

**School District  
of  
McFarland**

**Gifted & Talented  
Program Review**

**September 2008**

*“... and grateful for the wit to see  
prospects through doors we cannot enter –  
Ah, let us praise diversity  
which holds the world upon its center.”  
- Phyllis McGinley*

**Roberta M. Felker, Ph.D.  
Review Chairperson**

**School District of McFarland  
Gifted & Talented Program Review  
September 2008**

---

**I. Background**

The School District of McFarland's Gifted and Talented (GT) Program has served the students of the district since the late 1980s, when the first part-time GT teacher was hired. In 1999, a Program Plan was developed and has been both cornerstone and lighthouse for the District's GT services for the past nine years, with a formative assessment in 2005-06 shedding light on continuing progress and needs. In the fall of 2007, when oversight of GT services<sup>1</sup> shifted from Student Services to Instructional Services, the School Board (Board) requested a review of the GT programming.

In October 2007, Ms. Felker, Director of Instructional Services, met with the Board and the Superintendent to discuss the design and implementation of the review. An example template (Appendix A) was shared at that time; the common understanding was that Ms. Felker would act as the chair of the evaluation team with initial responsibility for identifying national standards that could guide the evaluation process itself as well as standards that could be useful in examining the specific context and content of the McFarland GT services, and return to the Board with next steps.

*The McFarland Review Plan and Process*

In December 2007, Ms. Felker provided the Board with a memorandum that addressed details of the review, including: a summary of the National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC) Standards for Program Evaluation, a summary of a Gifted Programming Evaluation Rubric based on NAGC standards that would guide our evaluation process (see Appendix B for the complete rubric), a tentative plan for the evaluation process, a timeline and budget estimate, and examples of realities and constraints that form the context for the review. The memorandum and summary are included in Appendix C. The proposed timeline for the process began in January 2008 and was projected to culminate with a final report to the School Board in October 2008. The budget projection reflected approximately \$5,400 for additional GT staff time as well as some additional time for Ms. Felker.

*Realities and Constraints of the Internal GT Review*

This internal review reflects the context and constraints of the District's staffing and resources and the Board's timeline (e.g., it was not included in the original 2007-08 goals, calendar, or budget of either the Director of Instructional Services or the Gifted/Talented Program staff). In addition, there have been specific trade-offs and strategic decisions made with respect to issues such as framing the scope of the review and the tension between depth and breadth. Finally, as noted in the December 2007 memorandum, Board ideas, feedback, and questions were solicited regularly throughout the school year and individual and Board conversations occurred as they were requested.

**II. Context of the Review**

One of the cardinal principles of program reviews is the importance of background and context to the understanding and interpretation of information. This review takes place within nested contexts, each of which is addressed briefly below:

- the context of the School District of McFarland, including its mission, vision, core beliefs, and values;
- the historical context of gifted/talented education at the national and state levels; and
- the specific context of the District's Gifted/Talented programming.

---

<sup>1</sup> Throughout this document, the terms GT programming and GT services are used interchangeably.

*Context: School District of McFarland*

The School Board's historical commitment to all the District's students and to the services they need is reflected in the District mission statement. The mission statement (Appendix D) includes a focus on high expectations, high achievement, a learning environment in which both challenge and support are embedded, and a shared commitment to the mission on the part of all members of the school community. These themes dovetail with themes that will appear again and again throughout this report; they also are consistent with themes mentioned by the NAGC and others whose mission it is to support the learning and development of gifted and talented youth.<sup>2</sup>

The more recently drafted belief statements and core values further focus and support the District's professional learning community, including its priority on educating all students – those who are not yet able to those who are already able. Other priorities such as the District's commitment to students as teachers as well as learners, the acknowledgment that learning is not exclusive to schools, and the passion for critical thinking, innovation, and community form a solid foundation for the District's gifted/talented programming.

Finally, the most recent draft of the District's strategic priorities and SMART goals (Appendix D) reflects growing awareness of the need for and benefits of bringing specific focus to the needs of students identified as EX and EX\* by including these students among the cohort groups whose academic progress will be measured and monitored as part of the schools' 2008-10 school improvement processes.

*Context: Gifted/Talented Programs at the National and State Levels*

James Borland, an historian and researcher in gifted education, writes that the history of the field of gifted education in the United States can be divided into three somewhat arbitrary but useful periods, each of which has been characterized by an increasingly "widespread acceptance of the needs of 'gifted' children for an appropriately differentiated education and a proliferation of gifted programs."<sup>3</sup> The first period was launched by the work of Lewis Terman and others after World War I; the second period was spurred by the Soviet Union's launching of Sputnik I in October 1957, when schools were given greater responsibility for encouraging the development of our "best and brightest." Borland posits that we are in the midst of the third period, one that began with the 1972 publication of the U.S. Office of Education's *Education of the Gifted and Talented*<sup>4</sup> (the so-called *Marland Report*).

Over the past three decades or so, gifted education has become a part of the fabric of public schools, stimulated and supported by public funding from the 1988 Jacob Javits Gifted and Talented Students in Education Act and by reports such as *A Nation at Risk* in 1983 and *National Excellence: A Case for Developing America's Talent* in 1993. In 1998, the National Association for Gifted Children published its gifted program standards for pre-K through high school, "solidifying the field's intent and provid(ing) school districts across the country with a set of programming criteria."<sup>5</sup> Most recently, the 2004 report, *A Nation Deceived*, raised the consciousness of educators and parents alike with the powerful and discomfiting message that, "schools pay lip service to the proposition that students should learn at their own pace; in reality, for countless highly able children the pace of their progress throughout school is determined by the rate of progress of their classmates."<sup>6</sup>

<sup>2</sup> National Association for Gifted Children. *Standards for Program Evaluation*. Washington DC: 2005.

<sup>3</sup> Borland, J.H. *Issues and practices in the identification and education of gifted students from under-represented groups*. The National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented, May 2004, 4.

<sup>4</sup> Marland, S.P. *Education of the gifted and talented. Report to Congress*. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1972.

<sup>5</sup> National Association for Gifted Children. *A history of services for the gifted and talented*. Washington, DC: 2006, 3.

<sup>6</sup> Colangelo, N. et al. *A nation deceived: How schools hold back America's brightest students*. Iowa City, Iowa: The Connie Belin & Jacqueline N. Blank International Center for Gifted Education and Talent Development, 2004, 1.

In Wisconsin, the Department of Public Instruction (DPI) “recognizes diverse learners, including the gifted and talented.”<sup>7</sup> The state Legislature addressed the needs of gifted/talented students in 1985 via State Statute 121.02(1)(t), commonly known as Standard (t), and its accompanying Administrative Rule PI 8.01 (2) (t).2. Standard (t) requires school districts to provide programs for gifted/talented students in kindergarten through grade 12; the intent, according to Stone et al (2005) is “for schools to develop the means by which gifted/talented students will be identified, and, once identified, provided access to a set of systematic and continuous instructional activities, which are appropriate to the developmental needs of those children and youth so identified.”<sup>8</sup> In addition, PI 34.02, Teacher Standards, delineates the knowledge, skills, and dispositions that teachers are required to demonstrate in order to receive a Wisconsin teaching license; the standards embrace the needs and possibilities of all youngsters, including students identified as gifted/talented.

*Context: Gifted and Talented Programming in McFarland*

Not surprisingly, the history of gifted/talented education in McFarland aligns roughly with the timeline and services trajectory set at the national and state levels. The McFarland School District’s *Gifted and Talented Program Plan*, dated February 1999, provides highlights of the history of gifted/talented education in McFarland from the program’s inception through 1998. The following chronology includes selected events from the plan spanning this period; the events from 1999 to 2008 were identified by staff and others involved with the District’s gifted/talented program during this decade. A reasonable estimate of the program’s annual budgets is also provided, including salary and benefits [S+B] and supplies [sup]; these data are more useful to illustrate a trend than they are to pinpoint an exact investment in gifted/talented services. Since support staff assistance has been minimal (currently 1.5 to 2 hours per week), episodic, and not consistently reflected in the GT budget, it is not included in these budget estimates.

<i>Fifteen Years of Gifted/Talented Education in McFarland, 1993 – 2008</i>		
<i>Date</i>	<i>Budget</i>	<i>Event</i>
Pre-1993		→ Some staff released up to .5FTE as initial efforts to address needs of GT students
1993	\$47,750 S+B \$ 5,642 sup <b>\$53,392</b>	→ One FTE GT Coordinator/Resource Teacher is hired to coordinate and promote K-12 programming for students identified as G/T
1996	\$53,150 S+B \$ 8,291 sup <b>\$60,441</b>	→ The District’s A-Council approves a TAG Position Paper
1997	\$62,266 S+B \$ 8,029 sup <b>\$70,295</b>	→ The McFarland Gifted and Talented Parent Advisory Council drafts and forwards a document entitled, <i>A Comprehensive Set of Recommendations for Gifted and Talented Students</i> to the School Board → Program planning workshops result in goals and action plans for future activities; representatives of the Parent Advisory Council meet with the A-C to present their findings and recommendations regarding how best to meet the needs of TAG students
1998	\$55,767 S+B \$ 9,187 sup <b>\$66,354</b>	→ The first meetings of the K-12 TAG Advisory Council are held → The TAG Advisory Council makes a presentation to the School Board and is charged with developing a long-range plan for TAG services; and a draft plan is created
1999	\$64,096 S+B \$14,195 sup <b>\$ 78,291</b>	→ The <i>McFarland School District Gifted and Talented Program Plan (GT Program Plan)</i> is presented to the School Board in February → GT Coordinator resigns
2000-01		→ Interim GT staffing arrangement includes release time for one District staff member; a second staff person is hired for approximately 10 hours/week at an hourly rate
2001-02		→ 1.0 FTE K-12 GT Coordinator/Resource Teacher added
2002-03		→ .5 FTE K-5 GT Resource Teacher added
2003-04		→ .6 FTE IMMS GT Resource Teacher added
2004-05	\$ 98,220 S+B	→ The .6 FTE IMMS GT Resource Teacher position is increased to .8 FTE , reflecting a .2 FTE

<sup>7</sup> Stone, S. et al. *Gifted and talented resource guide for educators, coordinators, and administrators in Wisconsin public schools*. WI: Department of Public Instruction and the Wisconsin Association of Talented and Gifted (WATG), 2005, iii.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, 4.

	\$ 7,000 sup <b>\$105,220</b>	allocation for MHS → The 1.0 FTE GT Coordinator is decreased to .8FTE → The .8 FTE GT Coordinator resigns
2005-06	\$116,494 S+B \$ 4,704 sup <b>\$121,198</b>	→ A .5 FTE GT Coordinator is hired through a 66:03 Agreement with Evansville Community School District in September → The .5 FTE WIS GT Resource Teacher position is increased to .6 FTE in September → The .5 FTE IMMS/MHS GT Resource Teacher position is increased to .8 FTE in September → A .4 FTE GT Resource Teacher position is added at MPS/CE in November → A policy on acceleration is written, approved by the School Board, and shared with the A-Council and school staff → District staff are provided with access to the Roger Taylor website which includes hundreds of differentiated units across curriculum areas → GT staff conduct a gap analysis of the <i>GT Program Plan</i> , identifying what is being done in each area, where the needs are, and what resources are needed to go the next step → A presentation is made to the School Board
2006-07	\$136,080 S+B \$ 6,445 <b>\$142,525</b>	→ A presentation is made to the School Board
2007-08	\$141,618S+B \$ 8,777 sup <b>\$150,395</b>	→ Oversight/coordination of the GT Program is shifted to the Instructional Services Office → The School Board requests a review of the GT program → A comprehensive review of the program is conducted
2008-09	\$146,733 S+B \$ 5,500 sup <b>\$152,233</b>	→ The review of the McFarland GT program is presented to the School Board in September

The chronology highlights the importance of the 1999 *Program Plan* in setting the direction for the district's GT program development; its recommendation for a "systematic and continuous program ... with appropriate resources (human, financial and material)"<sup>9</sup> in the six identified areas (identification and communication, staffing needs and program delivery, staff development, curriculum, social/emotional needs, and resources) has served as the cornerstone and touchstone for the program over the past nine years. The growth trend in the GT budget has been positive; it reflects the Board's commitment to the quality of the program and the acknowledgment that this quality commitment cannot happen without qualified and motivated staff to articulate and support it. The presentations to the School Board over the past several years have showcased areas in which changes and/or growth have occurred, identified areas of need, responded to questions from the Board, and provided an opportunity for dialogue among and between Board members and GT program staff.

