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A Change Plan for Underachieving Gifted Children

Jason Major

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ALLIANCE: OUR SCHOOL FOR UNDERSERVED GIFTED CHILDREN

Jason Major

Educational Leadership Doctoral Program

Submitted in partial fulfillment

of the requirements of

Doctor of Education

National College of Education

National Louis University

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ALLIANCE: OUR SCHOOL FOR UNDERSERVED GIFTED CHILDREN

Dissertation

Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements of
Doctor of Education
in the Foster G. McGaw Graduate School

Jason Major
Doctorate in Educational Leadership

Approved:

_____   _____
Chair/Co-Chair, Dissertation Committee   Program Director

_____   _____
Member, Dissertation Committee   Dean's Representative

                                    _____
                                    Date Approved

DISSERTATION ORGANIZATION STATEMENT

Though these three projects have different topics, the overall theme of doing education differently can be read throughout. We do not always have to do things the way that they have always been done. Schools need to re-focus on tasks, empowering students and teachers and providing them a voice to speak up for what is best. In a new age of information available anywhere at any time, schools need to adjust for that and re-think the way things are done to make sure for what students will need in their lives.

For the **Program Evaluation** candidates are required to identify and evaluate a program or practice within their school or district. The "program" can be a current initiative; a grant project; a common practice; or a movement. Focused on utilization, the evaluation can be formative, summative, or developmental (Patton, 2008). The candidate must demonstrate how the evaluation directly relates to student learning. In this program evaluation, an overall theme that originated was a re-focus on student problem solving and relationships with adults and students. In the **Change Leadership Plan** candidates develop a plan that considers organizational possibilities for renewal. The plan for organizational change may be at the building or district level. It must be related to an area in need of improvement, and have a clear target in mind. The candidate must be able to identify noticeable and feasible differences that should exist as a result of the change plan (Wagner et al., 2006). An overall theme from this change plan that emerged was allowing students to throw away any semblance of a traditional curriculum and pursue their interests, find what their passions are, and explore and fail in a low-stakes environment. In the **Policy Advocacy Document** candidates develop and advocate for a policy at the local, state or national level using reflective practice and research as a means for supporting and promoting reforms in education. Policy advocacy dissertations use critical theory to address moral and ethical issues of policy formation and administrative decision making (i.e., what ought to be). The purpose is to develop reflective, humane and social critics, moral leaders, and competent professionals, guided by a critical practical rational model (Browder, 1995). In this Policy Advocacy, top-down accountability was determined to have too much of a detrimental effect on the ways schools conduct business, creating an environment of compliance and rote tasks. Dropping high-stakes accountability allows schools to be schools.

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ABSTRACT

There exists a population of gifted and talented students for whom the educational system does not service. These children are often either from poverty or minority backgrounds, or sometimes so profoundly smart that schools simply do not know what to do with them or where they fit in. This change plan explores the opportunity for a school just for these students, where they can study free of hindrances of standards and acceleration. After research and interviews with members of the field of gifted, there may not currently be such a model anywhere in our country. Schools do exist for gifted students, but because of their ability to score highly on standardized tests, the performance of the school will always look like it is near the top of any ranking, but it does not necessarily mean that the school is servicing the children as individuals and providing opportunities for them to get the most of their abilities.

PREFACE

Ever since being introduced to the field of gifted education, I often said that people either love the field of gifted education or hate it—with very little middle ground. Those who love it feel it immediately and cannot imagine working with any other group of students. I personally caught the gifted bug as soon as I began my teaching career in mathematics. There was something about the students that reminded me of my own education, and I wanted to provide them opportunities that I wish that I had. It also opened my eyes to the school of thought that just because a school was listed or thought of as "the best" did not necessarily mean that it was "the best" simply because of test rankings. In my teaching career, our "rival" gifted school was often thought of in this way, but I saw teachers who did not hold out for the best interest of their students, and I saw a philosophy of acceleration that surely was not doing so. But I did see the students and their unique needs. Some of them did not need school at all. They could master anything put in front of them in a matter of seconds. Going home and doing extra work, often of the same variety, was a complete waste of time. It was turning them off to school and causing behavior problems. There had to be a better way. If they were in a school that was specifically for gifted students, why wouldn't the school take it upon itself to provide something different for them, not just a curriculum that one could find in any school if you would just advance a grade or two?

It became a personal mission of mine to investigate other avenues of work for these students to do, but I could not help but think that there was too much of the same going on. There were also students who were sitting in schools across my city and, surely, the country whose gifts and talents were being underutilized or not noticed at all—students who were being thought

of as "lazy" or "unmotivated" because they were not completing the work assigned to them by their teacher.

Even early on in my career, I thought that creating a school just for these students for whom even the gifted schools were missing the mark would be the greatest place to educate imaginable. It is still a dream that I hold today, and this change plan is just another small step in that direction of doing so one day.

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SECTION ONE: INTRODUCTION

Statement of the Problem

In the recent era of education—with high-stakes testing, high expectations, and outdated "factory model" schools (Mehta, 2017)—there is a population of students that has largely been forgotten in the equation. This population of learners consists of gifted students. Currently in Illinois, no money is set aside at the state level for gifted education. Many gifted programs exist in schools across the state and in Chicago Public Schools (CPS), but even within those programs, there are gifted learners being underidentified and underserviced. These students have high capabilities and abilities to do extraordinary things with their academic talents, but if those gifts are left undiscovered or unencouraged, problems can develop within the educational system, as well as within society at large.

I framed my change plan through the eyes of someone who has worked in and observed dozens of CPS locations throughout a four-year period, as well as someone who has long been an advocate for one of our underserved populations of students—gifted learners. In the current system, there is a severe problem of gifted students' needs not being served in our public schools. I developed an organizational change plan around the needs of these gifted students, taking into account the students whose needs were not being serviced within the public school system, and created a proposal for a school from scratch that does meet their needs. I will call the school Alliance: Our School for Gifted Children.

Oftentimes, gifted students are called "underachievers." Whitmore (1989) described three overarching causes for underachievement in gifted children: lack of

motivation to apply themselves, environments that do not nurture their gifts, and disabilities or learning deficits that mask their giftedness. Understanding the differences between the populations of who is considered a "gifted student" is vital to getting the mission of this plan.

My experiences—from teaching in a gifted program for elementary school students, to working for 50 Chicago Public Schools—have helped make clear how integral it is to articulate the differences between student populations that are academically talented and those that contain gifted learners. First, there are students that Alliance will not try to reach, which I will call "Population A." These students are academically talented students who have parents who are able to successfully navigate the education system. They have high test scores, good grades, and are typically advanced in all of their classes. These students are mostly satisfied at school, and some even love it. Their parents want what is best for them, help them attend the "best schools," and are satisfied with the status quo of the school as long as it continues to be one of the "best." From there, they want their children to get into a "good" college and enjoy a happy life. For most of these students, this system works completely fine, regardless of the larger discussion that we are having about the state of education and twenty-first century learning. Even for minority students and low-income students from this population in disadvantaged schools, the system works fine, due to the fact that their high scores and good grades make them stand out in their school. They get into excellent schools and are often touted as success stories of students making it out of a disadvantaged system. Alliance will respect these students and their families, help make

their schools as good as can be, and will partner with their schools in outreach capacities, but they will not compose our student population.

Instead of Population A students, we are looking for students who are, in general, bored in class; these students make up "Population B." From personal experience, I have seen many students bored in class because the material that is being presented covers things that they already know. Oftentimes, there is a ceiling put on what students have the opportunity to learn in a school year, even though the student may already understand everything that would be taught during the that year. A teacher might see this manifest in both positive and negative behaviors. I see the following two potential paths that these bored, gifted students can go down as a result:

Path 1: Students get Fs because they do not turn in the mostly compliance-based work that their teachers assign. Others lash out at the teacher due to the boring, standard nature of their courses. These students often have behavioral, emotional, and attendance issues, and bicker with their teachers.

Path 2: Students get As because they learn how to "play school" and turn in the compliance work, but they never learn anything, and they consistently crave ways to learn. They think that eventually if they get into the "best schools" that they will have that opportunity to learn more, but it never comes. They get turned off to school because if the "best schools" cannot challenge them, what can? Sometimes these students can be saved by one teacher or a very specific type of school or skill that the student discovers he/she has; however, many are completely left behind and turn to destructive behaviors.

The difference between the students for whom the system is working and the students that Alliance is trying to reach is that often, parents who have children that we

are targeting *do not know what to do with their child, and neither do their schools*, even if the school is *designated* as one for gifted learners.

Increasing amounts of research show that these gifted students in Populations A and B are severely underidentified in areas with high numbers of low-income and minority students. Dynarski (2016) reported that black third graders were half as likely as whites to be included in gifted programs, with nearly as wide of a gap among Hispanics, as well. In addition, when one district in California began a universal screening program, the share of Hispanic children identified as gifted tripled from 2% to 6%, while the amount of gifted black children increased from 1% to 3%.

In trying to solve the problem of a lack of effective gifted programming in public schools, my change plan is to create a school for these underserved populations of gifted students—those for whom the traditional school model does not fit, and those who score high but either learn nothing or get low grades. The school will have incredible diversity, as well, as it reaches minority and low-income students who have traditionally been underidentified in the gifted process. This school will be housed within the context of a public school system.

By initiating this change, a school will exist specifically for these students, where they have a major say in what their learning looks like. Educators who understand students' needs and act as facilitators to their learning will help lead them; additionally, these leaders will understand that they do not know everything, and will be willing to reach out to experts in the field, former students, or their peers for guidance on where to go next. I expect it to start small, but grow into a model that can be replicated across the country.

