Academic Programs for Gifted and Talented/Learning Disabled Students

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Determined to address the needs of gifted and talented/learning disabled (GT/LD) students, educators in Maryland’s Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) have spent 15 years creating a dynamic, comprehensive program for their GT/LD student population. MCPS identifies students with varying degrees of learning disabilities and has developed specialized self-contained classes for gifted students with severe learning disabilities while those with moderate and mild disabilities receive gifted instruction and services in their general education classrooms. The comprehensive nature of the MCPS program makes it one of the most unique in the country. Successful, practical programming based on research and theory guarantees GT/LD students access to accelerated and enriched instruction that maintains the rigor and high standards expected of all gifted students. Regardless of the setting, GT/LD students in grades 2 through 12 receive appropriate instruction, adaptations, and accommodations related to their disability. Drawing from the literature and from their own experiences, educators in MCPS combine the most successful components into a strength-based, integrated, and collaborative program.

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Identified as gifted because of high achievement or high IQ scores, these students exhibit remarkable strengths in some areas and disabling weaknesses in others. As they grow older, discrepancies widen between expected and actual academic performance. Instructional programs for gifted and talented/learning disabled (GT/LD) students must focus on developing their strengths, interests, and superior intellectual abilities while accommodating for their learning weaknesses (NAGC, 1998). However, the majority of school districts in the United States do not have procedures in place for screening, identifying, and serving GT/LD students.

Research and information about the gifted and learning disabled population has not been adequately transferred and applied to classrooms (Dix & Schafer, 1996). According to federal laws PL 94-142, and subsequently IDEA 97, these students are legally entitled to an appropriate education in the least restrictive environment that includes services for the gifts as well as the disabilities (Blancher-Dixon & Turnbull, 1978). This article presents the program model found in Maryland’s Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) that addresses the needs of this often underserved population.

Review of the Literature

Over the years, the body of literature regarding GT/LD students has been a source of inspiration, guidance, and validation for the design and implementation of the academic programming for GT/LD students in MCPS. MCPS’s identification of GT/LD students utilizes Brody and Mills’ (1997) definition, while incorporating VanTassel Baska’s (1991) concept of high functioning. The MCPS definition is: GT/LD students are those who possess an outstanding gift or talent and are capable of high performance, but who also have a learning disability that makes some aspect of academic achievement difficult.

As recommended in the literature, the MCPS referral process emphasizes early identification and appropriate inter-
The need for studies on effective treatment and programming for GT/LD students was cited in a 1987 report to Congress (Interagency Committee on Learning Disabilities, 1987). GT/LD students with disabilities require a unified effort of special education and gifted specialists who emphasize an appropriate pace of instruction, extend and compact curriculum, and use a variety of programming strategies (Whitmore & Maker, 1986). Unfortunately, little program development and evaluation for this population has been forthcoming (Vaughn, 1989). Students who qualify for special education services because of the severity of their learning disability and qualify for gifted services because of the type or level of their talent (Baum, Owens, & Dixon, 1991) rarely qualify for multiple services. The framework for the MCPS program incorporates the major recommendations for programming found in the literature (Brody & Mills, 1997).

