

Farmington leads way in education for gifted

By K. Joyce O'Brien
Special writer

He is different from most students. He does not learn in the same way as the majority of his classmates. He sees the world differently. He is intense, impatient and creative, characteristics not easily appreciated by most adults.

He is one of 900 students in the Farmington School District identified as intellectually gifted.

Farmington educators pioneered meeting the needs of the child with very high intelligence with a pilot program in 1976.

Today the Intellectually Gifted (I.G.) has evolved as a model for other school districts in Michigan which are just now starting programs.

The Michigan State Legislature recently allocated \$3 million to further this type of education.

"In general education, Michigan is way up there," said Roxanne Reschke, Oakland County consultant for gifted, about Michigan's ranking. "In gifted education we are probably in the middle. Oakland County is very progressive because of the initiative of local school boards."

The Farmington District worked in the dark in the early years deciding who should be in the program and what should be done to assist those selected.

Little research and few college courses were available for interested teachers. Years of experimentation and evaluation ensued.

In its first year the academically able program provided enrichment for youngsters with high grades. It was then decided that children with innate ability, but with problems that kept them from achieving, also needed attention.

THE INTELLIGENCE Quotient (I.Q.) test was selected as a criteria. It was expected that the national average of 2 percent with an I.Q. over 132 would be in the program. A surprising 9 percent of the student population qualified.

High achievement is no longer the sole criteria.

High achievers are still in the program. But they are now identified by I.Q. When the 230 academically able were given the test, only 55 percent tested in the upper stratum.

Today's I.G. program benefits both the very industrious students, who might not be extremely gifted, as well as the large group identified as super intelligent.

Aspects of the early program have been discarded, even though it was much like programs currently operating in neighboring districts. Students were pulled out of regular classrooms

in order to teach them in an accelerated manner. This was felt to have drawbacks.

In addressing the goal of the program, Graham Lewis, assistant superintendent of special education, said "We want to be able to maintain and raise the consciousness of people, to recognize that bright children have to be attended in a certain manner, but not on an elite or segregated level."

The special needs of the precocious child are just now being understood. It seems to be a consensus that they are a valuable resource to our nation and community. Educators agree that their innate abilities need to be developed and fostered beyond what a sound school system has always offered.

VERY BRIGHT children have always been around. Whether they were given opportunities that allowed them to reach their full potential is doubtful. The method of dealing with them was either special attention from the classroom teacher or double promotion.

"Many people don't believe in skipping grades," said Lewis. "It can be very effective, but only for certain individuals."

Every teacher will eventually confront a child with extraordinary ability. Some stand out because of their success. Others may be the class clowns achieving minimum grades with very little effort. A very bright child could be falling in school.

"Giftedness does not mean you know every answer," said Connie Mason, Farmington gifted coordinator. "It means you have some potential to learn more quickly and process information better and faster."

Some low achievers have been discovered to have extremely high I.Q. While being tested for special education programs. Learning handicaps, such as dyslexia, which impairs reading ability, or emotional problems, can keep a child from making good grades even though he or she may be very bright.

Jerry Kaplan, middle school coordinator, said, "I think most of the kids who go into the program are pretty successful students. Something we are trying to zero in on is our gifted underachievers."

"It is not the child's responsibility to tap into himself, if he or she doesn't know the mechanism for that," Lewis said. "There has got to be someone who takes their hand and leads them gently down this path. You can't kick him down it. You can't order quality. That's short lived."

DESCRIBING THE varied methods of gifted education in Oakland County's 28 districts Reschke said, "we have every configuration of program."

The spectrum ranges from separate magnet schools to school systems that have barely entered the field. Southfield, West Bloomfield and South Lyon place all of their gifted students in a magnet school.

Part time "pull-out" schedules occur when youngsters in regular classrooms are bussed to another site on certain days for accelerated learning. Royal Oak, Clarkston and Ferndale are some of the districts involved in this type of procedure.

Birmingham's gifted are administered by Resource Room teachers. Troy and West Bloomfield's districts operate low-profile programs, very similar to Farmington's I.G., even though programs with high visibility are more popular with parents.

Farmington administrators found that their earlier trials at modified "pull-out" were not liked by children. They balked at being singled out.

A college freshman who was in the program at the beginning recalls, "I didn't want to tell my friends why I was being pulled out of class. I simply didn't want to be different. It seemed to me my teachers heard I was gifted would expect me to make top grades in all subjects."

Lewis feels magnet schools are unnecessary where a sound school system exists.

"If we pull out kids, we'd have to set up a new school system, a parallel system. We already have a wholesome system, with a lot of depth in total staff capability," he said.

THE CURRENT programming method is to identify the child in elementary school, if possible. The student is put with other gifted children at times for stimulation but mostly for observation of his unique talent and problems. Should he have emotional problems that impair his learning, for example, he will then be referred to a social worker.

The four middle schools have two counselors, Kaplan and Robert Prior. Most of their work consists of counseling and resource work. They might suggest that a student who is very talented in math be allowed to take high school math classes.

The high schools have never had special courses for gifted students. A wide variety of accelerated classes are offered to all students.

Ray Voss guides students toward higher education in all three schools. Sometimes these students attend college while in high school.

"I never would have thought I would be allowed to take French at C.C.C. before I graduated. The gifted coordinator suggested it," said a student. Reschke considers the Farmington

district very fortunate to have a full-time staff person in the high schools.

"When we go to gifted conventions, there aren't senior high coordinators," Voss said. "I bet there aren't four people in the state of Michigan with my job."

"At this point, we have nothing that is exclusively gifted," Kaplan said. We have no Smart Room. What we have is Shakespeare, Physics and Advanced Placement Math being offered to all students in middle schools."

Voss encourages all interested students to compete in projects, such as Olympics of the Mind. The 1984 team from Harrison placed fourth statewide. The team designed small vehicles powered by mousetraps. Seven of the team members were in the I.G., three were not.

Educators who have been working with gifted education for the last 10 years believe the field is still in its infancy. Research is still needed.

Administrators are still trying to evaluate why Farmington's 900-student

I.G. has twice as many boys as girls. Possibly the answer is that males tend to grasp abstractions more readily and the I.Q. test is geared to determine a natural aptitude for abstractions, according to officials.

"I don't know where gifted education is going," Lewis said. "I don't think any one does. I do know that the gifted are a minority. Societies that deal with their periphery aspects, the gifted as well as the disabled, are more civilized."



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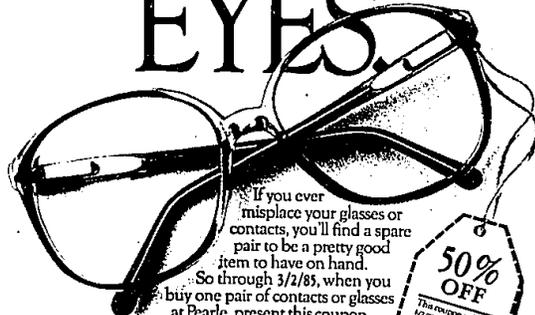
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