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Child Care Policy

From the Director's Office: Public Policy, Private Needs

From Policy to Practice

Center Stage: A Textbook Example of Research to Policy

NCEDL News: Doors of Perception

IT IS REMARKABLE. I still shake my head at what's been accomplished in a very short time. From my perspective, this process and this policy permits local districts to do what is right on behalf of gifted children in their schools." That's the opinion of Mary Ruth Coleman, an investigator with the Frank Porter Graham Center who helped give birth to North Carolina's new statewide gifted initiative.

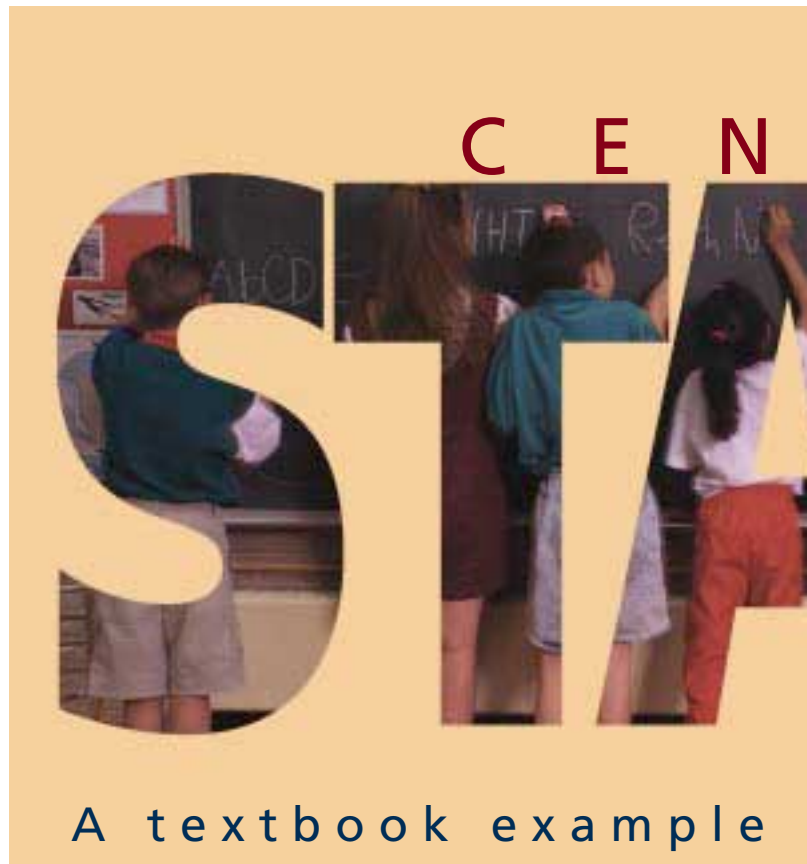
From a brand-new project scrambling to get on its feet four years ago, the Statewide Technical Assistance Gifted Education (STAGE) project completed a planning model for local school districts, developed a system level plan for service delivery, trained a statewide leadership core, designed a self-assessment program for school districts, designed and implemented a certification program for teachers of gifted children, and this year saw its results and recommendations go statewide into all 100 counties in North Carolina.

"It's been fascinating. And it's been exhausting," said Coleman, who has averaged driving 50,000 miles a year for the past three years.

The movement of STAGE from an idea bounced around by members of a task force in 1993 to full-blown state policy four years later is an example of how a state education policy can be based on the best available data, developed quickly, and implemented with a minimum of fuss.

In 1993, the North Carolina legislature established a task force to consider a statewide policy on education for gifted children. Two of those appointed to the task force were Coleman and Jim Gallagher, another FPG investigator. Both are nationally known researchers on policy in general and gifted education policy in particular. Thus, the task force had quick and easy access to distillations of work by Gallagher and Coleman during their national policy studies in the early 1990s. "We culled the 50 states for the best in gifted education ideas," said Coleman.

"The overwhelming response has been a willingness to develop a plan for gifted students that also benefits all students in the district."



The task force recommendations included the following: creating a local planning model so that each district would have to develop its own plan for gifted students, changing state funding for gifted education, setting up a mechanism for technical assistance for the school districts, and changing the definition of gifted by using multiple criteria.

In 1994, these recommendations went to the state school board, which asked, will these work? Coleman said, "We told them we weren't sure. And the state said, what will it take to find out? And we said, time, a little seed money, people to play with, and permission to make changes. And they granted all of that."

In 1995, STAGE asked for proposals from school districts who wanted to help develop a model and who would put \$10,000 on the table. The state Department of Public Instruction kicked in some money, expecting perhaps a half dozen proposals. Twenty-four proposals came in, and STAGE took on nine districts. "At that point, we began to take the policy from theory to implementation. Basically, we had six months to work with those nine districts," said Coleman. STAGE developed a model of what a comprehensive local plan should look like and began working on documentation for the state about what would happen if these new ideas went into effect statewide.



been very little rancor. The districts have stepped up in good faith. Coleman said that with a deadline to have plans ready by the spring of '98, more than two thirds of the districts are well underway. Only a very small number of districts are resisting things. For example, in helping districts begin the process, STAGE held regional conferences and of the state's 120 districts, only 8 did not participate in one of the conferences.

"The overwhelming response has been a willingness to develop a plan for gifted students that also benefits all students in the district," she said. "The plan is seen as a way to raise the expectations and thresholds for students across the board. Plus, the new identification protocol for gifted takes into account children from culturally diverse families, children from economically disadvantaged families, and children with disabilities."

In 1996, an additional six school districts enrolled and said, we also want help setting up a model regardless of what the state eventually decides.

