. 27). Evaluations of district programs must be submitted to the state department of education each year for review. Each district must also provide documentary evidence of compliance to the state standards. In a further act for ensuring gifted education quality, Arkansas has in place detailed standards which educators of gifted students must meet. Teachers of gifted students must exhibit mastery

in knowledge, disposition, and performance related to gifted education (Arkansas Department of Education, 2001).

Arkansas has developed another way of funding gifted education programming. Arkansas spent \$8,541 per pupil in 2008 (United States Census Bureau, 2010), but rather than providing each school with additional funding per pupil, as is done in Oklahoma, Arkansas requires that a percentage of the funding received by school districts be used towards gifted education programs. In Arkansas, “school districts are required to expend state and local revenues on gifted and talented programs in an amount equal to fifteen percent of the foundation funding amount multiplied by five percent of the school district’s prior year Three Quarter Average Daily Membership” (Arkansas Department of Education, n.d., para. 1). For 2008, the foundation funding amount per pupil was \$8,541, thus a school district with a three quarter average daily membership of 2500 students would be required to set aside at least \$160,144 for gifted programming. Besides this amount, districts are urged to apply for grants and add funding from various other local, state, or federal sources.

Arkansas has developed a way to ensure funding is available for gifted programs without putting additional strain on the state budget. As foundational funding rises, so will the available funds for gifted education, and districts which receive more funding due to their higher populations, will have greater amounts of funding set aside to administer gifted programs to their increased number of students who are in need.

### **Conclusion**

In a time when the economy is struggling and budgets are tight, states have to be intentional about making quality education for all students a priority. While Oklahoma

has made the decision to provide additional funding above and beyond the basic amount per pupil funding, it has also managed to meet budget requirements by placing reimbursement (but not identification) caps at 8% of total school population, and setting funding levels at .34 per identified and served student (Oklahoma State Department of Education, 2009). Additionally, while Oklahoma provides a solid base of funding for gifted programming, it does so while encouraging districts to combine these funds “with funds available from all other sources, federal, state, local or private, in order to achieve maximum benefits for improving education of gifted and talented children” (Oklahoma State Department of Education, n.d., para. 5).

Arkansas has been creative in its approach to gifted education funding. Rather than adding additional funding into the state budget, Arkansas has mandated that districts use the funding they already receive in a way that ensures quality education for all. This legislation has placed an accountability system on school districts in which they must use the state funding they receive from the state to provide quality education for all students. There is no additional financial burden placed on the state to dispense additional funding, but there is additional pressure on local districts to ensure that the money they receive for each student is spent on a system that meets that student’s educational needs. The state is left with the responsibility to ensure that the correct amount of funding is spent on gifted education programs. Both Oklahoma and Arkansas exhibit ways to provide necessary resources for quality gifted education programs despite the financial hardships states may currently be facing.

### **Gifted Education and Program Standards**

Program standards and accountability are the defining trends of the education system in the United States at this time. These trends are evidenced at the federal level in the No Child Left Behind Act (2001): “A key feature of NCLB is the requirement that each state adopt an accountability system built, in large part, on standardized testing in reading and math for students in grades three through eight” (Neal & Schanzenbach, 2010, p. 3). While the NCLB act created a federal mandate for test-based accountability in every state, no single proficiency exam will encourage the progress of every student because students exist on a wide spectrum of ability level. The federal government recognizes the needs of students requiring special education, and mandates, such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (2004), exist to ensure those students have their unique needs met. Similarly, gifted students have unique needs that need to be met outside the existing curriculum. However, the federal government provides no mandates for meeting the needs of these students. While the National Association for Gifted Children publishes standards for gifted education, states are not required to follow them, and very few do. In fact, many states have no mandates of any sort for gifted education. Without standards, gifted students continue to receive inadequate education in many school districts.

*National Excellence: A Case for Developing America’s Talent* (1993), published by the United States Department of Education’s Office of Educational Research and Improvement, made several recommendations to enhance student learning. Among them was the suggestion to “set content standards and use a curriculum that challenges all children. Schools should provide challenging learning opportunities that offer students

variety and flexibility and encourage students to pursue learning both in and out of school” (cited in Oklahoma State Department of Education, 2009, p. 5). Standards should be challenging regardless of the academic achievement level of students, including gifted students. Due to the fact that “the field of gifted education has no federal mandate, the structure that holds gifted programs together rests in the policies that individual states have enacted” (Brown, et al., 2006, p. 1). It is up to the states to ensure that standards exist that will challenge the levels of all students: “The importance of coherent and comprehensive state policy in gifted education cannot be overstated because it is not only influenced through all policy levels, but it affects the daily lives of gifted students and those who work on their behalf” (Brown, et al., 2006, p. 1). Challenging standards mandated by the state would benefit gifted education by providing stimulating programs for gifted students in every school district.

