

Historical Perspectives of a Program for Gifted and Talented Students

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Abstract

A retrospective historical study of a 40-year gifted and talented program in a large urban school system was conducted between 2015 and 2019. Current and former program administrators completed personal interviews and surveys concerning the program's services, challenges, improvements, and impacts. Relevant student enrollment data, program artifacts, evaluation reports, newspaper accounts, and curricular documents were examined to supplement the supervisors' analyses. A description was provided of the consequences of a United States Middle District Court-ordered consent decree desegregation agreement associated with the policies upon student recruitment, identification, placement, curricular enhancements, and program settings within the gifted and talented program. The study also presents an account of the evolution of a gifted and talented program and its effect upon students, teachers, school system administrators, and the greater community. Important historical perspectives regarding the gifted and talented program's development, policy changes, and influences are summarized.

Keywords: gifted, talented, gifted and talented programs, historical perspectives of gifted and talented program

Historical Perspectives of a Program for Gifted and Talented Students

Introduction

In 1975, a new Louisiana state law mandated that Louisiana parish (county) public school systems provide programs for all special education children to include the assessment, identification, and placement of gifted and talented students (Louisiana Department of Education, 2010) in programs developed to serve their educational needs. From that year forward, services for academically gifted and talented students and all other special education programs have continued to receive funding by mandated state legislative line-item appropriations and policies. The Louisiana Exceptional Child Act of 1975 required school systems to develop educational programs through either resource centers, resource rooms, or self-contained classroom settings to meet the academic needs of gifted and talented students. These curricular placement options are still an important part of the current philosophy that requires Louisiana public schools to offer a variety of opportunities to students identified as gifted and talented by accommodating each student's specific strengths, learning characteristics, interests, and academic potential as determined by the assessment and identification process.

The state law also encourages parents, teachers, and identified students to reach consensus regarding each student's curricular options by specifying content, goals, objectives, and performance outcomes by means of the Individual Educational Plan (IEP). The power of this educational concept lies in the potential for all three partners to share equally in responsibly recognizing that giftedness is not just a label determined from assessment data (I.Q. scores, achievement, percentile ranks, and other test information), but is developed through actual performance and the fulfillment of the curricular contract specific to the student. In 2008, a new special education reporting system streamlined the process by employing a statewide web-based standard for developing each student's individual educational plan (IEP). This reporting system simplified the tracking of students' progress associated with their individual educational plans.

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These are some of the components of a Louisiana law that has had a profound influence on the lives of gifted and talented students in Louisiana over 40 years later. The stated purpose of this research study was to analyze the impact this legislative action had upon one large parish school system in Louisiana.

History of the Research Question and Study Setting

The Baton Rouge greater metropolitan region has a population of 771,000 individuals with a racial composition of ~47.80% Whites, 44.20% Blacks, 3.90% Asians, and 3.70% Hispanics, and another 1.40% reporting two or more races (State and County Quick facts, 2016). East Baton Rouge Parish within the greater metropolitan region includes ~440,171 residents and four separate public school systems. The East Baton Rouge Parish School System is one of the largest school districts in the state, listed among the top 100 systems nationally with an enrollment of ~42,000 students, pre-kindergarten through grade 12 at 85 school sites, with an overall budget of ~\$413 million including funds available for facilities development (East Baton Rouge Parish Public Schools, 2016).

In 1976, one of Louisiana's first educational programs for gifted and talented students was developed and began serving students in the East Baton Rouge Parish School System (EBRPSS). Special permission was granted by the school system to use their name in this study because of the unique nature of the research study and the opinion that the gifted and talented program has been highly successful in providing an exceptional education to students identified and placed in the program. The public serving school system is in a large metropolitan region referred to as a parish that is analogous to a county in other parts of the country. The parish school system was the largest public school system in Louisiana at the time this study was begun and served the needs of all special education students including the academically gifted and talented within its system boundaries. Several years ago, there began to be an increasing interest by school officials, teachers in the program, former students, and parents in compiling the history of the school system's long-term program efforts to meet the needs of gifted and talented students. It was noted by many of the program's teachers that no systematic study of the long-term results of the program had ever been completed. Thus, a study that evolved over five years, beginning in Fall 2016 and concluding in Fall 2019 that documented the historical record of changes that occurred in the school system's program for gifted and talented students during the more than 40-year period. The perspective study provided a unique opportunity to understand the relationship and the relative importance of the changes, improvements, problems, and impacts of the PK -12 program for gifted and talented students as it began, evolved, and matured within in a large, urban public school program.