Rationale

This change plan is meaningful to me because, over the last year, I have realized that this is my life's work. It is the reason why leaving my students at the gifted program I taught at through 2012 was one of the saddest times of my life. It is the reason why I was not nearly as professionally happy as an assistant principal, in my past four school years as a coach, or as strategist for 50 schools. The reason is because I have been destined to work with underserved gifted students for my career, and I truly feel like there is nothing else that I should be doing as a career. Everything that I have done educationally now makes sense; it always has been about those two groups of students—those who test really well but do not learn anything in school, and those who test well but get very low grades because they are bored or do not feel the work is valuable. In both cases, the traditional school model does not fit for those students.

Alliance will be important to the educational community at large because these are students who are capable of extraordinary things, and we are leaving many of these students behind—bored, turned off to school, no interest, and feeling disheartened because they feel like there is nothing that exists in the school system that can challenge them. Even worse are the thousands of low-income and minority students whose gifts are left undiscovered for their educational careers. A new phenomenon of this are students who are learning English and are also severely underdiscovered. Sanchez (2016) reported that many schools do not even test ELLs for giftedness, and their teachers are not trained to identify them. By having a school that seeks out students like this, it will bring a better acknowledgement systemwide that these students are out there and need services. I engaged faculty and community members in collecting and analyzing information

pertinent to enacting this change for these populations of learners. I did this by

interviewing members of these communities about their experiences with these learners.

Research Questions

In attempting to impact change for underachieving gifted students in the public

school system, the following research questions were addressed as interviews were

conducted with a family, a teacher, and a school administrator regarding the needs of

gifted students being met in the public school system. Specifically, I asked the following

questions through my research:

1. Primary question: Where does the public school system fail underachieving gifted
   students?

2. Secondary question: How can the public school system best insure that
   underachieving gifted students' needs are served?

Goals

Creating a school that services the needs of gifted learners, including those

traditionally underidentified and underserved, requires clear goals to enact the change. In

starting a school for gifted students, the following goals will guide the way:

1. Learn the issues underserved gifted populations of students face.

2. Learn about the challenges that schools and districts face in implementing change
   for these students.

Creating a school for underachieving gifted students from scratch will solve the

problem of schools underservicing gifted students, because a model will then exist for the

type of school in which these students are appropriately challenged and are taught by

teachers who "get them."

Setting

Since the school will be located in Chicago, CPS makes sense as one district for which to state the demographics. There are currently 397,833 students in CPS—39.6% black, 45.6% Hispanic, 9.5% white, 3.6% Asian, and 1.7% of other races and those who do not report their ethnicity. Low-income populations compose 86.9% of students, 14 % of students have disabilities, and 17.8% are English Language Learners (ELLs). On the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) achievement test in 2015, 25% of students were ready for the next level, and 1% of students performed at the highest level of that assessment, which is a good indicator of how many students would qualify as a "gifted" learner in the traditional sense.

Alliance believes in a school model that reflects the demographics of the location where we are serving, and as expansion of the model continues to other markets in the future, this will be one of the guiding principles that we abide by.

SECTION TWO: ASSESSING THE 4 Cs (SEE APPENDIX A)

In assessing the changes that would need to be made to create a school for underserved gifted populations, Wagner, Kegan, et al (2005) introduced the 4 Cs analysis, which describes the context, culture, conditions, and competencies that exist and would need change in order for the school to exist. This analysis allows for an assessment of the current conditions in a district, as well as what will need to be considered to get to the scenario where the change would take place (see Appendix A: As-Is diagram).

Context

Wagner et al (2005) defined the context (p. 108) of the problem as how well we understand and work with students' families, as well as how clearly we see the core competencies that students will need to be successful. In the current context in Chicago, it is up to the parents of the students to get them screened, or assessed, for gifted programs in the district. If parents do not have the know-how to be able to sign up for the test and get their child there, there is no screener or assessment available for the students. The biggest piece of context to change is the identification of underserved students. There is currently no universal screening assessment in CPS that would identify more students as gifted.

However, CPS does offer gifted programs. Once students are tested and identified, there are classical schools and regional gifted centers that these identified students can attend. Students can also test into elementary schools specifically for high-scoring students on an achievement test beginning in kindergarten, called "regional gifted centers" or "classical schools." Fourteen of these programs exist citywide. "Selective enrollment" high schools are also available for students to apply and be accepted to based

on their test scores and grades in seventh grade; in Chicago you will find nine of these schools citywide. Once students are in those schools, it is up to the school's administration and teachers, as well as to their philosophies for implementing instructional programs. Because of this, there are still students from the populations I described in section one that continue to be underserved in these schools.

Another piece of the context is the unclear understanding among parents as to how best ensure that their children are successful as students. An underachieving student has needs that should be geared more toward his/her strengths, and could fall outside of the realm of the traditional school model. The education of this student up to his/her level is up to the school and the adults who work in the school to make it happen to get the most of his/her abilities.

Culture

Wagner (2005) described the culture of the current landscape as levels of expectations for students, the agenda of the school, the relationships of the adults in the building, communication between the district and school, and how adults view their responsibility for all students learning in their school. Currently, our system places too much of an emphasis on grades, leaving gifted students in places where they are failing due to lack of completing work that they already know, or receiving good grades despite actually learning next to nothing, meaning that they can coast through school with good grades without authentic learning experiences. The culture is also that grades are the one indicator that determines whether or not students are performing well in school, and Fs are the indicator that students are not doing well. Adults also have varied beliefs about

what makes for successful students, as well as what the best practices are for gifted students and their needs academically and socially.

Even among top administrators in schools for gifted students in Chicago, curriculum-based beliefs around what is best for these learners can vary. Some schools have a model of acceleration, going two years beyond the grade level's curriculum, and that is the extent to which they challenge the students. There is also an aura of superiority and arrogance among many of the top gifted schools, with the philosophy being that "we are the best school, we have gifted students, and we know what is best for the students as a whole more than individuals." Despite an institution's overall practices, many adults in the building might hold alternative beliefs as to how best serve students who are performing below standards or capabilities?

Conditions

Wagner (2005) described the conditions as ones that allowed for time for problem-solving, sharing data, discussing agreed-upon standards, and setting priorities for the work at the school and the district. The current conditions involve students completing compliance-oriented work in order to improve low grades. For example, a gifted student could know all of the material in the class for a test, but because some of the homework was not completed, the student did not get the credit for the course and still received an F. Standards also vary greatly from school to school in gifted programs, even within the same building.

In our current conditions, rarely is the student who receives all As considered to be an issue. However, if these students are not getting any authentic learning or the most out of their abilities to be challenged, this poses a disservice to the student.

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Topping off the issues with our current conditions is that few school administrators are trained to recognize this as a potential issue, and are also not trained to recognize when students may be gifted and bored in class. Most trainings for school administrators focus on addressing students who fall behind, accountability issues, and new initiatives; the problem of the gifted, bored student falls by the wayside.

Competencies

Wagner (2006) described the competencies as ones that allow for students' learning needs to be identified, as well as time for collaboration among adults to think, analyze and collect data, and have productive disagreements around the needs of the school. Competencies that currently exist in our gifted schools are ones that base their school model off of acceleration. For example, a school's philosophy could be to accelerate the curriculum two years ahead. Once they have moved two years ahead, they feel as if the students' needs are met within the school. In utilizing this model, students that are very far ahead, perhaps three or more grade levels, are still not having their needs met as far as challenging material. The existing competencies also move to a false sense of security when students have high standardized test scores, as the schools feel as if the students are doing well enough academically that they do not need any extra push or enrichment. These competencies do not take into account the authentic learning that schools must produce in order for the students to truly receive a balanced education that fits their needs. The move to a student-centered system is a competency that would need to be changed. In our current system, the needs of adults in a building are often placed above those of students.

Additionally, little data analysis geared toward gifted students and underachievers outside of standardized test results occurs within the current system. Pretesting, a method that can pay huge dividends when identifying what students can and cannot do, is nearly nonexistent in many schools, even gifted schools.

When teachers are in undergraduate programs, there is no required course for understanding gifted children. The closest would be ones about "exceptional students," which usually discuss students with individualized education programs (IEPs), and they rarely delve into giftedness. Therefore, most teachers have little to no training about gifted students when they are thrown into classrooms for the first time. Even for teachers in gifted programs and schools, there was no endorsement for gifted education in Illinois until 2015. Individual districts are then left to determine teacher readiness for gifted schools. In Chicago, teachers of gifted students are required to attend a Gifted Education Seminar of 20 hours. Teachers' readiness for gifted programs remains questionable.

Similar factors come into play for policy-makers of gifted education. As is the case with a lot of people in education, there are no requirements for policy-makers to have ever been a teacher, much less one of gifted students. Therefore, there is little policy written specifically for gifted students. In Illinois, no money is funded for gifted education in the state budget.

The current 4 Cs in gifted education in CPS and public schools in general may paint a reasonably bleak picture for servicing the needs of gifted students and underserved populations among them, but there are possibilities for improvement in each of these 4 Cs, and simple solutions that could lead to successes for this population, as I describe in the To Be section.

SECTION THREE: METHODOLOGY

Research Design

In order to gain a more accurate picture of the "as-is" for underserved gifted

populations and to convey the urgency of the need for change, I used all qualitative data.

Given the rationale and goals of this study, interviews were the best approach to

addressing my research questions. I feel that the most powerful way to showcase the need

for change is through interviews that tell the stories of these students. Their stories are

inspiring, heartbreaking, and hit home with the reader to understand the plight of gifted

students in many school settings. I interviewed a gifted student, the parents of a gifted

student, a former school principal, as well as a teacher who had a highly gifted student

while teaching in a general education classroom. These participants were selected not

only because they were people that I personally had worked with and encountered, but

illustrated the overall goals of this change plan because of their beliefs and experiences.