The literature describes program efforts that modify traditional enrichment programs (Baldwin & Gargiulo, 1983; Baum & Owens, 1988; Baum, Owens, & Dixon, 1991; Bees, 1998; Betts, 1985; Fall & Nolan, 1993; Renzulli, & Reis, 1985; Udall & Maker, 1983; Nielsen, Higgins, Wilkinson, & Webb, 1994; Whitmore, 1980). Programs have also been designed for GT/LD students with specific disabilities (Clements, Lundell, & Hishinuma, 1994; Coleman & Gallagher, 1995; Gentry & Neu, 1998; Hackney, 1986; LeVine & Evans, 1983; Maker, 1981; Yewchuk & Bibby, 1988). Regardless of the program model used, the curriculum must be geared to the strengths, rather than the weaknesses of the GT/LD student. Utilizing a variety of adaptations, strategies, and accommodations for GT/LD students is widely advocated throughout the literature (e.g., Baum et al., 1991; Daniels, 1983; Fox, Tobin, & Schiffman, 1983; Hishinuma, 1991; Howard, 1994; Silverman, 1989; Suter & Wolf, 1987; Torgesen, 1986; Van Tassel-Baska, 1991; Waldron, 1991; Weill, 1987; Whitmore, 1988). When a student's gifts are identified and nurtured, there is an increased willingness on the part of the student to put forth greater effort to complete tasks (Baum, Emerick, Herman, & Dixon, 1989). Differentiation of curriculum, (Maryland Task Force on Gifted and Talented Education, 1994; NAGC, 1998), acceleration and enrichment (Renzulli, 1985; Southern & Jones, 1991), and mentorships (Baum et al., 1991) provide positive opportunities for GT/LD students. “Education of these children must focus on abstract ideas and generalization. Teachers must provide organizational strategies to help these students achieve and allow alternatives to writing as a means of communicating.” (Baum et al., 1991, p. 19).

The System-Wide Comprehensive GT/LD Program in MCPS

Determined to address the needs of the GT/LD students, educators in MCPS have spent 15 years creating dynamic, comprehensive programs for their GT/LD student population. In 1986, MCPS initiated a pilot program to explore the incidence rate of students with high cognitive ability who were experiencing learning difficulties. The findings were presented in a paper to the Council on Exceptional Children National Conference in Washington, D.C. March 29, 1988 entitled “A Study in the Identification, Differential Diagnosis, and Remediation of Underachieving Highly Able Students” (Starnes, Ginevan, Stokes, & Barton, 1988). With initial funding from the Jacob K. Javits Gifted and Talented Education Grant, promising developments have occurred in MCPS. MCPS identifies gifted students with varying degrees of learning disabilities and has developed special self-contained classes for gifted students with severe learning disabilities while those with moderate and mild disabilities receive services in the general education classes.

GT/LD students in grades 2 through 12 receive appropriate instruction, adaptations, and accommodations related to their disability. Successful, practical programming is based on solid research and theory. GT/LD students are guaranteed access to accelerated and enriched instruction that maintains the rigor and high standards expected of all gifted students. As with other gifted students, the range of instructional opportunities available to GT/LD students is provided in gifted classes in elementary and middle school, in Honors and Advanced Placement classes at the high school, in highly selective gifted and magnet programs in grades 4-12, and through differentiation in general education classes at all levels. In addition, GT/LD students with severe learning disabilities receive appropriate gifted instruction within GT/LD Center Programs. Gifted underachieving students also have the opportunity to participate in a mentor program designed to nurture talents and develop potential.

The comprehensiveness of the delivery of GT/LD programming is what makes this one of the most unique programs serving this population.

Approximately 25-35 new students are identified for the GT/LD Center each year, primarily at the elementary level. The three elementary programs serve approximately 50 students or 16 students per center on the average. Currently the majority of these students are in grades 4 and 5, so grades 3 and 4 are grouped in the primary program and fifth graders are alone in the upper level program. Each of the elementary classrooms is staffed with one teacher and one special education assistant. These groupings are dependent on the referrals received and placements that are made each year.

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Each of the three middle school Center Programs has approximately 10 students at each of the three grade levels. Many of the GT/LD Center students have progressed to the point that they can return to their home high schools after middle school. Two of the GT/LD high school programs currently provide services for three to five students at each grade level, within their larger programs for learning disabled students. The third high school will become a full-fledged GT/LD Center Program during the 2003-2004 school year as students begin to transition from one of the middle school programs. Each year, 60 to 70 students participate in mentorship experiences.

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giftedness and the academic needs of each student regardless of the grade level or the severity of the disability. Overseeing all of the instructional and program opportunities is a full-time program coordinator with expertise in both gifted education and special education. Drawing from the best practices in the literature and from their own field experiences, MCPS combines the most successful components into a strength-based, integrated, and collaborative program.

