

# 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 special 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.

**Richard Weinfeld** is Montgomery County (Maryland) Public Schools' first full time Instructional Specialist for Gifted and Talented/Learning Disabled programs for which he coordinates the elementary, middle, and senior high school Center Programs for GT/LD students. He also conducts the training of school staff and consultation with both parents and staff regarding appropriate interventions and program placement for individual GT/LD students. **Sue Jeweler**, a retired teacher, is currently an educational consultant to the Montgomery County Maryland Public Schools. Much of her 30-year career with MCPS has been spent teaching elementary school; training student teachers from area universities; training teachers in conflict-resolution strategies, gifted and talented instruction, differentiation and accommodation strategies; and also in writing curriculum for conflict resolution and social studies. **Linda Barnes-Robinson**, a nationally recognized trainer and consultant in conflict management and mediation, is a mediator in private practice. She specializes in issues involving children; including parent/child mediation, special education mediation and custody/visitation in family mediation. **Betty Shevitz** developed and coordinates the GT/LD Mentor Program for the Division of Accelerated and Enriched Instruction in Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS). Prior to working with the mentor program, Ms. Shevitz was involved in a special program designed for identifying and nurturing gifted students in underserved populations.

*When Jonathan graduated from Carnegie-Mellon University, he landed a job as a computer engineer with Microsoft. It was hard to believe that this was the same young man whose parents were told by school staff that they needed to accept that he was an average first and second grade student. Jonathan's parents, however, had seen evidence of his giftedness as he worked on his "inventions" at home. They continued to advocate for his gifts and his areas of need to be recognized by the school system. He was eventually identified as gifted and talented/learning disabled (GT/LD) and placed in Montgomery County's GT/LD Center Program. After 3 years in the program, his writing and organizational skills had improved. His gifts in the sciences and the arts were so evident that he went on to participate in GT instruction in middle school and Honors and Advanced Placement courses in high school with support from the special education resource teachers.*

The premise of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 1997) is that a free and appropriate public education will be provided for all children with special needs. IDEA 97 emphasizes the participation of students with disabilities in the general curriculum and requires that Individualized Education Program (IEP) teams make many decisions that support and encourage student performance in the general curriculum and general education classroom (National Information Center for Children and Youth with Disabilities, 1997). The premise of gifted education in the United States, first articulated in the Marland Report (Marland, 1972), is that, "Gifted and talented children...require differentiated programs and services beyond those normally provided by the regular school program in order to realize their contribution to self and society" (p. 2). Learning disabled students who are also gifted and talented or "twice exceptional" require opportunities to promote their own individual strengths and talents to achieve the accelerated academic proficiency expected of nondisabled gifted students. They simultaneously require gifted instruction and the special instruction, adaptations, and accommodations provided to other students with special needs (Neilson, Hammond, & Higgins, 1993).

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 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-



