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Building and implementing a program review for gifted education in an urban school district

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Building and implementing a program review for gifted education in an urban school district

Abstract

In June of 1996, the Board of Education of the Waterloo School District, which is considered an urban school district, requested that all externally funded programs be reviewed. This included the Expanded Learning Program (ELP). The emphasis was to determine strengths and needs of ELP and the needs of gifted students in the regular classroom. A committee was formed, composed of ELP staff and parents of identified gifted students, who developed surveys which were sent to all ELP parents (K-12), all identified students, (K-12), and selected classroom teachers and specialists (K-8). Data were compiled and summarized according to (1) major strengths, (2) major concerns, and (3) recommendations. A final review resulted in three major findings. The survey revealed that the majority of parents, students, and teachers were supportive of the ELP program and felt it needed to continue. Most also felt that it was a good source of challenge for high ability students. A third major finding was that both parents and students felt gifted students need opportunities to be with other gifted learners. These findings produced the following recommendations. First, gifted students will be given the opportunity be with other gifted learners. Second, better communication between ELP faculty and parents and regular classroom teachers is necessary to promote a better understanding of gifted children, ELP, and other means of gifted programming. Third, gifted students need challenging academic experiences in the regular classroom such as curriculum compacting and acceleration. Finally, the senior high school expanded learning program needs to be reviewed. The project concluded with the outlining of a suggested action plan.

**BUILDING AND IMPLEMENTING A PROGRAM REVIEW
FOR GIFTED EDUCATION
IN AN URBAN SCHOOL DISTRICT**

A Graduate Project

Submitted to the
Division of Education of the Gifted
Department of Curriculum and Instruction,
in Partial Fulfillment
of the
Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts in Education
at the

UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN IOWA

by

Anna Mae Bagby

May, 1997

This Project by: Anna Mae Bagby
Titled: Building and Implementing a Program Review
for Gifted Education in an Urban School District

has been approved as meeting the research requirement for the
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May 15, 1997
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DEDICATION

To the Expanded learning staff, Pam Echeverria, Audrey Kimball, Pat Yates, and the ELP facilitator, Nancy Grimes, who met many nights developing surveys, compiling data, and determining strengths, concerns and recommendations.

To the Expanded Learning Advisory Committee for their dedication and assistance in this project.

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To my husband, John, whose relentless prodding has been instrumental in the completion of this project.

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ABSTRACT

In June of 1996, the Board of Education of the Waterloo School District, which is considered an urban school district, requested that all externally funded programs be reviewed. This included the Expanded Learning Program (ELP). The emphasis was to determine strengths and needs of ELP and the needs of gifted students in the regular classroom. A committee was formed, composed of ELP staff and parents of identified gifted students, who developed surveys which were sent to all ELP parents (K-12), all identified students, (K-12), and selected classroom teachers and specialists (K-8). Data were compiled and summarized according to (1) major strengths, (2) major concerns, and (3) recommendations. A final review resulted in three major findings. The survey revealed that the majority of parents, students, and teachers were supportive of the ELP program and felt it needed to continue. Most also felt that it was a good source of challenge for high ability students. A third major finding was that both parents and students felt gifted students need opportunities to be with other gifted learners. These findings produced the following recommendations. First, gifted students will be given the opportunity be with other gifted learners. Second, better communication between ELP faculty and parents and regular classroom teachers is necessary to promote a better understanding of gifted children, ELP, and other means of gifted programming. Third, gifted students need challenging academic experiences in the regular classroom such as curriculum compacting and acceleration. Finally, the senior high school expanded learning program needs to be reviewed. The project concluded with the outlining of a suggested action plan.

CHAPTER I

PROJECT OVERVIEW AND PURPOSE

The Waterloo (Iowa) Community School District considers evaluation to be of utmost importance. The staff of its Expanded Learning Program (ELP) also are aware of that importance and have engaged in formative evaluations in the past in order to review and upgrade the program. In 1996, however, the District made the decision to initiate formal evaluations of all externally funded programs. Because of the District request, the ELP staff decided to expand beyond the current formative evaluation process to develop a summative evaluation process which would help to determine strengths and weaknesses in the current program. It was felt that such an expansion would result not only in accountability, but also in the development of an action plan as suggested by Colangelo and Davis (1997).

Examination of various systems for program evaluation aided in the making of decisions as to how to begin and implement an evaluation plan, as well as how to proceed when data were compiled. Feldhusen, Van Tassel-Baska, and Seely (1989), for example, pointed out that a program evaluation plan needs to (a) be on guard for little problems that can grow into bigger problems; (b) make some judgments about the program as implemented in comparison to the intended program; (c) change according to pupil needs and building-level priorities; (d) change those things that need to be changed to make the program effective and efficient; (e) prepare the appropriate information to support

continuation of the program and allow others to adopt some or all of your model.

In addition, the suggestions of Callahan and Caldwell (1994) also proved to be helpful. They stated that a good evaluation should serve several purposes. First of all, it should document the need for the program. Second, it should justify the particular program approach. Third, it should determine the feasibility of the selected program. Fourth, it should document that the program is being implemented. Fifth, it should generate information that will assist in making program revisions. Sixth, it should help identify program strengths and weaknesses. Finally, it should document the results and impact of the program.

The Current Program

In order to develop a program evaluation process it is necessary to understand the philosophy upon which the current program is based. Borland (1989) states that "evaluation is one of the most important issues facing the field of education of the gifted, since it bears directly on the basic question of whether the programs we are advocating are doing what we want them to do" (p. 61).