Center Programs

The room was a buzz of activity. Steven was working on an independent study project at a computer as he listened to a book that had been converted from text to speech. A group of students were sitting and working at a round table with a variety of resource materials related to their in-depth study of whales. Rachel, returning from her social studies mainstream class, began dictating a biographical sketch on Sacagawea into a tape recorder. Frank was meeting with the teacher at the front table about next steps in his research project. Student products from their Structures unit lined the bookcases under the windows. The students made three-dimensional projects reflecting the concepts learned in both math and science. Junior Great Books, software products, reference materials, large-print books, science equipment, and math equipment filled the shelves. On the walls of the classroom, colorful posters, class standards and expectations, message boards, and plans for the day were displayed. The workstations had a collection of tools that were always available—pens, pencils, tape recorders, graphic organizers, NCR paper, electronic spellers, and calculators.

This profile is a “snap shot” of a student-centered classroom with a view into the workings, resources, and climate for students within the GT/LD Center Program. The activity is purposeful and planned. The interdisciplinary instruction and multiple tools and opportunities for choice are the norm. The first Center Program for GT/LD students opened in 1987 for fourth and fifth graders. Over the years, this program has expanded across the county to its present level of three primary (grades 2/3) and three upper level (grades 4/5) programs housed in three separate elementary schools, as well as three middle school programs and three high school programs. The instructional program has focused on: developing strengths; providing classroom organization that is flexible and collaborative to maximize goal setting, self-direction, group discussion, self-reflection, problem solving, and self-evaluation; and providing curriculum instruction that is inquiry based with a thinking focus.

Placement in the Center Programs

While the vast majority of gifted students with learning disabilities in MCPS are served in their home schools with varying degrees of supports and accommodations, GT/LD students who are not demonstrating academic progress in their home schools are considered for GT/LD Center Programs. The GT/LD Center Programs serve students who have both a documented superior cognitive ability and an identified learning disability. The majority of students accepted into the program score two standard deviations above the mean (130) on the verbal or performance scales of the WISC-III, or comparable intelligence scales with the verbal scale falling at or above average. Identification of the “gift” does not rely solely on broad IQ scores. Strong performance on IQ subtests as well as other less formal evidence of giftedness is also considered. Strengths of these students often include superior ability in forming concepts, abstract reasoning, vocabulary, creativity, math reasoning, science, and the arts.

In addition to superior cognitive ability, GT/LD students demonstrate a significant learning disability with academic deficits that are severe enough to drive the need for reduced staff-student ratio and special education supports throughout the day. Learning disabled students, as defined by state regulations, have a deficit in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language. The deficit affects performance in one or more of the areas of written language, reading, or mathematics. The GT/LD Center Programs serve students who demonstrate academic deficits that are severe, such that barriers to achievement cannot be overcome through accommodations and modifications in the student’s home school. These Center Programs provide access to GT instruction for students who would otherwise not have this access.

An Individualized Education Plan (IEP) team considers this placement as part of the school-based periodic or annual IEP review meeting. The school IEP teams refer students who are candidates for this program to their local supervisor of special education. A review is then conducted by a small committee of individuals who are familiar with the GT/LD program and characteristics of the students in the program. The committee includes the program coordinator for GT/LD programs, a representative from the GT department, and a school psychologist. If a difference of opinion regarding the placement exists or if there is a need to clarify certain issues, the case is considered by the Central IEP team, which then identifies the appropriate placement. The goal is to serve students in their home school. Therefore, students placed in the GT/LD Center Program must demonstrate a limited response to their home school’s attempt to modify the student’s program and provide sufficient interventions over a significant period of time.