A year later, in the summer of 1997, legislation was passed in North Carolina that establishes a timetable for all 120 school districts to create gifted education programs. "The legislation was quite specific and the language was almost identical to that we had written for the model sites. It sent us almost into an absolute panic. We went from 15 districts to 120 districts required to do the same thing," said Coleman.

She and Gallagher had been doing most of the legwork themselves, so they decided to create a leadership core across the state. The state gave additional money and the STAGE team put together a cadre of 25 people to act as planning facilitators for school districts.

Coleman described the entire process as remarkable, citing in particular the fact that collaboration was built into the policy changes from the very beginning. It was a joint effort with collaboration at many levels—the district, the Department of Public Instruction, higher education, regular education, the state legislature, parents, and advocacy groups. "When we talk about this in other states, they are just aghast that all these people are on the same page at the same time ready to move things forward," Coleman said.

Although it's been a very fast time line with a fair amount of pressure on the districts to make these things happen, there has

She said, "Another remarkable thing is that we've actually been able to unfold the program with ongoing evaluation and feedback. As we've gone along, we've been continually pushing the envelope but doing it based on feedback and evaluation," said Coleman.

In fact, four school districts were so taken with the plan that they are using it to realign their entire school curriculum from kindergarten through high school.

She said that so far the only missing piece is legislation that attends to funding. "Currently in North Carolina, if a child has a disability, a school district can draw down \$2100 in additional funds to meet their needs; but, if a child is gifted, the district can draw down only \$720. That's quite out of balance in terms of additional resources needed to educate an exceptional child."


Coleman cited a number of factors that she said contributed to the smooth adoption of STAGE's recommendations. The major one is that there has been traditionally strong leadership in gifted education across the state, not just in the Department of Public Instruction. "Jim Gallagher has provided outstanding leadership for years," she said. "Ann Harrison, lead author on the programs for gifted students has been a major player across the state. Judy Howard has been an outstanding leader, is president of the State Association for the Gifted, and was one of the Gallagher's doctoral students. Linda Robinson came to STAGE from Virginia State and worked as the legislative liaison for the state gifted association. Linda Weiss-Morris, executive director of the state advocacy organization, has

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been a colleague and contributor. Sylvia Lewis was head of the state's Department of Public Instruction when STAGE was getting organized. "She was a visionary and her influence was critical," Coleman said. "She really pushed for model sites. She left and Rebecca Garland came on board and her first meeting was with STAGE and the nine model sites. Garland has been a godsend and pragmatic and unflappable."

With a leadership core trained and school districts well underway with their plans, STAGE is about to put itself out of business. However, members of the STAGE team are already planning follow-up studies, especially in the areas of gifted children from culturally diverse and from economically disadvantaged families and children with disabilities.

Despite her quickly aging car, Coleman said she is pleased with the entire process. She even told a joke: "After eight month or so of working frantically with us, a person from one of those first nine models said to me, we paid \$10,000 to get involved with you. If we give you \$20,000, can we get out?" 

STAGE

DEFINES GIFTEDNESS as the manifestation of ability to learn well beyond the expected level of one's age mates. Indicators are student achievement, observable student behaviors, interest, motivation to learn, aptitude, and performance.

Within any indicator, a single criterion may reveal a need for services. However, no single criterion can eliminate a student from consideration. Information from any and all indicators may be used in matching students with appropriate service options.

STAGE's team drew on Donald Treffinger's book *New Directions in Gifted Education* to define these levels of need for differentiation in programming for local school districts:

■ Services for all

Services in the regular program should be designed to motivate and stretch all learners to reach their maximum potential and to provide a challenging curriculum that develops the abilities, skills, and talents of all students.

■ Services for many

Many students occasionally need differentiation. They may show giftedness only in one area through certain talents and/or certain abilities. Underachieving gifted students and "overachievers" may be in this category. Gifted students from culturally diverse families, economically disadvantaged homes, and gifted students with disabilities may also need the differentiation provided at this level.

■ Services for some

Some students show outstanding ability in a number of academic areas and need a strong differentiated program that provides challenging opportunities where they can pursue curriculum in more depth and at a faster pace.

■ Services for few

A few students need a highly differentiated program that might involve radical acceleration of content and grade. For students capable of working three or more years beyond their grade placements, services must be designed with transitions across grade levels.

Based on these differentiations, STAGE suggests a whole array of service delivery options for each level of school (elementary, middle, and high).

For example, under "services for some" in the elementary school grid, the learning environment might include cross-age grouping, part-time special class, and resource class; content modification might include tiered assignments, contracts, and independent study; talent development might include advanced enrichment clusters and mentor programs; special programs might include Saturday classes, fine arts activities, and Battle of the Books; and instructional strategies might include problem-based learning, group investigation, and seminar teaching.

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more...Recent FPG publications

Playmate Preferences and Perceptions of Individual Differences among Typically Developing Preschoolers

V. Buysse, L. Nabors, D. Skinners, & L. Keyes. (1997). *Early Child Development and Care*, 131, 1-18.

Assessing the Communication of African American One-Year-Olds Using the Communication and Symbolic Behavior Scales

J. E. Roberts, L.P. Medley, J.L. Swartzfager, & E.C. Neebe. (1997). *American Journal of Speech-Language Pathology*, 6(2), 59-65.

Community-Based Approaches to Personnel Preparation

P. Wesley & V. Buysse. (1997). In P. Winton, J. McCollum, & C. Catlett (Eds.), *Reforming personnel preparation in early childhood intervention: Issues, models, and practical strategies* (pp. 53-80). Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes.