



Gifted Education Program Review

Executive Summary



Elana Gray, M.Sc., Paul Favaro, Ph.D.

Rebecca Crouse
Debra Krutila
Chuck Waterman
Superintendents
Curriculum, Instruction and Special Education Support Services
Alternative Programs

Assessment and Accountability Department

Kim Bennett
Assessment and Accountability Officer

Rosanne Brown
Assessment and Accountability Officer

Marti Carpenter
Testing/Assessment Technician

Lisa Durocher
Assessment and Accountability Research Coordinator

Paul Favaro
Chief of Assessment and Accountability

Pat Hare
Assessment and Accountability Secretary

Tom Lam
Assessment and Accountability Analyst

Sumbal Malik
Research and Community Coordinator
UEY- Malton

Aimee Wolanski
Assessment and Accountability Officer

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Program Description

The Peel District School Board provides gifted education programming to students in elementary and secondary schools. At the elementary level, the Program includes two distinct service delivery models designed for students identified as Exceptional Intellectual-Gifted: (1) In-School Enhanced Learning Program (ISELP) and (2) contained Enhanced Learning Classes (ELCs). At the secondary level, specific subjects across grade levels are offered that

extend and enhance the curriculum. As part of the identification and placement process, an Identification, Placement and Review Committee (IPRC) considers the student's intellectual ability using the results of standardized educational assessments, a teacher nomination checklist, student achievement, and adaptive behaviour. Identification and placement decisions are reviewed annually (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007).

Program Review Approach

Purpose

The purpose of this review was to identify current issues in Gifted Education through a literature review, and to document models of gifted education identification and programming procedures within school boards across Ontario. The review also examined Peel's service delivery model, and obtained perceptions of key stakeholders regarding the Gifted Education Program. The information obtained in this review will help to illuminate program strengths and challenges and assist with the future planning and improvement of Peel's Gifted Education Program.

Project Steering Committee

During the 2006-2007 school year, a Gifted Education Program Review Steering Committee was formed, involving representatives from Curriculum, Instruction, Special Education, and Alternative Programs Support Services, the Assessment and Accountability Department, school administrators, representatives from the Association for Bright Children of Ontario (ABC Ontario) and an external researcher. The steering committee developed the Terms of Reference for the project.

Methodology

The research design for the Gifted Education Program Review included a mixed method approach (Green, 2007) using a range of quantitative and qualitative data methods: (a) literature review; (b) record reviews; (c) telephone interviews with school boards across Ontario; (d) survey data from key program stakeholders - students, teachers, administrators, and parents; and (e) focus groups with administrators, Special Education Resources Teachers and Psychoeducational Consultants.

The following questions were used to direct the Gifted Education Program Review:

1. What does the literature say about Gifted Education?
2. What does the Gifted Education Program look like in school boards across Ontario?
3. What is the Gifted Education Program service delivery model in Peel (historical and present)?

4. What are the perceptions of key stakeholders regarding Peel's Gifted Education Program?

Participation

Fourteen school boards across Ontario participated in the telephone interview. A total of 1194 elementary students (787 students in the ISELP and 407 students in ELCs) and 822 secondary students in the Regional Enhanced Learning Program completed the student survey; 154 elementary teachers and 52 secondary teachers completed the teacher survey; and 109 elementary administrators completed the administrator survey. A total of 1091 parents of students in the Gifted Education Program (713 parents of elementary students and 378 parents of secondary students) completed the parent survey. Focus group participants included four secondary administrators of Regional Gifted Centers, 17 Special Education Resource Teachers, and four Psychoeducational Consultants.

Results

Current Issues Regarding Gifted Education in the Research Literature

Over the past several years, the concept of giftedness has changed from a uni-dimensional viewpoint (based on IQ scores), to a multi-dimensional perspective emphasizing a variety of characteristics, abilities, affinities, and motivations (Senate Select Committee Report, 1988). Various models of giftedness have emerged in the literature [e.g., Sternberg's Triarchic Model of Giftedness (Sternberg, 1997), Renzulli's Three-Ring Conception of Giftedness (Renzulli, 2005)], and have inspired educational specialists to advocate for gifted education, programming, and curriculum.

The literature emphasizes that it is important for educators to continue to explore, understand and appreciate the multi-dimensional nature of giftedness and intelligence; and that accurate identification, enhanced curriculum, and appropriate programming can impact on the success of children identified as gifted.

The identification process is viewed as a critical step in the process of ensuring that students who need gifted education are recognized and matched with appropriate educational programs. Researchers suggest

that the best identification procedures rely on a multi-dimensional approach by obtaining multiple types of information (i.e., intellectual ability, academic achievement, interests, creative thinking, motivation, leadership skills), from a variety of sources (objective and subjective assessments) (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2001; Coleman, 2003; New South Wales Association for Gifted and Talented Children Inc., 2004; Ralph, 1996; Rogers, 2002). In addition, the literature emphasizes that the goals of the Gifted Education Program should set the direction for the identification process and that the data collected for identification must be matched with the types of services and activities being provided (Coleman, 2003).