The Expanded Learning Program was established in the Waterloo Community School District in 1984 after a group of seven gifted education staff members attended the Autonomous Learner Model (ALM) Conference in Estes Park, Colorado, and, on the basis of their positive reactions, selected it as the model to be adopted by the District. ALM was created by Dr. George Betts in 1978 with the purpose of developing a program for the talented and gifted that would meet the diversified,

cognitive, emotional, and social needs of gifted students.

During the first year of the program, a third through fifth grade program was established, followed by the implementation of the middle school expanded reading program the next year. In 1988, the senior high school program was implemented as the first middle school ELP students entered senior high school. At that time, there were seven teachers serving 24 elementary schools.

In 1991, the District decided to establish a K-2 program based on Doctor Bertie Kingore's Kingore Observation Inventory (Kingore, 1989). In this program, teachers of the gifted work in the regular classrooms presenting creative activities for diagnostic purposes. When the activities are completed and evaluated, small talent development groups are formed to allow for further observation. With the addition of this program, the District employed two more teachers to join the ELP staff.

Currently, there are 10 ELP staff serving 14 elementary schools, three middle schools, and two senior high schools. Most staff members split their teaching times between two or three schools, and several have combination elementary/middle or middle/senior high school programs. Plans now call for all staff to be assigned to two buildings by the beginning of the 1998-99 academic year.

Rationale and Purpose

As stated earlier, to date there has been no district-wide evaluation of the ELP program. However, when the Waterloo Board of Education established a goal to review all programs from outside sources in June of 1996, the ELP fell into this category since its funding

basis is tied to the allowable growth law, as well as to the local operating budget.

The ELP staff was assigned the task of program evaluation and directed to develop assessment strategies which included surveys of parents and students. The emphases were placed on the determination of perceived strengths and needs of ELP and the determination of instructional needs of gifted students in the regular classroom.

Thus, the purpose of this project was to develop and implement a process by which to evaluate the Expanded Learning Program which comprises the K-12 gifted program in the Waterloo Community School District. The process involved the development and distribution of the necessary surveys, the interpretation of received data to determine strengths and concerns related to the program, the development of recommendations to address the concerns, as well as an action plan for implementation of those recommendations.

CHAPTER II

METHODOLOGY

This chapter presents the methods and procedures used in the development and implementation of a process for evaluating the Expanded Learning Program in the Waterloo Community School District. It contains (a) Organizational Structure, (b) Survey Development and Distribution, and (c) Methods for Data Compilation and Analysis.

Advisory Committee

The first task was the creation of an Advisory Committee. All ELP teachers were asked to volunteer although all were not expected to participate. Representation from grades K-12 was important and was realized in the selection of the committee members. In this group there were two elementary teachers, two middle school, and one senior high school teacher. The ELP facilitator also was a member of the Committee. All staff members' ethnic backgrounds were European American, and they were all females. There is no other gender or ethnic background represented on the ELP staff at this time.

Parent and community representation also was sought with regard to selecting persons who reflected the diversity of the district from the perspective of gender, ethnicity, and grade levels of students enrolled in our schools. The ELP staff that volunteered to be a part of the evaluation process asked all ELP teachers to make suggestions of parents that would meet the criteria needed for the committee and would possibly be

willing to serve. The ELP staff committee members met and categorized this pool of names according to gender, ethnicity, grade levels of children in the program, and zip code in order to ensure representation from all areas of the district. The Committee then began calling from the list until a committee was formed. The committee members consisted of two European American males, three European American females, and one African American female. Parents of all grade levels of students were represented. My function in the evaluation process was that of committee member and developer of the final report.

The Committee met from October through March. During the first month, major components of current K-12 programming were reviewed. Members of the ELP staff each reviewed a portion of the program as it currently functions. Components reviewed included the primary, upper elementary, middle, senior high school programs, as well as available post secondary options. Also reviewed were the Autonomous Learner Model and the ALM/ELP student outcomes. This review was to assist the parents and community committee members in understanding all aspects of the program as it functions in the district at this time.

Survey Development and Distribution

The next task was to determine the constituencies to be surveyed and the critical questions that would need to be asked in order to assess the effectiveness of ELP and other means of meeting gifted learners' needs. In addition to surveying ELP parents and ELP students, the Committee decided it was also very important to survey regular classroom teachers and specialists.

Since the majority of the gifted students' learning time is in the regular classroom, educators' perceptions of needs were critical. The staff survey, however, was limited to K-8 because the Committee concluded from its deliberations that senior high school staff departmentalization limited the knowledge and understanding of ELP.

As an analogy, it might be difficult for an art teacher to evaluate AP Calculus and equally as difficult for a mathematics teacher to assess the strengths and needs of an art program. Whereas in both elementary and middle school, staff awareness and interaction with the Expanded Learning Program is more frequent.

Before developing the surveys, the ELP staff on the Advisory Committee examined various ways to evaluate the program. Use of a Likert scale would ask the individual to respond to a series of statements by indicating a degree of agreement. A Guttman scale would ask the individual to agree or disagree with a list of statements (Gay, 1996). The Committee determined that these types of instruments would take minimal time to complete. Open-ended questions also were included to allow the respondents to elaborate if desired.

The Committee decided that a combination of all three would be used. Care was taken to make the surveys thorough but simple, and not too time consuming. The purpose of the survey was not to collect scientific data, but to gather information that would be reliable and facilitate in the completion of an accurate evaluation of the ELP program with the result being recommendations that could be initiated immediately and continue through the ensuing years.

With the assistance of Dr. Gil Hewett, AEA 7 Assessment

Consultant, parent, teacher, and student surveys were drafted and then reviewed by the Committee for further suggestions. Care was taken to avoid phrasing or wording that could be described as “educational jargon”.

During the first meeting with the entire committee, parents were asked to brainstorm questions they felt were important to be placed in the survey. A list was generated. After this meeting, the ELP Committee staff met for a “marathon meeting” to develop the three surveys. Using the information obtained from researching various scales and the questions generated at the first committee meeting, the three surveys were developed. Copies are available in Appendices A, B, and C.

Steps were taken to assure confidentiality of those answering the surveys. The only differentiation in surveys was a color coding by schools or blocks of schools (See Appendix D). The purpose of the color coding was to be able to determine if there were particular needs in specific demographic areas. This was deemed an important concern because the Waterloo Community School District is an urban district and is moving toward site-based decision making. In such an organizational structure, schools located in the lower socioeconomic areas may have needs and concerns which are different from those schools in the upper socioeconomic areas. For example, research has shown that needs in different socioeconomic areas should be addressed in different ways even in the same district (Frasier, 1991). She stated: “We need to employ a much broader, more varied procedure for identifying gifted and talented children, particularly those from disadvantaged populations” (p. 7).

Parent surveys were distributed in November, 1996, to parents

during parent teacher conferences, a time that might encourage a high return rate. Forms also were sent home via the students to those parents who were unable to attend a conference. Student surveys were administered during ELP class. No names were required; and, as they were completed, they were placed into an envelope and sent directly to the administration building to be compiled by a secretary. Staff surveys were distributed during staff meetings or directly to teachers' mailboxes with follow-up reminders. All groups were given the option of sending completed surveys directly to the program facilitator or to the building ELP teacher who placed them in an envelope and forwarded them to the facilitator to be compiled.

Methods for Data Compilation and Analysis

Surveys were returned during the month of December, 1996. One thousand two hundred forty-eight surveys were sent out. A total of 588 (47%) surveys were received.

Four hundred thirty-one parent surveys were sent. Parents with more than one child enrolled in ELP were sent a survey for each child but had the option of filling out one survey per child or one survey for all children. Since responses were anonymous, there was no way of knowing what parents did in these cases. One hundred thirty-four parent responses were returned representing 23% of the total responses.

Three hundred eighty-three student surveys were sent. Student surveys returned numbered 318 representing 54% of total responses.

Four hundred thirty-four teacher surveys were sent and 136 teacher surveys were returned representing 23% of the total. All data

were compiled by computer according to group surveyed and grade levels.

Due to the amount of information received through the written comments in open-ended items, the data needed to be reviewed, summarized, and organized to assure a more meaningful analysis by the Advisory Committee. A secretary typed summaries of all three surveys. They were organized by number of respondents and category of respondent. Each question was typed and each answer listed the number of respondents and percent of respondents who answered in a like manner. Check off answers listed percent of like answers, not number. Answers to open-ended questions were typed by grade level. All answers were noted. The same format was used for parent, student, and teacher surveys with the exception of the parent and student surveys that also showed the color coding of each answer.

The common concerns, needs, and suggestions that emerged from all three groups were first summarized by the ELP staff on the Advisory Committee. They received copies of the compilations of data in advance and then met to collaborate in the determination of the strengths, concerns, and recommendations. The staff used the percentages of like answers to form their conclusions. The findings were then reviewed by the entire committee.

The survey data was summarized according to these categories: (a) major strengths of ELP, (b) major concerns, and (c) recommendations. Survey data listing perceived strengths, concerns and recommendations from parents, students, and staff follow.

CHAPTER III

FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDED ACTIONS

Responses from the parent, student, and teacher surveys were tabulated and compiled in separate documents. Each was sorted by categories appropriate to the group surveyed. Parent surveys were compiled by elementary, middle, senior high school, and multiple grades. Students' responses were divided into elementary, middle, and senior high school levels. Teachers were grouped by specific grade levels beginning with kindergarten through second, primary level; third through fifth, elementary; sixth through eighth, middle; and a final group representing those teachers who instruct students in several grades, such as specialists and multi age grouping. Senior high school teachers were not surveyed because of their limited knowledge of the expanded learning program due to departmentalization. Since the study included 588 surveys, compilations will be made available upon request.

An analysis of answers to open-ended questions and tabulations was initially completed by the gifted education staff representatives of the Advisory Committee. After completing individual examination of the compilations, the staff met to discuss data and identify the major strengths and concerns. Once determined, recommendations were made to address the key concerns. These recommendations came from respondents and the Committee combined. The Committee looked at suggestions for improvement in the expanded learning program, expressed concerns, the need to be challenged, and then discussed

methods that should be implemented to amend the situation.

The summary analysis and recommendations were reviewed with the parents during the February meeting. All committee members reviewed the data compiled from all surveys. At this time, revisions based on discussion and input were made. All members of the Advisory Committee present approved the report which follows.

Parent Responses

There were 134 parent responses: 43 elementary, representing 32% of the total responses; 43 middle school responses, representing 32%; 14 senior high school responses, representing 11%; and 34 multiple grade responses, representing 25%. Forty one percent (43) of the elementary (3rd-5th) students were represented, as well as 42% (43) of middle school students, and 35% (14) of senior high school students. These percentages may represent two or more students.

Strengths of ELP

The survey results showed that parents are highly supportive of ELP. Major strengths of the program which evolved from the data were the following:

- ELP challenges and expands the students by engaging them in activities that require higher levels of thinking, more student responsibility, and broader opportunities.
- Long-term and in-depth projects, often based on topics of individual choices within units, are integrating skills of goal setting,

higher levels of thinking, increased use of technology and self-motivation.