Instructional Programming

At all grade levels in Montgomery County, students in GT/LD Center Programs receive instruction that focuses on developing their strengths and on improving existing skills in their areas of weakness. The GT/LD programs are housed in general education school facilities, enabling students to participate with their nondisabled peers, wherever possible. Students may enter and exit the program at any grade level. Students typically are mainstreamed for physical education and the arts, as well as lunch and other general activities. Students are mainstreamed for other subject areas as they demonstrate readiness to handle the academic and organizational demands of those subjects. Students typically need special education staff in the classroom with them as they begin their mainstream experiences. As students near the point of exiting the program, they have developed the self-

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advocacy and compensatory skills necessary to handle the mainstream environment without direct staff support. Middle school and high school students are generally ready for participation in the mainstream. General educators at the secondary level also tend to be specialists in their content and, whenever possible, it is beneficial for students to have access to these specialists. Therefore, the middle school and high school models incorporate more team-teaching situations, giving GT/LD students opportunities to participate in the mainstream with supports. Similarly, both as a result of having spent several years in the program and because of their developmental maturity, more of the middle and high school students are able to take responsibility for their own accommodations and learning. More students are ready to exit the program in the upper grades than in the lower grades. The elementary GT/LD programs focus more on teaching and developing skills and compensatory strategies, while the secondary programs focus on implementing these skills and strategies throughout content areas. At every grade level, the primary focus remains developing the gifts of these students.

The GT/LD classes are staffed in the same way as other special education programs for students with severe learning disabilities. The teachers are all special education certified and receive ongoing training in the education of gifted and talented students. A full-time program coordinator helps manage all of these programs and provides consultation and training for all staff working with GT/LD students.

Implementation of effective instructional programming for GT/LD students has been a collaborative effort between the Division of Accelerated and Enriched Instruction (Gifted and Talented Office) and the Department of Special Education over the last 15 years. This collaboration has provided an opportunity to draw on what is known to be the best practices from both special education and gifted education (Brody & Mills, 1997). The ongoing dialogue and trust have built a partnership that serves students well.

The following is a comprehensive description of best practices that have been successful in the GT/LD Center Programs in MCPS. The analysis presented includes what works and what doesn’t work in the following areas: school climate, instructional skills and strategies, and content areas.

### School Climate
Creating a comfortable yet challenging classroom climate is essential. Addressing the socioemotional needs of GT/LD students is critical to their achievement. The climate is one that is designed to respect individuality with accommodations that focus on strengths and potential for success rather than remediation. It promotes the students’ development of an understanding of their unique strengths, empowering them to successfully advocate for themselves. It is counterproductive to use routine and remedial drill and practice that focus on the student’s disability. Lowering standards, confrontational communication, and inflexible expectations that diminish student individuality are inappropriate. Instead, the climate is designed to encourage interactive participation, flexibility, high standards, student participation in cooperative groups, individualized programming, active listening, and practice in conflict-resolution strategies.

The physical climate within the classroom is also carefully orchestrated. A stimulating environment is created—posters, collections, products, and highly visible student/teacher classroom standards and expectations for performance are displayed. Multimedia resources and technological tools including word processors, tape recorders, calculators, and spellcheckers are available in the classroom. Students have freedom of movement within the classroom. Careful attention is given to both the physical and social climate in the classroom, creating an environment in which needs are supported and abilities are recognized and nurtured.

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### Instructional Skills and Strategies

**Gifted Instruction.** Teachers, through professional development and self-study, implement models for gifted education (examples include: Howard Gardner’s Multiple Intelligences, 1983; Creative Problem Solving, McAlpine, Weinckel, Jeweler, & Finkbinder, 1982; Edward deBono’s CoRT, 1986; Bloom’s Taxonomy, 1956). Teachers use activities that focus on students’ strengths and interests, allowing for self-directed choices. Instruction is multisensory using hands-on experiences and guided discovery (e.g., What I Know/What I Want to Know/What I Learned [KWL], Ogle, 1986) as powerful strategies, especially when introducing new topics. Support and clarification for embedded directions, both oral and written, are given to the student.

Integrating the visual and performing arts into the program is effective. Champion of Change, Learning In and Through the Arts (LITA; 1999) and Champion of Change, The Impact of the Arts on Learning (1999) studies found evidence that learning in the arts has significant effects on learning in other domains. Students are more motivated and teachers report that students retain information more readily when the arts are integrated into the curriculum.

