



# BULLETIN

## Evaluation of Gifted Programs

by

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In an educational climate focused on accountability and “the bottom line,” it is reasonable for policy makers to expect evidence of effectiveness on the part of all educational programs. Gifted programs are no exception. In fact, with many gifted programs in danger of cutbacks, a program evaluation which demonstrates the value of the program may strengthen the case for retaining or even expanding it. The key, of course, is to perform a thorough and defensible evaluation.

Following are some areas which the evaluation might examine. The suggestions for the types of data to collect in each area are not intended to be exhaustive.

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**Philosophy, goals, and program direction.** Over the life of a gifted program, the philosophy, goals, and direction may change to reflect current trends, changes in personnel or student demographics, or alterations in the mission of the district as a whole. It is necessary to revisit these statements to ensure that they still reflect the objectives of the stakeholders. Types of data which might be collected include questionnaires and interviews. Perhaps the most salient information might result from asking the students to give examples of activities or projects they have undertaken which reflect each goal.

**Identification procedures.** These procedures should be examined for equity, fairness, inclusiveness, effectiveness, and efficiency. Effective identification procedures result in students being appropriately placed in program options—being sufficiently challenged but not overwhelmed. Efficiency implies that there is no redundancy in procedures—measures that result in no new nominations of students should be eliminated. Instruments used should be reliable and valid. Identification should be continuous beginning at kindergarten. Data relevant to this area include comparisons of test scores with progress in the program, analysis of the procedures and instruments by an expert in psychometrics, and questionnaires completed by regular teachers, administrators, and counselors.

**Student progress.** This is arguably the most important area to assess, for if the students are not growing from the program there are serious problems indeed. One *inappropriate* method of assessing student progress is to examine grade level achievement tests—scores are likely to drop for two reasons: 1) gifted program activities do not focus on factual recall and instead encourage students to go beyond the obvious answer, and 2) a statistical artifact called regression toward the mean implies a lowering of scores at the top of the distribution. Instead, out-of-level testing, portfolios, oral and written products, performances, and competition results might be evaluated. Comparisons might be made of achievement between program participants and eligible non-participants. Participants and parents might be asked to reflect on specific ways in which students’ knowledge and skills have changed as a result of the program. Classroom teachers might respond to questionnaires regarding transfer of skills and knowledge to the regular classroom. The long-term impact on students might be assessed by contacting program graduates.

**Curriculum and instruction in the gifted program.** These areas should exemplify current best practices in the field. Evaluators would be looking for a continuum of enrichment and acceleration options spanning grades K-12. One would expect the curriculum to encompass broad themes, challenging and engaging topics,

interdisciplinary content, and higher level thinking skills. A variety of teaching techniques and an accelerated pace would also distinguish the gifted program from the regular classroom. Most importantly, the curriculum and instructional practices should match the students' needs, interests, and abilities. Here, program observations, questionnaires and interviews of students and parents might be augmented by comparisons of written documents with exemplary published curricula. The quality of student products would also support this area.

**Regular classroom curriculum and instruction.**

Modifications in curriculum and teaching strategies ideally should occur in all settings in a gifted student's areas of strength. The extent to which the regular curriculum is extended, accelerated, or enriched might be documented by lists of differentiated activities provided in the regular classroom and interviews or questionnaires with students, regular classroom teachers, and parents.

**Professional development activities.** In order to maintain the highest quality of service for gifted students, all faculty must continually develop their knowledge and skills regarding gifted students, their needs, and ways in which those needs might best be met. Schedules of inservice activities along with inservice evaluations and faculty needs assessments would provide evidence in this area.

**Personnel.** Those who teach gifted students must be qualified and committed to doing so. Classroom observations, personnel records and indications of continued growth in the field through appropriate professional development activities might be examined. In order to appropriately allocate resources, teacher schedules and logs might be evaluated to make decisions about altering teaching assignments or adding staff.

**Resources.** High quality programs require sufficient resource commitment from the district. In many cases gifted teachers/coordinators are spread so thinly that the quality of services to children is severely compromised. Calculations of per-child expenditures may reveal inequities in funding. High quality instructional materials must also be obtained. To ensure fiscal responsibility, program expenditures should also be evaluated for appropriateness.

**Communication.** The extent to which all stakeholders are informed about program activities

directly affects support for the program. Communication can also highlight linkages between gifted and regular curricula and optimize student performance. Collections of newsletters and articles would provide information in addition to that gained from questionnaires completed by samples of all stakeholder groups.

**The evaluation itself.** A well-done evaluation consumes much time and other resources. The ultimate question to ask is "Was it worth it?" Did the data collected provide information to improve the program? The steering committee would be in the best position to answer these questions.

