

Upper Saddle River Schools

Administrative Offices

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Superintendent of Schools

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November 28, 2007

Mrs. Miriam R. Bakal
22 Cottontail Trail
Upper Saddle River, New Jersey 07458

Dear Mrs. Bakal:

I hope that you are well, and that you and your family had a Happy Thanksgiving. This letter is in response to your correspondence of October 23, and the questions you and other parents raised at recent Board meetings. I hope you will find it thoughtful and comprehensive. Though I made my best effort to address your concerns, many of your questions were beyond my scope and role as Board President/Board Member. In order to be thorough in my response I not only accessed information on my own, but also consulted with our educational experts.

The purpose of this letter is intended to clarify all aspects of our program, correct some inaccuracies and misconceptions that have been conveyed, and to recommend future modifications.

Let me begin by saying that the Board believes our program meets the legal requirements of New Jersey code. I have enclosed a copy of Dr. Snider's remarks from the October 25th Board meeting that addresses the major points of the legal requirements. This response addressed point by point the State's requirements and the district's response. I hope the details of this letter elaborate on those points. As always we will continue to review all our programs, make recommendations for improvement as needed, and continue to improve all our services for children.

There are four aspects of our gifted program that continue to come up in public conversations. These are: (1) policy; (2) identification procedures; (3) program and personnel; and (4) communications.

1. **Policy:** As you are aware, we are in the process of revamping our entire policy manual and accompanying regulations. This is a major undertaking for the Board. At the current time the draft policy manual is being vetted by our administrators and checked for legal compliance and will then come to a board sub-committee for review, and then to the board for the required two readings and board adoption. Our board policy # 2464 does not reflect our current program and practices, which nevertheless have been updated to comply with new state mandates. Each policy of the many hundreds is deserving of the same attention and scrutiny as that of policy # 2464. However, because of the interest in this particular policy, we have included a DRAFT of the new policy no. 2464 to confirm our comments about policy status.

2. **Identification Procedures:** Our identification criteria were designed and adopted in 2001-02 in a collaborative effort spearheaded by Ms. Jill Mortimer, Curriculum Coordinator, for the Quad District. The Quad District includes Northern Highlands Regional High School, and the three K-8 sending districts Allendale, Ho-Ho-Kus, and Upper Saddle River. [Saddle River is not part of the Quad District.] I have attached a copy of the Quad District Enrichment Philosophy and Identification Criteria Checklist. The criteria for identification in the program were adopted from the National Association for Gifted Children and have been refined over the last six years in meetings headed by Ms. Mortimer, the most recent having been last year. The criteria are, of course, different for various age levels. [See attached for details]. Gradually, over the past few years the State of New Jersey has added criterion-referenced tests for grades 3-8 inclusive. These were not available to us when the original criteria were developed, so the criteria are adjusted annually to review and include appropriate new sources of information. We have slowly phased out the Terra Nova (a norm-referenced test) which does not align with the format and content of the New Jersey Curriculum Core Content Standards. In response to some specific questions about criteria:

- This school district does not use a formal Intelligent Quotient (IQ) test for several reasons:
 - i. IQ tests are generally an out of date approach to measuring a child's general talents and abilities. They are limited to readings based on quantitative and verbal reasoning and do not respect many other gifts a child may possess outside this range.
 - ii. IQ tests are premised on a belief that intelligence is a "fixed" quantity that essentially one is born with and which does not change over time. Research over the last several decades has shown that "intelligence" is indeed far-ranging and very modifiable. [Particularly I would reference the work of Reuven Feurstein among others.] Also, note comment in paragraph 2 of gifted philosophy statement from Quad that states, "The identified population may vary from year to year as a result of student performance." I note this in response to statement by a parent that giftedness is not fluid...that is a belief, not a fact, as giftedness criteria are not defined and are delegated to districts to define.
 - iii. A parent asked whether or not the district would accept an outside, independently administered IQ test in lieu of district criteria for gifted

identification. IQ tests can only be administered to young children in a one-on-one setting, which would not be possible for a district of our size. Since this information would not allow us to equivalently “compare students to their peers,” it would be inappropriate to accept these testing results from an outside administration. Unless every child has the same opportunity to have the same testing, there is no opportunity to “compare” the child to others in the community as is recommended for identification.