- Being and learning with other gifted students provides mental challenges, reaffirms an understanding of and comfort with one's abilities, and nurtures a camaraderie and respect among other high ability learners.
- Children exhibit increased self-confidence and self-esteem at home, excitement about ELP activities, and apply many and varied skills learned in ELP to other situations.

Parents identified five major concerns. Each is listed below with recommendations following.

Concerns

Concern One: Both gifted education and classroom teachers need to continue staff development to understand better the needs of gifted children.

Recommendations

Recommendation One: ELP staff should be encouraged to identify areas for growth and to develop a personal professional plan.

Recommendation Two: ELP should continue to provide gifted education teachers with opportunities to attend conferences, workshops, and seminars appropriate to the individual needs.

Recommendation Three: ELP staff should continue to be encouraged to pursue college course work in related areas.

Recommendation Four: Professional readings should continue to be distributed to ELP staff by the district facilitator.

Concern Two: The survey showed that there is some confusion about the number of students served and the identification procedures.

Recommendation

Recommendation One: The parent handbook needs to be updated to include guidelines, descriptions of all identification procedures, and previous year's enrollment data. Also information about elementary talent development groups should be added to the parent handbook along with previous year's enrollment data.

Concern Three: While approximately 90% (120) of parents responded that they were well to somewhat informed about ELP activities, many commented that they would like to be more informed. The data seems to be contradictory. As an example, in the first question of the parent survey, "How well informed are you about ELP?", seventy three percent (98) responded, "Well informed." However, the same parents commented in an open-ended question about ELP that they were still not sure of what ELP was about and that they felt they should be informed about the purposes of the Expanded Learning Program. There appeared to be three levels of concerns: a) informed about ELP programming in general, b) informed about the school's activities, and c) informed about child's progress.

Recommendations

Recommendation One: Confirm what kind and frequency of information staff members send home. Because of district budget constraints, school regulations provide that the student is responsible for delivery of information home.

Recommendation Two: Confirm number of parent/teacher conferences either during scheduled district conference days, especially scheduled, and/or by phone.

Concern Four: Challenging content and opportunities should be extended beyond ELP, such as more advanced work in the classroom curriculum. Able students should be provided with more opportunities for acceleration in content areas.

Recommendations

Recommendation One: The ELP teachers should work with their building principals to determine appropriate staff development for differentiating curriculum for high ability students. This was also a concern of teacher respondents.

Recommendation Two: Because of the Board of Education's recent approval of a policy in support of acceleration, ELP teachers should assist students within the content area or provide grade acceleration when appropriate. Additionally, it is assumed that district-wide work on standards, benchmarks, and assessments will impact acceleration by allowing students who demonstrate achievement to move to the next level of learning.

Concern Five: Many issues and concerns were raised about the senior high school program. Commentary was related to scheduling, structure, and teacher performance. Major district-wide changes for 1996-97, including scheduling, have impacted ELP in both senior high schools.

Recommendations

Recommendation One: Since survey structure and limited response may have had an impact on issues related to the program at the secondary level, the Committee recommends a separate study be conducted to thoroughly review all aspects of programming for gifted secondary students. Components should include, but not be limited to: course content, structure, legal requirements, scheduling issues unique to the site, counseling services, availability of honors courses, off-campus learning, long-distance learning, and apprenticeships. These concerns must be addressed since they have implications for the total ELP program.

Student Responses

There were 318 student responses: 86 elementary, representing 27% of the total responses; 166 middle school, representing 52% of the total responses; 66 senior high school, representing 21% of the total responses. Seventy percent of the elementary (3rd-5th) students were represented, 91% of middle school, and 80% of the senior high school.

Strengths of ELP

Student remarks in the survey conveyed the significance of ELP and consistently noted the following strengths across all grade levels:

- Students, as a whole, feel that ELP challenges thinking, expands learning, and provides opportunities which are not frequently available.
- A majority of students, 280 (89%), feel that learning with and being with other gifted students in ELP classes reaffirms an understanding of and comfort with one's abilities and nurtures camaraderie and respect among high ability yet diverse learners.
- A large number of students comments (205) conveyed they are allowed more responsibility because they are trusted.
- Over three-fourths of students (245) value long-term and in-depth projects which integrate higher levels of thinking, research, and increased use of technology and on-line services.
- Learning how to set and meet goals is viewed by 76% of students (245) as an important accomplishment and one which many students use in other aspects of their lives.
- Over 80% (262) of the students expressed increased self-acceptance based on the perception that they have achieved a better understanding of both their giftedness and their personal strengths and needs.
- Twenty-three students volunteered commentary which described their ELP teacher as caring and trusting, one who listens, questions, and challenges their reasoning.

Students identified four major concerns. Each is listed below with recommendations following.

Concerns

Concern One: Thirty-two (37%) elementary and 32 (19%) middle school students stated that they were not challenged in their regular classes. However, 25 students did refer to the challenges encountered in their mathematics classes. Students, 32 middle and 32 elementary, expressed a desire to perform at higher levels in other classes and would like to have meaningful, challenging work as opposed to extra credit or “more of the same” assignments requiring little or no effort.

Recommendations

Recommendation One: This concern surfaced in all three groups surveyed--parents, students, and teachers. Two topics requested by classroom teachers were how to compact curriculum and how to differentiate content and activities for high ability students. ELP staff will work with building principals to develop site specific inservice plans; district-wide sessions may also be conducted.

Recommendation Two: Currently, district-wide committees are writing standards, benchmarks, and assessments which might extend opportunities, thereby allowing students who demonstrate achievement to move to the next level of learning. The Committee agreed that activities requiring depth in learning are critical in meeting the needs of high ability learners.

