

**AASA**  
THE SCHOOL SUPERINTENDENTS ASSOCIATION

# School Administrator

SEPTEMBER 2015

ESSENTIAL INSIGHTS AND COMMENTARY FOR SCHOOL SYSTEM LEADERS



## Cultivating Gifted Students

Expanding how we view  
giftedness in schools

### PLUS

*'Dear Colleague' Letters, p9*

*Frugality's Downside, p14*

*Schuler: Everyday Heroes, p46*

*Ethics: An Illegal Handoff, p8*





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Superintendent | Lincoln County School District,  
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# SchoolAdministrator

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**School Administrator** (ISSN 0036-6439) is a benefit of membership in AASA, The School Superintendents Association, 1615 Duke St., Alexandria, VA 22314. Telephone: 703-875-0772. Fax: 703-841-1543. Annual membership dues in the association are \$447 (active members), of which \$110 covers a subscription to *School Administrator*. *School Administrator* is published monthly except July. Send address changes to AASA, Membership Division, 1615 Duke St., Alexandria, VA 22314. Copyright 2015 by AASA. All rights reserved. Printed in USA.



Too often, career and technical education has been thought of as an add-on feature to an otherwise stand-alone curriculum. I was thrilled, therefore, to see *School Administrator's* April 2015 issue acknowledge CTE's integral role in increasing student engagement and achievement.

**CTE ISN'T JUST ABOUT GETTING STUDENTS INTO A JOB.** It is about laying the foundation they need as life-long learners to achieve their goals — whether they are heading to a two- or four-year college degree, an industry-recognized certification or other training or credentials. And as Chaney Mosely noted in his article (“Career and College Ready”), CTE educators are often the ones **LEADING THE WAY WITH NEW APPROACHES** such as career academies.

I hope that such attention to a readership of school district leaders can help us share the importance of recognizing CTE professionals as partners in K-12 education who stand ready to prepare every student for college and career success.

**LEANN WILSON**  
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR,  
ASSOCIATION FOR CAREER AND TECHNICAL EDUCATION,  
ALEXANDRIA, VA.

## Pioneer Women

In your 150th anniversary issue (February 2015), I paid special attention to the article on diversity by Glenn Cook. I was one of the 75 women selected to participate in the 1977 Ford Foundation grant that he references. Until her death, AASA administrator Effie Jones kept tabs on each of us, but I have lost track of most of the other women in the cohort.

**LETTERS SHOULD** be addressed to: Editor, *School Administrator*, 1615 Duke St., Alexandria, VA 22314. Fax: 703-841-1543. E-mail: [magazine@aasa.org](mailto:magazine@aasa.org)

I am wondering whether AASA has any information regarding the careers of these women? I went on to become a superintendent in the Kelso School District in Washington. Upon retirement from that position, I began a second career teaching and coordinating leadership programs for Washington State University.

**GAY V. SELBY**  
EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP PROGRAM CHAIR,  
WASHINGTON STATE UNIVERSITY,  
VANCOUVER, WASH.

## Fractal Leadership

In reading Mark Edwards' article, “Second-Order Leadership” (May 2015), I was particularly impressed by his reference to fractal leadership as a desired model. I wrote a paper about 15 years ago on the importance of incorporating a “new sciences” view as organizational leaders. Since that time, it has been rare to find leaders who are aware of these concepts.

I appreciate Edwards for advancing the idea that connectedness and self-similarity are foundational leadership concepts in this new era. He has a like-minded thinker on the West Coast who is attempting to do similar work.

**DEVIN VODICKA**  
SUPERINTENDENT,  
VISTA UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT,  
VISTA, CALIF.

## Any Ideas?

The staff at *School Administrator* is planning the magazine's spring issues, and we'd welcome our readers' ideas on what we ought to address. If you've read a good book or heard a presentation relating to one of the upcoming editorial themes, give us a heads-up. And if you are eager to propose your own story for us, please do so.

The spring themes are these:

- ▶ March: the productivity of rural education
- ▶ April: intelligence and grit, social and emotional learning
- ▶ May: combating poverty through schooling
- ▶ June: leadership succession

Please send your thinking to [magazine@aasa.org](mailto:magazine@aasa.org).

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THE SCHOOL SUPERINTENDENTS ASSOCIATION

## MISSION STATEMENT:

AASA, The School Superintendents Association, advocates for the highest quality public education for all students, and develops and supports school system leaders.





 Jamie Tetley, CCC-SLP  
Speech-Language Pathologist, Schools

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## STARTING POINT

### Going Going Gifted

The fragile funding of instructional programs was once again brought to the fore as we put the finishing touches on this issue. A coordinator of a gifted education program in a school

district recommended to us by the National Association for Gifted Children shared news that dripped with disappointment.

"Ironically," the program coordinator told me, "I found

out the second-to-the-last day of school that there will be an 18 percent cut in our gifted programming services for next year, the first intentional cut to our gifted program in 35 years." She added a glum-faced emoticon for emphasis.

The effect on this small district in the Pacific Northwest is her reduced time to work with identified students and to consult with teachers and parents.

The point isn't to criticize the district's decision making but to illustrate one of the challenges those in the gifted education movement regularly face. These reports from the field are part of this month's look at how

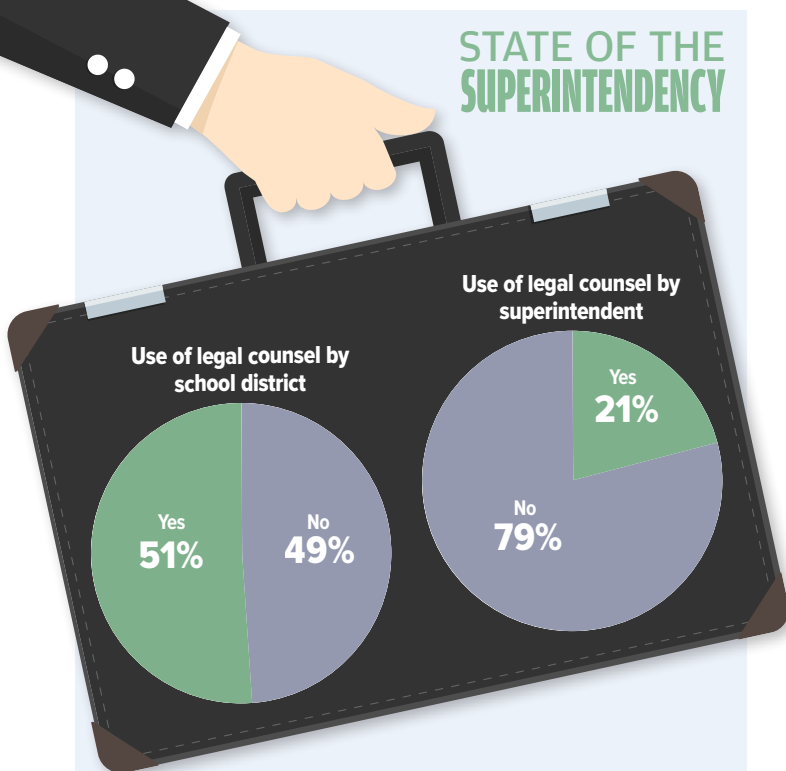
schools are trying to meet the needs of their highest-ability learners.

I'll also call your attention particularly to an article by William Johnson, the venerable, long-term leader of the Rockville Centre, N.Y., schools, which have effectively detracked instruction for all students for nearly two decades. His message (page 37) is worth considering, too.

*Jay P. Goldman*

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### STATE OF THE SUPERINTENDENCY



### Legal Counsel on Contracts

Half of the superintendents responding to an AASA study in 2014 indicated the school district used legal counsel to develop and/or negotiate the superintendent's employment agreement.

In contrast, only about one fifth of the superintendents said they retained the services of legal counsel for their employment agreement. While this represents no change from two previous studies, there is an indication that the larger the district's enrollment, the more likely that both boards of education and superintendents use legal counsel.

**SOURCE:** "2014 AASA Superintendents Salary and Benefits Study" published by AASA. Analysis was constructed by Leslie A. Finnan, Robert S. McCord, Christopher C. Stream, George G. Petersen and Noelle M. Ellerson. The full study is available at [www.aasa.org](http://www.aasa.org).



"HE does the meaning of life.  
I do the meaning of aptitude tests."





“A robust portfolio should also account for all of the ‘non-cognitive’ traits that teachers have influence over. How do we demonstrate a teacher’s influence on student confidence? Perseverance? Grit? These dispositions or habits of the mind are equally important to student development and teacher accountability.”

From “Some Thoughts on Assessments, APPR and Student Growth” by **Michael Nagler** (superintendent, Mineola, N.Y.) on his blog Nagler’s Notions

“I have a palpable memory of my tenth grade English teacher telling me that I would take AP the following year, that I did not have a choice in the matter. It was the first time I considered a more demanding route in school.”

From “Celebrating What Matters” by **Charles Sampson** (superintendent, Freehold Regional High School District, Englishtown, N.J.) on his superintendent’s blog

“Once again we are looking at legislation pending before the NJ Assembly and Senate that is not thought through as to the impact and ultimate value for efficient operations of the public school districts. Perhaps that is not [the] goal; however, it will be the outcome.”

From “Ill-Conceived Legislation” by **Louis J. Pepe** (assistant superintendent for business, Summit, N.J.) on his blog The Business of Education

“I had to use a checklist, but I believe I have been in each teacher’s classroom at least once. (If I missed anyone please let me know and I will be in your room first next year.) ... At first I would just write the teacher a positive note. After a while I started including an award and eventually I added the writing of these posts along with pictures of the people I observed.”

From “Ready to Begin Again” by **Tony Habra** (superintendent, Paw Paw, Mich.) on his superintendent’s blog

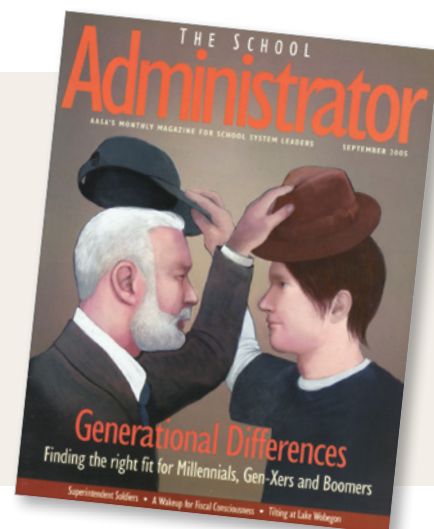
Read the full postings of these and other members’ blogs at [www.aasa.org/SAblogs.aspx](http://www.aasa.org/SAblogs.aspx).

“People push back against social justice. People suggest to me that this is not what the district needs to focus on. Social justice is too political they say. Social justice draws attention away from the important work that we must do in helping students learn the curriculum. ... I disagree.”

From “Will We Close Our Eyes?” by **Steve Matthews** (superintendent, Novi, Mich.) on his blog The Superintendent’s Chair

## FLASHBACK SEPTEMBER 2005

A theme issue on generational differences and how they play out between teachers and administrators, educators and parents, and students and teachers. Neil Howe and Bill Strauss, co-authors of a book on millennials, were the featured writers. ... “Superintendent Soldiers” described school administrators who’d been called up recently to active military duty in Iraq and elsewhere. A companion article examined how school boards cope with the extended absence of a superintendent in the military reserve. ... A letter writer applauded Superintendent Rosa Smith for her article on the over-representation of black boys in the school-to-prison pipeline. ... David Gee titled his President’s Corner column “Reform, Reform and More Reform.” ... The magazine’s advertising index listed 30 companies. ... AASA announced its monthly newsletter, the *AASA Bulletin*, now was strictly an electronic publication.





## A Penalty on the Handoff

**SCENARIO:** The wife of a high school assistant football coach who was terminated from his coaching position makes copies of the football team's playbook and mails them to several upcoming opponents on the football team's schedule. The wife is a teacher at the high school that had employed her husband. The varsity football coach is furious about the unauthorized playbook distribution and complains to the central office about punishing the offending teacher. Is disciplinary action warranted?



**KELLY HENSON:** The teacher's wife acted in a vindictive, retaliatory and unprofessional fashion. Student athletes were deprived of the opportunity to have a fair competition and were potentially exposed to injury. She has taken school property without permission and disseminated it without authorization.

The educator should be disciplined for her actions. Furthermore, I seriously doubt this teacher can remain in her current school. My experiences as a principal and superintendent tell me she will not be able to maintain appropriate professional relationships with her peers. An administrative transfer to another school in the district should be considered.

See the panelists' full analyses of this case and read the AASA Code of Ethics at [www.aasa.org/SAethics.aspx](http://www.aasa.org/SAethics.aspx).

**SARAH MACKENZIE:** As a member of a couple, both of whom work for the school system, she and her husband were obligated not to let their relationship interfere with their professional responsibilities.

Not only has she violated her teaching responsibilities in the school, but also the expectations of good sportsmanship. For a teacher to engage in this kind of behavior is a significant offense, and the resulting

discipline for her must be emphasized to underline for students and the entire community its seriousness. At the very least, suspension without pay for a period of time is warranted.

**SHELLEY BERMAN:** This unauthorized use of district property constitutes unprofessional conduct. Retaliating against the district by undermining the success of the football program hurts students who are giving their best effort to represent their school. A key purpose of school sports is to build character and a sense of fair play. The teacher's action undercuts that goal, bringing disrepute to herself, the athletic program and the school.

Although the assistant coach may have a sincere grievance about his termination, his wife's distribution of the playbook to other teams is an inappropriate manner to address that grievance. Her action embodies conduct unbecoming a teacher, who instead should be modeling ethical

behavior, and severely damages the confidence and respect students placed in her. Disciplinary action is warranted, although it legally may not rise to the level of dismissal.

Students, parents and colleagues deserve an apology, if the teacher hopes to re-establish her credibility.

**MARIO VENTURA:** The wife's actions were unprofessional and unethical and warrant disciplinary action at the school level. The teacher's supervisor should refer to policy that addresses the professional responsibilities of the teacher. She failed to make the well-being of students a fundamental consideration before sharing the playbook with opponents on the school football team's schedule. Her actions also interfered with the professional responsibilities of the coaching staff. She used a school resource in a selfish manner to get back at individuals she believes are responsible for the firing of her husband. At a minimum, her actions constitute a letter of reprimand.

Each month, *School Administrator* draws on actual circumstances to raise an ethical decision-making dilemma in K-12 education. Our distinguished panelists provide their own resolutions to each dilemma. Do you have a suggestion for a dilemma to be considered? Send it to: [magazine@aasa.org](mailto:magazine@aasa.org).

The Ethical Educator panel consists of **SHELLEY BERMAN**, interim superintendent, Andover, Mass.; **KELLY HENSON**, executive director, Georgia Professional Standards Commission; **SARAH MACKENZIE**, associate professor of educational leadership, University of Maine at Orono; and **MARIO VENTURA**, superintendent, Isaac School District, Phoenix, Ariz., and member of the Model Code of Educator Ethics Task Force. Expanded answers are published in *School Administrator* magazine's online edition.



## When ‘Dear Colleague’ Isn’t a Friendly Greeting

**DURING THE PAST** six years, the U.S. Department of Education has issued at least 18 “Dear Colleague” letters, outlining various concerns and directives for change relating to student civil rights.

The department’s Office of Civil Rights, or OCR, is responsible for investigating individual claims of discrimination and harassment. Not surprisingly, OCR reported a 24 percent increase in complaints from 2008 to 2012. Increasingly, school districts are receiving a letter from OCR announcing a complaint investigation.

Anyone can file a complaint with OCR simply by sending a letter. Following an initial investigation to determine if the agency has jurisdiction, OCR will open an inquiry. The agency then sends the district a letter notifying it of the complaint, outlining the process that OCR will follow and requesting the school’s position statement, along with additional information.

In addition, OCR may conduct on-site document reviews and interviews with staff, students and parents. The process often is lengthy and can expand well beyond the scope of the initial complaint.

If concerns are found, either with regard to the initial complaint or anything else OCR uncovers, the agency first will attempt voluntary resolution. If no agreement is reached, the district can be found in noncompliance, and OCR will require corrective action. If the matter is sufficiently serious, OCR can propose terminating all of the recipient’s federal education funding.

### Suggested Actions

Based on my work with numerous school districts who’ve had dealings with OCR, I can offer a few suggestions.

► **Stay current.** Make sure policies and procedures are up to date in the areas of student rights, including special education (IDEA and Section 504), discipline, sex equity and bullying. If these haven’t been reviewed in a few years, do so now. As the number of Dear Colleague letters has grown, OCR has refined or changed its position on many topics.

► **Provide training regularly.** All staff should be part of in-service sessions. Keep copies of

materials used and attendance sheets so you can document the training.

► **Make policies accessible.** Parents and students should have easy access to protocols and complaint procedures. Add these to a clearly identified spot on your district’s website. OCR will look on your site when reviewing a complaint. Outdated or missing policies will be a red flag.

► **Involve counsel pronto.** As soon as you receive a complaint or hear from a parent intending to file a complaint, notify your legal counsel and your insurance carrier. Your attorney will work with you to preserve relevant documents and help craft your response. It is unwise to proceed without representation.

