



The Nature and Needs of Rural Gifted Programs

By Emily Goglin and Lauren Miller

Are North Carolina's Schools Rural?

What comes to mind when you hear the word "rural"? Do you think of North Carolina? Our state's schools are not commonly considered rural, probably because our districts are geographically large and consequently can contain both rural and urban schools. Also, our rural schools are diverse. For example, rural schools include both a high school with more than 1,000 students located 30 miles from our state's capital and an Appalachian elementary school with an enrollment of 70.

In fact, our state has the highest rural student enrollment in the country. The Rural School and Community Trust's most recent report, *Why Rural Matters 2009*, highlights features of North Carolina's ruralness that have implications for many of our state's educators, particularly those who serve gifted students.

The Rural School and Community Trust identifies schools as rural based on their proximity to urban centers. Nearly half our state's schools are rural and nearly half our students attend rural schools. Thirty-six percent of our rural students are ethnic minorities, a percentage much higher than the US average of 22.2%. Approximately one third of our rural students fail to graduate high school, a figure that is higher than the national average.

Perhaps most importantly, a large number of our rural students are living in poverty. Our state has the second highest number of rural students living in concentrated poverty. We are second only to Texas, a state with more than double our population. As educators, we know that poverty often has dire academic consequences for students, even those with exceptional academic talents.

Rural School Systems and Gifted Students

Rural schools face particular challenges when it comes to serving the needs of their gifted learners. Perhaps the most obvious challenge stems from rural districts' smaller student bodies. Because of their size, rural systems often have a small number of gifted learners who are spread across grade levels and even schools. This sparse gifted population often leads the district to allocate fewer resources and time to these

students. Interaction with intellectual peers is vital to both the academic and social-emotional growth of gifted learners; however, in rural schools, gifted students may lack access to intellectual peers.

Rural school districts face geographic barriers that restrict their access to the variety of professional resources available in urban districts. Since gifted education is not addressed significantly in most teacher preparation programs, many classroom teachers have limited prior knowledge of gifted learners. In order to enhance their instruction of gifted students, teachers must receive additional training through professional development or graduate programs. However, in rural systems, logistical challenges, lack of time, and financial constraints often limit the quantity of professional development the district can provide, and gifted education is usually overlooked as a professional development priority.

On the other hand, urban districts that are often in close proximity to 4-year colleges and universities benefit from partnerships with such institutions of higher education, a resource not readily available to most rural systems. In addition to receiving financial support, volunteers, and professional training from universities, urban districts attract many highly qualified teachers through their relationships with colleges and universities. Rural districts must vie for the same teachers even though they have fewer resources and connections and are separated by considerable geographic distances.

Gifted programs in rural settings may lack a significant community support network. Because rural communities typically have a primary industry with which most adults are employed, students may not have access to a variety of professional role models. Gifted students who do not see themselves in that particular industry may be discouraged by a lack of professional opportunities, whether perceived or actual. In addition, community members may mistrust gifted education programs because they see them as disconnecting children from their home communities. Rural schools must constantly combat these perceptions in their efforts to place and support gifted learners.

A Toolbox for Rural Gifted Programs

Despite the many challenges that rural gifted programs face, there are several strategies that have worked for such programs across the country. One caveat involves the use of technology to bridge physical distances and enhance collaboration between gifted students and their teachers. While technology holds great promise for schools, it must be acknowledged that access to technology in rural areas of North Carolina is uneven at best, and limited at worst. Any recommendation that hinges on technology use must be presented with an understanding that the state and federal governments should re-prioritize funding for technology in order to ensure that school districts across the state have access to innovative and high-quality technologies.

The following strategies can form a "toolbox" for program coordinators and educators in North Carolina:

- Strengthen connections between nearby districts to pool resources

Many rural school districts are geographically small and close to other rural districts. This proximity provides the perfect opportunity to build connections and pool resources. Neighboring districts could form a regional professional development network through which gifted educators can share their expertise. Program coordinators and educators can stay connected through a phone "hotline," an email listserv, or an online chat room, moderated by a rotating group of stakeholders, where educators can share ideas and brainstorm solutions to common challenges.

- Organize a statewide network of academic clubs/competitions

It is very important for gifted students to spend time with gifted peers, but the small number of gifted students in rural districts may limit opportunities for interaction. Competitions like science fairs, spelling bees, or Odyssey of the Mind give gifted students a chance to interact with gifted peers outside their district. Even if statewide competitions are not available, neighboring rural districts can band together to create yearly academic events for their students.

- Take advantage of existing professional development and advocate for increased professional development opportunities

All teachers should take part in ongoing professional development regarding topics such as differentiation and identification. As teachers become more knowledgeable about gifted students, their ability to educate as well as advocate for gifted students will increase. In addition, teacher preparation programs at universities across the state should expand their networks beyond their local school districts. They should form partnerships with surrounding rural districts to provide professional development and AIG licensure opportunities.

- Take advantage of unique community resources

Because the variety of professions in a rural community may be limited, professionals often develop varied skill sets. For example, a farmer may have expertise in biology, engineering, and finance. Program coordinators and educators should think creatively about how these community members can be called upon to enrich the standard curriculum through job-shadowing and internships. In addition, involving students in their communities may help to combat the "brain drain" that is common in many rural areas. Many gifted students leave their communities as they get older, which robs communities of important human capital and prevents the development of a network of gifted role models in rural communities. If gifted students see that they can exercise

their gifts in their own communities, they may remain closer to home and contribute to the development of their community.

- Involve parents and community members as advocates

In rural communities, knowledge about gifted education may be limited, and community members may not value education as highly as educators would like. Program coordinators and educators can build awareness about gifted education by highlighting student achievements through local media, by holding information sessions for parents, and by involving parents more fully in the identification process. In addition to raising awareness, educators can try to involve parents and community members as advocates by helping them to understand the power of their voices in the quest to enhance resources and services for gifted students.

Because of the “hidden” nature of North Carolina’s ruralness, little research exists that is specific to the needs of rural gifted programs in our state. As rural districts develop their plans to meet the new state AIG program standards, they will surely face unique challenges. The needs of rural gifted programs affect nearly half the students in our state and deserve our attention.

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