- One parent questioned why her child was not identified for the gifted program as the child achieved at the Advanced Proficient Level on the New Jersey state test. Our gifted program is designed to meet the needs of children identified by multiple criteria which include the quad checklist, teacher recommendation, and where available appropriate results from state tests. Since almost half of our students (48%) at grade 3 scored at the advanced Proficiency level in math last year and 75% of our students at grade 4 scored at the Advanced Proficiency level in math, this is not considered a “stand alone” criterion for identifying students for program placement.
- The test of cognitive abilities (referred to in the criteria) that the district uses is the In View. This test is administered at grades 3 and 5 and provides a measure referred to as a Cognitive Skills Index. This is not a measure of intelligence but it purports to measure abilities related to thinking and learning. Letters to parents from Mr. Kaplan about the administration and results of this test are also included in this packet.
- In discussions held with Ms. Mortimer it has been made clear to me that all three sending districts do use the same criteria for placement in gifted and talented program. A parent has stated that they know this is not the case, but no definitive information has been forthcoming. I am confident that we are in alignment with the quad districts.
- The criteria used for placement in grades K-3 is outlined and detailed in the attachment. The criteria checklist (Quad District Enrichment Philosophy and Identification Criteria Checklist) is shared with classroom teachers who have the responsibility for completing it. This process, which is completed at the end of the year by the classroom teacher who has had the child the entire year, is supervised by Dr. Janet Katz, district coordinator of curriculum, and the school principal. This is a very comprehensive process and significant articulation occurs between the end of the current classroom teacher, Dr. Katz, and the enrichment teacher. After the checklist is completed and students identified this group revisits the results to see if by chance students who did not make the cutoff have special talents.

If parents are uncertain as to whether or not their child has been identified, they may request that information from the classroom teacher, enrichment teacher, or school principal. I attach a parent/teacher questionnaire (with author unknown and undesignated) that was surreptitiously being “administered” to our teachers. This approach placed our teachers in a very awkward position. If any parent wishes information deemed public (and not everything on this survey meets that criteria) s/he may make a written request for the information. There

are very clear guidelines about what is considered public, what we are obligated to supply, and procedures for obtaining same.

3. Personnel and Program: Two years ago, the Board of Education approved the appointment of three part-time teachers to serve as enrichment coordinators—one at each school. Cavallini Middle School already had a designated coordinator but the other two schools did not. This was designed to assist in meeting the needs of academically talented children. We do, and will continue to, use the term enrichment for the program that we provide. This is desirable and allowed. These three teachers (Mrs. LaPoff at Reynolds, Mrs. Bernstein at Bogert, and Mr. Ferrante at Cavallini) assist teachers in meeting the needs of identified children, provide resources and ideas to teachers and students, conduct staff development as needed, and meet with students.

Clearly, over the last seven to eight years this district has invested heavily in a model that is designed to individualize learning for all students, wherever they may fall across a spectrum of talents, intelligences, and skills. This model is based heavily in maintaining small class size, hiring strong, competent classroom teachers, providing substantial staff development in instructional models that assist teachers in identifying and addressing student needs, and providing the support structure (e.g. enrichment teachers) to assist them in achieving same. Our teachers have received hundreds of hours of training in differentiation techniques, including (for example) curriculum compacting, modifications of content/process/product, reading/writing workshops [by nature individualized for student ability]. These include workshops by both the district and the Quad and have been, and continue to be, significant, frequent, and substantive. We have provided our teachers with staff development using state and nationally recognized leaders in the field. Most recently at the quad level, K-2 teachers had a day's instruction in differentiating in math. [See enclosed PowerPoint.] We believe that with this strong support K-5 classroom teachers can meet the needs of all their students, including those identified by our quad district gifted criteria. Obviously, as new teachers arrive in our district, it behooves us to ensure that they too have the background, support, and resources to meet these needs. Additionally, if (as has been suggested) a given teacher is not meeting the identified needs of a child that parent should first approach the teacher, then the enrichment teacher, and eventually the principal if that is needed.