To truly understand the need for change within this population, there is no better way to

tell the story than through those closest to those students.

I used the following interview questions as a basis for my one-on-one interviews:

Parent/Student
1. Can you tell me a bit about your family background and demographics?
2. Can you describe your experience being identified as a gifted learner in your educational career?
3. Can you tell the story of your school experience as a gifted student, or as a parent of a gifted student?
4. What do you feel that the school could have done differently to meet your needs, or your gifted student's needs?
5. What social-emotional issues came about as a result of this experience?
6. What stories do you have about the school when you approached them for solutions to issues you had with the student (parent-specific question)?
7. How did you approach your parent/s or describe your school situation to your parent/s (student-specific question)?
8. Did teachers try to challenge you? How?

9. In general, did you like school? Why or why not?
10. How prepared did you feel teachers in your school were in servicing your needs as a learner?
11. What would you have liked to have seen done differently?
12. What other thoughts do you have on gifted education?

Teacher
1. Can you describe your experiences in gifted education?
2. Can you tell the story of your school experience with gifted students, as a teacher?
3. Where do you feel that you were unable to provide necessary services for these students?
4. What social-emotional issues, those issues that came to a student's personality, came about as a result of this experience with these students or yourself?
5. How aware or supportive was your administration when approached with issues about these students?
6. What would you have liked to have seen done differently?
7. What other thoughts do you have on gifted education?

Administrator
1. Can you describe your experiences in gifted education?
2. Can you tell the story of your school experience with gifted students as a school administrator?
3. Where did you feel that the school was unable to provide services? If areas exist, what could have been done differently?
4. How supportive was your district in providing necessary services for these students?
5. How did your school's vision differ from supporting the student's needs?
6. What would you have liked to have seen done differently?
7. What other thoughts do you have on gifted education?

Participants

My key participants for this study were a student, the parents of a student, an administrator of a gifted school, and a teacher of a highly gifted student. They were chosen through my professional network of those that I have worked with in the past. I focused on students who have recently completed high school and their parents, as they were ready to reflect upon their educational experiences as a gifted learner in a K–12 environment. These students were in gifted programs for part or all of their K–12

educational experience. These are students and families who fit the mold of who the school is trying to reach—students for whom the traditional school model does not fit, and need something different. They were chosen because their personal experiences provide examples that best convey the need for organizational change as it relates to underserved gifted populations. In addition, I used my professional network to contact former teachers and administrators to interview to gain a better understanding of gifted education from the school's view. These teachers and administrators did not necessarily need to have been in a gifted school or program, rather they must have had experiences working with students who were gifted, within their school, and with whom they had difficulty servicing.

Data Collection Techniques

All participants that I interviewed are anonymous. I conducted these structured, one-on-one interviews at a location comfortable and appropriate for the interviewee. I use pseudonyms for all participants. I recorded the interviews and stored the audio files on my password-protected laptop. I took notes during the interviews, and referred back to the audio for direct quotes. At the conclusion of the study, I deleted the tapes. Notes from the observations and interviews are stored in a locked cabinet, and will be destroyed upon completion of the evaluation. For security purposes, the data I collected is on my laptop, which already contains a large amount of sensitive student data. The laptop is password-protected and remains locked when not in use.

Data Analysis Techniques

Interviews provided the information in the chart below, which I collected and analyzed. I recorded the interviews, typed out the answers from the interviews verbatim, then coded them according to categories or trends that emerged among the four interviews using an Excel spreadsheet.

Context of student in school
Background/demographics of student
General anecdotes of student's school experience
Ways the school was able and unable to service the student
How the school could have better serviced the student (need for change)
Outcomes

A risk of this study included discussing sensitive information regarding students and their education that may reflect poorly on the school or district. However, I use pseudonyms when discussing the district, schools, and teachers to help decrease this risk. While there are limited direct benefits to participation for the teachers, there are greater overall benefits. Benefits include being a partner to figure out how to best service gifted students in a school setting.

Once I collected the interview data, I looked for trends and divided them into actual quotes from the participants within the different themes that emerged. I used Excel

to code quotes from the interviews into different themes, such as academic needs,

social/emotional needs, and outcomes and learning.

SECTION FOUR: RELEVANT LITERATURE

In reviewing relevant literature related to giftedness, underachievers, and underserved and underidentified populations of gifted students, four major categories became clear as it relates to a school environment that appropriately services these students' needs. First is the identification of gifted students in public schools, as there are some districts that make sure gifted students do not fall through the cracks, and that all potential students in gifted programs are identified as such, regardless of race or income level. Second, there is considerable research on underachieving gifted students, what causes them to do so, and what strategies and environments can help push them along. Third, related to that is research about how to measure authentic learning of students. Finally, I examined literature related to places that are attempting to make each of these categories work for their students and their needs across the country.

Identification of Gifted Students in Public Schools

The National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC) (NAGC, 2016) defined giftedness as the following:

> Gifted individuals are those who demonstrate outstanding levels of aptitude (defined as an exceptional ability to reason and learn) or competence (documented performance or achievement in top 10% or rarer) in one or more domains. Domains include any structured area of activity with its own symbol system (e.g., mathematics, music, language) and/or set of sensorimotor skills (e.g., painting, dance, sports) (p. 3).

Though the national organization has its own definition of giftedness, it admits that "nearly every state has its own definition of gifted and talented students" (NAGC, 2016, p. 2). Since states and districts are free to do as they wish as it relates to students identified in gifted programs, there becomes a certain inequity in the system. Across many states, low-income and minority students are underidentified as gifted. According

to research by Jason Grissom and Christopher Redding at Vanderbilt University, black

third graders are half as likely as whites to be included in gifted programming (Dynarski,

2016). Why this discrepancy? In many cases, it has to do with two different problems: the

lack of a universal screener to look for giftedness, and the lack of programs that include

"gifted and talented" in their definition.

The first problem is the lack of a universal screener for giftedness. Illinois and, by

proxy, CPS, has no mandate for either identification of students nor education services

for them. Finn and Wright (2016) reported that the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation graded

Illinois as a D- in its 50-state assessment of gifted education, one of the lowest marks

given to any state and proof that Illinois has a way to go before its gifted students are

serviced appropriately. The foundation made the following point about how this affects

students from unprivileged backgrounds:

> Such policies are sometimes tarred with the brush of "elitism" on grounds that
> they give undue advantage to privileged pupils. Wrong. Upper and middle class
> kids generally have parents who push their schools and live in districts that
> respond to such constituents. What these policies do is ensure that high-ability
> poor kids don't get neglected. Those are the children who depend on the "system"
> to create opportunities for them. Today, far too many of them are falling by the
> wayside (p. 7).

Without a universal screener, unprivileged students' families have no idea that

their students could be gifted, much less have any idea how to get them tested and

serviced in an appropriate school. To make matters worse, states without mandates to

take care of these students may not even have schools available in the first place.

So what happens when states change policies to include a universal screener?

Dynarski (2016) reported on Florida's Broward County, which includes Fort Lauderdale

and has an extremely diverse student population. In 2005, just 28% of students in its

gifted programs were black or Hispanic, while a little more than half of the general population were in the same demographic. To attempt to combat this discrepancy, the county introduced a universal screening program, requiring second graders to take a nonverbal test. The results were striking:

> The share of Hispanic children identified as gifted tripled, to 6 percent from 2 percent. The share of black children rose to 3 percent from 1 percent. For whites, the gain was more muted, to 8 percent from 6 percent (Dynarski, 2016, p. 2).

Not only were the families of these students unable or unwilling to get these students tested before universal screening, but their teachers were also less likely to refer potentially high-ability blacks and Hispanics for screening due to factors such as low expectations or the perception that these students were quiet and did not stand out in the confines of a traditional classroom.

Arizona is one state that has a gifted education mandate, requiring districts to assess students three times per year; it also has statewide criteria for identifying gifted students, establishing that gifted identification as being in the 97th percentile or higher in any one of the verbal, quantitative, or nonverbal assessments. From there, the district decides just how creative it can get in making sure that populations are well-represented and that its process continues to improve. For example, the Paradise Valley School District serves 32,000 students, including 37% of students with free and reduced lunch, as well as 30% of Hispanic descent (Clarenbach, 2015). Its process is multitiered, as Clarenbach found:

> The district begins by learning as much about the students as possible, beginning with an identification process that uses a range of instruments. A gifted specialist at every elementary school provides site-based training to help staff recognize characteristics and behaviors of gifted students, including those from diverse populations. Thirty-two percent of the students receiving gifted education services are nonwhite compared to 45 percent in the overall student population (p. 3).

Paradise Valley Director of Gifted Education Dina Brulles (2016) explains that

the nonverbal screener is the key for ELLs, and that component has been essential for her

district identifying more of these students. Even in mandated gifted education states like

Arizona, it is possible that these ELLs fall through the cracks. Even though there is a

policy on a universal screener, since the nonverbal is not a mandate, there are ELLs who

could go through school without being identified. Sanchez (2016) found that it often

becomes up to the individual teacher to identify and seek out testing for ELL students,

but as mentioned earlier, there are other factors in play that could keep such cases from

coming to fruition.

The second problem in the discrepancy in the identification of minority and

low-income students in gifted populations is the difference between "gifted" screening

and "gifted and talented" screening. In most cases, using a solely "gifted" screening takes

away human biases such as those from the teachers or administrators. In "gifted and

talented" screenings, teacher checklists or recommendations are usually included, which

become subjective rather than based on raw abilities of the students. Brulles (2016)

attributed Arizona's policy of identifying students "solely as gifted," not necessarily

talented, as being beneficial for students from diverse backgrounds. She explained:

> The gifted identification means that students have high ability, as measured on a
> standardized ability or IQ test. However, many are not yet achieving at levels
> commensurate with their ability. These are the students who concern me most—
> students…who have exceptional ability or high potential to learn, but who for
> some reason have not yet developed that potential (p. 3).