### III. Review Structure and Design

#### *Overview and Methodology*

The review of McFarland's GT programming had four goals:

- to identify a context for the review of the program, including the identification of a framework for best practices in gifted/talented education;
- to review the history and current status of the District's GT services with attention to the two Board priorities of coherence and fidelity to best practices;
- to identify some "big rocks"<sup>10</sup> (to borrow Covey's term for our most important priorities) that can frame and inform steps to take the District's GT programming to the next level; and
- to sketch out some representative next steps, based on the information included in the review.

The rest of this section provides an overview of the structure and methodology of the review process, keeping these goals in mind.

In its discussions about program review (evaluation), the NAGC reminds the reader of the logic of systematic study and making decisions based on what's working or not working. They conclude that the

<sup>9</sup> McFarland TAG Advisory Council. *McFarland School District gifted and talented program plan*. Author: February 1999, 7.

<sup>10</sup> Covey, S. *The 7 habits of highly effective people*. NY: Free Press, 1989.

“most robust provisions for gifted learners will evolve from careful collection of data regarding the context in which the services are delivered, the adequacy and appropriateness of resources available, the quality of activities carried out, and finally, the degree to which goals and objectives have been achieved.”<sup>11</sup>

In order to ensure that reviews of GT programs have the greatest chance of supporting the robust offerings that families, educators, and policy makers are seeking, NAGC has identified four guiding principles for the evaluation of gifted programs (see Appendix C for the principles and the key questions that were shared with the Board in December 2007). In brief:

- The evaluation should be *purposeful*, offering meaningful involvement to the stakeholders and responding to their identified priorities;
- the evaluation should be *efficient and economically feasible*, employing a methodology that has integrity, will lead to useful information, and is fiscally affordable;
- the evaluation should be *conducted competently and ethically*, ensuring confidentiality and an unbiased process; and
- the evaluation *results should be available through a written report*, accessible to all the stakeholders.

The review chair has been intentional about keeping these principles and their implications for the District in mind throughout the review period; every effort has been made to ensure that the process and this report respond to the spirit of the principles and the needs and priorities of the stakeholders.

The structure for the analysis of the District’s GT programming drew on the best of the team approach, cited by Fetterman in the report of the National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented entitled, *Evaluate Yourself*, as “the most common and often the most effective method of conducting self- or external evaluations.”<sup>12</sup> Fetterman goes on to explain that this format for self-evaluation draws on the insights of program staff, teachers, administrators, parents and students; evaluation tasks (including, for example, interviews and review of records) are divided among team members; the team chair or the reviewer is charged with the final analyses, recommendations, and the responsibility of producing the report. He concludes that this approach can “make it possible to conduct (the review) within time and budget constraints ... it also ensures a balanced perspective, as team members cross-validate each others’ judgments and observations, providing a continual check against individual observer bias.”<sup>13</sup>

In addition to Ms. Felker, the team chair, the District’s team included Heather Hanson, .4 FTE GT Resource at Conrad Elvehjem Early Learning Center (CE)/Primary School (MPS), Lisa Nyenhuis, .6 FTE GT Resource Teacher at Waubesa Intermediate School (WIS), Cindy Clark, .6 FTE GT Resource Teacher at Indian Mound Middle School (IMMS) and .2 FTE GT Resource Teacher at McFarland High School (MHS), and Kitty VerKuilen, .5 FTE GT Coordinator, district-wide. The team chair wishes to acknowledge their openness to the conversation, their experience and expertise in gifted/talented education, and their willingness to critique the program in which they have invested so much of their own spirit, skill, and energy.

The methodology for the McFarland review included:

- the review of program documents, selected research, and best practices,
- the collection of comparative data from other school districts in and surrounding Dane County,
- review and discussion of the GT team’s self-analysis,
- focus group and individual interviews, and
- parent surveys.

<sup>11</sup> National Association for Gifted Children. *Standards for Program Evaluation*. Washington DC: 2005, 13.

<sup>12</sup> Fetterman, D.M *Evaluate yourself*. Storrs, CT: National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented, 2003, 2.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, 2.

A brief description of each of these is included below. Although, as noted, the review process operated within the constraints of the priorities and activities of the school year, the team chair made every effort to identify, obtain, and consider the information that would be most useful to the analysis of the District's GT programming and the identification of next steps.

Review of program documents, including historical documents as available, plans, program brochures and descriptions, identification information, newsletters, GT resource documents, and other information about the District's programming and services. Copies of specific documents are available on request.

Review of selected research and best practices, including references and documents from national organizations such as the National Association of Gifted Children and the National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented, as well as other publications related to best practices in gifted/talented education. The team chair brought special focus to references related to Board priorities of coherence and fidelity to best practices. Such references included but were by no means limited to, for example, Colangelo et al's *A Nation Deceived*<sup>14</sup> and NAGC's service publication, *Best Practices in Gifted Education*<sup>15</sup>

Collection of comparative data, (Appendix E) including information from 34 school districts in the Dane County and surrounding communities. The request for information asked for each district's student count, FTE for GT services at each level (elementary through high school), FTE for a district coordinator, and information about any other notes or anticipated changes (e.g., retirements, layoffs, priorities); the completeness of the responses varied by district.

Review of the GT team's gifted/talented self-analysis (based on the NAGC evaluative rubric), which includes their assessment of where they believe the District's services fall on the NAGC continuum from minimal (1) to optimal (4). The GT team organized their self-analysis by color-coding each of the seven criterion's descriptive categories (53 total) according to whether they believed the activities/processes were "inherent in the District's GT services," or "not in place." Where available, they listed artifacts that support their judgment. A copy of their self-analysis is included in Appendix F.

Focus group and individual interviews, including 35 teachers, 96 students, and 14 parents, GT staff, and School Board members. The teacher focus group interviews were conducted at the buildings by an external professional; representation was stratified by team and included a minimum of two teachers per team at the K-8 levels; six teachers represented the MHS staff. All teacher participants volunteered to be involved. The time for each focus group was determined by the building principal and team leaders; teachers were provided with a written statement of the context for the review conversation and the guiding questions prior to and at the interviews (Appendix G). After talking informally with several students and the review team, the team chair determined that the student focus group interviews would be most honest and the information obtained more useful if conducted by the GT Resource Teacher who had a relationship with them. The protocol included three questions that paralleled the themes of the teachers' interviews; other comments were solicited and recorded. Students were interviewed at all District schools: The Primary School (N = 13), WIS (N = 28), IMMS (N = 22), and MHS (N = 16). The team chair, Ms. Felker, talked with a total of 14 parents, GT staff, administrators, and School Board members throughout the year; these did not follow a formal interview protocol. Insights shared during these conversations are reflected in this review. A copy of the interview protocols is included in Appendix H. Because of the small sample sizes and the commitment to confidentiality, interview notes are not publicly available.

<sup>14</sup> Colangelo, N., Assouline, S.G., and Gross, M. *A nation deceived: How schools hold back America's brightest students*. Iowa City, Iowa: The Connie Belin & Jacqueline N. Blank International Center for Gifted Education and Talent Development, 2004.

<sup>15</sup> Robinson, A. Shore, B., and Enersen, D.L. *Best practices in gifted education: An evidence-based guide (a service publication of the National Association for Gifted Children)*. Waco, TX: Prufrock Press, Inc., 2007.

Survey of parents of students identified as EX (two to five percent of the student population) and EX\* (one to two percent of the student population), conducted on-line via Survey Monkey (if email addresses were available) or via U.S. mail. Approximately 45 families of the 86 EX and EX\* students (grades 3-12) included an email address to which the parent survey was emailed; 13 of these came back as undeliverable and were included with the approximately 41 families without an email address on file who were mailed a letter with the explanation of the review process, a paper copy of the survey, and a school-addressed return envelope. Thirteen of the 32 emailed surveys were returned for a 40 percent return rate; four of the 54 U.S. mail surveys – or approximately 7 percent – were returned. A copy of the survey and the letter of explanation are included in Appendix I.

It was beyond the scope of this review to examine the impact of the District’s GT services on our GT students (e.g., how identified GT students are performing [academically or in other areas such as the arts] in comparison to their non-identified peers or whether they are entering and completing undergraduate and graduate degree programs in greater numbers than their non-identified peers). Because of a combination of cost and competing priorities, relatively few public high schools or GT programs collect and maintain these types of systematic, comprehensive longitudinal data on their students and graduates.

The next section of this review provides an overview of the District’s GT programming, using the categories from the NAGC rubric as an outline. *Tough Questions* that provide the reader with examples of the challenges shared by gifted/talented students, GT staff, and other school teaching staff and administrators are scattered throughout the following pages of the report.

*McFarland sixth graders told us they want,  
“More time to spend with people at my own level and more classes with them;  
more classes like WCATY where I can move at my own pace;  
different levels of classes for every subjects;  
to meet for lunch on Fridays;  
all three grades (6-8) choose the classes they want and mix grades in each class;  
and not to have to keep repeating lessons we know.”*

#### **IV. Overview of McFarland’s Gifted and Talented Programming**

In addition to creating a *process* that was reasonable, credible and had the greatest chance possible to identify and illuminate themes and areas for productive next steps, the *content* of the review was organized so that the District’s GT programming was examined with attention to the standards of best practices in gifted/talented education. The rubric that was shared with the School Board in December 2007 mirrors NAGC’s seven evaluation criteria and the accompanying guiding principles; it also provides descriptive information about the qualitative dimensions of each principle, ranging from minimal to optimal. A chart with the criteria and guiding principles is included in Appendix C; the criteria are also summarized at the beginning of each of the following sections.

Following an introduction regarding the philosophy of the District’s GT services, the rest of this section is organized by NAGC criterion. Each discussion draws on the multiple data sources described in Section IV, and includes an overview of what currently exists in McFarland.

#### ***GT Services Philosophy***

*District fourth graders shared this advice:  
“Put the GT kids into one homeroom for the whole day –  
everyone could work at a fast pace, then we wouldn’t have to move rooms  
or help other people so much.”*

**Overview:** The 1999 Gifted and Talented Program Plan cites the District’s mission statement, noting that “through its mission statement, the District is committed to setting high expectations and supporting the high quality achievement of all its students” – and then underscores that “while all students have gifts and talents, some possess them to an exceptional degree ... and require different instructional strategies and educational programs.”<sup>16</sup> The plan document does not include a statement of philosophy (in fact, it notes that philosophy “ha(s) been (a) long-standing issue in McFarland”<sup>17</sup>), however, a GT philosophy statement was developed at some point in the past and is included in the current brochure (McFarland’s Gifted and Talented Services) and on the District’s website (parent page). The philosophy reads, “*The McFarland School District strives to meet the needs of all of its students, including those in the gifted population. We recognize the five areas of giftedness as being: Intellectual, Academic, Creative, Artistic/Dramatic, and Leadership. We strive to identify students who are gifted and to provide them with continuous and systematic services.*”

→ Although not specifically referenced, the five areas of giftedness are taken from and embedded in the working definition of gifted and talented students in s. 118.35(t), Wis. Stats (which is taken from the federal definition of giftedness [the Javits Definition]): “*Pupils enrolled in public schools who give evidence of high performance capability in intellectual, creative, artistic, leadership, or specific academic areas and who need services or activities not ordinarily provided in a regular school program in order to fully develop such capabilities.*”

**Other sources:** Neither the staff focus group interviews nor the parent survey responses made mention of the program’s philosophy statement or related topics; since the GT self-analysis paralleled the NAGC gifted programming evaluation rubric, the topic of program philosophy is not addressed in this document.