The program longevity joins the historical list of many other programs that over the centuries have been provided for gifted and talented students. Educational programs for the gifted and talented were initiated during China's Tang Dynasty from 608 AD to 907 AD (Wenzhong, Y, 2004) after child prodigies were tested and identified by the government. More than thirteen hundred years later, during an era of the United States' national concern about the space race and educational achievement, Free hill (1961) wrote one of the earliest textbooks describing stewardship efforts and school programs deemed necessary for educating gifted and talented students. In more recent lay publications, authors continue to underscore educational challenges associated with educating child prodigies (Solomon, 2012). However, what has not been reported is how these programs evolve and change over time. Long-term studies of actual programs are rare in the literature. In contrast, one study by Purcell (1993) reported the effects of the elimination of gifted and talented programs on student and parents. Thus, this study was undertaken to address the questions associated with a long-term examination of one large parish program for gifted and talented students over 40 plus years. The literature of the field is concentrated on the concerns of identification and characteristics of gifted and talented students to the exclusion of research associated with program and curricular related questions.

Overview of Methodology

The major program impact questions addressed in this study were developed and employed by using qualitative study techniques and a research design that involved collecting data from a variety of sources and synthesizing the findings or results from a combination of non-numerical and numerical interpretations. The qualitative study used the researcher's interpretation of the results from multiple sources to better understand the historical effect the program has had upon students, teachers, administrators, parents, and the community over a 40-year period. One of the major and most important sources of data came from one current and six former program administrators who provided the supervisory leadership for the gifted and talented program over a period off our decades. Overall, the supervisors each had averaged about six years of service.

For the purpose of this historical case study, these seven program administrators either completed a written questionnaire and/or participated in an in-depth interview using identical questions that they had helped formulate regarding their supervisory perceptions and experiences in the school system's gifted and talented program. The researcher took extensive field notes during the two-hour interviews. Their composite responses furnished key historical information regarding program development, teacher certification, student enrollment, program demographics, and the challenges, changes, and impacts that influenced the administration and development of the gifted and talented program, which occurred during the program's history of providing services to students from 1976 through 2019. In addition, several administrators provided valuable personal artifacts and helped develop a plan for finding key sources of information associated with the administration of the gifted and talented program during their term of service, which consisted of newspaper stories, board minutes, and program evaluations. Multiple sources of data associated with the program were made available for review and examination. All supervisors were asked to identify particular difficulties that were resolved and were asked to explain factors that influenced their administrative decisions during their tenure of service. Their responses, program documents, and student data were analyzed for common themes using accepted qualitative research methods (Creswell, 2014; Saldana, 2013). Extensive coding of the major themes were completed and reviewed by several focus groups composed of certified teachers and administrators. The themes emerging out of the meetings provided the selection of topics that will be found in the following discussions. They are the key basis for the analyses and perceptions of the gifted and talented program and its historical impact and significance.

Finally, additional information was collected from school-wide archival records, local newspaper articles, program evaluation summaries, student enrollment reports, published journal articles, and other materials provided by the local association of gifted and talented parents. One of the most important historical documents reviewed for this study was the 1996 United States Louisiana Middle District Court of Louisiana versus East Baton Rouge Parish School Board, et al Consent Degree desegregation agreement with the East Baton Rouge Parish School System (Davis et al, 1996) which was in force until 2007 and had a major impact upon the gifted and talented programs during the 1990's. These additional sources of data provided a rich history of documentation that supported the interviews and surveys completed by the seven administrators. It should be noted that the customary non-disclosure of the name of the participating school system was not followed for this study. An earlier agreement between the researcher and school system has allowed the full use of the school system's identification in this study.

