A consulting teacher approach to educational programs for gifted students can offer enrichment opportunities to a broad range of the student population even as it provides the alternative learning environments very able students need in order to develop their potential.

# An Integrative Model for Educating Very Able Students In Rural School Districts

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Appropriate, effective education for very able students has been commanding increased public interest and legislative action during the past two decades. However, not enough information has been made available to guide educators in rural, isolated, and small school districts in serving the learning needs of their highly capable students. This is unfortunate, because two-thirds of our nation's school districts have fewer than 2,500 students enrolled (Spicker, Southern, and Davis, 1987) and can be expected to identify no more than 125 students for gifted programs. Furthermore, each and every state has a number of rural school districts and could benefit from practical, realistic approaches to serving their students who have high learning potential.

Very able students are present in economically disadvantaged as well as advantaged communities. They do exist across all cultural and ethnic groups, and in both rural and urban areas. Their numbers include both male and female students and occasional handicapping conditions such as physical impairment, learning disability, or emotional disturbance. It is virtually certain that any school with a heterogeneous student population of even a few dozen students will contain some who are capable of performing well beyond the limits imposed upon them by their school's conventional programs.

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### Educational Needs of Very Able Students

Students who need educational services beyond the basic curriculum and grade-level grouping are portrayed by a variety of labels, including gifted, intellectually superior, academically talented, high-performance students, and other descriptive terms. Regardless of the label selected, such students often perform at two to four, and sometimes as many as eight, grade levels beyond their age peers in school-based tasks. They have the ability to learn rapidly and easily. They know much about things which their age peers and sometimes the adults around them do not know. They tend to prefer difficult, complex subjects and thrive on intellectual challenge. Most are involved in a wide array of interests and activities.

These characteristics signify learning needs which have profound implications for school curriculum. It might be more honest and realistic to describe the very able in school as curriculum-disabled students who are at risk within the normal structure of a conventional school system (Dettmer, 1988). Some describe them as children-in-conflict (Davis and Bull, 1988) when penalized by typical school practices of age-grading, lock-step curriculum, and ordinary levels of intellectual activity.

Risk, disability, and conflict do occur for students when their learning potential cannot be nurtured in challenging school environments. The general classroom programs that are designed for the mainstream student population are not likely to provide *acceleration* of content and grade level placement that challenges them to greater heights of performance, *enrichment* of subject matter that allows them to delve, inquire, and produce, or the *personalized learning* options that allow them to demonstrate and develop their potential. Such students are in their own way as deprived as the most bitterly impoverished child of the ghetto (Fincher, 1976).

### Effects of Current Educational Trends Upon High-Ability Students

Many of the current educational movements do not bode well for very able students. Minimum competency goals, mastery learning models, behavioral objectives procedures, and even cooperative learning strategies that are not adjusted for wide ranges of student differences, limit the more capable learners. Because of these concerns, some schools strive to create more appropriate learning environments for students who can be accelerated, enriched, and guided beyond minimum essentials of the curriculum. Schools' motives for doing so many be pragmatic, if not outright self-serving—for example, aiming to avoid student flight to private schools and a subsequent loss of enrollment and funding. Other motives focus upon the future, toward development of outstanding student abilities that can be expected to help society and advance civilization.

All in all, the most promising concept of an enhanced learning program for the very able is that which creates school-wide learning environments of accelerated movement through material, enrichment of curriculum, and personalized instruction for any and all who can succeed with them. Good programs for very able students cannot exist

very long in subpar schools (Renzulli, 1987), and by the same token, schools which fail to challenge their more competent students are not likely to rise above mediocrity in serving any of their students.

Implementing school programs and curricula that meet the needs of all students is a monumental task for any school district, whether urban or rural, large or small, advantaged or poor. However, rural, isolated, and small school districts face particular challenges in providing appropriate learning environments for high-ability students. The most educationally disadvantaged youth in American schools may well be gifted students in rural communities (Milne, 1976).

### Problems and Possibilities in Rural School Districts

Several characteristics of rural areas become problematic when learning programs for very able students are addressed. Wide expanses of geographic space result in too much distance between learning centers. Too few students are available for many kinds of grouping arrangements. Excessive time is required for students to reach resource sites or for teachers to travel among schools. Not enough teachers are available for offering all the courses that are needed to serve student interests and talents. Often a very limited teaching staff must perform multiple teaching assignments. Furthermore, communities tend to be conservative, close-knit, and resistant to singling out any student for special programs. In poor rural areas, cultural values and outlooks may compete with academic expectations of school staff (Howley, Pendarvis, and Howley, 1988), and some parents have strong traditional values that conflict with the goals of the school program (Howley and Howley, 1988).

Helge and colleagues (1984) have identified several problems facing special services personnel in rural areas. These problems include: funding inadequacies, need for staff development in special education, attitudes of communities and school personnel toward special education, factors of geographic terrain and weather, and limited facilities and resources.