Teachers recognize that remedial instruction, rigid task guidelines, and a belief that GT/LD students can organize their thinking without accommodations or instruction do not work for GT/LD students. The teachers do not consider that a lack of production is a sign of motivational weakness or lower intelligence. Rote memorization, forced oral reading, text-based instruction, and the use of only teacher-directed activities are not successful practices. Instead, teachers use instruction that obviates weaknesses; provides for production of alternative products; provides “real-life” tasks; provides open-ended outlets for the demonstration of knowledge; designs tasks that fit the student’s learning style; differentiates instruction; and uses collaboratively designed rubrics.

**Thinking Skills.** The GT/LD student is capable of exceptional thinking. Many resources that focus on thinking skills are available through educational publishers and distributors. Teachers learn thinking strategies, teach, model, and practice them in the classroom. Teachers actively participate in the learning process using the Socratic method, as they work with the GT/LD students to help them formulate questions and think through logic problems. Students apply abstract concepts to everyday occurrences. Teachers help students to transfer and apply the thinking strategies that work for them in their areas of strength to their areas of need. Teachers use metacognitive skills, “Think Alouds” to
model the thinking process, develop a thinking language, and help students search for their own solutions. Teachers do not assume that students already know thinking strategies and can apply them without ongoing practice.

Reading. The emphasis in reading is on comprehension, listening, and gaining information. Teachers avoid overly focusing on word attack errors that do not affect comprehension. A successful reading program includes the use of literature for stimulating reading interest, oral discussion using supporting text, the development of expository reading, and the use of high interest personal reading material that may be above grade level. Programs like the William and Mary Reading Program (The College of William and Mary, 1998) and Junior Great Books (Great Books Foundation, 1992) offer great opportunities for the development of reading and writing skills for GT/LD students, even though reading may be a weakness for them. These programs provide opportunities for GT/LD students to build on their abstract reasoning and comprehension skills. Students also benefit from explicit instruction in phonological awareness, phonics, and decoding. The Wilson Reading Program (Wilson, 1985) is an excellent example of a program that has proven effective in teaching these reading skills. Accommodations such as books on tape or text-to-speech software that enables students to scan any print material and have the computer read the material to them aloud are appropriate supports to reading. More traditional approaches such as reading worksheets, round robin reading, and below grade level basal readers are not used.

Writing. Writing is often difficult for GT/LD students who may have trouble expressing themselves due to difficulty in sequencing and attending to detail. Students also may have graphomotor deficits. Focusing on handwriting instead of content, quantity versus quality, and the use of red pens to denote errors do not work. Establishing writing processes through discussion and practice is ongoing. Using assistive technology such as portable word processors, computers, electronic spellers, organizational and word-predictive software unlocks students' abilities to communicate what they know and understand. Graphic organizers, mind-mapping strategies, extended time for completion of work, and clear written expectations for writing tasks help the students create writing products. Prompts guide the purpose for writing. Rubrics, proofreading for one type of error at a time, and using a highlighter to indicate corrections aid in self-evaluation of written work. Publication of writing for an audience is a great motivator for the student.

Organization. GT/LD students frequently have problems with organizational demands of classroom assignments. Teachers help minimize the impact of this problem by structuring assignments with very clear directions and steps. Best practices include establishing specific due dates and a time frame for long-term assignments, providing checkpoints for monitoring progress, providing time for organizing materials and assignments, and providing a specific location for students to place completed work. Teaching students effective strategies helps them become more self-sufficient learners. The supervised use of assistive technology and visual organizers, as well as the use of the more traditional supports of assignment books, study guides, homework hotlines, and calendars, all help students become more organized.

Promising new practices include posting homework assignments on web pages, the use of hand-held organizers, and having students e-mail their own assignments to their home e-mail account.

Adults sometimes assume that students have the needed organizational skills, but are not using them because of laziness, lack of motivation, or poor attitudes. In the case of the GT/LD student, this is often not true and contributes to their academic problems and low self-esteem.