Program Development

As a result, of the 1975 Louisiana special education law, the East Baton Rouge Parish School System dedicated the 1975-1976 academic years to the design and development of a student identification system and a plan for curricular services for academically gifted students (Evans, 2012). Beginning Fall Semester 1976, the first academically gifted student services and curriculum was provided in an enrichment resource room setting at one centrally located elementary school to approximately 40 identified academically gifted students in 30-70 minute instructional sessions daily (Evans, 2012). Elementary students were transported to that site from six other schools in the public school system. The school was selected because it a) presented easier access for students residing in different school attendance zones within the geographically large urban parish school system and b) provided adequate classroom capacity to accommodate the anticipated future expansion in student enrollment. By 1978, the academically gifted program's enrollment had increased to 177 students in grades three through five in several elementary full-time self-contained classrooms (Evans, 2012, Furlow, 2010). Evans (2012) stated, "It was a combination of parents, outstanding teachers, and students willing to move schools for access to the enrichment program that helped create the early success of the program."

Louisiana's special education guidelines allow public school systems to offer a continuum of instructional options for gifted and talented student services including enrichment in regular and resource rooms, enrichment centers, and full-time self-contained classrooms. During the first 12 years of the program, however, academically gifted students primarily were provided enrichment activities within their regularly assigned classrooms or enrichment resource rooms with few opportunities for accelerated learning. From 1980 through 1990, due to an ongoing national and state debate among teachers, administrators, and parents concerning the benefits of part-time resource enrichment room programs vs. full-time self-contained classrooms administrative placements for academically gifted students, local placement decisions evolved quickly to focus on determining the suitability of a variety of program offerings for meeting individual student's needs, when various curricular options were available (Furlow, 2010).

Consequently, by 1991, the parish-wide Gifted Program had expanded to include an enrollment of approximately 3,500 K-12 academically gifted students in multiple sites throughout the school system managed by a full-time program administrator (East Baton Rouge Parish School System Data Processing Center, 1991).

From 1996 through 2012, gifted student demographics indicate a dramatically increased number of minority student participants. The critical four contributing factors that diversified student participation in the Gifted Program included a) recognizing individual learning characteristics, b) implementing appropriate assessments for potential abilities, c) determining students' curricular placements, and d) providing opportunities for minority students to demonstrate their abilities and talents through appropriate educational programs. As a result, the educational settings continued to evolve to be more inclusive throughout the 1990's and 2010's (Furlow).

Subsequent to adding the Talented Arts program in 1993, the Academically Gifted Program was correctly re-labeled as the Gifted and Talented Program to include students identified as exceptional in any of the areas of art, music, and/or drama, with many students qualified to participate consecutively in both programs. As a result of the increase in number of students, the school system was required to address the related challenge of finding the required classroom space and necessary funding to hire specifically qualified teachers in the arts. A program administrator credited empty classrooms at one elementary school as the sole reason for the development of a talented program at one particularly site, now known as the Center for the Visual and Performing Arts (Scardina, 2010). The Gifted and Talented Program is subsidized by supplemental funding from the State of Louisiana at approximately ~\$4,000 per student (Lussier, 2010) based on a formula. The State of Louisiana spends approximately \$65.7 million to fund statewide gifted and talented education including the cost of supporting assessment teams for the 25,555 participating gifted and talented students statewide (National Association for Gifted Children, 2012). However, the state reimbursement formula does not always provide sufficient funding for all educational programs for the gifted and talented, especially the talented arts students.

One major change in the program that all administrators unanimously agreed upon was that the program's history of serving minority students increased dramatically as a result of the United States Middle District Court ruling associated with a desegregation order. The accompanying Consent Decree (Davis, 1996) led to far-reaching policy and educational program changes. The legal mandate, occurring approximately 20 years after the academically gifted program was developed, required program administrators to develop a better system for identifying minority students, particularly among Black, Hispanic, and non-English speaking populations, who otherwise demonstrated potential to excel academically. Thus, alternative educational options were developed to identify minority students with high academic potential and provide them with challenging curricular enhancement for further academic development so they subsequently would become fully qualified to participate in the gifted and talented program.