Underrepresentation of gifted students is recognized in the research literature as a challenge. Gifted children can be found in every level of society and cultural group, however students from specific groups have been underrepresented in gifted programs (e.g., ethnic or racial groups, students who are economically disadvantaged, students with limited English proficiency, and students with physical disabilities) (Castellano, 2003, cited in Coleman, 2003; Fraser, Garcia, & Passow, 1995). Researchers attribute this underrepresentation to: (1) test bias, where standardized tests may discriminate against students who differ from the dominant norm group (Fraser, Garcia, & Passow, 1995); (2) selective referrals, where educators may have lower academic expectations for students who are culturally or linguistically diverse, and overlook them when making referrals for gifted program screening (Fraser, Garcia, & Passow, 1995; Jones, 1988); and (3) the reliance on deficit-based paradigms, where school systems focus on student deficiencies rather than strengths, thereby diverting attention away from higher

achieving students (Pollard, 1993; St. Jean, 1996).

Researchers concur that the primary goal of a Gifted Education Program is to provide opportunities for gifted learners to meet their intellectual needs that cannot be met in a regular classroom program. In order to meet these needs, various types of programming options are available, including: (1) differentiation, (2) ability grouping, and (3) acceleration. Differentiation involves teachers of heterogeneous classrooms tailoring the environment and instructional strategies to create different learning experiences for different students. Research evidence suggests that the level of challenge experienced by gifted learners in mixed-ability classrooms is minimal because teachers do not use differentiation as often, or as effectively, as they think they do (Archambault et al. 1993; Harlen & Malcolm, 1999). Ability grouping refers to the grouping of students by ability or achievement with the purpose of reducing heterogeneity. Meta-analyses indicate that the extent to which gifted students benefit academically from ability-grouping depends on the degree to which the curriculum is adjusted. Full-time ability classes have resulted in the largest effect on learning for gifted students (Kulik and Kulik, 1992; Kulik, 1993; Slavin, 1987). Acceleration involves offering students the standard curriculum at a higher than age-appropriate grade level, or speeding up the pace at which material is presented. Researchers conclude that students experience significant academic gains when participating in acceleration programs. Although acceleration has shown to be an effective curriculum intervention, it is not a routine strategy used in gifted programs throughout educational settings (Kulik, 2003; Rogers, 1992).

Gifted Education in School Boards Across Ontario

The Ontario Ministry of Education recognizes giftedness as an exceptionality and mandates that it is the responsibility of school boards to provide special education programs and services for students with special education needs (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2001). Identification, placement, and review procedures are regulated by the Ministry (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2006). The range of programming options for students identified as gifted in Ontario varies across school districts.

Variations in gifted identification procedures and program options were evident among the 14 school boards involved in this review. While several boards employed a two-step process for identifying elementary students (a group screening assessment followed by an individual assessment), there were variations in the assessment instruments and criteria used.

The majority of school boards provided in-class enrichment at all elementary grade levels, and began their formal gifted programming in grade 4 or 5 (full-time self-contained classes and/or part-time withdrawal). The proportion of students participating in each of the programs, and the number of schools within a board offering a part-time or full-time program, varied among school boards. At the secondary level, the majority of school boards offered a formal gifted program with a similar program delivery model (enhanced level courses). Differences existed between school boards with respect to the number of secondary schools offering a gifted program, the number and type of enhanced courses offered, and the grade levels offering enhanced courses.

Peel's Gifted Education Program Service Delivery Model – Past and Present

In 1999-2000, the gifted identification process involved using a Primary Enhanced Learning Program-Selector Matrix (including the OLSAT, above-level CCAT, achievement data, and a Teacher Checklist). For junior, intermediate, and senior students, a similar matrix was used (including the in-level CCAT, above-level CCAT, achievement data, and a Teacher Checklist). In 2006-2007, the identification process involved consideration of four factors: (1) a Teacher Nomination Checklist, (2) Intellectual ability, as determined by in-level CCAT results (achieving the 97th percentile or above in the verbal, quantitative, or composite index), (3) academic achievement, and (4) adaptive behaviour-learning skills. Results of privately obtained individual psychoeducational assessments were also accepted for gifted identification consideration.

Prior to 1999, the elementary Gifted Education Program provided levels of service based on the extent of giftedness (e.g., mild, moderate, profound), and included “non-gifted” students in the service structure. In 2006-2007, the Gifted Education Program in Peel included two distinct service delivery models designed for students identified as Exceptional Intellectual-Gifted: (1) In-School Enhanced Learning Program (ISELP) which were available at all elementary schools, and (2) contained Enhanced Learning Classes (ELCs) which were available at 12 schools.

