A Holistic Case Study Approach for Identification: Matching Students with Services

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Fairfax County Public Schools (FCPS) has shifted from a focus on labeling students as gifted to a focus on identifying student strengths and providing Advanced Academic services designed to develop and nurture students’ academic strengths over time.

Gifted identification practices in FCPS are guided by an understanding that intelligence:
1. develops over time
2. can be nurtured
3. manifests itself in different ways in different cultures
4. is complex and affected by both genetic and environmental influences - not only do genes and the environment cooperate as we develop, but genes require input from the environment to work properly.

This understanding drives the identification process and necessitated a shift in FCPS toward a multifaceted approach to screening and identification that allows teachers to find and nurture gifted potential over time in order to promote continuous intellectual growth. Gifted services are now provided along a continuum of four levels of increasing challenge, and these are available to all students beginning in kindergarten and continuing through high school. The identification procedures at each level are closely tied to curriculum and instruction and are designed to find and nurture advanced academic potential so that every student who has the capacity to succeed in gifted education programs has the opportunity to participate at the appropriate level of challenge.

Level I Services: Critical and Creative Thinking Strategies

The first level of service is introduced to all students in grades kindergarten through grade six and consists of nine instructional strategies designed to teach critical and creative thinking skills. The strategies are modeled in all classrooms by Advanced Academic resource teachers and then used throughout the year by classroom teachers and specialists.

The nine thinking strategies - consisting of tools such as encapsulation, point of view, and using analogies - are one important way that classroom teachers can recognize and develop advanced thinking in all learners. We believe all students can be taught to sharpen their critical and creative thinking skills and to become more independent and effective learners. The nine strategies in Level I services provide a foundation and toolbox of reasoning and skills that tie closely with 21st century learning skills. They provide a direct approach to increasing student awareness of thinking processes and they deepen the processing of content for students in engaging ways that are easy to integrate into daily lessons.

Model lessons that use these strategies to teach the state standards are provided at every grade level in every subject area. The model lessons are designed to elicit a higher level thinking response and can be used to identify and nurture gifted potential. The problem-solving skills, thinking processes, and student products that result from these lessons provide observable evidence of a student’s ability to think and reason at advanced levels. Each model lesson provides students the opportunity to build on prior knowledge, engage in new ideas, consider possibilities, reflect on their learning, and make interdisciplinary connections.

The strategies represent a broad range of thinking strategies that extend and enrich the Virginia Standards of Learning and the FCPS Program of Studies objectives. Each lesson can be expanded to encompass more complex thinking skills for those students ready for more advanced levels. Classroom
teachers can introduce these thinking lessons in any order as stand-alone activities, or they can integrate the strategies into content-area material.

**Level II-III Services: Part-Time School-Based Services**

*What are Level II and III Services?*

Level II services provide an opportunity for students who have a specific area of academic strength to receive curriculum interventions in a particular subject area. A student with a strength in mathematics, for example, can receive differentiated curriculum experiences using resources such as M³: Mentoring Mathematical Minds - a research-based program from the University of Connecticut designed to challenge and motivate mathematically talented students. The curriculum covers the same state standards, but with greater depth and complexity, a strong focus on the role of mathematician, and emphasis on academic conversations and communication.

Level II services are delivered by the classroom teacher, who plans with and is supported by the Advanced Academic resource teacher. Advanced Academic resource teachers are integral parts of the school collaborative learning teams. When grade level teams meet, the resource teacher is present to offer ideas about curriculum to extend and enrich lessons. In addition, the resource teacher may challenge the teacher's mindset about offering opportunities and access to more students, and discuss scaffolding that would help all students access curriculum that builds 21st century skills. For example, if a group of students are identified as requiring extra challenge in reading, the resource teacher may present the option of using the literature study unit, Patterns of Change, designed by the Center for Gifted Education at the College of William and Mary. The unit suggests particular books to study the concept of change through cycles in nature, knowledge, history, and human life. However, the discussion and concept-based approach could easily be made accessible to more students by using alternate texts at different reading levels which the resource teacher may suggest as a way of differentiating instruction while maintaining access to higher level conceptual thinking for as many students as possible.

In addition to planning, the resource teacher is instrumental in supporting classroom teachers through modeling and coaching as the teachers increase their efficacy with using instructional strategies and curricular resources with their students. Since Level II services are delivered in the general education classroom, they have the potential to provide increased opportunities to students as teachers employ flexible grouping and differentiation strategies to provide opportunities to more students.

Level III services are part-time services that include direct services from the Advanced Academic resource teacher for students with academic strengths in multiple subject areas. Level III services may be delivered in either a traditional pull-out group or when identified students are cluster grouped, through a co-teaching model with the classroom teacher. Both models ensure two important aspects of delivery of services to advanced students--access to differentiated curriculum, and opportunities to work with an intellectual peer group.

