

Southmoreland School District's Gifted Education Program Review

What Southmoreland School District Is Doing Well Recommendations for Improvement of the Gifted Program, K-12

Based on NAGC Pre-K -- Grade 12 Gifted Program Seven Standards Areas

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**Franny McAleer
Gifted Curriculum Specialist
Instructor, Indiana University of Pennsylvania, Wilkes, Duquesne, and
Waynesburg Universities
Past President, Pennsylvania Association for Gifted Education**

What Southmoreland School District is Doing Well: *The professionalism, enthusiasm and respect that Southmoreland School District exhibits is exemplary! The spirit of collegiality, lead management style, and trust forms a foundation for positive, well-designed change! The administrators and teachers are flexible, looking for, and are open to, change and improving the effectiveness of the gifted program. The administrative assistant to the superintendent explains the need for developing the gifted program because of the retirement of outstanding teachers who lead and taught the program effectively. (The program often becomes the teacher, as was the case here.) The review and refocus of the gifted program is timely because of the reauthorization of Chapter 16: Special Education for the Gifted. The administration, teachers, parents, and students are positively focusing and awaiting the improvement of the gifted program. The team is ready to plan and implement the recommendations developed by the five focus groups. As one parent wrote, "It is a good learning experience that needs fine tuning." Another commented, "I am glad to see that the school district cares to update the gifted program!"*

Recommendations: *The recommendations are comprehensive based on the district's self-assessment and focus groups of administrators, teachers of the gifted, regular classroom teachers, parents, and students, as well as administrator and teacher interviews. Seven primary recommendations are on page 2 with detailed recommendations on pages 3-18. They should be analyzed, prioritized, and put in place over a period of three years.*

Southmoreland School District

Gifted Program Areas for Improvement

Seven key areas for program improvement in order of priority:

- 1. Curriculum and Instruction Program Development – High School**
- 2. Curriculum and Instruction Program Development – Middle School**
- 3. Professional Development – Differentiating Instruction for All Learners with a focus on Gifted Students using the Train-the-Trainers Model**
- 4. Curriculum and Instruction, GIEP Writing Process – Curricular modifications based on student readiness, interest, and learning profile**
- 5. Program Development – Philosophy and a continuum of service options, K-12**
- 6. Time Student Participates in the Gifted Program**
- 7. Communication and public awareness**

The data from five focus groups, administrators, teachers of the gifted, and teachers, parents, and gifted students, as well as interviews, Chapter 16 and best practices are included in this report. Southmoreland has an exemplary start on the process of developing an outstanding gifted program. The detailed recommendations on pages 3-18 should be reviewed, prioritized and a plan established for their implementation over the next three years.

Program Design

The development of appropriate gifted education programming requires comprehensive services based on sound philosophical, theoretical, and empirical support.

What Southmoreland School District is Doing Well:

The community, represented by parents, values the program and wants MORE (always a positive sign)! They believe the elementary gifted education was excellent in the past because of the teacher of the gifted. It is often the case that the program is the teacher. When that person retires, the program suffers a set backwards. It is the desire of Southmoreland School District to revive the gifted program.

At the present time there is are two teachers who are learning about gifted education and providing gifted services for identified students. One teaches grades K-8; the second teaches grades 9-12, two periods a day. They are working earnestly to develop the program.

The district has a list of activities available at each level including Future Problem Solving, Creative Problem Solving, Knowledge Masters Open, Quiz Bowl, The administrators, teachers, parents, and students are eager to have a more “*dynamic*”, (Parent) connected program with modifications of the regular education curriculum through differentiated instruction. Parent reflections include:

1. *Change the interaction between gifted instructors and classroom instructors to have a more blended experience for the students.” (Parent)*
2. *“The gifted program provides an environment where ‘smart’ students can feel ‘safe’ and don’t feel the need to ‘dumb themselves down.’” (Parent)*

Recommendation:

The district’s philosophy and framework are outdated. It needs to be rewritten to include the new regulations and guidelines including, but not limited to:

1. The district’s gifted education policy including philosophy
2. Written continuum of gifted education programming options, K-12
3. Professional development plan including training in gifted education practices for teacher of gifted education, teachers of regular education, principals, administrators and support staff
4. Use of research supporting gifted education programming priorities
5. Coteaching and integration and of gifted education programming in regular education
6. Flexible groupings of students defined and developed in order to facilitate gifted education programming and differentiated curriculum (Karen Roger’s research)

Parent reflections include:

1. *“Change the interaction between gifted instructors and classroom instructors to have a more blended experience for the students. (Parent)”*
2. *“More dynamic, too much of a typical classroom feel, more fun, higher energy...!”*

Staff suggestions include:

1. *“Acceleration in the elementary school coordinated with regular education”*
2. *“Team time built in for gifted teacher to meet with staff at the secondary level”*
3. *“Coteaching to extend regular curriculum”*

Program Administration and Management

Appropriate gifted education programming must include the establishment of a systematic means of developing, implementing, and managing services.

What Southmoreland School District is Doing Well:

The professionalism, enthusiasm and respect that everyone in Southmoreland School District has for each other is outstanding! The spirit of collegiality and trust forms a foundation for change! The administrators and teachers are interested, looking for, and are open to improving the effectiveness of the program. The administrative assistant to the superintendent and principals understand that Chapter 16, the gifted regulations, have recently changed and have set a district goal to be in compliance. In addition best practices in the gifted education are being applied to the program improvement. The teachers of the gifted are learning about gifted education demonstrating a belief in the need for specially designed instruction and programs for gifted learners. Everyone is focused on what one parent claims to be a priority, “*structure and consistency*”. Together everyone is enthusiastic and focused, producing a synergy of forward thinking engaged in planning and implementing a district-wide gifted program improvement project.

Recommendations:

1. Information dissemination to parents and community members needs to be developed. As a part of the special education department, public awareness strategies to share what gifted programming options exist for gifted students needs to be developed. Links from the district website to appropriate resources should include:
 - a. The Pennsylvania Department of Education forms and documents
http://www.pde.state.pa.us/gifted_ed/cwp/view.asp?a=3&Q=67329&gifted_edNav=|5324|&gifted_edNav=|
 - b. The parent handbook should also be linked to the district website.
http://www.pde.state.pa.us/gifted_ed/cwp/view.asp?a=3&Q=73160&gifted_edNav=|5357|&gifted_edNav=|
 - c. Resources for administrators, teachers, parents, and students are located at www.learnerslink.com.

3. Communication with parents needs to be strengthened and systematic. Parents strongly indicated a desire to know what their children are doing in the gifted pull out program. One said,

“I would like more, much more, communication with the gifted advisors. I feel left in the dark as far as what my son is doing in his gifted class – I’m not sure if he even has one.”

4. In addition to communication with gifted facilitators, another suggested a parent advisory group. Both of these are recommendations will improve communication, a critical component of a gifted program. The suggestion of a parent advisory group might be a local affiliate of the state Pennsylvania Association for Gifted Education, (PAGE).

5. The district web site should be used to communicate what is happening in the gifted program such as a schedule of units, field trips, competitions, and activities.
6. GIEPs are the state-mandated system for developing, implementing, and managing gifted services. Southmoreland should consider connections with the areas of student strength in the curriculum for accelerated and enriched learning, as well as gifted pull out experiences.
7. Curriculum maps and guides provide the basis for curriculum acceleration and should be available as a resource for the gifted facilitators when planning the GIEPs goals and objectives.
8. Middle School students need additional time in the pull out program. At the present they attend during activity periods, so if they are in band, they have one period per week. If they have to make up a test, they may have 0 periods that week.
 - a. The students suggested three class period per week for gifted support on a rotating basis, so the same class is not missed each week. Missed class work that does not have to be made up based on their GIEP.
 - b. Seeing the gifted program as important to the students' education is echoed by one parent,
 - c. *"I would like the Administration to send the message to the regular teachers that they should support the students and gifted teachers in the gifted program."*
(Parent)
 - d. Setting up a schedule and adhering to it shows support and respect. Parents and students reported frequent scheduling changes and events that are cancelled.
9. High School students have little, if any, time in their schedules to meet with the gifted facilitator.
 - a. The time during which gifted facilitation is scheduled needs to be expanded from two periods per day to all day, or at the least, six periods per day. Students need contact time with this person.
 - b. Most of the students in the focus group did not attend his/her GIEP conference. Pre-planning the GIEP would refocus on student strengths, putting ownership for educational experiences and individual modifications on the gifted student.
 - c. Increase connections between regular education and gifted education. The gifted facilitators have their own styles of connecting with regular education. This is critical to the success of the program over time.