Memory. While GT/LD students often possess outstanding abstract reasoning abilities and are able to see the big picture readily, they may have difficulty remembering and sequencing details. When teachers motivate students through the use of a Multiple Intelligences approach and a variety of modalities, students are much more likely to remember the details. Students are more successful when they can utilize assistive technology as well as a variety of supports in the classroom environment. Students become more independent in this area as they learn techniques to enhance their own memory such as mnemonics, visual imagery, outlining, note taking, and highlighting. Other successful strategies include having students sequence activities after a lesson or event, having students teach information to other students, providing students with environmental cues and prompts, relating information presented to the student's previous experience, and telling them what to listen for when being given directions or receiving information. It is important not to assume that, although these students have great ability in certain areas, they have learned the needed skills to circumvent their difficulties with memory of details.

Handwriting. GT/LD students often have grapho-motor difficulties. Therefore, the occupational therapist is a partner in the instruction of GT/LD students. The goal is legibility. Focusing on form, using mechanical pencils and grips, and using an appropriate handwriting program (e.g., Handwriting Without Tears, Olsin, 2002) helps the GT/LD students who have difficulty writing by hand. Lengthy handwriting tasks that result in fatigue and expectations that disregard a student's physical weakness or limitation do not work. Assistive technologies such as a word processor, word-predictive software, or speech-to-text software, are often appropriate alternatives to handwriting.

Content Area Instruction

Mathematics. Preassessment of student mastery of mathematical content (e.g., decimal fractions, whole numbers, statistics, and probability) and objectives is an appropriate place to begin instruction. Focusing on developing conceptual skills and problem-solving strategies is essential. By using a multidisciplinary approach to math, students learn to apply and generalize skills and strategies. Using interactive, hands-on programs (e.g., Hands-on Equations, Borenson, 1997), manipulatives, and math tools help students grasp content and concepts. Students may need untimed tests, a reduction in the number of problems, and direct instruction in the use of calculators for accommodations to be successful. Lengthy, repetitive assignments; copying from textbooks, over-heads, or blackboards; and a focus on computation alone do not work with GT/LD students. Appropriate accommodations, such as a calculator, allow these students to utilize their often superior math reasoning abilities while not being held back by their computation skills.

Science. Science instruction that offers hands-on, interactive experiences is most successful. Activities that incorporate problem solving and "real-life" investigations with a purpose and an end product, along with a thematic approach that allows for students to direct their
search for knowledge and answers are meaningful to students. Simulations and the integration of the visual and the performing arts are extremely successful when teaching science content and concepts. Focusing on science process objectives works as does using graphic organizers to support note taking when researching a topic. Memorization of facts and emphasis on reading and writing are often counterproductive for these students. The GT/LD student may become an expert in specific areas of interest when time is provided for individuals to do research projects. The acquisition of expertise through their independent studies enables GT/LD students to become valuable contributors to cooperative group projects.

Social Studies. The conceptual framework of social studies is based on content and process. Students are responsible for learning the historical, economic, political, geographic, and cultural content standards. Students are expected to construct understandings through systems of processing information, critical thinking, and problem solving. Thematic units, simulations, hands-on activities and projects, the use of various forms of media, integration of the visual and the performing arts, and extension/enrichment activities work well with GT/LD students. Instruction led by textbook reading and focusing on facts rather than understanding the concepts, does not work for GT/LD students.

Assessment and Evaluation

Students and teachers collaborate on the evaluation/assessment methods and tools that will give an accurate picture of student understanding of both content and process material. Evaluations are based on instruction and reflect the attainment of the key concepts and basic understandings that are the focus of the curriculum. Providing objectives, study guides, vocabulary, memory strategies, rubrics, and support and clarification for embedded questions aid students in accurately sharing what they know. Models of appropriate responses to prompts are helpful. Differentiation in evaluation/assessments is important. With accommodations, students may audiotape responses, use a graphic organizer in lieu of paragraph responses, create a model, or give a speech.

Evaluation/assessments are designed to maximize the student’s demonstration of her/his knowledge of concepts and content. Lengthy essays, penalties for spelling in content areas, time limits, matching tasks, and the like may not communicate clearly a student’s understanding of course material. Attention is also given to the formatting of evaluation/assessments in order to circumvent visual processing difficulties.

