

New Jersey Gifted Education Survey 2018

The Rutgers University Division of Continuing Studies and the New Jersey Association for Gifted Children conducted a survey to better understand the current state of gifted education in New Jersey. Questions were focused on grade levels at which gifted students are identified and services provided and the professional preparation and responsibilities of teachers of the gifted. Opportunities for professional learning in gifted education for general education teachers were also examined. It is our hope that these findings will inform decisions about gifted education made by educators, advocates and policy makers.

The survey was distributed to 640 school district superintendents in New Jersey including traditional public, charter, magnet and Career and Technical Education schools. The majority (92%) of responses were from traditional public schools, along with four magnet schools, one charter school, and one CTE school responding.

62 school districts from all counties except Mercer responded to the survey, representing approximately 10% of all New Jersey districts. Every District Factor Group (DFG) is represented in the survey results. Both small and large school districts responded to the survey. Total student population of the responding districts ranged from under 300 to over 29,000.

Identification & Services

Identification practices are disparate across the state. The average percentage of students identified as gifted in the state was 7.4% of the total school population. The percentages by district ranged from 1% to 30%. District Factor Group did not appear to influence the percentage of students identified. There are no specific state requirements for the percentage of students identified, only that local norms must be used when interpreting identification scores so that students can be compared with their chronological peers. This is an important standard for districts to uphold as it fosters equitable and non-biased identification practices. There were no questions related to the use of specific measures and/or local norms in this survey, so it is difficult to make any conclusions about disparity across the state in relation to the percentage of students identified in each district.

DFG	% Identified
A	8%
B	11%
CD	4%
DE	6.6%
FG	6.7%
GH	12%
I	8.7%
J	2.3%

Table 1: The average percentage of students identified by DFG

71% of responding districts are *not* in compliance with the Administrative Code (N.J.A.C. 6A: 8-3) regulation requiring identification and services for gifted learners in Kindergarten through Grade 12. The districts were either non-compliant in identification practices, provision of services, or both. This holds true across DFG samples. No one DFG group is more or less compliant than others.

A majority (52%) of the responding school districts do not begin identification in Kindergarten as required by administrative code. Reviewing the data, it appears that responding districts identify gifted students in grades 3-5 more frequently than other grades despite the mandate that identification begin in Kindergarten and continue through Grade 12.

Q6 For what grade levels do you identify gifted students? Check all that apply.

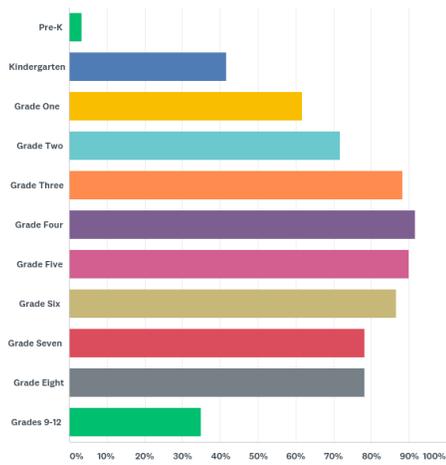


Chart 1: Grade level for which schools identify gifted students.

In addition, 52% of the responding districts are out of compliance with the administrative code requirement that services begin in Kindergarten and continue through Grade 12. As with identification, services for gifted students in the responding districts (as an aggregate) peak at grades 3-5. It is encouraging that some districts are providing services for gifted learners beginning in Pre K.

Q7 For what grade levels do you provide programs and/or services for gifted students? Check all that apply.

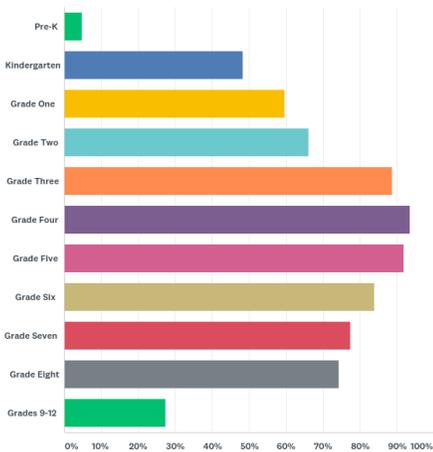


Chart 2. Grade levels for which services are provided

An interesting finding from the survey is that in many cases, the grades in which districts identify gifted students do not correlate with grades served. Some district respondents indicated that they provide services for gifted students in Kindergarten and/or first grade, and then indicated that they do not identify students in these grade levels. A small number of districts reported providing whole class enrichment for all students in the primary grades without an identification process in place. This finding might reflect a misunderstanding that when serving young gifted students by providing differentiation or “enrichment for all” in the general education classroom, identification is not necessary, when in fact the code requires identification beginning in Kindergarten.