**Criterion 1: Student identification** – Gifted learners must be assessed to determine appropriate educational services. This criterion addresses the extent to which the District’s identification process is comprehensive, cohesive, coordinated, and research-based; whether the instruments used to determine eligibility are appropriately sensitive to differences; whether student assessment profiles are developed and used to monitor ongoing progress; and whether the written procedures for student identification include all the appropriate provisions (e.g., informed consent, student assessment, appeals procedures) and are reviewed on a regular basis.

*MHS students shared,  
“It’s not so bad to be way ahead in an easy class because it gives you time to ‘rest’ in school.”*

**Overview:** At the primary level, data (both formal and informal) are collected; students are designated as Talent Pool. At the end of second grade, enough data are available to begin to identify GT levels, i.e., EX\* (one to two percent of the student population), EX (two to five percent of the student population), or Talent Pool (five to 15 percent of the student population). The District identifies approximately 10 to 15 percent of its student population as part of the Talent Pool (approximately 10 to 12 percent), EX, or EX\* (approximately three percent, combined). This is line with national figures.<sup>18</sup>

→ The GT Resource Teachers share the identification process<sup>19</sup> with each school’s staff on an annual basis (Appendix J). Following the presentation, K-8 staff are asked to complete an identification survey; high school staff are provided with information about gifted/talented services and are encouraged to talk with the GT Resource Teacher and/or the GT Coordinator about students with specific needs. Throughout the year,

<sup>16</sup> McFarland TAG Advisory Council. *McFarland School District gifted and talented program plan*. Author: February 1999, 2.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 5.

<sup>18</sup> Robinson, A. Shore, B., and Enersen, D.L. *Best practices in gifted education: An evidence-based guide (a service publication of the National Association for Gifted Children)*. Waco, TX: Prufrock Press, Inc., 2007.

<sup>19</sup> School District of McFarland GT Staff. Gifted and talented identification presentation. Author: 2008.

all staff are encouraged to recommend students who in their professional judgment seem to display a need for GT programming/services.

→ All 1-8 staff are given a list of identified students during the first month of school as well as information on the five areas of giftedness, academic and socio/emotional needs of GT students, and classroom support options. At the high school (because courses change each quarter and the process of reviewing class lists, identifying GT students, and connecting with individual teachers each quarter is both cumbersome and time-consuming), the GT Resource Teacher checks in with EX and EX\* students and connects with teachers as possible within the constraints of a .2 FTE position.

→ Parents may attend the fall parent seminar that covers the McFarland identification model in conjunction with the Midwest Academic Talent Search, the spring parent seminar which specifically addresses the McFarland identification model, and/or take the initiative to contact a member of the GT staff with questions about the District's identification process.

**1999 GT Program Plan:** Cites as “current reality” the “systematic and comprehensive identification of gifted and talented students in the five areas of giftedness,<sup>20</sup> as well as the detailed teacher referral form and the maintenance of a district-wide data base. Over the years, the District's formal process for identifying students has been “refined and expanded,” addressing this key recommendation from the *1999 GT Program Plan*. It now draws on performance data from district and state testing, observation/analysis of student performance during class, teacher recommendation, and parent referral.

**2005-06 GT Program Plan Review:** Notes that not all teachers understand how GT students are identified; community outreach regarding the behaviors that characterize giftedness is suggested, including but not limited to a Q&A for kindergarten warm-up.

**Staff interview data:** Suggest that the responding K-8 staff feel they have a “solid” sense of understanding about and good involvement in the GT identification process. They expressed appreciation for the opportunity to assist in the identification process and for GT staff support for ongoing identification and conversations about supporting both Talent Pool and EX and EX\* students in their classrooms. More than one mentioned enjoying their role as “talent scouts.” The broad topic of the identification of GT students came up only twice during the MHS focus groups. One MHS teacher noted that s/he appreciates receiving the list of GT students; another teacher referenced feeling generally knowledgeable about the program and expressed appreciation for what s/he saw as increased communication via the team visits and the monthly GT newsletter this past year.

**Parent survey data:** Sixty-eight percent (N = 13) of the respondents to the parent surveys agreed/strongly agreed that “information about the district's GT program, including the GT identification process, is made available to parents and community members;” 26 percent (N = 5) disagreed. One comment reflected some confusion about when their child was identified, one respondent questioned what happens once a student is identified in terms of K-12 programming, and one asked about whether/how identification happens at the high school level.

**GT self-analysis:** Identified the following general activities or processes related to GT identification as either part of the District's services or not in place in the District's offerings. Further detail is available in Appendix F.

---

<sup>20</sup> McFarland TAG Advisory Council. *McFarland School District gifted and talented program plan*. Author: February 1999, 9.

<i>Part of the District's GT Services re Identification</i>	<i>Not in Place in the District's GT Services re Identification</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ Nomination information provided to staff and available to parents</li> <li>→ Nomination process is ongoing throughout the year; students may qualify any time</li> <li>→ Parents are provided with general information about giftedness at fall seminar</li> <li>→ Students are assessed the same way, regardless of differences in culture, economic conditions, environmental factors etc.</li> <li>→ The percent of students from cultural and economic groups are represented in GT in proportion to their representation in the student population</li> <li>→ A lending library is available with resources for parents and staff</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ Nomination information not available in a variety of languages</li> <li>→ Workshops or seminars to help parents understand the "fuller meaning of giftedness" are not held</li> <li>→ Assessment that is responsive to students' ethnicity, culture, gender and other factors that affect assessment practices</li> </ul>

**Criterion 2: Professional Development** – Gifted learners are entitled to be served by professionals who have specialized in 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. This criterion addresses the extent to which the District's GT staff bring preparation, expertise, and experience to their work with the District's gifted/talented students, and the extent to which the District provides appropriate and ongoing professional development and time for teachers to prepare and develop differentiated curriculum, instruction, and assessments.

*McFarland's eighth graders reflected,  
 "There are not enough options – language arts has WCATY, math has different level classes,  
 social studies and science have no options at middle school.  
 We want more fun and engaging units, not just putting facts on paper or copying from a slide show or textbook.  
 Instead of Literacy Circles, have unorganized discussions  
 where everyone just has to be prepared to discuss something interesting.  
 We need other formats to show learning.  
 It's easier to learn if people can go off in smaller groups and learn more about a topic."*

**Overview:** The District is fortunate to have qualified, experienced GT staff.

- At the K-2 level, Heather Hanson (.4 FTE) brings certification in elementary education and three years experience in gifted and talented education at the primary level.
- At Waubesa Intermediate School, Lisa Nyenhuis (.6 FTE) brings certification in elementary education and 14 years experience as a GT teacher, working with gifted and talented students at the K-5 level. Lisa is a parent and holds a Master's degree in Teacher Leadership.
- Indian Mound's GT Resource Teacher, Cindy Clark, (.8 FTE) brings middle and high school certification, graduate work in GT education, and 20 years experience in gifted and talented education as both a parent and teacher. In addition, Cindy currently serves on the Board of Directors of the Wisconsin Association for Talented and Gifted, Co-Chairs the Wisconsin PTA Board of Directors Gifted and Talented Committee, and is a member of the CESA 2 Leadership Team for Gifted and Talented and the Greater Dane County Talented and Gifted Network
- The District's GT Coordinator is Kitty VerKuilen (.5 FTE), who brings a background in Special Education and gifted education, including graduate work in gifted education and a Master's degree in Educational Leadership. She is a parent, and has worked in the field of gifted education for the past seven years at the high school and middle school levels both as a Resource Teacher for gifted and talented students and as McFarland's GT Program Coordinator.

→ GT staff reported that they stay current by attending GT conferences, by participating in workshops geared for the needs of GT students, by reading professional publications, and by collaborating with other professionals in the field. This collaboration is facilitated by their membership in the Wisconsin Association for Talented and Gifted (WTAG), and the Greater Dane County Talented and Gifted Network.

→ GT staff are included as appropriate at CARE Team meetings in all buildings. They have the opportunity to share information about students' academic and social/emotional needs and to hear from the classroom teachers about what materials and/or other support is needed. Since the CARE Teams are integral to the District's acceleration process, the regular involvement of GT staff in a resource/consultant capacity is key.

→ District-wide staff development in gifted/talented education is primarily building-based, and thus heavily dependent on the time and expertise of the building GT staff. At Conrad Elvehjem/Primary and Waubesa, monthly GT Committee meetings provide an opportunity for the building GT Resource Teacher and the GT Coordinator to meet with teacher representatives to identify and discuss the programming needs of GT students and the support needs of staff. At all buildings, individual teacher assistance with differentiation is the outgrowth of the collaborative relationship between the GT Resource Teacher and the classroom teacher. These relationships may grow from questions or concerns about meeting the needs of a specific student, GT presentations at staff meetings, knowledge of GT assistance provided to another teacher, and/or parent and/or principal request. These one-on-one conversations, classroom demonstrations/modeling, and the provision of materials and ideas for enrichment and extensions were noted by teachers as "very helpful." In addition, monthly GT newsletters distributed to staff at all schools and to interested parents via email and accessible through the District website provide teachers and families with tips for challenging GT students and information about programming/services.

→ In 2002, the District instituted a requirement that all staff be trained in differentiation of instruction. Staff were given the option of being trained through the District, taking a college or university course, or demonstrating knowledge of differentiation practices in their classrooms for the Director of Instructional Services. Beginning in 2007-08, new staff are required to complete the Dane County New Teacher Project's class in *Analyzing Student Work* to meet this requirement.

**Comparative data:** In terms of the ratio of GT time to McFarland's enrollment, the comparative data gathered from 34 Dane County and area school districts (Appendix E) showed that McFarland has the fifth best teacher-to-student ratio at 1:877, behind Middleton-Cross Plains (1:528); Milton (1:642), Oregon (1:700), and New Glarus (1:845). Twenty-nine districts have staffing ratios that are lower than McFarland's, including seven with less than a 1.0 FTE GT staff allocation and seven districts with no staff specifically assigned to GT.

**1999 GT Program Plan:** Notes that there was, at that time, a tension between the District's philosophical position that "the majority of the population of gifted students would have their needs met in the regular classroom" and the reality that the kind of "appropriate training and other resources (human and material) to provide appropriate differentiation and programming in the regular classroom"<sup>21</sup> was not yet in place.

**2005-06 GT Program Plan Review:** Notes the continuing need for a district-wide "master plan" for staff development regarding the needs of and resources available to support gifted and talented students, including but not limited to new staff orientation and on-going professional development at the school and classroom levels.

**Staff interview data:** The staff focus groups identified a number of accolades and challenges related to staff development issues.

- GT staff were named at every level as (staff development) "assets," and as people who "know

---

<sup>21</sup> McFarland TAG Advisory Council. *McFarland School District gifted and talented program plan*. Author: February 1999, 38.

and understand kids and their needs.” GT staff also were appreciated for giving assurance and affirmation, keeping staff informed, meeting with teams, offering the option of pull-out groups, educating staff re GT, providing a range of opportunities for GT students, helping teachers keep their eyes on the prize of working with the “truly gifted, not just teacher-pleasers or hard workers,” communicating effectively with the whole school, providing individual student data, coming in and working with kids in classrooms (push-ins), listening, “providing a ‘building face’ to GT,” and the perceived high quality of the program overall.