If OCR will interview district employees as witnesses, the district’s legal counsel may only attend those interviews if the individual employee agrees. OCR generally does not allow district’s legal counsel to be present during parent or student interviews.

► **Gather the paperwork.** District staff should collect all relevant documents expeditiously. The district’s lawyer must review them before they are sent. OCR often requests documentation of potentially similar cases that were handled differently or statistical information about different groups of students. OCR generally seeks a response within 15 days. While the agency may grant a reasonable request for an extension, it will not agree to lengthy or unreasonable delays.

### Agency Slant

Take any complaint from OCR seriously, even if you believe the underlying matter was frivolous. If OCR contacts your district, it already has decided the matter has enough merit to begin an investigation.

OCR is not your friend or ally in this process. It is the fact-finding body responsible for enforcement. Although it is supposed to be neutral, many in the school community find OCR’s positions and analysis in particular cases to be slanted in favor of parents and against schools. For this reason, it is especially important to be well-prepared and well-represented in these matters.

**“Take any complaint from OCR SERIOUSLY, even if you believe the underlying matter WAS FRIVOLOUS.”**



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## Showing Respect to Your Meeting Visitors

**“At the very least, a handout should provide notice that certain subjects — TALKING ABOUT SPECIFIC STUDENTS OR SCHOOL PERSONNEL by name — are off limits.”**



**BRAD HUGHES** is the director of member support/communications services for the Kentucky School Boards Association. E-mail: brad.hughes@ksba.org. Twitter: @ksbanews

**MOST SUPERINTENDENTS WITH** tenure beyond initial contracts have seen board of education meetings reminiscent of a scene from the original “Frankenstein” movie — the villagers assembled, armed with torches and pitchforks, waiting for the opportunity to destroy the monster.

Over my career, I’ve attended plenty of these board meetings, usually involving a highly emotional subject — closing a school, altering attendance boundaries or firing a popular employee. Ironically, the first school board meeting I attended was in my hometown, where I was a student advocating for the board to grant tenure for our band director.

One observation from such meetings is that superintendents and board members who handle the passion of the moment well are those who already were prepared to welcome their guests just as they would in their homes. It’s no stretch to apply this analogy to a school board meeting. The family is there — the board, superintendent and staff. They all understand the rules of how meetings are conducted, what is permissible, what is frowned upon and what is unacceptable.

Not so for many guests who show up at the board’s “house,” often for the first time. Some don’t know there are rules. Others don’t care. But in fairness to all, rules of the house need to be routinely explained and, when necessary, reasonably enforced.

Proactive superintendents and their boards can be ready for such meetings by having house rules in place — and shared — before the villagers arrive.

### Audience Protocol

In most states, Open Meetings Acts guarantee a place for the public at sessions of government bodies. However, in Kentucky and other places, nothing in the law gives citizens a right to speak. Observe and listen, yes. Talk and interact, no. And people often don’t know this.

So the onus is on the district leadership to determine its rules for public participation, especially for visitors making speeches or posing questions. Some, but not all, districts

set time limits on participants. A few boards allow exchanges with the audience throughout the meeting.

Some districts employ a meeting protocol flyer. It’s a simple pamphlet that explains meeting functions, such as how action is taken, if and when comments are accepted, and limitations. Copies can be placed on seats for the audience or next to the sign-in sheet for those wishing to speak. Districts requiring advance notice of intent to speak should make this document available ahead of time, too.

At the very least, a handout should provide notice that certain subjects — talking about specific students or school personnel by name — are off limits. To a point, superintendents are the exception. Questions, even polite criticism, go with the job. But board chairs should be ready to step in and halt harangues amounting to little more than a public tongue lashing. And remember that all speakers — those who support you and those who oppose you — should have the same opportunities and face the same restrictions when speaking.

Just as with guests in your home, visitors should expect to adhere to the rules. If they don’t like comment limitations, they can run for office. But even a taxpaying, student-enrolling “guest” can be welcomed only so far. Removing an angry person from a meeting should be a last resort. It probably will become a news story. The best advice in such cases is to be as lenient and evenhanded as possible. And on those rare occasions when that doesn’t get the job done, politely show the person to the door.

### Emotional Restraint

High emotions can involve superintendents and board members as well as visitors. It’s easy to get caught up in the heat of the moment on a point of passion about children and their futures.

Districts with clearly defined, regularly explained rules for public engagement set an expectation for meeting visitors. Leaders who fairly manage participation send an appropriate message: You are welcome in our house, but rules apply to all.

## Aspirational Data Practices for Student Privacy

**PRIVACY IS OFTEN** a contentious issue that raises deeply held fears. Concerns around privacy have been rising in the U.S. since the revelations of electronic monitoring by the National Security Agency, the hack of Target credit card data and the shuttering of the education data platform inBloom.

Privacy debates often are divisive, putting superintendents and other educators on the defensive. Parents believe too much data is collected about their children, that it's left unsecured and is inappropriately used by companies for commercial gain.

Trust is at the heart of this privacy debate. As author Stephen Covey said, "Trust is the glue of life. It's the most essential ingredient in effective communication. It's the foundational principle that holds all relationships."

### Shared Guidance

The best example of the evolving context around the privacy of student data is a recently released set of student privacy principles (<http://studentdatapinciples.org>).

Last fall, CoSN – the Consortium for School Networking and the Data Quality Campaign convened representatives from diverse national education groups to find consensus on how student data should best be handled and protected. Our audacious goal was to create a set of common guiding beliefs from the education community.

Thirty eight of the most prominent education nonprofits have endorsed the principles since the effort went public in March, including AASA and professional associations representing school boards, state education officials, teacher unions and the National PTA. The "10 Foundational Principles for Using and Safeguarding Students' Personal Information" are grounded in the following:

- ▶ High-quality education data are essential for improving students' achievement and preparing them for success in life;
- ▶ Data can empower educators, students and families with the information they need to make decisions to help all learners succeed;
- ▶ Everyone who uses student information has a responsibility to maintain students' privacy

and the security of their data;

- ▶ This starts with limiting the data that are collected, stored, shared and used to support student learning and success; and
- ▶ Whenever possible, aggregated data that do not identify individual students should be used to inform key policy decisions and help improve services and systems that benefit students.

### Desperate Measures

For some time now, educational leaders have been saying that we need to move beyond compliance toward aspirational practices. The student data principles do just that.

While policymakers at the federal and state levels continue to pursue legislation intended to codify into law a wide variety of privacy protections, the education technology community has worked intensely to comply with existing laws, understand growing privacy concerns and identify aspirational practices in K-12 education.

This issue of trust is critical to keep in mind as education leaders talk with parents and school staff about privacy. It's too easy to shrug off the concerns as "conspiracy theories" run amok, but they are often genuine. And with parents feeling increasingly like they have lost control over much of their lives, it makes sense that they are trying desperately to protect the personal identity of their children.

A wealth of new resources on privacy compliance and other smart practices are included in a free CoSN toolkit, "Protecting Privacy in Connected Learning." Also, a significant step by K-12 online service providers has been signing the Student Privacy Pledge developed by the Future of Privacy Forum and the Software & Information Industry Association. Endorsed by President Obama, nearly 150 of the most prominent education technology companies have signed the industry pledge.

So how can you create more trust in your community? Define what these new aspirational principles look like at the school and district level. Be more transparent in your communications about why schools need data and how you protect it. Start the trust conversation today.

**"Privacy debates often ARE DIVISIVE, putting superintendents and other educators on THE DEFENSIVE."**



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## Harmful Assumptions About Students With Disabilities

**BY THE START** of 10th grade, I had accepted that getting a B grade was the best I could do in social studies or English classes. I was diagnosed with dyslexia when I was 7. After years of schooling, I had decided that with the reading required in those classes, it was hard enough to get a B. I wouldn't be able to do any better.

After the first few months of social studies, I was working hard, but I was getting a C. Surely I could do better. I decided to meet with my teacher, Ms. Sharma. I told her I wanted to perform better in her class, and I asked for her help. She agreed I could raise my performance, and she taught me strategies to help me study. She never

gave me less work or reading than the other students. Instead, Ms. Sharma taught me how to become efficient when studying. With her continuing support, my improvement was gradual but steady. Ultimately, I got an A- in her class.

With her high expectations and support, Ms. Sharma had shattered the limitations I had imposed upon myself, and she taught me to expect more of myself.

### Attitudinal Hurdles

Educators can have a profound impact on the lives of the students they teach. For students with disabilities, whose learning needs fall

outside the "typical," that personal impact is even more critical because, in school, those students face many barriers. These barriers can be in the curriculum itself. For a student with a reading disability, such as dyslexia, having access only to written texts can be a major hurdle.

Barriers also can be attitudinal. These arise from the overwhelming assumption that children with disabilities can't be successful in school. All too often, educators lower their expectations.

In a recent book co-authored with Thomas Hehir, a professor of practice in learning differences, we describe the paths of 16 students with disabilities who attended Harvard. These students are remarkable, but their academic success was not simply the result of individual willpower. For most, their paths could have ended in a much different place. Fortunately, these students had educators in their K-12 schooling who challenged the attitudinal barriers about children with disabilities and held them to high expectations.

Erin, who is deaf and has been losing her vision, had a teacher in 3rd grade who just didn't get it. The teacher had her sit next to the air conditioner in class — even though it nullified the benefit of her hearing aids. Erin knew the teacher didn't want her in class. She struggled to understand what was happening the whole year.

The following year, Erin's parents were called into school. Her parents were concerned her 4th-grade teacher wanted her moved to a separate classroom. They were right. The teacher wanted her transferred, but to their surprise this teacher, recognizing Erin's potential, advocated for her placement in a gifted program.

Brian, diagnosed with a reading disability, was the one student who did not credit his parents in help-

## Solving Dilemmas

Each month, four veteran educators suggest answers to a troubling scenario in K-12 school leadership in *School Administrator's*

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ing him succeed. He came from a low-income family he describes as dysfunctional. After several years in segregated classrooms, Brian said it was his special education teacher who pointed out he didn't belong there. She pushed him into general education where he would be held to higher expectations. Of his teachers, Brian remarked: "If it wasn't for them, I don't know where the hell I'd be right now."

**"Barriers also can be attitudinal. These arise from THE OVERWHELMING ASSUMPTION that children with disabilities CAN'T BE SUCCESSFUL in school. All too often, educators lower their expectations."**

Daniel was diagnosed with spastic cerebral palsy shortly after birth. When he entered an early intervention program, he didn't communicate. After observing Daniel, his teacher made sure to tell his parents, "Don't let anyone try to tell you your son isn't intellectually capable."

Erin and Brian have since received their master's degrees from Harvard and now work for nonprofit organizations. Daniel received his undergraduate degree from Harvard and is pursuing a Ph.D. in political science from Stanford.

### Unleashing Potential

It's much easier to fall back on assumptions — the child who can't read won't do well in classes with reading, the child who can't hear can't participate in class and the child who can't speak isn't smart. But it's the educators who challenge these assumptions who make a huge differ-

ence in students' lives.

Not every child will go to Harvard. But every child deserves the opportunity to reach his or her potential. To give students with disabilities this opportunity, educators should take the harder path, remove the barriers

and hold all kids to high expectations.

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## The Downside of Humble Frugality

**IF THERE IS** a school district leader who thought while growing up, “Boy, I’d like to work in education someday because I really want to try and make the most out of ever-shrinking funding,” I have yet to meet him or her.

Yet make the most they routinely do, often out of public view, because it is just part of the job. But keeping those efforts in the background actually does more harm than good in terms of nurturing stakeholder relationships that become critical when funding challenges become acute.

I recently conducted research of public school patrons for a modestly sized urban school district that wanted to ask for a healthy increase

in its operating levy because their ongoing cost cutting soon would be leading them to cutting into bone. They had found ways to quietly minimize the pain so far and to limit the impact on the classroom, and they had chosen not to bring their community members along on this journey. As such, the research showed the patrons were *shocked* to learn the district was facing financial difficulties.

These data pushed the planned ballot measure back several months to allow the school district to bring the public up to date *before* talking about the benefits of such an increase. The revised strategy ultimately worked, but it cost the schools several months without the additional funding.

### Humility Hurts

Unfortunately, this is a fairly common situation. Districts make do and try to keep the patrons from worrying. But while humbleness about the district’s efficiency may seem like the right course of action, it makes it more difficult than ever to all of a sudden get the message across that “We’ve done our best for many years. Now we need your help.”

In the research our firm has done on behalf of schools, school districts clearly get no credit when they say, for example, “How would it affect your vote on a bond issue if you knew we have not raised taxes in 16 years?” The general reaction? Meh. In short, “You took good care of the money you got from me. That is what you are supposed to do, isn’t it?”

So all that good stewardship buys a school district little to nothing in the area of goodwill if the district doesn’t make a point of finding strategic ways to work the frugality message — and the impact of funding challenges on education — into its everyday communication. How to do so?

### ► Do what you do best: Educate.

There will always be patrons who will not know what bond issues can pay for versus operating levy funds, and so on. What makes it worse is when one ballot issue follows shortly on the heels of another. This often leads to “Didn’t we just vote for that?” comments. That situation can be helped with a few regularly offered, well-placed, “As a reminder, bond funds cannot be used for teacher salaries”-type phrases in your routine communications.

### ► Show how you are making do with less than you need.

It makes good strategic sense to highlight the student impact of your financial challenges by saying, for example, “Due to funding shortages, only 30 students have been able to take advantage of our culinary program this year.” Always focus on how shortfalls impact students, not the district.

### ► Have an “abstract” and “detailed” budget.

Make the high points — the abstract, if you will, available in various forms, 365 days a year. Give patrons an easy way to look at the budget headlines (punctuated with “What this means ...” explanations) while also providing greater detail on your website for those who want to do a deep dive.

### Constant Reminders

We have long since passed the time when a school district could simply rally the troops to get something passed. Needs, and the budgets that fund them, have to be at least a parenthetical comment in every school district communication.

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## Leading by Tether Through the Storms

**AT THE END** of a long rope in the isolated northern region of Alberta, I learned several leadership lessons. It was my mother, a schoolteacher, widow and mother of four, who taught me.

In this remote settlement of Canada, they did not have paved roads for vehicles yet, so my mother would lead us to school on a frozen trail in the muskeg, a common surface in Arctic areas. In the winter, we trudged to and from school in darkness, through brutal weather conditions. Sometimes the path was illuminated by the Northern Lights, but more often we blundered blindly through whiteout conditions.

Undaunted by the blowing snow of those harsh winters, my mother joined us every school morning with a long rope wrapped around her waist and then around each of her four children. She led the way using her gloved hands to follow the fence along the edge of the subarctic bush. I was at the end of the rope, the eldest daughter, as an anchor and stable follower. Here I learned to trust the leader, my mother, even when she was not visible through the storm and darkness. She was aware of her connection with us, our goal, and how teamwork would help us to journey forward.

When one of us stumbled, the

connecting rope pulled us all closer. I felt safe because of the determination of my siblings and the strength of the leader. This is the essence of teamwork. When one person falls, everyone feels it, is aware of it and then helps each other so the team can accomplish its goal. It was her philosophy that followers are leaders in training and that a supportive attitude toward followers stands at the heart of effective leadership.

### New Understanding

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address federal and state mandates, pursue reform initiatives, cope with financial limitations and settle legal disputes.

Modern problems cannot be solved with the old ways of thinking. Contemporary challenges demand contemporary solutions, and these solutions need to be informed by new understandings. It is the leader's job to keep all team members moving forward, working together toward their goal.

In fact, the answers may not come through the traditional roles assigned to superintendents and other school leaders. In these dynamic times, we must rely on collaborative decision making and strategies. In my three years as a superintendent, I found the key practice to be that of developing connections where none may have existed.

## Durable and Resilient

My mother deliberately selected a rope braided of different kinds of strands. The rope's diversity of construction gave it durability to last the

winter, flexibility for elasticity and resilience, and weather resistance against the harshest conditions. She wanted a rope that would link us no matter what, so she could lead us as

**"Just as a braided rope is durable, **CONNECTED** RELATIONSHIPS INSIDE AND OUTSIDE THE SCHOOLS are vital to a secure, robust and lasting learning community. Like a connecting rope, superintendents should be flexible."**

a team to our desired outcome. She never forgot the individual needs of each one of us along the rope, youngest or oldest.

In a school system, the superintendent is the rope that connects the instructional community inside and

outside the district. Accomplished superintendents know that success in schools depends foremost on the knowledge, understanding, skills, energy and collaboration of the whole community of learners. Strength in diversity of ideas allows us to make decisions and solve large issues in public education.

Just as a braided rope is durable, connected relationships inside and outside the schools are vital to a secure, robust and lasting learning community. Like a connecting rope, superintendents should be flexible. Ultimately, they are the head learners who modify their leadership depending on the needs of the other learners. Those needs are ever-widening because of the exponential growth of knowledge and personal technology. As such, our superintendents should continually reflect on the next steps.

## Roped Together

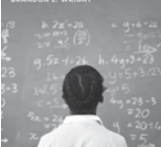
Weather-resistant leadership carries the ability to resist the effects of brutal exposure to negative political trends and crass media portrayals. It means withstanding an array of harsh conditions and stubborn hurdles that might distract us from the course of improvement.

