

**Wisconsin School District**  
**Survey on Identification of K-2 Gifted and Talented Students:**  
**Response and Discussion**

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Recently Wisconsin school districts responded to a survey about identification of gifted and talented students in kindergarten through grade 2. The results of the survey varied, but seemed to highlight a number of questions. What is a school district responsible for when identifying? Why is it necessary to identify kindergarten through second grade students as gifted and talented? What tools should be used? What procedures should a district follow? Can you accurately identify a young child as gifted and talented with the tools used? These are the questions that I will attempt to provide more information about in the following pages.

### **What is a school district responsible for when identifying students as gifted and talented?**

School districts within the state of Wisconsin are mandated to follow standards prescribed by the Department of Public Instruction (DPI). Educators and administrators not only have a legal obligation, but an ethical and moral obligation to educate students of all abilities. Therefore, as a public education institution that is funded through public monies, we cannot pick and choose which standards to follow. With this in mind, standard (t) was designed specifically for gifted and talented student needs. As per the DPI website (<http://dpi.wi.gov/cal/gift-law.html>) the administrative rule is as follows:

**PI 8.01(2)(t).2.** *Each school district board shall establish a plan and designate a person to coordinate the gifted and talented program.*

Gifted and talented students shall be identified as required in s. 118.35(1), Stats. This identification shall include multiple criteria that are appropriate for the category of gifted including intelligence, achievement, leadership, creativity, product evaluations, and nominations. A pupil may be identified as gifted or talented in one or more of the categories under s.118.35(1), Stats. The school district board shall provide access, without charge for tuition to appropriate programs for pupils identified as gifted or talented as required under ss.118.35(3) and 121.02(1)(t), Stats. The school district board shall provide an opportunity for parental participation in the planning of the proposed program.

Related Wisconsin Statute

**S. 118.35, Wis. Stats.** Programs for gifted and talented pupils.

1. In this section, "gifted and talented pupils" means pupils enrolled in public schools who give evidence of high performance capability in intellectual, creative, artistic, leadership, or specific academic areas and who need services or activities not ordinarily provided in a regular school program in order to fully develop such capabilities.
2. The state superintendent shall by rule establish guidelines for the identification of gifted and talented pupils.
3. Each school board shall:
  - a. Ensure that all gifted and talented pupils enrolled in the school district have access to a program for gifted and talented pupils.

Each school board shall:

(t) Provide access to an appropriate program for pupils identified as gifted.

Standard (t) requires school districts to assure that the special needs of gifted and talented students are understood and accommodated in all Wisconsin public schools from kindergarten through grade 12. The standard is consistent with the philosophy of Wisconsin school districts that children are entitled to quality education.

The intent of the standard is to provide a framework for schools to develop the means by which gifted and talented pupils will be identified and, once identified, provide access to a set of systematic and continuous instructional activities, which are appropriate to the developmental needs of those children and youth. This standard is applied to all grade levels in a public educational institution and districts are held responsible to identify and serve gifted children at all grade levels.

**Why is it necessary to identify kindergarten through second grade students as gifted and talented?**

Incoming Kindergarten students come to us with a wide range of abilities. Some are innate and some have been developed through a nurturing environment. Discerning which of these students are gifted and talented is the difficulty that we face. If we choose not to identify,

and thus not serve, is there a detriment to those children? Research conducted by Smutny, Walker, and Meckstroth indicates that

If young children don't receive appropriate recognition and response during this sensitive period, potential skills may deteriorate. . . . Having learned easy achievement without struggle and persistence these high-ability students now find little meaning in a school day. Many have fallen into a pattern of low performance. . . . The earliest school years are the most essential for finding these children before their eagerness and joy for learning have been conditioned out of them. . . . A young child who is provided with appropriately challenging, stimulating schoolwork can show substantial gains in achievement, motivation, and self-concept. (p. 6 –*Teaching Young gifted Children in the Regular Classroom*)

Besides learning issues such as underachievement other behaviors that can disrupt the learning of others can actually be mislabeled as behavioral disorder (bd). This may include obstinacy, impertinence, stubbornness, poor judgment, or failure to follow directions (p.8-9 Smutny et. al.)

Additionally, Linda Kreger Silverman describes behaviors of gifted and talented children as asynchronous.

