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Schools, Facing Tight Budgets, Leave Gifted Programs Behind

By DIANA JEAN SCHEMO

MOUNTAIN GROVE, Mo. — Before her second birthday, Audrey Walker recognized sequences of five colors. When she was 6, her father, Michael, overheard her telling a little boy: "No, no, no, Hunter, you don't understand. What you were seeing was a flashback."

At school, Audrey quickly grew bored as the teacher drilled letters and syllables until her classmates caught on. She flourished, instead, in a once-a-week class for gifted and talented children where she could learn as fast as her nimble brain could take her.

But in September, Mountain Grove, a remote rural community in the Ozarks where nearly three in four students live in poverty, eliminated all of its programs for the district's 50 or so gifted children like Audrey, who is 8 now. Struggling with shrinking revenues and new federal mandates that focus on improving the test scores of the lowest-achieving pupils, Mountain Grove and many other school districts across the country have turned to cutting programs for their most promising students.

"Rural districts like us, we've been literally bleeding to death," said Gary Tyrrell, assistant superintendent of the Mountain Grove School District, which has 1,550 students. The formula for cutting back in hard times was straightforward, if painful, Mr. Tyrrell said: Satisfy federal and state requirements first. Then, "Do as much as we can for the majority and work on down."

Under that kind of a formula, programs for gifted and talented children have become especially vulnerable.

Unlike services for disabled children, programs for gifted children have no single federal agency to track them. A survey by the National Association for Gifted Children found that 22 states did not contribute toward the costs of programs for gifted children, and five other states spent less than \$250,000.

Since that survey, released in 2002, the outlook for programs for the gifted has grown harsher. In Michigan, state aid for gifted students fell from more than \$4 million a year to \$250,000. Illinois, which was spending \$19 million a year on programs for fast learners, eliminated state financing for them. New York was spending \$14 million a year on education for the gifted but has now cut all money earmarked for gifted children, saying districts should pay for them out of block grants. Nearly one in four school districts in Connecticut have eliminated their programs for gifted students.

The new federal education law, known as No Child Left Behind, "has almost taken gifted off the radar screen in terms of people being worried about that group of learners," said Joyce L. Vantassel-Baska, executive director of the Center for Gifted Education at the College of William and Mary.

"In a tight budget environment," Ms. Vantassel-Baska said, "the decisions made about what gets dropped or not funded tend to disfavor the smaller programs."

Missouri was reimbursing districts for 75 percent of the cost of educating gifted children but has reduced the contribution to 58 percent. In Mountain Grove, an aging base of voters rejected a proposed tax levy in February. Schools are now planning to cut seven teachers in the elementary grades, public financing of team sports and transportation service within the town's boundaries.

"There are some mandates that you must do from the feds and the state," Mr. Tyrrell said, citing programs for disabled children as an example. "Those will be the last to go."

No Child Left Behind is silent on the education of gifted children. Under the law, schools must test students annually in reading and math from third grade to eighth grade, and once in high school.

Schools receiving federal antipoverty money must show that more students each year are passing standardized tests or face expensive and progressively more severe consequences.

As long as students pass the exams, the federal law offers no rewards for raising the scores of high achievers, or punishment if their progress lags.

Eugene Hickok, acting deputy secretary for elementary and secondary education at the federal Education Department, called the closing of programs for highly intelligent children an unfortunate, "unintended consequence" of No Child Left Behind. "Laws by definition are rather blunt instruments," Dr. Hickok said.

He said he did not believe that No Child Left Behind alone was responsible, adding that

some districts blamed the law unfairly. "It's running for cover to say we can't deal with your needs because our fundamental requirement is to serve these other kids," Dr. Hickok said.

He said the administration was not considering revising the law to protect programs for gifted children, calling such programs a matter of "state and local control."

The tough choices, in Mountain Grove and districts around the country, are fueling emotional debates about educational fairness and where districts should focus limited resources. Among some educators and parents, special consideration for gifted children appears to attract resentment, and here in Mountain Grove, the parents of gifted children, while concerned, seem reluctant to demand extra enrichment.

Bridget Williams, the principal of Mountain Grove Middle School, maintains that very bright children do not deserve specially tailored classes, especially when the district is focusing on bringing all children up to a minimum standard of competence.

"Are they more important than a special-ed kid?" Ms. Williams asked in an interview with other administrators. Some teachers did not like to release their smartest students from regular classes, and one perennial dispute involved whether or not students who attended the classes for the gifted should have to make up homework from their regular classrooms.

Ms. Williams said it was not so much the education, but merely status, that gifted children lost when their program was cut in September. "They lost the title," she said.

Others contend that cutting programs for such students threatens the nation's future by stunting the intellectual growth of the next generation of innovators. Not only do gifted children learn faster, but often they learn in a different way, experts say.

"Many of them will never, ever achieve their potential without some type of advanced learning opportunities and resources," said Joseph S. Renzulli, director of the National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented at the University of Connecticut. "Equity goes both ways. It means we're going to accommodate the needs of students, whether they're struggling, average or above-average learners."

Carolyn Groves, who taught gifted education here for seven years, fashioned creative projects intended to stretch the critical thinking of her students. One unit put "Nursery Rhymes on Trial," while in another, middle-school students created the government of Utopia. "Mind benders" gave students systematic rules for deconstructing challenging mathematical questions.

"People say, 'These kids are smart. They're going to make it anyway,'" Ms. Groves said.

But experts say that gifted children can easily grow bored and alienated.

"These are the kids who are either going to turn out to be nuclear scientists or Unabombers," said Ms. Groves, who now teaches high school remedial students at the vocational school. "It all depends on which way they're led."

Some parents of Mountain Grove's brightest children try to make up for the elimination of programs for the gifted. Mr. Walker and his wife, Marilyn, shuttle Audrey to dance and Spanish lessons. They encourage her interest in filmmaking by helping her develop ideas for movies she shoots on the family's video camera. Mr. Walker said he worried, though, about other promising children whose parents were too poor or overworked to offer their own children similar enrichment.

These days, Mr. Walker said, Audrey no longer enjoys school and frequently asks to stay home.

In small towns like Mountain Grove, Mr. Walker said, "a tremendous amount of frustration can build up in these kids, because they're different, but they don't know why." When she participated in the classes for the gifted, Audrey felt less isolated for her bookishness and learned to manage frustration that used to crush her, when her efforts did not live up to her vision.

On a deeper level, Mr. Walker said he worried about the message Mountain Grove was sending to its most promising students. "Yes, they may achieve great things," Mr. Walker said. "But I don't think they'll achieve the greatest things that they're capable of. It's saying it's all right to aim for mediocrity."