In many states and districts, gifted screening depends on the teacher giving a

recommendation or the grades of the student, hence the "talented" portion of the "gifted

and talented" label (Brulles, 2016). The problem is that the "talent" label often becomes a

subjective viewpoint on the evaluator or teacher, and students can become underidentified. Though such policies, as Brulles explained, do have an effect on minority or low-income students, the "talented" label can affect the masses. Students who have the raw ability to learn great deals of information but who have not yet reached their potential are among all populations, and the system struggles figuring out how best to serve them, as well.

Underachieving Gifted Students

Labeling an underachieving gifted student can be problematic because the definitions vary greatly depending on the advocate or researcher. Rimm (1997) defined it as "if students are not working to their ability, they are underachieving" (p. 22). The problem with definitions such as this is that it could be too widely used as one that encompasses all gifted students who are not receiving all As, as well as any student who is not reaching as such. Reis and McCoach (2000) analyzed the many definitions that researchers of underachieving gifted students used and categorized them into four different areas. One defined them as showing discrepancies between potential and performance, as in high aptitude scores and low achievement scores and/or low grades. Other definitions quantified the definition, like having an ACT score in the 95th percentile or higher but a GPA below 2.25. Other definitions involve utilizing a predictive model based on observations between aptitude and actual achievement, and looking for students that fall far below that threshold. The final one included Rimm's definition, as well as another that included the development of the whole child: ability, creativity, productivity, and motivation. Underachievement in any of those categories made the student an underachiever. For the purposes of this literature review,

"underachievement" in gifted students utilized the definition of having high test scores but low grades, as that fits into the overall change plan philosophy of identifying students who fit that criteria. It is important to note that there are other ways and means to identify such students, however.

The first question to ask is why some gifted students underachieve. Whitmore (1989) identified three broad causes for this phenomenon: lack of motivation to apply themselves in school, environments that do not nurture their gifts or discourage high achievement, and disabilities or learning deficits that mask their giftedness.

Reis and McCoach (2000) found that there are no predictive ways to identify underachieving gifted students. Their family lives did not leave any glaring patterns to indicate one parenting style or another would create an underachiever. Reid (2000) observed the following:

> Educators must also realize that home, peer, and cultural environments may impact students' levels of achievement. As educators, we may or may not be able to change the external factors that contribute to the underachievement of certain gifted students. However, students who have reversed their underachievement behaviors have noted that having a teacher who supported and believed in them helped them overcome their underachievement (p. 11).

The key to success for students who otherwise have been failing is a caring adult. The problem in many or all public or gifted schools is that current leadership inherited the staff; that is, if you get a school leader who believes in making sure that students' needs are serviced correctly and that underachievers need caring adults, it is not the case that all of the adults in the building hold the same beliefs. Turnover among administrators does not help either. A report by the School Leaders Network (2014) said that one-fourth of principals leave each year, and 50% leave within their third year. It is hard to build a culture of caring adults for this vulnerable population when the leadership continues to

change. How is momentum built? Starting a school from scratch with the vision of a leader who will hand-select teachers who hold these beliefs of empowering underachieving students would help in this regard.

The culture among students within the building becomes a huge part of the puzzle, as well. A school where everyone is helping everyone and the support is there from student-to-student helps with the underachievers. Reis, Hébert, Díaz, Maxfield, and Ratley (1995) found that high-achieving peers had a positive influence on gifted students who began to underachieve in high school. Having peers who provide a positive influence is a model that can be spread simply by providing space and opportunities for them to interact.

Smutney (2004) did a lot of work to help students who were underachieving. She suggested several strategies for intervening on behalf of the student, including staying focused on the child's gifts. By doing this, one reminds students of their strengths and how they may translate across subjects. Another strategy is creating an individual plan for a student; each underachiever is different. Creating an educational plan that fits their specific needs is essential, since there are myriad factors involved: learning style, diversity, cultural differences, and social/emotional needs, for starters (p. 2). Involving the parents of the student is a key component to creating a successful individual plan, as well.

Rimm (1986) also had a suggestion for dealing with underachievement through the Trifocal Model. The philosophy is that underachievement is learned, so it can also be unlearned. He recommended examining the three major influences on a student's life—home, school, and peer culture—and understand how each influence is affecting the

student's underachievement. Home life can have obvious effects: behavior modeled at home, parents who do or do not work, or having additional responsibilities when the student goes home. School influence can include who the student is friends with at school, how he or she interacts with the teachers and staff, and how the culture of the school is geared toward academics. Peer influence includes the intellect of the student's friends, how seriously they take school, and how they react to the student's underachievement.

The overarching points made in striving to decrease underachievement in students are the human interactions—having caring teachers, involving the parents, and surrounding the student with peers who will encourage them to give their best in school (Rimm, 1986). By having a staff at a gifted school that shares these beliefs that students should be treated on an individual basis and their needs met accordingly, underachievement can be reversed into a successful school experience.

One key component to making school work for underachieving students is reversing the heavy reliance in traditional schools on grades and grading practices. How can we best be sure that what students are getting from this courses is authentic learning?

Measuring Authentic Learning of Gifted Students

Grades have been embedded in our school history for centuries. One of the teachers credited with starting the grading system was William Farish, a tutor at Cambridge University, in 1792. Hartmann (2000) explained his origin:

> Getting to know his students, one may suppose, was too much trouble for Farish. It meant work, interacting and participating daily with each child. It meant paying attention to their needs, to their understanding, to their styles of learning. It meant there was a limit on the number of students he could thus get to know, and therefore a limit on how much money he could earn. So Farish came up with a

method of teaching which would allow him to process more students in a shorter period of time. He invented grades (p. 3).

Having grades meant that Farish did not have to spend as much time learning students as individuals or catering to their learning needs. He utilized grades as a shortcut to see more students in a shorter amount of time. Still, today the grading system plows ahead, as students and parents worry about GPAs for high school and for college to try to gain any competitive advantage. But what does a grade really mean? What constitutes grades? Who determines who makes them up, and what criteria are used? Where is there proof of actual, real learning? When posed with questions like these, even the staunchest supporter of grades will give a second thought. Kohn (2011) believed that grades diminish students' interest in whatever they are learning, create a preference for the easiest possible task, and reduce the quality of a student's thinking. These problems manifest themselves more among gifted learners and are related to underachievement as shown in the previous section of the review. So what are ways for gifted students to show their mastery or learning of a concept without a grade?

Many of the newer ideas toward moving away from a grade scale of A to F involve methods like standards-based grading or rubrics. Rock Island-Milan junior high schools moved to this system in 2016, but replaced grades with scales of 1 to 4 to demonstrate knowledge of particular standards. Other systems that use rubrics often use descriptors like "needs improvement" or "exceeds standards." Such descriptors are simply just letter grades repackaged into something else. What is a true way to demonstrate knowledge?

Kohn (1999) suggested the following:

Rather, abolishing grades opens up possibilities that are far more meaningful and constructive. These include narratives (written comments), portfolios (carefully chosen collections of students' writings and projects that demonstrate their interests, achievement, and improvement over time), student-led parent-teacher conferences, exhibitions and other opportunities for students to show what they can do (p. 4).

Problem-based learning (PBL) is a strategy that schools have used across the country with some effect for gifted students. It should not be the end-all, be-all of gifted education, but it is the type of out-of-the-box strategy that could be used with underachieving students. Swicord (2016) said that problem-based (sometimes called "project-based") learning can "challenge students of varying ability levels and interests to tackle aspects of a selected problem that are appropriate to them, and can cover multiple interdisciplinary objectives in a single scenario" (p. 2). These problems are real world-oriented and could involve solving the issue of potholes in their city, or creating a policy against genetically-modified food. Using students to help select the problems that they will work on engages the students in their own learning too. And upon completion, students have a choice on how they can present their learnings and findings: through a presentation to the class or a panel of experts, in blog posts or online campaigns, or a research paper. Giving gifted students flexibility in their style of learning and demonstration goes a long way toward engaging them in authentic learning.

The philosophy of teaching problem-solving as a means of authentic learning first caught my attention as a teacher of gifted students in mathematics. I found that students picked up on concepts more quickly and with greater interest when the basis of the teaching was on picking interesting problems that embedded multiple concepts. I selected the topic of servicing gifted students as a problem to study for my change plan partially

as an extension of my double-period algebra program evaluation (Major, 2015), where in both of my interviews it came up that the best use of the "extension," or extra, period of algebra was when time was used to explore complex problems and multistep, open-ended problems. I also think that teaching problem-solving strategies and skills through mathematics makes it easier to understand concepts, and understand them on a deeper level—which increases performance on a variety of measures, not just in mathematics. Given my background in teaching gifted learners, I saw the connection to the deep and authentic learning that is often missing among these top learners, challenging them to do things differently and increase the amount of academic rigor in their coursework. Upon realization that gifted students who are underachievers could thrive in such a system, I realized that the concept of problem-solving as the basis to teaching transcends mathematics. Rusczyk (2012), founder of the website Art of Problem Solving, a site for mathematically talented students, as well as a former math Olympian, wrote the following of his experiences with problem-solving in mathematics:

> When I got to Princeton I enrolled in organic chemistry. There were over 200 students in the course, and we quickly separated into two groups. One group understood that all we would be taught could largely be derived from a very small number of basic principles. We loved the class - it was a year- long exploration of where these fundamental concepts could take us. The other, much larger, group saw each new destination not as the result of a path from the building blocks, but as yet another place whose coordinates had to be memorized if ever they were to visit again. Almost to a student, the difference between those in the happy group and those in the struggling group was how they learned mathematics. The class seemingly involved no math at all, but those who took a memorization approach to math were doomed to do it again in chemistry. The skills the problem solvers developed in math transferred, and these students flourished (p. 2).

