

Piedmont Unified's approach to meeting the needs of gifted learners is through "classroom differentiation" and there is no separate GATE program. While I am not philosophically against this approach, my experience with having two GATE-identified children in Piedmont schools has been mostly disappointing and inconsistent. I hope that the district can work on improving gifted education in the following ways:

1. Providing opportunities for more challenging work
2. Ensuring follow-through on differentiated assignments
3. Consistency between classes and schools
4. Transparency about what opportunities are being provided
5. Accountability

Opportunities

My children have consistently found the Bridges math curriculum to be insufficiently challenging. Moreover, they have often demonstrated mastery of this curriculum in pre-assessments. Nevertheless, the only math homework they have ever been assigned is from the Bridges workbook. I do not see how this is in line with the district's goal of offering "tiered assignments," "making adjustments to pacing" or "replacing some skill-based tasks with tasks that place greater emphasis on higher-order thinking skills." Once, after bringing this up with a teacher, one of them was assigned a challenge packet that was an allowable substitute for the homework. However, the contents of the packet were unrelated to the content of their math curriculum - meaning that while the assignments may have helped foster some creative thinking, they unfortunately did nothing to promote a deeper understanding of the unit that the class was studying at the time. Ideally, teachers would be given materials to support and promote deeper exploration and higher-order thinking related to the math units that are actually part of the curriculum.

In another example, my child was told that the teacher welcomed presentations on a math topic. That is a good idea in theory, and in fact my child did make a presentation once. However, she had to prepare for this presentation at home, with my help and on her own time. This particular method of differentiation requires that children be extremely self-motivated and/ or have a parent who has the resources to help. Since that is not always the case, it would be better to find a way to facilitate these enrichment activities in class, perhaps during class time that is currently spent practicing skills that the child has already mastered.

One example of differentiation that I thought worked extremely well was when the school librarian formed a book club that specifically catered to very advanced readers. The librarian assigned the books and met with the children regularly to discuss their reading. These discussions were stimulating and engaging and my daughter loved them. I heard great feedback from other parents as well. However, the book clubs stopped when the librarian transferred to a different school, and they were never restarted with our new librarian.

Follow-through

Even when opportunities for deeper learning are occasionally presented, they are almost never followed up on. For example, when my child was given the math challenge packet, she was initially very excited and worked on it diligently, completing the whole packet. She turned it in to her teacher - and never heard about it again. She never found out if she had done the problems correctly and never received any help on the questions she had been unable to answer. She also never received another such packet or any other enrichment materials. This experience was disappointing and likely dampened, rather than fostered, her love of learning.

In contrast, another child of mine was given a challenging assignment to work on in class, and when he completed it, he was rewarded with classroom points. He also received some guidance from the teacher when he got stuck. This experience was very fun and motivating for him, and I heard all about it at home. I hope the district can do more to ensure that when challenging assignments are given, teachers also make a point of following up and grading them or providing help if necessary. It would also be good if teachers continued to provide opportunities for further challenge, as opposed to only providing such opportunities on a one-off basis after specific parental requests.

Consistency

Having a number of children in Piedmont schools, as well as having had numerous conversations with other parents, I have come to realize that opportunities for enrichment vary drastically between classes and schools, depending on the individual teacher involved. If your child happens to have an unusually motivated teacher or a particularly involved librarian, they will have a differentiated school experience. However, we all know that teachers are already overworked and underpaid, and understandably, classroom differentiation does not always happen in such situations. Ideally, someone from the district - the differentiation specialist, perhaps - would be responsible for designing and disseminating materials and ideas to assist individual teachers with classroom differentiation. There are probably already existing best practices that could be more widely adopted. Plucking this low-hanging fruit would allow us to achieve substantial results with relative speed and ease.

Transparency

It is possible that a lot more classroom differentiation happens than parents are aware of. If that is the case, it would be helpful to provide occasional information sessions or updates, for example during the regular parent-teacher conference sessions. I have participated in many such sessions but the question of differentiation has never been raised by a teacher. We are often told that many teachers have attended seminars from Dr. Jo Boaler, but that does not equate to knowing what specific differentiation, if any, actually happens in the classroom.

Accountability

Piedmont Unified believes that the best way to meet the needs of gifted learners is through classroom differentiation. However, I am not aware of any metric or system currently in place to identify or measure, quantitatively or qualitatively, the amount of differentiation that actually takes place in each classroom. It is also not clear who is responsible for ensuring that differentiated instruction happens. Is it the teachers? The district administration? The differentiation specialist? In the absence of clearly designated roles, responsibilities, and metrics, it is not credible for Piedmont Unified to claim that it is adequately catering to the needs of gifted learners in the district.

We are happy to live in Piedmont and very much appreciate the work that teachers and administrators put in to make this a safe, tolerant, equitable environment for children to learn in. However, there is much more the district can do to support its gifted learners and keep them from feeling like they have to choose between going to school in their neighborhood, with friends from their local community, or looking for a school or district that provides greater stimulation and challenge.