- Staff development -related challenges included the need for: help teachers cluster GT students to make differentiated instruction more feasible, time (once again) to work with the GT Resource Teachers to identify materials and methods to challenge their GT students, “those quick ideas via email that (you) can grab on to,” best practices in delivering instruction to GT students, what to do with twice-exceptional students (especially at the K-2 level), help identifying and responding to the “creative” student, more resources for supporting the socio/emotional needs of GT students, clarification of the District’s position regarding acceleration, information regarding GT girls (in math and science especially) and underachieving GT boys, how to identify and support GT students who have challenging behavior and low test scores, how to handle GT students who “aren’t delivering in the classroom and are pulled out for other opportunities,” student-specific suggestions for modification, including updates each quarter/term (based on the special education IEP model), and, finally, the need for the students’ perspective (what are their needs? how well are we meeting them?).

**Parent survey data:** Underscored the confidence that the responding parents have in the expertise and responsiveness of the GT staff, e.g., “I believe all the staff has great knowledge of giftedness and express themselves well at the workshops and school-based meetings.” There was no mention of concerns about GT staff qualifications, knowledge, or willingness to be of assistance. The surveys and conversations did yield some ideas for possible staff development emphases, including how to help teachers address teasing about grades, and helping all staff (“not just teachers”) understand that “options such as acceleration, even if they aren’t logistically simple, are necessary if the District is to walk its talk about meeting the needs of students who learn more, more quickly than other students.”

**GT self-analysis:** Identified the following general activities or processes related to professional development as either part of the District’s services or not in place in the District’s offerings. Further detail is available in Appendix F.

<i>Part of the District’s GT Services re Professional Development</i>	<i>Not in Place in the District’s GT Services re Professional Development</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ Some staff participate in workshops that are offered regarding gifted learners</li> <li>→ The GT Coordinator and Resource Teachers have training and/or experience in gifted education and are committed to their own, ongoing professional development, which is supported by the District</li> <li>→ The District’s differentiation requirement supports meeting the needs of GT students in the regular classroom</li> <li>→ Summer curriculum hours have been and are available for differentiating curriculum, assessment, and/or instruction</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ Less than 10 percent of regular classroom teachers participated in professional development designed specifically to address teaching GT learners during the last school year</li> <li>→ Release time is not routinely provided for staff development in GT during the school year (except as related to a building priority on Professional Development days (three afternoons/year))</li> </ul>

**Criterion 3: Socio-Emotional Guidance and Counseling** – Gifted education programming must establish a plan to recognize and nurture the unique socio-emotional development of gifted learners. This NAGC criterion addresses the extent to which the District provides differentiated guidance (including career guidance) for gifted/talented students including at-risk gifted students, and underachieving gifted students.

*A MHS high school student commented,  
“I took classes that weren’t necessary – we need a systematic way to learn about opportunities.”*

**Overview:** The District’s K-12 counseling program provides guidance (including career and college support) to all students, including those with identified gifts and talents. Although only one of the District’s counselors has specialized coursework in meeting the needs of gifted/talented students, the GT Coordinator and each building’s GT Resource Teacher work (as requested or as the need is recognized) with teachers, the counselor(s), and the school psychologist, helping individual teachers and CARE Team members understand and more effectively meet GT students’ socio/emotional needs. In addition, the GT Resource Teachers’ interactions with individual students provide valuable, spur-of-the-moment opportunities for personal guidance and career/college conversations.

→ There are also more structured opportunities that support the socio-emotional needs of the District’s GT students, e.g., at Waubesa, GT students’ issues are discussed in pull-out Book Groups; the Gifted Kids Survival Guide is a socio-emotional guidance group specifically geared to help meet the needs of gifted/talented students. At the high school level, Student Seminars are organized and conducted at each grade to address both academic and socio-emotional challenges. Attendance is optional; the block schedule and students’ priorities make it challenging to ensure that the timing of the seminars meets all students’ needs, but they are told that the opportunities are there for them.

→ The GT/Student Services Team has brought in speakers (e.g., Mike Cornale) to address timely issues such as perfectionism and underachievement in gifted/talented learners for staff and parents. The evaluations suggest that these occasions are well-received by staff.

**1999 GT Program Plan:** Cites limited staff development and a lack of counseling, career counseling, and college planning specific to gifted/talented students; recommendations for student support groups were noted as implemented for those students willing and able to participate at WIS and MHS; student support was provided on an individual basis at IMMS.

**2005-06 GT Program Plan Review:** Recommends improved guidance and counseling support for gifted/talented students; specific recommendations range from teacher professional development regarding socio-emotional issues, to *Intro to GT 101* for parents and students, and the continuation of groups such as take place at WIS. No specific mention is made of the role of the schools’ counselors or other members of the Student Services or CARE Teams.

**Staff interview data:** Reflect an awareness on the part of the respondents that gifted/talented students often have “unique stresses and dynamic issues”<sup>22</sup> associated with their giftedness, and acknowledge the need for professional development, student understanding of the socio/emotional dimensions of their gifts and talents, and/or individual or classroom interventions to address the socio-emotional components of giftedness/talentedness.

**Parent survey data:** Although socio-emotional issues were not specifically addressed in the parent survey, 73 percent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed (N = 14 total) that they are “provided special

<sup>22</sup> Robinson, A. Shore, B., and Enersen, D.L. *Best practices in gifted education: An evidence-based guide (a service publication of the National Association for Gifted Children)*. Waco, TX: Prufrock Press, Inc., 2007, 15.

workshops or seminars to help them understand the fuller meaning of giftedness (emphasis added).” It is not clear what the respondents believed was meant by the underlined phrase. The only parent comment related to this issue noted, “The (GT) teachers take time with parents and students so all understand the program and everyone is assisted in how to parent a GT child and the child is instructed on how to be a gifted/talented child, and how to handle feelings and challenges.”

**GT self-analysis:** Identified the following general activities or processes related to socio-emotional guidance and counseling for GT students as either part of the District’s services or not in place in the District’s offerings. Further detail is available in Appendix F.

<i>Part of the District’s GT Services re Socio-Emotional Guidance/Counseling</i>	<i>Not in Place in the District’s GT Services re Socio-Emotional Guidance/Counseling</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ Counseling is provided for GT students but the counselors have no substantive GT-related training</li> <li>→ GT students are provided with some college/career guidance that is different from and delivered earlier than is typical</li> <li>→ GT staff work with classroom teachers, members of the building CARE Team, and parents to provide some interventions for specific students who demonstrate signs of underachievement</li> <li>→ A limited affective curriculum has been developed and is provided for some GT students, based on student need as identified by classroom teacher and/or GT staff</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ Some informal training is provided to Student Services staff (including counselors) through the Curriculum Council and building workshops</li> <li>→ Limited specialized counseling and/or intervention is available for gifted at-risk students</li> <li>→ A comprehensive PK -12 affective curriculum scope and sequence is not available</li> </ul>

**Criterion 4: Program Evaluation** – Program evaluation is the systematic study of the value and impact of the services provided. This criterion addresses the extent to which the District’s evaluation of gifted/talented services is purposeful, efficient, competent, and available through a written report.

*McFarland’s second graders said,  
 “I want to do more things – we can only do two strategies in math  
 but I want to do more.  
 We have to pick our DEAR books too fast – there’s not enough time to read the back  
 and see if you are really interested.  
 I want more DEAR time and more homework – we don’t get very much, only two times a week.”*

**Overview:** Regular, systematic, formative evaluation has not been a part of the District’s standard operating procedures, either for GT or for other areas/programs. The GT staff discuss anecdotal data on an on-going basis (as they are available), but such information is not collected, organized, discussed, or shared in a structured way.

→ This review document reflects respect for and careful attention to the program evaluation parameters provided by the NAGC. Although it is not a formal evaluation per se, it nonetheless includes components of credible evaluations (e.g., research, systematic study, data collection, and reflection) to the greatest extent possible within the constraints of the project. The dissemination plan for the review document and appendices is that they will be available to the school community via a link on the District website; a hard copy of the review also will be sent to each school and will be available to interested parties on request.

**Staff interview data:** The teachers who participated in the staff focus groups did not comment specifically on the review process.

**Parent survey data:** Two parents shared their perspectives on the review process itself. One shared appreciation, saying, “Thank you for allowing the opportunity to express some concerns. I think it is great that this survey is being conducted at the district level.” Another noted, “I think it is great that you are having a review. I see it as a very positive growth opportunity.”

**GT self-analysis:** Identified the following general activities or processes related to program evaluation as either part of the District’s services or not in place in the District’s offerings. Further detail is available in Appendix F.

<i>Part of the District’s GT Services re Program Evaluation</i>	<i>Not in Place in the District’s GT Services re Program Evaluation</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ Informal evaluation conversations about the GT <u>program</u> parameters are conducted mostly at the end of the academic year and provide basic information to improve the program</li> <li>→ Evaluation conversations about the program’s <u>intersection with student needs</u> occur on a regular basis and involve school staff and parents as appropriate; impact is limited to incremental changes for individual students</li> <li>→ The GT Team has provided regular year-end updates to the School Board over the past several years</li> <li>→ The GT staff and informal evaluation processes have a reputation for confidentiality and integrity</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ There is no District requirement or budget for the review or evaluation (formative or summative) of any programs, including GT services</li> <li>→ A systematic plan for ongoing evaluation of the GT program related to annual SMART goals and objectives is not in place</li> </ul>

*Fifth graders commented that they would like,  
 “Metal-smithing, wood carving, animal biology, art and music (all day, every day),  
 classes where you make things, more math/logic groups,  
 more challenges, more in-depth information than in the textbook, big projects,  
 more pull-out groups for science, longer science time,  
 and longer recess.”*

*The fifth and seventh NAGC criteria overlap to a large extent; they are considered together for the purpose of this review.*

**Criterion 5: Program Design** – The development of appropriate gifted education programming requires comprehensive services based on sound philosophical, theoretical, and empirical support. This criterion addresses the extent to which the District offers an adequately funded, integrated, continuum of services for gifted/talented students that is supported by policies that “add to” the nature and operation of the regular education program.

**Criterion 7: Curriculum and Instruction** – Gifted education services must include curriculum and instructional opportunities directed to the unique needs of the gifted child. This criterion addresses the extent to which a continuum of differentiated curriculum and instruction for gifted and talented students is offered kindergarten through high school, including appropriate pacing to allow for acceleration and other options as appropriate.

**Overview:** The District’s GT programming model reflects Wisconsin’s Comprehensive Integrated Gifted Programming Model<sup>23</sup> (based on the nationally-accepted Pyramid Model<sup>24</sup>), a model that is both logically

<sup>23</sup> Stone, S. Himebauch, R. Mursky, C., Ginter, G., Kohn, Y., and Kueht, J. Gifted and talented resource guide for educators, coordinators, and administrators in Wisconsin public schools. WI: DPI et al, 2005, 22.

<sup>24</sup> Cox, J., Daniel, N. & Boston, B. *Educating able learners*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1985.

and philosophically persuasive and grounded in extensive empirical research. The model illustrates differentiated programming opportunities using three levels

- Level I/1, the base of the pyramid, includes opportunities commonly conducted within the regular classroom environment for between five and 15 percent of the student population – these students are included in the District’s Talent Pool;
- Level II/2, the center of the pyramid, focuses on more in-depth and extensive learning opportunities offered to between two and five percent of the student population – these students are identified in McFarland as EX; and
- Level III/3, the top of the pyramid, is intended for the one to two percent of students, designated as EX\* in McFarland, whose learning needs require an individual plan. Appendix K includes a graphic of the Wisconsin Model and the state’s Guidelines for Educational Opportunities that correspond to the three levels of the programming pyramid as well as the identification pyramid that is used in McFarland.

