

# Turnaround School: Embracing Diversity While Recognizing Giftedness

In 2005, Lafayette Elementary School's enrollment and standardized test scores were declining. Although the school was known for its fine programs for special needs students and English-language learners, and its diverse population offered many special opportunities to celebrate other cultures and languages, it was not making strides toward academic success. As a result, many parents had enrolled their children at other schools. In an attempt to turn Lafayette's performance trends around, the Boulder Valley School District in Colorado decided to infuse this long-established neighborhood school with a special talented and gifted (TAG) focus program.

First, an experienced principal with a background in gifted education took over the building leadership. Next, a highly skilled teacher familiar both with students living in poverty and with gifted education began working with administrators, teachers, and parents on a design advisory team. After studying current research, visiting other model programs, conducting a needs assessment of the school, holding discussions with parents, and collaborating with the existing staff, the team outlined a program model.

Because the staff felt strongly that the wonderfully diverse culture and acceptance of all students was part of the school's fabric, and should not be lost, initial energy was spent on educating teachers about how giftedness might be identified among students of poverty, those learning English as a second language, and those from different cultures. At the same time, teachers began book studies, article discussions, and team conversations about how to differentiate instruction for all students.

Given the school's highly mobile population, it was essential to have an ongoing talent identification process that was applicable to linguistically and culturally diverse as well as mainstream students. TAG staff screen all second-grade students with a nonverbal reasoning instrument that has helped identify students who ordinarily might have been overlooked. Students with special education individualized education programs might also be considered for gifted programming if they are shown to be highly capable. Although TAG nomination forms are accepted at any time, the staff also reach out to some families during parent conferences to explain how participating in more advanced programming might be appropriate for their children.

Every student is now assessed frequently and a team of trained educators uses the results to create "advanced" learning plans that set goals for academic challenge and appropriate enrichment. Instructional groupings for reading and math are flexible and based on assessed student knowledge and understanding. For example:



- Vertical acceleration is seamless, with all students in grades 2-5 having a math block during the first hour each day;
- The TAG teacher and TAG educational assistant instruct above-grade-level math groups in kindergarten through fifth grades, while several of the most advanced fifth-grade students take seventh-grade math at the local middle school;
- Kindergartners and first graders are taught in small groups that emphasize a deeper understanding of number sense and conceptual problem-solving;
- During literacy instruction, teachers focus on comprehension of advanced-level reading material and more challenging writing tasks; and
- Differentiated instruction, using research-based exemplary practice, is promoted in flexible and small groupings.

A review of the demographics at Lafayette during the past three years shows substantive change. Enrollment has increased by more than 200 students, and the annual school climate survey identifies parent and staff satisfaction among the highest in the district. The boys' performance level, which had been low, improved twice as much as the girls', and low-income, special education, and English-language learning students have made significant gains. As a result, the school's state accountability rating increased from "average" to "high," and its change score increased from "decline" to "significant improvement." There is now a wait list of students to be admitted and staff morale is high.

Certainly, additional challenges for academic improvement face Lafayette Elementary, but the TAG focus program has been instrumental in helping turn the school around. Diversity is still valued, appreciated, and embraced, and all students benefit from increased rigor as well as schoolwide creative and critical thinking opportunities.

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