

Gifted Education in Tennessee

Background, Recent Legislative Activity, and Recommendations

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ABSTRACT

This issue brief, developed for policymakers by the Tennessee Initiative for Gifted Education Reform and the Tennessee Association for the Gifted, (1) provides background information about the needs of intellectually gifted students and current Tennessee gifted education policy, (2) describes recent legislative activity, and (3) suggests several ways that gifted education can be improved in Tennessee.

BACKGROUND

Who are “intellectually gifted” students?

The Tennessee Board of Education defines an “intellectually gifted” child as one “having intellectual abilities and potential for achievement so outstanding that special provisions are required to meet the child’s educational needs.” Gifted students can be found in all school districts and come from all cultural and socio-economic backgrounds. Gifted students are very different from one another, and their individuality often makes them difficult to identify and appropriately educate. Some gifted students make “straight A’s” with little effort and appear happy in class, but may be learning very little in school while acquiring poor study habits. Some are “globally” gifted while others are exceptional in only one subject area. Some have learning impairments or motor skill problems that mask their abilities. Some attend college early. Some gifted students “dumb themselves down” to fit in with their age peers, receive poor grades, or become behavior problems, and it is not uncommon for gifted students to drop out of school.

Why do intellectually gifted students require accommodations?

A national study found that at the elementary level an average of 35 to 50 percent of the regular curriculum could be eliminated for gifted students (Reis & Purcell, 1993). Another study found that 84 percent of regular classroom teachers do not modify the curriculum for gifted students and, as a result, gifted students waste much of their time in the regular classroom (Westberg, Archambault, Dobyns, & Slavin, 1993). Compounding the problem is the social pressure that gifted students feel to moderate their achievements in the regular classroom (Delisle, 1982; Rimm, 1987; Whitmore, 1980).

Recent studies of TCAP value-added scores show that the brightest students typically make the least progress in school. One such study (Wright, Horn, & Sanders, 1997) concluded that

possible explanations include lack of opportunity for high-scoring students to proceed at their own pace, lack of challenging materials, lack of accelerated course offerings, and concentration of instruction on the average or below-average student. This finding indicates that it cannot be assumed that higher-achieving students will “make it on their own.”

The pace and content of the standard curriculum are not designed with gifted students in mind, and efforts to “raise the bar for everyone” do not address their educational needs. To ensure that gifted students are taught at their current achievement levels and make continuous academic progress, they need curriculum differentiation or compacting, subject or grade acceleration, special classes, and access to programs not normally offered to their age peers.

How do school districts in Tennessee approach gifted education?

Tennessee school districts are free to create programs and provide advanced instruction for intellectually gifted and high ability students in their regular education or special education programs. Therefore, there are a variety of programs offered across the state, including pullout programs and special classes in the lower grades and Advanced Placement, academic magnet schools, and honors classes in the higher grades. If the needs of a gifted student are not met in the regular program, then the student has the right to an Individualized Education Program (IEP) under state special education law. An IEP may specify one or more accommodations based on assessed learning needs, ranging from a simple plan about how the regular classroom teacher should modify instruction to a more complex plan involving subject acceleration, special classes, and dual enrollment.

What laws govern gifted education in Tennessee?

Since the mid-1970's, Tennessee has included gifted education under the umbrella of special education. The state law mandating identification and services for special education students is Tennessee Code Annotated (TCA) Title 49, Chapter 10. Tennessee and twenty-two other states manage gifted education as part of special education; Tennessee and seven other states classify giftedness as a disability.

Why did Tennessee include gifted students under the special education umbrella?

Special education is designed to help children who have difficulty making academic progress in the regular program. Tennessee includes gifted education under special education because the regular classroom curriculum is as inappropriate for gifted children as it is for other disabled children. That is why the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC), the nation's largest professional organization for special educators, includes gifted education as one of its primary concerns.

Exceptional students at the extremes of the normal development curve need program modifications because they learn differently and at different paces. Children at either end of the spectrum need academically challenging and developmentally appropriate instruction, which usually involves modification or replacement of the regular curriculum.