**Steps in Effective Program Evaluation  
(adapted from Tomlinson & Callahan)**

**Step 1: Preparing for the Evaluation**

- Convene a steering committee to direct the evaluation. Involve representatives of all groups of stakeholders: school board members, community members, administrators, regular educators, educators of the gifted, parents, and students.
- State a purpose for the evaluation.
- Review program philosophy, goals and objectives.
- Develop a budget to support the evaluation.
- Decide which program elements will be evaluated.
- Identify outcomes relating to each element.
- Prioritize evaluation questions.
- Develop procedures to ensure confidentiality.
- Identify personnel who will carry out each aspect of the evaluation, and make sure that these personnel have adequate training both in evaluation procedures and gifted education.
- Create a written plan for the evaluation.
- Establish a time line for the evaluation.

**Step 2: Designing Data Collection and Analysis Procedures**

- Select multiple data-gathering strategies to address evaluation questions. Examples: classroom observations, questionnaires, interviews with students, expert evaluation of student work, testing data, lesson plans, curriculum documents, minutes of meetings.
- Identify several sources of data, such as students, parents, teachers, administrators, archival materials, and news articles.

- Make sure data relating to student outcomes and growth reflect program goals (for example, creativity, analysis, advanced understanding of ideas).
- Ensure that data provide useful and accurate information for judging the effectiveness of policies and procedures.
- Determine data analysis procedures, such as frequency counts, percentages, content analysis, identification of common themes, etc.

### Step 3: Conducting the Evaluation

- Make sure key people and groups are involved in the evaluation and provide on-going monitoring.
- Carry out the evaluation according to the written plan.

- Analyze the data.
- Plan for communicating evaluation findings with key audiences.

### Step 4: Reporting Findings and Follow-Up

- Make specific recommendations for action based on evaluation findings.
- Analyze the impact of the findings on the future directions of the program.
- Decide who needs to know about the findings.
- Prepare the evaluation report in formats appropriate for various audiences.
- Plan changes dictated by the findings.
- Plan discussions with stakeholders and decision-makers.
- Make specific plans to ensure that recommendations are carried out.
- Look ahead to future evaluations.

## Sample Evaluation Questions

(adapted from *Guidelines for Education of Mentally Gifted Students*)

- ✓ Does the gifted program offer a continuum of educational services based on assessed abilities, levels of achievement, diagnosed needs, and interests?
- ✓ Is a systematic procedure of identification in place for grades K-12?
- ✓ Are teaching strategies and educational experiences appropriate and differentiated to meet individual students' needs and interests?
- ✓ Does instruction of the gifted exemplify current best practices?
- ✓ Is content delivered at an appropriate pace and depth?
- ✓ Is there valid assessment of student performance?
- ✓ Does the IEP reflect student needs and abilities as reported on the CER?
- ✓ Are modifications made in the curriculum and teaching strategies of the regular classroom?
- ✓ How is programming for the gifted integrated into the regular education program?
- ✓ Are alternative learning environments provided when needed?
- ✓ Does the curriculum involve abstract, complex, higher levels of thinking?
- ✓ Are enriching extracurricular learning activities designed for the gifted available?
- ✓ Are divergent and creative thinking encouraged in the regular and special educational settings?
- ✓ Is counseling related to giftedness provided for students and parents?
- ✓ Does the program identify gifted students with disabilities, culturally different gifted students, and underachieving gifted students, and appropriately meet the needs of these groups?
- ✓ Are college and career needs of students assessed and addressed?
- ✓ Are procedures in place for alternative ways of meeting graduation requirements?
- ✓ What professional development options are available to all faculty to develop skills for meeting the needs of the gifted?
- ✓ How are all interested stakeholders informed about gifted program activities?
- ✓ Are the resources to support instruction of the gifted appropriate?
- ✓ Are all special education procedural safeguards followed and all state mandates implemented?
- ✓ To what extent is the gifted program meeting the individual learning needs of gifted students?

## Evaluation Recommendations

(adapted from Fetterman, 1993)

1. Make sure the evaluation provides the practical information needed by all stakeholders.
2. Make sure the evaluation is realistic (politically and pragmatically) and cost effective.
3. Make sure the evaluation is conducted in an ethical manner.
4. Make sure the evaluation is as accurate as possible.
5. Make sure program documentation exists.
6. Make sure you review as many relevant data sources as possible.
7. Make sure you compare the program's stated goals with their actual performance.
8. Make sure you describe and assess the climate.
9. Make sure you talk to students.
10. Make sure program finances are reviewed.
11. Make sure community and school board components are included in the evaluation.

## References

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