

MT AGATE (Association of Gifted and Talented Education) Position Statement

Currently, whether gifted and talented (GT) students' abilities are noticed and developed depends largely on where they live, i.e. urban area, rural area, reservation, and which school they attend. This reality, which is counter to Montana's equity and achievement goals, leads MT AGATE to call for renewed focus on gifted and talented education (GTE) to fulfill the requirement that GT students are identified and provided services. This focus should take the form of increased funding, development of comprehensive identification procedures, support for districts/schools to create and implement GTE plans, and the addition of GTE training for pre-service and in-service educators.

It is a common and unfortunate myth that all GT students are highly-motivated, high achieving, people-pleasers who will "be just fine" even when no services are provided specifically for their needs. Given the high demands on our school systems in the face of budget cuts, GTE programs have never been developed in some districts and are the first on the chopping block in others. While this has been the norm, it is critical to understand that Montana state law *mandates* identification of and provision of services to GT students. (ARM 10.55.804). The lack of implementation, compliance, and oversight with regard to the law are major reasons why GT students' needs are not being met.

In order to meet the goal of identifying and serving all our GT students, MT AGATE recommends a multi-prong approach. The organizations responsible for oversight of our public school system, the Office of Public Instruction (OPI) and the Board of Public Education (BPE), need to develop and adopt standard procedures for identification of GT students and require that all districts and independent schools employ these standardized practices. While there can be no one-size-fits-all methodology, this standardization should provide a solid framework within which schools and districts can develop workable solutions.

Every district and independent school in Montana needs to have a GTE plan and the means to implement that plan. This goal can only be achieved through increased funding of GTE and inclusion of GT training for both pre-service and in-service teachers. At this time, the only State-level dedicated funding for GTE amounts to a non-competitive grant totaling \$250,000 per year for the entire state. Local districts are required to match whatever amount they receive from the grant. Apart from the 2009 biennium when \$1,250,000 was appropriated annually for the grant program, the annual appropriation has been \$250,000 for the past decade (K-12 School Funding: A 10-Year Review 2016). Based on our best estimates, this amounts to less than \$30 per year for each GT student.¹

There is evidence that providing pre-service teachers with coursework and practicum opportunities to transfer knowledge to practice increases awareness of the specific needs of gifted and talented students and confidence in adjusting instruction for them (see e.g., Bangel et al, 2010). However, most teacher licensure programs are not preparing teachers to meet the needs of high-ability students; the majority of schools and colleges of education do not offer separate coursework in the area of gifted education (NAGC 2014). No public teacher preparation programs in Montana require any coursework specific to

¹ While no specific count of GT students is possible due to the lack of identification in many districts, MT AGATE has used the national average reported by National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC) to estimate that there are approximately 8,700 gifted students in the state of Montana who should be receiving services each year.

teaching gifted learners. Curriculum for pre-service teachers should include college credit hours in identifying psychosocial characteristics associated with giftedness, meeting their social-emotional needs, and developing differentiated instructional supports.

Due to the lack of pre-service training and to keep up with current advances in the area of GTE implementation, it is critical that we provide regular, high-quality training for in-service educators. Professional development for teachers working with GT students should align with the Professional Development Standards articulated by the National Association for Gifted Students and Council for Exceptional Children.

Even when schools and districts agree that GT students require services, many subscribe to the myth that differentiation in the regular classroom alone is adequate to meet the needs of 80% to 90% of GT students. MT AGATE would like to dispel this myth. Differentiation within heterogeneous classrooms should not replace more intensive services for gifted learners that may be provided through resource support, full-class grouping models, or other approaches. (NAGC 2014)

Many students need more than differentiation in the classroom. Ability grouping, acceleration, project-based learning, guided independent/small group study, pull-outs, and other curricular resources that encourage depth and complexity and address social and emotional needs are effective means of meeting the needs of gifted students.

In summary, MT AGATE strongly supports increased attention to the needs of GT students. The Administrative Rules of Montana require GT students be identified and served. While some school districts are in compliance with this regulation, many are not. To meet the needs of this population of students, standards for identification should be crafted and support should be provided such that *every* school district will have a plan for serving its GT students. GTE plans need to go beyond basic differentiation in the classroom and incorporate specific methodology supported by current best practices in GTE. Emphasis should be given to requiring preparation in GTE during teacher training and ongoing professional development for all P-12 teachers. Underpinning all of these efforts is the need for additional funding. The current level of funding is not adequate to allow schools and districts to provide the services required by Montana law.