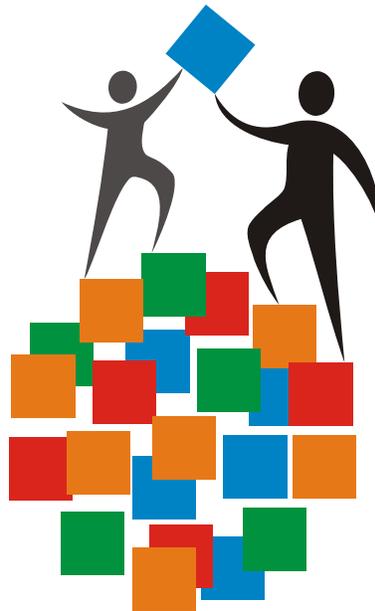
At the secondary level, past programming involved two options: (1) an informal option (providing students with enhancements in the regular classroom), and (2) a formal option (providing curriculum extensions and enhancements in specific subjects, available in grades 9 and 10 at all

schools, and grades 11-13 at Regional Centres). In 2006-2007, the Regional Enhanced Learning Program offered enhanced level courses in all grade levels, at six Regional Gifted Centres. Subject areas offering enhanced level courses varied from year to year and Centre to Centre depending on student enrollment and interest, and availability of staff.

Comparing Peel with Other Ontario School Boards

Given the variations found in identification procedures and program options among school boards across Ontario, it is not surprising that the Gifted Education Program in Peel was, in some ways similar to many other schools boards, yet different in other respects. Similar to other school boards, Peel: (1) participated in an elementary group screening assessment, (2) collected additional pieces of student

information to assist with identification and placement decisions, (3) provided in-class enrichment at all elementary grade levels, (4) did not have a group screening assessment process at the secondary level, and (5) offered a formal gifted program at specific secondary schools, involving enhanced level courses in all grade levels. Conversely, Peel's Gifted Education Program differed from other school boards in the following ways: (1) the identification of elementary students did not involve administering an individual assessment following the group screening assessment, (2) gifted assessment criteria for cut-point scores were different, and (3) the self-contained program (ELCs) and the in-school program (ISELP) were offered to elementary students who were identified as gifted as early as grade 1, compared to grades 4, 5, or 6 in other boards.

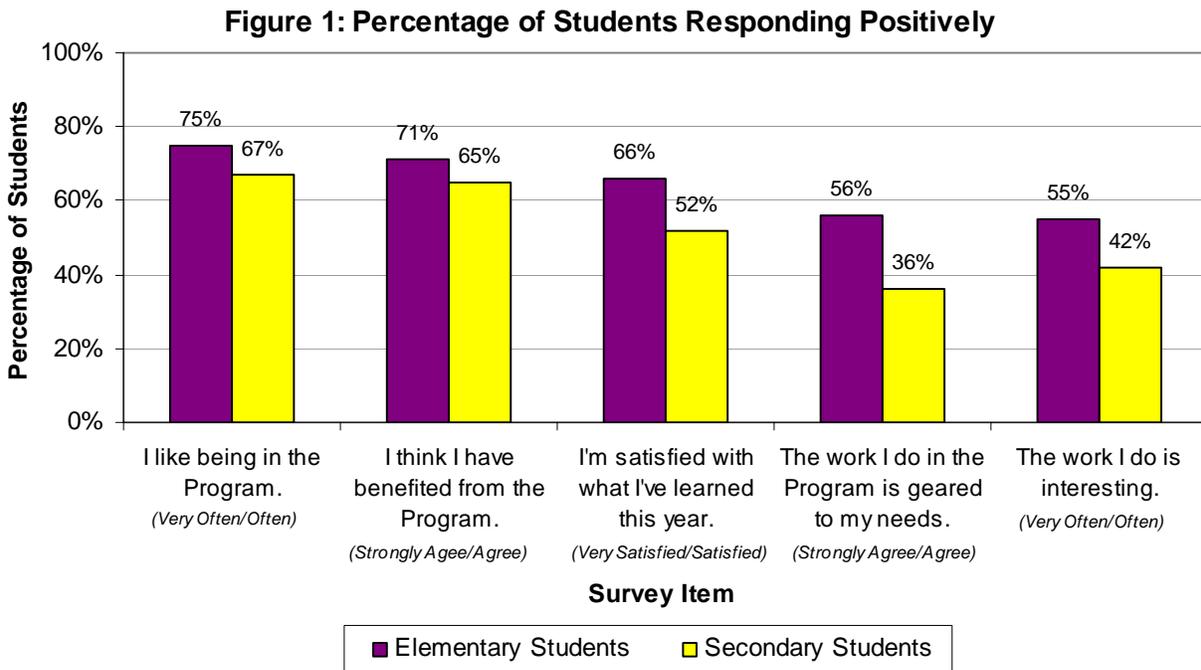


Perceptions of Key Stakeholders Regarding Peel’s Gifted Education Program

Students

Over two thirds of Peel’s elementary and secondary students in the Gifted Education Program reported that they liked being in the Program and felt they benefited from it. Compared to secondary students, elementary students were more positive about what they had learned over the school year, the extent to which the Program met their needs, and their interest in the work they were doing (see Figure 1). In addition, the majority of both groups of students in the Gifted Education Program enjoyed school, thought their school work was challenging, and felt

