

# Going Beyond the Basics to Reach All Children

The demands of the No Child Left Behind Act and response to intervention have faced school communities with the reality that basic skills drive our instruction and high-stakes testing dictates our success. Given this reality, we at Southeast Elementary School find it more critical than ever to address the needs of high-ability students and to focus on the strengths and talents of *all* of our students.

As part of our collaboration with the Neag Center for Gifted Education and Talent Development at the University of Connecticut, and with the guidance of its directors, Joseph Renzulli and Sally Reis, we have implemented the schoolwide enrichment model (SEM), a program designed to enhance learning and develop talents in all students. In the 15 years since Southeast Elementary began using this approach, many schools across the country have seen its value and followed suit.

The SEM program focuses on identifying the interests and talents of students, differentiating materials and activities based on individual needs, and providing enrichment opportunities for all students. This model has three components:

- The Total Talent Portfolio, focusing on each child's abilities, interests, and learning styles;
- Curriculum modifications, including curriculum compacting, a method for substituting enrichment and acceleration activities and/or programs for work students may already know; and
- Enrichment teaching and learning, including enrichment clusters (small groups of multiage students who meet regularly with a facilitator to pursue a specific interest with research and/or advanced real-world learning).

## A Fundamental Shift

The SEM represents a fundamental shift in how schools are run and uses creative teaching methods to balance basic skills instruction. At Southeast, we recognize that teaching critical thinking and problem-solving skills, as well as addressing the interests and talents of students, are at the forefront of academic success. Our enrichment program has become a platform for professional development in enrichment and differentiation. Supported by our partnership with the University of Connecticut, we have hosted education experts who work with our staff to develop their professional talents, as well as their personal interests, in order to better meet the needs of all students. Through professional

development opportunities funded by our district and several grant initiatives, our teachers also have received in-depth training in areas of academic achievement, with a focus on differentiated and enriched instruction and methods.

One of the strengths of our enrichment program has been its employment of talents within our community (i.e., parents, staff, students, community members, and nearby university staff and interns). Our parent-teacher organization and enrichment team includes teachers and parents who meet monthly to provide such enrichment opportunities as artist-in-residence programs, school performances, enrichment clusters, and after-



school programs such as Science Samplers and Expanding Horizons (an adaptation of the SEM Reading Framework, which focuses on reading enjoyment and guides students to self-select challenging books).

It is our strong belief that students will reach higher levels of success in their classrooms and on high-stakes testing if we differentiate and enrich curriculum and instruction, enabling them to think creatively, solve problems, and focus on their strengths and talents. At a time when many schools focus solely on basic skills, we have maintained our commitment to meet the needs of our high-ability students, and to develop the unique talents and interests of all students.

**Norma Fisher-Doiron**  
Principal  
Southeast Elementary School  
Mansfield, Connecticut  
[fisherdoironnj@mansfieldct.org](mailto:fisherdoironnj@mansfieldct.org)

**Susan Irvine**  
Enrichment Teacher  
Southeast Elementary School  
[irvinesb@mansfieldct.org](mailto:irvinesb@mansfieldct.org)