“Gifted is asynchronous development in which advanced cognitive abilities and heightened intensity combines to create inner experiences and awareness that are qualitatively different from the norm. This asynchrony increases with higher intellectual capacity. The uniqueness of the gifted renders them particularly vulnerable and requires modifications in parenting, teaching, and counseling in order for them to develop optimally.” (*The Gifted Individual*,” Counseling the Gifted and Talented, Linda Kreger Silverman ed. Denver: Love Publishing Co., 1993, p.3)

Just as it is critical to identify students who lack the necessary skills to be successful in school starting in kindergarten so that early interventions can minimize the risk of failure, thus it is critical to identify those students who are academically gifted and talented to minimize the risk of underachievement and anti-social behaviors that can also lead to failure.

## **What tools and procedures should be used by a district to identify gifted and talented students as they enter school?**

Survey results indicated a wide variety of tools were used for this purpose. The responses indicated that when trying to identify, districts gathered both standardized and non-standardized data. No one tool stood out as the “best” tool. Rather it was clear that districts took a broad picture of the child and met the needs as they arose for individual students. Survey responses indicated that districts were uncomfortable with identifying at the K-2 grade level for a variety of reasons. These included:

1. Mislabeling a child as gifted has negative affects associated for that child.
2. Using only non-standardized information rather than data driven tools misidentifies and misses truly gifted students.
3. Lacking established procedures allows for inconsistent identification of students – only some students were considered rather than looking at all students.
4. Some test scores are inconsistent and unreliable.

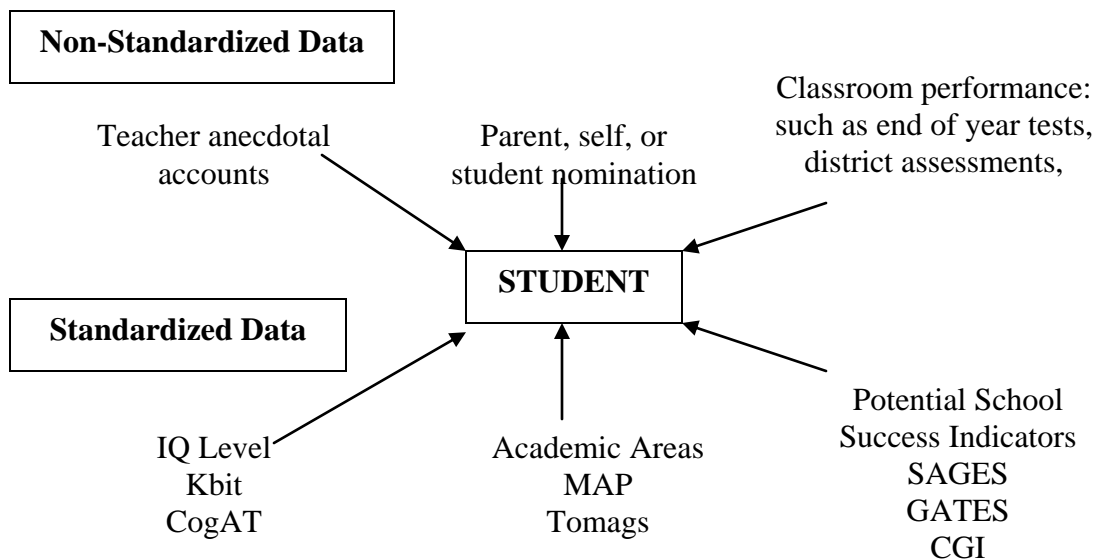
In a child’s career as a student he/she will be tested annually from grade 3 through grade 8 and again at grade 10 through the Wisconsin Knowledge and Concepts Exam (WKCE). Testing is a reality and schools use it throughout a child’s career as a student to inform decision-making. Keeping in mind that all tests are just a snapshot of a child at the time that they are given, districts need to couple test data with teacher and parent input so that a district can get a comprehensive picture of a child’s capacity.

Standard (t) requires that districts use a minimum of two criteria when identifying. Suggestions to meet that requirement include standardized and non-standardized data. Educators

in districts indicated that using standardized data in the areas of intellect, academic, and school success such as the Measures of Academic Progress (MAP), Kaufman Brief Intelligence Test (KBIT), Sages, and CogAT, along with out of grade level testing and coupled with parent and teacher input provided a more complete picture of the child in question and allowed the educators to feel more confidence in their identification process and in meeting the long term needs of their gifted students. Using a triangulation of data process helped them separate students who are bright and do very well in school from students who have needs beyond the normal curriculum in a classroom because of their gifted capacity.