Rusczyk also backed problem-solving transcending mathematics, believing that mathematics is the shortest way to teaching problem-solving, and if there were an easier mechanism in order to do so, he would teach it through that subject instead.

Using authentic learning through problem-solving is a method that could work as the foundation for a gifted education school. It would serve the needs of underachieving students because you are gearing the learning toward their interests. The school would not be prescribing a curriculum for the students, but rather letting them drive the content based on what they want to learn. Gone would be the days of compliance-based work assigned by a teacher, massive quantities of wasteful homework, and repetition of material that the students have already mastered. It would be a hands-on "learn by doing" organization where students were challenged to go deep into subjects and topics that interest them. The question becomes then, where are there locations trying things this way in our country and others?

Examples of Schools Attempting to Make It Work

Fitting into the needs of a diverse gifted population that is inclusive of minority, low-income, and English Learner students, as well as those students who are underachieving in school, is a massive undertaking, and perhaps not surprisingly, it is difficult to find schools or programs in the country that are doing it perfectly. There are many examples, however, of schools making some things work and trying to get better.

Clarenbach (2015) described the Young Scholars Program in Fairfax County, Virginia. Started with just 35 students in 2000, it now operates in 84 of the 139 elementary schools in Virginia and reaches more than 5,700 students. Its strength lies in the diversity of the program. Its demographics reflect those of the school district and reaches nearly twice, 54%, of the students who are eligible for free and reduced lunch compared to the district's number. The program also utilizes a portfolio approach when identifying students and does not utilize grades when selecting students for the program.

Rivers (2009) described a school that fits the needs of highly gifted children in Lincoln, Nebraska. This uses a "school within a school" model and the students meet up to five afternoons a week in a small setting with students of multiple ages. Rivers described what made the program successful, matching the earlier theories on improving underachieving students:

> We have found the human component to be our most vital asset. The first months of the program were rocky until a teacher who "matched" the group was employed. We needed a very bright, non-defensive, creative teacher with an easy temperament (those folks aren't just sitting around), and we now have that person (p. 6).

Finding adults who understand, empathize, and can act as mentors for these students plays a vital role to successes of programs. The Davidson Academy of Nevada is another that understands this connection. This academy was bred from the Davidson Institute, a national resource for profoundly gifted children. This fully funded public school has high standards for admissions, and once students are in, its philosophies match up with many of the concepts discussed previously (Davidson, 2016):

> The goals of the Davidson Academy are:
>
> To provide a Personalized Learning Plan (PLP) that appropriately challenges each student's abilities, allowing him or her to engage in learning opportunities at a pace and depth consistent with the student's knowledge, skills and personal motivations
>
> To allow students the opportunity to develop their talents and skills at an advanced level and be supported by teachers, professors and other experts in their fields of interest
>
> To provide students an opportunity to learn with intellectual peers (p. 3)

The Davidson Academy is a relatively new school and has found great success, and this success provides hope in the future that similar schools will continue to pop up in

other places. It will be interesting in the future if the push toward better identification will result in further schools being developed with these philosophies.

A hot button issue in the past few years has been the underidentification of gifted students among minority, ELL, and low-income populations. Often, but not always, these populations overlap with underachieving gifted students—those who receive low grades or are bored in school even though their aptitude on tests is profound. When working with these students, it becomes important to rethink how to define what true authentic learning experiences are for these students, through projects, problems, or portfolios. There are schools in the United States right now making good examples of all three of these categories, and hopefully that number continues to grow in the future.

SECTION FIVE: DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

I conducted four interviews with the following people in order to get a picture of what the situation is like for gifted students in the public school climate:

1. Betty Thomas, a former principal of a Midwestern elementary school, former president of the Illinois Association for Gifted Children, and current professor of education.

2. Teri Montrose, a former Chartlen Public School high school teacher, math coach for 40 schools, and the current head of school at a private alternative high school.

3. Sarah Yopp, a parent of twins who were both identified as gifted at a young age, and who both went to different elementary and high schools. I interviewed one of her children, Mike. I refer to the other, Pat, in the narrative findings.

4. Mike Yopp, one of Sarah Yopp's children, who became a freshman at Idaho Tech in fall 2016.

Though they were relatively new to the country, Sarah Yopp is a parent who was savvy enough to get her children identified for gifted programs in BSD. She was from Russia, and they were a middle class family living in the Rogers Park neighborhood of Chicago. Both of her twin boys were identified as highly gifted and were placed into two of the most prestigious schools in the city. She and her husband decided that it was best for their kids' development to be placed in different schools, and that is what they decided on. Mike was placed at Bartow School, and Pat was put into the class of Darko Academy. It did not take long before the vast differences between the two school's approaches took shape:

In Pat's case, the school was not willing to do anything differently at all. They saw all of the students as the same. Their philosophy was that "we are one of the best schools, we know what we are doing, just leave us alone because we know what we are talking about."

Even at a young age, she saw that Pat had different learning needs than what the school was recognizing, yet the school was not willing to work with her in order to make him successful. She contrasted that with Mike's school:

> [Pat's school's leaders] were full of themselves, "we know what we are doing. It didn't matter that he already did everything, we know what we are doing, we are the best school." On the other hand, Mike's school was willing to work with us, to do things differently. He was willing to try new things and do things differently as a result of that, and Pat's was not. It was the school that did that. At Mike's school, they asked what he needed. At Pat's, it was them telling us what he needed.

The belief system of the adults will be a recurring theme throughout the interviews. As Yopp said, "It was about the adults. You have to get all of the adults on board." She told an anecdote about the belief system of Pat's school regarding pretesting for what the students knew:

> When they did testing, students had to master second grade math and read at a first grade level—there was no wiggle room there. In order to get to first grade, you had to do second grade math. They would tell kids to stay and leave based on their testing results; there were parents embarrassed and students crying.

Such philosophies of the school are ones that rely strictly on the acceleration of the students and nothing else. They do not take into account students who may be highly gifted in reading, but not in math, or students who have even already mastered second grade math. Those students would continue on in second grade math that school year anyways. Yopp believed that "his elementary school's rigidness changed how he saw learning, he wanted to do the minimum that he needed to do." Pat was often bored. He and his twin brother both had very similar scores upon entry to the program. But Pat was

stuck doing work that he already knew how to do even if he had demonstrated mastery. As his mother said, "What is the point of someone giving it 25 times if he can already do it?" Unfortunately for Pat's schooling, the majority of the teachers at Darko shared these beliefs, as they were ingrained in the culture of the school: that leaders knew what was best, and there could not be a better way to approach the work for students of the school. Mike's school had quite the opposite. While Yopp described Pat's school as one that was "rigid, accelerated, orderly," Mike had "adults who worked with us."

Bartow School clearly had a different approach. In one of Mike's first years there, the teacher asked parents to "tell me about your kid, what he likes and what he doesn't like, and what he needs to get out of [school]." If Mike was doodling or bored, it was allowed as part of the quirks and nuances of working with highly gifted children, and the curriculum backed it up. It was adjustable, catered to his needs, and made sure that he was being appropriately challenged in class.

Mike himself agreed with this assessment of his school:

My brother's gifted school was more like an accelerated school. If the kids want to learn more, have them learn more of the same, instead of learn higher. At my gifted school, almost every teacher was on board.

He also felt that his brother's school was accelerated with no room for adjustment. At Barlow, on the other hand, teachers were willing to make adjustments to provide more of a challenge if he was coasting through material. Barlow also adjusted his entire math curriculum and pulled the brakes on acceleration. Mike received a 30 on his ACT math portion when he was in the fifth grade and, because of this, started a calculus course online. It was not until the school recognized that there was far more math to be learned at a deeper level than basic calculus that he began taking courses in math problem-

solving through the website Art of Problem Solving, an online community and math

program for gifted students. The world of math problem-solving and competition math

changed the direction of learning for Mike. Instead of "running out of courses" for math

in the fifth grade, he could now take entire courses in number theory, statistics,

probability, and competitive math that did not necessarily contain "advanced"

mathematical topics and concepts, but provided for intensely challenging word problems

that fostered creativity and problem-solving. It was the school that dictated this for him,

and it continued until he started high school at probably the most prestigious high school

in Illinois, one where test scores and grades determine whether students get in or not. It

was there that Mike ended up meeting resistance similar to what Pat did at Darko

Academy:

> [Darko] was like where I went to high school…they knew best, they were full of themselves for the most part, they weren't willing to put me in AP Calculus because "freshmen didn't take it" rather than seeing that I could actually do it.

His high school math department chair did not "believe in competitive math" and

all of the accolades that Mike had racked up during his elementary time, or his perfect

score on both the ACT and SAT math portions by the time he finished eighth grade.

Rather, he was not able to even attempt to test out of precalculus at this high school

simply because "freshmen didn't take it." It was not until his freshman year math teacher

saw how easily Mike (and another friend of his from the same class at Bartow) was

breezing through the course—and with lobbying from their elementary teacher—that the

department allowed him to sit for an exam to be placed into Advanced Placement (AP)

Calculus. He passed the test with ease and was placed into the course, where he

proceeded to get straight As and pass the AP exam at the end of the school year. Mike

felt that if the high school teachers shared the belief system that his elementary school teachers did, he would have been able to test into the course from the beginning of the year without lobbying them to do so. He explained the difference:

> My high school was pretentious in their methods—they thought they knew everything. I had teachers that were very good, but the teachers were probably pretty hit or miss.