We believe students may be gifted in many ways. This is affirmed by many recognized authorities in the field, including Harvard author Howard Gardner in his book on *Multiple Intelligences*. We do, however, aggressively support and believe that we should meet the needs of all children across areas of cognitive ability, talents, and skills....and this does include challenging students who have demonstrated abilities. We believe that we are doing that and that many parents whose children have been identified using our criteria are very happy with the services of this district and their teachers. That being said, we do not ignore concerns and recognize that there may be some improvements that can be made.

4. Communication: There have been many parent questions and requests related to their individual's child "designation" and this leads me to believe that we should improve how and what we communicate. I will tell you that this needs to be done carefully and sensitively because the more transparent we become the more conflict it may create among other parents. That being said we will examine closely our current practices of notifying parents about our program, their child's designation, and make improvements as administrators, educators, and parents may recommend.

To this point, I believe this letter responds to the many questions that the Board has received, primarily from the Board meetings of October 25 and November 12, but also from other communiqués it has received.

You requested that the Board immediately instruct the enrichment coordinators to contact the parents in their schools whose children have been identified: I refer you to my comments in the item 4 above regarding communications. That communication process will need to be reviewed and vetted with appropriate personnel. Additionally, once this happens I want to be clear that there will be parents who disagree with our process and identification. The resolution of these will become time-consuming and will draw us away from our mission.

Our superintendent has served on the board of the Gifted Society, and as its president, and is well positioned to recommend those aspects of programs she believes could be of assistance in this process.

The Board has sought and obtained the methodology utilized for the identification criteria for Allendale and Ho-Ho-Kus; they are identical to those in Upper Saddle River and have been collaboratively developed, reviewed, and applied.

While it is not uniformly in place across all K-5 grade levels our teachers have been trained in the following techniques and our superintendent has personally seen them applied: curriculum compacting, grade acceleration, higher order thinking skills (Maslowe's hierarchy and Bloom's taxonomy), higher level questioning techniques, grouping and regrouping (jigsaw) within the classroom, clustering, project extensions and enrichment, individualization through reading/writing workshop, math differentiation, etc. We have also sent some of our teachers to workshops, conferences, and visits directly related to gifted programs including presentations by Reis, Renzulli, the Gifted Society, visits to other school districts, and Quad District staff development.

The State does not require that a district use a particular model, nor that accommodations must be separate from the regular classroom setting, nor require a separate curriculum be adopted. They do require that we identify children and that we modify to meet their needs. We believe that we have one of the strongest models for individualizing instruction, accompanied by the most significant staff development model available, to prepare our teachers for this challenge. I have enclosed a brochure from Bogert School with information about our grades 3-5 program. We recently received a letter (copy enclosed) from the Liberty Charter School requesting to visit our highly recognized program.

We believe that our *gifted and talented* program is one that has been developed by the professional educators, and that while some parents may not agree with our approach, we feel that our philosophy is effective for the majority of identified gifted and talented children in this district. We will continue to seek ways to improve our program (e.g. evaluating children new to the district, expanded staff development, improved parental communications) but we believe that our program is a comprehensive program and one that we support.

I hope this responds to your questions and inquiries. Thank you for your interest in our schools.

Sincerely,



Stephanie Karl
President, Upper Saddle River Board of Education

Enclosure (8)

SK:jd

cc: Board of Education
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