

What We Have Learned: Experiences in Providing Adaptations and Accommodations for Gifted and Talented Students With Learning Disabilities

Rich Weinfeld Linda Barnes-Robinson Sue Jeweler Betty Roffman Shevitz

- ◆ Would you allow a person to use a wheelchair?
- ◆ Would you carry him or her?
- ◆ If using a wheelchair gives someone an unfair advantage in a race, should his or her time count the same as that of other runners?
- ◆ Would you allow a person to wear glasses for reading a test, even if they only help a little? What about glasses that are so strong that they give the person an ability to read faster than average?
- ◆ Would you allow a person to use a word processor if you knew that the person had a severe writing disability but had ideas that showed evidence of giftedness?
- ◆ Would you allow dictation for a gifted student who had a severe writing disability?

At a recent national conference on gifted education, participants shared their feelings about allowing accommodations for students in a variety of situations. For each accommodation, they gave a thumbs-up, a thumbs-down, or a thumbs-sideways response, depending on whether they agreed or disagreed with the appropriateness of the accommodation. The seminar participants demonstrated little agreement in their responses to the preceding questions. Reactions to the situations reflected their varying attitudes and perceptions about appropriate adaptations and accommodations.

Twice-exceptional students, that is, students who are gifted and have learning disabilities (GLD), often need to have appropriate adaptations and accommodations (Barton & Starnes, 1989; Baum, 1991, 2004; Cline & Schwartz, 1999; National Association for Gifted Children; 1998) so that they can effectively gain access to enriched and accelerated instruction. Our experience in Maryland's Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) indicates that students often receive inadequate or inappropriate adaptations and accommodations, thereby making their access to gifted instruction problematic. The differing beliefs and opinions of teachers, parents, and students often lead to too few accommodations, too many accommodations, or the wrong accommodations.

A review of the research about GLD students and about successful programs for them reveals that the most important component in the education of GLD students is providing gifted and talented instruction in the student's areas of strength. However, programming for GLD students must simultaneously furnish support in the student's areas of weakness (see box, "What Does the Literature Say About Providing Instruction in Areas of Students' Strengths and Weaknesses?").

Additional Critical Components in GLD Instruction

In almost 2 decades of working with GLD students in Montgomery County, we have developed a system of approaches that we use for dealing with the complexities of providing appropriate adaptations and accommodations for students (see box, "Resources That Describe the GLD Program in Montgomery County, Maryland"). The following is a description of these critical components and the ways that MCPS has addressed them.

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Best Practices

The following four major components summarize best practices for educating GLD students:

- ◆ Instruction in the student's area of strength.
- ◆ Opportunities for the instruction of skills and strategies in academic areas that the student's challenges affect.
- ◆ An appropriately differentiated program, including individualized instructional adaptations and accommodations systematically provided to students.
- ◆ Comprehensive case management to coordinate all aspects of the student's individual educational plan.

Definition of Terms

Since multidisciplinary teams make decisions about adaptations and accommodations, all participants must share a common vocabulary. Definitions of the terms *accommodation*, *adaptation*, *enable*, *empower*, and *differentiation* have proved to be especially useful in MCPS when educators discuss issues related to appropriate adaptations and accommodations for GLD students. The definition of *enable* has both positive and negative connotations. In a discussion of appropriate adaptations and accommodations, it often becomes the rationale for denying or limiting student access to adaptations and accommodations. The authors have used the word *empower* as an alternative to emphasize the positive effects of adapting and accommodating instruction. (Weinfeld, Barnes-Robinson, Jeweler, & Shevitz, *Smart Kids With Learning Difficulties: Overcoming Obstacles and Realizing Potential*, in press-a).

Systemwide Training

The success of any program depends on the training of those who work with the student population. Training should focus on defining and identifying GLD students, as well as using best practices in programming for them. Training should include opportunities to attend county, state, and national conferences or institutes on topics related to instructing GLD students. Professional leave can allow educators to participate in these sessions so that they can learn the material and implement it with their students. School-based inservice workshops, staff meetings, and team or individual meetings are other methods that

What Does the Literature Say About Providing Instruction in Areas of Students' Strengths and Weaknesses?

Regardless of the program model used, educators must gear the instruction to the students' strengths, rather than to their weaknesses. Using a variety of adaptations, strategies, and accommodations that allow GLD students to access gifted instruction is widely advocated throughout the literature (e.g., Baum, Owens, & Dixon, 1991; Daniels, 1983; Fox, Brody, & Tobin, 1983; Hishinuma, 1991; Howard, 1994; Silverman, 1989; Suter & Wolf, 1987; Torgesen, 1986; Van Tassel-Baska, 1991; Waldron, Saphire, & Rosenblum, 1987; Weill, 1987). When educators identify and nurture a student's gifts, the student is more willing to put forth greater effort to complete tasks (Baum, Emerick, Herman, & Dixon, 1989).