Over the months of being roped together, my siblings and I realized how our mother could think on her feet and change course to avoid obstacles. She set the example of handling problems by finding innovative solutions that always took into account the needs and abilities of each individual. She recognized we must travel as a team for our journey to succeed.

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## A Super Superintendent? Not Really

**IN 2009, I LEFT** the best job in education. I had everything superintendents dream about — a supportive school board; a team of bright, energetic colleagues; a hard-working group of teachers and principals who were getting results in a high-minority, high-poverty school district; and a community that repeatedly approved tax increases for operations and capital projects. One staff member described it as “Camelot.”

I had just been recognized by my colleagues as superintendent of the year in Missouri. I had received a number of local, state and national awards for leadership, for advancing the cause of women and minority children and for community service. Most important, I loved my job.

### A Natural Move

So why leave such an ideal set of circumstances? Surely no one in our business takes a leadership position without a fair dose of ego. Every time we put ourselves out there for career advancement or for a new and “better” job, it’s at least partially due to our belief that we can do it better than anyone else. I’m no exception.

And, like most of my colleagues, I saw the state education commissioner position as a sort of “super superintendent.” I saw the job as professional advancement, a natural progression for a successful superintendent and a chance to make a positive difference for many more kids. It was an exciting challenge.

So, after serving 5½ years as a chief state school officer, I can tell you this: I was right ... and I was wrong.

### Loss of Control

As a district superintendent, you control your annual budget. Funds can be allocated, moved or eliminated based on the needs and priorities determined largely by the superintendent.

And, in most school districts, you can raise money. Proposing and passing tax increases, while not easy, is a tool superintendents can and do use.

As state commissioner, I had little influence and no control over funding. The fact is, the annual budget could

**“As state commissioner, I had LITTLE INFLUENCE AND NO CONTROL over funding. The fact is the annual budget could have little relationship to the needs of schools ...”**

have little relationship to the needs of schools, and no relationship to the needs of the state education department. As necessary, individual line items or portions thereof could be withheld. And I couldn’t run a tax levy.

Another significant contrast is communication. In a district, you have a defined community. Even if your school district has multiple municipalities and a diverse population, you find sharing information relatively easy because most community members share some common experience.

As commissioner, the populations I served were starkly different. Missouri has large cities, small cities, suburban areas and isolated rural areas. Political and social lines are drawn around geography, socio-economic status, race, urban-rural, farming and industry. Values, experience and priorities differ drastically from one area to another.

Communicating with these various groups as a state commissioner meant what might be understood and appreciated in one place could be the source of violent disagreement and conflict in another. I was the “city girl,” a perception that made interaction tough with most of the state.

A third major difference between the two jobs is summed up in one word: bureaucracy. As someone who worked as a superintendent in two districts over 15 years, I found a distinct increase in the levels of bureaucracy between a district with 7,500 kids and one with 20,000. Both pale in comparison to a state system serving over 900,000! Even the simplest task involved forms and procedures, rules and policies, approvals and authorizations — usually at both the state and federal levels. Getting anything actually done was a monumental task. I longed for closure ... on anything.

### What Counts

What I learned was that the jobs are very different. Being the chief state school officer is not a “super superintendent” job. In fact, I think experience as a superintendent might even be a liability.

Make no mistake, being a state commissioner had its rewards. During my tenure, we raised expectations, established systems for supporting schools, improved the use of technology and created a nationally recognized system for the preparation and evaluation of educators. With the leadership of an amazing state board of education, we took a strong stand against failing schools. We demanded quality schools for every child.

In the end, whether we are superintendents, chief state school officers or teachers, the only thing that matters is that each of us in education makes a positive contribution, that in some small way kids are better off because we served. Time will tell.

**CHRIS NICASTRO**, who retired last December as Missouri commissioner of education, is consulting for the Council of Chief State School Officers. She lives in St. Louis, Mo. E-mail: [chrislnicastro@gmail.com](mailto:chrislnicastro@gmail.com). Twitter: @LeeNicastro



# Expanding the View of Giftedness

Five districts share a mission to develop underrepresented students on the cusp of excellence

BY JANE CLARENBACH

*“Now I view myself as a talent scout, always thinking of how I can challenge my students so that I can see what they are capable of.”*

Lisa Rogers, gifted education specialist, Marietta, Ga.

With what seem to be ever-increasing demands on educators and limited resources, turning all teachers into trained talent scouts would appear to be a lofty ideal in K-12 education.

But absent such a commitment to proactively identify talent by knowing what to look for and nurturing it to the point of excellence, countless students go unidentified for advanced learner services. This results in a significant amount of talent going undeveloped or underdeveloped, which is a loss not only for the students but also for their com-

munities and our nation.

Fortunately, school districts in various communities are putting in place effective programs to develop the talents and abilities of students who have high ability but who may not be demonstrating high achievement. These places, while somewhat limited in number, deliver challenging curriculum commensurate with the students' abilities.

Some district initiatives stem from an effort to close the “excellence gaps,” or disparities among students reaching advanced achievement levels. Other districts want to ensure their

gifted education programs fully reflect the districts' diversity.

## Talent Searches

Districts are addressing this need by expanding the view of giftedness, systematically searching for students with the potential to achieve at high levels and creating programs and services that emphasize identifying students from culturally, linguistically and ethnically diverse and/or economically disadvantaged populations.

Some operate as gateway initiatives intending to identify and develop talented students who can be moved on



to traditional gifted and talented programs and other advanced coursework, while some provide standalone services.

Three fundamental elements found in each of these programs include:

► **USE OF MULTIPLE IDENTIFICATION CRITERIA.** Each program uses multiple criteria to assess students for services, including observation checklists, student work samples and nonverbal ability tests to identify students from traditionally underrepresented populations.

► **A STAFF OF APPROPRIATELY TRAINED AND COMMITTED PROFESSIONALS.** Each program employs willing educators trained to identify and serve gifted learners: These staff provide professional development to participating teachers.

► **COMMITMENT OF DISTRICT LEADERSHIP.** Of particular importance, each program director described the support of district-level and building-level leaders as essential.

### Exemplary Programs

When it comes to an exemplary school-based program to identify and develop students on the cusp of excellence, a promising district-based initiative is the Young Scholars Program in Fairfax County, Va.

Launched 15 years ago with 35 students in one school, the program now operates in 84 of 139 elementary schools and reaches more than 5,700 students. The program reflects the ethnic and cultural diversity of the school district and has nearly twice the percentage of students (54 percent) who are eligible for free or

reduced-price lunch compared to the district as a whole.

Beginning in kindergarten, educators observe students and create portfolios of work to identify children with gifted potential. “Ongoing assessments by teachers who have been trained to provide instruction designed to elicit higher-level thinking may be the most powerful means of identifying advanced learners from low economic and minority populations,” says Carol Horn, K-12 coordinator of advanced academic programs in Fairfax County.

Each Young Scholars school has a half-time resource teacher with credentials in gifted education who implements the program. The scholars are clustered with teachers who provide challenging and engaging learning experiences. Summer school,





**Students in the Young Scholars program at Hybla Valley Elementary School in Fairfax County, Va., doing scientific observation in the “Budding Botanists” lesson.**

after-school sessions and field trips provide further enrichment.

The program’s long-term goal is to nurture participants so they can be prepared for gifted education and other rigorous programming in upper elementary, middle and high school. Twenty-seven percent of scholars in grades 3-8 are served in full-time gifted programs, and another 23 percent receive part-time services in elementary grades or honors classes in the middle school. And 95 percent of the scholars take Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate or honors classes in high school.

### Demonstrating Skills

While a fraction of the size of Fairfax, the 9,000-student Eden Prairie, Minn., school district launched a similar Young Scholars program in 2011, serving about 55 students each year in grades 1 and 2.

According to Sue Feigal-Hitch, coordinator of gifted services, the district identifies students based on four

**Second graders at Forest Hills Elementary School in Eden Prairie, Minn., work on an experiment in the interdisciplinary KEY program, in which students meet with the gifted resource teacher twice a week.**

demonstration lessons conducted by the gifted education resource teacher while the classroom teacher observes to spot signs of higher-level creative and critical thinking. Identified students gather in a resource room once a week to build background knowledge and vocabulary and to develop study skills.

During the first two years of the program’s operation, 29 percent of the Young Scholars have been admitted to the grades 2-6 pullout gifted education program, and the number of stu-

dents from underrepresented groups has increased in a new full-time program for highly gifted students.

In nearby Bloomington, Minn., the district launched its Alfred Nobel program targeting creatively gifted students in 2013 at the most diverse middle school in the district. The program tries to develop talent in high-ability students through a rigorous humanities approach focused on critical thinking and creativity.

“We found that many students with innovative ideas and creative skills may not be the rule followers or the highest achievers and that they often approach tasks in a more nontraditional way,” says Erin Boltik, director of gifted programs and services. “We had to do something a little different and have seen that teachers are beginning to understand that there are different ways to be gifted.”

Students who score at the 80th percentile or above on Northwest Evaluation Association’s Measures of Academic Progress are given the Torrance Test of Creativity before being accepted into the program. Two of seven classes a day are spent in the Nobel courses; Bloomington hopes to increase this to three classes per day.

The school district has 20 students per grade in each Nobel class, but interest has resulted in a waiting list.





**A 1st grader in the Paradise Valley Unified School District in Phoenix, Ariz., learns about chromatography using Sharpie markers and rubbing alcohol.**

### Multiple Assessments

The Paradise Valley Unified School District in suburban Phoenix, Ariz., serves about 32,000 students with 37 percent eligible for free or reduced-price lunch; and about 30 percent are of Hispanic descent.

Arizona's gifted education mandate requires districts to assess students three times each year and establishes statewide criteria for identifying gifted students.

"A comprehensive process that strives to identify all students with high ability, even if they are not yet high achievers, is necessary if they are to have consistent opportunities to make academic progress every day, month and year," says Dina Brulles, Paradise Valley's director of gifted education.

The district begins by learning as much about the students as possible, beginning with an identification process that uses a range of instruments. A gifted specialist at every elementary school provides site-based training to help staff recognize characteristics and behaviors of gifted students, including those from diverse

populations. Thirty-two percent of the students receiving gifted education services are nonwhite compared to 45 percent in the overall student population.

Once students are identified as gifted, they are placed in the program regardless of their previous achievement levels. Students are clustered with other high-ability peers, a grouping tactic Paradise Valley discovered helps them develop advanced skills as a group.

In grades 4-6, gifted students are placed in a daily pullout program with enriched mathematics and language arts content, and highly gifted students are accelerated in a self-contained program with content at least two years above grade level. After elementary school, students can access an array of options, including an honors program designed for culturally and linguistically diverse learners.

### A Watch List

Like the other districts, Englewood, Colo., with 3,000 students, relies on multiple criteria to identify approximately 250 students for gifted education services. Leaders in this high-poverty district with a large percentage of English language learners have made increasing the diversity of students receiving gifted education services a priority.

The district maintains a talent pool watch list of students who demonstrate potential but whose performance is not yet strong enough for gifted program placement, and teachers are encouraged to actively track these students' progress.

"We have some work to do on increasing our program's diversity," says Gail Stine, Englewood's gifted and talented coordinator. "But we're making progress, largely because of increased teacher awareness of what students are capable of."

Each school has a gifted education teacher and mental health liaison who are committed to becoming the experts in gifted education for their building.

### Tailored Programs

These five district-level programs demonstrate that a focused commitment to high-ability students from disadvantaged and underrepresented populations pays off with increased high-order skills and achievement. While every program must be tailored to fit the goals and needs of each district, evidence-based strategies can be replicated and customized to deliver results.

Administrators can — and must — play a role in such programs if they are to succeed. This involvement and commitment must come at all levels, from district mission statements and priorities on down, to ensure building-level professionals have the training and resources they need to identify and develop such learners. ■

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## Additional Resources

Jane Clarenbach of the National Association for Gifted Children suggested these informational resources related to her article:

- ▶ A short teacher guide for understanding children who may have disabilities along with gifts and talents. Access "The Twice Exceptional Dilemma" at [www.nea.org/assets/docs/twice\\_exceptional.pdf](http://www.nea.org/assets/docs/twice_exceptional.pdf).
- ▶ An overview of the impact of poverty on high ability and the factors behind successful programs. Access "Unlocking Emergent Talent" at <http://bit.ly/unlocking-talent>.
- ▶ A handbook for educators, "Identifying Gifted and Talented English Language Learners, Grades K-12," covers such issues as addressing bias in assessment instruments. Access at <http://bit.ly/identifying-gifted-talent>.
- ▶ A three-hour online professional development course on the Young Scholars program in Fairfax County, Va., is available through CaseNex at [www3.casenex.com](http://www3.casenex.com).



# Gifted Tact

Reports from four school districts on the challenges of instruction for gifted students

**EDITOR'S NOTE:** In the following package of field reports, *School Administrator* asked four school districts to share their experiences about serving students who are capable of learning well beyond the current grade level. They were invited to address four different aspects of a district's work in educating those identified as gifted academically.

One district in a remote, rural community describes its approach. Another district details how it has expanded participation of those student groups typically underrepresented in gifted programs. A third school district addresses the manner it tackled a poor program evaluation of its gifted services. And, finally, a district shows how it is using synchronous distance learning to meet these students' academic needs.

## Gifted Services in a Small, Rural Community

BY TAMARA J. FISHER



**M**y small, rural district in northwestern Montana has a 35-year track record of providing gifted services for students.

It's a community with mixed demographics and high poverty, yet we've been able to offer a comprehensive approach without breaking the bank.

About 140 gifted students, or 8 percent of the district's 1,650 students, attend our four Title I schools. Because we are located on the Flathead Indian Reservation, 30 percent of the students are American Indian. The gifted students' demographics reflect those of the district's population.

Gifted students need a variety of services, but not every gifted learner needs every item on the menu. A continuum of services ensures that their varying needs can be met more individually.

Our menu in Polson includes thinking skills activities, subject acceleration, whole-grade acceleration, early entrance to kindergarten, dual enrollment, small-group pullout, independent learning and in-depth projects.

Additional key programming features involve teacher collaboration; support for parents; consultations with individual students, teachers and parents; and a comprehensive identification process using multiple measures that begins in kindergarten and maintains an open window throughout the K-12 years. These measures are both observation-based and data-based.

### Starting Realistically

How should a small, rural school district with limited staffing begin?

► **Talk to some kids.** Ask your teachers to give you the names of a few of their most gifted and advanced learn-

ers and then seek their input on what school is like for them. When do they feel challenged? How often is school too easy? What could the teachers do to reach them better? Hearing it straight from the students is an eye-opening way to understand what is, or is not, happening for these learners.

► **Seek volunteers for a gifted programming committee.** Start with those who understand the intense need and value of providing unique services for unique learners. Ideally, these individuals would have had some training in gifted education, but since that training can be sparse, you may have to begin with a few teachers and parents who have demonstrated their interest and knowledge in this area in other ways (e.g., by differentiating in their classrooms, by advocating for advanced opportunities for students, etc.)

► **Start small.** Pick three to five goals for the first year and focus on them. One goal might be to explore identification processes and services and choose the paths that best suit your district. Another goal might be to

# ics in the Field

examine staffing and decide who and how many FTEs you can devote to coordination and implementation of these services. Assess your progress, tweak the issues and proceed further the next year. Establishing an effective program takes time.

► **Remember that gifted students are in all populations.** These students exist wherever you are. Mythology about what “gifted” is lends to the misbelief that it is only about the rare Einstein. Yet high potential abounds.

► **Realize no district is too small, too rural or too poor to provide gifted services.** Services for gifted and advanced learners can cost little or nothing. Any school can flexibly group students by readiness for a content area, and this does not require

additional staffing. It only requires assessing which students are ready for which level of the content and grouping them accordingly (whether within or across grades). Cluster grouping gifted learners and whole-grade acceleration (“grade skipping”) also do not require additional staff nor funds, and are both research-proven ways to benefit advanced learners. Even staffing a full-time gifted and talented position is a small fraction of a percent of a total district budget, even in a small district.

► **Don’t assume one measure can or even should identify all gifted students.** Accept that identification never will be clear-cut. Stereotypes about giftedness exist, but in truth, gifted children come in all varieties. Some excel academically and some

are underachieving. Some are from wealthy families, others are homeless. Some excel in many areas and some shine in just one. The gifted often are nonconformists, and they may not exhibit classroom-friendly behaviors as they ask challenging questions and point out the teacher’s mistakes. Some are endearing pleasers who turn in perfect work; others are class clowns and troublemakers on the road to suspension.

► **Acknowledge what you already do for gifted students — then ask, “What’s next?”** Most districts can point to appropriate pieces of a menu of services for these students. Look for what already is happening (e.g., a teacher who is a master at differentiation; the school that groups students by readiness and re-assesses groupings



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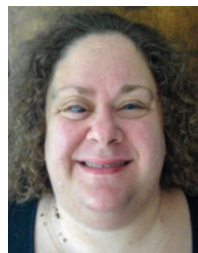
regularly; the Academic Bowl coach who already is mentoring standout students on strategies for seeking a challenge and then meeting it). Then build on the foundation you may not have realized you already had.

