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Gifted and Talented Education in Maryland

Background

In the Spring of 1982, the State Superintendent of Schools in Maryland, David Hornbeck, appointed a task force to advise him and the Maryland State Department of Education concerning educational programming for gifted and talented students. That task force presented its recommendations to the superintendent and the Maryland State Board of Education in May 1983.

Many of the issues addressed in the 1983 report remain with us today. For example, mathematics and science education, particularly at the elementary school level, was seen as weak and in need of attention. This remains true today. The needs of underserved students were discussed in the 1983 report and much still remains to be done in this area. The 1983 task force recognized the critical role of well-trained, motivated teachers and the importance of on-going staff development in any attempt to provide appropriate educational experiences for talented students. Teacher training, as well as staff selection and development, are still critical elements that must be addressed.

As the current task force began its deliberations, it understood the continuing status of these issues and committed itself to addressing them in as direct and forceful a manner as possible. In addition, there are several forces currently affecting the educational community that were recognized by the group as having a negative influence on the ability of the state and local systems to provide appropriate and comprehensive educational services to our most able students. Since these forces influenced the deliberations of the task force and, ultimately, its recommendations, they are discussed in the introduction and mission statement to this report.

Current Status of Gifted and Talented Education in Maryland

To assess the current status of gifted and talented education in Maryland, each local education agency was surveyed by the task force. The group also

examined the results of a study conducted by the Maryland Coalition for Gifted and Talented Education in 1992, as well as a 1988 study by the Center for Talented Youth, Johns Hopkins University. In addition, discussions were held with LEA Gifted and Talented liaisons and Maryland State Department of Education staff.

Although some improvement has been made in some areas since 1983, overall there has been little progress and, in some areas, we have actually lost ground. What follows is the result of a careful review of the information submitted by each LEA to the request of this task force for information about the current status of programs for the gifted and talented students.

Given that Maryland has no state mandate regarding programming for the gifted and talented, it is surprising to find areas in the state where comprehensive, quality services are being provided. However, what is decidedly more disheartening is the fact that there are some counties with little or no programming of any kind. This fact is even more disappointing when one considers that many of these counties had active, successful programs in full operation as recently as five years ago. What has transpired in such a short time to account for this rather shocking disappearance of programs for the gifted? Further, why do we see a significant reduction in the commitment of some counties to their programs in terms of partial or nearly complete loss of supervisory and teaching personnel, as well as other components critical to the operation of a meaningful program?

What is apparent in the overall status of programs for the gifted in the LEA's in Maryland is the great inequities that have come about between and among counties as a result of 3 factors:

- (1) Maryland has no mandate or minimum program standards for the education of the gifted.

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- (2) A lack of MSDE leadership in the following areas of the education for gifted and talented students:
- clear direction and focus for programming and teacher training;
 - facilitation of networking, sharing of best practices and resources, and joint multi-county planning and implementation strategies; and,
- (3) Until very recently, a lack of state funding to assist counties in providing services for talented students.

The fact that MSDE has for several years had no full-time, designated person responsible for monitoring programs for the gifted, and has instead assigned responsibility to one or more individuals who were already responsible for very challenging and demanding programs, has communicated a message that caring for the needs of highly able students is not a priority. The absence of full-time MSDE staff with the responsibility for supporting and overseeing gifted and talented education in the state, as well as an overall reduction of budgeted funds has resulted in:

- * few, and in some cases no, annual meetings of LEA G&T liaisons to discuss on-going efforts or to share ideas and concerns;
- * significant changes in the format and operation of the nationally-recognized Maryland Summer Centers for the Gifted and Talented; and,
- * the annual practice of publishing a report outlining the status of programs for the gifted in each LEA and describing "best practices" being discontinued.

It is not hard to understand, then, why some LEA's have felt comfortable in reducing or eliminating programs for the gifted and talented as they have been faced with budget constraints. Currently, there are few incentives to maintain programs for highly able students or to begin such programs.

To be fair, several counties have continued to provide many exemplary programs for gifted students. Some counties have even expanded the range and breadth of their programming during the last few years. However, all of these movements were brought about because the systems individually had strong philosophical and practical commitments to these types of programs or there were individual catalysts (superintendents, board members, curriculum staff personnel, parent groups) who had the vision to recognize the system's responsibility to provide ways to meet the needs of gifted and talented students.

Although the larger, growing and/or wealthier counties have managed to continue to provide quality services for the gifted and talented, they have not been exempt from budget cutbacks and loss of personnel directly responsible for providing such services. As expected, however, smaller counties, especially those most affected by recent recession-related budget cuts, have been unable to continue their support of programs for the gifted and talented, and have experienced the most dramatic program reductions or eliminations.