Concern Two: Students would like more technology integrated into their classes.

Recommendation

Recommendation One: This concern would likely be echoed by most students in our schools. The technology plans, development of technology benchmarks, and staff development of the district and individual schools hopefully will have an impact on this issue. As a result, all students will experience increased use of various kinds of hardware and software in their classes. Expanded learning students will then have a better opportunity to meet their technology objectives on a regular basis, in the regular classroom and in their ELP activities.

Concern Three: Students (elementary, 8; middle school, 15; senior high school, 8) perceive that some teachers have unreasonable expectations for them because they are in ELP. Examples cited included expectations of perfect test scores, perfect behavior, and the expectancy of service as a teacher's helper. Students also felt teachers assumed they did not need help because they understand everything. Some teachers insist all work missed due to an ELP activity or class must be made up even though the students already have demonstrated successful achievement. Also, there is an expectancy that an ELP student is good at everything, every endeavor. This concern was determined through analysis of open-ended questions. No question in the survey referred to this concern.

Recommendation

Recommendation One: It is important to determine the extent of this type of negative stereotyping. Bias against any kind of learner should not be tolerated in an educational climate and setting which holds student achievement paramount. To discourage such biases, the Committee recommends that inservice on characteristics of the gifted should be presented to assist classroom teachers in this area.

Concern Four: Student concerns at the senior high school level were similar to those expressed by responding parents. The senior high school program is perceived as the weak link in the ELP program. Seven comments included a need for more structure. Four said there needed to be less pointless paper work. Two wanted more challenging projects, and eight said no more P. E. P.s (personal education plans).

Recommendation

Recommendation One: The Committee recommends that further study of the senior high school ELP program is needed with consideration given to pending decisions by administration. When the administrative senior high school program decisions are made, the ELP staff can begin an intensive evaluation of the senior high school ELP program which will include teacher, student, and parent input, specifically addressing concerns at the senior high school level.

Teacher Responses

There were 136 teacher responses: 30 primary teachers (K-2nd),

representing 22% of the total responses; 38 elementary (3rd-5th), representing 28%; 31 middle school (6th-8th), responses, representing 23%; and 37 specialists (K-8) and multi-grade responses, representing 27%. Thirty five percent of the primary teachers were represented, 61% of elementary, 40% of middle school, and 33% of multi-grade and specialists. Secondary teachers were not surveyed because of their departmentalization.

Strengths of ELP

- Of the 100 teachers who responded to the open-ended questions, 92 were supportive of ELP and perceived that it meets the needs of gifted students.
- Seventy-five percent (102) perceived themselves to be somewhat or well informed about the identification process, the purpose of ELP, and program activities.
- The teachers surveyed commented that the ELP program benefited gifted children by providing opportunities to challenge thinking (34), expand learning (34), and provide learning opportunities with other gifted children beyond the regular classroom (31).
- At the primary level, five classroom teachers perceived that they were better able to meet needs of high ability children because of collaboration with the ELP teacher.
- Fourteen middle school teachers felt that ELP students were encouraged to explore their special talents and passions which

often involves risk-taking at an age when peer acceptance is paramount.

Teachers identified three major concerns. Each is listed below with recommendations following.

Concerns

Concern One: A majority of all teachers at all levels, 99 (73%), feel that in order to better meet the needs of gifted students, they would like to increase collaboration with the ELP teacher in planning activities for high ability students in their classrooms.

Recommendation

Recommendation One: The District is considering schoolwide Wednesday early dismissals next fall. Some time should be allotted for teacher collaboration in both gifted education and special education. The Committee recommends one early dismissal a month be allotted for collaboration and inservice pertaining to special needs students (gifted and special education).

Recommendation Two: With the employment of one additional ELP staff, ELP teachers will be able to reduce their building responsibilities from three to two by the 1998-99 school year. This will allow more time for the ELP teacher to confer with regular classroom teachers. The Committee recommends the additional time ELP teachers acquire be designated for assistance to the regular classroom teacher in the form of collaboration in planning activities for high ability students in

the regular classroom, curriculum compacting of content, and ability grouping in specific content areas.

Concern Two: Fifty percent (68) of the K-8 teachers indicated the belief that curriculum compacting of content would meet the needs of gifted students by extending current curriculum. This concern surfaced in all three groups surveyed--parents, students, and teachers. Eleven teachers expressed concern that meeting needs of high ability students will be even more difficult beginning in the fall of 1997 since they perceive that the inclusion of special education students will require more of the teacher's attention with less time for other children in the classroom.

Recommendations

Recommendation One: ELP staff will work with building principals to develop site specific inservice plans. Instructing district staff in the use of cluster grouping (48% requested), curriculum compacting (50% requested), and differentiating curricular content (48% requested) should help teachers better meet the needs of high ability students. The members of the Committee recommend site-based decisions on inservices with district-wide decisions being considered when appropriate.

Concern Three: Half of the respondents believe that gifted students could benefit from mentorships, working with an adult in an area of student interest, and special summer programs for gifted learners.

Recommendations

Recommendation One: No recommendation to the Board of Education will be made at this time since mentorships did not appear as an issue or expressed need by either students or parents. However, an effort will be made by the ELP staff to confer with regular classroom teachers and assist in the development of mentorship programs wherever possible.

Recommendation Two: Since both the Waterloo Community School District Summer Tech and AEA 7 Summer Enrichment Program are summer opportunities and the community offers many programs that enrich children, no further recommendations will be made to the Board of Education at this time. The members of the Committee recommend that an effort be made to better inform teachers, parents, and students about available opportunities.

