

Our schools cannot afford to invest time and money in redundant programs that have little real-world value.

## Finding a main stream for the gifted

by Myrliss Hershey



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The phrase "least restrictive environment," sine qua non of the mainstreaming movement takes on an inverse connotation when applied to the gifted exceptional student. Historically the term referred to the need to alleviate some of the restrictions inherent in segregated classes for the mentally handicapped. It was postulated that educably handicapped students would benefit from the stimulation of a heterogeneous classroom. For gifted students a regular classroom may constitute a restrictive environment. Gifted students often work at "keeping behind" so they will not appear too different from their age-mates. A "less restrictive" environment would be one in which the gifted student would be challenged by content in keeping with his ability and one in which she could interact with intellectual peers.

As school districts are asked (mandated in Kansas) to add programs for the gifted to their special education priority lists the expedient temptation to apply program guidelines appropriate for the mentally handicapped to students who are environmentally handicapped must be countered before costly mistakes are made. Program provisions for the long-neglected minority of gifted students desperately need the protection of the special education umbrella; but if forced to operate under the regulatory processes appropriate for other special education students, programs for the gifted could be stifled before they flourish.

Traditionally gifted students have been swimming upstream IN the mainstream. According to a recent Office of Education report only one in 20 gifted students have had the benefit of discernible curricular adjustments appropriate to their ability. If these children of promise are to receive their rightful share of exceptional children subsidies, concerted effort is necessary to build bridges of communication between special and general educators. Common semantic ground—refreshed by streams mainly untainted by traditional biases—should be established.

Program planning for the gifted was given dramatic impetus in Kansas by House Bill 1672 which included gifted students in a special education mandate effective July, 1979. By this date state approved programs for the gifted necessitate the hiring of personnel certified in gifted education. A number of gifted education prototypes have been piloted in Kansas the past few years providing accessible "fishbowls" to observe the effectiveness of a

variety of program adjustments for gifted students. The following observations are presented as an attempt to cut through some prevailing myths and to clarify assumptions that might block meaningful program development for this highly educable minority.

**Assumption:** Status conscious parents will insist that their children be included in programs for the gifted, whether or not they qualify.

**Observation:** Parents have not been "storming the gates" to get their children into programs for the gifted. On the contrary there have been many reports of parental surprise when their children have been selected for special program provisions and oftentimes a reluctance to have them segregated from age-mates.

**Assumption:** Programs for the gifted will not be accepted by communities with strong egalitarian values.

**Observation:** Low profile programs with minimum use of labels have been received with no visible furor. These programs emphasize "matching students' needs with the purpose and objectives of the program." Problems of non-acceptance have appeared in situations where students have been selected for special programs on the exclusive basis of test scores with little or no input from classroom teachers, parents or students regarding specific individual needs. In such instances a backlash of resentment may fall on the students so selected.

**Assumption:** Students placed in programs for the gifted become snobbish—"effete elite."

**Observation:** Much to the contrary interaction with intellectual peers has a leveling effect along with cognitive stimulation. Programs which emphasize personal value clarification and social responsibility along with intellectual challenge encourage high level altruistic thinking.

Certain concerns emerge along with positive observations. There is evidence of need for clarification regarding the: a) mechanics and contingencies of state funding for gifted programs; b) interpretation of criteria for state approved programs; c) appropriateness of Individual Edu-