By this time in the program's history, multiple curricular options included a) part-time resource enrichment classrooms, b) full-time academically gifted classrooms at each grade level (pre-kindergarten through grade twelve), c) resource centers for the Talented Arts program, and d) the Academic and Scholastic Academies intended to increase minority student participation. The Academic and Scholastic Academies were housed at the same school sites as the existing Gifted and Talented Program and were staffed by certified gifted and talented teachers. In addition, a more inclusion and transparent system for identification began to take place with regular informational open-house programs at each school with a gifted and talented program. The purpose was to educate the broader community about the educational opportunities for academically gifted and talented arts students in the public schools.

The net effect of this change led to a significant enrollment increase from the approximately 3% racial minority enrollment in the 1980's to a broader socioeconomic segment of the school system's population in the 1990's. Student data from the parish annual enrollment records reveal that the Gifted and Talented Program, together with the two academies, now is considered "racially diverse" with 53% of the students identified as Black and 47% of the students identified as Non-Black, the latter term including White, Asian-American, and/or Hispanic students (East Baton Rouge Parish Gifted and Talented Program Count 2015 - 2016, 2016). These programs, in conjunction with the overall changes in the public school population, have greatly influenced the Gifted and Talented Program to better reflect the racial diversity of school community that supported it.

This process also concurrently achieved the related school system's goal of desegregating some schools that formerly were of all one race.

Due to enrollment growth and the related expansion of school sites, geographical balance of program offerings were realized within the school system. Accordingly, curricular options for academically gifted students expanded and transformed the program from a single elementary enrichment resource room in 1976 to pre-kindergarten through grade twelve multi-school experiences in various administrative arrangements. By 2016, within the existing administrative placement options, the program's curriculum also provided students with more opportunities for both acceleration and enrichment. In hindsight, program administrators' concluded that the provision of curricular options became less of a concern over the years as parents frequently decided their children's educational placements based on the school's location near their attendance zones and residences and the outstanding reputation of the teachers and educational program at that site.

By 2016, 3,202 gifted and talented students comprised approximately 3.70% of the entire school system population with the majority receiving instruction in self-contained classrooms (East Baton Rouge Parish Public Schools, 2016). Three- and four-year old students receive services in pre-kindergarten self-contained classrooms in six schools. Three middle school and two high school programs provide full-time self-contained educational programs identified by subject matter (East Baton Rouge Parish Public Schools, 2016). Overall, within the preschool through grade twelve settings, the school system administers four educational programs serving 1,158 students in the Academically Gifted program, 703 students in the Talented Arts program, 578 students with academic potential in the elementary Scholastic Academy, and 763 students with academic potential in grades seven through twelve in the Great Scholars Academy (East Baton Rouge Parish Public Schools, 2012). Instructional services for students in the Gifted and Talented Program including the Scholastic Academy and the Great Scholars Academy preschool through grade twelve, have expanded to incorporate 30 elementary, middle, and high schools with ~245 certified teachers. Administrative placements incorporated a) self-contained and resource room classes for academically gifted students and b) resource centers for talented students (East Baton Rouge Parish Gifted and Talented Program Count 2012 - 2013, 2012).