Student Identification

Gifted learners must be assessed to determine appropriate educational services.

What Southmoreland School District is Doing Well:

The NORA, GWR, and GIEP forms are developed for gifted students. The school psychologist has a long history in the district and expertise in gifted identification. He writes the GWR and includes ability and achievement test scores, WISC-IV Subtest Scaled Scores, intervening factors which may mask gifted abilities, specialized skills, interests, aptitudes. The GIEPs are developed using district activities at the middle and high school levels. When the gifted pull out structure is used, this expands to objectives related to student strengths, such as “applying research skills when composing an ‘American Dream’ speech or “organizing sets of clues and reaching logical conclusions when solving MINDBENDER activities.”

Recommendations:

When the Gifted Guidelines are revised, use them to reconsider the current process and criteria. Consider the use of the Renzulli Hartman Scale or modified version of it. Some teachers requested a multiple criteria matrix for identification.

1. Teacher checklist - <http://www.gifted.uconn.edu/3summers/pdf/rhrs.pdf>
2. Parent checklist - [http://www.pvsd.k12.ca.us/16411051145821740/lib/16411051145821740/_files/GATEP ParentChecklist.pdf](http://www.pvsd.k12.ca.us/16411051145821740/lib/16411051145821740/_files/GATEP%20ParentChecklist.pdf).

Continue to focus on student strengths and needs. Gifted facilitators should determine a district-wide resource for understanding student interests, such as *the Interestilizer (Renzulli)*, *My Learningprint* <http://www.gifted.uconn.edu/mylearningprint/mylearningprint.html>, or one composed for Southmoreland students to help them understand individual students and develop the GIEP. If integrated into the program, parents should be informed of these resources, and a conference reviewing the results should be scheduled. Expand the GIEP objectives to include connections to regular education in areas of student strength. The use of curriculum maps is necessary in writing these objectives.

Regular classroom teachers need to be more aware of and involved in writing the GIEP. Most do not see it or help in its writing. If the student’s area of strength is used to set a goal related to regular education, that teacher should participate in its development and goal evaluation. Teachers requested both horizontal and vertical differentiation.

Curriculum and Instruction

Gifted education services must include curricular and instructional opportunities directed to the unique needs of the gifted child.

Recommendations, All Levels:

1. Time for gifted programming, for planning, writing and implementing GIEPs, small group instruction, and large group seminar discussions was a consistent recommendation by all stakeholders. A continuum of service options needs to be developed, K-12.
2. Pre-assessment before teaching a unit. Teachers included this in their discussion as a possible way to make time to individualize instruction through enrichment or acceleration.
3. Communication among all stakeholders – administrators, teachers, gifted facilitators, parents and students. A written continuum of services will provide all stakeholders with the understanding of the program and its delivery. Parents and students will know the expectations of a gifted learner in Southmoreland School District. Teachers will understand their roles related to curriculum, instruction, and their gifted students. Administrators will know what support structures need to promote success in gifted programming.
4. Communications via the district webpage – updated monthly to report what is happening in the gifted program (Parents)
5. Communication by students using classroom webpage – students put their work on the teacher’s webpage to share their projects
6. GIEP writing should include parents and students, as well as administrators, gifted facilitators, and regular classroom teachers, as part of the team. They should attend the GIEP meeting and sign the GIEP. They should have input into writing the goals. A pre-conference questionnaire should be sent home, as in the elementary program, prior to the actual meeting. Follow up conferences should be scheduled to determine if the students’ progress towards meeting his/her goals. Student work and accomplishments should be shared at the meeting. Communicating progress is important to successful gifted programs.
7. The gifted facilitators should coordinate the GIEP writing process, including information gathering for the Present Level of Educational Performance (PLEP), meeting with the students for input regarding strengths and goals, working with teachers and counselors to determine appropriate content, process or product modification such as enrichment, pre-assessment, compacting, learning contracts, independent studies, acceleration, mentorships, or apprenticeships in the area(s) of student strength.

