



Using Local Norms to Equitably Identify Gifted Learners

Guidance provided by Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education and the Advisory Council on the Education of Gifted and Talented Children

An ongoing concern in gifted education is equitable identification and selection of students for gifted programming. The report, *Gifted Education in the United States: Laws, Access, Equity, and Missingness Across the Country by Locale, Title I School Status, and Race* was published in 2019 using data reported biennially to the federal government Office of Civil Rights by all public schools in 2000, 2011–2012, 2013–14, and 2015–16. Report cards were developed for each state and Missouri received an F in equity of access to gifted education between Title I and Non-Title I schools. Inequitable representation exists in Missouri of students who attend impoverished schools, or who come from Native American, Black, Latinx, or Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander families. The report states, “Clearly, examination of identification practices, policies, and procedures is warranted.” (Gentry, M., Gray, A.M., Whiting, G., Maeda, Y., Pereira, N., 2019)

Several approaches can be used to enhance equitable identification and selection of students for gifted programs. These strategies are outlined in a manuscript prepared by the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) and the Advisory Council on the Education of Gifted and Talented Children (the Council): [Identifying and Serving Traditionally Underrepresented Gifted Students](#).

This document provides guidance on one strategy which is essential in equitable identification: using local norms. It is important to point out: to use local norms, school systems must work with the Director of Gifted Education at DESE to develop an Alternate Identification Plan. The [Gifted Education Program Guidelines](#) provides information on Alternate Identification Plans. Contact [Christine Nobbe](#), Director of Gifted Education for Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, for further assistance.

Rationale for Using Local Norms

Dr. Scott J. Peters, an associate professor in the Educational Foundations Department of the University of Wisconsin at Whitewater states:

there is no defensible reason to make identification decisions on the basis of national or international norms. Instead, a student should be compared to other students within a particular educational context (such as a single school) in which his or her needs will be met. This means using local norms for identification where a student’s performance is only compared to his or her peers at the same school. This is easy to do but it does make for identified students who have a wider range of learning needs, which will need to be taken into consideration when designing services. A ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach to gifted

services may not be appropriate when you have students with different levels of preparation. They might sound complicated and fancy, but really they're just a matter of sorting students test scores from highest to lowest and then applying your chosen 'gifted' criteria. (Minnesota Department of Education)

How to Use Local Norms

Missouri school systems are developing and using Alternate Identification Plans, including the use of local norms. This paper outlines examples from three different school systems.

One Missouri school system provided this detailed example:

We give our universal screening, SAGES-3, and enter all scores, along with student demographics, into a spreadsheet. Within that data we look for the top 20th percentile, as well as, the median and standard deviation. That's pretty standard, but for local norming we then disaggregate each subgroup of students and determine their 80th percentile. Students scoring at or above the 80th percentile for *any* subgroup in which they are identified are moved on in the testing process. That is important because each subgroup may have different scores for their 80th percentile, and any student may qualify in more than one subgroup. For instance, a student may be an English language learner and have an IEP. If the student scores high enough for either of those groups, the student is moved on to the testing phase. We disaggregate for several subgroups:

- Race
- Gender
- EL status
- IEP
- Free & Reduced Lunch
- School building

A note about school building disaggregation: this is as much a check on our testing procedures as it is for identifying a subgroup. Should an individual building score significantly differently from the rest of the district that could be an indication of testing issues. Local norming can be used to identify patterns that can result from systemic issues within a district, much as any other benchmark data.

We then do the same process for our IQ testing, but what is really interesting is that while we have found wide disparities in our universal screening, we do not see that reflected in the IQ testing. Local norming has greatly helped us to make sure that students who need to continue in the identification process are not left out before we obtain a full picture of their needs.”

We don't use achievement as one of our measures. The vast majority of our students are not reaching their potential. Including achievement as a measure in the past contributed to our history on inequitable identification. As part of our alternative identification plan, we made the decision to look at GAI/IQ, Reasoning/Problem Solving/Creativity, and Other (a portfolio of student work, observations by gifted specialists, and team-decisions).