For students to obtain the greatest benefit from GT instruction, programming strategies must furnish additional support in the student's areas of weakness while they nurture the student's areas of strength. To help students achieve, teachers must teach them organizational strategies and must allow alternatives to writing as a means of communication. In addition to extending and elaborating the regular curriculum, instruction must emphasize problem-solving, reasoning, and critical thinking. The education of GLD students must focus on abstract ideas and generalizations (Baum, 1991). Differentiating rigorous instruction with appropriate individualized instructional adaptations and accommodations is necessary and requires close collaboration between special educators and general educators (Friend & Cook, 1996).

allow educators to receive training. MCPS typically provides a minimum of three full-day training opportunities per year for all staff who work with GLD students.

Parents also need training opportunities. An active local parent network can provide a monthly speaker series. Universities, school systems, schools, and community organizations can offer courses, workshops, seminars, fairs, and forums related to this student population.

Students can receive training in a variety of places, too. Schools, classrooms, outreach programs, and community organizations offer opportunities for students to learn about themselves and others who share similar strengths, interests, and needs (Weinfeld, Barnes-Robinson, Jeweler, & Shevitz, in press-b).

School Personnel

Co-Teacher. In the middle school GLD program in Montgomery County, a special education teacher who is familiar with GLD best practices often serves as a second teacher in a mainstream class. The school places GLD students as a group in these classes, which teach rigorous content. One role of this special education teacher is to ensure that the GLD students receive appropriate adaptations and accommodations.

Resource Room Teacher. MCPS uses special educators who are familiar with GLD best practices to see GLD students

Resources That Describe the GLD Program in Montgomery County, Maryland

Maryland's Montgomery County Public Schools is one of the few public school districts that offers comprehensive services in Grades K-12 for GLD students. The following references include descriptions of these programs:

Shevitz, B., Weinfeld, R., Jeweler, S., & Barnes-Robinson, L. (2003) Mentoring empowers gifted/learning disabled students to soar. *Roepers Review*, 26(1), 37-40.

Weinfeld, R., Barnes-Robinson, L., Jeweler, S., & Shevitz, B., (2002). Academic programs for gifted and talented/learning disabled students. *Roepers Review*, 24(4), 226-233.

as part of the students' weekly schedule or for periodic check-ins. This special educator monitors and implements the students' individualized education programs (IEPs) and ensures that the students receive appropriate adaptations and accommodations. This resource room specialist is available for students in elementary school, middle school, and high school.

Designated Teacher. High school is often where GLD students are left to cope without much overt assistance. MCPS has worked hard to change this situation. At the high school level, one class period in each of the major content areas at each grade level serves as a target class for GLD students. The teachers of these classes teach a typical honors or advanced placement class while providing the adaptations and accommodations that ensure the success of the GLD students, as well as others who may also have learning challenges.

GLD Coordinator. At each of MCPS's GLD middle schools, a teacher spends part of the day dedicated to providing leadership for GLD students. The teacher (a) identifies the roles and responsibilities of staff working with GLD students; (b) gathers feedback and communicates information to parents; (c) develops and implements a transition plan to improve articulation between elementary, middle, and high school; (d) provides information and training for staff; and (e) oversees the GLD program. A crucial part of this person's role is to make sure that appropriate adaptations and accommodations are available for the GLD students and to make sure that all staff who work with these students understand the rationale and need for these adaptations and accommodations.

Instructional Specialist. The instructional specialist for GLD programs oversees and coordinates all GLD services and programs throughout the county. This specialist is responsible for providing consultation to schools, training staff, and ensuring that GLD students are receiving appropriate services. Through consultation, training, and placing individual students into appropriate services, the specialist works to

ensure that adaptations and accommodations are appropriate and available to the students.

Case Manager. A staff member serves as the point person to coordinate all aspects of each student's program. The case manager monitors the student's overall progress, contacts parents regularly about progress, administers triennial reevaluations, develops IEPs,

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consults with classroom teachers, solves problems, and refers unresolved issues to appropriate staff. The case manager has a major responsibility in helping select appropriate adaptations and accommodations, communicating them to staff and parents, and ensuring that the students receive them.

Guidebook

MCPS has developed and distributed a guidebook that addresses GLD student identification and services. The purpose of *Twice Exceptional Students: A Guidebook for Supporting the Achievement of Gifted Students With Special Needs* is to assist parents, staff, and the students in understanding the identification process and in accessing appropriate instruction. The guidebook has been distributed widely at every school in the county and to parent groups. It serves as a basis for ensuring that there is a common understanding of GLD students as well as the adaptations and accommodations that they need for success in every school. Having a guidebook should prove helpful to any district striving to improve communication among and between families and school personnel.

