

Pennsylvania Association for Gifted Education
Affiliate Chapter of the National Association of Gifted

A Special Pennsylvania Association for Gifted Education Publication

Comprehensive Assessment

- The Issues
- The Questions
- The Definitions
- The Possibilities

The Pennsylvania Association for Gifted Education supports the Department of Education and the Distance Learning Center's efforts to define and clarify the issues which directly affect the comprehensive assessment of gifted learners. The following abstracts are a composite of opinions by informed and experienced advocates of gifted education.

Referral Process

Referral for evaluation of potentially gifted students can and must occur as early as kindergarten and may continue through the twelfth grade. It is a school district's responsibility to evaluate a student if one or more of the following indicators exists:

- instructional assessment indicates high potential,
- the student's performance level exceeds that of his/her peers in the regular classroom,
- a student has been previously evaluated.

Parents have the right to request an evaluation of their child at any time during the course of the child's educational career. A request for testing, specifically made by parents, must be submitted to the school district in writing. An evaluation of a potentially gifted student may also occur if ordered by a hearing officer or if a judicial decision has been made.

Comprehensive Screening and Evaluation Process

The screening of thought-to-be gifted students is an ongoing process. Every attempt should be made to identify potentially gifted students at or before the beginning of the school year. Early identification ensures that a student's specialized program can be implemented in a timely and effective manner. A school district must use multiple criteria to screen and identify gifted learners. Multiple criteria may include information from the following sources:

- standardized tests
- cumulative records
- enrollment records
- health records
- report cards

In addition, checklists related to the characteristics of gifted youngsters may be included with annotated observations from the regular classroom teachers. Parents should be encouraged to complete similar checklists and provide information relevant to past student performance, especially when school records are not available or are incomplete. Identification of a gifted child cannot be based solely on an individually administered psychological evaluation. Determination of gifted eligibility cannot be based on IQ alone. Testing should not only include the psychological examination, but also comprehensive testing in the areas of general aptitude, subject specific scores, diagnostic evaluations, critical thinking levels and creative ability.

Multidisciplinary Evaluation / Comprehensive Evaluation Report

Assessment to Develop Specially Designed Instruction

For too long, the evaluation process has focused on determining eligibility for services based on intellectual

functioning and scores on standardized tests of academic achievement. This evaluation process is beginning to change to more accurately determine the need for specially designed instruction. Need is based on an evaluation of the student's performance using curriculum-based assessment and measures of the student's learning rate and retention rate.

Curriculum-based assessment will identify the student's instructional level within the curriculum. If the student's instructional level is within the levels taught in the classroom, the student does not require specially designed instruction. On the other hand, if the student has mastered the concepts in the curriculum, then the student should be placed at a higher level of instruction; i.e. acceleration. Curriculum based assessment can be applied to any area of the curriculum enabling the multidisciplinary team to have specific information about the student's performance by subject area. Decision making can be based on the student's interaction with the curriculum instead of global assessments. One student might be accelerated in math while another might be accelerated in reading. This information can be used to generate the strengths, weaknesses, and recommendations for specially designed instruction in the Comprehensive Evaluation Report (CER).

Assessments of learning rate and retention are essential. This information is necessary to determine the number of exposures required to learn and remember a new concept. Instruction should be paced according to these acquisition and retention rates. If a student requires limited exposures to retain information, then the student's curriculum must be compacted.

Additionally, parents must become an integral part of the evaluation process. The information that is important for parents to share with the multidisciplinary team is the child's interests, social, medical, and developmental history as well as their observations of their child's learning styles.

Once all of this information is collected, the multidisciplinary team meets to review it and decide whether or not the student is eligible for specially designed instruction. The team's conclusions are compiled into a Comprehensive Evaluation Report (CER) which is given to the individual education planning team. The individual education planning team uses this information to design the Individual Education Plan (IEP) to determine where and how the plan will be implemented.

Rate of Acquisition - Rate of Retention

In Chapter 342 of the Pennsylvania Department of Education Rules and Regulations, Paragraph 342.25(j) the statement is made that the "Evaluation of students...shall include in an instructional assessment consisting of the basic content that the student is expected to learn, [that] shall yield the student's rate of acquisition and the student's rate of retention..."

