

An Interview with Rich Weinfeld, PhD

How One School System Came to “Get It” for 2e



The Montgomery County Public School System in Maryland is considered a model – one of few in the country – for twice-exceptional education. Rich Weinfeld, GT/LD (gifted and talented/learning disabled) Instructional Specialist, has been involved with the

district’s programs for 2e students right from the start. For the last five years, he has served as the coordinator for these programs.

The end of the 2003-2004 school year marks the end of his 30-year career with the school district. At the AEGUS conference in New York last April, 2e Newsletter spoke with Rich about the end of one career and the beginning of another.

Q: Your school district has been supporting the needs of twice-exceptional students since the late 1980s. Why has the program had such a long and successful life in Montgomery County when so many other school districts in the nation have been unable to put any programs in place for this population?

A: There was a fortunate meeting of two forces in Montgomery County. First, there was a very active, knowledgeable, and intelligent parent group for twice-exceptional kids that began in the 1980s and still exists. It’s called the GT/LD Network. Second, we had an inspired and innovative administrator who served as the director of the GT department in the 1980s. She believed that something needed to be done for this population and was able to create a partnership between the gifted education and the special education departments.

Q: How did the program begin?

A: I was the director of a middle school special education program that included students with a variety of disabilities, including twice-exceptional kids – or as we refer to them GT/LD. I became very interested in this population and built a successful model for working with them. I based the model on a program in Westchester County, New York, which was the first in the country. Five years ago I became coordinator of our program.

Q: What advice would you give a school district looking to implement a program like the one in your district?

A: Get the special education people and the gifted/talented people to work together. That’s key because special education

The School System that “Gets It”: Overview

Chances are, no matter where you live, you wish that your local school was one one of those that “gets it” when it comes to dealing with 2e learners. There aren’t very many schools that do. Parents of 2e kids in the Montgomery County Public School System in Maryland can count themselves lucky. Following is an overview of the school system and the way it handles 2e learners. On page 6 you’ll find more about how this unique school system educates this unique population.

Size of Student Population	TOTAL NUMBER OF STUDENTS	138,000
	NUMBER OF STUDENTS IDENTIFIED AS 2E	2,400
	IDENTIFICATION	
	GIFTED	Students are identified as gifted by tests given at the end of second grade.
	LD	The students are tested for disabilities whenever staff or parents raise a concern that they may exist. Typically, they have difficulty with written language, memory, reading, organization, and AD/HD. Some have secondary behavioral issues as well.

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people don't typically have gifted training and vice versa. Also, each side can contribute to the budget. In our program, money to pay for the staff and most resources comes from the special education side. The gifted/talented side brings funding for training.

Then focus on the four areas of best practices that are crucial:

1. *Giving access to gifted/talented instruction.* Whatever is available for other students should be available for twice-exceptional students. Even before students are identified, differentiation should be taking place so that everyone is challenged at an appropriate level.
2. *Providing appropriate adaptations and accommodations.* We can remove barriers for these students by taking a multiple intelligences approach to instruction – using different teaching methods and styles to maximize students' strengths. It's essential to appeal to visual as

well as auditory learners, to hook them into material and let them demonstrate their mastery of it in a variety of ways – present drama, build models, and so forth. And we can use technology to make accommodations. When they have to write, let them use a keyboard and software like *Inspiration*.

3. *Balancing remediation with talent development.* We need to give them high-level instruction – challenging and project-based – but also remediate them in areas of weakness.
4. *Providing effective case management.* There must be a special educator responsible for communicating with all staff members about students' needs, accommodations, and progress.

Q: How would you answer educators who say that a program like the one your school district offers

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School System Overview, continued