→ A comprehensive, continuous program would include a range of opportunities at each level, along with clearly articulated pathways (both in terms of access to opportunities and the focus of these opportunities) through which students could progress, pre-kindergarten through high school. See Appendix K for the range of educational opportunities that exemplify what could occur in McFarland and other districts for students in the Talent Pool in the regular classroom (Level 1), for EX students both within and outside the regular classroom (Level 2), and for EX\* students whose exceptional gifts/talents call for individual learning plans with support and opportunities outside the regular classroom and/or the school (Level 3). A District timeline that represents what GT programming and support activities occur by grade and by month is available in Appendix L; it should be noted that this document is fluid and should not be construed to include all GT services.

→ Acceleration of academically gifted students is one of the most commonly recommended practices.<sup>25</sup> In general, acceleration is defined as the recognition of students’ prior achievement;<sup>26</sup> it includes grade skipping, early entrance to school, subject acceleration (in which students attend a part of the school day at a more advanced grade level), compacting, fast-paced extracurricular classes, and early college entrance. Despite the research evidence supporting acceleration, it is generally used very conservatively (fewer than two percent);<sup>27</sup> the two most frequently cited reasons are staff discomfort and equating acceleration with grade skipping. At the K-8 levels, acceleration in McFarland follows the District’s policy, using the CARE Team process for both full-grade and subject acceleration. At the high school, students may access higher level classes when they have met the pre-requisites; in this sense, it involves some self-selection. Students may also be recommended for subject acceleration by individual teachers; there are, however, inconsistencies in the criteria teachers use as the basis for such recommendations. For example, teachers may recommend students based on true academic ability or the student may (especially if the curriculum content is not challenging) simply fit the profile of a “good student” (aka a “teacher pleaser”) who finishes class assignments quickly and easily, completes homework, and participates actively in class discussions. It is logically persuasive that gifted underachievers who may appear bored or exhibit teacher-challenging behaviors are less likely to be recommended for acceleration.

*“A high schooler commented,  
“Peer reviews are not taken seriously;  
only mechanics are checked and if (other) students don’t know the mechanics very well,  
you end up editing your own papers.  
And after you reach ‘advanced’ on your writing assessment, then what?”*

<sup>25</sup> Shore, B.M., Cornell, D., Robinson, A., & Ward, V.S. *Recommended practices in gifted education: A critical analysis*. NY: Teachers College Press, 1991.

Colangelo, N. et al (eds.). *A nation deceived: How schools hold back America’s brightest students*. IA: The Connie Belin & Jacqueline N. Blank International Center for Gifted Education and Talent Development, 2004.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Saylor, M., & Brookshire, K. Social, emotional and behavioral adjustment of accelerated students, students in gifted classes, and regular students in eighth grade. *Gifted Child Quarterly*, 1993, 37, 150-154.

**1999 GT Program Plan:** Describes the “current reality” in McFarland as characterized by a lack of program opportunities (including inconsistent delivery of differentiated curriculum, no resource or enrichment programming, and no program options offered consistently across grade levels), extensive reliance on parents for direct instruction, and inadequate staffing (a 1.0 FTE GT Program Coordinator).

**2005-06 GT Program Plan Review:** Does not specifically address the program design but does address the GT staff’s perception of the need for more extensive regular classroom differentiation (e.g., a procedure by which students could test out of courses in which they could demonstrate 80 percent mastery of the material) and supports (e.g., the Roger Taylor website, a site offering teacher-created, differentiated instructional units to all McFarland teachers for the 2005-06 school year).

**Staff interview data:** The responding teachers indicated that they understand the idea that there is a range of service delivery options (identified in the interviews as ranging from classroom alternatives to pull-outs and programs such as Science Browsers, Math 24, and AP offerings), that they see GT program quality as related to the depth and extent of the options, and that it is not easy for them, as classroom teachers, to find things “to challenge high-level kids” or to integrate those things, even when they are provided.

**Parent survey data:** All respondents cited positive experiences with and feelings about the GT services and programming overall. One parent, however, articulated a gap that the review chair heard from several other parents during interviews: “It would be helpful to have a clear vision of what options are available to students as they progress from Kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> grade. This would allow students and families to be more proactive.”

**Student interview data:** Program Delivery and Curriculum and Instruction are the two areas with which students have the most experience, and are the two NAGC criteria to which they spoke most clearly. The following quotations are taken from the student interviews; they are both inspiring and revealing, and although no claim is made regarding their representativeness, the themes embedded in them are familiar ones.

→ *Question: “How could school be better? What kinds of learning opportunities would you like to have in school?”*

- *Second graders* said, “I want to do more things – we can only do two strategies in math but I want to have more; we have to pick our DEAR books too fast not enough time to read the back and see if you are really interested; more DEAR time; more homework – we don’t get very much only two times a week.”
- *Second graders* added that they wanted to learn more about the Twin Towers, the Titanic, knights and castles, slingshots, different landmarks, the human body, different languages, how the world started, different states, different animals, how to become a fashion designer, how to make candy, and how Nintendo was created and how it works.
- *Third graders* shared: “Longer math and more challenging stuff; more free time so I can have time to write a story; more SMART Boards.”
- *Fourth graders* responded: “Put the GT kids into one homeroom for the whole day; everyone could work at a fast pace, then we wouldn’t have to move rooms so much or help other people so much.”
- *Fifth graders* answered: “Metal-smithing; wood carving; animal biology; art and music (all day, every day); writing; classes where you make things; more math/logic groups; more challenges; more in-depth information than in the textbook; big projects; more pull-out groups for science; longer science time; and (of course) longer recess.”
- *Sixth graders* wanted: “More time to spend with people at my own level and more classes with them; more classes like WCATY where I can move at my own pace; different levels of classes for

every subjects; meet for lunch on Fridays; all three grades (6-8) choose the classes they want and mix grades in each class; shouldn't have to keep repeating lessons we know."

- *Seventh graders* asked for: "All independent classes, teachers who would give us all the lessons for the year right away – then we could learn it all first quarter and learn our own information for the rest of the year; classes modeled more on WCATY (on-line, at own pace, with similar kids); shortened class times without explanations, and then just get work done and use the extra time at the end of the day for challenges; getting the assignment and instructions at the beginning of class and letting us get to work right away; not going to class but working on the assignments with kids at the same level in a different setting."
- *Eighth graders* said, "Not enough options – Language Arts has WCATY, Math has different level classes, Social Studies and Science have no options at middle school; more fun and engaging units; not just putting facts on paper – copying from a slide show or textbook; instead of Literacy Circles, have unorganized discussions where everyone just has to be prepared to discuss something interesting; need other formats to show learning; it's easier to learn if people can go off in smaller groups and learn more about a topic."
- *High school students* shared a desire for less review ("condense the curriculum") and a faster pace, more AP classes (specifically mentioned were: World Languages, Biology, Chemistry, World History ["regular World History is too slow – the same four or five kids answer the questions because the other kids don't do the work"]; and the desire for a way to "get to more advanced classes more quickly – we can't skip lower levels/the classes have to be taken in order (e.g., having to take *Information Processing* – which is "repetitive – most kids today already know the information" – before *Principles of Engineering*) – testing out doesn't seem to be an option in every area – why not?" They also shared a myriad of other comments and critiques:
  - It's not so bad to be way ahead in an easy class because it gives time to "rest" in school.
  - There are "not enough chances to improve your writing, not enough detailed descriptions of ways to improve writing, and not enough specific, constructive feedback. Peer reviews are not taken seriously and don't do much good; only mechanics are checked and if (other) students don't know the mechanics very well, you end up editing your own papers." And "after you reach 'advanced,' on your writing assessment, then what?"
  - "Open discussions are more interesting and useful than just following the lesson plan. It's easier to pay attention when you're pushed/challenged."
  - Recommended new MHS co-curriculars included: forensics, a book club "with different types of literature," a computer club, and a video game club (both for creating and playing video games).
  - Guidance-related requests included: Attention to how students are supported when they need to change classes after a term begins; more background on prerequisites ("I took classes that weren't necessary – need a "systematic way to learn about opportunities."), more information about new career areas (e.g., science, technology – perhaps a job shadow day), how to get a summer job in a selected field (school-to-work situation), and a more focused Career Day including "obscure/different careers, ability to sign up for a particular career presentation rather than having to go to all of them, more detail about the jobs (e.g., day-to-day schedule), and what the job requires (instead of a "sales pitch").

**GT self-analysis:** Identified the following general activities or processes related to program design and curriculum/instruction as either part of the District's services or not in place in the District's offerings. Further detail is available in Appendix F.

<i>Part of the District's GT Services re Program Design and Curriculum/Instruction</i>	<i>Not in Place in the District's GT Services re Program Design and Curriculum/Instruction</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ A continuum of GT services is offered at some grades for some areas of giftedness</li> <li>→ The District has continued to increase funding for GT programming</li> <li>→ The District's mission/vision statements include students with gifts/talents</li> <li>→ A District acceleration policy is in place; general procedures can be articulated for each building, more specifically for K-8</li> <li>→ Youth Options supplements District offerings for MHS students</li> <li>→ Increasing numbers of GT strategies and skills are being adopted by classroom teachers (e.g., flexible grouping, compacting)</li> <li>→ At least six different services on the continuum of service options (e.g., counseling, pull-out classes, regular class enrichment ...) are offered at most grade levels</li> <li>→ Differentiated curriculum and flexible instructional arrangements for GT learners is offered at some grades and/or in some areas</li> <li>→ Some teachers offer a pre-test or other assessment to determine GT students' proficiency with the regular curriculum</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ A full continuum of GT service options is not available PK-12 in all areas of giftedness</li> <li>→ Additional funding could be invested to support identified areas of need</li> <li>→ Policies and/or procedures for a comprehensive PK-12 GT program need to be expanded if these are important to the District</li> <li>→ GT education knowledge, skills, and strategies are not yet integrated into the philosophies and classroom practices of all District teachers</li> <li>→ Flexible grouping arrangements that span grade levels and are assessed regularly based on student needs, interests and abilities are not always utilized</li> <li>→ Some adaptation of District curricula occurs but it is implemented primarily outside the regular classroom</li> <li>→ Pre-testing coupled with on-going assessment of levels/rates of learning are not district-wide practice</li> <li>→ Acceleration opportunities (content, courses, grade levels) are available; on a day-to-day basis, formal acceleration is not a frequently-used strategy</li> </ul>

*Criterion 6: Program Administration and Management* – Appropriate gifted education programming must include the establishment of a systematic means of developing, implementing, and managing services. This criterion addresses the extent to which the District's GT programming is directed by qualified personnel, integrated into the regular education program, reflects positive working relationships with stakeholder groups, and is supported by "requisite materials and resources."

**Overview:** As noted under *Criterion 2: Professional Development*, the District is fortunate to have qualified, experienced, and committed GT staff. Positive working relationships with other teaching staff, parents, and students are reflected in the appreciation these groups expressed for what they viewed as the competence and caring of the GT staff. In addition, Cindy Clark serves on the WATG Board, bringing a state-level perspective to the District's programming.

→ Not surprisingly, the extent to which GT programming is integrated into the regular education program is teacher-dependent, with some classroom teachers willing and able to (learn how to) accommodate a range of student needs, willing to be flexible and humble about the importance of their own curriculum, and able to acknowledge that they may not be as proficient as they would like to be at teaching students who might be more intellectually able than they are. For other teachers, one or all of these areas may be more of a challenge.

→ The integration of programming for gifted students into the regular classroom curriculum, instruction, and assessment practices is also dependent to some extent on the degree to which the principal makes this a high priority and follows through in terms of defining his/her expectations regarding the education of students with gifts and talents, supporting teachers in identifying goals that will help them (and, just as importantly, their GT students) move toward the next level, and including differentiated practices as part of the ongoing observation/evaluation process. This echoes back to the *1999 GT Program Plan* observation,

cited earlier, that “a rigorous academic program ... provided within the regular classroom ... is the foundation of all other programming”.<sup>28</sup>

**Comparative data:** As noted previously, McFarland’s teacher-to-student ratio (1:877) is the fifth best among the 34 schools who responded to the survey. This is approximately 350 students per GT teacher higher than Middleton-Cross Plains (the district with the best student-teacher ratio), 235 students per GT teacher higher than Milton, 177 students per GT teacher higher than Oregon, and 32 students per GT teacher higher than New Glarus. Twenty-nine districts have staffing ratios that are lower than McFarland’s, including seven with less than a 1.0 FTE GT staff allocation and seven districts with no staff specifically assigned to GT. McFarland’s GT staff work with an educational assistant who provides approximately six to eight hours per month of support staff assistance; information about support staff was not provided consistently for other districts.