Indicators of a high Rate of Acquisition include: (1) high scores on pretests in the skill areas and/or presurveys in the content areas; (2) being able to demonstrate that the skill or knowledge has been learned immediately after the initial instruction; and (3) being able to demonstrate that the skill or knowledge has been learned after one repetition of the initial instruction.

Students that demonstrate a high level of Rate of Acquisition based on pretests and presurveys are indicating a need for instructional modifications such as the mandated acceleration and/or enrichment. [See 342.38(5) and 342.42(a) (1)].

Indicators of a High Rate of Retention depend on the following conditions: (1) the quality of the initial instruction; (2) the interest of the student and/or the meaningfulness to him/her; (3) the degree of active involvement in the initial and follow-up learning; (4) the student's possession of the background and/or the prerequisite skill for the new learning; (5) adequate time having been allotted to the initial learning; (6) the use of multiple strategies and a variety of resources to serve a variety of learning styles; and (7) the student's having knowledge of the objectives or outcomes at the outset of the learning.

Rate of Retention should be evaluated based on the larger learnings (concepts, generalizations, laws and principles), not just on retention of specific facts, data and information.

Portfolios

The word portfolio elicits a picture of a large black case in which an artist proudly carries art work. The new Chapter 5 regulations embrace the vision of an artist's portfolio for all public school students. Although the intent of these portfolios remains the same as the artist's, a student's portfolio is a purposeful collection of works that span grade levels and reflect student achievement. They are integral to performance-based assessment. They represent the history and diversity of the learner in the educational process. The portfolio contains actual pieces of the student's work instead of a test score that stands for student achievement. A portfolio gives a picture of the learner's progress showing the development of skills and talents over a period of time. Effective portfolios stress the strengths of the student, the skills developed, improvement in academic achievement, reflections of the student's expectations about life, and future aspirations.

"The sky is the limit" depicts what could go into a portfolio. It might include essays, reports, quizzes and tests, anecdotal records, audio tapes, projects, journals, interviews, inventories, lists of books read, observation checklists, self evaluations, video tapes, models, readings, works of art, collaborative team work experiences, scientific experiments, dramatic presentations, dance performances, problem solving work, simulations, competitive accomplishments, creative designs, student-designed independent studies, apprenticeship or mentorship experiences, and other authentic tasks. Deciding what goes into the portfolio is a process that should be directly related to the curriculum outcomes or a student's special talents. Teachers and students need to ask what types of authentic, performance-based evidence can be included in the portfolio that will demonstrate the child's progress toward reaching these outcomes or demonstrating their talents. As students have input into portfolio guidelines and the creation of their own portfolios, a sense of ownership and pride in learning is cultivated. It becomes a personal diary of their lives as learners.

The motivation behind portfolios is putting the responsibility for demonstrating learning on the learner, with the emphasis on the student showing what he/she has learned. The teacher and student then become partners in learning. Time must also be set aside to give the students an opportunity to review and reflect on their work using rubrics and self-evaluation. Rubrics can be developed to provide expectations or guidelines to align the student's work with the learning outcomes. The specificity of the rubric gives the students information about the quality of their work and offers goals for improving their performance in the future. In addition, a self-evaluation process adds to the effectiveness of portfolios because it provides the learner with the essential life tools. Students might ask: (1) What did I do well? (2) What of my work was the most difficult? (3) What could I improve in the future? (4) What part of my work showed the most growth?

Two main types of portfolios are working and showcase. The working portfolio contains many examples of the student's work. The showcase portfolio highlights the student's best efforts, work that tells who they are as autonomous learners. Portfolios offer the opportunity to link instruction and assessment and share ownership in the learning process. They represent the essence of what education is all about -learning.

Bulletin Contributors

- David L. Mason, Ed.D. - New Cumberland, PA
- Carole Preston - Pittsburgh, PA
- Kenneth R. Chuska, Ed.D. - McMurray, PA
- Franny McAleer - Pittsburgh, PA

Bulletin Editor

- Dawn Fisher - Slatington, PA