► **Seek guidance from those who specialize in gifted education.** The National Association for Gifted Children ([www.nagc.org](http://www.nagc.org)) offers a wealth of online resources. You don't have to go it alone. Thousands of passionate individuals with expertise can help. ■

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## Online and Face-to-Face Delivery Synchronously

BY RACHEL SMETHERS-WINTERS



It's 9:10 a.m. on a Tuesday. Clare and her 4th-grade classmates have dispersed into leveled reading groups. Clare takes her head-

set/microphone combo from her desk, grabs a laptop from the cart and joins Delante at the door. Together, they travel to the conference room, greet the principal in his office, choose seats around the conference table and turn on their laptops.

"Good morning, Delante, Clare," their gifted intervention specialist teacher, Mrs. G., greets them from a camera feed in the corner of each laptop screen. Over her shoulder, they see five classmates waving hello. "The vocabulary starter for the day is on the whiteboard. Clare, you're the blue marker, and Delante the green. We'll discuss the possibilities as soon as

everyone's here."

Mrs. G. and her students are located in a school across town. She directs the students to begin the word-etymology activity, which is a feature of the distance learning software. Clare clicks the small blue box at the top of the whiteboard and moves her mouse to write her answer; Delante chooses the green box, clicking an additional button to allow him to type his answer on the screen. While Clare and Delante are working, two students appear in smaller camera feeds below the image of Mrs. G.'s classroom, joining the class from School B and School C. Clare finds it difficult to concentrate because she's excited about the prospect of being paired with her new friend Mia, the student from School C, to work on a project.

"Who would like to start?" asks Mrs. G., as the camera pans to show the students in her room. The class begins to discuss a word problem. The principal peeks in then drifts over to join Delante's camera feed, only to drift out again when his walkie-talkie beeps.

Clare and Delante, both identified as gifted in reading, join Mrs. G. and their seven other classmates for 40 minutes of reading enrichment each day. Since 2012-13, these synchronous distance-learning classrooms have

operated across the 20,000-student Akron, Ohio, school district. By 2014-15, every one of the district's 32 elementary schools had at least one student participating in this gifted service-delivery option.

Akron began using the Measures of Academic Progress test to assess all students in grades K-10 in 2013-14. Under Ohio law, the test can be used to identify students as gifted. As a result, nearly twice as many students have been identified as gifted in reading and/or math in grades 3-5, and all have access to gifted services using the new distance learning delivery. In addition, the district offers gifted services to identified students at its two specialty middle schools — a visual-performing arts school and a STEM school — and to students in high school via Advanced Placement courses, the International Baccalaureate Program and college course options.

Before 2012, when the online service began, the district's five gifted intervention specialists traveled to schools with the largest number of identified gifted students and pulled students out of classrooms for enrichment. Yet only some schools got a daily visit. A state audit in 2011 found these services inequitable. With the



Students in Akron, Ohio, work with their gifted intervention teacher remotely through a laptop in a synchronous distance learning classroom.

PHOTO BY AKRON PUBLIC SCHOOLS

help of the Ohio Department of Education, Akron developed a plan for providing gifted service opportunities for all identified 3rd through 5th graders in reading and math. The online delivery option enables the district to provide access to all who qualify, no matter the school of attendance.

After weighing options — using a central location for instruction, asynchronous distance learning and the traveling teacher — the district chose to connect gifted students via real-time, online classrooms. This model maximizes teacher time and maintains the social and emotional benefits of a resource room while making services available to every student who qualifies for them. “It’s important for gifted students to be together each day,” explains Mrs. G., who has taught gifted students for eight years, “especially because some students are the only identified gifted students in their grades or schools.”

### Leading Challenges

To make such a bold move successful requires ongoing communication and support and updates to curriculum for the gifted when districtwide curriculum changes are made. Gifted teachers receive training in how to use WebEx (video conferencing software) and Moodle (a learning management system), as well as in how to engage online and face-to-face students at the same time.

Akron’s commitment to online learning has resulted in an expanded its technology support staff so teachers and students have help with their online connections each day. Gifted students can use laptops provided by the LeBron James Family Foundation that also support after-school initiatives.

Two big challenges remain: (1) the need for communication between the gifted teacher and the students’ teachers in the satellite locations and (2) the alignment of student schedules across multiple classrooms and buildings. However, the benefits outweigh the difficulties. More students have equi-

table access. They are connecting with their intellectual peers, while honing the 21st-century skills of collaboration, technology use and independence. ■

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## Program Evaluation As a Wakeup Call

BY TANIA K. LYON



**A**ll means all in Mankato Area Public Schools, where we take our mission seriously: “Assuring learning excellence and readiness

for a changing world.” When we fall short, we act.

In gifted education, serving all students means looking objectively at school district practice, committing to change and making it happen.

Two years ago, Mankato Super-

intendent Sheri Allen commissioned an external review of gifted and talented services in our district of 7,800 students in south-central Minnesota. National experts Karen Rogers and Karen Westberg, both University of St. Thomas professors of special education and gifted education, conducted a comprehensive review of curriculum, instruction and programming — a process that collected input from students, parents, teachers and administrators.

Their study revealed serious structural and program weaknesses. The shortcomings included identification processes, curricular scope and sequence, professional development and support for families. Few economically disadvantaged, culturally diverse, English language learners and twice exceptional students participated in gifted and talented programs.

### Reform Initiative

Using the review as a wakeup call, the district immediately expanded to a preK-12 Talent Development Program and hired a full-time coordinator. Rogers and Westberg helped us apply for a federal grant under the Jacob K. Javits Gifted and Talented Students Education Program. The three-year

*continues on page 28*



The Mankato, Minn., district used a poor program evaluation as a catalyst for significant upgrades in its services for gifted pupils.





# safety & security

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grant provides \$200,000 annually to support these collaborative activities:

► **Develop a defensible and inclusive student identification process.**

Mankato's revamped elementary identification processes to use multiple measures in selecting students for advanced academic programming. Equal weight is given to measures of ability and achievement, which includes academic trend data rather than one score.

This restructuring included a universal screening of 3,000 students in grades 2-6 with the Cognitive Abilities Test-Screening Form, known as the CogAt.

The district obtained local norms on the CogAt to deepen understanding of its students who scored significantly higher than the national norms. This decision was based on recommendations from the National Association of Gifted Children and experts Joseph Renzulli, Rogers and Westberg.

Using the CogAt and Measures of Academic Progress scores, the district generated potential candidates for talent development services. Teachers also could nominate students. We gathered feedback using online instructional rating scales for students being considered.

All test scores and rating scales were normed and converted to standard scores to use in a weighted formula for statistical consistency for student selection. A selection committee identified students for services using an eight-step process that created multiple pathways into services. The district added an appeals process for student identification decisions.

The process of using local norms led the district to understand students in context with each other, identify those students underchallenged by current programming and plan more effectively to serve their educational needs.

Educators districtwide are now using CogAt scores as another data point to serve students more effectively — especially traditionally

underserved learners. More students are now receiving talent development services, and those students are increasingly diverse. A Rising Scholars Program helps support the needs of underserved learners.

► **Provide continued professional development for teachers and administrators.**

The universal screening and identification process gave the district a much better understanding of the academic needs of local gifted and talented students. These needs drive student programming and professional development. The district uses the Response to Intervention model with Tier 1, 2 and 3 services to meet students' advanced academic needs and to train teachers in programming to meet these needs.

At Tier 1, classroom differentiation in core instruction takes place. For Tier 2, new resources and strategies provide greater complexity and a faster pace in core subjects. Tier 3 offers a more individualized approach and includes independent study and subject or grade acceleration.

Reading and math coaches provide job-embedded professional development and share research-based best practices in gifted and talented education.

Each year, about 150 educators will have workshop training to address teachers' attitudes and assumptions of giftedness, to increase teachers' knowledge of differentiation and to train teachers in interventions. School administrators attend an annual leadership academy to help them support the needs of gifted learners.

Through the University of St. Thomas, nearly 40 educators are enrolled in free graduate courses to earn a Gifted, Creative and Talented Certificate and/or a Twice Exceptional and Underserved Learners Certificate.

► **Train and support families of students receiving talent development services.**

This fall, the district is offering families learning opportunities around the

unique needs of both mainstream and traditionally underserved learners.

► **Provide a scope and sequence of appropriately differentiated curricula for grades 1-10.**

As part of the RTI system, the district is implementing gifted and talented reading/English language arts curricula for 2015-16. The district is building the scope and sequence of differentiated curricula in reading/English language arts, math, science and social studies.

## Ending Indifference

The many changes in gifted and talented education are helping Mankato intentionally serve diverse students.

As Ernest Boyer, the late president of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, said, "You can't have an island of excellence in a sea of indifference." ■

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## Broadening the Scope for the Underrepresented

BY JOHN ALBERTS



It is a Thursday morning, and Pam Schwarz, gifted intervention teacher at Woodson Kindergarten Center in Austin, Minn., is conducting one

of her Young Scholars groups. The four boys in the group are typical kindergarteners — unable to sit still and excitedly blurting out answers even after being reminded that it is important to raise their hands. But if you listen carefully, you will notice this



**The Austin, Minn., schools are addressing underrepresentation of minority students receiving gifted services through the Young Scholars program.**

diverse group of boys is analyzing narration for a story based on pronoun use as well as making advanced predictions and connections. This is the heart of gifted services in Austin.

Located in southeastern Minnesota, Austin is best known as the birthplace of SPAM. Our school system of approximately 4,800 students has been experiencing rapid shifts in population. During the past 10 years, the number of home languages spoken has increased from 18 to 57, the percentage of nonwhite students has increased from 20 to 41 percent, and the percentage qualifying for free and reduced-price lunch has increased from 41 to 57 percent.

Through significant partnerships, the Austin district has developed a service model for its most able learners that enhances our ability to serve underrepresented populations, especially in grades K-4.

### Ending Identification

Seven years ago, we entered into a partnership with the Hormel Foundation and the Minnesota Department of Education to improve gifted and talented services with the goal of increasing the equity and access of gifted programming.

The foundation's funding helps the district provide 3.5 gifted and talented

intervention positions, serving the district's all-day, every-day kindergarten center and four neighborhood elementary schools with grades 1-4. These interventionists focus on enrichment activities and talent development through programs like Young Scholars.

The district has moved to a "right fit right now" model of delivery and has forgone traditional identification. Students meet with the gifted and talented interventionists based on their demonstration of mastery of material delivered in general classrooms at that time. As a result, the number of students from underrepresented populations receiving gifted and talented support has increased.

Earlier this year, the district opened Pi Academy, a full-time gifted services center for those who qualify by being in the top 2 percent of students in the district based on a combination of achievement and ability assessment scores. We renovated space in an elementary building to create an ungraded environment. To meet students' interests and needs, Pi Academy uses one-to-one technology, flexible learning and a highly interest-based curriculum based on their ability levels.

Another component is staff development. This has been accomplished at both the community and instruc-

tional levels. Austin hosts an annual four-day gifted and talented symposium that brings in national and international experts on gifted education. All district parents and educators attend at no cost, thus increasing the community's knowledge of gifted education. The six symposia have attracted more than 1,000 attendees, including international attendees from Hong Kong, Kenya and Turkey.

Austin teachers can receive gifted and talented certification from nearby St. Mary's University at no cost, and to date, 20 have done so.

### Cognitive Capacity

Finally, a significant shift has occurred in how students have been identified owing to the work of our gifted and talented interventionists. Beyond our use of achievement measures, students who demonstrate high ability, especially in the nonverbal components of the Cognitive Abilities Test, are offered talent development. This is also a key component in identifying students from more diverse backgrounds for the fledgling Pi Academy.

During 2014-15, our district served 355 students in our gifted program, up from 215 just three years prior. Of those served, 21 percent are Hispanic, 9 percent are black, 24 percent are considered English language learners and 48 percent qualify for free or reduced-price lunches.

Notably, almost 12 percent are students in special education. This is largely due to the inclusion of CogAT into the assessments for consideration.

Only through the partnerships with a generous foundation and the state education agency has our district been able to secure the know-how and necessary funding. We've broadened our district's scope of talent development to be more inclusive and to allow a group of wiggly kindergarteners a chance to explore their full potential. ■

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# The Stories They Tell About the Gifted

*How superintendents view gifted education stems from their personal and professional encounters*

BY LINDA S. CONLON

**A**s an applicant for a coordinator position, I made my way through a long series of stakeholder interviews before landing in the office of the superintendent for the final round of hiring. There I met the leader of the 2,000-student Quaker Valley School District where I work in western Pennsylvania.

The superintendent chatted with me like an interested colleague, sharing philosophies and asking about mine, clearly dissatisfied with the status quo of the district's gifted education program. And then he told me the story that would set my career in motion.

The superintendent's son had attended high school in a neighboring district, in an affluent area that was proud of a distinguished record of academic achievement among its students. The young man breezed through his years there, barely breaking a sweat, while earning high grades that resulted in a first-choice college acceptance — only to nearly fail once he got there. He had never learned to study because he never had to. His high school's coveted gifted program had not prepared him for the rigor he faced in college and that was

a problem, his father professed with conviction.

My superintendent went on to talk about his nephew next, a young man of significant intelligence and remarkable creativity, who went through school unchallenged, unmotivated and unrecognized for his unique combination of gifts.

These two stories so captured the essence of what he believed was wrong with gifted programs that he told me at the conclusion of our talk that I was to “make ours a district where gifted is done right.” My marching orders as the newly hired coordinator of gifted programming called for academic rigor for all students (we now have an open-door policy in our Advanced Placement program) and alternative methods for identifying talent (now any student is eligible for gifted services based on need).

## **Emotional Baggage**

I thought more about my superintendent's stories as we worked to reform our gifted program, a task fraught with significant political and emotional baggage. Changes to any established program generate some dissent but tampering with

gifted programs seems to trigger a circling of the wagons like no other.

Asking for stories and listening for the embedded issues that were trigger points or sacred cows helped to guide our district's efforts without sounding the alarm. Nearly everyone interested in gifted education had a story and an almost irresistible need to tell it. The philosophical center, however, came from the superintendent's stories, and attending to those embedded issues was critical, given his influence over district culture and resources.

A recent president of the National Association for Gifted Children noticed that top-level administrators had been inexplicably excluded from advocacy efforts and the discourse of the field. Virtually nothing was known about how superintendents viewed gifted education. Practitioners and researchers were strongly advised to find out in order to improve local programs and to strengthen the knowledge base of others in the field.

I took up the charge, as the focus of my doctoral research, to investigate what other superintendents had experienced in their encounters with gifted education by having them tell me a story about "gifted." The stories were enlightening and clearly as influential as the people who told them. They were offered from diverse perspectives — some from experiences as a student or parent, others as a teacher, a principal and even a superintendent. All of them revealed key components of gifted education in general and what was most important to them specifically.

### Student Advocacy

Superintendent Walter Amberg (pseudonyms are used here for each of the superintendents because the research subjects were guaranteed anonymity) related an unusual experience from his days as a first-year teacher. He had a 2nd grader he would never forget. She had been identified as gifted but was severely underserved by the weekly pullout enrichment program, which was all his school offered.

As a classroom beginner, Amberg struggled with what to provide her that would engage her quick mind as she clearly exceeded the regular curriculum. When he approached his principal about skipping a grade, the request from a new teacher was met with consternation but not an outright "no."

Amberg took the initiative and did his home-

work by collecting data on his student's current achievement, using pretests and the information on her gifted intake report, talking to her parents and the 3rd-grade teachers, then made his case to the principal. The student was placed in 4th grade and flourished there. Years later, she entered college early but ready. The parents were thrilled and his principal was happy to have given Amberg the chance to advocate for his student.

This early, positive experience had a profound effect on Amberg's attitude toward acceleration and the limitations and inadequacies of a one-size-fits-all gifted program.

### A Resentful Role

Superintendent Sean O'Farrell's experience with gifted education was more personal and not so positive. He found himself, by grade 5, completely bored by the math curriculum he had mastered years earlier. His teacher, believing she would kill two birds with one stone, set him up as a teacher's assistant, helping the struggling students and checking their papers — and most importantly, keeping him busy and out of mischief.

O'Farrell soon grew to resent the arrangement because he loved math and was learning nothing new. He tired of reviewing math concepts for students who just couldn't get what was so easy for him. O'Farrell learned firsthand that peer tutoring is not an effective strategy for gifted learners, so

*continues on page 33*

**Heidi Ondek (left), superintendent of Quaker Valley School District in Leetsdale, Pa., with Linda Conlon, the district's specialist for gifted instructional services.**





# The Conundrum of Gifted Education: Embrace, Reject and Lament

For my doctoral dissertation, “The Stories Superintendents Tell About Gifted Education: A Study of Their Narratives,” at the University of Pittsburgh, I prompted 18 superintendents to recall an encounter with gifted education in a personal or professional role. The stories illustrate what superintendents think but are understandably reluctant to say.

The issues embedded in their interviews revealed attitudes that could more effectively guide the work of gifted education coordinators and others responsible for design and delivery of services at the local level.

The summaries of the three superintendents’ stories below illustrate dramatically disparate mindsets toward gifted education and perhaps its fate in their school districts. I used pseudonyms for each superintendent because I assured them of confidentiality as subjects in my research, but the stories are factual as related to me.

## Superintendent Bonnie Bullington

A student named Jeffrey had arrived at Bullington’s high school, located in western Pennsylvania, with a long history of emotional and disciplinary problems, including an incident where he set off a small bomb on a neighbor’s porch.

At the time of Jeffrey’s admission, the school did not have a program or special room for students with emotional and behavioral disorders. However, one was created for him out of necessity. After numerous angry outbursts and consistently failing grades, Bullington investigated Jef-

frey’s history in greater depth. She was astounded to discover he had an IQ of 150, well into the highly gifted range. Further complicating matters, Jeffrey should have been a senior, but his earned credits placed him in the freshmen class.

The superintendent placed Jeffrey in some advanced classes, arranged for him to test out of others and had to battle some resistant teachers along the way. In the end, she says, “Jeffrey came through.” Bullington followed Jeffrey’s progress through college, and he graduated with honors in chemistry.

He is gainfully employed — “not making bombs,” she quipped.

Bullington’s persistence in looking for a solution to Jeffrey’s behaviors and her recognition of the student’s dual exceptionalities were key in providing him with the desperately needed intervention. The superintendent’s experiences helped her district support a substantial array of services, some crossing the program boundaries of special education, gifted education and regular education.

## Superintendent Stanley Coffman

Coffman’s story was from the vantage of his long-term and current position in a rural school district of 1,500 students.

A student in his school system had parents who aggressively sought acceleration in mathematics. The student was identified as gifted when he was in elementary school, which, Coffman said, “was too early in his career to have been tested.” His IQ at that time was about 127.

“To me, if you come from an educated home, I think most kids in kindergarten, 1st, 2nd grade, they’re going to shine just

because of the environment in which they lived. ... This student was really no more gifted than a lot of other students we have in the classroom,” Coffman said.

Over the years, the district reluctantly accommodated his accelerated progress in math, but balked when the student exhausted the district’s curriculum and the parents requested dual enrollment at a nearby college. To solidify his position, Coffman explained that his own son’s IQ was significantly higher than this student, but as a parent, he chose to do nothing “special”

and his son was successful without intervention.

Coffman questioned the value of early identification and the need for subject acceleration and resented the parents’ expectations. While stating the gifted program teacher “did some good things,” clearly he viewed gifted education as more trouble than it was worth.

Gifted education in this district is likely to remain responsive primarily to demanding parents and merely tolerated by staff and administration.

## Superintendent Paula Hensley

As both a parent and an administrator, Hensley lamented that she expected something more from gifted programs, saying they “should have been more private ... individualized” and tailored for each child. “They are more of a program, a pullout where students who are identified as having gifted abilities are taking a problem-solving course — something maybe a little more in-depth.”

As an administrator new to the 750-student small-town district after working in several other places, Hensley said she “witnessed a principal of a building who basically explained that the gifted program, one tenet, one hallmark of being gifted was that you are invited to attend any or all field trips that were offered in the building. That’s probably an example of what I do not believe the gifted program should be.”

Hensley was decidedly dismissive about gifted education in general, having seen no model or services in her entire career that met her ideal of more tailored, personalized instruction. However, with such a clear view of what gifted education should look like, she could be open to guidance in creating programming that is more attentive to the unique needs of individual students.

— LINDA CONLON

recalling this experience helped him to challenge other persistent myths in gifted programming. He strongly supports math acceleration today.

Superintendent Helene Cooper began her story by identifying the issue she found the most problematic and distasteful — telling a student and his or her family that the student does not qualify for the gifted program. “It was very heartbreaking because the family’s response to it was somewhat extreme,” she said, recalling one particular episode. “We had multiple meetings. I went through a lot of paperwork the family submitted. ... I kept saying the district doesn’t set the criteria, the state does. It’s 130 IQ, you know. It’s got to be like that, just like students who aren’t eligible at the other end of the spectrum. They may have some barriers and challenges, but they don’t fit the criteria for special education.”

Cooper was troubled by the rigidity of the identification criteria. But despite the damage she felt it inflicted on the child and his family, she supported drawing the state-mandated line as an unfortunate but necessary evil. In reality, most IQ-based eligibility rules allow for lower IQ scores when other criteria indicate gifted ability, though such loosely defined flexibility can prove problematic if the program size must be limited and gifted evaluation requests are many.

Cooper’s overall affect toward gifted programming was negative as she felt forced to make entire families unhappy. Understanding this superintendent’s discomfort with the existing gifted identification paradigm helped her to focus on reforms that were more inclusive, such as offering a continuum of services rather than a single program students are either in or not in.

### A Touchy Situation

With his narrative, Superintendent John Dowd shifted to the perspective of parent, describing the delicate and exasperating situation he encountered with his own child’s connection to gifted education.

“My 9-year-old son had been identified as a gifted student and my story is one of frustration because the program there is academic, but what I find is, well, sometimes the gifted teacher is one who was not successful in the regular classroom so they move the teacher there because it will be a smaller group and easier to work with. She’s a very nice person, but she doesn’t get gifted, in the sense that gifted doesn’t look the same for every child, and just because you get 100 percent on every spelling test or you do every math problem correctly, that doesn’t make you gifted.

“My son, he did well, obviously he did well

enough to be identified on measures, but his real gift is problem solving, thinking things through in a way that he often manipulates the situation, so he had his gifted teacher played within a month of being placed in that room to the point that she asked for him to be removed because he was refusing to do the work!”

Dowd reluctantly ventured into this touchy situation — the skills and qualifications for teaching the most able of students — as he watched his son’s motivation and behavior deteriorate in a gifted program that didn’t address his needs.

Dowd’s story was the impetus for reviewing the competencies for a new job description and criteria for future openings in gifted education in his district. Because specialized certification for this population varies widely by state, Dowd focused on the teaching skills that would address advanced student need. His contention that this issue was at the heart of his own child’s work refusal bodes well for his renewed interest in placing specially trained teachers in charge of gifted programming whenever possible.

**“What is your story about **SERVING GIFTED STUDENTS?** How might it inform the way **YOU VIEW AND ADDRESS THE PROGRAM** in your district?”**

### Revealing Tales

As I spoke to more superintendents, the big ideas of gifted education — identification (socio-economic, cultural and ethnic representativeness), curriculum, programming and service delivery models and acceleration — were revealed in every story. The telling of stories is both cathartic and enlightening.

What is your story about serving gifted students? How might it inform the way you view and address the program in your district? Can it be the catalyst for change? The embedded issues at the core of each story you tell or hear may provide direction for program evaluation and a roadmap for navigating the landmines of gifted education reform in your schools and beyond. ■

**LINDA CONLON** is secondary academic specialist in the Quaker Valley School District in Leetsdale, Pa. E-mail: conlonl@qvsd.org



# The Obstacles Detering Gifted Education

State policy and minimal federal funding don't help, but school systems can adopt practices to better serve our brightest students

BY CHESTER E. FINN JR. AND BRANDON L. WRIGHT

**T**he education of high-ability children faces many challenges today, starting with disagreement about which kids we're even talking about. Fairfax County, Va., defines them as "students [who] exhibit unusual performance capability in intellectual endeavors in one or more academic areas," identified as math, science, social studies and language arts.

In Virginia Beach, Va., however, the gifted program is open to students who possess "advanced aptitudes demonstrated by skills and creative expression in general intellectual ability" — with no reference to particular subjects — as well as "spe-

cific aptitudes in selected visual or performing arts."

When we don't agree on which kids may be "gifted," we have no way of knowing how many there are or how many our schools are serving, much less how well their educational needs are being addressed.

But that's just one bump on this gnarly log. In *Failing Our Brightest Kids: The Global Challenge of Educating High-Ability Students*, we describe plenty more, some within the grasp of school districts but many arising from state and federal policy priorities, educator attitudes and the broader culture.

## Allocating Resources

At the macro level, America's K-12 policies long have focused on ensuring that all children attain a minimum level of academic achievement. This is a worthy goal, and we've made some progress toward it. But as educators struggle to close gaps and equalize opportunity, many kids who could soar to academic heights instead languish in classes geared toward modest proficiency.

The consequences are well documented. The number of students scoring at the "advanced" level on the National Assessment of Educational Progress is miniscule — and flat. Students in the bottom 10 percent have made greater gains than those in the top decile. And on the latest (2012) round of the Program for International Student Assessment, or PISA, 27 of 34 countries in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development had larger percentages of their 15-year-olds reach the top two tiers in math than did the U.S.

The problem is not that we lack smart children. It's that too many such kids aren't getting the help they need. A woeful 2 percent of low-SES Americans reach the uppermost PISA ranks versus 20 percent from the top quartile. Plenty more poor children have the ability but lack the supports from home and family that middle-class children enjoy, and many attend schools that struggle with low achievement, places where the pressures on teachers and administrators are to equip weak pupils with basic skills (and, often, to deal with such challenges as discipline, attendance and hunger). Such schools understandably invest their resources in boosting their weak pupils — and state and federal accountability systems push them hard in that direction. They have little to spare by way of energy, time, incentive or resources for students who easily clear the proficiency bar.

State policies in this realm are spotty at best. Ohio requires school districts to identify gifted pupils using a five-part definition but has no requirement that districts serve those that they identify. As a result, only about one in five Buckeye students designated as gifted is enrolled in gifted and talented programs. Imagine the outcry if only one-fifth of those with disabilities were served by special education programs!

As for Uncle Sam, the one tiny grant program (named for the late Sen. Jacob K. Javits) is only intermittently funded and then with just a few million dollars for the whole country.

Behind this low priority — and deterring greater attention to high-ability learners — is America's anxiety about elitism, fear of discrimi-

nation and misgivings about doing more for the already-fortunate. That attitude gets reinforced by the fact that many gifted programs disproportionately serve middle-class white and Asian students but ignores the reality that such imbalances are due in large part to our neglect of other kids who could make it into these programs (and the Advanced Placement classes, selective colleges and career opportunities that follow) if we cultivated their talents from the earliest grades.

## Program Hurdles

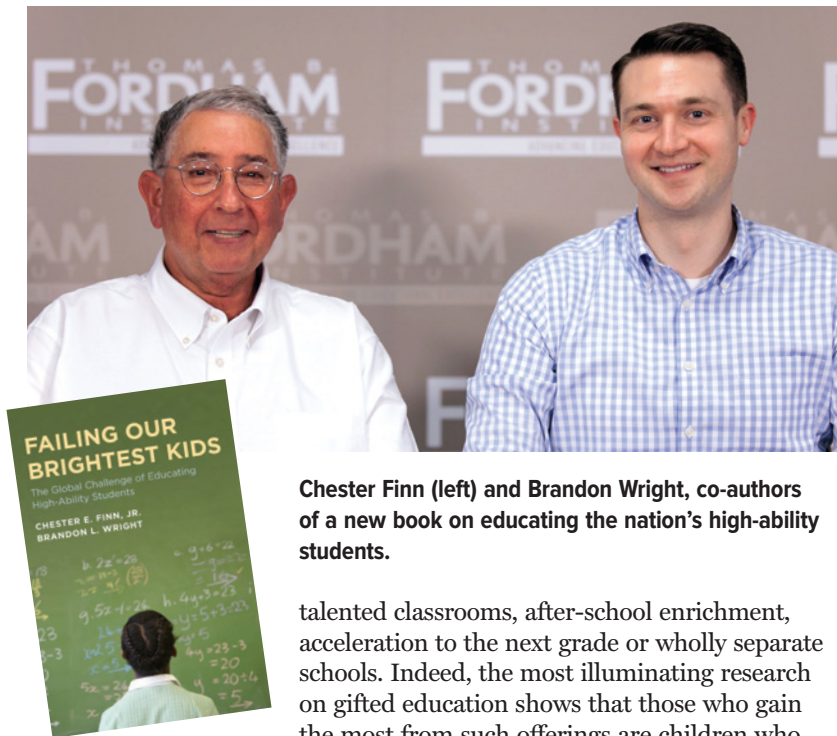
As if blurry definitions, spotty data, policy neglect and political angst weren't enough to explain America's poor showing on high-level academic metrics — and the inequities found among the few youngsters who reach those levels — the research in our book highlights four additional problems afflicting gifted education.

First, educators place too much faith in "differentiated instruction" as the way to teach children whose needs, abilities and prior achievement differ widely. (The big exception, again, are kids with disabilities, who get much individualized attention and extra help inside and beyond the regular classroom setting.) Teachers generally do their best but, faced with a class of 26 or 30 kids sprawled across a spectrum of knowledge and ability, they understandably tend to focus on those struggling to grasp the essential material.

Second, teachers may temporarily group pupils according to achievement, but the system in general is allergic to ability grouping, especially in the early and middle grades. Yet that's the best way to cultivate the talents of high-ability youngsters from tough circumstances, whether in gifted and







**Chester Finn (left) and Brandon Wright, co-authors of a new book on educating the nation's high-ability students.**

talented classrooms, after-school enrichment, acceleration to the next grade or wholly separate schools. Indeed, the most illuminating research on gifted education shows that those who gain the most from such offerings are children who already are achieving strongly, not those identified through old-fashioned measures like IQ scores.

Third, it's hard to track academic growth among fast learners when assessments top out and don't ask these kids enough questions to reliably gauge their progress. Computer-adaptive testing could help, but current federal policy emphasizes grade-level metrics, such that a 5th grader never even sees the 8th-grade questions that she or he might be ready to ace.

Finally, just as we argue over the definition of giftedness and the best ways of spotting it in children, our approaches to meeting their educational needs are all over the lot. Should they skip a grade? Get something extra after school? Transfer to a special class? Attend a different school? Even in high school, where it's common to offer at least a few Advanced Placement classes and sometimes programs like the International Baccalaureate, such offerings are most ample in places full of middle-class kids with educated, pushy parents and most meager in schools attended by poor kids.

### **A Full Spectrum**

We looked closely at the education of smart children in 11 other nations that mostly surpass the U.S. on international comparisons, including boosting more low-SES students into the ranks of high achievers. No place we visited has a flawless strategy, but we saw several practices that American school leaders could adapt.

Most obviously, our standards, tests and

accountability schemes should measure, incentivize and reward student growth across the full achievement spectrum. Let's also strengthen our data systems and research agendas so we can better understand what's happening to high-ability students and how well our practices and programs are working for them.

States or school districts should practice universal screening, using extant assessments to identify the students who are doing best in 3rd or 4th grade and asking teachers to add more children who, in their view, have the spark or drive to excel academically. Once identified, the single best thing we could do for them is make it possible to progress through the curriculum at their own pace — in other words, base progress on mastery, encourage acceleration and create additional options for fast learners. These might include resource rooms, separate classes, after-school enrichment, summer programs and more.

None of these is a novel idea, but none, to our knowledge, is systematically practiced in American public school systems, and all would do great good for high-ability students, particularly those whose parents may not be able to help them navigate today's options.

### **Equity and Capital**

We acknowledge that school budgets are tight, and there's pressure from many directions to concentrate available resources on the students with greatest needs.

Yet the education of high-ability students commands closer attention for two important reasons.

First, these children deserve curricula and instruction that meet their needs and enhance their futures, just like those with problems. (And many gifted students also face other challenges, including poverty and disability.)

Second, the country needs its schools to maximize the education of such children to ensure our long-term competitiveness, prosperity and capacity for innovation. As the American Enterprise Institute's Frederick M. Hess notes, these girls and boys are excellent prospects to become tomorrow's scientists, inventors, entrepreneurs, intellectuals and artists.

This, then, is a problem of both equity and human capital, a problem that America needs to get much better at solving. ■

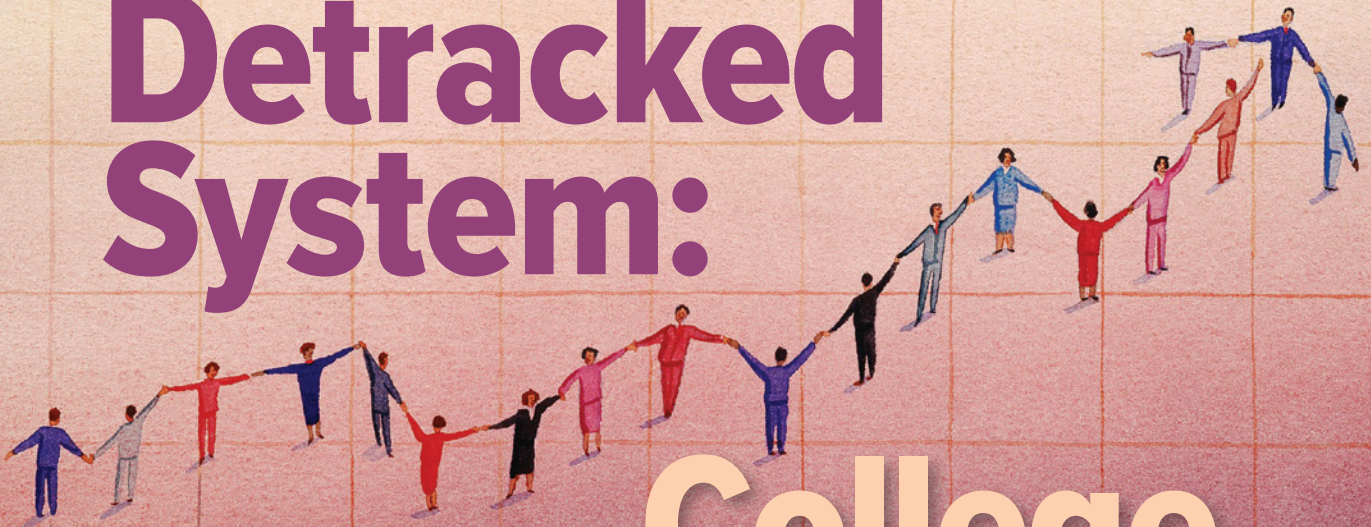
**CHESTER FINN JR.** is a distinguished senior fellow and president emeritus at the Thomas B. Fordham Institute in Washington, D.C. E-mail: [cefinnjr@edexcellence.net](mailto:cefinnjr@edexcellence.net).