Although glaring statewide inequities in wealth and community commitment to the funding of education are apparent across the spectrum of educational program efforts, nowhere are they more obvious than in the education of the gifted and talented. These inequities, compounded by the reduction in state staff and overall funding for gifted and talented education, have had a devastating effect on the provision of programs to meet the very real needs of highly able students.

A brief summary of the major findings obtained from the survey of local school systems follows.

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STUDENT ACCESS TO PROGRAMS

- Not all systems identify students throughout grades K-12.
 - Some site-based identification procedures are unique to specific schools and are not system-wide.
 - Many systems make no specific efforts to identify minority or disadvantaged students.
 - Not all LEAs match their identification procedures to program features.
 - Many LEAs indicated a need for more teacher training in the area of identification and recognition of talent.
- All LEAs requested from MSDE greater opportunities for networking (e.g., sharing strategies, materials, etc.) among systems and individual professionals, and more teacher training opportunities in gifted and talented education across the state.

PROFESSIONAL PREPARATION AND STAFF DEVELOPMENT

- Staff development and professional preparation opportunities vary from one-day inservice to three-credit courses in gifted education.
- Some LEAs provide reimbursement for teachers to attend conferences or cover tuition for college coursework.
- Few LEAs provide staff development in the areas of identification and/or programming for underserved populations.
- Few LEAs provide guidelines or requirements for professional development or advanced training.
- Only one LEA indicated no need for training or staff development in gifted and talented education.

PROGRAM ORGANIZATION AND ADMINISTRATION

- The present state of programming varies widely from a minimal level of service to provisions for full-day special programs for students.
- A few LEAs have a range of programs to meet the varying needs of students and to develop a range of talents.
- The presence, or lack, of designated personnel is reflected in the number, range, and variety of programs offered.
- Most LEAs indicated that, over the last several years, budget cuts have had devastating effects on programs, ranging from program reduction to program elimination.

Previous studies and recommendations identified critical needs in the area of gifted and talented education. However, many of the proposals put forth to address these issues have been only partially implemented or received only short-term support. The needs have not changed. Furthermore, additional concerns have arisen, creating an even wider array of issues that must be addressed. Now is the time to address forthrightly the education of students with outstanding talent and ability, and respond to the very real needs identified in 1983 and again by this task force.

The Charge to the Maryland Task Force on Gifted and Talented Education

Charge to the Task Force

In September 1993, the Maryland State Superintendent of Schools established the Maryland Task Force on Gifted and Talented Education. The charge to the task force was "to study the current status of gifted and talented education across the State of Maryland and make appropriate recommendations..."

Co-chaired by Carol Mills, Director of Research at the Center for Talented Youth (CTY) of The Johns Hopkins University, and Russell Beaton, Curriculum Specialist for Gifted and Talented Education/Communications Specialist for Frederick County Schools, the task force was composed of representatives from local boards of education, parent groups, local school systems, students, research and higher education, as well as State Department of Education staff.

The study and preparation of the report of the task force took place over a 14-month period. During that time, the task force developed a mission statement and a set of principles for improving gifted and talented education that are reflected in the recommendations of the group.

Task force members studied monographs from the National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented; published research articles on "best practices"; a variety of MSDE documents; and reports from several recent state-wide studies. The 1983 report of the Task Force on Gifted and Talented Education was carefully reviewed by the group. With the timely publication of the document "National Excellence: A Case for Developing America's Talent" by the U.S. Department of Education, the task force was able to align its recommendations with those made in the national report.

National, state, and local educators and researchers reviewed the work of the task force at several stages of the study and provided valuable reactions and suggestions. Several prominent national, state and local educators served as consultants for information, research, and reactions. Drafts of the report were reviewed by state and local advocacy groups, and two interim presentations were made to the Maryland State Board of Education.

In its work, the task force addressed each of these objectives that were included in the charge:

- Student Access to Programs: Definition, Identification, Equity and Underserved Populations
- Mathematics and Science Education
- Program Organization and Administration
- Performance Assessment
- School Improvement Planning
- Professional Preparation and Staff Development

Recommendations are organized around key questions that address issues pertaining to appropriate and effective services for gifted and talented students. The initiatives contained in the recommendations, in the judgment of the task force, will not only result in an exemplary educational program for our most able students, but also have the potential for improving educational services for all Maryland public school students.

Members of the Maryland Task Force on Gifted and Talented Education

Appointed by State Superintendent Nancy S. Grasmick in September of 1993, these persons were selected to serve on the Maryland Task Force on Gifted and Talented Education.

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The Maryland Task Force on Gifted & Talented Education is grateful to the following persons and organizations who provided suggestions in reaction to draft materials produced by the task force during its study.

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The Maryland Task Force on Gifted and Talented Education is grateful for the contributions to the work of the task force of these staff members of the Division of Instruction, Maryland State Department of Education.

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