

## Proposal for Restructuring Secondary Gifted Education

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

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"The old gods are dead; the new gods are not yet born."

Like the old gods, our nineteenth century educational model is also dead. Modern science has changed the way we understand the universe and high technology has changed the way people communicate. The "assembly-line" school day (A. Shanker, Oct. 12, 1990) where students are processed through a set of classes is no longer working not when TV, radio, and video bombard us with information and stimulation not when computers dazzle us with instant data retrieval -- and not when the work force is organized into problem-solving teams.

But the new gods will not be born unless we in education restructure "the delivery system" of our schools so that students have the opportunity for the extraordinary learning they need: first, to manage the knowledge explosion and, second, to make the critical decisions required to solve the problems of our planet in the twenty-first century.

How, then, can we meet those extraordinary needs of gifted students for acceleration, enrichment, critical thinking, and independent learning within the present rigid school day scheduling and the traditional teacher-centered models? The answer is, we cannot! We must "break set," take a fresh look, and begin to initiate the following steps to reform the schools.

### Restructure The Rigid School Day

Gifted children have longer periods of concentration than average students. Therefore subjects should be scheduled in blocks of time, with at least ONE OPEN DAY, or with FLEXIBLE PERIODS OF TIME built in for enrichment, independent study, and mentoring. For example:

- Mon/Wed Mornings-Humanities Study
- Tues/Thurs Mornings-Science & Math Study; Afternoons: Arts, Physical Education, and Electives
- Friday: Independent Study/Enrichment/Mentor Day

The school day should also be extended, but again with classes scheduled in modules or blocks of time. Michael J. Barrett, writing in The Atlantic Monthly, makes a convincing case for more time in school when he compares the average American school year of 180 days with the Japanese average of 243 and West Germany's 240. In fact, in comparing American students with those in Asia and Europe, he argues that Americans stand out for two things: "how little they work... and how poorly they do." (M. J. Barrett, November, 1990)

### Restructure Teacher Time

- Teachers of the gifted MUST have time to meet and MAKE DECISIONS about curricula and activities that will best meet their students' needs
- Teachers must have time to mentor/tutor their students, particularly those who are highly gifted and have little home or peer support
- Teachers of the gifted should also have time to meet with the regular education teachers who instruct gifted students in their mainstream classes
- Regular education teachers need inservice and support in identifying the characteristics and needs of

gifted children across several content areas

### Design Interdisciplinary Units

Gifted children also need holistic/thematic instructional approaches in order to make connections, draw comparisons and make inferences, i.e. between science and social studies, or art and mathematics. The Civil War, for example, offers learning opportunities which connect to history, English, art, music, mathematics and science. Therefore subjects should be taught through INTERDISCIPLINARY units that may incorporate problem solving, Great Books style discussion with Socratic questioning, seminars, outside resources, field trips, group and independent study projects.

### Provide Opportunities for Accelerated Work

Since many gifted students at the secondary level function and achieve beyond grade level, placement should be flexible - according to ability, not just age. Opportunities for "College in the High School" and Advanced Placement courses, or part-time attendance at local colleges are appropriate options for the gifted. So is the practice of challenging credit for courses by examination. Research shows that shortening the years of formal schooling gives highly gifted children a significant advantage in starting their careers without stunting their social growth.

### Make Extensive Enrichment Options Available

Seminars and lectures by teachers or outside "experts," field trips to museums, galleries, historical sites, local industries and universities; opportunities to participate in science fairs, math competition, Shakespearian festivals, foreign language and arts fairs should be provided. Computer networking would also give students access to a host of data banks in diverse fields where they can retrieve the latest information, and exchange research data and ideas with students and professionals across continents. These enrichment experiences are particularly important for culturally deprived children or in schools where limited attention is given to developing aesthetic sensibility and research skills.

### Provide Mentorships, Apprenticeships and Externships

Cooperation with other districts, I.U.'s, local universities, agencies and industries can open the door for rich experiences in scholarship, service, and career exploration. Both teachers and adults in the community can serve as supportive and inspiring role models for students.

### Tailor Teaching Styles and Strategies

The teacher of the gifted must act as a guide and coach, one who establishes a framework for challenge and shifts the maximum learning responsibility to the student. Instructors should make use of a variety of writing and discussion techniques, group problem-solving and inquiry activities, including cooperative learning. But above all, they must provide multiple opportunities for independent learning. Teaching strategies for the gifted only make sense when they encourage aesthetic sensibility, creative and critical thinking ability, in-depth research skills, and demand reflective self-evaluation.

### Making it Work

- Eliminate Carnegie Units
- Permit students to challenge courses by examination
- Encourage students to attend college classes
- Allow selected students to graduate early from high school
- Grant Physical Education credit for various activities; i.e. sports, ballet, cheerleading, etc.
- Develop new, interdisciplinary programs
- Incorporate philosophical reasoning into several content areas
- Develop an Interdisciplinary Writing Seminar for all students
- Provide the computer/media and curriculum resources necessary to support independent learning
- Incorporate authentic assessment of student performance, including writing portfolios, problem solving, project evaluations, written and oral examinations
- Inservice staff, both gifted and regular education teachers on characteristics of gifted learners, critical thinking strategies, ways to individualize instruction, how to use a coaching model for teaching, and new methods of assessing student progress