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INTRODUCTION

THE IMPORTANCE OF A BOARD-APPROVED PLAN

As of the 2014–2015 school year, 32 states (of the 40 responding to the National Association for Gifted Children’s 2015 State of the States report) had some kind of mandate to identify and serve gifted and talented students enrolled in public schools. Of these states, some (21) monitored the compliance of individual school districts, and at least 18 states required local school districts to submit gifted education plans for approval to the state education agency. This means that there is a strong and ongoing need for guidance regarding the creation and structuring of gifted and talented education plans. These plans help lay out what services are provided, which students receive them, and how gifted education aligns with other aspects of the K–12 curriculum. Even for those states where such plans are not required, school districts all around the country are struggling with how to best meet the needs of advanced learners. This issue has become even more prevalent in general education circles as many teachers and schools are beginning to be held accountable for the growth and learning of all students—including those who are already above proficiency. This move toward evaluating educators based on growth has renewed the focus on how to best serve those students who are already proficient. It has also called forth a conversation about how to incorporate gifted and talented education into mainstream education initiatives.

All of this is taking place while the field of gifted education is simultaneously realizing and accepting that what makes for “best practice” in K–12 gifted education can and should look different across different states, districts, and even school buildings. This contemporary view of advanced educational services means that sources of generic “best practices” are not what is needed. Instead, a process is needed for how local school leaders and stakeholders can develop their own plans for advanced educational services to best meet the needs of their students.

As referenced above, the creation and maintenance of a gifted education plan for a local district is required in at least 18 states. Even beyond these states, far more districts maintain some kind of informal plan or policy for how to meet the needs of advanced learners and other students with high potential. Often the creation or revision of such plans is the first job of a tenderfoot gifted education coordinator. Despite this seemingly common requirement, teacher training regarding gifted and talented education is inconsistent at best—only Nevada requires a stand-alone course in gifted education for all preservice teachers. This leaves many districts without experts on staff to help develop or implement services. Because of this lack of consistent training, a book that presents not only a guiding structure and format, but also case study examples from real school districts across the country that have

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been through the process and lived to tell the tale, has the potential to be of great value. Never has this been truer than in the post-No Child Left Behind age where growth is a major focus—something we will discuss more in Chapter 1. Many districts have seen their funding cut back in recent years, making the task even more daunting. District leaders must now challenge all learners, including those who are already proficient, without expending any additional resources. Because hiring additional staff is rarely an option, many schools need resources at hand in order to accomplish these daunting tasks.

This book is about gifted education plans. By “plans” we mean proactive, thoughtfully derived systems, procedures, and policies regarding how a school or a school district will assure that the needs of advanced learners are met. Although this book will cover many traditional topics (e.g., data use, student identification, programs and services), we chose the topic of gifted education plans for a very important reason. Many people in the field of education can probably reflect back to an outstanding teacher or even a special program that made their school experience especially positive or effective. Eventually, these people will retire, if they haven’t already, and all too often the programs retire or move on with them. Effective or otherwise outstanding programs should never have to retire and be created by each generation from the ground up. Likewise, building administrators come and go with their own opinions and ideas about gifted education that might not be in line with the best practices that were put into place by a concerned coordinator. There is also the nonstop questioning from concerned parents who want to know how their child will be challenged. For all of these (and other) reasons, formalized policy is important.

Wisconsin State Statute 121.02(1)(t) states that [Each school board shall] “Provide access to an appropriate program for pupils identified as gifted or talented.” In the application of this statute, the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction required that “Each school district shall establish a plan . . . to coordinate the gifted and talented program” (Wisconsin Administrative Code 8.01(2)(t)2). This is the very first in a list of requirements laid out in this particular Administrative Rule governing gifted education in the state of Wisconsin. But why? Why is one of the most explicit requirements for school districts that a plan must exist and that it is the responsibility of the school board? The answer is likely related to the phenomenon described above that many of us in education have witnessed all too often. Individuals or committees spend countless hours developing plans and procedures just to have many of these plans forgotten with the change of administration or the hiring of a new staff member. Why school board approved plans? We believe that in the contemporary world of K–12 education, where nearly nothing is certain, enshrining gifted education plans and policies in board-approved policy is the best way to leverage support from other stakeholders as well as to assure this particular agenda is taken seriously. Of course, we are not so naïve as to think that this means