Amazingly, being placed in the top course available to most seniors at this school was not enough of a challenge for Mike as a freshman at one of the top schools in the country based on measures used to rank schools. And even though he was breezing through AP Calculus, Mike realized that there was another misnomer regarding what constitutes challenge at the high-school level, namely that AP courses are the end-all, be-all of challenge:

> The AP in theory is great, but it becomes too much about passing a test. One of my Latin teachers didn't worry about the AP test, and many students didn't pass it, but I learned a lot more in that class.

Mike felt that the teacher who taught the AP course became the most important factor as to whether or not the course would be appropriately challenging. There were some courses that simply prepared you for a test, and they did a good job preparing them for that test at the end of the school year, "but there wasn't authentic learning happening." There were other teachers who did not worry so much about passing the exam and concentrated more on the big ideas. Mike explained:

> College Board [the organization that puts out AP courses and tests] puts forth every year a set of big ideas about the science that you need to learn [for an AP Chemistry course]—and that's great—and the teachers can teach those big ideas in whatever way they want to.

He felt that the teachers who latched onto the idea that they could teach these big ideas in whatever way that they wanted to do so provided the most opportunity for

authentic learning, compared to those who took "the big ideas down into smaller and smaller sections until it gets to 'teach this in this way and this in this way.'" He felt that the most effective AP instructor that he had was truly passionate and knowledgeable about his subject matter, and went "on tangents because [the instructor] likes [the subject], and we learn more because of it, but it is not necessarily what is on the AP test." Ironically, less of this teacher's students passed the AP test at the end of year, but Mike felt that the "learning that [he] received in the course far surpassed anything in any of [his] other AP courses."

Even though having the lack of an additional credit for an AP course means potentially more work in college (getting a certain score on an AP test can count for college credit at many locations), even Mike's mother agreed that the learning was more important than the score on the test. "Some teachers who teach AP it is about how those kids learn, and what they want to learn, and they get a lot more out of the class," she said.

The Yopp family experience showed the need for adult belief systems that align with what is best for students, as well as the fact that student needs should dictate what is taught—that broadening their interest outside of what will be on a test should be the driver of instruction in a school. A school can provide opportunities in isolation based on the teacher for that particular school year, but when a school is aligned year after year, paying attention to students' needs, that is when authentic learning can occur even for top-performing students in the finest schools in the country. It is up to the adults in the building to allow that to happen.

Teri Montrose echoed that sentiment when she talked about her experiences as a teacher who occasionally had off-the-charts scoring students, and as someone who now

saw these students in her alternative high school and how their previous experiences in elementary school manifested themselves once they came to her location. She discussed some students in particular that attended her high school:

> There's a couple of kids that teachers say that they are disengaged. You see a disengaged student, you often think of scaffolding down, but the teachers need to figure out that they actually need more. One of these students at this school failed out, and the other just left on his own. Missing work, not doing it, couldn't catch up, and it was all because he wasn't challenged or motivated. No interest in doing it because it was so below his level. And the teacher by default did a scaffold down and scaffolding down made it worse.

At her school, she got transfers from some of the top-performing gifted high schools in the city, but she noticed the following things with some of the students she received pertaining to their level of challenge at those schools and how they reacted to it:

> Some have learning differences that stop them from being successful. When they see that the best high school can't challenge them, they get addiction. They feel like there is nothing for them. We have a lot of transfers that come here who leave the [best high schools] because, while they were academically rigorous, the students were not personally invested and we had determined that. But the key is that they know what they need and how to communicate to service their learning style.

Montrose saw social/emotional problems among those transfer students, not only because they felt like there was no place for them within the school system, but also because they were serviced by a system that did not train them to be able to describe their wants and needs for learning. She continued:

> If I could do one thing as a way to challenge gifted students who were underachieving, it would be by getting their voice and perspective. They have been asked for their answer, but they have never been asked for what they thought. I am most interested in kids who get straight As and never do a thing. They do work hard, but they aren't learning anything. There is no learning, there is no interpersonal connection at all.

For one of the students, the school was aware of his level of intellectual capability based on psychological evaluations and standardized test scores, yet it was unable to

fulfill his needs, based on what Montrose saw as the core of the problem—a lack of

understanding and training of the adults in the building:

> It is up to the teacher to identify the problem is a lack of rigor. It is up to the
> teacher to figure out what is that spark of interest? What is it that you should be
> doing? Should you be doing coding? Should you be doing Art of Problem
> Solving? That is a lot of work. Teachers are not trained to look for students like
> that. They are trained to look for the disengaged student and scaffold down.

She believed that part of the training for all educators needs to be the ability to

recognize when behaviors exhibited by students in class are not because of a difficulty in

understanding material, but for the exact opposite reason—a lack of challenge and

boredom. "I think that educators should be trained to have to be able to look for the kids

that need more rigor," she said. The other important aspect of training all adults in the

building is establishing cohesiveness and alignment from one year to the next:

> The other issue is making sure that those kids are taken care of every year. If I
> saw a kid bored in my classroom, I would do what I had to make sure that he/she
> was challenged…but they could get lost in the next year.

Making sure that teachers are all trained to look for these students has to start at

the top, but from Montrose's experiences as a teacher, this was not evident in her schools:

> This was absolutely not a priority of administration to take care of these kids.
> Even though they were the reason that our test scores were high…one kid with a
> 36 [on the ACT] could raise the class average two points higher, there was no
> focus at all in making sure that their academic needs were met. The only time I
> was allowed to do study hall was for failing kids for low scores. I was never asked
> why so many kids had an A. And I don't think that they were officially labeled.

She believed that many factors were the cause of this problem, including that the

students' scores were such that schools did not have to worry about those students from a

high-stakes accountability perspective. But she believed that the lack of adult training to

look for these kids and notice the pattern that made unchallenged students stand out was

the missing piece from her days teaching, as well as running, a school.

Betty Thomas was in the rare position of being able to try to do something about it. She was principal of a school, a districtwide gifted coordinator, and the president of the Illinois Association for Gifted Children. She echoed many of the sentiments of the Yopp family and Montrose. She felt it was her duty as a school and district leader to make sure that her teachers and adults in the building were trained to look for these students:

> The best thing to do as a principal is to train all of the teachers. All teachers need to have the gifted seminar, so how do you know the underachieving gifted kids? Your social worker has to be trained, your counselor has to be trained. So if you don't know what it is that you are looking for, you don't know how to find it. You'll find ADHD and behavior disorders if you aren't trained to look for giftedness.

Part of the training that she incorporated into her own school went past the identification of the students, into what to do with the students once they were identified. She recalled an anecdote about a student in a primary class:

> A kindergarten teacher who was doing letters with the whole class and one kid was just rolling her eyes... The teacher saw it as she was being rude…but she was bored. She was reading, why did she have to sit through listening to letters?

The "end game" of what teachers were doing with students was hugely important to Thomas as a building principal. If the student in the kindergarten class was already reading chapter books, what was next for her? If the goal of the class was to identify letters, and the student could already do so and more, what was next for her? What was her new end game?

> It amazes me that there are teachers who don't know the end game…because if they did, and a student in their class is already at the end game, why aren't they doing something else? Let them read on their own. If the end goal is for them to spell these words on Friday and they can already spell those words on Monday, or do those math problems, then why are they doing it through the whole week? Pretesting is so foreign to teachers.

Pretesting was a strategy that Thomas was a huge believer in for gifted students in her school. If they already had all of the information needed at the end of a week or end of a unit, it was the school's, and the teacher's, responsibility to provide additional learning opportunities that offered an appropriate challenge to the student.

Overall, Thomas felt that her school did a "pretty good job" of identifying these students and making sure that they were challenged, but even so, "we had some kids slip through the cracks." If this could occur with a leader who was clearly in it for the best interests of these kids, with a trained staff, what happens when there is not such a leader in place? She saw this even more on the district level. She still felt that many teachers needed to be trained as much as possible, but also was apt to the realities that not everyone is going to attend since it was not mandated by the district. Even so, getting more teachers trained had its benefits within some of her 13 schools in the district:

> When I did it, I never forced anyone to take it. I had the gifted seminar offered voluntarily, and trained 70 teachers over 13 schools. But what happened is you get somebody on a team, either they're talking about it and the other teachers say "that sounds interesting," and if you bring your kid issues, other teachers that are trained can bring the gifted perspective to it. So when you have one, you have someone looking for it, and it can snowball from there. And it improves the culture of the school.

Thomas had the belief system as a principal to make sure that teachers were looking out for the underachievers in their classrooms, but she did notice differences when working at the district level with multiple principals in their dispositions toward identifying those students:

> The biggest group of principals [wasn't] even trained on it at all. The other principals may know, but the job is so fragmented that [it] is so hard to pay attention to the gifted kids. There are pressures for test scores, but those kids are already getting the high scores.

She also believed that part of the issue was that principals' perceptions and

knowledge of gifted students were often based on interactions with parents who

challenged or questioned the school's techniques in working with these students:

> Part of the problem with principals too is that the parents who speak up are [of]
> the academically talented kids, not the gifted kids, so the principals can get a bad
> taste in their mouths about "gifted parents," when the truly gifted parents are not
> the ones speaking up.

She gave an example of this phenomenon on the academically talented students'

parents speaking up compared to the truly gifted students' parents speaking up:

> We brought a math program into our gifted program that included some problem-
> solving. Some of the parents [the academically talented kids' parents] were like
> "what are you doing to us?" The kids who were never challenged before loved it.
> The wanna-be parents are the noisy parents…they are the ones who say to make
> school more rigorous and raise the standards, until their kid gets a B.

How does a principal or district combat this? Training is one way, Thomas

believed; but she admitted that showing principals and teachers the differences between

those populations of students is hard to quantify. "How do you quantify all As and no

learning?" she wondered. Still, anecdotes like the one that she gave regarding the math

program are a way to identify the parents who truly want their student to be challenged in

school, and those who want to compete in the rat race of getting good grades for the next

good school. She did have an idea for starting a school specifically for these gifted

students who need the challenge based on an idea used in another district:

> They put the academy in the worst school in the district…which was smart. It
> forced parents that they had to want them in the school.

She also believed in the philosophies of providing problem-solving as the basis of

an all-gifted school for underachievers, saying that though she did not think "many

teachers understood the problem-solving approach," it could be done right if started from

scratch. "It takes the right kids and the right adults," she said. Cross-curricular ideas are ones that would work too, needing "big ideas and essential questions," as well as open-ended problems and projects—not things like AP—which she believes can be "too prescriptive" for the types of learners who we are trying to reach.

Interpretation

One theme became readily apparent from all of the interviews as it relates to servicing the needs of gifted students. All roads pointed to the same thing: It is all about the adults. The adults in a school determine what happens for the students in their classroom, in the hallways, with behavior, and with learning. The school's administrators should set the vision of the school, and it is their job to find people who naturally buy into that vision. The downside of making this happen is that there is so much turnover in education that administrators come and go. It is possible to have a visionary administrator that truly wants to service the needs of all underachieving gifted students, but that leader can leave and the vision is lost upon his/her replacement. Another issue is that even if the administrator takes over a school and has this vision in mind of meeting students where they are at and insuring that all are challenged and getting the most of their abilities, they do not choose every adult in their building. They have to inherit the adults that are working in the school building every day, and changing their minds to what is best for students and the school may not align with their own personal belief system. Then it could take years to do some convincing, or wait it out until the adults who do not buy into the theories leave the school. By that time, many students could have come and gone, and it is possible that the visionary administrator could be gone, as well.

The solution to this is to start a school from scratch consisting of these student populations—those who learn nothing and get good grades, and those who have bad grades but score off the charts. The population of the school would include students of low-income, unprivileged backgrounds and be a diverse group. The visionary leader of the school could then select adults who agree with the philosophies of catering instruction and plans to the needs of the students, not having a top-down approach, and customizing plans accordingly.

Every issue that was brought forth in the interviews can be traced back to the belief system of the adults in the building. If a gifted school was not willing to adjust because they "knew it all" and were "the best school," then it would start with an adult at the top to start to discuss with the staff that "maybe we are not as good as we think, maybe we can continue to grow." If a school's homework policy was to load the students up with work and punish them with bad grades for not turning it in, it is up to the adults in the building to think that there is a better way to do it, that students should not be punitively punished for not doing work on something that they already know. On a related note, if the culture of the school is to not do much pretesting of students, then the students who have already mastered material can never demonstrate that they do, and they sit in class bored, unchallenged, or both. It is up to the adults in the building to create a culture of pretesting.

Cohesiveness becomes an issue, too. If there is not consistency from one year to the next, problems could even be amplified more. Take the case of a student who has a teacher one year who notices when she is bored and provides her with alternative assignments. She does not have to participate in the weekly spelling work because she

received a 100% on the week's pretest, and is provided alternative assignments with her own words that came from a book that she is reading, chosen by her, and an appropriately challenging book for her reading level. Her needs are clearly being met in the classroom. But what happens next year, when her new teacher does not pretest the spelling words, when she must complete all of the homework on words that she knew, and when she has to read a book that the rest of the class is reading that she already read two years prior? This case has the opportunity to have a much worse effect on the student because she now has the chance to regress, or get turned off to learning altogether. Factor in that she may be attending what is known as "the best school" and parental concerns or complaints could be taken as sour grapes or, even worse, simply crazy, when in actuality they are all valid points about the challenge level of the school for their daughter. School is about the adults.

School is about the right adults who recognize that AP courses may not always be the best solution to making sure that students are being challenged in class. Doing school right is about adults allowing students to explore and to make decisions on their own learning, what they wish to study and why, and how they plan to execute it. Making the best change for gifted students in school is about adults willing to take risks academically and professionally to model the behavior of stepping outside of their comfort zone to be successful for the students in their class.

SECTION SIX: A VISION OF SUCCESS

Reflecting upon the data and interpretations from four interviews with those who know about gifted education, I have a vision of success—as Wagner (2005) called it, the "to-be" vision, using the context, culture, conditions, and competencies that I described in section two—of a school for underachieving and underserved gifted children that would make for the best-case scenario for these students (see Appendix A: To-Be diagram).

Context

Once students are identified, the context would be one where there is an increase of minority students, low-income students, and ELL students in gifted schools. The entire district would achieve this by using a universal screener for giftedness. By having a universal screener, it would insure that no students fell through the cracks from being identified as gifted at a young age. Parents of underachieving students would better understand the reasons why their students are either getting good grades but are bored or not learning, or getting poor grades even though their test scores were incredibly high. Parents would understand that it is the adults in a school building responsible for meeting the students where they are at and servicing their needs accordingly.

Culture

The culture of the school environment would be one that puts students' interests first rather than putting the needs of adults first, as we see often in public schools. The philosophy of the school would not be a top-down approach, but rather one where the student voice is listened to and acted on. The focus of the school would be on authentic learning, rendering grades meaningless. Due to the culture of authentic learning, there

would be time for problem-solving and for project- and problem-based learning in the school.

Acceleration—merely speeding up the curriculum rather than diving deep within topics—would be a practice that was not one solely relied upon. There would be particular instances where it was necessary, but gearing the curriculum toward deepening understanding, and "learning by doing" would be the top priority.

The adults in the building would put the mission of the organization over themselves, and buy into all of these beliefs for what is right for the students of their school. The space for student/teacher/parent collaboration would reflect this culture of doing what is necessary to move students and the school forward, putting their needs above the adults.

Conditions

The conditions that must exist are a situation where adults are trained to put students first, as well as one where things can be adapted on the fly. There must be a nurturing environment for students as well, one that takes into account the difficulties many students run into when they have giftedness. It must be a place where adults are trained to ask, "What is best for this student?" Space must exist for these conversations to happen, where adults can think through issues that are going on with students, solve problems, and bring in parents and the students themselves to think through solutions.

There would be time for problem-solving among the students and staff. The base of the school's curriculum would be standard-based and traditional letter grades would be nonexistent. Students would demonstrate what they knew by projects, speeches, or presentations. The adults in the building would understand that in a traditional school,

there could be problems with students who have gotten As for their entire life, because they would ask themselves the question as to whether the student had ever learned anything. Pretesting would be an essential practice in the school because students need the opportunity to show what they know before a unit or a lesson even begins, and if they demonstrate enough knowledge, it is the school's responsibility to make sure that the student's level of challenge is pushed and continued to grow. This practice is one that would seamlessly continue year to year as all adults in the building would understand this; it would not require "retraining" a teacher from one year to the next about what practices make for a successful school year for specific students from one year to the next. The adults in the building would form a cohesive unit that understands these practices to fit the needs of the students in the school.

Competencies

In a gifted school that fits students' needs, their voices are heard and emphasized when putting together curriculum and school rules. This level of collaboration includes all of the adults in the building. It is a place where the school philosophy is that the students know best, so their interests and needs are put first, and the adults join the collaboration to make sure that their needs are met. Along the way, there could be productive disagreements among the adults on the greatest ways to move forward for students, but these discussions come from a place of knowing that students' best interests are always put first.

Teachers will be trained on how to recognize when students are unchallenged and may need an extra boost, as Thomas discussed as part of her staff training. Utilizing a mixture of student test scores, grades, and signs of emotional behaviors in class would be

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the overarching point of the training regarding looking for gifted underachievers. The second focus of the training would be to understand how to best challenge those students. Practices could include giving students open-ended, problem-based work, and having an interest survey available, as well as building relationships with the students in order to cater the instruction to their level and deciphering what would help them get the most out of their abilities.

There would be no place for large egos in this school, because students would come first. Adult needs would be secondary to students' needs, as well as their families' needs. The help of competent, empathetic adults is necessary to make this a reality. Again, space and time for collaboration between students, adults, and the students' families becomes essential.

As referenced in Appendix B, there would also be areas for students to take some ownership and leadership of their own learning. There would be a need for student advisory councils or student councils to provide input and feedback on plans, initiatives, and strategic thinking for the school and organization at large.

The culture shift would be the most monumental in the changes from the "as-is" to the "to-be." Moving from an adult-oriented culture to one of "students first" takes a change in the attitudes of the adults working in the school, lending credence even more to the idea of starting a school from scratch, in order to control who gets involved with the school in the beginning.

SECTION SEVEN: STRATEGIES AND ACTIONS FOR CHANGE

The overarching theme from the interviews and the changes necessary in moving from the as-is to the to-be for underachieving gifted students is that the beliefs of the adults are the most important factor in making sure students' needs are being met, led by the principal in charge of the school. For this reason, the most effective way to move toward the to-be would be to have a separate school solely for underachieving gifted students. The following strategies and actions will take place to achieve this goal. These strategies and actions (see Appendix B) encompass what would make the larger strategy a reality. The larger strategy is to create a school specifically for underachieving gifted students, one that can further serve as a model for other schools based around philosophies of its founders and teachers.

Figuring out the school model would be the first step. There are pluses and minuses of taking on different formats:

a. Charter schools take a lot of time and paperwork to make happen, as well as it could prove difficult to have a charter just for gifted students.

b. Public schools are even more of a hassle to get started because of political concerns, working with district personnel, and working within the scope of public opinion.

c. Private schools are easily to best way to get started, but you run the risk of cutting off access to students because of tuition costs. It would still be possible to have lots of available free spots, but now you are getting into fundraising issues and making sure that the school has enough money to continue to run.

Researching each school model and then making a decision of which to go with is the first step toward starting the school. My first tendency is to say that finding funding, starting small, and going with a private school with scholarships attached is the best way to go. Then, the model would be easily replicated so long as funding could be found. Once word is out on the advancements that we are making with our students, funding opportunities will be there.