8. The gifted facilitators should write the GIEP using data from the student's cumulative folder, previous GIEPs, parents, students, and regular classroom teachers' input.
9. Conferencing at least two times a year with parents and students regarding progress towards reach GIEP goals, gifted program experiences, and discussions to get to know the parents and students better.
10. Expand the number and content focus of activity options. For example, at the middle school, *add mathematics options* (student recommendation).
11. Grouping of students of like abilities (Karen Roger's research see attachment) is critical to providing challenge and intellectual stimulation. Seminar topics should be offered periodically bringing all elementary, Junior High, and High School students together for a thematic interdisciplinary seminar. After this has proven successful, other groupings of elementary, Junior High and Senior High should be considered for creative, interdisciplinary seminars. An example of a theme might be *Inventions are Everywhere*.

Recommendation, All Levels in the Future:

1. Gifted programming might be open to high achievers/performers when the teacher of the gifted is able to work with the regular classroom teachers. This practice is positive and aligned with differentiating instruction based on flexible grouping as well as content, process and product readiness. This policy was requested by the focus group of teachers (elementary and middle school) and administrators and should be discussed.

Curriculum and Instruction

Gifted education services must include curricular and instructional opportunities directed to the unique needs of the gifted child.

What Southmoreland School District is Doing Well at the Elementary Schools:

Administration, teachers, parents and students are supportive of gifted education and want to work together to improve the program.

There are teachers designated as gifted facilitators and are ahead of Pennsylvania compliance caseload of 60 (2010).

The parents were pleased with various activities such as KMO, Literature Competitions, Reading Team, and Future Problem Solving. Activities offered at the elementary school include: Fun with Physics Fair, Knowledge Masters Open, Celebration of Literature, Science Seminar, Engineering Day at Penn State Fayette, Academic Quiz Bowl, and Westmoreland County Interscholastic Reading Competition, Health Fair, DAR History Essay, National Geographic Geography Bee, Invention, Believe It or Not Boxes.

The pre-GIEP planning parent form used at the beginning of the year. (Parent)

Recommendations, Elementary:

1. Consistency in the gifted program delivery options is a priority. The gifted support teachers and administrators should meet to discuss and form consensus on the amount of time students at the elementary level attend the pull out program and if time will be devoted to curriculum modification in the content areas of student strength. Instruction should be include three areas: large group, interdisciplinary seminar themes, small group content specific studies, and individual in-depth investigations. These best practices in gifted education are detailed in the research of Dr. Joseph Renzulli and Dr. Karen Rogers.
2. The district needs a policy about missed class time and homework. Students have had to miss recess to make up work and attend gifted support classes. Parents said they were disappointed in this practice which they see as penalizing their children.

Curriculum and Instruction

Gifted education services must include curricular and instructional opportunities directed to the unique needs of the gifted child.

What Southmoreland School District is Doing Well at the Middle School:

The teacher and students are connecting positively and working together.

A list of enrichment activities is currently available.

GIEPs are written based on student strengths.

Students wrote:

“Creative Problem Solving is one thing that should be kept.”

“We get to do things together, instead of individually.”

“Our gifted program is small, but we get to do a lot of fun activities and field trips in it.”

“I like field trips and KMO!”