all one must do is get a policy approved by the board and then it is guaranteed to go off without a hitch. That said, we believe it's a step in the right direction and have seen it help advance advocacy efforts with reluctant teachers and administrators.

This leads us to our very first recommendation: Whatever you take away from this book and decide to implement as a gifted education or advanced academic plan or system in your district, make sure that your procedures and policies are thoroughly reviewed and then placed into a comprehensive plan, which is then approved by your school board. As if the reasons we've already outlined are not enough, many states either require that district plans be developed and then submitted to the states on an annual or semiannual basis, or that they be available in case of a state review or a formal complaint. Because just under half of the states in the nation require districts to have gifted education plans on file with the state, we were surprised to realize that no publication existed on this topic until now. Some of these states are: Alabama, Arizona, Arkansas, Colorado, Georgia, Iowa, Louisiana, Maine, Maryland, Mississippi, Nebraska, North Carolina, Ohio, Oklahoma, Oregon, Rhode Island, South Carolina, Tennessee, Utah, Virginia, and Washington. Of course, this changes all of the time. To see if your state requires such plans, check the National Association for Gifted Children's State of the States website (<http://www.nagc.org/resources-publications/gifted-state>).

Much of this book is about process. There is no such thing as a canned gifted education program or a one-size-fits-all policy for identification or services, yet volumes abound to provide exactly this kind of information. In this book we hope to guide the concerned school or district through the process of developing its own plan and procedures for assuring that those students who have already mastered grade-level materials remain challenged. Note that we will focus on a much larger population than that which is commonly discussed in "gifted education" circles. Our goal with the gifted education plans that we describe in this book is to assure that any student with an unmet advanced need will have that need met through an appropriate intervention or service. The plans in this book will not tell you what to do with the kids who "are" gifted because of some "happenstance of nature or nurture" (Lohman, 2006, p. 7). Rather, they will assist the concerned school or district in how to plan for what will happen once students have already mastered grade-level content or require support in a domain that cannot be elsewhere provided. Through this process, the end goal is assuring that as many students remain challenged as much of the time as possible while engaged in compulsory education.

STRUCTURE

The book is organized into two parts. Part I provides a structure with which schools or districts can develop their own plans. With this as a goal, we proceed through first understanding who your students are, what they can currently do and already know, and what content would best help them move forward. Much of this involves diving into data (of all types) to determine what it is that students already know and how that compares to what they will be taught. However, every state has its own laws and regulations for gifted education and every district is different. For better or worse, state regulations are often vague at best. Even best practice handbooks can be too theoretical for staff in schools to implement easily. Because of this, Part II includes links to real gifted education plans from districts around the country, coupled with written commentaries from district personnel who were either involved in their development or had to live with their implementation. Rather than reprint all of the district materials, we compiled them all onto our publisher's website (see <http://www.prufrock.com/Assets/ClientPages/DesigningGiftedPrograms.aspx>). As you read the commentary chapters in Part II of this book, you can follow along with the district materials to see what they actually said about what they put into practice. Our goal here is to show what "real-world" gifted education plans look like and what their rationale was when they were created. Not all practices are ideal and, in some cases, the authors of the commentaries note things they'd like to see changed. In this fashion, this book includes a structure for how to create your own plan as well as in-depth, annotated examples for what such plans look like in practice. We hope that the combination of the "best practices" with the "real-world practices" helps you better meet the needs of advanced learners. If nothing else, hopefully the collective experience of the Part II chapter authors helps you move a little further and a little faster than if you had to start from scratch.