**1999 GT Program Plan:** Recommended increasing GT staff to 1.0 FTE per building, K-8, allowing for educational assistants and interns to be counted as part of this full-time equivalency. It also recommended maintaining the 1.0 FTE Program Coordinator. These staff are to be responsible for defining, refining, and delivering instruction – again acknowledging that the rubber meets the road in the regular classroom.

**2005-06 Program Review:** Recommended the addition of professional staff to “meet the current needs of GT students” and the provision of programming opportunities to match student needs. The staffing level recommended is the 1.0 FTE per building cited in the 1999 *GT Program Plan*, with 2.0 FTE for support staff assistance.

**Staff interview data:** Reflected teachers’ needs and desire for further support from the GT Resource Teachers, from “the need for ideas that aren’t packets of worksheets,” to “find(ing) things to challenge high-level kids,” to providing “ongoing training in GT best practices,” to the options of pull-out and push-in groups “for exceptional kids.” One staff person noted that “the program started with ‘hit or miss;’ now there’s so much more – certain things (like teacher consultation) can be guaranteed.” Other specific requests from staff included, “additional research on bright girls in math and science,” “balanced staffing so that our GT kids got the same help as our special education and at-risk students,” “help with students who have challenging behaviors and low test scores who are also GT,” and “the solution to GT students who are not delivering in the classroom and being pulled out to participate in other opportunities.” The list goes on.

**Parent survey data:** Related to the criterion of “requisite (staff) resources” reflected a sense, as one parent commented, “that staff are spread too thin.” Another noted, “there are not enough hours in the day for the limited part-time staff McFarland currently has in the GT program to meet with parents,” while a third echoed the same theme, “the GT staff does the best they can with limited time and resources.”

**GT self-analysis:** Identified the following general activities or processes related to program administration and management as either part of the District’s services or not in place in the District’s offerings. Further detail is available in Appendix F.

<i>Part of the District’s GT Services re</i>	<i>Not in Place in the District’s GT Services re</i>
--	--

<sup>28</sup> McFarland TAG Advisory Council. *McFarland School District gifted and talented program plan*. Author: February 1999, 18.

<i>Program Administration and Management</i>	<i>Program Administration and Management</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ The GT Coordinator has coursework and experience in gifted education</li> <li>→ Collaboration occurs between GT staff and regular education teachers, including sharing of resources and brainstorming about students' needs</li> <li>→ In general, teachers seem to believe that they are well informed about GT education/students</li> <li>→ Monthly newsletters provide pertinent information and encourage communication among and between GT staff, other teachers, and families</li> <li>→ Parents are often asked to assist with GT activities</li> <li>→ GT staff meet regularly with principals and teams in each school and seem to have a good working relationships with these colleagues</li> <li>→ GT students have access to routine technology as necessary for their projects and research</li> <li>→ Library selections reflect a range of materials, including those appropriate for GT students</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ The needs of GT students are not yet a clearly stated priority in scheduling, staffing, or budgeting decisions</li> <li>→ Parents are not regularly involved in program development or evaluation</li> <li>→ The number of parents who attend evening workshops or advisory committee meetings is small and not reflective of the diversity of the school community</li> <li>→ The range of resources available for advanced-level students in some grades is too narrow</li> <li>→ Access to advanced technology is not available</li> </ul>

## V. Reflections and Recommendations

The review thus far includes a plethora of information about the School District of McFarland's gifted and talented programming; from the review chair's perspective, there are no surprises:

- The context and recommendations of the 1999 Program Plan ring true;
- the 2005-06 Program Plan Review reflects some progress as well as continuing challenges; and
- staff, parents, and students identify general areas of strength and need that echo the plans and program documents and speak to specific areas that relate to their own, personal educational experiences.

Yes, yes, yes. So what? Where does the District go from here?

Before examining the Big Rocks and some representative next steps in moving the District to the next level, there are at least four overarching issues that may be helpful in framing the subsequent reflections and recommendations.

1. Formative assessments such as this one are central to continuous improvement and could benefit each and every department and program in the District. The key to realizing this benefit lies in the acknowledgement that there is neither blame nor the quick-fix but rather the day-by-day creation of a supportive and collaborative culture in which moving forward is based on gathering, considering, and acting on data, over and over again. This review process has affirmed the wisdom of an explicit recommitment to the mindset that everyone involved in creating, questioning, implementing, critiquing, and improving the District's teaching and learning – whether this takes place within a classroom, program, or school – are all professionals doing good and important work, and that the successes, messiness, progress, disappointments, and mis-steps that occur are an inevitable part of the arc of growth of any professional learning community.

2. Noted change researcher, Michael Fullan, reminds us of the “valuable but slippery”<sup>29</sup> distinction between theories of education and theories of change – thoughtful, “evidence-based” ideas are often ignored or poorly implemented in practice. There are a host of reasons for this, e.g., the proposed good ideas conflict with “the way we've always done it;” it is not clear how to balance the needs and interests of teachers with the needs and interests of students; we don't know well enough how to allow individuals/schools the freedom to grow as they see fit while still providing enough support and direction to ensure that the desired

<sup>29</sup> Fullan, M. *Change forces: The sequel*. Philadelphia: Falmer Press, 1999, 20.

outcomes are achieved. These are not McFarland-specific challenges, and each of them (and the myriad of other challenges related to the change process) has an impact on the choices and speed with which change can/will happen, whether it is within the context of school improvement, literacy, gifted/talented programming or the District’s other programs and priorities.

3. Both nationally and here in McFarland, there has been a proliferation of teacher leadership roles in the schools (e.g., team leaders, mentors, coordinators, resource teachers), and with these roles come new challenges and opportunities for both teachers and principals. Varying definitions of terms such as *collaborative culture* muddy efforts at conceptual clarity; role ambiguity leads to confusion and even anxiety about what decisions or differences teachers can or should make.<sup>30</sup> Teacher leaders are at once empowered and constrained. As the District encourages the simultaneous top-down and bottom-up leadership that characterizes effective learning organizations, it also must acknowledge that, role aside, no teacher in the District, whether a coordinator, resource teacher, or team leader can move best practices forward independently of the policy leadership and support of both the building principal and classroom peers. Toolboxes of strategies and professional respect can go only so far.

4. Last, we know that, “it is a fallacy to think that one kind of program or provision will meet the educational and affective needs of all gifted students.”<sup>31</sup> The wide range of student-related factors that need to be acknowledged (e.g., the degree of giftedness; racial, cultural and socioeconomic factors that may impact the definition of giftedness; gender; talent area; and emotional factors in the student’s home life) coupled with resource-related challenges characteristic of any program or innovation from Eclipse and SmartBoards to Title I and GT (e.g., leadership, commitment, time, money, and personnel) make it challenging to identify where to go next. Nonetheless, it is possible to identify some places to begin the conversation.

The following section includes reflections on the data presented in Section V and enumerates some Big Rocks as well as some other, representative next steps for further consideration; these are included on the chart at the end of this section. Some overlap in the discussion is to be expected; the NAGC criteria and principles are not mutually exclusive. It is also obvious that these reflections and recommendations cannot do justice to the range of perspectives that could be brought to this rich conversation, nor do they reflect the myriad of possible process recommendations (the “tactics” of the District’s school improvement plans) or next steps that could – or will be – implemented. Rather, they are presented as a reasonable effort on the part of the review chair to fairly represent a range of factors and considerations that impact each criterion and a few action areas that will, it is believed, support the District’s continued progress.

Finally, it is important to keep in mind that some of the Big Rocks (noted in **bold**) are *simple and easy*; others are *simple but not easy*; a few are *neither simple nor easy*. All of them are resource-hungry. District staff, especially but not exclusively the GT staff, will be called to reflect, prioritize, and recommit to balancing the day-to-day demands of direct student support with investments in the District’s programming as well as their own professional development, and to taking a long view on those Big Rocks that are systems change challenges. It is a path with heart, and one well worth the walking.

## Philosophy

*MHS students shared a desire for:  
 “Less review and a faster pace, more AP classes (regular classes are too slow –  
 the same four or five kids answer the questions because the other kids don’t do the work.  
 ... A way to get to more advanced classes more quickly –*

<sup>30</sup> McCarthy, J. *The effect of the accelerated schools process on individual teachers; decision-making and instructional strategies*. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association. San Francisco, 1992.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid*, 19.

*we can't skip lower levels/the classes have to be taken in order.  
Testing out doesn't seem to be an option in every area – why not?"*

**Big Rocks:**

- **Revisit the statement of GT statement of philosophy, clarifying and updating it as appropriate to reflect the District's commitment to meeting the needs of all students.**
- **Create belief and goals statement that align with the District's mission, vision, core values and beliefs.**
- Make these documents easily accessible.

Reflections ...

The statement of philosophy, like other District and GT documents, should be revisited on a regular basis and revised, as appropriate. For example, language in the current philosophy statement (such as "strive to") could be changed to reflect a stronger commitment; "continuous and systematic services" might be defined more clearly and behaviorally. What, exactly, do phrases like this mean to families, students, and teachers? The statement of philosophy could continue with additional language from the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction that would further strengthen the District's definition of giftedness and make explicit the District's commitment to the identification of students from all cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds: "... Children and youth with outstanding talent perform or show the potential for performing at remarkably high levels of accomplishment when compared with others of their age, experience, or environment .... Outstanding talents are present in children and youth from all cultural groups, across all economic strata, and in all areas of human endeavor."<sup>32</sup>

The statement of philosophy could be accompanied in public documents by a statement of the program's beliefs (e.g., learning experiences built on inquiry, rigor, variety, novelty, flexibility, and choice are central components of curricular design, differentiated instruction, and meeting the needs of gifted and talented students) and goals (e.g., to build a cohesive, broad-based and inclusive range of services, to support the identification, development and/or implementation of curricula across the grades and content areas that emphasize problem-solving, reasoning, integrating, and communicating knowledge ...). Such belief statements and goals echo and could be connected with frameworks such as the Partnership for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills<sup>33</sup> vision for learning in the 21<sup>st</sup> century; creating a process to identify and articulate these would be an excellent investment of time.

Finally, the accessibility (by parents, staff, administration and students) of important and useful information about the District's GT programming is key. In this case, the statement of philosophy could be embedded more widely in district and program documents (e.g., each school's family handbooks, a [to be created] GT family handbook or resource guide), and within the Instructional Services pages of the District website. Referencing it within conversations at schools, especially by the principals, would underscore its meaning, importance, and connection to both the District's mission and vision and to specific GT services.

### **Criterion 1 - Identification**

*MPS second graders want to learn more about:  
"The Twin Towers, the Titanic, knights and castles,  
slingshots, different landmarks, the human body, different languages,  
how the world started, different states, different animals,  
how to become a fashion designer, how to make candy, and  
how Nintendo was created and how it works."*

<sup>32</sup> Stone, S. Himebauch, R. Mursky, C., Ginter, G., Kohn, Y., and Kueht, J. Gifted and talented resource guide for educators, coordinators, and administrators in Wisconsin public schools. WI: DPI et al, 2005, 8.

<sup>33</sup> Partnership for 21st Century Skills. New framework for 21<sup>st</sup> century learning. Tucson, AZ: 2007.