The reverse was also true. In some cases, district respondents indicated that they identify students at multiple grade levels, yet indicated that they *did not* provide services for those identified students. This again, is a clear violation of the code requirements that services begin in Kindergarten and continue through Grade 12.

Duties of the Teacher of Gifted

According to the data collected, teachers of the gifted have responsibilities that go beyond direct instruction for gifted students. Most respondents (79%) indicated that teachers of the gifted provide direct instruction to gifted students. Other services for gifted learners were reported including facilitating enrichment projects (74%), selecting instructional materials (64%), consulting with parents about gifted students (64%) and completing progress/assessment reports for identified gifted students (46%). Responsibilities for program implementation were also frequently cited by the respondents including designing and developing identification procedures (52%), administering and analyzing identification measures (56%), developing program documents (51%), scheduling gifted classes (46%), evaluating the gifted program (39%), completing reports for federal, state and local educational agencies (11%) and responsibility for public relations for gifted programs (15%).

District level responsibilities included providing support for differentiation to general education teachers (34%), collaborating with general education teachers to modify grade level curriculum (28%), and providing professional development workshops for general education teachers (15%). In addition, teachers of the gifted from responding districts are expected to facilitate school-wide enrichment opportunities for all district students (41%), and offer informative sessions to district parents (26%).

Q10 What duties are the teachers of the gifted in your district responsible for? (Check all that apply)

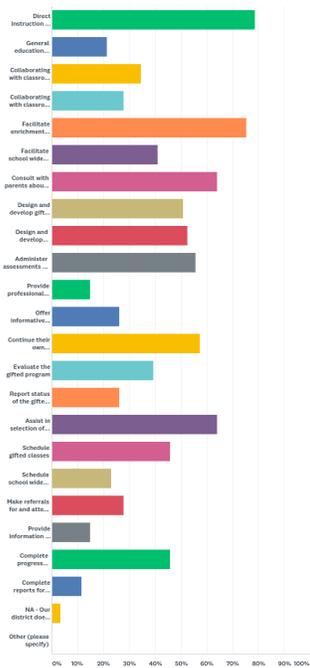


Chart 3. Duties of teachers of the gifted

Additional Teaching Responsibilities

Along with responsibilities for the instruction of gifted learners, program development and implementation, and broader district responsibilities, the majority (52%) of the teachers of the gifted also have other teaching responsibilities. Respondents indicated that in addition to gifted education responsibilities, teachers of the gifted provide other services in the district including; basic skills

support, ELL instruction, physical education, health, library/media specialist, music, art, STEAM or technology instruction, literacy or math coaching, and general education teacher. This finding may reflect the practice of placing teachers into gifted education positions based on scheduling considerations such as free periods available or maximizing the cost effectiveness of a single educator providing services in multiple “special” areas.

Professional Preparation of Teachers of the Gifted

Superintendents were asked to rate the level of professional preparation of the *most prepared* teacher of the gifted in the district. 29% of the respondents reported that the most prepared teachers of gifted in the district had five hours or fewer or no preparation at all in gifted education. 43% of the respondents had less than 10 hours of professional development with the majority (51%) of districts reporting their most prepared teacher of the gifted had 20 hours or less of professional development. 10% of the responding districts employed a teacher of the gifted with a graduate certificate in gifted education. These findings held true across DFG samples.

Professional Learning Opportunities for General Education Teachers

District superintendents reported that general education teachers receive professional learning in gifted education through varied routes. A vast majority (87%) of the responding districts reported that teachers of the gifted provide professional learning for general education teachers in the district. Respondents indicated that teachers of gifted present workshops to general education teachers (33%) and/or collaborate with general education teachers to modify curriculum and instruction for gifted students on a regular (16%) or as needed (38%) basis. Superintendents reported that consultants provide one-day workshops (10%) or ongoing professional development (11%) for general education teachers focused on gifted education. In addition, respondents indicated that general education teachers attend gifted conferences (23%), participate in professional learning communities focused on gifted education (26%), have access to webinars (26%) or receive counsel from administrators during the observation process (33%). Some district superintendents (20%) reported that no professional learning opportunities in gifted education are available to general education teachers in their districts. 31% of responding superintendents indicated that the district reimburses *general education teachers* for University credit coursework in gifted education.

Comments

Superintendents were asked to comment on the benefits (if any) of enhanced preparation in gifted education for teachers of the gifted. The comments revealed several general perceptions of the potential benefits for enhanced professional requirements.

