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Educators Guild Newsletter

Middle Years Scholars Program — Success in Public Education

The Middle Years Scholars Program in Springfield, Mo., is tailored to the needs of profoundly gifted students in sixth through eighth grades. A program of Springfield Public Schools, MYSP is an example of successful public education for exceptionally intelligent students.

The Middle Years program originally was established as a pilot elementary school. But teachers soon realized their abilities to challenge were being outpaced by their students' abilities to learn. These 10-, 11- and 12-year-olds were learning so rapidly that they needed instruction beyond what the teachers could provide.

The staff addressed the problem first by bringing in volunteers and later paid instructors to teach advanced subjects in mathematics. But it soon dawned on them that specialists in math were already on the school district payroll – at the high schools.

They approached the principal of a nearby high school and proposed introducing some of their advanced students into a high school geometry class. The principal agreed, and a handful of gifted students, accompanied by a gifted education instructor, were bused the mile-and-a-half to the high school for their class. At the end of the semester, they had earned the highest grades, had proven their capacity to behave appropriately and had set the stage for more students to follow.

Success in hand, the staff from Springfield's gifted program again approached their "gifted-friendly" high school principal. Soon, the accelerated students and an instructor had a classroom at the high school. The arrangement allowed them to mix high school courses with advanced middle school courses and do so using fewer staff.

Lynda Crowder, who has been involved with the MYSP from the beginning, said all of this was done quietly, so as not to draw attention to the program. She added that once its success was proven, the program would be more likely to survive.

"We didn't want anybody to tell us that we couldn't do it before we tried," Crowder said.

Serendipitously, the MYSP was looking for a full-time home at the same time that there was a push to establish

an International Baccalaureate program. Both found a home at Central High School, which at the time was losing enrollment and had a reputation for low test scores. Last year, Central had the highest scores in the district.

Springfield's MYSP is the only one of its kind in Missouri, and although it does receive state grants, it was created and is sustained by the local school board. The 120 students enrolled this year in the Middle Years program make up nearly 10 percent of the student population at Central High School where they attend classes. According to both administrators and parents, the advantage of gathering these students at the high school is twofold.

First, because there are more than 100 students in the program, middle years scholars at Central High have formed a tight-knit and supportive peer group. And because they make up a significant percentage of the student bodies, they are readily accepted into high school classes without stigma. The result is a social environment that fosters these students and nurtures their abilities.

"We consistently underestimate what gifted kids can do. The kids have convinced me that they can do anything they want to if we just get out of the way."

MYTH: Being gifted guarantees straight A's in school.

FACT: Being smart (even really, really smart) doesn't always lead to high grades. Some highly gifted children don't do well in school at all. Then again, there are gifted kids who get A's but aren't learning anything because they already know all or most of what's being covered. So their grades don't show progress, just performance.



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(See MYSP on page 3)

Uncover federal aid for early entry college students

Many early college entrants and their parents run into roadblocks when seeking federal student aid. However, knowledgeable teachers and counselors may be able to help. Early entrance college students are eligible for federal aid as long as specific requirements are met. Because college financial aid advisors do not deal with early entrants often, they may need to be informed about specific rules that apply to these students.

WHO IS NOT QUALIFIED

1) Students who are attending college courses for enrichment, but are not seeking a degree are NOT eligible for federal aid.

2) Students who are enrolled in high school – essentially any student actively seeking a high school diploma – are NOT eligible for federal aid. This includes any students receiving high school credit for the college courses they are taking. However, this restriction does not include students who are seeking a GED. Students enrolled in both college courses and a GED program are eligible for federal aid, but federal aid money cannot be used for GED programs.

WHO IS QUALIFIED

Federal student aid is offered only to “regular students,” which the Department of Education defines as “one who is enrolled in an institution to obtain a degree or certificate.” College students who have applied to and been accepted by a college are considered matriculated and fall under this definition.

Having a high school diploma is NOT a requirement for receiving federal aid. Students without a diploma are eligible for federal stu-

dent aid if they meet other specific requirements established by the Department of Education. Unfortunately, the information regarding those exceptions is not readily available.

Although the requirements are alluded to, specific descriptions are not found on the FAFSA Web site, or in the Student Guide to federal financial aid. The Federal Student Aid Handbook, which is published by the federal government for financial aid professionals, includes detailed information about the requirements for eligibility. The relevant portion of that document, including a list of approved tests, is available online. <www.ifap.ed.gov/sfahandbooks/attachments/0304Vol1Ch1.pdf>

According to the handbook, there are two ways for students to establish federal financial aid eligibility without a high school diploma: 1) by establishing high school diploma equivalence or 2) under the Education Department’s Ability-to-Benefit provision. Below is an outline of your options:

DIPLOMA EQUIVALENCE

The Department of Education recognizes three equivalents for students who do not have a high school diploma or a GED.

- 1) If a student has already completed a post-secondary program of at least two years’ length, his or her transcript is acceptable, but only if the program is acceptable for full credit toward a bachelor’s degree.
- 2) Students who have completed a home study program approved by their home state can submit their certificate of completion.
- 3) Students enrolling in a program leading to an associate



degree or higher can submit documentation of academic excellence in high school AND meet the requirements for admission to the college.

If a student does not meet one of the three requirements for diploma equivalence, another option is...

ABILITY-TO-BENEFIT

Put simply, any student who passes an Education Department-approved test or meets Education Department-approved state standards is eligible for federal financial aid under the Ability-to-Benefit provision. The Ability-to-Benefit rules (Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) 34, Part 668, Subpart J) are independent from the admission requirements to the college or university.