Often, the public and many policymakers do not understand the needs of gifted students. Sometimes accommodations for gifted students are seen as elitist. Gifted programs are often the first programs eliminated during a budget crisis.

The framers of Tennessee special education law in the 1970s had the following goals and concerns in mind:

- the standard curriculum does not meet the needs of intellectually gifted students;
- disabled students, including intellectually gifted students, have educational needs that can be served by the same legal framework and administration,
- gifted education needs a "safe haven" from ideological and budgetary swings, and
- a law with "teeth" is required to force some school districts to accommodate gifted children's academic needs.

How many gifted students are identified in Tennessee?

There are about 19,000 gifted students in Tennessee. Gifted students comprise about ten percent of the special education population and about two percent of all K-12 students. The percentage of gifted students requiring IEPs varies from district to district.

Does Tennessee receive federal funds for gifted education?

Tennessee receives no federal funds for gifted education. However, school districts in Tennessee receive a portion of the state's funds allocated for special education students, averaging about \$250 per gifted student. The average expenditure for all special education students is more than \$2000 per student.

Do teachers receive training in gifted education?

Tennessee Board of Education rule 0520-1-2-.03 requires that teachers of gifted students with IEPs must have completed six hours of coursework in gifted education or an amount determined by the Tennessee Department of Education (usually one or two weeks of in-service training), or they must consult with a special education teacher. Tennessee is the only state in the region without a gifted education endorsement. An endorsement usually requires from twelve to eighteen graduate hours in gifted education.

Do gifted students have a right to dual enrollment?

TCA 49-6-3111 gives gifted students with both an IEP and a 3.2 or higher GPA a limited right to dual-enroll in college and receive high-school credit in grades nine through twelve.

RECENT LEGISLATIVE ACTIVITY

In January 2001, the Tennessee Organization of School Superintendents (TOSS) drafted a bill, filed by Rep. Mark Maddox, to remove "intellectually gifted" from TCA 49-10. The bill was withdrawn within a few weeks of its introduction after parents and educators contacted TOSS director Dr. Tony Lancaster and argued that it would negatively impact gifted students.

In January 2002, the Tennessee Association of Administrators of Special Education (TAASE) drafted a bill filed by Rep. Maddox to remove "intellectually gifted" from TCA 49-10. The full House Education Committee heard testimony, and the bill was withdrawn from consideration a few weeks later without a vote. Rep. Bunch introduced a similar bill, but it was

also taken off the calendar. Legislators received hundreds of letters, calls, and personal visits from parents, educators, and children who opposed the bills. Statewide organizations opposing the bills included TIGER, TAG, the Tennessee School Boards Association, the Tennessee Congress of Parents and Teachers, and the Tennessee Department of Education.

In January 2003, representatives of TAASE, TIGER, and TAG sat down together to discuss future legislation. They agreed, subject to the approval of their respective boards, to draft and support a resolution to be introduced in this legislative session calling for a study committee to make recommendations that would improve State Board of Education rules related to gifted education. It was agreed that the legal status of gifted students in TCA 49-10 would not be raised in legislation or in the study committee.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Tennessee cannot claim that it is “leaving no child behind” until every school district in the state provides academically challenging and developmentally appropriate instruction to all students, including its very brightest students who are capable of achievement far beyond the standard curriculum.

The following recommendations for improving gifted education in Tennessee were developed by TAG and TIGER in consultation with state and national experts, and after a review of gifted education policies in Tennessee and other states (Swanson, 2002).

RECOMMENDATION 1. Ensure that the category “intellectually gifted” remains defined as a disability in state law.

In most school districts in Tennessee, the regular education program does not come close to meeting the needs of gifted students and there is a tendency to reduce or eliminate gifted education when there are budget concerns. Many gifted students in Tennessee would not receive a free and appropriate education without special education involvement and the significant rights and protections afforded under current state law.

