

PSCC Meeting Minutes

Tuesday, October 28, 2008

Subject: The Gifted Pilot Program

Speakers and Guests: David May-Stein, Principal Pittsburgh Colfax; Cora Wallace, Vice-Principal Pittsburgh Colfax; Michelle Monahan, Gifted Pilot Liaison; Betsy Juhas, Gifted Resource Teacher; Dina Miller-Ponas, Part-time Colfax Gifted Resource Teacher; Jerry Minsinger, Principal Pittsburgh Gifted Center; Andy Norman, Gifted Task Force Member and Colfax parent

In attendance: approximately 85 Colfax parents

I. Purpose of Meeting

Cate Axtman convened the meeting, explaining that many parents were anxious to hear about the new pilot program as it is scheduled to roll out in two months, and introduced the speakers.

II. Gifted Pilot History

Andy Norman gave a brief history of how we got this pilot program: in the spring of 2006, the District convened a Gifted Task Force to evaluate gifted education, review the latest research, and to conduct site visits here and around the country to gather best practices. The key recommendations from that report, which was submitted in the spring of 2007, were:

1. the current one day per week model is insufficient to meet the needs of students and we ought to move towards a five day per week program
2. all the literature and best practices strongly supports grouping within the classroom, which this report called "Readiness to Learn" groups

Based on these (and other) recommendations, the District decided in spring 2008 to implement a pilot program at five schools with the initial plan to start this fall, though that has been pushed back to January 2009.

III. Explanation of the 5-Day Gifted Pilot

Because this program is not fully developed yet, our speakers were unable to give an explanation of what it will look like at this time. Cate Axtman expressed the concern that we do not want to lose our one-day program without something to replace it. There is also a lot of confusion about the proposed "Readiness to Learn" grouping and its relationship to the Gifted Pilot. Here's an overview of what our speakers said about each:

1. Gifted Pilot: The program now has a full staff, including a District liaison and two teachers at Colfax (one of whom is part-time). The staff is concentrating on professional development this fall: reading the literature, attending training, attending the National Association for Gifted Children conference this week. They've also been visiting classrooms and helping teachers to develop differentiated homework packets, which many parents reported they have started to see. They will be bringing what they learn to the teachers to assist with the proposed groupings in the classrooms -- so there is overlap between the Gifted Pilot and the groupings. But there will still be a separate Gifted program, they just don't know the details at this point as to whether the students will be pulled from the classroom, how much time they will spend with other students designated as Gifted, etc. All the speakers stressed that we will not be duplicating the program currently offered at the Gifted Center, which focuses on enrichment in students' strength areas. Finally, they indicated that there will be some effort made to have school-wide screening so that more students will be brought into the program who are currently being missed (in part because the District relies on parent identification to get students tested).

2. Cluster Grouping: David May-Stein noted that we will be using new terms for this -- "skill mastery" and "skill need" -- that emphasize achievement. He explained that there is still resistance to this idea given the history of "tracking," which has had negative consequences when implemented in the past, especially for African-American students (who, in our District, are also often socio-economically disadvantaged). "Tracking" occurs when students get stuck in a "track" and can't get out -- when there is not sufficient, regular movement of students between groups, when teachers do not have the same, high expectations of all students, and when race plays a conscious or unconscious role in how teachers assign students to groups and make decisions to move them. Because the achievement gap at Colfax falls largely, though not exclusively, along racial lines, any initial grouping by "skill mastery" and "skill need" will almost inevitably result in de-facto racial segregation. The expectation is that this will change as students are moved. David addressed two key points:

a) We cannot be satisfied with the status quo in the disparity of student achievement. Recent efforts have yielded incremental results, but these have been small steps and we need to tackle this problem in a larger way. We must get proficiency for low achieving students, while addressing the needs of all students. There is great potential for here for high-achieving students, as well, who have also not been making individual gains under the old model as they should (in other words, individual achievement has been "flat" for the students at the top of the spectrum, too).

b) We still plan to have cluster grouping in the spring, and its success will depend on a full partnership with the teachers. David is meeting with the union soon and reiterated his highest praise for Colfax teachers, their commitment to all students, and their ability to implement grouping.

IV. Submitted Questions

1. Why is the Gifted Pilot good for our students?

Because they will get five day per week enrichment to meet their needs.

2. What will the curriculum look like?

It is too soon to say for sure. Also, the focus right now is not on "content" or "curriculum" but rather on process -- how the students will be learning, how to meet the needs of gifted students. Acceleration (essentially grade skipping) or compaction (where students move through material more quickly) could be a part of the program.

3. What are we doing to duplicate the creative and enrichment aspects of the current Gifted Center program?

In the classroom (as opposed to the as-yet undefined Gifted Pilot), students are starting to get differentiated homework that is more project based, creative, and goes more in depth. However some, students with GIEPs will not get these differentiated packets because they are not ready for them in certain areas. The classrooms are also emphasizing "accountable talk" and higher thinking skills such as asking "bigger" questions.

4. How will the Pilot challenge kids to their limits?

There will be more professional development for teachers. The school is also using the term "fidelity," meaning how the teachers and staff approach what they do: they are "taking it seriously."

5. How will the Pilot accommodate acceleration?

If we take this to mean "grade skipping," that will continue to be handled on a case-by-case basis. Compaction, on the other hand, where a group of students might move through material more quickly, cannot be implemented until we have grade level grouping in place.

