



24 August 2018

Education Interim Committee  
C/O Mr. Padraic McCracken  
Montana Legislative Services  
P.O. Box 201706  
Helena, MT 59620-1706

Re: June 28, 2018, Questions from the Committee Regarding Montana's Gifted & Talented Programs

Dear Education Interim Committee:

The Office of Public Instruction (OPI) appreciates the attention that the Education Interim Committee (Committee) is paying to the state of Gifted & Talented (G&T) education in Montana and will endeavor to provide as much information as possible to the Committee.

1. Are Teachers Adequately Prepared to Identify and Serve Gifted and Talented Students?

The Montana Council of Deans of Education (Council) are best-suited to discuss the state of educator preparation while aspiring educators are still enrolled in their programs and the OPI will defer to the Council's expertise on that matter. The OPI's response to this question will instead focus on what services are available for educators as they prepare for and maintain licensure, as well as in what areas the OPI is not tracking information.

The single greatest opportunity that the OPI provides educators pertaining to training in G&T education would stem from the Teacher Learning Hub (Hub). The Hub is an online platform where the OPI hosts numerous free online courses that educators and aspiring educators can take as professional development to earn renewal units and expand their own horizons. The Hub is constantly expanding its course selection, with over 100 self-paced or facilitated courses as of the date of this letter. Pertaining specifically to G&T, the Hub has two open classes "Intro to Gifted Students"<sup>1</sup> and "Gifted and Talented: Depth and Complexity"<sup>2</sup> that educators may currently take. Two additional classes, "Identifying High-Ability/High-Potential Students" and "Creating Supportive Learning Environments for GT" are currently in development.

As the Council points out in its response letter, there is no current endorsement in G&T that an educator may apply for as part of their license. Further, the OPI does not have a system in place to provide any sort of "micro-credentialing" or other mechanism to officially document an educator's

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<sup>1</sup> This four-hour course has been available for 19 months and has been completed by 162 educators from 92 Montana schools.

<sup>2</sup> This one-hour course has been available for just over six months and has been completed by 38 educators from 25 Montana schools.

experience or expertise in working with G&T students. The OPI also does not track the areas educators receive renewal units in, so it is unable to report whether educators are regularly refreshing on or learning anew about serving G&T students during their five-year licensure cycles.

2. Are Districts Being Held Accountable for Providing Educational Programs for Gifted and Talented Students?

By necessity the response to this inquiry requires some clarification on the OPI's part. With respect, the OPI believes that the Committee has perhaps misunderstood some of the information previously provided to it. For accreditation purposes under Admin. R. Mont. 10.55.804, the OPI requires that districts affirm or deny this inquiry:

Does the Board of Trustees provide structured support and assistance to teachers in identifying and meeting the diverse student needs of gifted and talented students, and provide a framework for considering a full range of alternatives for addressing student needs?

Districts will report back "Yes" or "No" in response to this question. This Committee's letter states that "in testimony to the committee, we learned that a significant number of districts report identifying no gifted and talented students despite reporting through the accreditation process having programs to serve gifted and talented students." This is certainly a possibility and not inconsistent with the assurances that districts give to the State every year. It is possible for a district to offer a program (indeed, all of Montana's districts reported on their last accreditation report that they have one) but have no students currently qualified for or participating in the program. An example of a similar assurance would be a district that reports having the capacity to serve Special Education students but also reports that it has no students who are currently identified as qualifying for those services.

That said, the OPI is unable to respond to the part of this inquiry related to the "extremely anomalous distribution of gifted and talented students..." While the OPI is aware of some of the data on which the Committee's position may be based, the OPI does not have the capacity to perform regulatory oversight of districts to ensure that they are living up to all the various assurances they provide in their yearly accreditation reports. For example, the OPI collects assurances that districts have a policy on bullying, but the OPI has not been tasked with, or provided the resources for, collecting every district policy manual and checking the quality, much less the state of enforcement of, those policies. Montana has historically left such oversight to the locally-elected boards of trustees.

Thank you again for your interest in this important subject. I or my staff will be present at your September meeting to discuss any additional questions or concerns you may have.

Sincerely,

Elsie Arntzen  
State Superintendent of Public Instruction