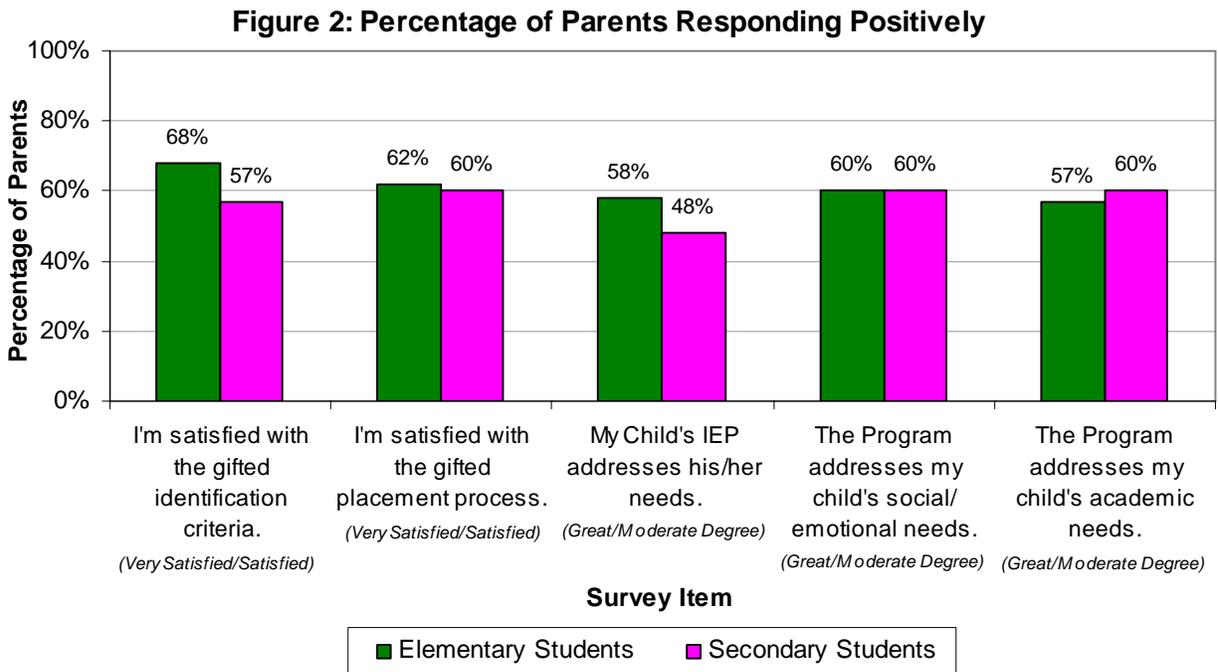
they did well in school. Compared to elementary students in the ISELP, relatively more students in ELCs felt challenged with their school work, were satisfied with what they learned during the school year, and felt they benefited from the Program. Seven out of ten elementary students and eight out of ten secondary students felt socially confident at school. Relatively more elementary students in ELCs felt that being in the Gifted Education Program helped them make new friends and fit in at school, compared to students in the ISELP.



Parents

Six out of ten parents of students in the elementary and secondary Gifted Education Program felt the Program met their child’s academic and social/emotional needs, and were satisfied with the gifted placement process. Compared to parents of secondary students, slightly more parents of elementary students were satisfied with the identification criteria and felt the Individual Education Plan (IEP) addressed their child’s needs (see Figure 2). In addition, seven out of ten parents from both groups felt the breadth and depth of content learned by their child throughout the school year was greater than that of the regular program. Compared to parents of elementary students in the