Recommendations, therefore, include:

1. Create a broad picture of the child (see diagram below as an example).
2. Gather standardized and non-standardized data – using both reduces misidentification of students who are able learners but not gifted.
3. Place gathered data into the Iowa Acceleration Scale (developed by Belin-Blank Center) to assist when placing students in need of acceleration.
4. Convene as a group to discuss the educational needs of the child.



## **Is early admission to Kindergarten an identification of gifted and talented students?**

Most districts that responded to the survey did not see Early Admission as identification of gifted students. Many districts have policies that define early admission and because of the arbitrary cutoff date often times allowed children with September birthdays entrance into their kindergarten. Other districts never allowed early entrance or only highly able students entry to kindergarten.

When a request to come early to Kindergarten is made, districts can look at the request in various domains. “Is the child ready?” appears to be a simple question; however, it is more complex than initially thought. Social skills, academic skills, success in interacting and adapting to the school environment all play a role in readiness for kindergarten. Checklists, testing, a trial period in summer school are often ways district help determine whether a child of four should enter a 5-year old kindergarten. Since cutoff dates are arbitrary and determined by the state (*Prepared for Kindergarten: What Does “Readiness” Mean?* National Institute for Early Education Research) a school district needs to determine what is best for the child.

Recommendations include:

1. Explicitly defining readiness to assist parents, teachers and others in preparing children for school success.
2. Realistically assessing supports currently present in your communities.
3. Using quality preschool education to enhance readiness and children’s prospects for reaching higher levels of academic achievement.
4. Devoting more resources to kindergarten programs that support learning and developing strengths and minimizing weaknesses of students.

5. Relying on multiple sources of data, rather than a single readiness test. Often these are invalid measurements when determining ability.

If a parent feels that he/she are bothering or imposing when asking questions about early admission, gifted and talented support, and curriculum; then that parent will walk away unhappy or disgruntled which could color future interactions. Conversely if the parent feels respected and his/her questions are answered honestly, openly, and collaboratively the tone is now set for a more positive relationship. In Compass Points, the article entitled *Connecting for High Potential* makes the point to keep the child at the heart of all decisions. “We can best help children learn, not by deciding what we think they should learn and thinking of ingenious ways to teach it to them, but by making the world, as far as we can, accessible to them, paying serious attention to what they do, answering their questions – if they have any – and helping them explore the things they are most interested in.” (John Holt, NAGC, Winter, 2006, p.11-12)

### **What process/procedure happens after identification of gifted and talented students?**

Differentiation is the current choice for meeting diverse needs within the classroom. Too often additional seatwork, homework, or worksheets are used to “add” to a gifted child’s education. Very quickly students understand that getting done early means more busy work, not necessarily appropriate learning experiences. Behaviors then occur that mask a child’s potential. These include underachievement, incomplete homework, and not attending during class discussions. Using differentiation to provide tasks that are at an instructional level for the gifted child takes planning and support. Quality differentiation changes content, product or process (Tomlinson, 2004) in an endeavor to encourage individual student growth. Using summative and formative assessment as a guide to determining what students know and can do changes instruction and can create respectful learning tasks that encourage all students to make gains.

## **What is a school district's responsibility to its students who are gifted and talented?**

Oftentimes when surveying districts more questions are raised than are answered. This brief discussion hoped to focus on children and what is best to meet their needs. In the current climate of budgets and staffing issues let's not forget that our children are our focus. Therefore, as districts determine what is best for the children they serve, several points to consider are:

1. When determining policy and practice do all students have equal access for identification regardless of parental advocacy, race, socio-economic status etc.?
2. Since Standard (t) is a required standard, does the district have resources in the form of appropriate curriculum, professional development, and personnel to support the gifted children they serve?
3. By offering a strong gifted and talented program what kind of public relations are you building with your community, school board, and parents?
4. Are your gifted and talented policies and procedures aligned with your mission statement and the No Child Left Behind Act?
5. Is the individual child at the heart of decision-making when determining curriculum, policies and procedures for gifted and talented children?

Although the answers to these questions are not easily forthcoming the discussion is well worth having. As in the words of Margaret Wheatly, "Life is inherently messy...but out of messiness comes great things."

## References

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