We do, however, follow the Guidelines for Identification of Traditionally Underrepresented, specifically: ‘mine assessment data for patterns of performance that indicate upward trajectories and rapid growth and improvement.’ Every six weeks the gifted specialists look at the reading and math benchmark data from all classrooms in 1st-8th grades. The specialists look for any outlier students: not necessarily above grade level, but a standard deviation above their class. Those students are flagged for review and we check to see if/when they were last screened for gifted. If it’s been more than a year, we nominate them and begin assessments. This has been our most successful way of identifying gifted students outside of the universal screening. (School System A, 2020)

Another Missouri school system began using local norms in 2019-2020 and shared this detailed account:

District Rationale

Historically, like almost all districts, we have struggled with identifying students from traditionally underrepresented populations for our gifted program. Prior to the 2019-2020 school year, only 3% of students identified for gifted services across the district were African American. This was in contrast to the general student population, where African American students make up 15% of the District’s enrollment. Recognizing there were many challenges with our identification process that led to this inequity of services, the District implemented a new gifted identification process with a state-approved alternative pathway for underrepresented students and a transition to localized norming where students are compared to their District peers. The goal of the alternative pathway was to more effectively identify African American students and provide gifted services to a percentage of African American students that more closely reflected their representation in our community. More specifically, over a three-year period, we hoped to increase the representation of African American students from 3% to at least 12% in the gifted program. This change would better align with the equity index expectations described in the state guidelines.

Identification Process

In the new identification process, which was approved by DESE in the summer of 2019, the District used the Naglieri Non-Verbal Ability Test (NNAT3) to screen students in grades 2 and 4 as well as those new to the District. Previously, students’ scores were compared to national norms to help in determining identification for the program. Under the new process, all students were compared to their District peers in an effort to create local norms. Additionally, students from traditionally underrepresented populations were compared only to their racial peers in the District in an effort to address the systemic inequity issues reflected in the previous identification data.

Based on DESE guidance, a district’s identification process should move about 10 to 20 percent of students on to individual evaluation. In the first year of implementation, the District moved about 33 to 40 percent of all students in grades two and four on to individual evaluation. This was a purposeful move by the District to cast a wider net to find students who may have been overlooked or eliminated from the process in previous

years. All students who moved into the individual evaluation phase of the selection process took the Cognitive Abilities Test (CogAT) and Torrance Test of Creative Thinking (TTCT). Classroom teachers also completed a HOPE Teacher Rating Scale for those students. The HOPE Teacher Rating Scale is designed to help guide teachers in identifying gifted students for programming and was designed to offset expressions of implicit bias found in other behavioral assessments. This short data gathering form has only 11 items that measure academic and social/affective components of giftedness. Since this was our first year using the HOPE form, the District's gifted specialists worked with classroom teachers to complete the assessment for 30 students who were a mix of general education students and students already receiving gifted services. These forms allowed the District committee to calculate local percentile rank norms for the tool. This combination of assessments was a departure from previous practice where achievement scores (such as NWEA, SRI, and the Iowa Test of Basic Skills) were a required part of the selection criteria.

The District developed a review team for each building to analyze all data collected during the individual evaluation process to determine which students represent the top 10 percent based on District norms. This team consisted of the Assistant Superintendent of Student Services, the Gifted Coordinator, the building Gifted Specialist, and building leaders (such as the Principal, Instructional Coordinator, or Counselor). Students who performed in the top 10 percent when compared to their District peers qualified for the District's gifted program. This team is also responsible for reviewing any evidence brought forward by teachers during building advocacy, which is a process designed to allow teachers to champion the work or characteristics of specific students they feel are in need of gifted services, but for whom testing may not have demonstrated such a need.

Results

In the Fall of 2019, approximately 125 students in grades 2-8 were individually evaluated for eligibility for gifted services. Of the 125 students, 44 qualified and 12 of the 44 qualifying students were African American. In comparison, during the 2018-2019 school year, 3 of the 111 students identified for gifted services were African American. Overall, the representation of African American students in the gifted program increased from 3% (11/324 students) to 6% (23/368 students). This improvement is based on two factors: the use of local norms and comparing students to their District racial peers. At this current pace, the District expects to be in line with DESE's Equity recommendations by 2023.

Tips when Transitioning to Local Norms

- Teach the teachers. Leading building-level PD for teachers helps them understand how this transition is beneficial to underrepresented populations.
- Prepare for a decrease in the number of students from historically overrepresented groups, such as white, affluent students, being identified for gifted services. This decrease is likely the product of overidentification of this group in the previous identification process.
- Communicate clearly to parents that students are compared only to other students in the district. It will be confusing for many parents to receive test results with national norms reflected if there is not clarity around how those translate locally.