It is important to note that the curriculum framework used for Level III services is the same as for Level II and IV services (discussed below). All curriculum and instructional strategies are research-based in their use with advanced learners and have been created by experts such as the National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented at the University of Connecticut, the Center for Gifted Education at the College of William and Mary, National Geographic, and others. The main distinctions between Level II and Level III are based on the number of subject areas covered--Level II addresses one one subject area and Levels III and IV cover all subject areas--and whether the service is provided on a part-time or full-time basis (Levels II and III may be part-time and Level IV it is full-time).

*How Are Students Identified for Level II and III Services?*
Decisions about which level of school-based services best match a student’s particular needs are made at the local school level by a committee comprised of the classroom teacher, the Advanced Academic resource teacher, an administrator, and other teachers who work with the student. Students are discussed in screening committee meetings using multiple data and artifacts through a holistic case study approach. Data may include:

- ability and achievement test scores
- assessment data from classroom instruction
- rating on a Gifted Behaviors Rating Scale (GBRS) which includes classroom anecdotes regarding the student’s exceptional ability to learn, application of knowledge, creative/productive thinking, and motivation to succeed
- work samples from tasks that give opportunities to show critical and creative thinking
- parent/guardian questionnaire

Particular flags will prompt a student to automatically be screened for Level II or III services. For example, a student with an ability test score of 120 or higher or a pass advanced score on a state achievement test will automatically be screened for school-based services. Likewise, a student with a GBRS score of 11 or higher will automatically be screened. A student may also be referred for Level II or III services by a parent, teacher, or by the student him/herself.

**Level IV Services: Full-Time Services**

*What are Level IV Services?*

Level IV services provide a full-time curriculum in the content areas of mathematics, language arts, social studies, and science. The highly challenging instructional program is designed to meet the needs of advanced learners with a strong emphasis on higher level thinking, problem-solving, and decision-making. Students have ongoing opportunities for reflection and self-assessment that develop an understanding of the characteristics, demands, and responsibilities of advanced intellectual development.

Students identified for Level IV services receive a full-time, challenging curriculum in a placement with other eligible students. Additionally, they are also assigned to a teacher who is trained both in gifted education and pedagogy. Teachers are required to obtain an endorsement in working with advanced learners in order to be prepared to meet their students’ cognitive and social-emotional needs.

The content standards taught to students who receive Level IV Advanced Academic services are differentiated through extensions and enrichment. Performance assessments provide evidence of intellectual growth in ways that standardized tests are unable to do. For example, students might engage in Document Based Mini-Questions from the DBQ Project, an inquiry-based process by which students analyze primary and secondary historical sources. Employing historical analysis and interpretation, they learn to use evidence as support in a persuasive essay on a given question prompt (e.g., *Was Hammurabi’s Code Just*?). Through the learning experience, they refine their thinking, improve their ability to analyze historical documents, and strengthen their writer’s craft.

*How are Students Identified for Level IV Services?*

Students are identified for Level IV services through a central selection process rather than at local schools. A portfolio-based approach, including a referral form, ability test scores, the Gifted Behaviors Rating Scale (GBRS) with commentary, progress reports, parent questionnaire, work samples, and additional optional information, is assembled by the Advanced Academic resource teacher to create a file that is sent to Central Office to be screened by a committee. The resource teacher coordinates training on observing and documenting gifted behaviors for school staff, convenes a local screening committee to complete the GBRS with commentary, and collects strength-based work samples that represent a student’s thinking when presented with opportunities for higher level thinking.
Screening committees are comprised of six professionals with different areas of expertise who review the file and make independent recommendations about eligibility. At least four people in the review must agree for a student to be found eligible.

Once identified, students receive a letter informing them of the eligibility decision. Parents of students who are found ineligible may appeal the decision by submitting new information that was not included in the original file and supports a need for Level IV services. An appeals committee reviews the original file and the new information and makes a decision. The decision of the appeals committee is final. Parents of students who are found ineligible may refer their child again the following year.

Final Thoughts

The identification of gifted and talented potential must be grounded in an expanded understanding of intelligence that embraces diverse cultural, ethnic, and linguistic manifestations. A narrow definition of intelligence that is measured by how well children perform on assessments that require a knowledge of words and numbers learned in school precludes from participation in gifted programs certain populations of students who have not had the opportunity to attain this knowledge before coming to school. As we move from an understanding of intelligence as innate ability grounded in a cultural and social context tied to Western, affluent populations to an understanding of intelligence as a student’s evolving potential that is contextually-based and is nurtured through experience, we provide numerous possibilities for understanding giftedness as developing potential in a much broader range of students.

Because gifted programs are an important gateway for participation in challenging courses in high school and higher education, FCPS is guided by a belief in providing access to advanced learning opportunities 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. Our continuum of Advanced Academic 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.

Additional information about Advanced Academic Programs in Fairfax County Public Schools, including additional forms, videos, and frequently asked questions, is available at www.fcps.edu/is/aap.