GT/LD Services	PLANS	All identified students have an IEP (Individual Education Plan)
	TYPES OF SERVICES OFFERED	A range of services, from self-contained to mainstreamed.
	WHERE SERVICES ARE PROVIDED	Most students stay in their home schools, where they receive accommodations and adaptations – minimal special education services along with gifted/talented services. Some students need to be in self-contained classrooms in their areas of weakness. The rest of the time, they're mainstreamed with non-disabled peers and given appropriate support in the classroom.
Program Description	OVERVIEW	175 students in nine self-contained classroom programs throughout the district: three at elementary level, three at the middle school level, and three at the high school level.
	ELEMENTARY SCHOOL	Students spend much of the day in a special room with other GT/LD students. Teachers provide a nurturing environment and help students understand and develop their gifts and identify which accommodations and adaptations work best for them.
	MIDDLE SCHOOL	Students are self-contained in areas of disability but mainstreamed for the rest of the day with non-disabled peers with support from a special education teacher and aid.
	HIGH SCHOOL	Support is not in the classes, but in a special technology room staffed by a special educator. Help is available at any time with planning assignments and using technology to complete work.
	COMING NEXT YEAR	The designated teacher program: A teacher with GT/LD training will be available to teach honors-level classes in each of the main areas: history, English, science, and math. Anyone who needs extra support can take these classes, making help available to students whether or not they have been identified.
	A MEASURE OF SUCCESS	On the 2002 Advanced Placement (AP) tests nearly two percent of the AP tests taken by MCPS students were taken by students with disabilities. Their scores were commensurate with the success achieved by nondisabled students.

A Profile

The Montgomery County Public School System

The Montgomery County Public School (MCPS) System has spent over 15 years creating comprehensive programs to meet the needs of their gifted and talented/learning disabled (GT/LD) student population. Here are some highlights of the program, based on the article "Academic Programs for Gifted and Talented/Learning Disabled Students," by Rich Weinfeld, Sue Jeweler, Linda Barnes-Robinson, and Betty Shevitz.

Determined to address the needs of the GT/LD students, educators in MCPS have spent 15 years creating dynamic, comprehensive programs for their GT/LD student population. With initial funding from the Jacob K. Javits Gifted and Talented Education Grant, promising developments have occurred in MCPS. MCPS identifies gifted students with varying degrees of learning disabilities and has developed special self-contained classes for gifted students with severe learning disabilities while those with moderate and mild disabilities receive services in the general education classes.

The following is a comprehensive description of best practices that have been successful in the GT/LD Center Programs (self-contained classes) in MCPS. The analysis presented includes what works and what doesn't work in the following areas: school climate, instructional skills and strategies, and content areas.

School Climate

Creating a comfortable yet challenging classroom climate is essential. Addressing the socio-emotional needs of GT/LD students is critical to their achievement. The climate should be designed to do the following:

Encourage or promote

- Respect for individuality
- Accommodations that focus on strengths and potential for success rather than remediation

- The students' development of an understanding of their unique strengths, empowering them to successfully advocate for themselves.
- Interactive participation, flexibility, high standards, student participation in cooperative groups, individualized programming, and active listening
- The use of conflict-resolution strategies.



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sounds great, but there's no money in their budgets to develop something like this?

A: It doesn't necessarily require a larger budget. It takes willingness and awareness. For example, the designated teacher program requires very little extra budget. Our mentor program is another example. We train volunteers from the community to mentor underachieving kids. The mentors come to school for one hour each week to work with their students. Over eight weeks the student develops a product and presents it first to classmates and then at a district fair. It's a real self-esteem booster.

It's to the benefit of the school system to serve twice-exceptional kids, to intervene *before* they become emotionally disturbed and need more intense services. Neglecting them can lead to more expensive public or private programs in the future to try to fix the damage.

After all, many of these students would be in special education programs anyway. So the district is spending the same special education dollars but giving these kids the added benefits that come from bringing them together with

their peers.

Another way to look at it – given the focus of many school districts today – is that these are the kids who could be carrying the school to greater heights with test scores if the obstacles in their way are removed.

Then, of course, there's also the question of what is the cost to society of not developing the potential of these children. We have to consider the cost in emotional suffering and the cost to our society of not having the next Edison. These are kids capable of being leaders if we develop their potential.

Q: What does the future hold for you now that you're retiring from your position with MCPS?

A: The next phase for me is to continue to work with this population as a parent advocate, as a consultant to other school systems, and as someone who can train teachers and parents about these issues.

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void

- The use of routine and remedial drill and practice that focus on the student's disability
- The lowering of standards, confrontational communication, and inflexible expectations that diminish student individuality.

The physical climate within the classroom must also be carefully orchestrated. A stimulating environment is created with displays of:

- Posters
- Collections
- Products
- Highly visible student/teacher classroom standards and expectations for performance

Available in the classroom are multimedia resources and technological tools that include:

- Word processors
- Tape recorders
- Calculators
- Spellcheckers

Students have freedom of movement within the classroom. Careful attention is given to both the physical and social climate in the classroom, creating an environment in which needs are supported and abilities are recognized and nurtured.