Program Administrators and Teachers

From the beginning of the development of the EBRSS Gifted and Talented Program to the present, supervisory responsibility was provided by seven academically gifted and talented state-certified program administrators. During the first four years of the program from 1976 through 1980, the supervisory position combined assignments for both teaching in the program and administrative responsibilities. The position was labeled as a Teacher-Coordinator (Evans, 2012). Thereafter, the administrative role became a full-time position and was identified as a Supervisor of Gifted Programs (Evans, 2012, Furlow, 2010). The seven administrators have provided overall program oversight including: a) hiring and supervising certified teachers in the EBRPSS Gifted and Talented Program; b) addressing administrative and curriculum issues related to classroom service and program site selections; c) reviewing student screening, identification and placement according to Louisiana state law; d) addressing program funding and budgeting issues; e) providing input on transportation issues; f) addressing public relations and school board questions, and g) responding to student, teacher, parent, and program questions and emergencies. The latter issue was identified and addressed by all of the supervisors interviewed and/or surveyed with some commenting on both the issues and challenges. Furlow (2010) commented, "the issues that were addressed depended on the interest of the local newspapers and the topics under discussion within the greater school community". A challenge identified by many of the supervisors in both interviews and written surveys was working with new principals not familiar with gifted and talented programs in their schools and the need for additional guidance required for a successful school program to develop. One supervisor commented that the "challenge of working with 21 new principals takes a lot of time in helping them understand the difference between traditional and gifted education. This topic was most important." (Stapleton, 2014).

From the earliest years of program development, the parish school system's Office for Special Education administered the Gifted and Talented Program. Many teachers, parents, and students viewed the program administrators of the Gifted and Talented Program as the school system officials who had final authority to address problems and implement desired changes at the local level quickly. However, in reality, under the Special Education organizational structure, these gifted and talented program administrators were limited in their ability to address student and parent questions and were specifically assigned to administer the Gifted and Talented Program only leaving it up to others to work with budget. All of the administrators interviewed stated that they did not have comprehensive authority to resolve all classroom, school, and parish school problems.

Thus, the program administrators often became overwhelmed with the extra time and effort necessary to explain and address problems associated with gifted and talented students through an administrative office primarily focused on programs for students with physical and educational disabilities. Because program administrators agreed that the reporting line was challenging and a critical issue for them, administrative oversight for the gifted and talented program eventually was changed to the Office for Innovative and Specialized Programs in 2007 to more accurately reflect program philosophy and ease at addressing program issues (Aquirre, 2011).

Teacher Recruitment and Certification

The gifted and talented program has addressed many challenges throughout its history in the East Baton Rouge Parish School System. Program administrators reported that they adhered to the tenets of national research studies, which conclude that academically gifted students possess unique abilities, need enriched curricular opportunities, and exhibit advanced interests and learning styles requiring specialized training and certification of competent classroom teachers. However, there were no greater problems, than recruiting teachers for the growing program. To be certified to teach in the Gifted and Talented Program at the elementary, middle, or high school levels, educators in Louisiana are required to complete specified graduate coursework in gifted and talented education resulting in a master's degree beyond the bachelor's degree. The prescribed coursework both educates and empowers teachers to develop appropriate and relevant curricular experiences commensurate with the academic abilities of their students. Further, state guidelines for certification in the Talented Arts Program require teachers to obtain either a master's degree or demonstrate a high-level of proficiency in the fields of visual arts, music, or theatre.

According to a theme identified by the supervisors, in the early years, few teachers within the school system were a) knowledgeable about the program, b) state-certified in academically gifted or talented arts education, and c) interested in voluntarily joining the program's classroom personnel. Thus, all program administrators agreed that recruiting and hiring certified teachers for the Gifted Program was a significant challenge, particularly during its rapid program growth between 1978 and 1992. As the expanding the gifted program gained recognition and prominence, an increasing number of educators self-selected to become teachers in the program and voluntarily returned to universities in the area to enroll in the academic courses required to obtain endorsement for additional state certification. Further, as program administrators endeavored to identify and enroll a more diverse population of gifted and talented students, they found it even more challenging to accomplish an associated goal of identifying and recruiting minority teachers who were willing to return to college to obtain the master's degree required for state certification in gifted and talented education. That problem was complicated by the fact that, to balance overall program instructional staff diversity, certified teachers who accepted employment in the Gifted Program sometimes were required to relocate to new school sites, often on the other side of the parish.