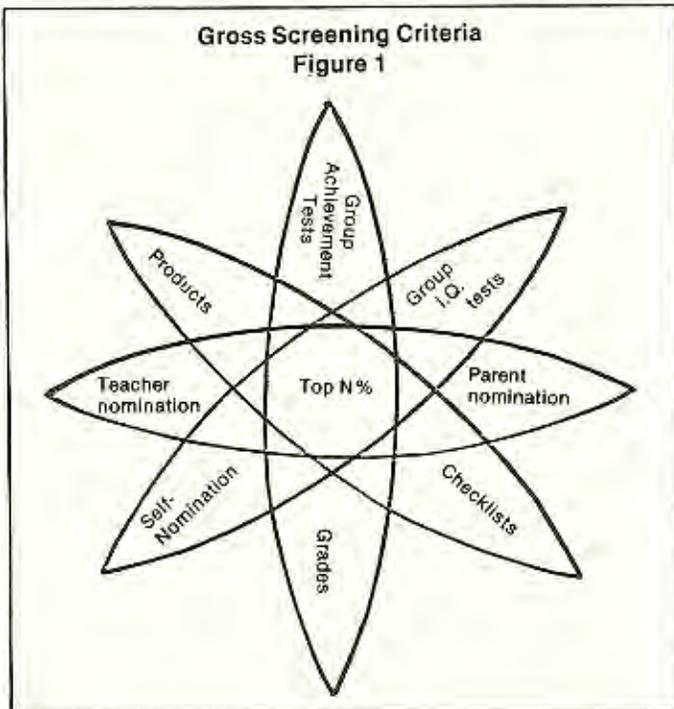
cational Plans for gifted students; d) role of the regular classroom teacher in program planning.

On the basis of the aforementioned observations and concerns the following guidelines are offered to help offset possible disparities and incongruencies in program planning for the gifted. The suggestions are within the limits of the Kansas state plan and national program planning parameters.

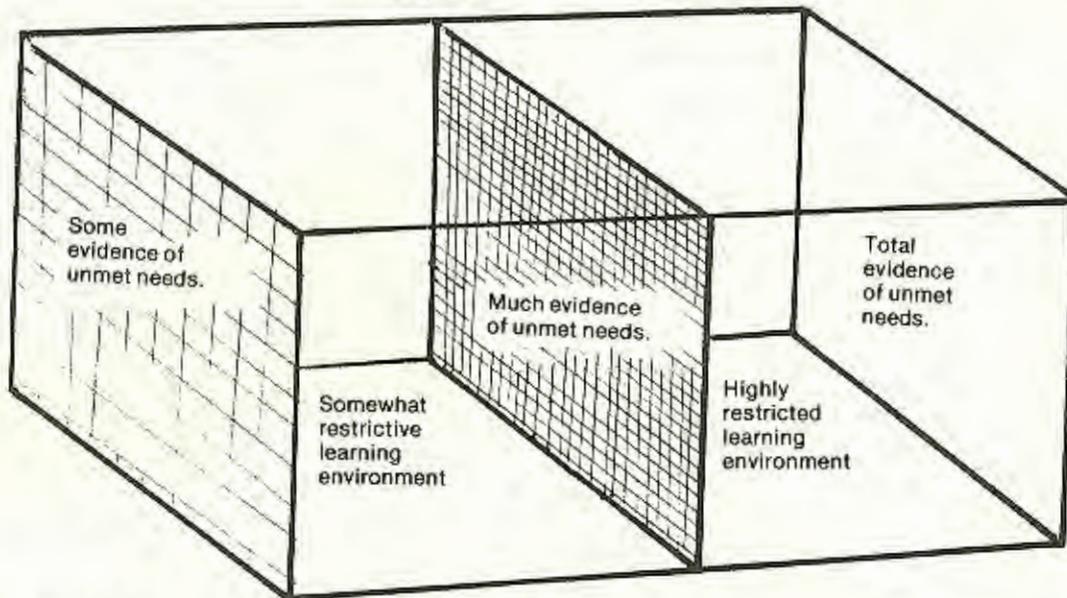
It is suggested that:

1. Students selected for full staffing and Individual Educational plans not exceed 1-2 percent of the population of a given attendance center.
2. A comprehensive screening process be utilized to nominate students for a "reservoir." (See Figure 1) This process is detailed by Gowan.'
3. The gifted education program coordinator or certified designate interview the students who constitute the top 5 percent of the grossly screened population to determine which students should be referred for full staffing. Criteria for this fine screening process would be outlined carefully and congruent with the purpose of locally determined goals and objectives. (See Figure 2)
4. Parents of students referred for full staffing would be notified in keeping with due process procedures.
5. A full staffing would determine which students would become the type III population i.e. the beneficiaries of individual educational planning. (Figure 3)
6. Students so selected would be provided special educational services and be subject to the regulations of due process. ("Special services" might include alternatives such as off campus options during school time.)
7. Students who received multiple nominations in the gross screening process but were not referred for full staffing would constitute a type II population.
8. The coordinator or certified designate would work closely with general education personnel (particularly the regular classroom teachers) to insure consistent efforts to meet the educational needs of these students. Gifted education personnel would schedule such options as seminars (to allow peer interaction), mentorship provisions, flexible "pull-out" alternatives, cluster grouping, etc. It is imperative that the classroom teachers have a feeling of ownership in the proceedings.
9. Students who received a nomination for special programming but were not a part of the finely screened group would constitute a type I population. Certified gifted education personnel would periodically review the learning situations of these students. If there is evidence of unmet needs as a result of the classroom situation restricting the child's gifted potential, the student would be reconsidered for placement in a type II situation or referred for a full staffing and possible type III placement.

Gross Screening Criteria  
Figure 1



Fine Screening Criteria  
Figure 2



Certified gifted education personnel would observe and interview students who were in the top N% (usual cut-off is 5%) of the grossly screened population in a given attendance center. The top 1-2% would be recommended for full staffing and individual educational plans.

10. Type I students would have occasional opportunities to self-select into some of the programs offered for the type II population.
11. Gifted education personnel would be encouraged to offer periodic opportunities for the total school population to self-select areas of interest which might give clues to special talents e.g. educational fairs, smorgasbord minicourses, after school interest groups, etc. Such endeavors would be invaluable for observing talented potential of students not readily identified by traditional measures.

If the intent of the preceding suggestions would be considered in program planning for the gifted, it is proposed that:

The unwieldy and largely unnecessary procedure of staffing an inordinately large population of students would be mitigated.

Patrons would be satisfied that educational needs of their "gifted" children would be met. There would be no need to tell parents their children are **NOT** gifted. Demanding parents would be assured that the gifted education coordinator (or certified designate) would work with regular classroom teachers to meet the educational needs of the students.

Students selected for full staffing would be those who are definitively restricted by the regular classroom learning environment. There would be little room for doubt regarding the unique learning needs of these students.

Individual Educational Plans for the type III population would insure the provision of the least

restrictive environment for this professionally identified highly gifted student.

While the type III population would be under the direct jurisdiction of special education for funding purposes, there would be no particular need or reason to differentiate publicly the degrees of service in terms of labels.

Regular classroom teachers would undoubtedly admit their inability (time-wise and/or otherwise) to meet the educational needs of the type III population. General educators would, hereby, be freed to devote more time to provide a less restrictive learning environment for the type I and II populations.

Gifted education personnel would work closely with general education personnel thus providing an important communication link with special education in an area of exceptionality that **MUST** function symbiotically in order to make any sense out of the educational milieu.

By placing responsibility for final screening cut-offs in the hands of certified gifted education personnel, concerns about restrictive interpretations of individual educational planning would be alleviated. Personnel recommended for full gifted education certification must have demonstrated their ability to use wise judgment in working with parents, colleagues, administrators and students.

There will be omnipresent need for concerned educators and lay people to monitor special programs for the gifted, elicit feedback from staff and students, and revise procedures when they obviously hinder meaningful program implementation.

Our schools cannot afford to invest time and money in redundant programs that have little real-world value. If wisely handled, however, investment in the least restrictive education of a priceless natural resource—the minds of our ablest—should pay great dividends.

**Notes**

1. John C. Gowan and E. Paul Torrance, **Educating the Ablest**, Itasca, Illinois: F.E. Peacock Publishers, 1971.
2. Joseph Renzulli, **The Enrichment Triad Model: A Guide for Developing Defensible Programs for the Gifted and Talented**, Weathersfield, Connecticut: Creative Learning Press, 1977.

**Figure 3.**  
This model correlates with Renzulli's Enrichment Triad Model of Type I, II and III curricular format.<sup>2</sup>

