

The Young Scholars Model

The under representation of students from culturally, ethnically, and linguistically diverse backgrounds in gifted and talented programs across the United States is one of the most critical problems facing public educators today. These students are not only denied access to the exciting and challenging accelerated and differentiated learning experiences that these programs provide, they are also less likely to engage in the higher education and advanced degree opportunities that gifted and talented students are encouraged to pursue. In response to the notion of under representation, two major issues have evolved and they center on the concepts of equity vs. excellence: (1) How can students of all cultures and backgrounds have equal access to gifted programs; and (2) Can gifted programs be more inclusive without compromising high standards? On the issue of equity, some would dismiss all programs for the gifted as being elitist and serving the needs of only a privileged few. Others would advocate for excellence, believing that students with high ability need the opportunity to participate in special classes for the gifted in order to progress at a rate that is commensurate with their advanced capacity to think, reason, and learn.

The *No Child Left Behind Act* (United States Department of Education [USDOE], 2001) was a step in the right direction. It clearly delineated the need for raising expectations for all students so that every student would be proficient in reading and mathematics by 2014. However, it did not go far enough and a major drawback of the legislation is its focus on minimum proficiency and its lack of attention to students who have already gained proficiency and are ready to achieve at a higher level. Although the *No Child Left Behind* legislation does not specifically target the gifted learner, the notion that no child is left behind supports the need for gifted programs that find exceptional ability and promote continuous academic progress toward advanced academic achievement in all groups of learners.

Development of the Young Scholars Model

A growing concern with the continual under representation of Black, Hispanic, and English Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) students in gifted programs impelled the Fairfax County Public Schools Gifted and Talented Central Office staff to take a more comprehensive approach to this issue during the 1999-2000 school year. Previous changes focused on identification criteria that did little to increase the participation of underrepresented populations in the Gifted and Talented Programs. The study district's central office staff created a task force of principals and teachers at schools with high numbers of students from diverse cultural, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds. The task force was charged with finding ways to rethink current practice and to design a model that not only focused on identification but also on the delivery of gifted services to students from diverse cultural, ethnic, and

linguistic backgrounds. The new model developed by this team of stakeholders was called Young Scholars and it embraced current thinking and research on best practices for identifying and nurturing gifted potential in all populations.

The Young Scholars model promotes the notion of nurturing continuous academic growth beginning in kindergarten through differentiation and acceleration. Teachers work with students on basic skills that are needed for proficiency in reading and mathematics. They also provide challenging learning experiences that help young scholars acquire the advanced knowledge, understanding, and skills that they will need in order to be competitive in challenging programs as they progress in grade level. Early identification coupled with early intervention allows each Young Scholars school to provide learning experiences that increase the students' self-efficacy. The teachers, specialists, and administrators are student advocates and they provide ongoing support to the young scholars as they prepare them for the challenging curriculum and instruction that gifted and talented programs offer throughout the elementary years. The long term goal for the Young Scholars is that they participate and succeed in Honors, Advanced Placement, and International Baccalaureate programs in middle school and high school.

As the Young Scholars model was developed, changes in the delivery of school-based gifted services district-wide promoted and supported increased involvement of classroom teachers in the screening and identification process. Concurrently with the development of the Young Scholars model, the school-based program transitioned from a pull-out model for a small group of identified students, to a collaborative model in which the Gifted and Talented Resource teacher works with classroom teachers to provide a continuum of gifted services in kindergarten through grade six.

This change in the delivery of school-based gifted services from a once a week pull-out model to a collaborative model allows each Gifted and Talented Resource Teacher to become integrated into the total school community. It also supports their work with classroom teachers at Young Scholars schools as they work together to find and nurture gifted potential as early as possible. Observations, conversations, and collections of anecdotal records over time help increase the capacity of teachers to find and identify gifted potential at an early age. These efforts to identify and build on students' strengths highlight the need to nurture the potential of all children so that gifted potential has the opportunity to emerge.