Instructional Skills and Strategies

Following are successful skills and strategies for a variety of types of instruction.

Gifted Instruction

- Implement models for gifted education (i.e., Howard Gardner's *Multiple Intelligences*, 1983; *Creative Problem Solving*, McAlpine, Weincek, Jeweler, & Finkbinder, 1982; Edward deBono's CoRT, 1986; Bloom's Taxonomy, 1956).
- Use activities that focus on students' strengths and interests, allowing for self-directed choices.
- Provide multisensory instruction, using hands-on experiences and guided discovery, especially when introducing new topics.
- Give students both oral and written directions and provide clarification.
- Integrate visual and performing arts into the program. (Students are more motivated and teachers report that students retain information more readily when the arts are integrated into the curriculum.)
- Avoid remedial instruction, rigid task guidelines, and the belief that GT/LD students can organize their thinking

without accommodations or instruction.

- Recognize that a lack of production is not a sign of motivational weakness or lower intelligence.
- Use instruction that obviates weaknesses; provides for production of alternative products; provides "real-life" tasks; provides open-ended outlets for the demonstration of knowledge; designs tasks that fit the student's learning style; differentiates instruction; and uses collaboratively designed rubrics.
- Acknowledge that with these students rote memorization, forced oral reading, text-based instruction, and use of only teacher-directed activities are not successful practices.

Thinking Skills

- Learn thinking strategies and then teach, model, and practice them in the classroom.
- Use the Socratic method to work with students to help them formulate questions and think through logic problems.
- Help students to transfer and apply the thinking strategies that work for them in their areas of strength to their areas of need.
- Use metacognitive skills to model the thinking process, develop a thinking language, and help students search for their own solutions.
- Avoid assuming that students already know thinking strategies and can apply them without ongoing practice.

Reading

- Place the emphasis on comprehension, listening, and gaining information.
- Avoid overly focusing on word attack errors that do not affect comprehension.
- Use a reading program that provides opportunities for GT/LD students to build on their abstract reasoning and comprehension skills. (The program should include the use of literature for stimulating reading interest, oral discussion using supporting text, the development of expository reading, and the use of high-interest personal reading material that may be above grade level. Examples are: the William and Mary Reading Program (The College of William and Mary, 1998) and Junior Great Books (Great Books Foundation, 1992)).
- Provide explicit instruction in phonological awareness, phonics, and decoding. (The Wilson Reading Program (Wilson, 1985) is an excellent example of a program that has proven effective in teaching these reading skills.)

The Montgomery County Public School System, continued

- Provide accommodations such as books on tape or text-to-speech software that enables students to scan any print material and have the computer read the material to them aloud.
- Avoid using more traditional approaches such as reading worksheets, round robin reading, and below-grade-level basal readers.

Writing

- Recognize that writing is often difficult for GT/LD students who may have trouble expressing themselves due to difficulty in sequencing and attending to detail and who may also have grapho-motor deficits.
- Avoid focusing on handwriting instead of content, quantity versus quality, and the use of red pens to denote errors.
- Establish writing processes through ongoing discussion and practice.
- Use assistive technology, such as portable word processors, computers, electronic spellers, organizational and word-predictive software, to unlock students' abilities to communicate what they know and understand.
- Use graphic organizers, mind-mapping strategies, extended time for completion of work, and clear written expectations for writing tasks to help the students create writing products.
- Use prompts to guide the purpose for writing.
- Promote students' self-evaluation of written work by using rubrics, proofreading for one type of error at a time, and using a highlighter to indicate corrections.
- Use the publication of writing for an audience to motivate students.

Organization

- Recognize that GT/LD students frequently have problems with organizational demands of classroom assignments.
- Structure assignments with very clear directions and steps. (For example, set specific due dates and a time frame for long-term assignments, providing checkpoints for monitoring progress, time for organizing materials and assignments, and a specific location for placing completed work.)
- Promote the supervised use of assistive technology and visual organizers, as well as assignment books, study guides, homework hotlines, and calendars, to help students become more organized.
- If possible, post homework assignments on web pages, use hand-held organizers, and have students e-mail their

own assignments to their home e-mail account.