Concurrently, as more teachers enrolled in graduate studies in higher education courses associated with gifted and talented education, an increasing number of university classes became available for completing the state-mandated certification program to meet their needs. Program administrators agreed that, more than any other factor, the 1978 Louisiana guidelines that mandated teacher certification and professional training in gifted education has been the most important variable influencing the overall quality and success of the gifted curricular offerings. One program administrator stated, "certified and empowered teachers became extremely skilled at developing an appropriate curriculum for gifted and talented students with very special needs" (McLinn, 2011). This fact was confirmed by a survey of 2,144 parents, teachers, and administrative personnel associated with the parish Gifted Program which revealed strong support (92.40%) for requiring ongoing certification of the teachers of the academically gifted(Mathews, 1990). Further, of all groups participating in that survey, 94.40 % of parents expressed the strongest agreement for mandating certification of teachers of gifted students.

Student Screening, Identification, and Program Placement

Program administrators collectively concluded that since the beginning of the program the process of screening and identifying gifted and talented students resulted in a dramatic increase in their workload. Thus, one of the school system's assessment teams assigned to the gifted and talented program identified as its major goals a) to eliminate all identification and evaluation wait lists, b) minimize wait time, and c) improve external and internal communication with parents and school officials (Aquirre, 2010).

This problem partially was resolved by a grant that funded the hiring of additional personnel who focused on minority student identification and those students who spoke English as a secondary language (Aquirre, 2010).

Further, additional factors that addressed the “waiting-to-be-assessed” problem included (a) the assignment of a dedicated assessment team for gifted education, (b) universal kindergarten screening, (c) community involvement and education by a parent association, (d) a marketing plan to educate parents of preschoolers about screening and identification, (e) student recruitment for the gifted and talented program via the parent open house events, (f) a summer gifted program “screening blitz” events, and (g) a multimedia marketing plan regarding the gifted and talented program (Scardina, 2010; East Baton Rouge Parish Office of Gifted and Talented Programs Presentation, 2010). Moreover, results of a survey of parents of gifted students (Mathews, 2011) revealed that 77.80% of the respondents confirmed that their children had been screened, identified, and placed in programs with gifted and talented services in a timely manner.

One of the most persistent challenges for program administrators has been the annual relocation of schools and classrooms as required for the development and expansion of the Gifted and Talented Program, particularly subsequent to the implementation of the 1996 consent decree desegregation agreement. Programs and resources have been shifted around the parish to address the following related variables: a) neighborhood attendance patterns, b) availability of vacant classrooms in particular schools, c) racial demographics of the school, d) increased bus transportation of students to distant school sites, and e) some school administrators’ unwillingness to embrace the philosophy of providing gifted and talented education in their particular schools.

Student enrollment cycles over the lifetime of the program have reflected the changes in school system policies, procedures, and attitudes toward the program (Slocumb, 1998). For example, dramatic program growth occurred from approximately 40 student enrollees in 1976 to more than 3,500 students in 1993 (East Baton Rouge Parish Data Processing Center, 2011). As transportation complications became more unpopular among both students and parents during the later years of the program, enrollment declined from ~3,500 students to ~1,197 students from 1993 to 2007 (East Baton Rouge Parish Gifted and Talented Program Count 2006-2007, 2007). More recently, however, the academically gifted student enrollment has culminated in a 36.8% enrollment increase (East Baton Rouge Parish Gifted and Talented Program Count 2012-2013, 2012, 2018). Also, there has been a trend for parents voluntarily providing their own students’ transportation to those schools with gifted and talented services (Mathews, 2011). This process saves students’ bus riding time and reduces parents’ concerns about program locations.

Media Coverage

During the history of the gifted and talented program development, program administrators agreed that responding to journalists and addressing public reactions to news media output required an inordinate amount of administrative time and effort, particularly during the 1980’s and 1990’s during program expansion and the United States Middle District Court desegregation suit and agreement (Rumfellow, 2010). In June 2012, more than three decades after special education services for gifted and talented students were implemented, a keyword search for “gifted talented education” in the local newspaper archival database yielded 2,228 news stories (Archives Search Results, 2012) beginning in 1976. The print media primarily focused on eight themes: a) enrollment growth, b) school site selection for programs, c) student screening, d) student assessment, e) student identification as gifted, e) teacher qualifications and training, f) racial diversity, g) student achievement, h) recognition of student success, and h) the resulting requirements of the court-ordered consent decree desegregation agreement. Thus, responding to the media was labeled by the program administrators as a major challenge without easy resolution. Interestingly, there has been little research literature within the academic field of gifted and talented education regarding the influence of media coverage on various elements of gifted and talented programs.