Influenced by the work of Donald Treffinger, (Treffinger, et.al, 2004) the school district now offers a continuum of gifted services that provides all learners with myriad opportunities to engage in complex subject matter and prepares them for more challenging and rigorous classes as they proceed to the next grade level. Because gifted programs are an important gateway for participation in advanced courses in high school and higher education, access to these challenging learning opportunities are provided to all students who have the potential to succeed. Every student is

encouraged to raise and exceed their own expectations and to participate in learning experiences that challenge them to discover and develop their highest potential. This continuum of gifted services embraces a definition of giftedness in children that moves beyond the notion of giftedness as a static trait and supports the notion of giftedness as dynamic, evolving potential that has no limits.

The Young Scholars model was initially piloted in twelve schools that are considered high impact schools because they have large numbers of students in poverty. There are now over seventy schools implementing the model and the growth has occurred over time through school by school success.

In the Young Scholars schools, school professionals including principals, teachers, and educational specialists begin in kindergarten and work together to find and nurture gifted potential using a variety of assessments. Assessments include observations, anecdotal records, and portfolios of student work. Learning opportunities for the students (to include summer school, after school, and intersession activities) coupled with professional development for the teachers, and in-service offerings for the parents help to ensure that any child who has an exceptional capacity to learn, reason, and apply knowledge is nurtured at an early age and prepared to participate in the formal gifted and talented programs that begin in grade three.

The Young Scholars model has two short-term goals. The first goal is to identify giftedness in children from diverse cultural, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds as early as possible. The Young Scholars are identified by their classroom teachers in collaboration with the Gifted and Talented Resource Teacher who is assigned to each school. Because the Gifted and Talented Resource Teacher has a limited amount of time at each school, the classroom teachers play a significant role. Through systematic observations of all students, anecdotal records, and a careful review of portfolios of student work, classroom teachers in Kindergarten through grade two identify and nurture students who have gifted potential, (i.e., an ability to think, reason, and problem solve at a level that is advanced in comparison to their peers). Historically, these students have lacked access to gifted services, advocates for their high potential, and affirmation of their advanced abilities. The second goal is to nurture, guide, and support the development of the Young Scholars' exceptional potential. Once identified, Young Scholars receive challenging curriculum and instruction in a supportive and stimulating educational setting that is responsive to cultural, ethnic, and linguistic differences. The teachers in the Young Scholars schools collaborate, plan, and design learning experiences that connect to the students' diverse cultural, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds. Basic skills are strengthened through lessons that require students to think and apply knowledge on a higher, more complex level. Multi-age classrooms, looping, flexible grouping, and/or vertical teaming of Kindergarten through grade two teachers are examples of service-delivery options that are used to support the students. Young scholars are held to the same high standards and performance expectations as other

gifted students. The main difference is in the amount of support that is provided to promote and nurture their advanced academic ability. The long-range goal is to find students with high academic potential from historically underrepresented populations at an early age, to raise their personal expectations, to support family involvement, and to prepare students for the more challenging and rigorous work of the formal Gifted and Talented Programs that begin in grade three.

Final Thoughts

Because gifted programs are a major gateway for participation in challenging and advanced classes in middle school, high school, and higher education, access to these advanced learning opportunities must be provided to all students who have the potential to succeed. The Young Scholars model builds capacity in schools to embrace a new way of thinking about giftedness in students. This new way of thinking moves beyond the notion of giftedness as a static trait and supports the notion of giftedness as emerging potential, evolving over time, in response to and mediated by external and internal catalysts.

The Young Scholars model offers new language and ideas for thinking about giftedness that embrace expanded beliefs about the nature of intelligence and the importance of nurturing intelligent behavior in children from diverse cultural, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds as early as possible. These expanded beliefs move beyond an exclusionary vocabulary that is based on a child's proficiency in skills that are taught in school and focus on culturally responsive measures of a child's ability to think, reason, and problem-solve that cross cultural, ethnic, and linguistic boundaries. Schools that make a concerted effort to value the differences that children bring to school and provide multiple opportunities for students to demonstrate their academic strengths ensure access to gifted services for all populations and embrace the democratic ideals that support social justice and equal opportunity for all.