



Barrington 220 Extended Services Program Evaluation

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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The Barrington 220 Extended Services Program is designed to meet the needs of students of high academic ability. As with all programs, it is important to evaluate its components and ensure the program also meets the needs of the organization. The Extended Services Program was last reviewed in 2000 by a group of internal stakeholders. The administration scheduled an evaluation of the program for this school year by a team of experts from the University of Virginia. This paper shares information pertaining to the evaluation process, the findings from the evaluation team and next steps for the organization.

The Evaluation Team from the University of Virginia

A team of professionals from the University of Virginia (UVA) representing various areas of expertise in gifted education, including identification, administration, curriculum, instruction and program evaluation, was contracted to evaluate the Extended Services Program offered by Barrington 220. This team was shepherded by Drs. Moon and Brighton, nationally recognized leaders in the field of gifted education.

Dr. Tonya R. Moon teaches courses in research design at the University of Virginia, where she received her Ph.D. in 1994. She is a principal investigator for the National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented, a principal investigator for a research grant focused in the area of STEM and elementary teachers and students. Dr. Moon is a past Chair of the NAGC Research & Evaluation Network and is a past president of the Virginia Educational Research Association. She is active in the American Educational Research Association, the National Council on Measurement in Education and the National Association for Gifted Children. In 2003 she was awarded by the National Association for Gifted Children the Early Scholar Award. Her expertise is in the areas of academic diversity, evaluation, research and methods.

Dr. Catherine Brighton is an Associate Professor at the University of Virginia, a Principal Investigator on a Spencer Foundation-sponsored research project and serves as the co-director of the University of Virginia Institutes on Academic Diversity. She is the past-president of the Virginia Association for the Gifted (VAG), and is the former treasurer for the American Educational Research Association (AERA), Special Interest Group on Research in Giftedness and Talent. She earned her doctorate in Educational Psychology - Gifted Education at the University of Virginia in 2001. The National Gifted Association recognized her for Gifted Children in 2005 as the Early Leader for the Association. This award is given annually to an individual who has exhibited the highest and most consistent degree of leadership in the field of gifted education since receiving the doctorate.

Charge

The charge presented to the team focused on gathering information related to the current program offerings and to compare these programs to the current best practices in gifted education. The purpose of the evaluation was to provide recommendations to Barrington 220 for program improvements.

The Evaluation Process

The evaluation was carried out in accord with the procedures outlined in the evaluation proposal submitted by the University of Virginia team and approved by Barrington central office staff. The findings are categorized according to The Standards for Gifted Programs of the National Association for Gifted Children. The evaluation team reviewed documentation related to policies, practices, and program design, including the identification process, the review process, and program enrollment data. The evaluators developed surveys distributed by the Extended Services administration to: 1) parents of students in the aforementioned programs, and 2) teachers who taught in the Extended Services program. Drs. Moon and Brighton conducted an on-site evaluation during the month of October 2014.

Analysis of the Data

As the themes from the collected data were identified, they were organized into the categories suggested by National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC) The Pre-K-Grade 12 Gifted Program Standards. Analyses of results from all sources (interviews, observations, document analyses, and across the groups of respondents to the surveys) were used to triangulate findings to assure similar patterns of results across sources of information. For the purposes of this evaluation report, these focus areas are:

- Program Philosophy and Definition
- Assessment: Student Identification
- Assessment: Program Evaluation
- Learning Environment
- Curriculum Planning, Instruction, and Classroom Assessment
- Programming and Program Management
- Professional Development

For each area, this report provides a short narrative about the topic, commendations reported by the evaluators and areas to note for the district.

Program Philosophy and Definition

The philosophy and definition of a program are so critical to successful program development and the basis for all decisions made. Program philosophy should drive all programmatic and curricular decisions. Further, the definition of giftedness accepted and publicly espoused by the school district must be used to guide the identification and curricular decisions for program consistency and unity.

According to the district's handbook, Extended Services Handbook, the following statement exemplifies the district's philosophy statement:

The Extended Services Program addresses the needs of students for educational services distinct in nature and content from the existing standard program in district schools. Barrington 220 identifies students for extended classes as those who demonstrate achievement or potential aptitude in general intellectual ability, specific academic aptitude or performance in visual arts.

The mission of Barrington 220 is "Inspiring all learners to achieve excellence." Extended Services strive to provide opportunities and challenges that match student abilities.

Commendations

- The district has articulated a philosophy of giftedness and gifted education. The statement is commendable for being broad and inclusive.

- There is a plan for services for gifted students in grades 3 through 8, with opportunity for high school acceleration for some identified middle school students.

Areas to Note

- Nationwide, the general student population is becoming increasingly diverse and this trend is being reflected in schools. Therefore, it is important the program's philosophy and definition be guided by a more encompassing view of who gifted children are and the needed provision of services.
- There exists a perception of the "truly gifted student," referencing a construct neither defined nor operationalized. This approach to defining and operationalizing the construct is not reflective of best practice and emerges. This consistent narrative suggests a belief and assumption gifted students are "out there" and need to be found. The contrasting belief, aligned with incremental views of intelligence such as Dweck's work on *Mindset*, suggests learners, given appropriate opportunities to engage with rigorous curriculum and instructional services, can develop intellectual talents.
- There are currently no overarching measurable student academic outcomes established for the program overall. Because of this, stakeholders both inside and outside of the program may not see the program as making a significant contribution to the overall education of participating children.
- Consideration should be given to re-examining the district's definition of giftedness to account for non-traditional, twice-exceptional and/or underachieving students in the equation.

Assessment: Student Identification and Program Evaluation

Overall Standard Description: Assessments provide information about identification, learning progress and outcomes and evaluation of programming for students with gifted and talents in all domains.

Student Identification

In the larger area of assessment, student identification is an important component of any gifted program. A lack of congruence between philosophy and definition, identification, and services calls into question the quality and effectiveness of services offered to gifted students. Just as important, inappropriate, narrow and outdated identification measures and procedures seriously hinder the ability to recognize the potential of most students. The NAGC Standards include in the Assessment Standard evidenced-based practices regarding identification.

It is a firmly established principle of educational psychology that there is a strong positive relationship between measures of cognitive ability and measures of academic achievement, especially in those content areas emphasizing verbal and mathematical concepts and operations. Further, cognitive ability has been shown to strongly influence the extent to which students benefit from formal instruction. That is, cognitive ability influences the rate, quantity and quality of new learning. While all children can learn, they do so at varying rates and amount when exposed to the same learning experiences and resources. This variation is a result of cognitive ability. Therefore, when evaluating the identification processes districts employ for their gifted services, it is important to consider these areas.

Commendations

- The district employs a district-wide assessment process for all students in grades 3-8 and has provisions for students entering the district mid-year, who have not been assessed.
- The district has multiple avenues available for students to be considered eligible for the Extended Services Program. Materials for the "alternative" identification route clearly indicate an organized process that attempts to standardize the process across teachers and schools.
- Multiple measures are used for placement in the extended reading and/or math programs.
- The program handbook outlines the identification process, which is available via the district's Website.
- The district employs local norms as the basis for identification.

Areas to Note

- It is important to recognize recommendations for admission into a program (from teachers, parents and students) have been widely criticized for the potential bias against students who may be underachievers, underserved populations, students who demonstrate behavioral problems or students from cultures that devalue self-promotion.
- There exists a lack of an easily accessible dedicated database intertwined with the larger district database that maintains all data related to identification, which could be connected to all outcome data.
- Ensure the instruments used in the identification process were developed specifically for identification of gifted students. Furthermore, review the reliance on test scores derived from a narrow array of performance.
- Using locally-based school norms that differ from year-to-year as well as from school-to-school can be problematic when students transition from elementary to middle and middle to high school.
- Assessment of students from under-represented populations without a talent development approach for students who come from at-risk environments could unfairly penalizes students.

Program Evaluation

Regular and systematic evaluation of any organization is critical to the continued effectiveness and efficiency of the program. Therefore, the purpose of a program evaluation is to answer the question, “How well is the program working in relation to articulated goals and expectations for students?”

Commendations

- The effort of the district leadership to examine the Extended Services Program is commended for its openness and intent on using the findings for the goal of improving services.
- The district leadership was open and responsive in providing requested information and data and addressing clarifying questions throughout the collection and analysis of data.

Areas to note

- Create a long-term evaluation plan, for both internal and external evaluations, based on clearly articulated goals and objectives appropriate for outcomes (e.g., academic, social) for students served in the Extended Services Program. This plan should serve as the basis for the routine collection of both quantitative and qualitative data beyond what is typically collected on all district students.
- Development of a database based on comprehensive and longitudinal program and student data will assist in future strategic planning, evaluations and other types of program decisions regarding identification, services, personnel and resources. In addition, these types of data can also be used to evaluate student progress at regular intervals to ensure student needs and program services are aligned.

Learning Environment

Overall Standard Description: Educators, recognizing the learning and developmental differences of students with gifts and talents, promote on-going self-understanding, awareness of their needs, and cognitive and affective growth of these students in school, home, and community settings to ensure specific student outcomes. Effective learning environments are safe and foster emotional well-being, positive social interaction, leadership for social change, and cultural understanding for success in a diverse society. The design of the environment should encourage independence, motivation and self-efficacy.

Commendations

- In every classroom observed, teachers and students were respectful to each other and other adults.

- In every classroom observed, students seemed to be eager participants in the learning process and worked collaboratively with peers.

Areas to Note

- In nearly every focus group with teachers, parents and students each separately described a culture of high achievement, expectation of placement into the extended programs, and need to “please” parents/teachers/self with grades and test scores.
- The program cultures varied widely among school buildings.
- Establish a clear vision for increasing the culture of intellectualism. As part of this process, schools need to consider programs and services that prioritize talent development.

Curriculum Planning, Instruction and Classroom Assessment

Overall Standard Description: Educators apply the theory and research-based models of curriculum and instruction related to students with gifts and talents and respond to their needs by planning, selecting, adapting, and creating relevant curriculum and by using a repertoire of evidence-based instructional strategies to ensure specific student outcomes.

Curriculum is the engine driving what students learn in a classroom, how they learn and what is understood and produced as a result. When servicing students in separate programs, it is important to have a clear scope and sequence to guide district personnel’s thinking about curriculum and instruction. For gifted students, it is critical the curriculum be one that is rich in content and meets their accelerated capabilities; rich in processes that stretch their metacognitive abilities, problem-solving skills, and critical inquiry; rich in products that investigate authentic, real-world problems and show a transformation of information into original understandings. The environment must be one that encourages and supports risk-taking, creativity and student centeredness so students can reach their fullest potential.

Commendations

- In observed classrooms, students worked collaboratively in groups and appeared to have good strategies for working together and felt comfortable offering individual, sometimes conflicting, ideas.
- Mathematics curriculum maps begin with grade-level acceleration.
- Some curricular materials incorporated Understanding by Design (UbD) curricular frameworks, suggesting the district has prioritized comprehensive approaches to curricular, instructional and assessment frameworks.

Areas to Note

- Develop an overall curricular vision for the Extended Services Program. Armed with an overall curricular vision, program personnel can identify common outcome goals for each grade level and content area (Reading/Mathematics/Science/Art) that not only align with, but also exceed, Common Core standards. The curriculum offered to gifted students should exceed grade level standards, but teachers should be careful to ensure all students have mastered grade level standards at the highest levels of proficiency.
- It is essential the aforementioned curricular vision for Extended Services be developed in accordance with a curricular vision for the general education population so these are complementary curricular plans.
- Appropriate professional development and resource allocation is necessary to ensure all relevant teachers and administrators are fully equipped to translate the curriculum vision into high quality practice within the diverse school settings across the district.

Programming and Program Management

Overall Standard Description: Educators are aware of empirical evidence regarding (a) cognitive, creative, and affective development of learners with gifts and talents, and (b) programming that meets their needs. Educators use this expertise systematically and collaboratively to develop, implement, and effectively manage comprehensive services for students with a variety of gifts and talents to ensure specific student outcomes.

The design of a gifted education program is related to the services provided to participating students, the location(s) for these services, the grouping arrangements for providing these services, and the staffing requirements needed to implement these services. The most defensible gifted education programs ensure the school district's philosophy about giftedness and gifted education, the district's definition of giftedness, the identification process and the student goals are all closely aligned with the way in which the program is designed. Further, the design for delivering program services should maximize the opportunity for curricular differentiation appropriate for student needs.

Commendations

- The district provides provisions of program services across school bands, from K-12. There is an option for early entrance into the school setting for kindergarten or 1st grade for students who have documentable needs. Students at all levels have access to some form of accelerated and/or extended services. This suggests a high priority is placed on supporting learners throughout the school trajectory. Furthermore, there is recognition of the arts as an area where services are provided.
- There is devoted Website space to the Extended Services Program that is easily navigated.
- There is a dedicated non-profit organization (Barrington Council for the Gifted and Talented) whose purpose is to support the efforts in educating gifted students within the district. These supportive efforts are actualized through various opportunities provided by the organization. Such opportunities include, among others, family networking, funding pilot programs targeted specifically for gifted students, providing funds for classroom materials and teacher professional development through supplemental funding for professional conferences, and legislative advocacy efforts.
- Documentation supports a long-standing district commitment to funding programming.

Areas to Note

- The administrator who oversees the Extended Services Program should serve as a liaison between the program and the general education program and services to ensure a true continuum of services for academically advanced students. This individual would also oversee the talent development and bridge programs.
- Establish student academic outcomes for each content area and grade level for all components of the Extended Services Program.

Professional Development

Overall Standard Description: Gifted learners are entitled to be served by professionals who have specialized preparation in gifted education, expertise in appropriate differentiated content and instructional methods, involvement in ongoing professional development, and who possess exemplary personal and professional traits.

Comprehensive and ongoing professional development is critical to personnel preparation and ultimately program quality. The selection, assignment and training of teachers and administrators responsible for the Extended Services Program are critical to the development and delivery of high-quality services. At the very least, all educators must have access to information that adequately prepares them for effective participation in the development and delivery of high-quality, differentiated services for gifted students.

Commendations

- Teachers reported having taken graduate level courses in gifted education (average of about 10 hours of graduate work), attended workshops, training sessions, or attending conferences about gifted education.
- A variety of topics have been a focus for training ranging from gifted education, to context specific areas, culturally responsive pedagogy, to instructional strategies and student assessment.

Areas to Note

- Continue to develop and create a strong professional development plan for all educators and administrators in the needs of all learners, including the needs of gifted students. The plan should focus on the following topics:
 - Development of high-quality, rigorous curriculum, instruction, and assessment;
 - Translation of data into actionable instructional plans that address student academic needs;
 - Development of talent in under-represented student populations;
 - Differentiation of instruction and assessment to meet the needs of all learners;
 - Supervision of Extended Services Program teachers by building-level administration.
 - Affective needs of all students, including gifted students (e.g., academic stressors, underachievement, time management) so teachers can identify early indicators of trouble and identify appropriate resources and support staff.

Conclusion and Next Steps

At the conclusion of the evaluation process, Drs. Moon and Brighton shared their overall thoughts.

The evaluation process was open with full discussion of issues. We were allowed access to any available requested materials, and we were allowed to speak with any individuals we requested. The central office staff members with whom we worked were extremely open in providing all requested materials, responded quickly and carefully to all scheduling and document requests within the limitations of available data, and were most helpful in assisting in the evaluation process.

The evaluation completed by Drs. Moon and Brighton was the first step in the process of purposeful, systematic analysis of the Extended Services Program. The findings of her team were shared with teachers and administrators in a follow-up two-day training. During the meetings, staff developed a Theory of Change Logic Model for aiding in goal planning and implementing program improvements.

The second phase of this process will begin with the 2015-2016 school year. Staff and administration will focus on effective practices and recent research to discuss the following components of the program: philosophy, identification, curriculum/instruction and assessment. The goal of this process is to enhance the Extended Services Program in Barrington 220.