**Big Rocks:**

- **Review the District’s assessment and identification practices and identify sequential steps toward ensuring that they are responsive to students’ ethnicity, gender, culture, and other relevant factors.**
- **Track, share, and discuss data related to the percent of students from various cultural and socio-economic groups receiving GT services**
- Create and disseminate a *Gifted/Talented Parent/Staff Handbook* that would provide specific information about the GT referral and identification process as well as what that means for a student’s education in the McFarland schools, differentiated by grade level.
- Translate the GT forms and information into the various languages of District families, beginning with Spanish.

## Reflections ...

Although parents are informed about the District’s referral and identification processes through avenues such as individual conversations with a Resource Teacher or the GT Coordinator, evening parent presentations, and the GT identification PowerPoint on the District website, further outreach and information-sharing should be considered. Parent information about identification and referral of students for District gifted/talented programming should be widely available in multiple languages, and proactively distributed. Neither the District’s brochure nor the GT information on the parent page of the website make mention of how parents might refer their child for gifted/talented services or how to tell whether their child might be gifted/talented (though more general resources such as readings and websites are listed in the brochure). The information could be differentiated by school and grade level, so that parents would understand the difference in process and outcome between a kindergarten referral and a middle or high school referral.

A *School District of McFarland Gifted/Talented Parent/Staff Handbook* should be created (including information on philosophy, identification and other topics of important/interest to parents and staff) and distributed via a variety of avenues, from availability at student registration and report card nights to inclusion on the District website. Going forward from here, closing the loop with both staff and parents after identification is key.

**Criterion 2 – Professional Development***MHS student options for co-curriculars included:*

*“Forensics, a book club with different types of literature, a computer club, and a video game club (for both creating and playing video games).”*

**Big Rocks:**

- **At the District/A-Council level, examine the big picture PK-12 professional development paradigm, practices, and funding and identify a plan for next steps.**
- **As the District moves forward with Response to Instruction/Intervention (RtI), include specific attention to the needs of GT students in all written materials and conversations.**
- Create a GT Committee at IMMS and MHS, where monthly meetings would provide an opportunity to further identify and respond to staff needs and priorities.
- Include GT staff in continuing conversations about and opportunities for instructional coaching.
- Support the offering of at least one Teacher Study Group per year around high-priority professional development topics related to the delivery of classroom services to GT students (e.g., flexible grouping, meeting the socio-emotional needs of gifted/talented students).

Reflections ...

It may be time to create a district-wide professional development plan that aligns processes (from school improvement to the new Teacher Goals process) with procedures (from the way the District tracks substitute teachers to the way we bring new teachers to the way student grades are assigned), written documents and policies (from the District's mission statement to its acceleration policy), budgets (at the building and district levels), priorities (of the various stakeholder groups, e.g., GT staff, A-Council, building CARE Teams, grade-level teams, and department teams, K-12 Reading Team, the District Curriculum Council, the RtI Design Team) and teacher competencies (ala the state standards).

This obviously would not be a quick-fix; creating the process itself would have to be a District priority with Board, union, and administrative support, much as the MADSAPI Data Retreat was in the spring of 2008. Alternatively, another paper plan to "provide professional development regarding GT" in isolation from these other factors, influences, and priorities seems no more promising a route than it has been in the past. This is at least in part because the issue does not seem to be about training teachers to support gifted and talented students in isolation but about how (on a very practical, SMART level), to raise awareness about and commitment to what it takes to be a professional learning community (PLC). The District's responses to the classic PLC questions of: what do our students know?, how do we know?, and what do we do when they don't know or already know? must translate into support for each and every teacher to create pathways for each and every student to do his or her best, at his or her own pace.

Right now, the work of the Alternative Salary Schedule Committee (ASSC) supports creative opportunities for interested staff to create and continue a Teacher Study Group related to any of the staff development challenges identified above (or others). GT staff could initiate/ facilitate these groups; the groups could continue across academic years and support a common language, a better understanding of the District's GT philosophy and programming, and on-the-ground ideas for classroom differentiation. Such a TSG could also inform and be informed by the professional development planning process identified above.

And in the meanwhile, the GT team can reflect on what teachers identified as needs and align them with strategies that the team has already identified as best practice (e.g., pre-testing in every subject to determine what students already know – a strategy that, supported by team leaders/department chairs and principals, could easily be incorporated into school improvement plans). Pre-testing is an example of a *simple but not easy* strategy; the implications of having students who already know the curriculum are challenging both from pedagogical and practical perspectives.

### Criterion 3 – Emotional Guidance and Counseling

*“Seniors talked about:*

*“A more focused Career Day, including obscure/different careers, the ability to sign up for a particular career presentation rather than having to go to all of them, more detail about the jobs, and what the job requires (rather than a sales pitch).”*

#### **Big Rock:**

- **Analyze the components of the current McFarland GT PK-12 affective curriculum and set reasonable goals and a timeline for its completion.**
- Identify professional development opportunities for school counselors around counseling gifted/talented students (both socio-emotional challenges such as underachievement and college/career issues), and support their attendance as part of a team with their schools' GT Resource Teacher at one or more of these opportunities.
- Create a resource list for parents and staff regarding socio-emotional challenges of gifted/talented students and make available both within the District and the community.
- Embed regular professional development opportunities into staff meetings and

building CARE Team processes, much like the identification process currently happens.

Reflections ...

The District's family handbooks (including the to-be-created GT Family Handbook) and website should include specific information, resources, and guidance for parents regarding the gifted/talented child's socio-emotional development and challenges. One family noted in their survey response, "We believe the Web is a powerful resource and the website is not used efficiently. ... It should include more information about the GT program." Information on understanding and knowing how to respond to socio-emotional challenges, e.g., a young person who moves with amazing speed from an adult's intellectual understanding to child-like behavior, is appropriately included with the District's other resources.

In addition, the steps that McFarland is taking to explicitly acknowledge and incorporate priorities such as the following into both the general school guidance program and the professional development agenda for staff are well placed:<sup>34</sup>

- understanding the need for acceptance of the different ways that children move through developmental stages and cope with every day issues;
- ongoing professional development in adapting strategies to meet the needs of students with high intellectual abilities, including the need to allow for what may be "normal" for some gifted students (e.g., perfectionism, over-excitability);
- acknowledgement of the fact that, "much of the growth in healthy self-concept is tied in with appropriate challenge of a curriculum that is a good fit in pace, depth, and concept, and with a group of mental peers (like-minded peers) with whom the child can work;"<sup>35</sup> and
- on-going work with students on self-reflection, reasonable goal-setting, how to understand situations from others' perspectives, how to make their needs known in a proactive manner, stress management, and how to deal with mistakes, failure ... and success.

#### Criterion 4: Program Evaluation

*A MHS senior shared,*

*"Open discussions are more interesting and useful than just following a lesson plan.  
It's easier to pay attention when you're pushed or challenged."*

#### **Big Rock:**

- **Take the time to reflect, as a GT Team, as building teams, and as a District, on the implications of this review for GT students – and all students – in the District.**
- Talk with A-Council, team leaders and other teacher leaders about the value of formative evaluation of various programs, curriculum, departments ... and adapt/create one to allow for regular review processes, keeping it simple and manageable.
- Review and revise 2008 on-line parent survey and administer regularly.
- Add at least one question/activity to the Senior Exit Interview Portfolio process and to the CAREI or other student life survey to better understand the social/academic experiences of MHS GT students.

Reflections ...

Program review, in a format and structure that is efficient, focused and user-based, should be a regular priority. A process of the magnitude of this review is not and should not be a yearly event, but the establishment of priorities, the identification of one or two SMART goals that align with the district's mission and the schools' goals (or are embedded within them), and the thoughtful analysis of the data and consideration of whether they were met – and what next – are possible and should be implemented.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 19 – 21.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid, 25.

As an aside, to make these kinds of formative evaluations possible District leadership, including mentors and team leaders, should continue to talk about and follow through with ways to explicitly acknowledge the potential and difficulty of reflection and risk-taking. Formative reviews such as this one will not happen if they are viewed as threatening or potentially punitive; the same is true at the classroom level. It is much more likely that a teacher will ask about a new differentiation strategy or admit to needing a hand with formative assessment if the climate is explicitly supportive of this questioning or acknowledgment.

### Criteria 5 & 7: Program Design/Curriculum and Instruction

*IMMS seventh graders asked for:*

*“All independent classes; teachers who would give us all the lessons for the year right away – then we could learn it all first quarter and learn our own information for the rest of the year; classes modeled more on WCATY (on-line, own pace, with similar kids); shortened class times without explanations and the just get the work done and use the time at the end of the day for challenges.”*

#### **Big Rocks:**

- **Articulate and share with the parent and staff communities what the “comprehensive, continuous GT program” looks like in McFarland at and across grade levels, PK-12. What options are available at each grade? How do they build on each other? What gaps does the District need to fill/fill first?**
- **Beginning with a joint meeting of the A-Council and the GT Coordinator, examine the District’s acceleration policy to identify perceptions/reality about how it’s working, roadblocks to its application, and what’s needed to move District practice toward best practice.**
- Share students’ interview data with building CARE Teams, asking each team to identify and commit to SMART ways to support differentiation strategies in the classroom for students at their grade/building levels; share these commitments across schools.

#### Reflections ...

It makes sense to identify and articulate what exists at each level of the continuum for students identified as EX and EX\* and disseminate the information so that teachers and families know what’s possible and what is not currently available.

Clarity regarding what it means (to students, families, and teachers) to have a student identified as in the Talent Pool could help avoid confusion about “who is GT,” help parents understand why they “don’t hear anything” from GT before 4<sup>th</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup> grade, and support more realistic expectations for program staff at the primary and intermediate levels. If such designation is primarily for the purposes of the GT staff (e.g., defining the focus of differentiation resources for individual teachers and tracking of individual student progress and challenges through building CARE teams) and there is no practical implication for parents or teachers, consideration should be given to when and for what purpose(s) the terms are publicly used.

The District’s position and policy on acceleration, from philosophy to practice, needs to be discussed and changed, if and as necessary, to reflect clear support for each student moving forward at his/her own pace. For example, the District’s acceleration policy (Appendix M) should be reviewed and its language and process considered within the broader context of what we can learn from Colangelo et al.’s report, *A Nation Deceived*<sup>36</sup> and other best practices research. Policy provisions such as assigning the final acceleration decision to the building principal, silence on the involvement of the receiving school administrator(s) and

<sup>36</sup> Colangelo, N., Assouline, S.G., and Gross, M. *A nation deceived: How schools hold back America’s brightest students*. Iowa City, Iowa: The Connie Belin & Jacqueline N. Blank International Center for Gifted Education and Talent Development, 2004.

teacher(s), and an introduction that does not spell out a clear rationale and District position on the types of and factors involved in acceleration can be topics of lively conversation among members of the District's Administrative Council, GT staff, building-level teams/departments, and the students themselves. Consideration should be given to such practices as telescoping/compacting curriculum when a student or cohort of students are ready for curriculum beyond their current grade placement and awarding credit based on demonstrated performance at the high school level. The bottom line, however, must be policy and practices that are consistent with the powerful research indicating the promise of acceleration practices for gifted/talented students.

The students' responses underscore the need for and urgency of flexible grouping and differentiated in-classroom curriculum, instruction, and assessment practices (including but by no means limited to acceleration); it would, in fact, be hard to be clearer than their voices were. But like many (if not most) districts, McFarland works within a paradigm that respects teachers' autonomy, is collaborative rather than autocratic in its professional development processes and requirements, and whose interpretation and implementation of best practices is constrained both by financial challenges and logistical concerns such as schedules, school rules, and GPA calculation formulas (nearly all of which District staff have made up themselves). Across the United States, schools are acknowledging that class ranks are no longer required for top students to be admitted to the best colleges and universities. They are granting high school credit (not simply waiving the course requirement) to younger students who pass high school courses; they are giving all students the opportunity to test out of courses that used to be required (even when those students may be regarded as rascals and/or don't do well in other courses); they are changing grading scales, assessment practices, and homework assignments, even when it is time-consuming, inconvenient, and challenging to the status quo to do so. McFarland has some exciting challenges ahead; as noted in *A Nation Deceived*, "in the case of educational acceleration, what has to change is not written policy but the attitudes of policymakers"<sup>37</sup> and, we might add, others of us in the educational community.