Succeeding in the General Education Classroom

Based on an analysis of what works in the GT/LD Center Programs, the best practices used in educating GT/LD students in any setting can be summarized in four major components: gifted and talented instruction in the student’s area of strength; opportunities for the instruction of skills and strategies in academic areas which are affected by the student’s disability; an appropriately differentiated program, including individualized instructional adaptations and accommodations systematically provided to students; and comprehensive case management to coordinate all aspects of the student’s individual educational plan.

The most important component in the education of GT/LD students is providing gifted and talented instruction in the student’s area of strength. Instruction emphasizes problem solving, reasoning and critical thinking, and includes extension and elaboration of the regular curriculum. Classroom organization is flexible, yet structured with opportunities for collaborative goal setting, significant peer interactions, and cooperative learning. GT/LD students receive this GT instruction in the least restrictive environment in which they can receive educational benefit. In order to benefit from GT instruction in a typical classroom setting, GT/LD students need educators to utilize appropriate strategies. Implementing these strategies involves close collaboration between special educators and general educators. By receiving GT instruction along with special education, GT/LD students develop their full potential.

GT/LD students need instruction in skills and strategies in academic areas that are affected by the student’s disability. Instruction may be needed in one or more of the following areas: writing, reading, math calculations, organizational skills, test-taking skills, self-determination skills and social skills. These improved skills allow students even greater success in the development of their gifts. Skills and strategy instruction are accomplished through direct instruction and/or integrated into content instruction. Instruction in this area includes helping students to develop an awareness of their strengths and weaknesses and the ability to advocate for what they need in order to be successful.

Teachers adapt their programs by utilizing a multisensory approach that emphasizes student’s strengths and interests. One successful example of this approach is the integration of art and drama into the curriculum within the middle school Center Program that serves as a model for general education. An award winning partnership with a local art college has integrated art and drama into all curricular areas, resulting in demonstration of both greater motivation and greater mastery of the curricular objectives among students. An art specialist from the college works with teachers to identify key concepts in content areas and find ways that art can be used in both learning activities and assessment. In all of the GT/LD Center Programs, teachers use similar processes for integrating the arts.

GT/LD students need an appropriately differentiated program in order to be successful. Appropriate differentiation includes instructional adaptations and accommodations systematically provided to students. Instruction and assignments are structured in such a way that all students succeed to their fullest potential. Resources for teachers such as the State of the Art Handbook (MCPS, 1998) detail many appropriate adaptations and accommodations that obviate student’s disabilities, allowing them to understand and master material in a manner appropriate to their strengths. Utilizing appropriate assistive technology, which may include word processors, portable keyboards, electronic calculators, books on tape, speech-to-text and text-to-speech software, helps GT/LD students to succeed. Methodologies such as team-teaching allow students to participate in GT classes while receiving the supports that are necessary for them to be successful.

Crucial for ensuring that all other components are in place for the GT/LD student, the final component is comprehensive case management. The case manager, most often the special education resource teacher, must utilize the skills of a wide variety of professionals to build a team that includes students and parents. The case manager communicates with all involved staff regarding the student’s strengths and needs as well as appropriate adaptations and accommodations.
The case manager coordinates all aspects of the student's individual educational plan, making sure the student is both challenged and supported. Mr. and Mrs. Anderson were relieved and somewhat surprised as they left the team meeting for their son, Matthew, at his new school. Matthew was a complicated student with great gifts and significant challenges. In the past, they had received many contacts from the school about the problems that existed, but few positive comments or solutions. This year they had been called to come to the school before the year even began to plan for Matthew's first year in middle school. Matthew's English teacher, who was also the sixth grade team leader, volunteered to tell all staff about the appropriate adaptations and accommodations Matthew would need. The teacher described the special education instruction that she would be providing to address Matthew's needs in writing and organization. The team leader would coordinate the communication between the general educators, Matthew, and his parents and would communicate regularly with the special education teacher. The team leader spoke about how bright Matthew was and suggested that he should be involved in some GT classes. The special educator said she would communicate with the counselor, who recommended that Matthew participate in a new group to help students advocate for themselves when talking with teachers about their strengths and needs. Matthew agreed to participate in the counseling group and to check in with the resource teacher at the beginning and end of each day to clarify his assignments and make sure he had the needed materials. Mr. and Mrs. Anderson agreed to check Matthew's planbook each night and communicate with staff via e-mail on a regular basis. The team recommended that Matthew start the year in GT classes for science and social studies with a review before the second marking period began to evaluate his progress and to make recommendations for the next marking period. The principal reviewed each person's responsibilities and set the date for a progress review. Mr. and Mrs. Anderson and Matthew left the meeting feeling optimistic that the new school year would be Matthew's best yet.

