

Utilizing the Expertise of Gifted Education Coordinators and Specialists

Many Minnesota districts will rely on a distance-learning or hybrid model for instruction at some point during the school year. To do this requires that administrators think strategically about how to use their resources to best serve their communities. These resources include the gifted education coordinators and specialists at the district and school levels. Coordinators and specialists can provide valuable supports to schools as they work to ensure fidelity of gifted services; general education teachers so that they can continue to differentiate instruction to meet the needs of students; and to families as they juggle the demands created by these unusual times. Below are six recommendations for school administrators to utilize the expertise of gifted coordinators and specialists.

Identify Students for Services

Gifted education coordinators and specialists are a valuable resource to work with teachers and administrators to provide guidance in recognizing the varied characteristics of giftedness across populations. As schools move into new instructional models, it is necessary that students with gifts and talents continue to be identified and served. This is especially important for those students who live in poverty, are culturally and linguistically diverse, or are twice exceptional (gifted and learning disabled.) Youth in these groups who achieve at the highest levels are less likely to persist as high achievers; are twice as likely to drop out of high school; less likely to attend selective colleges; and less likely to graduate college (Wyner, et al., 2009). Gifted specialists can use this time to work with teachers and administrators to provide guidance in recognizing and responding to the varied characteristics of giftedness across these populations. MDE [resources available on the gifted education page](#) and tools such as [15 Tips for Identifying ELL Gifted Learner](#) and [Varied Faces of Gifted/talented Learners](#) can also be useful in this process.

Differentiate Instruction

Gifted specialists can be a powerful resource as teachers work to ensure the differentiation continues. The familiar program models of full-time inclusion, push-in, pull-out, special schools for the gifted, and resource rooms are evidence-based practices that align with the [National Association for Gifted Children Pre-K-12 Program Standards](#). Modification to these models may be required to ensure differentiation and appropriate challenge.

Keep in mind that “key aspects of teaching in a face-to-face classroom may look different in an online classroom, but one thing that holds constant is the importance for teachers to meet the needs of all students.” (Beasley and Beck, 2017, page 551) Though these researchers pointed out that the literature is limited on how differentiation looks in an online environment, our concept of best practices remain in place. [The International Association for K-12 Online Learning](#) offered through the [Aurora Institute](#) provides teachers with guidelines on how to promote student success through regular feedback; give prompt responses and clear expectations; remain responsive to students with special needs; and use assessment data to modify instructional methods and content. Tools like Universal Design for Learning (UDL) can be used as you plan for multiple means of representation, action and expression, and engagement. (Beasley and Beck) Tomlinson (2014) reminded us an educator can differentiate by readiness, interest, or learning profile. Additionally, factors such as gender and culture also need to be considered. Finally, we can differentiate for gifted learners as we [meet the needs of the whole child](#) suggested by the National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC).

Create Independent Learning Experiences

Gifted education coordinators and specialists can work with general education classroom teachers to help them plan authentic independent learning experiences. There has been a renewed focus on equity and culturally responsive teaching in recent years (e.g., Gay, 2018; Hammond, 2015). With the move to distance learning, questions of equity and access have become more important than ever. Gifted coordinators and specialists can support student information processing by including authentic opportunities to “connect to students’ community and everyday lives.” (Hammond, 2015, page 17)

Project Based Learning (PBL) provides an opportunity for gifted coordinators and specialists to support teachers, students, and to reach into the community. Gifted coordinators and specialists can work with general education classroom teachers by helping them develop relevant PBL topics; identify the learning objectives and goals; map out the learning process; and plan for assessment. The coordinator or specialist can provide support for students by helping them identify and procure any necessary resources as they exhibit their learning; reflect on the process; and transfer their knowledge. (Thomas and Davidson, 2013)

The [2020-21 Reach for the Stars](#) online catalogue of enrichment activities and programs provides a listing of opportunities for students. Programs listed are suitable for individual students, teams or classrooms and vetted by the Minnesota Academic League Council, a strategic partner of the Minnesota Department of Education (MDE).

Facilitate Professional Learning

Gifted coordinators and specialists have an understanding of the unique needs of gifted and talented learners. They can increase staff capacity to facilitate learning needs by sharing instructional strategies and guidance on how to support the social and emotional needs of gifted and talented learners.

Sustained professional learning is necessary to increase awareness of the needs of gifted children. Gifted education coordinators and specialists can facilitate growth experiences through a systematic, job-embedded book study process that includes the elements of study, select, implement, analyze, and adjust (Fugate and Bower, 2019; [Southwest Educational Development Laboratory](#), 2008). These types of professional learning

experiences can be facilitated in person and virtually and allow participants to select and implement a variety of strategies in new learning environments.

Gifted education coordinators may complete and/or facilitate a cohort using the Project North Star on-demand gifted education training modules available. The Learning Management System (LMS) platform modules focus on culturally responsive identification and services. Educators can access the practical and strategy-laden professional learning modules via [MDE's gifted and talented education page](#).

Support Families and Communities

Gifted specialists can support the families in their school communities who may wonder how to support their gifted students as they attempt to handle the stressors of our current reality. Several documents related to gifted learners are available on [MDE's Gifted and Talented Education page](#) and the website for [The National Association for Gifted Children](#). Burns (2018) noted, "Digital tools let us capture student voice, change the way students interact with the world, and provide an audience for children of all ages" (page 2).

Strengthen Gifted Education Procedures and Practices

Gifted and talented coordinators and specialists are able to review and make recommendations to strengthen and update district and charter school gifted and talented procedures required by [Minnesota Statutes, section 120B.15](#). A variety of tools from the Minnesota Department of Education and National Association for Gifted Children are available to assist districts and charter schools in a systematic review of district procedures and models of service. Technical assistance from MDE is also available to support this work.

References

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