Action Plan

In January, 1997, the Advisory Committee reviewed the reports of parent, student, and teacher survey data. They discussed the data and recommendations for action. The gifted education staff representatives of the Committee then met to devise a plan in order to begin implementing recommendations immediately. The action plan which resulted from their discussions is a synthesis from several venues. Most influential were the recommendations from the parent, student, and teacher surveys.

Additionally, current and best practices in gifted education and school transformation were identified, studied, and incorporated into the plan.

Current district initiatives also impact the education of high ability

learners. These include standards, benchmarks, and assessment. For example, since the district ELP program is strongly founded upon the Autonomous Learner Model, the development of increased student autonomy and efficacy will continue to be a major goal of the ELP curriculum. The implementation of new district-wide standards and benchmarks, K-8, also will affect classroom instruction and student learning opportunities of the gifted and talented. Finally, the foresight of the Board of Education in approving an acceleration policy and procedures will have a highly positive impact on the ELP program and its students at all levels.

The recommended action plan is based on four major areas. It includes brief discussion and suggested supportive activities.

Action Item One

Gifted students should be given the opportunity to be with other gifted learners. This need was consistently expressed by students, parents, and teachers. While it is not suggested by research on gifted and talented education that gifted children be with one another throughout the day, it does suggest that it is important to continue with opportunities wherein gifted students interact by challenging and sharing with one another (Davis & Rimm, 1994).

It is important to remember that the nature and characteristics of gifted learners create within an individual a different way of dealing with life and with learning (Silverman, 1993). She has described a gifted person as "asynchronous", that is, one who is not intellectually or emotionally in sync with chronological age (p. 3). The resulting

asynchrony requires modifications in parenting, teaching, and counseling in order for gifted children to develop optimally.

It follows, then, that gifted children are special needs students, too. The purpose of special grouping is to respond to their unique affective and intellectual needs. Student respondents themselves mirror this need.

One student stated: "I always asked 'Who am I?' Now I ask even more. Sometimes I get answers, many times I find them."

A second student reflected: "ELP is like poetry and prose converging into a single 46 daily minutes of education. There is one other experience I get from ELP. I learn. I do not 'study' in ELP, I learn."

Another student used analogy to express his feelings concerning the necessity of a program like ELP in his life. He said: "ELP looks at more than the capital of Mississippi, who invented the Cotton Gin and so forth but lets us dare ask 'Where would I put the capital of Mississippi? Would the residents like it?' or 'I want to increase cotton processing speed, but how can I do it without anything beyond the late 1800s?' ELP is necessary for our right-brained self to wake up and learn."

A fourth student remarked: "The freedom to pick our own schedules and subjects according to our needs and passions is a very strong point. It not only gives us room to grow, it tells us that our intelligence is trusted."

These are but a few of the remarks made by student respondents to the survey. They tend to demonstrate the great need for a gifted education program for high ability students.

By law, gifted students must be identified and differentiated

programming must be provided (Iowa Administrative Code, 1989). Additionally, the mandate addresses the need for specialized instructional activities not ordinarily found in the regular school program with a curriculum focus on cognitive and affective concepts and processes.

The current ELP curriculum, based on Betts' Autonomous Learner Model, values lifelong, autonomous learning, and is the cornerstone for meeting both affective and intellectual needs of the gifted students. Well defined concepts, content, skills, and processes are taught and facilitated by ELP teachers. The student role parallels the staff role in that initially what is taught to the pupil is transformed into that which is facilitated for the learner (Betts, 1994). Student experiences in ELP ebb and flow on this continuum with the consistency being the goal to acquire the attitudes, skills, and concepts necessary for a life of continuous, self-directed learning. The use of the ALM model and the continuous updating of curriculum has proven an important factor in meeting gifted students needs in the Waterloo Community School District. Review and evaluation will be essential in assuring that the needs of the talented and gifted continue to be met.

Action Item Two

The development and implementation of better communication between ELP faculty and parents and regular classroom teachers will promote a better understanding of gifted children, ELP, and other means of gifted programming.

While the responses of most parents indicated they were informed

about ELP, there still is a perceived need to better the communication because of the discrepancies noted earlier in the parent surveys. Thus, a parent booklet written in circa 1989 will be updated and will include basic information about ELP, identification, and programming. A tentative completion date has been set for Fall, 1997.

Ongoing informational links to parents about their child(ren) will continue with ELP teachers conferencing, phoning, and sharing printed information. Parent meetings will be held at each building or cluster of buildings at the beginning of each school year. District meetings may be held according to need covering broader topics such as advanced classes, acceleration, and benchmarks.

In order better to appreciate the diversity of gifted children, teachers must understand asynchrony and the needs of gifted learners. ELP staff will facilitate this understanding and acceptance in several ways. They will share noteworthy articles, volunteer to serve on curriculum review committees, and present inservices on characteristics of giftedness at staff meetings. ELP staff will also conference with a teacher about a specific child's strengths and needs, discussing ELP activities, sharing ideas and activities, providing clear communication about possible acceleration, and enrichment options. A concerted effort or plan will be developed to include regular classroom teachers in gifted education workshops and conferences.

Action Item Three

The Expanded Learning Program at the senior high school level will be evaluated. Out of this evaluation, it is hoped that a senior high

school action plan will be developed. The place of ELP in the current senior high school curriculum needs to be a more active and relevant option for senior high school students. The purpose of the program is to provide challenge and achievement with the intellect students possess.

Both parents and students expressed concerns about the program at this level, although opinions of both group also strongly support the program. Far more options are available to senior high school students than at any other level. Extra-curricular opportunities can provide students the avenue to explore and expand their interests and passions. Advanced Placement courses and Post Secondary Education opportunities can provide additional challenges. ELP, however, allows students to pursue self-selected, long-term, and in-depth projects as part of the curriculum. Both parents and students highly value this curricular option.

The beginning steps of the recommended evaluation involve gathering information. Actions to be taken include:

1. A survey of senior high school teachers
2. A survey of current 8th graders to determine reasons for scheduling or not scheduling ELP
3. A survey of a sample of identified 9th-11th graders who are not enrolled
4. A survey of a sample of seniors both enrolled and not enrolled in ELP
5. A review of ELP enrollments for 1997-98

The data accumulated through these surveys will determine the direction of the evaluation. Current initiatives being decided also will

impact senior high school ELP. Scheduling, course acceleration, and school-to-work are examples of possible changes. It is important to be aware, also, that many students have part-time jobs and so have either a late start or early release schedule, thus impacting ELP enrollment.

Action Item Four

Needs of gifted students will be met in the regular classroom through collaboration, curriculum compacting, and program differentiation. Since gifted students are mainstreamed for the major part of the school day, instructional modifications often need to occur in content, pace, and depth. As the district implements new standards and benchmarks, it will be necessary to monitor the progress of ELP students from the perspective of continued intellectual challenge.

Undoubtedly, some students will master benchmarks faster if allowed to progress at a rate commensurate with their abilities. Will these students progress to the next "grade level"? How will continuous progress occur when a gifted student needs to move to the next level and no other students are at that place? For example, it is conceivable that a 4th grade gifted student might master "grade level" benchmarks by midyear, and need to begin 5th grade work while other 5th graders are a semester ahead in their course work. What modifications must be made for the student who excels in two contents but not other areas? When a child has mastered all 5th grade level work, will he or she enroll in 6th grade regardless of the time of year?

As these decisions on acceleration are made, the gifted education staff will initiate collaboration with regular classroom teachers to develop

the academic part of the Personal Education Plan (P.E.P.) that is required by law for all identified students (Iowa Administrative Code, 1989). This will become necessary as we begin to meet more of the identified gifted students' needs in the regular classroom.

Regular classroom teachers indicated the desire to receive assistance from ELP teachers in differentiating the curriculum for high ability learners. Finding common planning time is a concern for both teachers and ELP staff, coupled with the limitations of full time equivalency allocation of the gifted and talented resource teacher. It is difficult for an elementary ELP teacher serving three buildings to work with the staff and specialists in all three centers. The approval by the Board of Education in October to hire an additional elementary staff person for 1997-98 will help, and staff will develop alternative solutions in order to strengthen collaborative alliances.

Staff development is a critical beginning step toward achieving the goal of providing challenging learning to high ability students in the general education classroom. Site-specific plans need to be developed with the principal, the building's instructional leader, ELP teacher, regular classroom and specialist teachers.

Survey results indicate high teacher interest in the learning strategies of curriculum compacting; flexible grouping options; developing units that differ in-depth, process, content, and product; appropriateness of acceleration; independent study; and self-directed learning. Steps will be taken to set a two year schedule of staff development opportunities addressing these stated needs. Inservice

workshops will be offered in individual buildings, among a cluster of schools, and/or be offered district-wide.

Most of these strategies will benefit more students than those identified for ELP service. While still based on standards and benchmarks, challenging learning encourages the individual to achieve at a higher level. Students who never have the opportunity to work to their abilities never learn to do so. If a ten minute paper earns an A, that effort and “study” becomes the standard for the student. Schools need to provide an optimal match between all students’ strengths and school wide learning opportunities.

CHAPTER IV

PROJECT, SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND
RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE APPLICATION

Summary

The Expanded Learning Program (ELP) evaluation was completed as requested by the Board of Education. The emphasis was to determine strengths and needs of ELP as well as the needs of gifted students in the regular classroom. The Committee, composed of ELP staff and parents of identified students, developed surveys which were sent to all ELP parents, all identified students, selected classroom teachers, and specialists. Data was compiled and summarized according to (1) major strengths, (2) major concerns, and (3) recommendations.

A final review resulted in three major findings. The survey revealed that the majority of parents, students, and teachers were supportive of the ELP program and felt it needed to continue. Most also felt that it was a good source of challenge for high ability students. Another finding was that both parents and students felt gifted students need opportunities to be with other gifted learners. These findings produced the following recommendations. First, gifted students will be given the opportunity be with other gifted learners. Second, better communication between ELP faculty and parents and regular classroom teachers is necessary to promote a better understanding of gifted children, ELP, and other means of gifted programming. Third, gifted students need challenging academic experiences in the regular

classroom such as curriculum compacting and acceleration. Finally, the senior high school expanded learning program needs to be reviewed. The project concluded with the outlining of a suggested action plan.

Conclusions

Implementation of this project resulted in the following conclusions:

1. A program evaluation can yield information which can be used to improve a district-wide program.

2. This project was the most challenging endeavor I have ever attempted. The complexity, development, and implementation of this type of evaluation involves collaboration of all constituents.

3. There was a tendency toward common concerns among student, parent, and teacher respondents. One such concern was the need to challenge gifted students in the regular classroom and the desire to perform at higher levels. Common concerns helped to establish the action plan.

4. A common perception that seemed to be incorrect was that regular classroom teachers are not necessarily interested in working with gifted and talented staff. Fifty percent of the teacher respondents expressed a desire to meet the needs of their gifted students in the regular classroom and requested assistance in doing so.

5. The findings of the ELP evaluation did appear to fulfill the purposes of good program evaluation as enumerated by Callahan and Caldwell (1994). It documented the need for the program, generated information that will assist in making program revisions, identified

strengths and weaknesses, documented the results, and provided recommendations and an action plan that will impact the program.