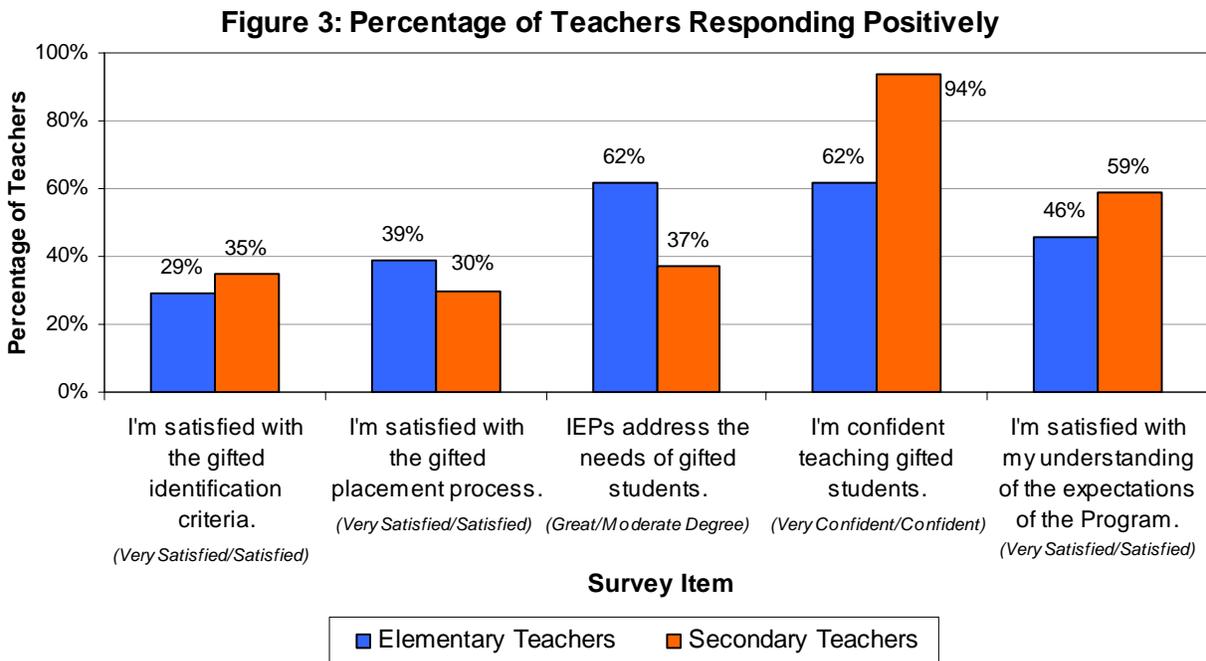
ISELP, parents of students in ELCs felt that the breadth and depth of content learned by their child during the school year was greater, school work was more challenging for their child, and the Program addressed their child’s needs to a greater degree. Compared to parents of secondary students, parents of elementary students communicated with their child’s teachers more frequently throughout the school year, and were more positive regarding the quality of information received about aspects of the Program (e.g., the IPRC process, curriculum and instructional activities, their child’s IEP).



Teachers

Approximately one-third of elementary and secondary teachers were satisfied with the gifted identification criteria and placement process. Compared to secondary teachers, elementary teachers were more positive about the extent to which the IEP addressed the needs of their students. Secondary teachers were more confident teaching students identified as gifted, compared to their elementary counterparts, and were slightly more satisfied with their personal understanding of the expectations of the Gifted Education Program (see Figure 3). In addition, the majority of elementary and secondary teachers felt that the Gifted Education Program was tailored to the needs of gifted learners, and that it met the social/emotional needs of their students.

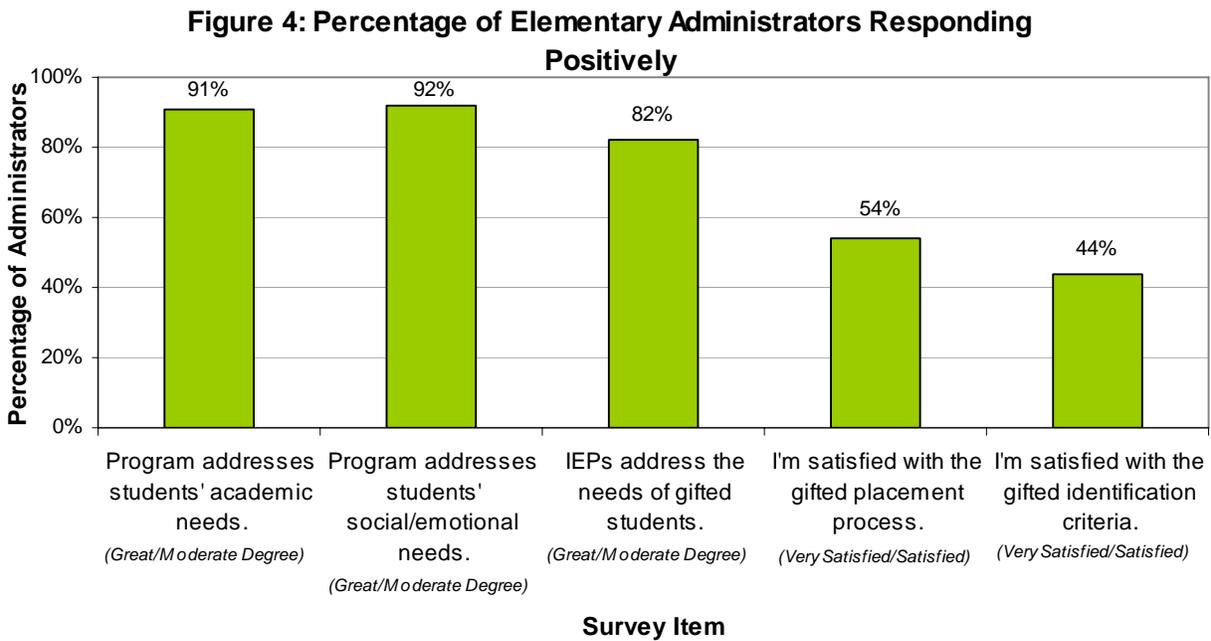
Compared to secondary teachers, elementary teachers felt the Program was more challenging for their students; and secondary teachers felt the Program addressed the academic needs of their students to a greater degree, compared to their elementary counterparts. Over half of elementary teachers and one-third of secondary teachers were dissatisfied with opportunities available for collaboration with other teachers, and half of both groups of teachers were dissatisfied with opportunities available for professional development related to gifted education. Two-thirds of secondary teachers and half of elementary teachers were dissatisfied with classroom resources available for teaching students who were identified as gifted.



