

OVERVIEW

There are an estimated three million academically gifted and talented students in U.S. classrooms, spanning pre-Kindergarten to grade 12. Although these students represent a diversity of experiences, expertise, and cultural backgrounds, they all require a responsive and challenging educational system to help them achieve their highest potential.

The data collected for this report and highlighted here offer a snapshot of the extent of state support for gifted learners in the 2010-2011 school year. Forty-four states and one territory (referred to collectively from here forward as “states”) responded to this year’s *State of the States* questionnaire, which contained a combination of closed-response and open-ended questions about gifted policies, programs, services, and other practices within the states. Several major themes emerged: decentralized decision-making and limited accountability; limited service options; the importance of professional development; the influence of federal education law; and funding issues in a difficult economic climate.

DECENTRALIZED DECISION-MAKING AND LIMITED ACCOUNTABILITY

Without a coherent national strategy or a federal mandate, all gifted programming decisions are made at the state and local levels. Within this context, states and districts can respond to the specific needs of their populations; the context also presents the potential for fractured approaches and limits on funding. The variation in policies results in a disparity of services between and within states. Many states provide little direction regarding the education of gifted and talented students, leaving local education agencies (LEAs) to determine how and whether to identify and serve their gifted and talented students. Even in states that provide direction, there is often a lack of specificity and clarity regarding identification procedures, programs, and services for gifted learners.

- Thirty-one states have a mandate related to gifted and talented education, for identification, services, or both.
- Fourteen states have no mandate, and 5 states that have mandates do not provide any funding for them.
- Forty-one states have defined giftedness in statute or regulations. However, only 32 of them require LEAs to follow the definition.
- Schools in 30 states are required to use specific criteria and/or methods to identify gifted and talented students, and the criteria/methods are completely or partially determined at the state level in 23. Nine states require a particular identification process, while the others leave some or all of the specifics to the LEAs.
- Four states require LEAs to accept gifted identifications from other states, and 16 states require LEAs to accept identifications from other LEAs in the same state. Relocating families may have to repeat the identification process in order to obtain services for their gifted children.

- Some states require gifted education strategies aligned with special education, especially free appropriate public education (23) and non-discriminatory testing (24). Far fewer states require other strategies from special education, such as due process (14), dispute resolution (13), Child Find (13), and individual education plans (13).

States that do specify standards or requirements regarding gifted programming differ in their ability to monitor and report on the quality of gifted programs.

- Seventeen states reported having one or more full-time staff members at the state level dedicated to gifted education. Twenty-seven states have entirely part-time gifted education staff. In 31 states, including 21 without a full-time person dedicated to gifted education, these staffs also have responsibilities for one or more programs or projects not specific to gifted education.
- Twenty states reported that they neither monitor nor audit LEA programs for gifted and talented students, and 4 others do so only when the LEAs apply for funds. In 13 states, LEAs are not required to report on their gifted education services, and in 2 others LEAs are only required to submit reports when applying for funds.
- Twelve states that do not monitor or audit LEA gifted programs also do not require reporting. Nine of those states gave no additional information on how they ensure compliance.
- Fourteen states reported that data regarding the number of students in the state who are identified as gifted and talented is not collected or not available. Several states did not have information on identified students' gender (16) or ethnicity (12).
- Ten states publish an annual report on the state of gifted education, and 5 others publish this information as part of a larger report.
- Sixteen states include gifted and talented indicators on district report cards or other state accountability reporting forms. Twenty-nine states report advanced proficiency indicators on those same forms.

SERVICE OPTIONS

Services to gifted and talented students may be limited by state and/or district funding, geographic isolation, or other inhibiting factors. Additionally, many state laws and policies leave to districts all decisions about the type of services offered.

- Twenty-six states require some form of program or service for gifted and talented students. These required services fall under a variety of categories, including intellectual (20), specific academic areas (12), general academic (9), creativity (9), visual or performing arts (8), and leadership (4).

- Twenty-one states require services starting in either pre-Kindergarten or Kindergarten all the way through grade 12. Another 4 start service requirements later, and 2 of those also end service requirements earlier.
- Very few states have state policy to specify whether gifted programs should include components such as differentiated instruction (9), contact time (7), social-emotional support (5), academic guidance and counseling (5), or content-based acceleration (3).
- At almost every grade level, the regular classroom is one of the most-used delivery methods for gifted services. It was the most frequently named method for pre-Kindergarten and Kindergarten (11) and second most frequently named in early elementary (19), upper elementary (18), and middle school (16).

STATE POLICIES AFFECTING SERVICES

- In the majority of states (35), LEAs set academic acceleration policies. Eight states specifically allow acceleration by state policy.
- LEAs also set proficiency-based promotion policies in 25 states, although 14 states have policies permitting this practice. On the other hand, 3 states specifically prohibit proficiency-based promotion.
- Seven states have policies specifically permitting early entrance to Kindergarten. Ten states do not allow early entrance, and 24 states leave the decision to LEAs.
- In most states (24), policies on whether a student may be dually enrolled in middle and high school are made at the local level. Ten states specifically allow this kind of dual enrollment, and 8 states prohibit it. Whether high school graduation credit is earned for these courses is also usually determined at the local level (16), although 17 states have policies that permit it and 1 state prohibits it.
- Thirty-two states specifically permit students to be dually enrolled in high school and college or university. Eleven states set this policy locally, and 1 state prohibits it. In most cases (30), state policy allows the student to earn credit towards high school graduation through college courses.
- Several states fund residential public high schools for math and science (16), fine and performing arts (11), or the humanities (2). Fourteen states fund a virtual high school.
- States may also fund advanced programs called governor's schools during the summer (13) or during the school year (2).

THE IMPORTANCE OF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Survey responses indicated that LEAs relied upon the regular classroom as one of the top three delivery methods for gifted services from pre-Kindergarten to middle school. However, only six

states require regular classroom teachers to have pre-service training in the nature and needs of gifted students, despite the fact that these teachers are most often relied upon to meet the diverse educational needs of our most able students.

- Six states require all teachers to receive pre-service training in gifted and talented education.
- General education teachers in 36 states are not required to have training in gifted and talented education at any point in their careers.

Even where districts place gifted students in specialized programs, the professional preparation of their teachers will vary.

- Twenty-one states require teachers in specialized gifted education programs to have a certificate or endorsement in gifted education.
- Only five states require teachers in specialized gifted programs to receive annual professional development in gifted education.

Sixteen states require district administrators for gifted education; however, district administrators are only required to have training in gifted education in 6 states.

While there are signs that the emphasis placed on professional development in gifted education may be improving, it is still an area of concern. Professional development initiatives were considered a positive influence on gifted education by 28 of 43 respondents, and only 6 people said that this factor was not applicable to their states. However, a majority of respondents rated funding for professional training in gifted education (34), pre-service training in gifted education at the undergraduate level (34), and professional training for general education teachers in gifted instruction (40) as in need of attention.

THE INFLUENCE OF FEDERAL EDUCATION LAW

The extent to which federal education law, which does not address the learning needs of above-proficient children, has affected gifted and talented education is unclear. However, it does appear that federal law has had a negative effect on gifted education in many states.

- The lack of recognition of gifted and talented students in federal education law was one of the most negatively rated factors influencing gifted education, with 33 ratings in the very negative to slightly negative range, 7 neutrals, and only 1 positive rating.
- Federal education law's focus on struggling learners received similar ratings regarding its overall effect on gifted education, with 29 in the very negative to slightly negative range, 9 neutrals, and 2 in the positive to very positive range.

Open-ended questions regarding the effect of federal education law on gifted education programming and services elicited similar responses:

- Twelve referred to the focus on bringing underperforming students to proficiency levels, resulting in limited challenge for students who have met that target already.
- Thirteen explicitly stated that gifted and talented education programs, services, or staffing have been reduced or that less money is being spent on them.
- Thirteen noted that there had been little or no change as a result of federal education laws.

In response to later open-ended prompts for comments and questions, 4 respondents stated that a federal mandate or federal funding is needed to improve gifted education services.

FUNDING ISSUES IN A DIFFICULT ECONOMIC CLIMATE

In the absence of federal funding for gifted education services, the success and long-term stability of gifted programs and services are tied to the degree to which states dedicate a reliable funding stream to districts to meet student needs. However, this report found that gifted and talented learners in the majority of states are dependent on local rather than state funding to support programs and services to meet their needs.

- Out of 43 responding states, 23 specifically allocate funding for gifted services. Eight additional states indicated that funds might be available as part of general education funding.
- Of the 32 states with mandates related to gifted and talented education, only 4 reported funding the mandate completely at the state level.
- Of the 26 states that submitted non-zero funding amounts for gifted education in 2010-2011, 7 spent more than \$50 million and 4 spent less than \$1 million. An additional 10 states reported spending \$0 in state funds. State funding per identified gifted student ranged from less than \$8 to more than \$2,500.
- Funding for gifted education was rated as one of the areas of greatest need of attention, with 35 respondents rating it as most in need (16) or in need (19) of attention, and no one rating it as not in need or least in need of attention. Funding for professional training in gifted education was rated only slightly better, with 34 rating it as most in need (6) or in need (28) of attention and 3 rating it as not in need (2) or least in need (1) of attention.

The ongoing economic crisis has affected many state budgets, and gifted education budgets often reflect these changes.

- Between 2008-09 and 2010-11, 14 states decreased funding for gifted education, while 11 increased it.
- When asked about positive and negative influences on gifted education, respondents gave negative ratings to all three factors related to changes in funding: change in state funding

for gifted education; change in state funding for education; and decrease in general education formula.

- When asked about recent changes in their states, 6 respondents explicitly mentioned decreases in funding or a need for additional funds for gifted education.

A majority of states had representatives who responded to the request for information for this report, thereby providing us with a wide view of gifted education across the country. The report shows the great range of state-level support and direction in gifted education, as well as emphasizing the areas that are common concerns across the states. The range of responses highlights areas for growth and possible directions for change. Features such as specific mandates, high levels of funding, professional preparation requirements, and accountability measures in particular states represent possible models for other states to consider as they continue to strive for the best possible educational experiences for gifted and talented students.