Next, a plan must be in place to figure out the population and numbers of students with whom to start the school. Starting the school small would make for the most effective strategy. The school would start with a classroom of 10 students of kindergarten age, and 10 students of the fourth/fifth grade age. Recruitment will take place through my large network of principals, assistant principals, and teachers in the Chicago area, as well as the school's social networking pages. I will also solicit testimonials from former students and their families to post on the school's website and social media accounts to spread the word about the openings for the next school year.

The most important part of the strategy is having a team of people who believe in the mission of the school. Holding a rigorous interview process and hiring the right people would achieve this. The head of the school would hire two more teachers and one administrative assistant to be part of the founding school team. These staff members would go through an interview process to determine their belief set and whether it aligns with the mission of putting the needs of the students first. All members of the staff will double as teachers and will also be responsible for all aspects of management of the school.

Building the student population would be the next part of the strategy. This would be done mainly through the recruitment and securement of students for the 2018-2019 school year. The application process for the kindergarten and fifth grade students would be a combination of test scores and parent narratives/speeches. Parents or the students' teachers would be invited to write about, or provide a spoken narrative about, their child's development as it relates to their giftedness, as well as their experience in the public school system for the fifth grade students. Any notes that would gear them toward criteria that fits underachieving students would make them a good candidate for the school. The staff would meet together to review the applications as they come in and determine if the students were a fit for the school. Students and their parents would be invited to meet with the school staff. In order to make sure that we are truly serving an undertargeted student population, monitoring the student demographics is essential. Keeping track of the percentage of students in high-poverty neighborhoods, as well as tracking the percentages of students who belong to minority groups, is a huge piece of the process. Targeting and marketing students in these areas will be an action when recruiting students for the first year and beyond.

The next strategy will involve developing effective curriculum and assessments for the student population. The main action for this strategy will be to create individualized plans for students. Upon acceptance into the school, staff will meet with the students and their parents to determine learning style, strengths, weaknesses, and how to best serve their needs for the learning environment. The vision for the start of school would be to literally get the students in the same room, have no plan or structure, and just allow them to begin working on something that they please, with the adults as facilitators

on the side. Students would be guided through portfolios and building those in an online platform. We would reach out to professionals in fields of study that are based around what the students are working on. For example, when students are working on a PBL activity, and are looking to start a DJ business, the head of the school would reach out to his or her list of contacts to find someone who could possibly assist. Essentially, any time an instructor of the school hits a road block, we would look to the outside for guidance in order to make the student successful.

The next strategy will be around building and developing faculty to meet student needs. Its main action step will be to have staff will meet regularly after school to maintain progress on student learning and adjust plans accordingly based on the day-to-day operations of the school. The best way to describe student plans as a whole is that they are "constantly changing." There will be no set curriculum, because students will set their own learning pace. Each student who comes into Alliance is a clean slate and will require a new learning plan from the ground up. We can base it on our knowledge of what has worked previously for other students, but we will pride ourselves on creating goals and outcomes for each student from scratch, each time.

For professional development for staff, weekly staff meetings will be a requirement. Professional development will be based around anything that comes up in the school throughout the week, using that as a microcosm of further learning for the staff. For example, if there is a student who is continually showing a lack of motivation to do work or show interest in a subject, professional development will be geared around theories, practices, and suggestions on dealing with that behavior amongst the student

body. These case studies will further the learning of the staff while also moving things forward in the school.

The key to this working is finding the right adults to help run and teach in the school. Ideally, candidates will empathize with students of the school because they themselves were students like that when they were in the school, and they will want to provide for that student what they did not have in their own schooling.

Starting this school from scratch will be a challenge, but the interview data clearly showed that getting adults to buy into a strategy to put the needs of underachieving students first will have an impact to make sure that they are getting the most of their abilities. We will do this by creating learning plans and outcomes for each student as they enter the school; facilitating large-scale projects and problems that the school works on as a whole, including the staff; and having a culture that puts the needs of students first.
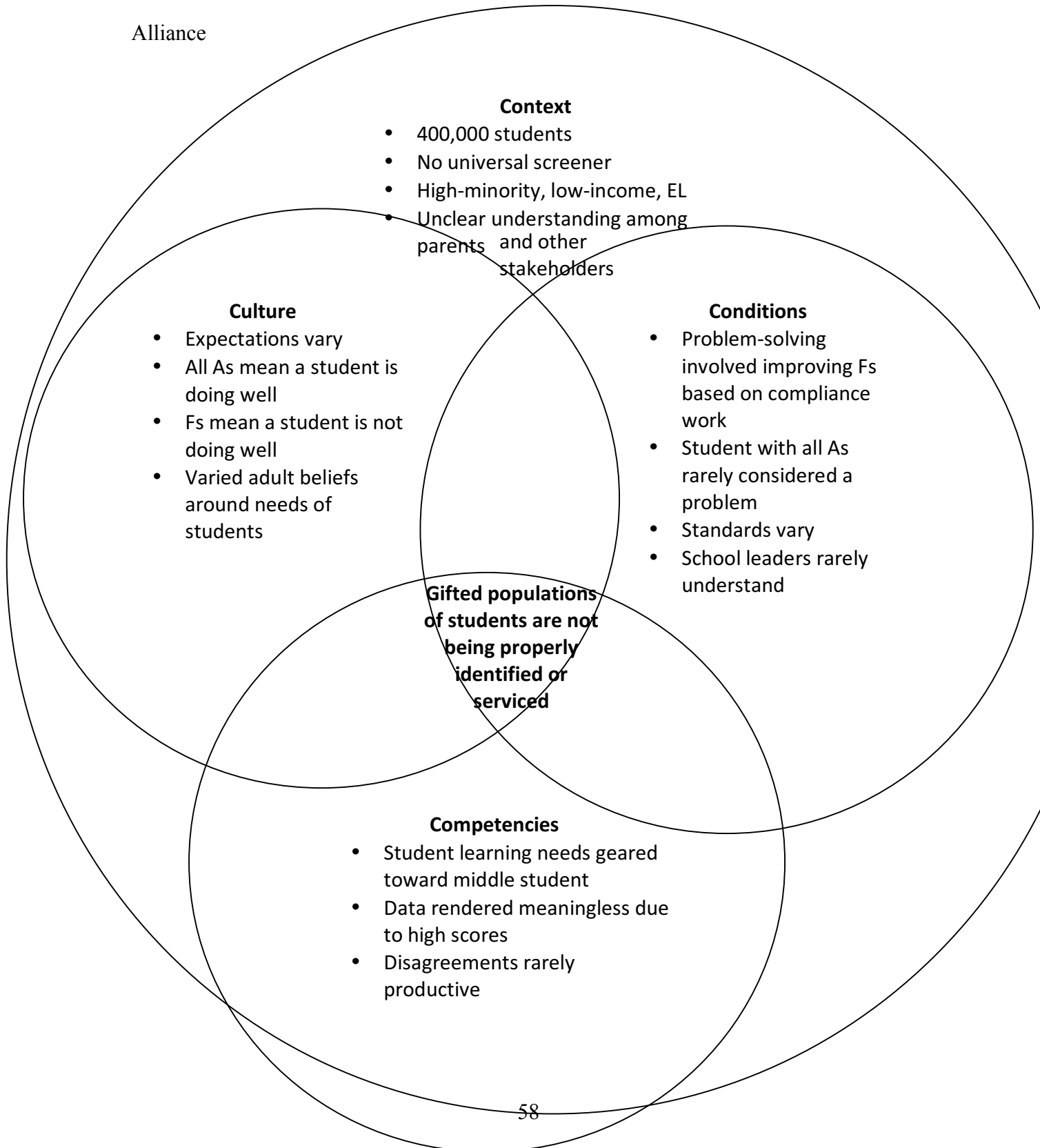
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APPENDIX A: AS IS/TO BE CHARTS

As-Is

Alliance

Context
- 400,000 students
- No universal screener
- High-minority, low-income, EL
- Unclear understanding among parents and other stakeholders

Culture
- Expectations vary
- All As mean a student is doing well
- Fs mean a student is not doing well
- Varied adult beliefs around needs of students

Conditions
- Problem-solving involved improving Fs based on compliance work
- Student with all As rarely considered a problem
- Standards vary
- School leaders rarely understand

Gifted populations of students are not being properly identified or serviced

Competencies
- Student learning needs geared toward middle student
- Data rendered meaningless due to high scores
- Disagreements rarely productive

Context
- 400,000 students
- Universal screener
- Parents understand needs of gifted children

Alliance

Conditions
- Student interest and engagement heart of problem solving process
- Student-centered standards that they provide input on

Culture
- Clear expectations of what is best for students
- Grades rendered meaningless due to focus on authentic, student-driven learning
- Teacher and student driven leadership

A School That Services All Gifted Populations

Competencies
- Student needs geared toward the student and their academic gifts
- Data collection based on student need
- Productive disagreements based on needs of children

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Strategy	Action
Have a universal screener	Pilot a screener in a traditionally underserved neighborhood
Start school with K and grade 5	10 kindergarten students 10 fifth grade students Three teachers Identify kindergarten students through parent evidence and narratives Utilize test scores and grades for fifth grade
Hire three teachers	Checklist includes empathy, flexibility, lack of ego
Have individualized learning plans	Use software that easily tracks learning goals
	Use goal-setting meetings with students and parents
	Students communicate their learning each day with parents
Effective alternative assessment systems	Have portfolios instead of grades
	Reach out to field professionals to showcase their skills to students
	Problem-based learning
Establishing appropriate school personnel	Group interviews and shadow days
	Narrative on why to teach at this school
Effective/appropriate opportunities to learn	Weekly staff professional development Learn along with the students