- Enhanced preparation of teachers of gifted can improve student achievement (13)
- Improved programs and services (11)
- Gifted teachers assume leadership roles in professional development of all district teachers (8)
- Support curriculum modification that supports true differentiation (7)
- Better understanding of needs of gifted learners/common understanding (7)
- Higher level engagement for all students (2)
- Communication with parents

Discussion

It is our hope that the data collected in this survey will inform the practice of educators and decisions made by policy makers regarding gifted education in New Jersey. The data revealed a lack of compliance with the administrative code across the state and a possible misunderstanding of the intent of the code related to grade levels at which identification and services are provided. Without requirements for professional learning in gifted education for the teacher of the gifted, it was not surprising that the majority of the most prepared teachers of the gifted in the responding districts had

less than 20 professional development hours in gifted education to support their important work. A positive finding from the survey revealed a wide range of professional learning opportunities in gifted education for general education teachers and various opportunities for gifted education practices to influence opportunities for the talent development of all students in a district.

The finding that 71% of the districts are out of compliance with the requirements of the Administrative Code (N.J.A.C. 6A: 8-3), in relation to the grade level at which students are identified and/or the grade level at which services are provided was serious cause for concern. This is an issue of equity and access to appropriate learning opportunities for *all* gifted students in the state. Although not all districts are out of compliance with both the grade level at which they identify gifted students and the grade level at which they provide services, the fact still remains that the large majority of districts responding to this survey are not meeting the most basic requirements of the code in the areas of identification and grade levels at which services are required.

The disparity in the grade levels and percentage of students identified in the responding districts across the state may illustrate the consequences of the lack of guidance for districts in effective identification and programming for gifted students provided by the New Jersey State Department of Education. Few state resources are available to help districts navigate the complexities of identifying and serving gifted students. The disparity might also be a reflection of the lack of state or federal funding for gifted education in New Jersey. Local districts bear the sole burden of allocating financial and personnel resources to gifted education programs.

Whether this non-compliance is a result of misinterpretation of the code requirements, lack of funding to support identification and services for the K-12 range required, or a simple lack of understanding of best practice in identification, the need for additional guidance and preparation for those responsible for these decisions is clear. It should be noted that the survey included questions related to grade levels at which students were identified and served, but did not include any questions about other requirements such as multiple measures and the use of local norms. It is actually possible that more districts are out of compliance in identification practices than this survey suggests.

The survey data illustrates the range of duties required of teachers of the gifted in the responding districts. Beyond direct instruction, most teachers of the gifted had responsibilities for programs including identification processes, collaboration and coaching of general education teachers, providing enrichment to all district students, communicating with parents, and/or public relations duties to promote programs. One notable finding of this survey is that a majority of teachers of the gifted have unrelated teaching responsibilities in addition to those duties listed above. This might reflect the common practice of assigning teachers to gifted education classes because they have open time in their schedule, a practice that has been anecdotally reported quite frequently across the state. This might be the result of decisions made in an understandable consideration of economy of personnel or resources. It is not possible to conclude that gifted program staffing decisions are made without regard to professional preparation in gifted education. However, district leaders should be aware that N.J.A.C.6A: 8-3 requires that districts consider the Pre K – Grade 12 Programming Standards when implementing programs. Standard 6: Professional Development clearly articulates the need for teachers that serve gifted students to develop the expertise and skills necessary to meet the social, emotional and academic needs of gifted learners.

The survey data indicates that many districts offer varying opportunities for professional learning in gifted education for general education teachers, which is in line with the recommendation of the national standards. The respondents indicated that general education teachers had access to professional learning in gifted education through consultants, webinars, conferences, and tuition reimbursement. A majority of district respondents indicated that the teacher of the gifted provides learning opportunities for general education teachers in the form of workshops and/or collaboration in

the classroom. Since so many districts rely on the teacher of the gifted for this professional learning, it is imperative that these professionals are equipped with accurate knowledge of gifted learners' academic and social emotional characteristics and needs, and additionally they must be adequately prepared to share and model current best practices in curriculum modification and differentiated instruction for gifted learners as they teach or coach general education teachers.

A majority of teachers of the gifted in the responding districts from across the state have 20 hours or less of professional development hours. This is equivalent to a bit over one university course credit. There is no data to determine the quality of the professional development referred to in the survey responses. We asked for district respondents to rate the level of preparation of the *most prepared* teacher of the gifted in the district, so it is hard to estimate the actual level of preparation of the state's teachers of the gifted. With almost one-third (29%) of the responding districts indicating that the *most prepared* teacher of the gifted in their district had no preparation or five or less hours of professional development, it is clear that there is work to do to increase the numbers of prepared teachers in the state.

The benefits of enhanced requirements for professional preparation in gifted education that were identified by responding superintendents included benefits to gifted students, teachers, parents, programs, and *all* students in the district. The positive impact that trained teachers of the gifted might have on gifted students and their classroom teachers through direct services, identification/program improvements, and collaboration with colleagues warrants a closer look at how we might increase opportunities for this training to occur. One superintendent wrote, "We have seen the benefits of preparation for gifted education in our district. Teachers that have gone through the coursework know how to effectively meet the academic, social and emotional needs of our gifted students."

Thank you to all of the district superintendents who took the time to respond to the survey.