**BRANDON WRIGHT** is a managing editor and policy associate at the Thomas B. Fordham Institute.



# Our Detracked System:

## College Curriculum for All



**D**etracking in K-12 education remains a controversial subject. Supporters have the research they need and detractors have the research they need to argue effectively for their respective positions.

But real-life cases count for something and should not be left out of the equation for helping leaders decide what might work for their schools or districts. Much of the longitudinal and cross-sectional work lacks the sense of character that an in-depth examination of the process and variables, as well as the development of solutions, would provide. Those who have tried to detrack students and failed and those who have tried it and succeeded need to share their stories and insights with one another.

In Rockville Centre, N.Y., a Long Island school district with approximately 3,600 students, we've

**In Rockville Centre, N.Y., accelerated instruction is served to students of every ability level and a range of socioeconomic backgrounds**

**BY WILLIAM H. JOHNSON**





**William H. Johnson, superintendent in Rockville Centre, N.Y., with teacher Viri Pettersen and students in the STELLAR (Success in Technology Enrichment Literacy Library and Research) Center at Francis F. Wilson Elementary School.**

had our share of successes and we've made plenty of mistakes from which other school systems might learn.

### Open Access

How is it that over the past 29 years we have managed to accelerate the curriculum for students in this racially, ethnically and socioeconomically diverse suburban community and even provide some with opportunities to begin their college studies early?

Years ago, I was sitting with a high school principal and assistant principal reviewing file after file of students who were not achieving at levels that would prepare them for higher education. We noticed some interesting themes that were rooted in administrative decisions made at the elementary and middle schools. Some of the more noticeable themes focused on our special education and gifted programs, but the most obvious was rooted in math.

At the time, the majority of our students took algebra in 9th grade. Incoming 6th graders needed to meet strict standards to qualify for any accelerated math courses. The limited number of seats in the classes meant only the best of the best were able to take accelerated classes. If students were not following an accelerated path in math in middle school, they had little or no opportunity to take calculus in high school.

We took a look at the research and at the students in our district who did have access to algebra in 8th grade and discovered the majority of those students were, at most, marginally different from their classmates who were denied this opportunity based on the math courses they com-

pleted in 6th and 7th grades.

We began increasing the number of sections of algebra in 8th grade and found no difference in pass rates on the New York State Regents exam. This continued for two years until we had only two sections of non-algebra math. At this point, we again looked at the students remaining in the last two sections of non-algebra math only to discover marginal differences between the remaining students and their classmates taking algebra. In fact, when we compared the transcripts of students passing algebra with those in the non-algebra courses, we found that, except for the severity of disability in some students, there were no differences in performances in other courses and therefore no reasons for pushing these students into a separate and less-challenging math class. It was at this point that we decided to enroll all 8th-grade students in algebra.

So began our walk down the road of detracking. We did not call it detracking at the time because we were focused primarily on our goal, which simply was to increase the overall participation of students in college-level curriculum before they left the high school. What we learned from our experience in math enabled us to recraft the entire system to allow all students to enroll in the most challenging academic courses rather than a chosen few.

Now, approximately 70 percent of our students are enrolled in Advanced Placement Calculus or AP Statistics before they graduate. In addition, every student is enrolled in two college-level International Baccalaureate courses as juniors, English and social studies, and more than 95 percent of the juniors continue with these IB courses into their senior year.

Looking back, it's clear detracking alone was not the sole factor in our success. Rather, a mixture of many variables, including collaboration, accountability and differentiated instruction, was needed. A focus on math will illustrate how these parts all fit together.

### Laying Groundwork

If the goal was to have all students fully prepared to take algebra in 8th grade, we needed to start with a backwards planning model that took into consideration factors such as the content and skills necessary for students to be ready for alge-



bra; the academic support some students might need to take on this challenging curriculum; the means and costs of providing that support; the composition of the classes; teacher training in differentiation, collaboration and assessment; and a way to share results with the community. These questions actually informed our definition of detracking.

First, we needed to develop a course of studies that prepared all students for algebra in 8th grade. By compacting the curricula and eliminating topic repetition, we moved the original 8th-grade math curriculum to 7th grade and combined the 6th- and the 7th-grade curricula to be taught in 6th grade. In later years, the district also revamped its 4th- and 5th-grade math curriculum to better prepare students for the expectations in 6th- and 7th-grade math.

We knew some students would struggle with algebra, so we considered ways to structure the school day to provide access to more instructional time. We already had experimented with stretching the course into a two-year sequence for some students, but performance for students who took the extended sequence was no different than it was for those who participated in the one-year course.

Our secondary schools operate on a six-day cycle (A/B cycle) with a nine-period day and a half hour of extra help before each day's start. Ultimately, we provided every student with one

period of math every day and created three additional periods of instruction every other day for students who needed extra support. Consequently, some students received nine periods of instruction during a six-day cycle.

We next considered the composition of the classes. Our goal was to have every class reflect the racial, socioeconomic, cultural and ethnic composition of our student population. If the intent is to detrack, building administrators need to be sensitive to the idiosyncrasies of their scheduler. When the scheduler completed its task, the principal and assistants responsible for scheduling reviewed every class and every schedule and hand balanced the classes, usually during the summer.

### A Sensitive Matter

One of the more sensitive issues, and possibly one of the most volatile, concerned teacher assignments. Tradition may have it that teachers with seniority teach higher-level courses with the better students. In a detracked school, that's not the case and actions by the principal that in any way resemble favoritism, punishment or violation of the rules of fairness or equal distribution of classes can easily bring effective instruction to a grinding halt.

We have found our teachers buy into both detracking and their assignments if they feel they are treated fairly, the classes are balanced, performance data are shared with teachers and they are provided adequate support for any of the instructional modifications expected of them due to the wide variety of students in their classes.

With the groundwork laid, we looked at the

**A 12th-grade International Baccalaureate course, History of the Americas, is open to all students at South Side High School in Rockville Centre, N.Y.**



PHOTO BY ROCKVILLE CENTRE UNION FREE SCHOOL DISTRICT

class composition one more time with an eye toward actual instruction and wondered how these students will learn together as a unit. The answer is differentiated instruction. Simply stated, differentiated instruction works when it's supported by good supervision, observations and evaluations by knowledgeable administrators; effective use of technology; collaboration with colleagues; and lots of district-supported staff development.

Because staff development around differentiated instruction is so important, we negotiated into the teacher contract that teachers must spend time in district-approved or district-designed staff development outside the school day. During the many years this has been in place, we have found that the majority of offerings are developed and provided by members of our own professional staff at a minimal cost to the district.

Teacher collaboration also is an integral element of detracking. Teacher collaboration does not happen by accident. Teacher schedules, like student schedules, need to be hand done so teachers have time to meet and share their expertise and experiences with colleagues through structured staff time.

Teachers, once they buy into the success and richness of classroom life in a detracked system, become the staunchest supporters, defenders and drivers of new ideas for enhancing classroom instruction. Our teachers and leadership teams have become conscious of leveling student performance and, with district support, have collaborated to develop grade-level and subject-wide assessments that help teachers and principals monitor student progress throughout the school year.

On the topic of buy-in, there are forever those in the community who will argue for a return to a sort-and-select model for their students. The concept of "us" and "them," for whatever reason, seems to be built into the DNA of an ever-present segment of our communities. The only way to manage what may appear to be a counterintuitive initiative is to build a mountain of good data. It is not enough to say you are successful; you must prove you are successful with irrefutable information that can be clearly articulated by staff and readily understood by the public.

### **Enrichment for All**

Additional districtwide issues needed to be addressed so we could move forward with detracking. One of these was the education of the "gifted." For many years, we had a pullout program in our elementary and middle schools.

The district was disappointed with the results of participating students who in much smaller than anticipated numbers took on the challenge of the International Baccalaureate diploma. We decided the search for the gifted child was futile, and it was time to move on to teaching to giftedness in all children. The district did away with the gifted program as it existed and replaced it with an enrichment-for-all program constructed around the schoolwide Renzulli model in grades K-5, and in grades 6-8 did away with the honors/accelerated curriculum.

That decision was not met with open arms by the community. At one standing-room-only meeting of parents, it was clear they had come to fight for the gifted program. An hour into the discussion, I asked them the same question I had asked our instructional staff: By show of hands, who in the room does *not* have a gifted child? No hands went up. And so began a real and meaningful discussion on how to discover the giftedness in each child and develop it to its fullest.

If the expectations were to be the same and instruction the operant variable, why not try it in all classes, including special education students in general education settings? We did and it worked. We now are a fully included district and have no special classes except for the most severely, developmentally disabled students who remain until they are 21 and participate in our school-to-work program. Support is provided by a combination of special education and regular teachers and teaching assistants. Since inclusion has become the rule, more than 90 percent of our special education students are graduating prepared to continue their studies in college.

Every high school in America proudly sends a segment of its graduating class off to college each year. Every high school has a successful formula for preparing those students for college. Therefore, the question is not whether schools and school systems know what college and career ready means, the question is how do we expand to all students the opportunities that often are available only to a select group?

In Rockville Centre schools, we challenge ourselves to expand to all our students the richness of the curriculum and programs that prepared some of our students for college work. Virtually every strategy we in the school district could imagine leads us back to a central theme: Detracking done properly can and will work. ■

**WILLIAM JOHNSON** is superintendent of the Rockville Centre Union Free School District in Rockville Centre, N.Y. E-mail: drj@rvcschools.org



# Reading & Resources

## BOOK REVIEWS

### The Triple Focus: A New Approach to Education

by Daniel Goleman and Peter Senge, More Than Sound, Florence, Mass., 2014, 78 pp., \$14.95 softcover



The subtitle of *The Triple Focus* suggests its approach to education is new. It isn't. But it also isn't the common approach today that promises quick-fix test score improvements driven by misguided policy mandates.

Authors Daniel Goleman, author of a landmark work on social emotional learning, and Peter Senge, author of *The Fifth Discipline*, which introduced us to systems thinking, affirm and advance changes appropriate for an interdependent, complex world.

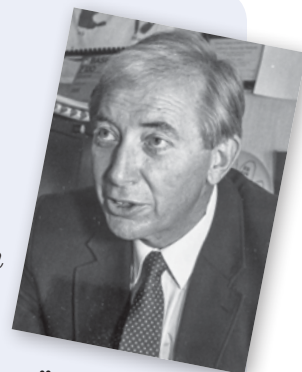
They begin by showing how teachers, principals and administrators can improve the efficacy of their work with students. They outline new ways for wise leaders to address the change process to improve student learning outcomes, noting that the industrial-age models for schooling have changed only incrementally.

The educational strategies described by Goleman and Senge are well known to

### WHY I WROTE THIS BOOK ...

*"This book was born as a result of being on the front lines for a quarter of a century. Schools will only be as great as their teaching force. Therefore, it is the responsibility of administrators to have the moxie to deal with any teacher who is marginal or borderline. This book gives specific examples of these types of teachers and remedies for improvement."*

Donald L. Fuhr, AASA emeritus member, Seneca, S.C., on co-authoring (with Mason Gary) *No Margin for Error: Saving Our Schools From Borderline Teachers*, Second Edition (Biblio Publishing)



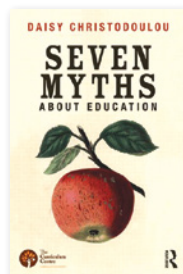
effective teachers and administrators. Implementation challenges have led to resistance to these ideas, but the book suggests strategies to make a positive difference. A systems approach takes leadership, creativity and careful planning. It also takes patience to avoid making it a mandate.

Thoughtful educators will see the wisdom of this short, but carefully crafted book. It is an essay that, in part, effectively counters ill-devised, top-down mandates to improve student achievement.

Reviewed by Brian L. Benzel, adjunct professor at Whitworth University, Spokane, Wash.

### Seven Myths About Education

by Daisy Christodoulou, Routledge, New York, N.Y., 2014, 133 pp., \$29.40 softcover



I expected *Seven Myths About Education* to be a breeze given its small size, but I was pleasantly surprised by my misconception. The author, a research and development manager at ARK Schools,

described as an education charity in the United Kingdom, sets forth a text applicable to a U.S. audience.

I was captivated by the manner in which Daisy Christodoulou presents each myth, the path by which people came to support the statement of belief and an alternative perspective that deflates the myth. I found myself making notes that often contained

those infamous five letters — PARCC.

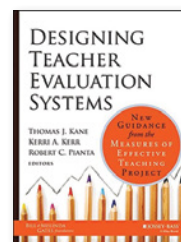
As a student, parent and educator, I recognized the myths in action in each role during the past 30 years of my postsecondary education life. In a supervisory capacity, there were pages on which I have notations about the Charlotte Danielson model of teacher evaluation, our school district's teacher evaluation framework and the Common Core standards.

The powerful concluding words of the book are evident in our everyday lives — knowledge liberates.

Reviewed by Hope Blecher, supervisor of language arts literacy, North Plainfield, N.J.

### Designing Teacher Evaluation Systems: New Guidance from the Measures of Effective Teaching Project

by Thomas J. Kane, Kerri A. Kerr and Robert C. Pianta, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, Calif., 2014, 616 pp. with index, \$45 hardcover



"What is effective teaching?" The editors of *Designing Teacher Evaluation Systems: New Guidance from the Measures of Effective Teaching Project* attempt to answer this question by contributing to the study of teacher effectiveness with lessons from the Measures of Effective Teaching studies funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

The book's premise is that the purpose

### MORE BOOK REVIEWS

[www.aasa.org/SAreviews.aspx](http://www.aasa.org/SAreviews.aspx)

***Courageous Conversations about Race: A Field Guide for Achieving Equity in Schools (Second Edition)***

by Glenn E. Singleton

REVIEWED BY BARBARA A. KLOCKO

***Education Is Special for Everyone: How Schools Can Best Serve All Students***

by Janet D. Mulvey, Bruce S. Cooper, Kathryn F. Accurso and Karen Gagliardi

REVIEWED BY EDYTHE B. AUSTERMUEHL

***Total Literacy Techniques: Tools to Help Students Analyze Literature and Informational Texts***

by Persida Himmele and William Himmele

REVIEWED BY DENVER J. FOWLER

of teacher evaluation is not high-stakes evaluation, but to improve teaching. The conclusion reached by the researchers is something that successful superintendents already know: Measuring effective teaching is complex and no single measurement tool can get the job done.

Data analyzed for the 15 studies conducted between 2009 and 2012 involved more than 3,000 teachers and approximately 100,000 students in six urban districts. The three editors have served as pre-K-12 teachers, policy consultants, researchers and professors, and the 34 con-

tributing editors, including leading teacher evaluation researcher Charlotte Danielson, represent the fields of research and statistics, university curriculum, and instructor professors, as well as for-profit and non-profit groups. Noticeably absent were professors of educational administration.

This lengthy tome would be of little value to the typical superintendent, who is dealing with complex issues, challenges and demands from multiple constituents.

**Reviewed by Margaret A. Noe**, professor of educational leadership, Southeast Missouri State University, Cape Girardeau, Mo.

## AASA Journal

Insight on how a college of education is working to develop principals to lead with confidence and racial competence is the lead research article in the Summer 2015 issue of the *AASA Journal of Scholarship and Practice*.

A second article reports results from a study of principal evaluation and supervisory feedback.

The quarterly publication is intended for higher education members as well as school leaders. It can be accessed on the AASA website.

## Publication Awards

AASA's *Conference Daily Online* received the top honor in its category at the 35th annual EXCEL Awards, which honor the best in association publishing nationwide. The four-day e-newsletter, produced at the 2015 national conference, received the silver medal in the online conference publication category.

Also, *School Administrator* magazine received the Award of Excellence for its November 2014 issue ("Signs of Things to Come: Eight Trends for Future-Focused Leaders") in the National School Public Relations Association's 2015 Publications and Electronic Media Contest. The conference e-newsletter received an Award of Merit.

Nearly 1,000 entries were submitted to NSPRA's competition.



## Community College Project

AASA and Hobsons announced a joint CGI America Commitment to Action to improve access to community colleges.

The project convenes high school, school district and community college leaders to create better pathways for the transition.

Visit [www.aasa.org/community-colleges.aspx](http://www.aasa.org/community-colleges.aspx) for more details.

## Upgraded AASA Searches

An advanced, customized Google search function has been added to AASA's website. The new features will help website visitors find exactly what they are seeking.

The content searches now include all main AASA websites: [www.AASA.org](http://www.AASA.org), [www.AASAConnect.org](http://www.AASAConnect.org) and [www.aasa.org/NCE](http://www.aasa.org/NCE).