RECOMMENDATION 2. Hire a full-time Director of Advanced Academic Services in the Tennessee Department of Education.

This senior-level administrator must have significant graduate training and experience in gifted education and gifted program administration, and should oversee gifted education, AP classes, Governor's Schools, and other high ability programs across the state. Currently the state does not have a full- or part-time director of gifted education. More than 20 other states have a full-time director of gifted education (Swanson, 2002).

RECOMMENDATION 3. Create an add-on endorsement in gifted education based on nationally recognized standards.

The gifted endorsement should be patterned on the prototype developed by the CEC and the National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC). The endorsement should be available to regular and special education teachers as well as school psychologists, administrators, and counselors. Staffing requirements for endorsed gifted specialists should be based on a school district's average daily attendance and administrative needs.

RECOMMENDATION 4. Create a pre-service training requirement in gifted education for educators-in-training.

All teachers-in-training should have at least one undergraduate course on curriculum differentiation for the full range of abilities from resource to gifted, and preferably a full course on gifted student identification, needs, and instruction. Teachers need to recognize gifted students who do not fit the “high achiever” stereotype, and they need to know how to adjust instruction for students who are two or more years ahead of their age peers. Counselors-in-training should receive training in the social and affective needs of gifted students, and psychologists-in-training should receive training in the use of very-high-ceiling assessment instruments.

RECOMMENDATION 5. Reduce special education paperwork and improve education planning.

The Tennessee Department of Education should strive to automate and streamline all special education paperwork processes for all students. There should be a specialized IEP for gifted students, reserving standard IEPs for (a) learning impaired gifted students, (b) highly gifted students, (c) other categories requiring significant planning or transportation and (d) when a parent, teacher, or administrator believes that a standard IEP is needed.

RECOMMENDATION 6. Use talent search test scores for academic placement, and analyze TCAP value-added scores of identified gifted students.

School districts should use talent searches (e.g., Duke's Talent Identification Program) not only to honor bright students, but also to determine which students need more advanced work at school. The Tennessee Department of Education and all districts should analyze achievement and disaggregated value-added scores of identified gifted students and districts should modify their programs to ensure that gifted students, individually and as a group, are making adequate academic progress.

RECOMMENDATION 7. Require first screening for intellectual giftedness in pre-kindergarten through second grade.

School districts should place an emphasis on early screening using state criteria. Gifted children very often are not afforded the opportunity to explore their abilities in the early grades. By third grade, when most school districts first screen for gifted students, many have already adapted to an unchallenging education system. Early intervention is important for these out-of-step, asynchronous learners to help them develop their abilities rather than hide, resent, or fear their differences (Smutny, 1988). Early identification can also help reduce under-identification of minority students, students in poverty, and English language learners (Shaklee, 1992).

RECOMMENDATION 8. Create a center for gifted studies at a Tennessee university.

A university in Tennessee should conduct research and provide support for teachers, parents, school districts, and policymakers in the area of gifted education. An example of such a center is Western Kentucky University's Center for Gifted Studies.

RECOMMENDATION 9. Remove barriers to, and create new, advanced educational opportunities.

Districts should coordinate class schedules between grades so that advanced students may be subject accelerated. Gifted students should be allowed to test out of Gateway and other high school courses before and during high school so that they may access advanced courses or other educational options when they are developmentally ready. Gifted middle and high school students should have the option to take the GED test under special circumstances. Dual enrollment rights should be expanded so that gifted middle school students may dual enroll under special circumstances. The Governor's Schools should be fully funded every year and should include college-level instruction, the state should begin laying the groundwork for a residential math and science school modeled on those operating in all other states in the region, and the charter school law should be extended to allow schools for high ability students.

RECOMMENDATION 10. Ensure that all school systems meet nationally recognized minimum standards for educating gifted students.

The NAGC has developed minimal and exemplary standards for gifted education, which are published in their report, "NAGC Pre-K - Grade 12 Gifted Program Standards." The state needs to create requirements and incentives to ensure that all districts meet at least the minimum standards.

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