Parental Advocacy

Beginning in 1976, parents of gifted and talented students organized themselves into a parent association that now has a history of supporting an educational mission that “assures that all gifted and talented students in the East Baton Rouge Parish school system are afforded an appropriate educational opportunity through a public school program that maintains the highest standards of professional quality” (Baton Rouge Association for Gifted and Talented Students, 2012). The parent association has accomplished its mission by advocating for students in the gifted and talented program, interfacing with school system representatives, organizing membership meetings, presenting “teacher of the year” awards, and periodically administering parent surveys focusing on various dimensions of gifted and talented programs including educational quality and recommended improvements.

Several former program administrators credit the parent association with influencing the development of the full-time self-contained classrooms that evolved into the dominant administrative design of the program. Further, because of a major public advocacy effort by the parents informally known as “pushers,” the Gifted and Talented Program expanded into the middle and high schools in the middle 1980’s (Furlow, 2010).

Six of the seven program administrators stated that the Parent Association also has become influential in advocating for the entire public school system. In fact, their recent defense of the school system and its commitment to the Gifted and Talented Program was evidenced when proposed state legislation threatened the existence of the current school system’s service area. Parents collectively articulated the value of residing in a community that provides quality education to all students commensurate with their abilities. These parents also have been successful over many years in defeating legislative attempts to relax the mandated regulations concerning special education for gifted and talented students.

Program Impact on Gifted and Talented Students

Approximately 55,000 students have participated in the gifted and talented program at some time in their pre-kindergarten through grade twelve enrollment from 1976 through 2011 (East Baton Rouge Parish Data Processing Center, 2011). All program administrators unanimously stated that the most significant historical impact of the gifted and talented program has been the overwhelmingly positive educational advancement of its student participants. These conclusions were extrapolated from the school system’s student enrollment records, evaluation reports, newspaper stories, and analyses of the state’s enrollment reports from the school system’s annual student counts completed each October.

Anecdotal stories from former gifted and talented students who participated in the program from 1976 through 2004 were collected from informal interviews with a small sample of individuals (Mathews, 2004). Many of these former students, now adults in their late 30’s to mid-40’s, are employed in a wide array of professions such as investment bankers, academic researchers, lawyers, professional musicians, teachers, elected state leaders, business leaders, etc. During a review of their post-secondary educational opportunities, they revealed that they had attended some of the nation’s premier institutions of higher education for their undergraduate and professional training. As a group, they credited the challenging curricular offerings in the gifted and talented program with preparing them for their high level of academic achievement and professional success. Furthermore, many of these former students recounted how their gifted and talented teachers were the primary impetus for their high self-expectations and positive attitudes. They collectively confirmed that their varied and successful career patterns could be attributed to their participation in and influence of the gifted and talented program. This generation of past students continues to reconnect through social media, internet networks, class reunions, weddings, and business associations. Also, many in this cohort now have children who are participating in the current program, and some are serving as leaders of the parent association that advocates for gifted and talented education.

Program Impact on Teachers, Administrators, and the School System

Many of the former teachers of gifted and talented students have become curriculum experts, principals, superintendents, and leaders within the school system during the past 40 years. Program administrators stated that these former teachers have told them that their professional careers were enhanced by participating in the gifted and talented program because of the required additional educational certification, challenging curricular opportunities, and their enhanced reputation as outstanding educators. Further, program administrators of the gifted and talented program reported that their careers also have changed positively due to their program leadership experiences. One former supervisor stated, “being a principal in a school with a gifted and talented program helped them become better curriculum leaders because of the need to challenge gifted and talented students.” There is little research literature in the field of gifted and talented education addressing these professional outcomes, however, Dehaan and Kough (1956) identified the changes that teachers of the gifted and talented would make as a result of their employments and participation in programs identified to educate the brightest. Their research identified a number of questions that should be addressed concerning a teachers experience in the program.

