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Gifted students losing lifeline

Parents, advocates decry budget cuts

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Getting top grades has always been easy for Schuyler Gardner, 17, of Mequon, even though she attends one of the best public school systems in the state.

In fact, the hard part has been finding challenges to keep the Homestead High School senior working to her potential.

"She thrives in an academic environment. The challenge has been to find things that challenge her. It is so easy for her," said her mother, Peg Randall-Gardner, who credits the teachers in the district's gifted and talented program for giving Schuyler - and two of her other children - the help they need to succeed.

"It's a lifeline for my family," Gardner said.

But the lifeline is in danger of snapping for thousands of the state's best students with districts cutting back and even eliminating gifted and talented programs as they struggle with tight budgets and the need to comply with new federal education mandates.

According to a study by the Wisconsin Association of School District Administrators and the Wisconsin Education Association Council released last fall, 60% of the 344 superintendents responding said they cut or eliminated gifted and talented programs last year.

The cutbacks are coming in small rural districts such as Kewaskum in Washington County - which no longer has any staff dedicated to teaching gifted and talented students - and affluent North Shore districts such as Mequon - which cut its staff from three teachers to two last year. In Racine, one teacher oversees the gifted and talented program for the district's 21,000 students. And her job is on the line, with the district targeting such positions for possible budget cuts.

The Milwaukee Public Schools have not been affected as dramatically as many suburban school districts because much of the programming takes place in three schools specially designated for gifted and talented students.

A worrying trend

The trend worries parents and advocates such as Ruth Robinson, a Janesville teacher and president of the Wisconsin Association for Talented and Gifted. These programs provide the motivation and challenges that bright students need to do well in school, Robinson says.

Without them, gifted students will simply turn off from school, underperform and may even drop out. Research shows that up to one-quarter of the country's high school dropouts are gifted students, Robinson adds.

"Part of the problem is that people are going back to the comfortable myth that gifted kids are OK on their own," said Robin Schlei, the gifted and talented coordinator for the Mequon-Thiensville School District. "These kids are different from the norm, and they need help and support."

Pamela Clinkenbeard, a University of Wisconsin-Whitewater professor and expert in gifted education, says gifted students are among the most at-risk for failing.

As a graduate student at Purdue University, she said, she worked with a seventh-grader who was years ahead of her classmates in math. School officials did not want to accelerate the girl, and she started skipping school and becoming depressed. At the urging of Purdue professors, she enrolled in a college calculus class and earned an A.

District officials say they have no choice but to make the cuts as they struggle with limited resources to educate all students.

An added wrinkle is the push to comply with No Child Left Behind, the federal law that requires all students to be proficient in reading and math by 2014. In order to meet that goal, districts have to allocate more resources to help struggling students.

With budgets expected to be tight for the foreseeable future, this means that cuts in other areas - like gifted and talented - are unavoidable, according to John Box, superintendent of the Mequon-Thiensville School District.

Under state law, all Wisconsin districts are required to identify gifted students and give them access to appropriate programs. Robinson and others worry that many districts are no longer complying with the law. Adding to the concerns is the fact that the state Department of Public Instruction has not had a consultant exclusively for gifted education since 1994.

According to the National Association for Gifted Children, Wisconsin is one of only eight states that do not have a state coordinator for gifted programming. It is one of 17 states that did not allocate any money for gifted programming in 2002.

Getting a DPI consultant is "critical," Clinkenbeard said. Without enforcement from DPI, she said, there's no way to know how many Wisconsin school districts actually are meeting legal requirements - but she estimates it could be as low as 25%.

According to Clinkenbeard, Wisconsin was recognized as a national leader in gifted education in the 1970s. Its

reputation started to decline as teachers retired and weren't replaced, she said.

"It's hard to measure what you lose by *not* challenging them," said Clinkenbeard, who calls investing in gifted education good for the economy, because it can slow down Wisconsin's much-publicized brain drain.

Sue Grady, a DPI consultant whose assignment covers gifted and talented among other areas, says the lack of a consultant for gifted and talented does not reflect a lack of commitment. She is involved in plans to hold a summit on gifted education this fall.

Reductions in gifted programming present an equity issue, Robinson said. Affluent families still will be able to give their students enrichment by sending them to camps or special weekend programs. Gifted students from poor families will be able to get the help they need only if it is offered through the public school system, she said.

Gardner, the Mequon parent, has two other children involved in the district's gifted program. Each has different needs that - like Schuyler's - have been identified and addressed by Schlei, the gifted coordinator.

But as she watches Schlei and the other gifted specialists stretched thin this year after the loss of the third gifted position, Gardner can't help but compare the situation with the level of services that her youngest child, Nikolai, receives. Because he is autistic, the kindergartner receives a host of special education services.

"I wish they could get the same validation that Nikolai does," she says of her oldest children. "They are special-needs kids, too."

Sarah Carr of the Journal Sentinel staff contributed to this report.

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