Finally, teachers, students, parents, and GT staff all identified gaps between what currently exists in terms of services for GT students and what they would like to see exist. It is possible to identify the most important gaps (beginning with the way in which the District would define "important"), including what the District believes can be accomplished via clear priorities and administrative support, what requires additional staff time and funding, and what requires professional development. It is also possible to identify what resources would be needed to influence the outcomes, and to move forward. The following chart is the beginning of a foundation for this process.

### **Criterion 6: Program Administration and Management**

#### **Big Rock:**

- **Shift a significant part (five to 10 hours per week) of the GT Coordinator's time and focus as well as the GT Resource Teachers' time (as it evolves) from managerial and program support functions to program leadership by increasing the FTE of support staff assistance from two hours per week to 20 hours per week.**
- Track the impact of the GT Coordinator's and GT Resource Teachers' leadership activities, and use the baseline in conjunction with other program data to focus GT staff time, over time, to those areas where there is the greatest bang for the buck for students.

#### Reflections ...

The GT staff are both committed and qualified to expand and enhance the GT services across the District. Expecting them to do this while they also maintain student records, copy materials for staff and parent meetings, provide individual student reports for homeroom teachers, sort MAP data by RIT scores, take

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, 2.

notes at building GT Committee meetings, prepare materials for extension activities and provide direct service to students is like asking them to drain the proverbial swamp while the alligators are swimming around their ears. Like any other program or activity, from revising classroom curriculum to reinvigorating the District's strategic priorities, leadership and time are necessary to move beyond the challenges of each day. The District's investment in summer curriculum over the past decade underscores this point. The value of the GT staff within their area of expertise needs to be acknowledged and supported with additional clerical support; Appendix L provides a description of the ways in which the additional clerical hours would be invested.

As GT staff hours are shifted from these clerical responsibilities, it is reasonable to ask what will be different in terms of the program leadership role played by the GT Coordinator and, to an extent still to be determined, by the GT Resource Teachers. Preliminary conversations suggest that the GT Coordinator will invest five to 10 hours per week, working with the Director of Instructional Services, to identify and implement embedded professional development opportunities within the structure of the District's existing professional development program. This could include, for example, working with MHS department chairs to create additional advanced courses, and/or facilitating one of the 2008-09 DCC Teacher Study Groups, the mid-year Team Leader retreat, and/or a Dialogue Dinner opportunity with our mentors and new teachers. The Coordinator also is a member of the District's Reading Team; she will be involved as they explore the role of classroom literacy coaches over the next few years. Tracking the impact of these activities will provide a baseline for formative evaluation of the promises kept and needs identified as time goes on.

Ultimately, this review underscores the need to make the individualized, thoughtful, flexible, family-friendly programming we want for gifted/talented students the goal for all students – and, from the other perspective, to explicitly include students with gifts and talents in the “ordinary” conversations, professional development, family handbooks ... that speak to and about all students. We want both of these for all students and their families.

*“I would suggest that worrying less about who is ‘truly gifted’  
and more about making curriculum and instruction truly differentiated for all students  
would do more to meet the goals of the gifted child movement  
than would a mandate for pull-out enrichment programs in every school in the nation. ...”*

**-James Borland**



**Gifted and Talented Services  
Representative Activities  
2008 ... Going Forward  
working draft**

Criterion	Year 1-2 <sup>38</sup>	Year 2-3	Year 3-4
<b>Philosophy</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Revise GT statement of philosophy</b></li> <li>• <b>Create belief and goal statements</b></li> <li>• Revise GT brochure, incorporating revised statements; disseminate</li> <li>• Update District website re revised statements</li> <li>• Create communication plan template</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Include GT statement of philosophy, belief, and goal statements in school handbooks</li> <li>• Continue to update District website as appropriate</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Include GT statement of philosophy, belief, and goal statements in school handbooks</li> <li>• Continue to update District website as appropriate</li> </ul>
<b>1 – Student identification</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Review GT assessment and identification practices and identify/implement at least one high-priority change to make them more culturally/gender/racially/economically responsive</b></li> <li>• <b>Track, share and discuss diversity-related data re students receiving GT services</b></li> <li>• Rewrite GT page on website to include information and resources about the GT referral/identification process</li> <li>• Review other districts’ GT handbooks and talk with staff and parents to identify the most needed and most valuable information</li> <li>• Invest a minimum of \$200 in the District GT lending library, identify a site, and publicize</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Write <i>GT Parent/Staff Handbook</i> and have available for August 2009 registration days</li> <li>• Translate the identification information into Spanish; translate handbook if possible</li> <li>• Conduct formative evaluation of identification process in terms of students identified/not identified as GT and make any revisions as needed</li> <li>• Continue minimal investment in GT lending library</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Translate <i>GT Parent/Staff Handbook</i> into Spanish if not done previously; have available on website and at school occasions</li> <li>• Continue to make GT brochure and handbook available for registration, conference days etc.</li> <li>• Continue investment in GT lending library</li> </ul>
<b>2 – Professional development</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b><u>Invest a minimum of one A-Council meeting examining the big-picture of PK-12 professional development in the District and follow up with the articulation of a district-wide plan including a PD vision, goals, practices, funding (building and district), practices, and implementation challenges</u></b></li> <li>• <b><u>Include specific attention to the needs of GT students in all RtI materials/conversations</u></b></li> <li>• Create a GT Committee at IMMS and MHS and hold monthly meetings</li> <li>• <u>Make the place of GT an agenda item for the RtI (Response to Instruction/Intervention) Design Team</u></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Revise building, instructional, and student services budgets to reflect priorities identified in PK-12 professional development plan</li> <li>• Revise release day PD agendas in alignment with the District’s PD plan</li> <li>• Offer at least one Teacher Study Group around high-priority topics related to the deliver of classroom services to GT students</li> <li>• Within the context of literacy coaching, offer classroom coaching specifically</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Continue to offer at least one Teacher Study Group around high-priority topics related to the deliver of classroom services to GT students</li> <li>• Continue to offer classroom coaching specifically targeted to the needs of gifted/talented students</li> <li>• Continue to offer a minimum of one <i>Twelve O’ Clock Scholar</i> presentation re meeting the needs of GT students in the classroom at each school</li> </ul>

<sup>38</sup> Big Rocks are in **bold**

Big-Picture conversations/initiatives that are outside the sole scope of responsibility of the GT staff are underlined

	<p><u>and create a written statement regarding how the District's RTI model reflects its commitment to gifted/talented students</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Include the GT Coordinator as a member of the District's Coaching Cadre, with attention to supporting the District's reading specialists/teachers with specific strategies to support GT students</li> <li>• <u>Include differentiation-related PD presentations at each year's Leadership Retreat and New Teacher Orientation activities</u></li> </ul>	<p>targeted to the needs of gifted/talented students</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Offer a minimum of one <i>Twelve O' Clock Scholar</i> presentation re meeting the needs of GT students in the classroom at each school</li> <li>• Continue to include differentiation-related PD presentations at each year's Leadership Retreat and New Teacher Orientation activities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Continue to include differentiation-related PD presentations at each year's Leadership Retreat and New Teacher Orientation activities</li> </ul>
<b>3 – Socio-emotional guidance and counseling</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Analyze the components of the PK-12 affective curriculum</b></li> <li>• Based on building needs, identify/provide at least one professional development opportunity re the socio-emotional needs of GT students for building teams including the school counselor, psychologist, and the school GT teacher/coordinator</li> <li>• Create and disseminate a resource list for parents/staff re the socio-emotional needs of gifted/talented students</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Continue to provide at least one PD opportunity per year for building teams based on building needs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Continue to provide at least one PD opportunity per year for building teams based on building needs</li> </ul>
<b>4 – Program evaluation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b><u>Take the time as a GT Team, as building teams, and as a District, on the implications of the GT review for GT students – and all students – in the District</u></b></li> <li>• Create evaluation plan for 2008-09 SMART goals and activities</li> <li>• Review and revise 2008 on-line parent survey; administer, analyze results of revised survey in spring or fall 2009</li> <li>• Add one question/activity to the Senior Exit Interview process to better understand the impact of MHS programming on the academic/personal lives of students identified as GT</li> <li>• Identify what is worth tracking, and keep records and/or files of activities for formative evaluation purposes</li> <li>• In keeping with the District's strategic priorities, track, analyze and act on data from sub-group analyses of MAP and WKCE, with Dara</li> <li>• Identify and celebrate good work</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Incorporate at least one tactic that addresses the needs of GT students into each buildings school improvement plan</li> <li>• Continue evaluation plan of SMART goals and activities</li> <li>• Continue on-line parent survey based on prior year's data</li> <li>• Consider creating and administer an on-line staff survey in conjunction with</li> <li>• Evaluate usefulness of Senior Exit Interview question/activity and change as needed</li> <li>• Continue to track, analyze, and act on data from sub-group analyses of MAP and WKCE</li> <li>• Continue to identify and celebrate good work</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Incorporate at least one tactic that addresses the needs of GT students into each buildings school improvement plan</li> <li>• Continue evaluation plan of SMART goals and activities</li> <li>• Continue on-line parent survey based on prior year's data</li> <li>• Continue to evaluate usefulness of Senior Exit Interview question/activity and change as needed</li> <li>• Continue to track, analyze, and act on data from sub-group analyses of MAP and WKCE</li> <li>• Continue to identify and celebrate good work</li> </ul>
<b>5 &amp; 7 –</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Articulate and share what the District's</b></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Based on gap analysis, add to/change at</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Based on gap analysis, add</li> </ul>

<b>Program design &amp; curriculum and instruction</b>	<p><b>“comprehensive and continuous GT program” looks like at each grade and across grades, PK-12</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conduct a gap analysis of the GT program continuum and identify at least one area for change in 2009-10, along with funding requirements</li> <li>• <b><u>Beginning with a joint meeting of the Superintendent, Principals, Directors of Instruction and Student Services and the GT Coordinator, examine the District’s acceleration policy to identify perceptions/reality about how it’s working at each building, roadblocks to its implementation, and what’s needed to move District practice toward best practice</u></b></li> <li>• Share students’ interview data with building councils and CARE Teams</li> <li>• <u>Gather data from the District Curriculum Council and K-12 Curriculum Councils regarding what is needed in terms of classroom differentiation support and the District’s vision for acceleration</u></li> </ul>	<p>least one area to enhance the District’s GT programming</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Continue annual gap analyses of the GT program continuum and identify at least one area for change in 2010-11</li> <li>• Based on 2008-09 acceleration plan, evaluate progress and identify at least one next SMART step</li> </ul>	<p>to/change at least one area to enhance the District’s GT programming</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Continue annual gap analyses of the GT program continuum and identify at least one area for change in each subsequent year</li> </ul>
<b>6 – Program administration and management</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b><u>Increase support staff FTE from two hours/week to 20 hours per week in order to release the GT Coordinator/Resource Teachers for leadership work in staff development and programming a minimum of five to ten hours per week</u></b></li> <li>• Track the impact of the leadership activities in GT in relation to 2008-09 program goals</li> <li>• Review and analyze GT budget to determine what is needed on an annual basis to support the expansion of identified new GT service options</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Continue to track the time investment of the GT Coordinator in relation to 2009-10 program goals</li> <li>• Continue annual review and analysis of GT budget to determine what is needed to support the expansion of identified new GT service options</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Continue to track the time investment of the GT Coordinator in relation to annual program goals</li> <li>• Continue annual review and analysis of GT budget to determine what is needed to support the expansion of identified new GT service options</li> </ul>

