

Are gifted kids properly identified/taught?

No, according to some parents who are trying to revamp the program

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OF TOWN JOURNAL

How do you know a child is gifted and talented?

Is a child gifted if he or she raises his or her hand when the teacher asks a question, or is there some other, less identifiable criteria?

This is part of the debate between school officials in Upper Saddle River and 49 parents who have revived an organization called PAGE (Parents Advocating for Gifted Education). PAGE was initially formed by a member of the school board in the fall of 2002 with the goal to improve the district's gifted program. The group died down in 2005 and was reformed in October.

For PAGE members, led by Miriam Bakal and Cynthia Vasilakos, there are two main issues: proper identification of gifted students and implementation of the curriculum once the students have been identified. In a series of interviews, Bakal and Vasilakos have said they believe the identification process is too broad and does not accurately identify gifted students.

Presently, the checklist for Grades K-4 has 14 guidelines a student must meet. These are:

- Is the student an avid reader?
- Can the student follow multi-step directions?
- Does the student participate in group discussions?
- Does the student read orally with fluency and expression?
- Does the student select material of a high level?

- Can they adopt different strategies when problem solving?

- Do they do calculations in his/her head?

- Do they express ideas well?

- Does the student understand and apply advanced math concepts and

applications?

- Does he or she show satisfaction with books and stories?

- Does he or she communicate mathematical thinking through written and oral

communication?

- Does the student show perseverance when completing a task?

- Do they show extraordinary memory?

- Do they possess a wealth of knowledge about a variety of subjects?

The K-8 enrichment checklist includes 11 standards. These include:

- Who is the best student (academically, socially, behaviorally)?

- Who has the largest vocabulary?

- Who is the most creative and original?

- Which child has the best leadership skills?

- Who is the most scientifically oriented child?

- Who does the best critical thinking?

- Who is the most motivated child?

- Who is most ahead on grade placement?

- Which child displays leadership potential?

- Who displays consistent enthusiasm, perseverance and commitment to task?

- Who is able to fulfill high standards of classroom performance?

For students in Grades K-4, both checklists are used. In Grades 5-8, only the K-8 enrichment identification is used. Using the K-4 guideline, a student must obtain 11 out of 14. And using the K-8 checklist, a student must receive eight out of 11.

Bogert Elementary School Principal David Kaplan said this process is under review.

"We are looking to refine our gifted programs," Kaplan said. "But we do not want to get into a situation where there is not enough flexibility in our programs and specific guidelines always need to be followed."

But PAGE members said these checklists are too broad and identify the motivated students and high achievers, but not necessarily the academically gifted ones.

"We as PAGE do not believe our school district has appropriate criteria for identification of gifted children," said Bakal, spokesperson for PAGE. Bakal has three children in the district ages 8, 6 and 4. "The school doesn't offer them appropriate opportunities for instructional learning."

Members of the group said students' IQ should play a role in

whether or not a child is identified as gifted.

"We do not use IQ tests," Reynolds Elementary School Principal Joanne Vernon said. "We have our own system of identifying gifted students."

Once the students are identified, a special enrichment teacher (the district has three of them) meets with the student's classroom teacher to review their academic profile. Together, the two teachers formulate the student's "differentiated" lesson plan. The student then works directly with the enrichment teacher and also will be given independent work to meet their needs. But the gifted students are not pulled out of class; instead it is up to the classroom teacher to meet the needs of all the students in his or her class.

Superintendent Dr. Joyce Snider said she believes the enrichment teachers meet the needs of the gifted students.

PAGE members, however, believe the protocol is not clearly defined, and there is too much discretion when teaching gifted students.

"There are not enough guidelines and specifics on how to handle gifted students," said Vasillakos, who has two children, ages 9 and 11. "There needs to be a defined program in place to meet the needs of gifted students."

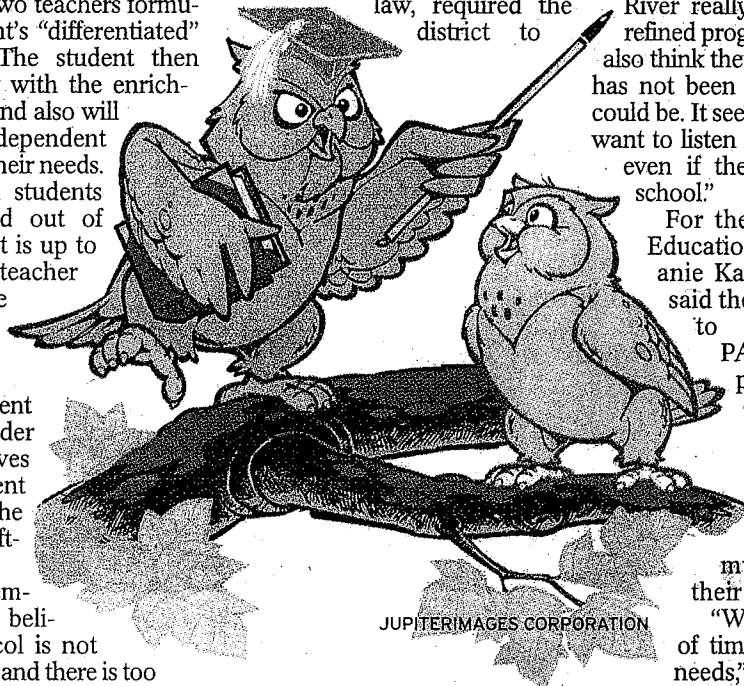
PAGE members said they feel as if a school should be able to answer who the gifted students are, what is being done to teach them, where are they being taught and how they are being taught. They also would like to see gifted kids clustered together, be accelerated in their classes, be pulled out of class and have the curriculum tailored to meet their needs.

In addition, members are calling for a trained and experienced gifted and talented enrichment specialist to train teachers in the design of a gifted and talented program. They would also like guidance counselors to receive special training.

"If you want to make the argu-

ment that it is teacher dependent, then you can make that argument for any subject and any level of school work," Kaplan said as a reply. "A lot of education is teacher dependent and we have great teachers."

PAGE members already have achieved some of their goals. For one, the school district did not have an updated written policy regarding gifted students, which by law, required the district to



identify gifted students in kindergarten. The old policy called for identification of gifted students in fifth grade.

"We were identifying students in kindergarten," Snider said. "We just didn't have a written policy. We were getting the job done, but just needed to update the policy, which we did in March."

To further their cause, PAGE leaders have amassed over 130 signatures from parents who are upset with the gifted program.

Despite their signatures and advocacy, Vernon said she does not believe that a majority of the people in the district is upset with the school's policy.

"If there was really a problem, we would see much more of an outcry from the residents," Vernon said. "Overall, people are really happy with what we are doing and know this is a great school district. There is just a small group of people who are upset. And you will always have that when people care about the education of the students."

Still, some residents think this is just the beginning.

"With any political issue, there are two sides," said Jeff Manheimer, a resident with three kids in the district ages 5, 8 and 12. "Not everyone has the energy or the time to get involved, but I think the school needs to be careful because they may start seeing a lot of parents at the board meetings. I agree with PAGE that Upper Saddle River really does not have a refined program for the gifted. I also think the board of education has not been as helpful as they could be. It seems as if they do not want to listen to any suggestions, even if they might help the school."

For their part, Board of Education President Stephanie Karl and Dr. Snider said they have responded to the issues that PAGE and other parents have raised. They have written letters and corresponded with members of PAGE and others in the community to address their concerns.

"We have taken a lot of time to address their needs," Snider said. "We understand their concerns and respect their wishes but feel we have a good program in place. That said, we are always looking to improve the program and are making changes as we speak. It is my responsibility to make all of my students get a great education and I am going to do that."

For PAGE, it has not been enough.

"We are not going to let up until we feel as if the district has a good program in place," Vasillakos said. "By the time things change, my kids will not even be affected so this is not just for my kids, but for all gifted kids that enter the school district."