## ABSTRACT

### Turnover and Trust

A doctoral study by Edgar B. Camacho for the Ed.D. at Walden University examined the impact of frequent superintendent succession on levels of trust and morale in small school districts.

Camacho found a significant relationship between frequent turnover and a decline in trust in districts that had two or more leadership changes within six years. But he found no effect on personnel morale.

One implication of the study is that districts can sustain high levels of trust and build leadership capacity by providing training to school boards on the impact of frequent turnover.

Copies of "Frequent Superintendent Succession: The Impact on Personnel Trust and Morale" are available from ProQuest at 800-521-0600 or [disspub@proquest.com](mailto:disspub@proquest.com).

## BITS & PIECES

### Charter Schooling

As part of a larger effort to improve the conversation about charter schools, Public Agenda and the Spencer Foundation have released a set of nonpartisan charter school resources called *Charter Schools In Perspective*.

The resources include a guide to charter school research on topics such as student achievement, finances, governance and diversity.

Find the resources at [www.in-perspective.org](http://www.in-perspective.org).

### Teens' Mental Health

Researchers at University College London and the Anna Freud Centre have published "Mental Health Difficulties in Early Adolescence" in the *Journal of Adolescent Health*.

They studied changes in adolescents' mental health between 2009 and 2014 and found that most aspects were stable, but girls had greater emotional problems in 2014 than in 2009.

Learn more at <http://bit.ly/teen-mental-health>.



## Case Management

A report detailing first-year results of the Communities In Schools program, "Case Management for Students at Risk of Dropping Out," has been released by MDRC.

After one year, CIS students were more likely to view education as valuable and to report having positive relationships with adults and peers. Improvements in attendance, academics and discipline were not yet discernable.

Read the full report at [www.mdrc.org](http://www.mdrc.org).

## Scoring Principals

The journal *Education Evaluation and Policy Analysis* has published a paper that examines the use of student test scores as a measure of principal performance.

The research analyzes three approaches to assessing performance through test measures and compares them against non-test methods.

Read the abstract at <http://bit.ly/scoring-principals>.

## Home Communication

Harvard and Brown universities have released a new study, "The Underutilized Potential of Teacher-to-Parent Communication: Evidence from a Field Experiment."

The study says struggling students' academic performance improves when teachers are in regular communication with their parents, especially with specific advice for how to improve students' grades.

Access the study at <http://bit.ly/teacher-parent-communication>.

## Disability Outcomes

*Review of Educational Research* has published a systemic review of research that examines the relationship between experiences in school and post-school outcomes for students with disabilities.

Predictors of success include aspects of education, employment and independent living.

Read the abstract at <http://bit.ly/disability-outcomes>.

## Teachers' Judgments

The *Journal of Social Policy* has published "Stereotyped at Seven? Biases in Teacher Judgement of Pupils' Ability and Attainment."

The University of London study found teachers stereotype students according to their level of poverty, gender and ethnicity, regardless of academic achievement.

The study can be found at <http://journals.cambridge.org>.

## AASA School Solutions Center

These firms make up the AASA School Solutions Center. NJPA is the premier member.

**NATIONAL JOINT POWERS ALLIANCE**, national contract purchasing solution, [www.njpacoop.org](http://www.njpacoop.org)

**CHROMAGEN**, new lens technology for students with reading problems, [www.IReadBetterNow.com](http://www.IReadBetterNow.com) and [www.HelpStudentsRead.com](http://www.HelpStudentsRead.com).

**ECRA GROUP**, research, analytics and accountability solutions, [www.ecragroup.com](http://www.ecragroup.com)

**EDBACKER**, crowd fundraising for education, [www.edbacker.com](http://www.edbacker.com)

**HMS EMPLOYER SOLUTIONS**, dependent healthcare eligibility audits, [www.employeraudits.com](http://www.employeraudits.com)

**JASON LEARNING**, STEM education through exploration, [www.jason.org](http://www.jason.org)

**K12 INSIGHT**, develop strategic communication initiatives to engage and collaborate with stakeholders, [www.k12insight.com](http://www.k12insight.com)

**ORGANIZATIONAL HEALTH**, organizational audits of human capital, [www.organizationalhealth.com](http://www.organizationalhealth.com)

**PENN MID-CAREER DOCTORAL PROGRAM IN EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP**, national, executive, cross-sector, innovative, cohort-based, [www.gse.upenn.edu/midcareer](http://www.gse.upenn.edu/midcareer)

**QUANTUM LEARNING**, transformative schoolwide professional development, [www.QuantumLearning.com](http://www.QuantumLearning.com)

**READ TO THEM**, creating communities of readers. [www.readtothem.org](http://www.readtothem.org)

**SCHOOL LEADERS RISK MANAGEMENT ASSOCIATION**, focus on federal legislation and litigation, [www.slrrma.org](http://www.slrrma.org)

**UPS**, shipping, freight, logistics, supplies for schools, [www.ups.com](http://www.ups.com)

School districts should do their own due diligence before signing contracts with companies that belong to the AASA School Solutions Center. More on the School Solutions Center can be found at [www.aasa.org](http://www.aasa.org).

## SchoolAdministrator | OCTOBER



**SUPERINTENDENT MOBILITY AND TRANSITIONS.** Julie Hackett, author of *Building Relationships, Yielding Results*, writes about the high price of superintendent turnover. Houston's veteran superintendent Terry Grier contributes an article, "Building Good Board Relationships 101: Lessons From a Battle-Tested Superintendent." Other superintendent contributors: Michael Snell and Dan Foster.

## PLUS

- ▶ A guest commentary by Superintendent Rebecca McFall on her use of student feedback to ramp up staff performance reviews
- ▶ State of the Superintendency info-graphic on severance agreements
- ▶ Profile of Don Haddad, superintendent, St. Vrain Valley School District, Longmont, Colo.
- ▶ Reviews of *Presidents, Congress, and the Public Schools: The Politics of Education Reform* and *Living on the Horns of Dilemmas: Superintendents, Politics, and Decision-Making*

## Moving (Briskly Even) Beyond Tired Notions of P.E.

BY MERRI ROSENBERG

**“NO ONE SPORT** should predominate in a quality P.E. program or deserve marquee status,” says John Skretta, superintendent of Norris School District in Firth, Neb. “That’s a tired notion.

“The very nature of P.E. instruction has evolved,” he adds. “It’s about equipping kids with the developmental assets to draw upon for a lifetime.”

Skretta’s leadership in the schools just south of Lincoln has ensured that wellness, nutrition and phys-ed are given due consideration in budget decisions about curriculum, professional development and facilities. (Even master schedules have been adjusted to include two 10-minute activity breaks where students stretch during an activity like vocabulary study.) Physical education teachers are involved in the conversations, not muted on the sidelines.

The district’s holistic approach to student health required, Skretta explains, that “we re-imagine how P.E. works within a school system.” His success in doing so has drawn national recognition to the Norris schools.

### Emerging Models

Just what is on the menu for sports in the standard, exploratory P.E. curriculum in his 2,300-student district? Fly fishing, archery, lacrosse, floor hockey and yoga (as part of a Mind and Body course) are offered, along with traditional team and other sports, such as swimming, track and tennis.

The old model of gym class often focused on a narrow range of team sports involving balls, nets, bats and mats. Sometimes programs catered more to talented athletes rather than ensuring all children participate in vigorous activity. Today phys-ed has branched out to include strength training, yoga, Pilates, Zumba, biking



**Marathoner John Skretta, superintendent of Norris School District in Firth, Neb., makes health and fitness a top priority in his district.**

and hiking, thanks to new national and state standards that emphasize strength, endurance and flexibility, as well as wellness and nutrition.

While Norris School District benefits from enhanced attention under Skretta’s leadership, students in the Miami-Dade County Public Schools have the South Florida geography and climate in their favor.

Their wealth of physical education choices go well beyond traditional team and individual sports: swimming, kayaking, canoeing, snorkeling and paddle-boarding, as well as dance and fitness activities.

A high quality P.E. program is comprehensive; it includes dance, rhythm, cardiovascular activities, muscular strength, endurance and flexibility, explains Lisa Perry, a physical activity adviser for the Alliance for a Healthy Generation. “It is also more

fitness-based.”

Those priorities and attributes serve as a partial checklist for evaluating and purchasing curriculum, training and equipment.

Districts facing budget challenges have helped support a program with grants or phased in changes. And a fitness-based model can be implemented without a significant capital outlay, says Kathy Chichester, CATCH national coordinator, “Many activities don’t require equipment,” she said. “There are skill builders, with lots of movement, tag-oriented games and skill-building games.”

### Curriculum Standards

“You have to teach kids concepts, skills and understanding,” said Executive Director Kymm Ballard, whose organization, SPARK, helps districts identify the equipment to purchase and offers training and curriculum plans to implement the new standards.

“Districts should determine what kids should know and be able to do when they graduate,” says Ballard. “It’s a backwards plan — develop fitness goals and develop the physical activity goals and skills around that.”

Just as with other academic subjects, districts should focus on best practices and evidence-based programs to incorporate into the revamped physical education curriculum, which also should include age-appropriate outcomes and benchmarks for students.

If a district is moving to a fitness-based curriculum, the basic equipment can be minimal. Frisbees, noodles — even iPads or tablets — are what’s needed, explains Ballard.

“Medicine balls, kettle balls and body weights for resistance training are other common equipment,” Perry says.

In Miami-Dade, for example,



students use resistance bands, jump ropes, balls, light body bars, treadmills and cross trainers in the district's wellness center. The equipment is totally funded through grants, says Jayne D. Greenberg, district director of physical education, health literacy and JROTC.

Miami-Dade also uses technology, like Xbots, for "Dance Dance Revolution" and video to teach winter sports like snow-skiing.

And with more districts offering or adding fitness centers, administrators might want to consider purchasing a defibrillator, says Ward Hamilton, senior vice president of Zoll Medical Corp. "An EMS can't get to you quickly enough. If you're putting together a fitness center, you need to think about AEDs."

### Professional Development

None of this will work, however, without a concomitant effort in professional training and development, not only for the district's physical education teachers but also for classroom teachers. To determine whether a curriculum is appropriate, even districts that don't have a full-time phys-ed coordinator should take advantage of the expertise of their P.E. teachers, as well as the specialists at the state education agency.

Norris School District hired outside trainers for its P.E. teachers to help them gain hands-on skills and knowledge. The P.E. curriculum now familiarizes students and teachers with the seriousness of head injuries. Teacher training focuses on recognizing the symptoms of concussions in case they are not identified by the student and discusses how teachers must accommodate recovering students upon their return to class.

"A customized workshop from SPARK costs between \$2,000-\$10,000 for 40 teachers depending on their needs," says Ballard. Schools can adapt SPARK as a place to start. You get assessments that are aligned with the national standards and you can edit the curriculum."

The SPARK curriculum also provides adaptations that teachers can use to work with students with disabilities or who need accommodations. Ballard suggested using social media as a resource for teachers to talk about ideas and challenges.

Healthy Kids Challenge offers webinars, curriculum materials and onsite consulting programs and workshops, as well as free downloadable tip sheets to help districts. Through partnerships with organizations like SPARK, Healthy Kids Challenge focuses on training and education about wellness

## Resources

AASA's Children's Programs Department staff work with superintendents and school system leaders to improve school policies, practices and structures concerning children's health, including physical activity. To learn more about their work, visit [www.aasa.org/ChildrensPrograms.aspx](http://www.aasa.org/ChildrensPrograms.aspx).

and nutrition to enhance newly invigorated phys-ed programs.

### Return on Investment

"When a program can't be implemented all at once, start with a pilot program at the youngest age possible," says Carly Braxton, senior manager of SHAPE America. She urges districts to "collect data and show the success and impact of programming."

Miami Dade, for example, has been relentless in making sure programs are having an impact. "Our programs are evidence-based," says Greenberg. "We're implementing state standards, working with the University of Miami School of Medicine. We collect data all year long."

Programs use different measures of success, and districts will have to decide what measures they feel are appropriate.

"CATCH has improved educational outcomes, with academic performance and discipline, an increase in students choosing water, eating fruits and vegetables and a decrease in screen time, as well as an improvement in teacher self-confidence in teaching wellness," says Duncan Van Dusen, executive director of the CATCH Global Foundation.

"Physical education is a critical component to educating the whole child, and healthy kids learn better," says Perry. "You need to place as much emphasis on acquiring those skills as on academic skills."

**MERRI ROSENBERG** is a freelance education writer based in Ardsley, N.Y. E-mail: [merri.rosenberg@gmail.com](mailto:merri.rosenberg@gmail.com)



Teachers in San Diego are involved in games and demonstrations during the SPARK Summer Institute.

### Connecting 'Heroes' on Leadership Excellence



**MY HOPE IS** you are all having a great start to your school year. It is always so exciting and re-energizing to begin a new year. Thanks to your leadership, there is much to be proud of in our public schools.

Our nation's high school graduation rate has reached an all-time high, which is absolutely outstanding. At the same time, AASA members continue to look for ways to enhance the educational experience for every child who walks through our school-house doors each day.

As an organization, AASA is assisting in that process by creating and curating programs, collaboratives and conferences designed to connect innovative leaders because it is you, our public school children's everyday heroes, who are truly transforming lives and dreams and creating hope for our nation's youth and their families.

Many of our AASA colleagues, who are among our nation's everyday heroes, are taking steps to do just that. Here are a few examples:

► Michael Fulton, superintendent of the Pattonville School District in St. Ann, Mo., is doing great work to eliminate the achievement gap in his district.

► Dallas Dance, superintendent in Baltimore County, Md., spearheaded the development of an initiative to fundamentally shift how teachers teach and to improve academics, safety, communication and organizational effectiveness in his district.

► Michelle Price, superintendent in Moses Lake, Wash., is visiting various locations in her community to listen to feedback from all stakeholders and to answer any questions they may have.

► Jim Rollins, superintendent in Springdale, Ark., is bringing together community and business leaders to ensure all students receive relevant, career-focused opportunities.

► Mary Jo Hainstock, superintendent of Vinton-Shellsburg Community School District in

St. Vinton, Iowa, is working with her community to provide support to homeless students.

► Terry Grier, superintendent in Houston, has implemented a 1:1 initiative designed to develop capacity among staff and transform teaching and learning in his district.

► Janet Mason, superintendent in Rutherford County, N.C., has done outstanding work in the area of early college opportunities for students.

► Richard Carranza, superintendent in San Francisco, is doing phenomenal work in the area of restorative justice. His district has adopted programs that require students to acknowledge wrongdoing and make amends rather than simply face suspension.

Our association is building and connecting innovative leaders like these and many others. From East Coast to West Coast, north to south, AASA members are everyday heroes who are changing lives and changing the world.

Like all those I've mentioned, AASA members must move beyond the minutiae that can control our day and truly transcend and lead for excellence. Our nation's superintendents have a moral obligation to be the voice for the voiceless, and I know you do that every day. We need to continue to celebrate the many successes of our public schools and be honest about our ongoing challenges.

A world that we cannot yet imagine lies before us, but I am confident that AASA and its members will provide the innovative leadership necessary to prepare our nation's students to be incredibly successful in our ever-changing global economy.

I wish you all an awesome school year and I look forward to seeing you in Phoenix, Ariz., in February for our National Conference on Education. It is going to be a phenomenal opportunity for professional growth and networking, and I hope you are able to join us.

**DAVID SCHULER** is AASA president for 2015-16.  
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#### EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE 2015-16

(terms expire June 30 of the year indicated)

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# Growing LEADERS at every level of your organization is not an option. *It's the whole ballgame.*

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## There's too much at stake to guess the answers to these questions.

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*"In the last ten years I've seen the Organizational Health process make the difference in leadership development in a large county district in Colorado and a suburban district in Portland, Oregon. Even in a high performing district like Bellevue, we are using the annual OH improvement process for all schools and central office units as a way to take student performance to new and higher levels."*



**Dr. Tim Mills**  
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## Finding Your Affinity Through AASA Consortiums



**ANOTHER SCHOOL YEAR** is underway while AASA continues to celebrate its 150th anniversary. In all of those years, we have honored our founders' mission to be advocates for the public schools and the children we serve.

Along with our advocacy role is also the professional development of our members. Today AASA coordinates a range of programs that engage our members in areas of interest and allow them to interact and collaborate with colleagues nationwide.

Seventeen school districts are involved in the Large Countywide and Suburban District Consortium. Their mission is to significantly advance systemic education improvement and innovation in policy and practice to benefit all students. Consortium districts collectively serve more than 1.55 million students, and membership is by invitation and approval from current members. The group is chaired by Dallas Dance, superintendent in Baltimore County, Md., and a member of AASA's Executive Committee.

Through a community of practice, the consortium seeks to define an assessment process that truly measures what matters, placing a higher priority on assessments that improve teaching and learning.

Some 30 school districts make up the AASA Collaborative. AASA Associate Executive Director Morton Sherman, formerly AASA's superintendent-in-residence, leads a group that considers itself a national think tank of superintendents. Meetings of the collaborative have attracted the likes of Yong Zhao, Presidential Chair at the University of Oregon, author Heidi Hayes Jacobs and consultant Bena Kallick. The focus is on collaboration and working together as critical

**"Forty superintendents and community college presidents are sharing how their COLLABORATION IS INCREASING GRADUATION RATES and college and career readiness."**

friends to solve problems confronting our schools.