Recommendations, Middle School:

1. A K-8 Gifted Resource Room should be relocated to be physically close to both the elementary and middle school hallways. (As it is now, middle school students cannot meet with the gifted facilitator in the elementary room.) With one room, the gifted facilitator would be available throughout the school day for gifted students to work on small group, individual projects and activities. Time in the resource room would be an option when curriculum is compacted or pre-assessment supports it in regular education classes. This room would be available for gifted students who want to work on enrichment and/or acceleration activities. The current list of program options would be expanded.
2. Coteaching between regular and gifted education teachers focusing on content-based acceleration or enrichment, such as tiered assignments.
3. The students requested more *hands-on activities, more labs, small group units, and creative problem solving experiences.*
4. Expand the number and content focus of activity options. For example, at the middle school, add mathematics options (student recommendation). There is a list of activities to consider at www.learnerslink.com/giftedandhighability.htm The options in the red font are enrichment activities
5. The students would like a *more creative classroom environment* including color, posters and student work. Equipment requested by them include: trash can, clock, pencil sharpener, video and digital camera, laptops, lcd projector, books, and buzzer student response system.

Curriculum and Instruction

Gifted education services must include curricular and instructional opportunities directed to the unique needs of the gifted child.

What Southmoreland School District is Doing Well at the High School :

At the High School there is a teacher assigned for two periods to work with gifted students. However, the connection between students' schedules and these two periods is often a disconnect.

Activities listed for high school students include: Future Problem Solvers, Knowledge Masters Open, Academic Quiz Leagues, and Westmoreland County Interscholastic Reading Competition.

Parents were pleased with dual enrollment and the activities such as Quiz Team, Future Problem Solving,

Recommendations, High School:

1. The students said there is little participation in the high school program. One student has no contact time this year with the gifted facilitator. Two students claimed,
 - a. *"the program is virtually non-existent."*
 - b. *"It has been very neglected."*

2. The time during which the gifted facilitator is scheduled for gifted programming needs to be expanded from two periods per day to all day, or at the least, six periods per day. (Chapter 16 mandates a caseload of 75 this year, 60 next year, per teacher.) The high school teacher has 40 students for approximately 25% of the school day. Students need contact time with the teachers of the gifted in a resource room. The position should be expanded to include more time and/or ideally, additional teachers in content areas such as science, mathematics, and English. This would individualize the GIEP writing process when student strengths indicate advancement in those content areas.

3. A College Preparation course designed for gifted students is recommended. This supports the grouping research of Dr. Karen Rogers, *"gifted students need to be together for a portion of the school day."* This course would include *creative experiences* (high school student recommendation) and could incorporate components of the Autonomous Learner Model (ALPS) by George Betts in Colorado or Renzulli's Triad Model, University of Connecticut. It might be a combination of seminar themes, small group investigations, and individual real life projects. Odyssey of the Mind focusing on student interests and strengths could be a significant part of the course. *Robotics was requested by a student.*

4. Student requests include thought provoking discussions, open-ended writing topics, peer interaction, leadership studies. The high school students also requested Future Problem Solving with instruction in the five-step process and Mock Trial with which they had great success in middle school.
5. A resource room should be established in which the gifted facilitator(s) and students can meet. Enrichment work would be monitored in this room when curriculum is compacted or pre-assessment supports it. This room should be available for gifted students who want to work on enrichment and acceleration activities such as Individual Apprenticeships, National History Day, Pennsylvania Junior Academy of Science, and Odyssey of the Mind, STEM Competition, or the long-term project. A list of program options is on line at www.learnerslink.com/giftedandhighability.htm. The options in the red font are enrichment activities.
6. Each gifted student should be connected with a gifted facilitator or mentor in his/her area of expertise.
7. Coteaching between regular and gifted education teachers focusing on a topic content based acceleration or enrichment, such as tiered assignments.
8. A real life investigations project related to the student's passion could be a modification of the graduation project. This might extend over the four years at the High School. Renzulli's Triad Model, Type 3 Investigations, Individual and Small Group Investigations of Real Problems have been successful in providing a structure for this type of project.
9. Parents asked if there could be additional AP classes.

Socio-Emotional Guidance and Counseling

Gifted education programming must establish a plan to recognize and nurture the unique socio-emotional development of gifted learners.

What Southmoreland School District is Doing Well:

The district school psychologist is available for consultation when requested.