Administrators

The majority of elementary administrators felt that the Gifted Education Program met the academic and social/emotional needs of the students in their school, and that the IEP addressed the needs of students identified as gifted. Over half of elementary administrators were satisfied with the gifted placement process, and four out of ten were satisfied with the identification criteria (see Figure 4). In addition, seventy percent of administrators were satisfied with their personal understanding of gifted education

and expectations of the Program. Four out of ten elementary administrators were dissatisfied with the classroom resources available for teachers of students identified as gifted, one-third of were dissatisfied with the professional development opportunities available to them, and half were satisfied with the usefulness of the Additional Qualification courses and other professional opportunities related to gifted education.



Secondary administrators identified the following strengths of the Regional Enhanced Learning Program: (1) the model encouraged ability grouping where students learned together and challenged each other, (2) the model enabled students to learn and socialize with their mainstream peers, (3) the Program enhanced learning by focusing on the depth and breadth of subject areas,

(4) students were provided with valuable leadership opportunities, and (5) students had a variety of courses they could choose from, at the academic or enriched level.

Secondary administrators also expressed concern regarding the wide range of academic achievement found among secondary students identified as gifted,

student achievement levels not reflecting gifted identifications, and students who entered secondary school with strong quantitative abilities and struggled with the holistic nature of the Program. Secondary administrators also discussed some challenges they faced with gifted programming at the secondary level:

(1) finding qualified teachers within their school, (2) schools offering more than one specialized program (i.e., Gifted Education Program and International Baccalaureate Program), and (3) the need for increased teacher planning time, classroom support resources, and professional development for teachers and administrators.

Special Education Support Staff

Special Education Resource Teachers and Psychoeducational Consultants identified the following strengths of the Gifted Education Program in Peel: (1) the model enabled students to learn together in an environment that was suited to their needs, (2) the model offered students a challenging learning environment, (3) Peel had talented and dedicated teachers of gifted students, (4) schools had developed innovative and creative activities to better meet student needs, and (5) parents and students were involved in placement decision-making processes.

Special Education Resource Teachers and Psychoeducational Consultants also expressed concerns with the gifted identification process. They felt the process obtained minimal information about students, did not acknowledge non-verbal or creative skills, was over-reliant on cognitive scores, and the CCAT cut-points were too low (97th percentile on one index - verbal, quantitative, or composite). Special

education support staff also expressed concern with Peel accepting external private assessment results. The following issues and challenges regarding gifted programming were discussed: (1) inconsistencies with the delivery of the ISELTP across elementary schools, (2) limited extended learning opportunities available for students in the ISELTP, (3) challenges teachers faced with programming for students in large, multi-grade ELCs, and (4) difficulties administrators had with finding qualified teachers who were genuinely interested in teaching ELCs. In addition, Special Education Resource Teachers and Psychoeducational Consultants viewed the IEP as being limited in its usefulness with students identified as gifted, due to the restrictions for including individual student information. Special Education Resource Teachers also expressed concern regarding the minimal professional development opportunities and resources available to them for effectively supporting teachers of students identified as gifted.