Programs in gifted and talented education traditionally measure success by describing the program’s impact on student achievement.

However, according to parents who completed a 2011 parent survey (Mathews, 2011); approximately 84% of the parents of participating students stated that would not have enrolled their children in the public school system if the gifted and talented program had not provided as an outstanding educational option for curricular enhancement. Further, the gifted program within the public school system is perceived by parents to be an exemplary educational program with outstanding teachers (82.9%) who meet their child's academic requirements (80 %) and social needs (89%) (Mathews, 2011). Also, after reviewing the seven program administrators' responses to the surveys and interviews, it is apparent that they also perceived that the public school system has benefitted. One former administrator commented, "the gifted and talented programs had been one of the best retention programs provided by the public school system for the parents who could afford options." For example, high-achieving students were retained who otherwise might have enrolled in private or parochial schools or sought alternative educational options outside the traditional school systems.

Summary and Discussion

By the late 1970's, it was widely recognized that the State of Louisiana developed legislation that was sustainable and supported the education of gifted and talented students within the public school systems (Mathews, 1980). States that mandated comprehensive coverage for the education of gifted and talented students were unique at that time and eventually became national leaders due to their long-term stability in both program efforts and the quality of legislation. The landmark Louisiana special education regulations incorporated provisions for financial support, flexible program administrative options, assessment and placement guidelines, and the protection of the rights of all individuals involved. As a result, the East Baton Rouge School System developed a plan to educate its gifted and talented students and successfully implemented it according to its original intent.

Forty plus years later, the collective analyses of various evaluation reports, program artifacts, court documents, interviews and surveys from one current and six former administrative supervisors of the gifted and talented program indicate that there were a combination of factors that sustained this environment from early program development through the various challenges, changes, and improvements. First, from the gifted and talented program's initiation, there has been strong parental involvement that evolved into ongoing advocacy for the continuation, expansion, enhancement, and support of the gifted and talented program. Second, exceptional leadership by the Louisiana Legislature with the support of school administrators established the necessary procedures to enact quality educational legislation and accompanying guidelines to sustain the necessary financial resources for long-term program success. Third, in addition to statewide and local advocacy efforts, the large public school system that developed and implemented the gifted and talented program collaborated with state universities to develop certification programs for teachers who, in turn, provided the high-quality differentiated instruction to the school system's students. Fourth, the precedent-setting United States Middle District court-ordered consent decree agreement (Davis, 1966) had a positive influence by modifying student recruitment, identification, placement, curricular enhancements, and program settings within the gifted and talented program. Fifth, student participants in the gifted and talented program are now serving as living testaments to the gifted and talented program's influence as they have progressed in their respective careers, become leaders in their communities, and continue to serve as advocates for the East Baton Rouge Parish Gifted and Talented Program.

The long-term implications for the future of the program include challenges associated with the continuation of the East Baton Rouge Parish Gifted and Talented Program. This would come from a regional political movement in which some political leaders are advocating for a more decentralized public school system that would include a range of educational options including charter programs and a voucher system allowing public school students to attend private and parochial schools. One of the more recent supervisory had opined that the only way the program would be discontinued was by breaking it apart. Further, in a movement for more independence and local control, an increasing number of regions within the large East Baton Rouge Parish public school system have developed or are attempting to develop separate, disconnected school districts with or without the benefit of gifted and talented educational services. An editorial in the local newspaper expressed concern that the excellent programs in magnet and gifted and talented education increasingly would be threatened by the further fragmentation of the school system (Editorial, 2012). Thus, it has become critical for educational leaders to widely recognize that publicizing a program's history, accomplishments, and student successes of an acclaimed 40-year gifted and talented program would be important to gain support and advocacy from the greater community.

Understanding the historical significance of gifted and talented program becomes important in preventing its possible demise and is ultimately the final evaluation for the worth of developing programs for gifted and talented students.

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