In order to develop standards for gifted education, the term “standard” needs to be defined. According to the National Association for Gifted Children (2001), “[s]tandards establish the level of performance to which all educational school districts and agencies should aspire” (p. 1). On a deeper level, though, when standards are defined as “enabling legislation that either mandates or permits gifted education and that delegates to the state education department the specific procedures and criteria via regulations” (Zirkel, 2005, p. 229), many states could claim to have set standards for gifted education. But when defined as a criterion-based designated level of performance against which programming success is measured (Worthen, Sanders, & Fitzpatrick, 1997), not many states can claim to have standards set in place for gifted education.

Developing an effective program that will ensure equal opportunity for gifted students to be challenged and grow in their learning could take extensive research, time, and money. Thankfully, researched standards are already in place that states could use to plan and test their gifted education programs. The National Association for Gifted Children is an organization of over 8,000 members that for the past 50 years has been “invest[ing] all of its resources to train teachers, encourage parents and educate administrators and policymakers on how to develop and support gifted children” (National Association for Gifted Children, 2008c, para. 4). NAGC has developed detailed standards addressing not only the development of gifted educators, but also PreK-12 Gifted Programming. The 2010 Pre-K-Grade 12 Gifted Programming Standards cover learning and development, assessment, curriculum planning and instruction, learning environments, programming, and professional development for gifted education. The standards can be used to “evaluate existing programs, compare services across schools and districts, and provide guidance for developing new programs for gifted learners” (National Association for Gifted Children, 2001, p. 1). While some school districts choose to adapt the NAGC standards to their programming, and states such as Kansas and Mississippi use the standards to provide guidelines for local districts, the NAGC gifted standards are not mandated. In fact, no standards are federally mandated for gifted education, and few standards which are criterion-based designated level[s] of performance against which programming success is measured (Worthen, Sanders, & Fitzpatrick, 1997) exist anywhere in the nation. Standards need to be set into place at the state level in order to ensure equal opportunity for all gifted children to receive quality, challenging education.

### **Conclusion**

According to the National Association for Gifted Children, “the U.S. is largely neglecting the estimated 3 million academically gifted and talented students who represent diverse experiences, skills, ethnicity, and cultural and economic backgrounds. All of them require a responsive and challenging educational system if they are to achieve to their highest potential” (National Association for Gifted Children, 2009b, p. 2). Resources are being funneled away from high achieving students. Unfortunately, “many students who are identified as gifted and talented are bored and unchallenged in the classrooms of this country... Many of the nation’s most talented students are not encouraged to master rigorous or complex material or even to work hard” (Oklahoma State Department of Education, 2009, p. 5). Though students may not be left behind, gifted students are being handicapped in the process.

As the “No Child Left Behind Act neither excludes nor includes gifted learners,” it “encourage[s] many states to compromise services for the gifted in order to focus on specific mandates addressed in the legislation” (Brown, et al., 2006, p. 2). It is up to the state and local governments to determine that gifted students deserve a challenging education. States like Kansas and Iowa have developed their philosophies of education around the core belief that every student should receive quality education. With the vision of seeing this come true in their respective states, Kansas and Iowa have managed not only to provide quality programming for gifted students, but they have also excelled in their adequate yearly progress.

It is also clear that “programs at local levels will not improve without appropriate incentives, levers, and sticks from the state level as most districts still depend on states

for 90% or more of their funding for gifted education” (Brown, et al., 2006, p. 12).

During a time when state policy makers are looking for ways to cut costs, Oklahoma and Arkansas have found ways to ensure gifted programming is not cut but rather mandated and funded.

As the federal government has avoided involvement in gifted education programming, “for gifted learners, all program and service decisions are made at the state and local levels. In the absence of federal minimum standards, there is wide variability between states, and in many cases, an even wider unevenness between districts in the same state” (National Association for Gifted Children, 2008a, para. 2). States such as Kansas, Iowa, Arkansas, and Oklahoma, however, provide models for ways to provide detailed mandated services for gifted education. The NAGC provides quality standards that states can adopt into their mandated legislation. Using these mandates and the examples of the afore mentioned states, others can develop effective programming for their own gifted learners, ensuring that this group of students is no longer considered underserved.

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