

# **GIFTED AND TALENTED PROGRAM AUDIT REPORT**

## **Executive Summary**

**Woodbridge Public Schools**

**Beecher Road School**

**Woodbridge, Connecticut**

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## District Information

Superintendent	Gaeton Stella
Special Services Director	Sheila Haverkampf
Focus	Audit of the Current Gifted and Talented Program and Services
Dates of Visit	December 12, 2010, February 7, 2011, February 24, 2011

## **PURPOSE OF THE AUDIT**

The purpose of this audit of the Woodbridge Gifted and Talented (TAG) Program is two-fold. First, it is to review and assess the current programs and services for gifted and talented children in Woodbridge Public Schools. Second, this report includes a special focus on the identification criteria and identification process that is used in Beecher Road School, a specific aspect of gifted and talented programming.

This audit was requested by the Superintendent of Schools, Gaeton Stella, and Special Services Director, Sheila Haverkamp, in early December 2010. They expressed that a review of Woodbridge's services for gifted and talented students had not been conducted in the recent past. They also expressed that they wanted to (1) ensure linkages between current curriculum initiatives and the services for gifted and talented students in Woodbridge, and (2) pay particular attention to refining the district's identification procedures.

## **EVALUATION MODEL**

A qualitative interview research design was chosen to obtain data for this audit. Qualitative methodologies refer to research procedures which produce descriptive data: people's own written or spoken works and observable behavior. Most often, descriptive data is obtained through interviews.

An interview is a purposeful conversation usually between two people (but sometimes involving more) that is directed by one in order to gather information. The purpose of an interview is to learn to see the world from the eyes of the person (s) being interviewed. As such, the interviewer comes to understand multiple perspectives that are held by a variety of constituents about a topic of interest.

The following eight questions were used to guide the interviews in Woodbridge Public Schools.

1. Who are gifted and talented (G/T) students in Woodbridge Public Schools?
2. What are the criteria for being identified as G/T in Woodbridge?
3. What services do G/T students receive in the regular classroom?
4. What services do G/T students receive outside the regular classroom?
5. What are the goals of services provided to G/T students?
6. What evidence is there to document gifted and talented student academic growth either individually or collectively?
7. What are the strengths of the program for gifted and talented students in Woodbridge?
8. What are the issues related to the program for G/T students?

Seven constituent groups were interviewed across three days: (1) classroom teachers, (2) teachers of the gifted and talented, (3) parents, (4) parents of identified gifted and talented students, (5) Talented and Gifted Committee members, (6) building administrators, and (7) board of education members. The researcher used an interview protocol to guide the interviewees through the questions and take notes about them.

Following each day of interviews, the notes were reviewed, edited and recombined. Subsequently, the notes were analyzed for trends and patterns across constituent groups. Finally, commendations and recommendations were prepared for each research question based upon the trends and patterns.

The identification procedure for gifted and talented students was examined during two meetings with the Talented and Gifted Committee, 12/21, from 9:00AM-11:00AM and February 24, 2011, from 12:30PM-3:00PM, as well as tangentially from other constituent groups. Commendations and recommendations regarding the identification process are provided under Question Two of this report.

## **RESPONSES TO INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

*Question 1: Who are gifted and talented students in Woodbridge?*

### **COMMENDATIONS**

1. Administrators and TAG Committee members have sought continually to define who gifted and talented children are.
2. Administrators and TAG Committee members recognize the important need to seek out unique subpopulations of students within the larger student body, including twice exceptional students and ELL learners.
3. Most school personnel recognize that academic ability alone does not define this subpopulation of students; talented students are also part of this group.

*Question 2: What are the criteria for being identified as gifted and talented in Woodbridge?*

### **COMMENDATIONS**

1. Some district personnel are aware of Connecticut law and regulations regarding gifted and talented students, and they make efforts to meet the state requirements and report them.
2. Woodbridge uses carefully selected, multiple measures.
3. Beginning in the 2009-2010, TAG Committee members will visit with grade level teams to initiate the nomination process. This outreach will clarify any questions and/or misunderstandings that classroom teachers have about the nomination process.
4. Beecher Road School has a flow chart to illuminate the identification process used in the district.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### Grades 3-6

1. Continue with all existing identification measures. They come from multiple sources and include quantitative and qualitative measures.
2. Add a universal screen that is sensitive to *local* norms. It is suggested that the first screen be the CMTs in reading and math. The top fifteen percent (15%) of students in each area should constitute the initial pool of potentially gifted and talented children.
3. Institute a rotating position on the selection committee. This position can be filled by a classroom teacher.
4. Develop rubrics and anchor sets of papers to assess the overall quality of student work sought for the writing and math portfolios. The rubrics and anchor sets of papers will help (1) classroom teachers understand the quality of work being sought, and (2) parents better understand why their child was/was not identified and gifted and talented.
5. Ensure that the nomination and screening process for any students is ongoing.
6. Ensure TAG Committee members visit with grade-level teams, grades 3-6, to solicit nominations.
7. Allow nominations from any source (e.g., parents, peers, community members).
8. Provide all teachers with professional development about the identification of gifted and talented children, as well as the process used in Woodbridge. Show teachers the SAGES so that they understand the measure and how it can be used to uncover both aptitude and achievement data.
9. Ensure that all teachers make nominations and comply with state law.
10. Ensure the consistent application of identification procedures to all candidates.
11. Review guidelines and procedures annually.
12. Continue to study and employ screening/assessment instruments that are responsive to underserved populations, e.g. twice exceptional, English Language Learners (ELL).
13. At the conclusion of each screening process, complete a final review of all the candidates to make sure that they represent the demographics of the community.
14. Make sure there is a standard appeal process, that it is communicated clearly to each constituency group, that it is on the district web site, and that it is followed exactly across all cases.

### Grades K-2

1. Provide professional development to teachers in grades K-2 about Connecticut law and its implications.
2. Ask TAG Committee members to assist K-2 teachers with the identification process.

### Other

1. Provide outreach to parents to explain the identification process.

2. Create a link on the Woodbridge website that provides information about the identification process.

*Question 3: What services do gifted and talented students receive in the regular classroom?*

### **COMMENDATIONS**

1. Woodbridge staff needs to continue with all the enrichment opportunities that are currently provided to students, including Open Studio, Digital Story Telling and other such initiatives.
2. The use of Reader's and Writer's Workshop are predicated on differentiation in the regular classroom. These curricular programs work to benefit all students, including those who are gifted and talented.
3. The use of cluster grouping—currently practiced in Beecher Road School—supports the learning needs of gifted and talented students. This practice ensures that high-achieving students will always have one or two like-minded peers with whom to associate in the regular classroom.
4. Beecher Road School embraces Responsive Classroom, an instructional initiative that promotes optimal student learning. It includes classroom practices, such as, for example: morning meeting, interactive modeling of expected behaviors, positive teacher language, guided discovery, academic choice and collaborative problem s solving. All of these practices support maximum student learning, a critical foundation for the learning needs of gifted and talented students.
5. Beecher Road School seeks continuous improvement, as evidenced by the Tri-State Consortium Report.
6. Beecher Road School has built Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) into teachers' daily schedules. During this time, teachers have the opportunity to discuss student learning, formative assessment data, and instructional next steps, based upon the formative data. More PLC time could be dedicated to talking about differentiation for all students, including those identified as gifted and talented.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

1. Create a list—by grade and content area—of all enrichment activities offered by Beecher Road School. Make it available to students and parents.
2. Put the list of enrichment activities on the Woodbridge web site; encourage *all* students to take advantage of these offerings.
3. Interview gifted and talented students regularly to gather their perceptions about the challenge level of the curriculum; compare their beliefs with the observations made by administrators about the nature and extent of differentiation in Woodbridge classrooms; act upon student data and classroom observations as necessary.
4. Establish a district definition and "common language" for differentiated instruction.

5. Provide on-going professional development to all teachers on curriculum differentiation. The professional development will need to be differentiated around teachers' unique learning needs and be embedded, collaborative and reflective.
6. Offer professional development about preassessment—a type of formative assessment—used by teachers to determine what students know about a curriculum unit *before* it is started; require the use of preassessment data to inform instruction for all students, especially those who are gifted and talented.
7. As part of the professional development for teachers, highlight how all the current initiatives in Woodbridge work together: Scientific Research-Based Interventions (SRBI), Differentiated Instruction, Responsive Classroom, and Reader's and Writer's Workshop.
8. Ensure that the specialists in Beecher Road School are included in the professional development and that their expertise is tapped as teachers begin to create their differentiated lesson plans. Be sure to include Special Education teachers in the professional development because they can participate as co-teachers in many classrooms.
9. Include professional accountability as a part of the three- to five-year strategic plan for professional development. Provide teachers with the opportunity to be on the committee that sets forth the accountability measures for the differentiated instruction initiative.
10. Ensure that teachers are aware of the accountability plan as well as its implications.

*Question 4: What services do gifted and talented students receive outside the regular classroom?*

### **COMMENDATIONS**

1. Woodbridge is to be commended for continuing to offer services during a time when many towns have eliminated their special services for gifted and talented students.
2. TAG pull-out services provide different, yet aligned and more challenging content than is taught in the regular classroom.
3. Small group size during the pull-out component of the G/T services promotes focus and customization of content.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

1. If at all possible, increase the amount of time students spend in the pull-out programs. An hour a week would be better than the current 30-minute block of time.
2. Create a calendar that delineates when pull-out programs will occur. Share this calendar with teachers, students and parents.
3. Provide release time for TAG Committee members and other staff to attend local offerings vested in the education of gifted learners, e.g., differentiation workshops, Confratute.



4. Ensure that TAG Committee members have regularly scheduled time for planning and curriculum development.
5. Ensure all teachers of gifted learners continue to be actively engaged in the study of gifted education through staff development, conferences or graduate degree programs/ classes.
6. Establish a parent advisory committee for gifted education in Woodbridge.

*Question 5: What are the goals of the services provided to gifted and talented students in Woodbridge?*

### **COMMENDATIONS**

1. Woodbridge has a mission statement and philosophy statement that addresses the learning needs of gifted education students.
2. Beecher Road School has an overview of its program, a list of program goals and strategies for meeting the program goals.
3. Woodridge personnel recognize the need for clear, measurable goals for each pull-out program.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

1. TAG Committee members need to reflect upon the students identified in language arts and mathematics to determine their unique learning needs. With students' learning needs as a backdrop, as well as the K-6 curriculum benchmarks, they need to craft 2-3 specific learning goals for each pull-out program.
2. Share these specific goals with teachers, parents, students, and board of education members.
3. Revisit the broad goals for gifted education programs in Woodbridge to refine them and/or modify them as necessary to address the learning needs of gifted education students.
4. Review current methods of communication to parents, staff and other constituents to determine the most effective forms of communication.
5. Conduct regular evaluations of the specific program goals; share findings with all constituent groups.
6. Conduct regular reports to the board of education that highlight various facets of gifted education including, for example: identification criteria, program goals, student products
7. Encourage representation of gifted education educators on essential school committees as needed (professional development, curriculum review committees, strategic planning, etc.).

*Question 6: What evidence is there to document gifted and talented student academic growth either individually or collectively?*

### **COMMENDATIONS**

1. Woodbridge teachers are currently working to create rubrics for projects across content areas.
2. Teachers have significant PLC time to support the continued development of these rubrics.
3. TAG Committee members are working currently to create rubrics to assess student work samples in language arts and mathematics.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

1. Provide TAG Committee members additional planning time to formulate goals and create rubrics for students' writing and mathematics work samples.
2. Ensure that all rubrics contain high enough ceilings to gauge and monitor the learning progress of gifted and talented students.
3. Share the rubrics with teachers, parents and administrators.
4. Provide narrative feedback to parents about the progress of their children.
5. Showcase the work of gifted and talented students in a variety of ways including, for example, a celebration evening, a web site dedicated to student work, a newsletter from the TAG program that is published three or four times a year.
6. Invite gifted and talented students to assess their own work in the pull-out program.

*Question 7: What are the strengths of the program for gifted and talented students in Woodbridge?*

### **COMMENDATIONS**

1. The sheer number of dedicated professionals who work on behalf of all students, including those who are gifted and talented. Many Woodbridge practitioners seek to instill the love of learning by providing customized encouragement, opportunities for continuous academic growth and individualized choice in learning activities.
2. The desire among many Woodbridge professionals to constantly seek improvement in their programs and services, including those for gifted and talented students. Evidence for this important striving include the Tri-State Consortium Report, as well as this audit that was commissioned in December 2010.
3. Woodbridge has spent considerable time and funds to provide a large number of important resources that support individualized student learning including, for example: Reader's and Writer's Workshop, the World Languages program, Open Studio, Digital Story Telling, and a variety of technology resources. All of these programs coalesce to

form an inviting environment for young people and a powerful array of individualized pathways for Woodbridge students.

4. Woodbridge personnel are making connections across content areas and grade levels. The increasing number and strength of the connections will support the learning and academic achievement of all students, including those who are gifted and talented.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

1. Continue to forge connections between gifted and talented program and all the disciplines in the regular curriculum.
2. Remodel the role of the Special education teachers. They can often serve as co-teachers who can provide critical differentiation for small groups of students.
3. Develop increased communication between the TAG Committee members and regular education staff about the program goals, student projects and student progress. This can be accomplished through written communication, sharing between TAG Committee members and regular education staff at team/grade-level meetings.

*Question 8: What are the issues related to the services for G/T students?*

### **COMMENDATIONS**

1. Woodbridge maintains small class size.
2. Personnel are committed to improvements in all areas of the curriculum, including refinements for the unique learning needs of gifted and talented students.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

1. Modify the existing flow chart and accompanying text, as necessary.
2. Complete the refinement of the identification process, K-6.
3. Ensure the consistency of identification practices, K-6.
4. Ensure transparency by communicating all aspects of the identification process with parents, teachers, administrators, board of education members.
5. Devote PLC time to the analysis of pre-assessment and formative assessment data and subsequent professional dialogues about "next teaching steps" for all students, including those who are gifted and talented students.
6. Provide professional development focused on the use of tiering, especially in science and social studies.
7. Assess to see whether differentiation is provided more proactively and consistently by all teachers.
8. Assess the extent of differentiation for all students, especially high-achieving students
9. Query parents about topics they would like to explore with Woodbridge professionals (e.g., what constitutes curriculum rigor?).

10. Assess the best times to conduct dialogues with parents/community members (e.g., early morning, evening dinners that are coupled with discussions as well as showcases that feature student work).