6. The ALM program was originally conceived at the senior high school level. Yet, this is the part of the program that is struggling to survive. It will be necessary to examine it and continue to pursue excellence and encourage students at the senior high school level.

Recommendations for Future Applications

As the result of this project, five recommendations related to future program evaluation of the Expanded Learning Program in the Waterloo Community School District are as follows:

1. Implementation of organized formative evaluation of the program based upon the action plan.
2. Periodic evaluation to determine successful implementation of the action plan.
3. Redistribution of the surveys three years after the implementation of the action plan to determine perceived program improvement as a result of that implementation.
4. Continued review of curriculum at the senior high school level.
5. The use of the Expanded Learning Program as a foundation upon which curriculum based decisions are made, thus promoting student challenge and achievement across the board.

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APPENDIX A

ELP PARENT SURVEY

Waterloo Community Schools

Please respond by December 5, 1996

Please answer the following questions about the Expanded Learning Program and services provided to gifted students in the Waterloo Community Schools.

What are the grade level(s) of your identified children? Circle all that apply.

K 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12

ELP is different for students in primary, upper elementary, middle school and senior high school. Primary students, Kindergarten - 2nd grade, work with the ELP teacher in very small groups or individually once or twice a week. Upper elementary students in 3rd-5th grade meet with the ELP teacher about 2 1/2 hours a week usually pulled out of the regular classroom. Middle school students meet one period every day with the ELP teacher combining the gifted education and reading classes. senior high school students enroll in ELP as an elective for which they receive credit.

How well informed are you about ELP? Circle the number that applies with 1 being well informed, 2 somewhat, 3 not informed.

- 1 2 3 Identification of your child for gifted services
- 1 2 3 The purpose of ELP
- 1 2 3 ELP activities
- 1 2 3 Information shared by your child

What are some comments and experiences shared by your child?

Based on what you know about ELP what are the strengths of the program? Check all that apply.

- Scheduled time with students of similar ability
 - Teacher trained in the needs of the gifted
 - Opportunity to explore individual interests
 - Activities that stretch thinking
 - Increased understanding of self and abilities
 - Challenging content
 - Focus on skills for lifelong learning
 - Other
-

How has your child benefited from participating in ELP?

What suggestions do you have for improving the Expanded Learning Program?

What questions do you have about ELP?

How might our district better meet the needs of your gifted student(s)?

Any additional comments or concerns:

Please return this survey by December 5th to your child's ELP Teacher or mail it to Nancy Grimes, Waterloo Community Schools, 1516 Washington St., Waterloo, IA 50702. Thank you for your participation.

APPENDIX B

ELP STUDENT SURVEY

Please circle whether you are a student in:

Senior High School

Middle School

Elementary School

How many years have you been in ELP? _____

How have you benefited from being in ELP? Check all that apply.

- _____ Understand more about giftedness
- _____ Better understand my strengths and needs
- _____ Working with other gifted students
- _____ Developing my thinking skills
- _____ Learning how to plan and realize goals
- _____ Learning how to research
- _____ Exploring individual interests
- _____ Thinking about career possibilities
- _____ Pursuing topics in-depth
- _____ Other:

What are the strong points of ELP? What have you enjoyed, learned, and experienced?

What experiences have you had in ELP that you might not have had otherwise?

What suggestions do you have for improving the gifted program?

As a gifted student, how are you challenged in your other classes?

Please return the survey to your ELP Teacher. Thank you for your participation.

APPENDIX C

ELP TEACHER SURVEY

Waterloo Community Schools
Fall 1996

Please answer the following questions about the Expanded Learning Program and services provided to gifted students in the Waterloo Community Schools.

Circle the grade level(s) you teach.

K 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8

How knowledgeable are you about ELP?

Circle the number that applies with 1 being well informed, 2 somewhat, and 3 not informed.

1 2 3 Identification of children for gifted services

1 2 3 The purpose of ELP

1 2 3 ELP activities

What do you perceive to be the benefits of ELP?

How might our district better meet the needs of gifted students? Check all that apply.

- _____ Collaboration with ELP teacher to assist in planning activities for high ability students in the classroom
- _____ Ability grouping within a class such as math or reading
- _____ Curriculum compacting of content to allow able students to extend their learning
- _____ Pullout program for elementary
- _____ Pullout program for middle school
- _____ Mentorship, working with an adult in an area of student interest

- Grade or content acceleration
 Special summer programs
 Saturday classes taught by salaried professionals

Other:

What areas of inservice would benefit you to better meet the needs of high ability students in your classroom?

- Characteristics of gifted students
 Differentiating curricular content
 Clustering high ability students; why, when, and how?
 Curriculum compacting
 Concept learning as opposed to topical themes

Other:

What are the most difficult aspects of meeting the needs of the gifted students in your classroom? Check all that apply.

- Finding adequate planning time
 Finding appropriate resources or materials
 Knowing how to differentiate the curriculum
 Monitoring students who are working independently

Other:

Any additional comments or concerns:

Please return this survey to your ELP teacher's mailbox by December 16th. Thank you.

APPENDIX D

COLOR CODE FOR ELP SURVEY
PARENT AND STUDENT FORMSElementary

white:	Kingsley, Orange
yellow:	Edison, Elk Run, Jewett
pink:	Lincoln, Lowell, Roosevelt
blue:	Grant, Longfellow, McKinstry
green:	Black Hawk, Irving, Kittrell

Middle

white:	West Middle
yellow:	Hoover
blue:	Logan
green:	Central

Senior High School

pink:	West
blue:	East