Technology Room

In each of the GLD high schools, a special educator staffs a technology room throughout the day. Students, or teachers on their behalf, may sign up to use

the technology room and receive special education support while using state-of-the-art technological assistance. In this way, appropriate adaptations and accommodations are available throughout the day, rather than just during a specified class period.

Final Thoughts

MCPS has made a long, researched-based, and concerted effort to systematically meet the needs of all K-12 GLD students. Strategies that focus on providing appropriate training, researching best practices, providing skilled specialists, and making available important resources have shown a history of success (see box, "Additional Resources to Explore"). We hope that other school districts can learn from our successes and improve services for their GLD population.

Additional Resources to Explore

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Supplement Section

Guiding Principles for Appropriate Adaptations and Accommodations

The 2004 Individual With Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA '04) requires that, where appropriate, students with disabilities have access to general education and are included in state and districtwide assessments.

A review of the literature (see citations after each principle) revealed the following principles as the best practices for providing appropriate adaptations and accommodations for GT/LD students in order to ensure that access. Following each principle is a discussion of what the authors have found to be the merits of each guideline based on many years of field experience.

1. Accommodations used in assessments should parallel accommodations that are integrated into classroom instruction. (CEC, 2000; Maryland State Department of Education, 2000)

During instruction and assessments, students should be given the conditions that allow them to access their strengths and truly demonstrate their knowledge. This is empowering because the student is familiar and comfortable with the use of the accommodation. Introducing an accommodation for testing only may actually hinder a student who is unfamiliar with the accommodation. (Calculator studies, Tindal & Fuchs, 1999.)

2. The adaptations/accommodations are aligned with the educational impact of the individual student's disability and the adaptations/accommodations are aligned with the needs described in the student's IEP or 504 plan. (CEC, 2000; IDEIA '04)

This principle relates to the idea of individualizing the accommodations for the specific student in question. Focusing on the individual student should alleviate the

general educators' concern about whether the accommodation is needed by that student. It should also provide guidance to the parent who may be asking for unnecessary accommodations. The individual focus helps explain to the student what it is about his or her disability and needs that make it necessary for him or her to have the specific accommodations. Individualizing accommodations for the specific student in question is empowering because it is consistent with what the individual student needs at that time.

3. The adaptations/accommodations are based upon the strengths of the student. (Baum, 1991; Gardner, 1983; NAGC, 1998)

Consistent with the best practice that what is most important is working through each individual's gifts, an accommodation will only be useful if it capitalizes on a gift, allowing the student to circumvent the difficulty. This is empowering because it focuses on the individual's strengths.

4. Accommodations are based on what students need in order to be provided with an equal opportunity to show what they know without impediment of their disability. (National Center for Educational Outcomes, 2001)

This is consistent with the idea of "leveling the playing field" that appears frequently in the literature. Students should not be given an unfair advantage, but should be given an equal opportunity. Although individual potential varies from student to student, all students should be provided with the opportunity to reach their greatest potential. This should answer the general educators'

objection about students being given an unfair advantage and should also answer the student's perception of receiving an unfair advantage. This is empowering because students have a fair chance, rather than giving them a crutch when none is needed.

5. Assessments allow students, while using appropriate accommodations, to demonstrate their skills without the interference of their disabilities. (Adapted from CEC, 2000)

Throughout the literature it is noted how important it is for all students to be included in assessments in order to give an accurate picture of how all students are performing. Assessments that allow students to demonstrate their knowledge empowers them.

6. After selecting and providing appropriate adaptations/accommodations, their impact on the performance of the individual student is evaluated and only those that are effective are continued. (Adapted from Fuchs, Fuchs, Eaton, Hamlett, & Karns, 2000)

Evaluation provides data for decision making regarding which accommodations are useful and should be continued. The evaluation eases general educators' concerns about having too many or unnecessary accommodations. It assures parents that selected accommodations are of value. It further demonstrates to students that only effective accommodations are part of their individual plan. This is empowering because only useful accommodations are continued.

Guiding Principles, (Continued)

7. The adaptations/accommodations are reviewed, revised, and when appropriate, faded over time, allowing the student to move from dependence to independence. (IDEIA '04)

Accommodations that are no longer needed are removed over time. Students, parents, and staff see progress and growth, which is empowering.

8. A multidisciplinary team, which considers the input of the parent and student, decides upon the adaptations/accommodations. (IDEIA, '04)

The parent and student input is considered, which is empowering. The professionals make the final determination and do not abdicate their responsibility.

9. The appropriate adaptations/accommodations and the rationale for each of them are shared with all staff members who work with the student. (IDEIA '04)

This guideline will mitigate objections from general educators when they see the rationale for each accommodation. Students are empowered when staff and parents are in agreement as to what the student needs and is capable of doing at that time.

Riverside, on disk