On the other, more positive hand, rural areas abound in opportunities and commitments which can be integral in nurturing excellent education. Class sizes usually are much smaller, producing more opportunity for interaction among teachers and students. More students participate in a greater number and variety of curricular and extracurricular activities. Parents usually are more accessible, and more involved in school life. School administrators, teachers, students, and parents know and interact with each other more frequently and productively. Also, students in rural areas tend to be open to a range of experiences and free from pseudo-sophistication, with inclinations toward creativity and resourcefulness (Samples, 1987).

Because programming for the very able in rural and isolated schools must focus on smaller numbers of students and usually must overcome paucity of staff, it is vital that regular classroom teachers become involved in differentiating curriculum and providing learning options and alternatives for their students. Many strategies can be employed that not only will enhance curriculum for the gifted few, but will have a positive ripple effect upon the total school program for all students.

### Consulting Teacher Role within an Integrative Approach

In order for classroom teachers and special services teachers to provide effective learning environments for very able students, there must be a concerted effort to coordinate regular and special school programs. The coordination process requires communication and cooperation by teachers, administrators, and support staff, with respect for uniqueness among students, teachers, and the educational settings. A consulting teacher approach to programming for students with special needs is an effective catalyst for collaborative efforts among teachers, administrators, parents, and other community members.

Consultation teachers share information and ideas, orchestrate efforts of all who are involved, and develop courses of action for meeting student needs. The consulting teacher approach is capturing the interest of many educators as an instrument for providing qualitatively differentiated education not only to highly able students, but to a wide range of the student population that would benefit from acceleration, enrichment, and personalized curriculum planning.

The gifted program teacher who functions in a collaborative consultation role will work with a team of teachers, principals, counselors, media specialists, parents, mentors, and community leaders to plan, implement, and monitor arrangements that challenge very able students. A concomitant goal should be to insure that the special program will create a multiplier effect for all students throughout the school system.

### EXPRO, An Integrated Model for Very Able Rural Students

A consulting teacher approach is used by the Dayton School District in the state of Washington to serve the educational needs of highly capable students while increasing learning opportunities for all students. The consulting teacher is responsible for lesson planning and organization, and community volunteers are an integral part of the program. A parent support group provides new avenues for funding and serves as a vehicle for educating the community about the importance of individualized instruction for highly capable students. By utilizing the unique characteristics of the community, the program provides challenging activities for up to twenty percent of the school population and delivers enriching activities to the entire student body of the district's schools.

### Description of the EXPRO Program Community

Dayton, a community of three thousand residents, is the heart of small, sparsely populated Columbia County in southeastern Washington. Its fully accredited elementary school, junior high school, and high school serve about 700 students. The student/teacher ratio in the Dayton district is 25 to 1. About 25 percent of the school population is eligible for the free lunch program. An encouraging 99 percent of students graduate from eighth grade, and 94 percent graduate from high school. Approximately 75 percent of the graduate pursue some form of higher education.

Several colleges and universities are within reasonable driving distance and encourage enrollment by very able students, but arranging the transportation for a 30–130 mile drive to a campus is not practical. Although Walla Walla Community College offers courses for college credit to high school students, the 45-minute trip to and from campus would cause participants to miss four high school class periods while attending only two college courses.

One of Dayton's biggest assets is its preponderance of talented people. Many of the young, college-educated workers and retired professionals are willing to serve as mentors for gifted children. They constitute an invaluable resource for the program.

### Development of the EXPRO Program

Washington state's education law allows school districts to establish and operate programs for highly capable

students, but funding for the programs is based on one percent of the student population of a district. Thus, for a rural school district the size of Dayton, the state would provide funding for only seven students at an approximate rate of $350, or a total of $2,450 for the entire program. Yearly application must be made for the money, and districts receiving funds are subject to audit by the Superintendent of Public Instruction office.

The limited state funding makes it advantageous for rural districts to work cooperatively in providing programs for their highly capable students. Dayton initially used this method of service, pooling funding with several other small districts and affiliating with the local Educational Service District (ESD). The ESD hired a specialist in education of the gifted, and began to develop a program for participating rural districts. The plan developed by the specialist provided for identification of gifted students in each school and bimonthly meetings with them in a pull-out model.

After two years of participation in the ESD program model, and with urging from local parents, the Dayton school district withdrew its state funds for the gifted program for the ESD for several reasons. Identification of eligible participants had taken four to five months. Also, students had met with the visiting instructor for a maximum of only two times every nine weeks, and had not had time to establish rapport with the visiting instructor.

The district, at the continued urging of interested parents, hired a specialist with state and local monies. The limited funding allowed for only 2/7 teacher time (three afternoons per week) for the entire K-12 program. This restricted time frame encouraged the instructor, parents, and school district to work cooperatively and creatively toward a goal of having a successful program for gifted students that also could provide enrichment for the entire school. The program was named EXPRO, from the Latin motto "*Ex* portu *pro*ficisci audeamus," or "We dare to set out from the harbor."