### Certification Cohorts

AASA's Digital Consortium has convened 30 superintendents to identify problems and share successes in making the digital leap. Former National Superintendent of the Year Mark Edwards of Mooresville, N.C., has been leading this effort. During his nine years there, Edwards has transformed the district into one of the most successful examples of blended learning with one-laptop-per-child technology and a culture that focuses on the individual needs of each child. The other superintendents in the group have had similar successes in their district and serve as resources to superintendents looking to make the digital leap.

The positive outcome that comes about when K-12 systems communicate and collaborate with their regional community colleges is the thrust behind our K-12/Community College Partnership Group. Forty superintendents and community college presidents are sharing how their collaboration is increasing graduation rates and college and career readiness. Students simultaneously graduating with high school and associate college degrees are common fare for many of these districts. In partnership with the American Association of Community Colleges, our goal is to replicate this process throughout America.

Our National Superintendent Certification Program has been a huge success. Our first cohort graduated this past February at our national conference in San Diego. There are three cohorts now underway with our next graduation scheduled for the 2016 conference in Phoenix. New additions to the certification program are urban programs in partnership with Howard University and the University of Southern California and our first state-level program for aspiring superintendents in Minnesota in partnership with the Minnesota Association of School Administrators.

### New Engagement

At the beginning of summer, we launched our Makers Movement Superintendent Consortium with a meeting at the White House. Last year, President Obama hosted the first-ever White House Maker Faire and issued a call to action that "every company, every college, every community, every citizen joins us as we lift up makers and builders and doers across the country."

Cognizant of the personalized education efforts generated by the digital transformation, a Personalized Education Collaborative is being launched by superintendents deeply engaged in the process, with the first convening of the group scheduled for Oct. 5-7 in Salt Lake City. These superintendents see technology as facilitating the transformation of education to a truly personalized format where each child will receive, at all times, instruction that matches his or her level of aptitude and knowledge.

Thanks to all of these collaboratives and consortiums, member engagement in AASA is at an all-time high.

**DANIEL DOMENECH** is AASA executive director. E-mail: [ddomenech@aasa.org](mailto:ddomenech@aasa.org). Twitter: @AASADan



# Superintendents: Leaders of Readers

**S**uperintendents set the tone for instruction throughout their districts. Increasingly, superintendents are becoming leaders of readers by using the One District, One Book program. “I am a champion and cheerleader for literacy, and this program allows me to show that the superintendent places a high value on reading and literacy,” says Brad Reed, superintendent of USD 428 in Great Bend, Kan.

Ricardo López, superintendent of the Mission Consolidated Independent School District in Mission, Texas, learned about ODOB at the Texas Association of School Administrators conference in January. He then participated in the statewide Texas Reads One Book program, which launched in April with a videotaped reading by Dallas Cowboys head coach Jason Garrett. The program involved tens of thousands of students across Texas.

López immediately saw how ODOB could be a foundational piece for the district’s literacy initiatives. ODOB engages students, parents and staff at elementary schools throughout a district in reading the same children’s book at the same time. “The home connection is the most critical piece,” López says. “We have already seen a significant impact.”

In May, Mission CISD gathered 7,000 students at the local stadium to launch a summer reading initiative to help prevent “summer slide.” Dressed as storybook characters, López and other community leaders celebrated the importance of reading. “We are trying to transform the community through literacy,” López concludes.

This fall, Great Bend’s 1,600 elementary students will read *The World According to Humphrey* by Betty G. Birney. “Any time we can celebrate reading/literacy and give parents a time to connect with their children, while also involving the community, it’s a unique opportunity,” says Reed.

Reed will introduce the book from his office with a video that will be streamed live into the district’s five elementary schools. He has these goals:

- ▶ Increase the love of reading among students.
- ▶ Boost students’ reading/literacy levels.
- ▶ Create a deeper connection between students and parents over reading.
- ▶ Drive a feeling in the community that reading and literacy are vital for youth, adults and families.
- ▶ Create a greater community connection through a shared activity.



**Dressed as storybook characters, Superintendent Ricardo López (left), school board member Patricia O’Caña-Olivarez, and assistant superintendent Criselda Valdez (at podium) led the kickoff of Mission CISD’s summer reading program in May.**

The Watertown City School District in New York has successfully used the ODOB program for several years. A recent survey indicated that 96 percent of the district’s parents believed the program would cause their children to read more often or reinforce their current love of reading. “The One District, One Book program has been an amazing opportunity to invigorate the joy of reading among our students, their families, and our staff as well as many community members,” says superintendent Terry Fralick.

“We brought an excitement to reading and talking as a family about the message that books convey,” adds assistant superintendent Mary-Margaret Zehr.

The One District, One Book program is used in dozens of districts and hundreds of schools across the United States and Canada. Read to Them, creator of the program, has been designated as an AASA School Solutions Center partner. For a longer feature, visit [www.aasa.org/content.aspx?id=37323](http://www.aasa.org/content.aspx?id=37323).



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### Daniel Brenner

After nine years in Roslyn, N.Y., three as assistant superintendent for curriculum, instruction and technology and six as superintendent, Dan Brenner has

accepted the superintendency in Darien, Conn. He previously spent five years as a high school principal in Yorktown, N.Y., and five years as principal at the Village School in Great Neck, N.Y. Brenner began his education career as a school psychologist and has continued in his role as a clinical psychologist since 1988. A member of AASA since 2009, he holds a Ph.D. from Hofstra University in Hempstead, N.Y.



### Tammy Campbell

The new superintendent of the 21,000-student Federal Way, Wash., district is Tammy Campbell, who joins the Seattle-area system after two years as assistant

superintendent of learning and teaching in Renton, Wash. Campbell previously served as executive director of instructional programs and executive director of teaching and learning in Spokane, Wash., for seven years. She began her career as a classroom teacher, subsequently serving as a summer school principal and then principal in Spokane Valley's Central Valley School District. An AASA member since 2009, Campbell holds an Ed.D. from Washington State University.



### Ronald G. Hanson

Ron Hanson has assumed the superintendency in North Platte, Neb. He joins the district after six years as assistant superintendent of curriculum and instruction

and four years as director of curriculum in Papillion-La Vista School District in Papillion, Neb. Prior, Hanson served as principal and director of curriculum and professional development in Bellevue, Neb. An AASA member since 2013, Hanson began his career as a math and science teacher in Buffalo, S.D. He holds an Ed.D. from University of Nebraska-Lincoln.



### Curtis L. Jones Jr.

The Bibb County School District in Macon, Ga., has welcomed Curtis Jones as superintendent. Jones most recently

spent more than a decade in administration in the Griffin-Spalding County School System in Griffin, Ga., as superintendent, assistant superintendent of administrative services and principal. Prior to his career in education, Jones served in the U.S. Army for 20 years. An AASA member for six years, he currently serves as a Governing Board member. Jones holds an Ed.D. in educational leadership from Nova Southeastern University in Fort Lauderdale, Fla.



### Richard D. Tomko

The 4,700-student Belleville, N.J., school district has selected Richard Tomko as its new superintendent. Tomko previously spent

five years as superintendent in Elmwood Park, N.J., where he also was a principal and interim assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction. Tomko's earlier teaching and administrative experiences were in North Arlington, Dunellen and Paramus, N.J. He currently serves as an adjunct instructor at Manhattan College in Riverdale, N.Y., and Bergen Community College in Paramus, N.J. An AASA member since 2010, Tomko holds a Ph.D. in educational leadership from Seton Hall University in Orange, N.J.



### Brian J. Whiston

After seven years as superintendent in Dearborn, Mich., Brian Whiston has been named state superintendent of the Michigan Department of Education.

Previously, he served 11 years as director of government and community services for the Oakland Schools in Waterford Township, Mich., during which time he was a member of the district's school board. Whiston began his career in politics as chief of staff to former Michigan Sen. Rudy Nichols. An AASA member since 2008, he sat on the association's Governing Board.

## APPOINTMENTS

**Tami Crader**, from superintendent, Warren, N.J., to superintendent, Neptune, N.J.

**Franklin Foster**, from interim superintendent to superintendent, Colleton County School District, Walterboro, S.C.

**Dirk Halupnik**, from deputy superintendent, Linn-Mar Community School District, Marion, Iowa, to superintendent, Southeast Polk Community School District, Pleasant Hill, Iowa

**Jim Hogeboom**, from superintendent, Lucia Mar Unified School District, Arroyo Grande, Calif., to superintendent, Novato, Calif.

**John Link**, from superintendent, Fair Grove, Mo., to superintendent, Jackson, Mo.

**Mackey Pendergrast**, from superintendent, West Morris Regional High School District, Chester, N.J., to superintendent, Morris School District, Morristown, N.J.

**John A. Ravally**, from superintendent, Point Pleasant Beach, N.J., to superintendent, Franklin Township Public Schools, Franklinville, N.J.

**David Whitesell**, from superintendent, Stevensville, Mont., to superintendent, Arlee, Mont.

**Charles Young**, from associate superintendent, Palo Alto, Calif., to superintendent, Benicia, Calif.

## RETIREMENTS

**Patrick Bird**, superintendent, Mattawan, Mich.

**Jeff Corkery**, superintendent, Western Dubuque Community School District, Farley, Iowa

**Elizabeth Everitt**, superintendent, Aiken, S.C.

**Dan Fox**, superintendent, Pershing County, Nev.

**Jerry Frew**, superintendent, Kearsarge Regional School District, New London, N.H.

**Richard Grimoskas**, superintendent, Tipton, Iowa

**Sue Ann Gruver**, superintendent, Prior Lake-Savage Area Schools, Prior Lake, Minn.

**Alan Jensen**, superintendent, English Valleys Community School District, North English, Iowa

**Bobbi F. Johnson**, superintendent, Culpeper, Va.

**Kelley Kalinich**, superintendent, Kenilworth, Ill.

**Tim Morgan**, superintendent, Sheffield, Ala.

**Catherine Nichols**, superintendent, Covina-Valley Unified School District, Covina, Calif.

## DEATHS

**Ron Sodoma**, 70, retired superintendent, Albion, N.Y., April 13

**Robert R. (Bud) Spillane**, 80, retired superintendent, Fairfax, Va., July 18

News about AASA members' promotions, retirements, honors and deaths should be addressed to: Editor, *School Administrator*, 1615 Duke St., Alexandria, VA 22314. Fax: 703-841-1543. E-mail: [magazine@aasa.org](mailto:magazine@aasa.org)



## A Leader Others Admire

BY LIZ GRIFFIN

**DRIVING INTO A** puddle that was more like a pond, MaryEllen Elia, who was superintendent in Hillsborough County, Fla., at the time, destroyed the engine of her car and the clothes of her two deputy superintendents who pushed the vehicle out of the water. But like great leaders in any field, she turned the harrowing scenario into a lesson worth sharing.

As she puts it: “It’s good to surround yourself with people who will go the extra mile [for] you.”

She’ll be applying that counsel anew in Albany, N.Y., as the recently appointed New York State education commissioner. She’s charged with oversight of museums, libraries, professional licensing and adult education, in addition to nearly 2.7 million K-12 students.

During the 10 years Elia ran a central Florida school system the geographic size of Rhode Island, she was responsible for more than 200,000 students, 28,000 employees and a \$2.9 billion budget. Her first priority, upon taking the reins in 2005, was to create a college-going culture. She displayed what she calls a “persistence of purpose,” introducing successive systemic reforms that worked together to lift student and teacher performance.

“Success in a district this size, or any size for that matter, does not occur overnight,” Elia says. “There is still work to be done. I believe I leave a legacy of continuous improvement.”

School board member Dorothy Edgecomb says Elia raised expectations for everyone tied to the schools. “She not only opened up the opportunity for Hispanic and African-American students [to take more Advanced Placement classes], she also supported students.”

Today, 30 percent of graduating seniors have received AP credit and the number of minority students taking AP classes has risen significantly.

At 66, Elia gained national atten-

### BIO STATS: MARYELLEN ELIA

**CURRENTLY:** New York state education commissioner, Albany, N.Y.

**PREVIOUSLY:** superintendent, Hillsborough County Public Schools, Tampa, Fla.

**GREATEST INFLUENCE ON CAREER:** Beth Shields, who offered me job opportunities as she advanced in her career from principal to deputy superintendent

**BEST PROFESSIONAL DAY:** Attending graduations for our 27 high schools

**BOOK AT BEDSIDE:** *How Children Succeed: Grit, Curiosity, and the Hidden Power of Character* by Paul Tough

**BIGGEST BLOOPER:** While driving to an event during a torrential rainstorm, I drove into standing water not realizing it was several feet deep. My car stalled and I was stuck. My two deputy superintendents pushed my car out of the enormous puddle.

**WHY I’M AN AASA MEMBER:** I find that the support, insight and counsel of fellow school administrators through AASA is tremendously valuable.



tion as a forward-thinking leader with a deep understanding of systemic change, accountability and performance evaluation. She inspires others to go beyond the status quo. Earlier this year, she received the National Women in School Leadership Award from AASA and was named one of four finalists for National Superintendent of the Year.

“Others look to her for advice and counsel,” says Bill Montford, CEO of the Florida Association of School Superintendents and a state senator. “She’s exceptionally knowledgeable and skilled — a superintendent’s superintendent who never lost touch with those in small districts.”

One of Elia’s biggest achievements is winning a \$100 million grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation to revamp teacher and principal evaluation systems.

Elia worked with the Hillsborough teachers’ union to achieve gains on both sides of the labor-management line. Teachers there now follow an evaluation system in which 40 percent of ratings are based on student growth on state and local tests. They

receive performance reports that are reviewed by teachers they have a say in selecting.

“It is a testament to MaryEllen’s leadership, not only for winning such a large grant but for successfully implementing new evaluation and accountability programs in a district as large as Hillsborough,” says Kathleen Shanahan, former chair of the Florida State Board of Education.

Despite her record of substantive progress on deeply entrenched issues, the Hillsborough board, in a move viewed by many as bewildering, terminated her in a 4-3 vote without cause last January. Business and political leaders responded with dismay. Elia accepted the board’s decision and maintained a positive attitude about what would come next.

Montford wasn’t surprised by Elia’s resiliency and career move upward. “MaryEllen is a true professional and a team player. She is a rarity, not just as a superintendent, but as a person.”

**LIZ GRIFFIN** is managing editor of *School Administrator*. E-mail: [lgiffin@aasa.org](mailto:lgiffin@aasa.org)



### The Losing Bettor on Public Display

In front of his school board, David Goodin, superintendent of the Spring-Ford Area School District in Royersford, Pa., agreed to a bet he did not expect to lose to Allyn Roche, an assistant superintendent, over the former's athletic fitness.

The proposition was this: If Goodin finished ahead of his colleague in a 5K run/walk to support the district's education foundation, Roche would fully shave his head. But if Roche's 7-year-old son Cooper finished ahead of the superintendent, Goodin would agree to spend a full day working in a trophy case at the high school.

When the unexpected somehow happened, the superintendent held up his part of the bargain, working 7:30 a.m. to 2 p.m. with a laptop and reading material on display for all to observe in the central hallway.

SOURCE: *Phoenix Reporter*, Pottstown, Pa.

### A Chilly Workplace

As an incentive to get students to contribute to a food drive benefitting a community program for needy families, Michael Poore, superintendent in Bentonville, Ark., pledged this: He would move his workplace for a day to the roof of the school district administrative headquarters once the goal was reached.

He's a man of his word. A photograph in February appearing in the *Northwest Arkansas Democrat-Gazette* shows Poore in a winter parka at a rooftop worktable surrounded by a couple of inches of snow.

### Not the School Day She Remembered

For Lisa Snyder, superintendent in the Lakeville, Minn., school district, going back to school required some personal adjustment. It had been a long time since she spent a full day moving from one class to another on a schedule.

Snyder agreed to shadow a high school junior who won a Facebook contest. The superintendent especially loved being permitted to drink coffee during an early-morning class — quite a departure from her own high school days in the late 1970s. She also noted students completing academic work on smartphones, tablets and laptops — largely without abusing the privilege.

"The only person who forgot to silence their phone was me," Snyder told the *Minneapolis Star Tribune*.

### Out With Attire and the Job

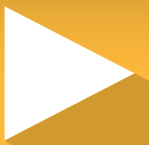
Janice Adams didn't wait until her last day as a superintendent to start shedding her wardrobe.

Six months before she retired in June as superintendent of the 5,000-student Benicia Unified School District in the San Francisco Bay Area, Adams began to donate her business attire to charities. This included, according to the *Vallejo Times Herald*, "one outfit she would rather shear than wear."

After eight years running the Benicia schools and 42 years in all as an educator, Adams said: "I'm never going to wear this brown suit again. I never did like that suit."

**SHORT, HUMOROUS** anecdotes, quips, quotations and malapropisms for this column relating to school district administration should be addressed to: Editor, *School Administrator*, 1615 Duke St., Alexandria, VA 22314. Fax: 703-841-1543. E-mail: [magazine@aasa.org](mailto:magazine@aasa.org). Upon request, names may be withheld in print.





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