We tell parents our top 10% begins around the 97th national percentile so they have some grounding for their expectations.

- Select assessment tools that match the program outcomes. Our previous identification process used metrics that emphasized academic achievement. However, the program is not focused on content acceleration nor advanced academics. Instead, the district program focuses on problem solving, critical thinking, and creativity. With that in mind, we selected a set of tools that better capture students' readiness in those areas.
- Rethink the role of grades in a selection process. Grades are often subjective and awarded on inconsistent criteria. An over-reliance on them as a selection criterion could magnify the bias of adults and prematurely eliminate gifted students from individual evaluation. (School System B, 2020)

Another Missouri school system offered these thoughts:

Each school district has its own unique population of students based on variable demographics and other factors. It is precisely because of this uniqueness that local norms should be used. Local norms not only look at the student body in that system or schools in the system, but actually recognize and honor the students that comprise that school and/or district. When you honor local norms in the identification and evaluation process, you are truly honoring the students in each school system, building, grade, and/or class.

Based on the work of Donna Ford and Scott Peters, we know about the 20% equity index rule (see appendix A) and how to use local norms. The rationale is an equitable way to truly look at and honor the student demographics in your district and schools.

In general, our district has used a form of Donna Ford's 20% equity index rule to help establish local norms for the gifted identification process. Over the last 5+ years, this was used to look at the first grade NNAT-3 screening scores. More recently, this practice was used to potentially identify fourth grade students that took the CogAT and sixth and eighth grade students that took the NWEA (Math & Reading) in the fall term. (We looked at the top 10% for each group/grade.)

Each school and class' student body data was examined based on gender, race, FRL, IEP/504, and gifted identification. The top 10% scores of students in each subgroup were looked at more closely. Our purpose was to honor each student that otherwise (when using national norms) would not be looked at more closely for possible gifted identification. (School System C, 2020)

Recommendations for Action

To more equitably identify Missouri gifted learners, the RPIE model (Research, Plan, Implement, and Evaluate) can be implemented.

1. Research

- a. Determine the issues by comparing the gifted program demographics to the school system demographics.
 - b. Convene a Gifted Identification Committee of professionals. The school system's gifted education specialist and coordinator must be members of the committee. If the school system employs more than one gifted education specialist, it is not necessary that all teachers are on the committee. Additional members could include counselor(s), school psychologist, building level administrator(s), special services director (or another school-wide administrator), and other appropriate professionals.
 - c. Committee members study the resources and examples described in this paper, discuss options, and consult with DESE's Director of Gifted Education.
2. Plan
 - a. Write Alternate Identification Plan and submit to DESE's Director of Gifted Education.
 - b. Work with the Director to revise the plan and receive approval.
 - c. Submit Alternate Identification Plan to appropriate school system administration and school board.
 3. Implement
 - a. Implement the Alternate Identification Plan once it is approved.
 - b. Communicate Alternate Identification Plan with school system and community.
 - c. Create a system to track/record all data for student nominations, evaluations, and gifted placement being cognizant to include demographics for each student.
 4. Evaluate
 - a. Annually evaluate success of Alternate Identification Plan by analyzing gifted program data.
 - b. Determine next steps: revise plan, use plan as stated for another year, or discard plan and look at other options.

Dr. James J. Gallagher was an authority on child development who helped establish that gifted and talented children are a population with unique educational needs and whose work expanded educational opportunities for gifted children nationwide. He said,

Failure to help the gifted child is a societal tragedy, the extent of which is difficult to measure but which is surely great. How can we measure the sonata unwritten, the curative drug undiscovered, the absence of political insight? They are the difference between what we are and what we could be as a society. (Gallagher, 1975)

Dr. Gallagher reminds us that equitably identifying gifted learners is essential to meet the needs of students and to impact our world in positive ways.

Resources

Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. (2019, July). *Gifted education program guidelines*, [PDF file]. Retrieved May 12, 2020 from <https://dese.mo.gov/sites/default/files/Program%20Guidelines%202018-2019.pdf>

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Appendix A

APPENDIX A: SUBGROUP PARTICIPATION TARGETS IN GIFTED PROGRAMS

% of sub-group population in the school system	minimum target % participation in the gifted program
10%	8%
20%	16%
30%	24%
40%	32%
50%	40%
60%	48%
70%	56%
80%	64%
90%	72%