- Avoid assuming that students have the needed organizational skills, but are not using them because of laziness, lack of motivation, or poor attitudes.

Memory

- Recognize the difficulty GT/LD students may have remembering and sequencing details, despite their often outstanding abstract reasoning abilities and ability to readily see the big picture.
- Use a "multiple intelligences" approach and a variety of modalities to motivate students to remember the details.
- Recognize that GT/LD students are more successful when they can utilize assistive technology as well as a variety of supports in the classroom environment.
- Help students learn techniques to enhance their memory such as mnemonics, visual imagery, outlining, note taking, and highlighting.
- Teach students strategies for remembering details such as having them sequence activities after a lesson or event, having them teach information to other students, providing them with environmental cues and prompts, relating information presented to the students' previous experience, and telling them what to listen for when being given directions or receiving information.
- Avoid assuming that, although these students have great ability in certain areas, they have learned the skills needed to circumvent their difficulties with memory of details.

Handwriting

- Recognize that GT/LD students often have grapho-motor difficulties.
- Work in partnership with the occupational therapist to reach a goal of legibility.
- Focus on form, use mechanical pencils and grips, and use an appropriate handwriting program (e.g., *Handwriting without Tears*, Olsen, 2002).
- Avoid assigning lengthy handwriting tasks that result in fatigue and expectations that disregard a student's physical weakness or limitation.
- Provide alternatives to handwriting in the form of assistive technologies such as a word processor, word-predictive software, or speech-to-text software.

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Content Area Instruction

In its best practices, MCPS delineates what works and what doesn't in various content areas.

Mathematics: What Works Well

- Starting instruction with preassessment of student mastery of mathematical content and objectives
- Focusing on developing conceptual skills and problem-solving strategies
- Taking a multidisciplinary approach to math so that students learn to apply and generalize skills and strategies
- Using interactive, hands-on programs (e.g., Hands-on Equations, Borenson, 1997), manipulatives, and math tools help students grasp content and concepts
- Offering these accommodations if necessary: untimed tests, fewer problems, and direct instruction in the use of calculators (which allow these students to utilize their often superior math reasoning abilities while not being held back by their computation skills)

Mathematics: What Doesn't Work Well

- Lengthy, repetitive assignments
- Copying from textbooks, overheads, or blackboards
- Focusing on computation alone

Science: What Works Well

- Using instruction that offers hands-on, interactive experiences
- Creating meaningful activities that incorporate problem solving and "real-life" investigations with a purpose and an end product, along with a thematic approach that allows for students to direct their search for knowledge and answers
- Using simulations and integrating the visual and the performing arts when teaching science content and concepts (an extremely successful approach with GT/LD students)
- Focusing on science process objectives and using graphic organizers to support note taking when researching a topic
- Providing time for the student to become an expert in specific areas of interest (Acquiring expertise through independent studies enables GT/LD students to become valuable contributors to cooperative group projects.)

Science: What Doesn't Work Well

- Memorizing facts
- Emphasizing reading and writing

Social Studies: What Works Well

- Using thematic units, simulations, hands-on activities and projects
- Using various forms of media
- Integrating the visual and the performing arts
- Offering extension/enrichment activities

Social Studies: What Doesn't Work Well

- Creating instruction led by textbook reading
- Focusing on facts rather than understanding the concepts

Assessment and Evaluation

Students and teachers collaborate on the evaluation/assessment methods and tools that will give an accurate picture of student understanding of both content and process material. Evaluations are based on instruction and reflect the attainment of the key concepts and basic understandings that are the focus of the curriculum.

To aid GT/LD students in accurately sharing what they know, teachers keep the following in mind.

What Works Well

- Providing objectives, study guides, vocabulary, memory strategies, rubrics, and support and clarification for embedded questions
- Supplying models of appropriate responses to prompts
- Differentiating in evaluation/assessments
- Offering accommodations (i.e., allowing students to audiotape responses, use a graphic organizer in lieu of paragraph responses, create a model, or give a speech.)
- Formatting evaluation/assessments to avoid visual processing difficulties

What Doesn't Work Well

- Assigning lengthy essays
- Assessing penalties for spelling in content areas
- Imposing time limits
- Using matching or other similar tasks to evaluate or assess GT/LD students

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