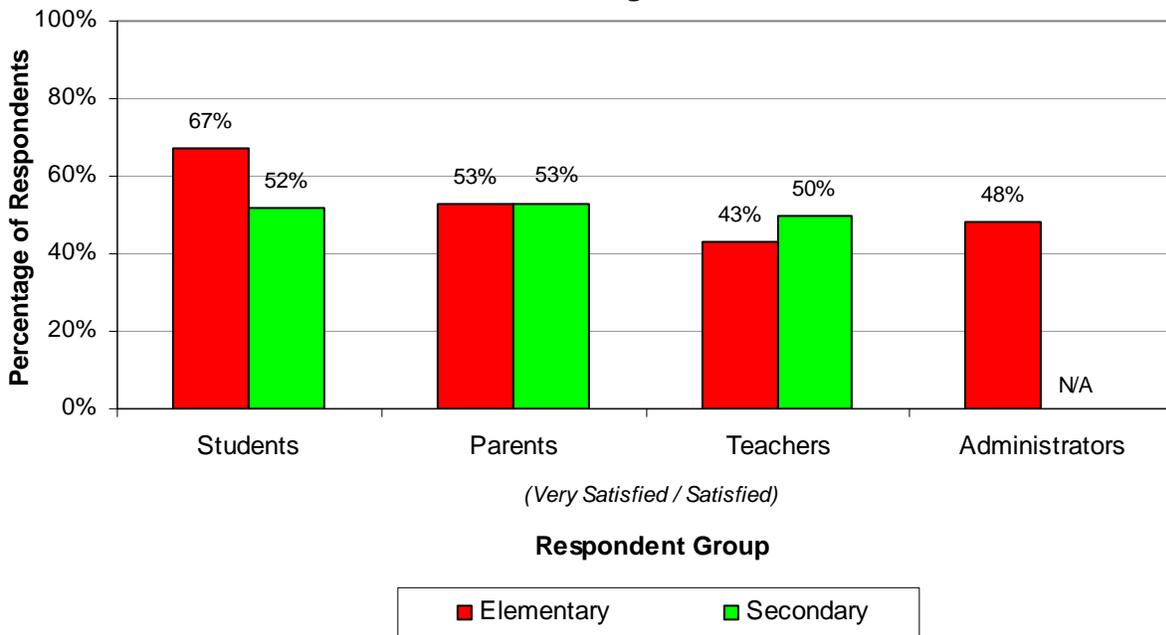
Overall Satisfaction with the Gifted Education Program

Survey respondents were also asked to rate their overall satisfaction with the Gifted Education Program in Peel. Approximately half of all parents, teachers, and elementary administrators were satisfied with the Program. More elementary students were satisfied with the Gifted Education Program as a whole, compared to their secondary counterparts (see Figure 5). In addition, compared to parents of elementary students in the ISELP, parents of students in ELCs were generally more satisfied with the Program. Approximately one-quarter of all

parents, elementary teachers, elementary administrators, and secondary students reported being dissatisfied with the Program as a whole. One in ten elementary students, and two in ten secondary teachers, were dissatisfied with the Program.

Approximately one-quarter of all students, parents, and elementary administrators, and one-third of all teachers, reported a neutral rating for program satisfaction (they were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied with the Program).

Figure 5: Percentage of Respondents Satisfied with the Gifted Education Program as a Whole



Program Strengths and Areas for Improvement

The following strengths of the Gifted Education Program in Peel were identified:

- The program model allowed for ability grouping where students with similar abilities, skills, and interests learned together in a comfortable environment that was suited to their needs.
- The program model enabled teachers to extend learning by focusing on the depth and breadth of subject areas; nurture creativity, problem-solving, and independent learning skills; as well as promote healthy competition/ collaboration and social risk taking.
- The program model facilitated social confidence and self-esteem among students, and enabled them to develop meaningful friendships.
- The homogeneous structure of the program model in the elementary panel enabled teachers to provide individualized attention, and better accommodate students' academic, social, and emotional needs.
- Peel had knowledgeable, talented, and dedicated teachers who understood giftedness, enjoyed teaching students identified as gifted, and employed effective teaching strategies.
- Overall, the nature of the Program challenged, motivated, and enhanced student learning, and encouraged students to pursue their interests and improve skills.

The following areas for improvement were identified for the Gifted Education Program in Peel:

- Overall, the gifted identification process was viewed by stakeholders as “lacking rigor.” It was suggested that Peel incorporate more stringent identification criteria by: increasing CCAT cut-point scores, including all indices of the CCAT, administering an individual assessment once screening criteria were met, and obtaining a more comprehensive picture of students.
- Placement decisions did not always appropriately reflect the needs of students. Stakeholders were concerned with primary students being placed in multi-level ELCs, and with secondary students who struggled in the Program. It was suggested that students be re-assessed in grade 8 or 9 to confirm their gifted identification and ensure that the Regional Enhanced Learning Program would continue to meet their needs.
- The IEP was “limited in its usefulness” for teachers of students identified as gifted. It was suggested that the IEP could be improved by increasing its user friendliness, and allowing for the ability to include detailed and specific student information. In addition, teachers required more training and time to work on IEPs in order to use it consistently and effectively as a framework for planning student success.
- In order for teachers to better understand giftedness, the expectations of the Gifted Education Program, and effectively meet the academic, social, and emotional needs of students identified as gifted,

they required more teacher support, classroom resources, professional development, and opportunities for teacher collaboration.

- Stronger focus on addressing the individual needs of students identified as gifted, and providing them with more challenging curriculum that incorporated critical thinking, creativity, and problem

solving activities. In addition, increased time should be allotted to ISELP students for extended learning opportunities beyond the regular classroom.