The counselors provide support services for gifted students.

Parent reflection:

1. *“Gifted students at our school give back to their community tenfold !!!!”*
2. *“The gifted program provides an environment where ‘smart’ students can feel ‘safe’ and don’t feel the need to ‘dumb themselves down.’” (Parent)*

Recommendation:

1. Social and emotional needs of gifted students offer unique opportunities for Socratic or Six Hats® seminars. Gifted resource specialists should read and consider using the following resources:
 - a. The Gifted Kids' Survival Guide for Ages 10 & Under by Judy Galbraith, Pamela Espeland, and Albert Molnar
 - b. The Gifted Kids Survival Guide: A Teen Handbook by Judy Galbraith, James R. Delisle, and Pamela Espeland
2. A resource for teachers of the gifted and counselors is Supporting Emotional Needs of the Gifted - SENG provides information on identification, guidance, and effective ways to live and work with gifted individuals. www.SENGGifted.org
3. Underachievement research is also found at www.SENGGifted.org

Professional Development

Gifted learners are entitled to be served by professionals who have specialized preparation in gifted education, expertise in appropriate differentiated content and instructional methods, involvement in ongoing professional development, and who possess exemplary personal and professional traits.

What Southmoreland School District is Doing Well:

The administrative assistant to the superintendent initiated a study of the gifted program during the 2008-2009 school year. He contracted with Franny McAleer, www.Learnerslink.com, to plan and conduct a review of the gifted program. The district self-assessment was completed and submitted prior to the onsite visit on May 13th and 14th, 2009.

Recommendation: Gifted Facilitators

1. Gifted facilitators, teachers, and administrators should meet to discuss and determine an appropriate continuum of gifted programming in the district K-12.
2. Observations at other grade levels should be ongoing, so gifted teachers can see what their students are learning in regular education and how.
3. Teachers of the gifted should visit other gifted programs and determine what they might add to continuously change and improve Southmoreland's gifted program.
4. Gifted facilitators should be involved in professional development on differentiating content, process, product, creativity, problem solving, and ascending levels of difficulty. Attendance at area workshops and the Pennsylvania Association for Gifted Education conference in April, 2010 in Mars, PA is recommended.
(www.penngifted.org)

Duquesne University offers a three credit graduate course the last week of July, 2009.

An online course is offered through Allegheny Intermediate Unit, www.aiu3.org.

5. The high school students recommended staff training with one high school student writing

“Staff would be thoroughly trained so that they would be able to implement new ideas in order to stimulate gifted students.”

Recommendation: Regular Education Teachers

1. All teachers need professional development to understand the characteristics of gifted students, programming options, meeting the needs of gifted students in the regular classroom, and what role they play in writing GIEPs.
2. A high school student recommendation is

“Staff would be thoroughly trained so that they would be able to implement new ideas in order to stimulate gifted students.”

3. All teachers should have ongoing professional development using the train-the-trainer model on Differentiating Instruction, focusing on the 7 Keys Framework. All teachers may use this framework to meet the needs of their students. It is a comprehensive tool designed to create curricular modifications based on student readiness, interest and learning profile. Teachers learn to modify the content, process, products, and learning environment. This is aligned with Chapter 16 and the Gifted Guidelines, now in the revision process.

Program Evaluation

Program evaluation is the systematic study of the value and impact of services provided.

What Southmoreland School District is Doing Well:

Program evaluation in 2008-2009 school year has been a cooperative model involving administrators, parents, teachers, and students. The report from each focus group shows interest and enthusiasm for the study and support for change. The on site program study was completed on May 13 and 14, 2009 with recommendations included in this report.

The program review was initiated by the administrative assistant to the superintendent who was completely open to the structure of the on-site study. He attended each focus group session, listened with an open mind, and responded positively to suggestions. In one instance two middle school girls talked about the facility and a need for a trash can, so they could clean up after making a creative project. He immediately called maintenance for one. The young ladies were impressed that their ideas mattered.

Each focus group offered suggestions from their observations and experiences. The parents and students appreciate this initiative and are very positive about the administrators, teachers and the program.