Matthew's success that school year was aided by a team approach implemented by the educators who serve gifted students with learning disabilities in their home schools. The successful planning and implementation of their program, whether in the mainstream situation or in the Center Programs, becomes the responsibility of the school administrator, the general educators, the special educators (special education resource teacher, speech and language teacher, occupational therapist, physical therapist) the school counselor, the student, and the parent.

Designing a classroom like the ones described here, be it a GT/LD Center class or a general education class, does not happen serendipitously. It requires careful analysis, planning, and thoughtful implementation. Key to its success is the educator's adoption of the underlying belief that these students are gifted first and learning disabled second. Once this attitude prevails, developing the climate in which the students feel safe and can achieve is a natural outcome. Providing appropriate accommodations with the understanding that one is leveling the playing field rather than giving unfair advantage is also key.

The success of this program is dependent upon professional development of those who work with this special student population focusing on definition, identification, and best practices in programming for GT/LD students. It includes opportunities to attend county, state, and national conferences and institutes on topics related to the instruction of GT/LD students. Professional leave is granted so educators may participate in these sessions with the intent of learning the material and implementing it with their students. Professional development is also accomplished through school-based in-service workshops, staff meetings, and team or individual meetings.

During school-based, half-day or full-day training sessions, a variety of topics related to GT/LD students are addressed. Administrators, special education staff, counselors, GT Committee members, and grade-level teams collaborate to meet the needs of GT/LD students within the school. Based on a needs assessment, in-service workshops are designed to introduce and/or develop instructional resources, materials, and strategies to be used with students. For example, in-service workshops may include topics such as building positive attitudes, a deeper understanding of the characteristics, strengths, and needs of the GT/LD population, conflict resolution strategies, strategies for integrating arts instruction into content areas, thinking strategies such as Bloom's Taxonomy (1956) and Edward deBono's Thinking Hats (1986), Howard Gardner's Multiple Intelligences theory (1983), utilizing mentors, and strategies on how to differentiate instruction. Development also includes a review of current best practices in the areas of reading, writing, organization, memory, metacognition, and the use of technology.

Staff meetings are a time for professional engagement. Due to the shorter length of this type of meeting, one concept, strategy, idea, or issue is addressed. For example, keeping up-to-date on current research is important. Therefore, in this forum, a recent journal article related to the GT/LD population is distributed and discussed with staff members. Team or individual meetings also offer excellent opportunities for development. The resource teacher shares, with a teacher or team, an effective adaptation or accommodation for a GT/LD student. In this setting, questions, concerns, and plans are focused on individual students and their unique strengths and needs. The immediate transfer and application of training takes place in the classroom.

By using the "what works" and "what doesn't work" suggestions from the field experience of teachers in MCPS as a basis for appropriate training, educators will build their knowledge, confidence, educational techniques and strategies for the successful instruction of GT/LD students.

Conclusion

The goal of education is to provide opportunities for students to build knowledge, skills, and attitudes in order to become successful, contributing members to a global society. The comprehensive program found in MCPS for the GT/LD population, makes it one of the most unique in the country. Successful, practical programming is based on solid research and theory. GT/LD students are guaranteed access to accelerated and enriched instruction that maintains the rigor and high standards expected of all gifted students. Gifted students with special needs are, therefore, not to be excluded from this promise. In fact, according to Thomas West (1991) in his book, In the Mind's Eye, it is these very students who have made and will make some of the most extraordinary contributions to our world.