- Stronger school-home communication regarding student progress throughout the school year, expectations of students, and the Gifted Education Program.

Discussion

The results of the Gifted Education Program Review demonstrated variations in Gifted Education Programs across Ontario school boards. Similarly, when comparing the Gifted Education Program in the Peel District School Board to other Ontario school boards, differences and similarities in identification procedures and programming were noted. Overall, the Gifted Education Program Review identified a variety of strengths and limitations of the Gifted Education Program. The positive program perceptions identified by students, parents, and educators have also been described in the research literature as key advantages in gifted education. Peel's stakeholders and many researchers concurred that gifted programs can be successful when they: (1) group students according to ability, (2) engage trained and dedicated teachers, (3) provide a challenging curriculum, (4) address individual academic, social and emotional needs of students, and (5) encourage students to pursue their interests and utilize their skills to their full potential.

The Gifted Education Program Review also identified areas for improvement that were recognized as challenges in the gifted education research literature. Specifically, Peel's respondents and the research literature agreed that: (1) a multi-dimensional identification approach provides a more accurate picture of the abilities, skills, and interests of a potentially gifted child, (2) programming for students identified as gifted should involve adequate exposure to extended learning opportunities, and involve challenging activities that encourage higher-level thinking skills and self-directed learning, (3) teachers have a significant influence on the classroom learning environment and require the appropriate support and resources to effectively meet the diverse needs of students identified as gifted, and (4) strong, ongoing school-home communication will work to enhance the learning experiences of students.

Recommendations

Based on the results of this study, recommendations for the Gifted Education Program in Peel are presented in six broad categories: (a) gifted identification model, (b) program placement model, (c) individual education plan, (d) gifted education programming, (e) professional development for educators, and (f) home-school communication.

(a) Gifted Identification Model

(i) It is recommended that a Special Education Support Services Work Team be developed to review and revise Peel's gifted identification model. The revised model will include standards for:

- group administered assessments
- individual assessments
- qualitative and quantitative indicators of academic achievement
- social, emotional, and behavioural factors and
- professional teacher ratings.

(b) Program Placement Model

(ii) It is recommended that the Special Education Support Services Work Team review and revise the gifted program placement model. The revised model will include specific criteria for admission and demission into ISELP, ELC, and transition into the Secondary Regional Enhanced Learning Program.

(iii) It is recommended that the Work Team review and revise placement options available at the primary, junior, intermediate levels with respect to student academic, social, emotional, and behavioural needs.

(c) Individual Education Plan

(iv) It is recommended that the Work Team review the current status of the Individual Education Plan for students

identified as gifted. The Team will address: usability (ease of use, purpose, and planning), level of detail regarding student information, teacher training on the IEP Writer, and time to work on developing IEPs.

(d) Gifted Education Programming

(v) It is recommended that the Work Team develop program expectations for Enhanced Learning Classes (ELC) and the In School Enhanced Learning Program (ISELP). Expectations will encompass: differentiated instruction, delivery of program, program location, and amount of withdrawal time.

(e) Professional Development for Educators

(vi) It is recommended that a professional development plan be created, which focuses on the academic, social, and emotional needs of students identified as gifted. The plan will address the following areas: increasing knowledge of giftedness, understanding program expectations, facilitating teacher collaboration, accessing support and classroom resources.

(f) Home-School Communication

(vii) It is recommended that a home-school communication plan be developed, which will address: strategies for engaging parents, Gifted Education Program description/objectives, and resources available to parents.

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Gifted Education Program Review Steering Committee Members

Sid Ali	Assessment and Accountability Officer Assessment and Accountability (September 2006 – January 2008)
Robin Lynn Buchanan	Co-ordinator Special Education Support Services
Barbara Cyr	SEAC Alternate for ABC Peel (as of June 2008)
Lori D'Aquila	Parent ABC Peel (September 2006 – April 2008)
Joan Dinnin	Co-ordinator Special Education Support Services
Paul Favaro	Chief of Assessment and Accountability Assessment and Accountability
Elana Gray	Evaluation & Research Consultant Gray and Associates
Jeanne Gray	Principal Woodlands S.S
Gina Heisz	SEAC Alternate for ABC Peel (September 2006 – April 2008)
Julie Hunt-Gibbons	Principal Lorne Park S.S.
Jack Kamrad	Chief Psychologist Special Education Support Services
Debra Krutila	Superintendent Special Education Support Services (as of September 2007)
Dianne Miles	Superintendent of Education Mississauga West Field Office
Carey Mollenhauer	Vice Principal Homestead P.S./Terry Fox P.S.
Barbara Murck	Parent ABC Peel (as of June 2008)
Shirley-Ann Teal	Superintendent Special Education Support Services (September 2006 – July 2007)
Marilyn Willis	Instructional Co-ordinator Curriculum and Instruction Support Services