6. How will kids be grouped and on what basis?

Using our new terms, "skill mastery" and "skill need."

7. How will kids be moved between groups?

Using data analysis, teachers will review every five weeks and move students every nine weeks, or more often if necessary.

8. How will we ensure equal opportunities for kids in all groups?

David will assign the best/most experienced teachers to work with the high and low achieving groups. Newer teachers will be assigned to the middle group who are working at level and moving ahead at pace.

9. How can parents help?

Right now there is not a distinct role for parents within Colfax on this project. David explained that we are of course free to go to the District, but did not think putting pressure on the central office for anything right now would be helpful, though he certainly wants us to hold Colfax accountable.

10. Do we have a university partner for the Pilot?

They were about to close a deal with Purdue, but that university did not get a big grant they were anticipating, so we are now in negotiation with two other, unspecified, universities. This has pushed our timeline back a bit, too. When that decision is made, it will be announced, hopefully in November. The content and form of the pilot will come from that university partner, so this is a really significant piece of the puzzle.

V. Open Question and Answer Period

1. We are concerned about the uncertainty in this process and how it is affecting the students.

David May-Stein agreed and noted that it is his responsibility to help the students make the transition to the new program.

2. If you can't tell us the program specifics, can you give us the range of options, help us understand the broad parameters?

University piece will "probably" happen and will define much of the program. Differentiation is already in place, though not the fully implemented groupings.

3. Will we roll out the Pilot if it's not ready?

No. David would put in a formal request to delay. Jerry Minsinger reminded the group to expect bumps along the way.

4. What are parents' choices if we don't like the new Pilot?

There is not an option for individual students to go back to the Gifted Center. No wiggle room on this, kids will be staying at Colfax. If a parent is really unhappy, they could probably petition the District to be assigned to a new school.

5. Do we have to re-do the GIEPs for all students?

Probably. Parents can make requests through this plan, but moving a student back the Center would likely be considered unreasonable.

6. A parent expressed her concern about the quality of experience: students are getting a certain kind of teaching and experience at the Center that she does not want to see lost. She especially did not like the emphasis she was hearing

on "acceleration" and "compaction", since she would like to see Gifted students move more slowly, go deeper, get "mushier" into the problems.

7. Could we roll out the program and continue to go to the Center?

No.

8. Another parent expressed the feeling that the depth of student experience is more important than acceleration, and wondered about how that will be accommodated in the groupings.

9. Is there a difference between "Gifted" and "high achievers"?

Not in the groupings (but supposedly in the Gifted Pilot, yes).

10. Will Gifted kids be pulled out to spend time with other Gifted children (an essential part of the current experience)?

We don't know for sure, but they seem to think this will happen.

11. What about kids who aren't grouped in the high "skill mastery" group, but are Gifted?

Not all GIEP students will be in the highest achievement group, but they would still be participating in the Gifted Pilot (we just don't know what that looks like yet).

12. What is the date that we will know about the Pilot?

November.

13. Could we start the cluster groupings in just one area, such as reading where there is more disparity?

Had not been considered, but David will bring up at their next meeting.

14. Can we have a parent liaison or group?

Yes. David would take up to three parents, though we can't expect weekly meetings with the whole team.

15. What should we be calling "Gifted" children, do we need a new term?

Self esteem is certainly an issue and the Gifted label is problematic. But it is also a state term, and we are a public district receiving state money, and our terms do need to match in some way. The PA state law, Chapter 16, that defines "Gifted" has recently been amended so that the admission criteria now reads "130IQ *and* multiple criteria" (or something to that effect). We are bound by state law on how we assign students to a GIEP.

16. Are we keeping the term "Gifted" and the eligibility requirements?

Yes.

17. More parents expressed concern about acceleration and compaction, preferring enrichment, creative projects, and emphasis on how students learn.

18. Are we conflating "achievement" with "Gifted" when one describes what a student has learned and the other *how* a student learns?

University partner will help guide this using the latest research.

19. Where will the District resources go?

Goes back to the school, rather than the center; appears to have been used to hire the teachers. We do not get any savings in not busing the students (that is state money).

20. How will we parents receive communication about the program?

David will call a meeting as soon as he has details. Betsy will post to the Yahoo group. Liaisons will also help communicate.

21. Given the significant impact the groupings could have on racial disparity within the school, at what point would we abandon the program if it's not working?

We hope the cluster groupings will really address this issue, but if the kids are moving based on skill development that will indicate problems with the program. It will be reviewed at years end. Might have to make other modifications: for instance, one unintended consequence of the groupings might be that students in the lower "skill needs" group might not hear their proficient peers reading as often (which presumably has positive impacts on learning).

22. Will we have more time for physical activity to help address the needs of students who are wiggly and disruptive, creating discipline problems?

No additional time planned.

23. How will teachers get "Gifted" training?

Through the Gifted resource teachers bringing information back from university partner; professional development for all.

VI. Closing Comments

Andy Norman closed, noting that he is "heartened" by the process that is being emphasized by our new staff. Rather than getting upset about the lack of content or curriculum right now, he urged parents to feel encouraged that the staff is focusing on professional development, to really understand how Gifted children learn and what the issues will be. He is particularly pleased to see the movement to "accountable talk" in the classroom, the use of the Junior Great Books program, and higher level thinking ... areas where he sees direct impact for Gifted students.

--- respectfully submitted by Jessie Ramey, Colfax parent