**EXPRO Program Design**

Two keys to the program design were recognized as vital for success. First, possibilities had to be explored without regard for program size or cost, and second, activities must reach the entire student body rather than focus upon a select group of students. These guidelines molded the base for the program and led to its acceptance in the district and community.

Parents, teachers, and administrators met with the specialist to work cooperatively in identifying the needs of highly capable students. This group believed that a program should be initiated for students especially gifted in a specific subject area such as art, mathematics, or language arts, as well as for students identified as gifted in many academic subjects. To meet this variety of needs, the group developed a volunteer instructor program using talented community members to help provide challenging activities for talented students.

The volunteer instructors donated one to three hours per week for carrying out lessons developed by the district specialist for highly capable students. These volunteer instructors represented a variety of backgrounds and shared a love for helping interested students master challenging material. Their dedication was demonstrated by careful preparation for class, consistent attendance, and willingness to find substitute volunteers to teach if needed.

Volunteers were found by having the original planning group brainstorm for names of people in the area with special talents ranging from oil painting to public speaking. The identified individuals then were contacted by the specialist to determine their interest in working with talented youngsters. The overwhelmingly positive response led to specific curriculum development and a matching of student needs with volunteer talents.

The following courses were developed for grades 3-8: Problem-solving, reading inquiry, science wizards, art, advanced junior high and high school English, and overall achievement. These classes use a pull-out model and meet for one to three hours weekly. Course content is developed according to student need and volunteer talent. A learning contract signed by the participating student, volunteer, instructor, classroom teacher, and parents outlines the responsibilities of each participant in EXPRO. The contract stipulates that attendance for a particular number of class meetings is required before the student can leave, or be asked to leave, the class. This alleviates possible problems experienced by either students or volunteers in adjusting to a new situation.

The second key to success of the EXPRO program is that of reaching the entire student body with challenging and interesting activities. Volunteers are instrumental in finding solutions to this need. Three types of programs that have been developed are academic competitions, cultural enrichment performances, and student peer-teaching.

Two academic competitions were expanded and managed by community volunteers under the guidance of the school administration and the EXPRO specialist—a written spelling bee and a declamation contest. Other rural schools are invited to both of these competitions, with all interested students encouraged to participate. EXPRO volunteers pronounce words and help develop spelling lists for the spelling bee. Many community members assist students as coaches in the declamation contest, which is judged by local college speech students and their professor.

EXPRO students are encouraged to meet students from other schools who have similar interests by attending the Mid-Columbia and Eastern Washington University Young Writer's conferences. Students who participate in the EXPRO art classes display their works in local stores and regional art show competitions.

A science discovery van from the Pacific Science Center and performers from music and literary fields further enhance the academic program of all students in the district. Funding for the events comes from local donations, the Parent-Teacher-Student Organization (PTSO), and grant monies. Organization of each performance is handled by EXPRO volunteers.

Peer-teaching by students involved in the overall EXPRO program has been very popular with both teachers and students. EXPRO students attend the Science Champions Program sponsored by the Pacific Science Center. The participants have a variety of hands-on science experiences and receive materials to take back for sharing with other students. The Dayton Science Champions write lesson plans in their pull-out special classes, develop oral speaking skills, and organize materials to demonstrate science experiments in all classrooms within their schools. The program has become so popular that the National Science Teachers Association (NSTA) invited the Dayton Science Champions team to demonstrate at the recent NSTA convention in Seattle.

The EXPRO program has flourished during its first three years. Classes now included Advanced Placement English for high school juniors and seniors, and whole-group lessons in math and science for grades K-2. As it enters its fourth year, the EXPRO program will manage a new computer lab for the elementary school and is expanding into a double-size room that will be called the EXPRO Opportunity

Center. The specialist position has been expanded to half-time, with a part-time assistant, but unpaid volunteers remain an essential part of the program as it develops to meet the needs of the rural district.

Volunteers often comment that they receive more benefits from the program than the students do. Without question, both groups find excitement and reward in working with each other to master difficult activities and to develop a thirst for information that they will continue to nourish through the EXPRO program.

## Conclusion

Effective education that nurtures the potential of very able learners must surmount many difficulties in rural, isolated, and small school districts. The hurdles include budget restrictions, too few students, wide expanses of space, distance from resource people and places, conservative attitudes, small staff size that limits course offerings and burdens teachers with multiple assignments, and resistance of students toward standing out in achievement or performance.

On the other hand, such schools offer many benefits and it is upon these strengths that excellent education can be built. Smaller class sizes, greater involvement by families in school activities, as well as students who are in tune with the natural environment will encourage high levels of interest and productivity.

A school-wide approach to accelerated content, enrichment activities, and personalized instruction can create positive ripple effects within the learning environment for many students. Approaches utilizing the consulting teacher model, such as the EXPRO program in Dayton, Washington, have been developed to provide a solid, locally-based program of curriculum differentiation for very able students in rural and small school districts. These approaches serve the particular learning needs of very able students and, while doing so, also provide important benefits to a wide range of the student population throughout the school district.

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