Unfortunately, there is almost no crossover between the approved tests and the popular college admission tests required by most schools. This means students who are applying under the Ability-to-Benefit rules likely will have to seek out an independent testing facility that offers one of the approved tests. Such facilities may be available at some colleges and universities, but they MUST be independent from the admissions and financial aid offices at those institutions.

Teacher to Teacher

Conducting Informal Assessments:

Meeting the needs of gifted students does not need to be an all-consuming task. One of the easiest ways to better understand how to provide challenging material is to conduct informal, whole-class assessments on a regular basis.

For example, before beginning any unit, administer the end-of-the-unit test. Students who score better than 80 percent should not be forced to “relearn” information they already know. Rather, these students should be given parallel opportunities that are challenging. I generally offered these students the option to complete an independent project on the topic or to substitute another experience that would meet the objectives of the assignment, i.e. taking a college/distance course.

With areas of the curriculum that are sequential, such as mathematics and spelling, I recommend giving the end-of-the-year test during the first week of school. If you have students who can demonstrate competency at 80 percent or higher, you will save them an entire year of frustration and boredom if you can determine exactly what their ability level is and then offer them curriculum that allows them to move onto the next grade.

Formal assessments can be extremely helpful, however, they are expensive, and there is generally a backlog of students waiting to be tested. Conducting informal assessments is a useful and inexpensive tool that will offer you a lot of information.

Marie Capurro, M.Ed. is a former public school teacher who is now the director of the Davidson Institute for Talent Development — a national non-profit organization devoted to meeting the needs of gifted children and the professionals who serve them. She can be reached at mcapurro@ditd.org

Opportunities for Educators: Online courses in gifted education

More than 100 universities offer courses and degree or certificate programs in gifted education. However, oftentimes they are not accessible to you because they are not in your hometown or are not offered at convenient times. The programs listed below may be of interest because they are offered either online or at times when many educators have a break from school.



The Department of Educational Psychology at The University of Georgia has a gifted, creative, talented training on the Web (GCTWEB) endorsement program <www.coe.uga.edu/gctweb/>

The Center for Gifted Studies and Talent Development at Ball State University offers courses both on campus in the summer and statewide through the academic year for teachers interested in obtaining the Endorsement in Gifted and Talented Education. The center also offers special workshops for educators. <www.bsu.edu/teachers/services/ctr/ctr.htm>

Neag Center for Gifted Education and Talent Development at the University of Connecticut offers a master's degree online in Gifted and Talented Education. <137.99.89.70:8001/siegle/WebClasses/OnlineMasters.htm>

University of North Texas College of Education, Gifted Education offers online graduate courses and programs in gifted education. <www.coe.unt.edu/gifted/>

Confratute is an annual summer conference on gifted issues held at the Neag Center for Gifted Education and Talent Development University of Connecticut. <www.gifted.uconn.edu/confratu.html>

University of South Florida offers an online master's degree in Gifted Education. <www.coedu.usf.edu/giftedma/gifted.htm>

(MYPSP from page 1)

The second advantage that MYPSP offers is academic rigor. Beginning in sixth grade, students take a combination of gifted and high school honors courses. By eighth grade, students are taking three high school honors courses and one gifted class in communication arts.

Each student also is evaluated individually and offered a curriculum that suits his or her abilities and interests, so some students are

able to accelerate dramatically within the program.

“We don’t have the end-all program here in Springfield,” Crowder said. “But we meet a lot of needs that weren’t being met before.”

Crowder insists that there is nothing unique about Springfield and that similar programs can work almost anywhere. The difficulty is not in succeeding, but in getting started. If a similar program doesn’t exist, Crowder suggests asking ad-

ministrators to accommodate of gifted students in existing classes.

“If we can get one kid in a classroom somewhere, it’s going to demonstrate that we can be successful and that these students are wasting their time in a regular classroom,” Crowder said.

“We consistently underestimate what gifted kids can do. The kids have convinced me that they can do anything they want to if we just get out of the way.”



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Mentors who make a difference

Daniel Kane, a 2003 Davidson Fellow Laureate, has been described as one of the best talents in mathematics in decades. At the age of 17, Daniel has proven conjectures posed by leaders in the field and published papers in professional journals of mathematics. And although his talent and his drive are exceptional, Daniel's success also is the product of a successful mentorship.

Dr. Ken Ono, a professor of mathematics at the University of Wisconsin at Madison, has devoted a significant portion of his career to mentoring talented, young math students, but Ono says that's not something he set out to do. He began working with high school students after a member of his extended family approached him for help with an especially bright student.

Ono found the experience rewarding. Since then he has mentored about a

dozen students – many of whom have received national recognition for their work.

Most of those students came to Ono through a local high school program that allows students to attend college courses at UW during the day. Daniel, who took part in that program before graduating last year, sought out Ono because of a shared interest in number theory.

Weekly meetings soon became daily discussions that were largely directed by Daniel with the professor offering suggestions and readings to help his protégé along. Ono also helped Daniel publish his first academic paper in a professional journal.

Daniel entered MIT this fall and is taking more advanced courses in mathematics. His professors, says



Dr. Ken Ono

Ono, are probably just now finding out how talented he really is. And in the true spirit of mentorship, Ono is happy to see Daniel move on to other things.

"It's time for Danny to see a wider array of subjects in math and science than just those that I'm interested in," Ono says. "It would be selfish of me to keep pushing my interests."

Ono's advice for teachers? Use your available resources to help exceptionally talented students. Ono says a call to the department head at a local college or university may be all it takes to find an appropriate mentor. He also encourages educators to take advantage of the many services that are available such as mentoring programs, science and math competitions and talent searches – Ono's particular favorite is Science Service. (online at www.sciserve.org) Many more are available at www.gtcybersource.org.