



MIDDLE SCHOOL GIFTED SERVICES



A POSITION PAPER

The California Association for the Gifted (CAG) periodically publishes position papers that deal with issues, policies, and practices that have an impact on the education of gifted and talented students. All position papers approved by the CAG Board of Directors are consistent with the organization's philosophy and mission, and the current research in the field.

The position papers support the organization's belief in the value and uniqueness of all individuals, its respect for diversity present in our society, and its commitment to honoring the similarities and differences among all students. CAG encourages the provision of educational opportunities that are appropriate to challenge and nurture the growth of each child's potential. The organization is especially mindful of the need for advocacy for individuals who have developed or show the promise of developing intellectual abilities and talents at high levels.



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The middle school years are an important and challenging stage in the development of young adolescents. For gifted students middle schools must provide rigorous, challenging, and motivating academic experiences while meeting their unique social and emotional needs so that these students can extend their abilities and become self-directed learners. There are many structures and strategies that middle schools can use to accomplish this balance.

In the attempt to meet the unique affective needs of middle school students, the focus may be more on school climate than on academics. However, it is essential to provide an academically rigorous environment for gifted middle school students. The instruction should focus on the strategies of differentiation, such as depth and complexity, as well as the use of independent study, advanced resources, and ability-appropriate learning experiences. This can be accomplished through an emphasis on complex, problem-based, student-centered curricula, differentiated according to the student's needs. Other appropriate instructional strategies include acceleration, Socratic seminars, universal concepts, use of higher-level thinking skills (e.g., analysis, synthesis, and evaluation), research and advanced study skills, and organizational skills. Instruction in metacognition will enable students to become self-directed learners and provide the opportunity for continual growth in knowledge, understanding, and skill.

Meeting Cognitive Needs

Middle school philosophy generally emphasizes affective development and peer interaction through heterogeneous grouping and cooperative learning. In the attempt to provide equity for all students, the academic needs of the gifted learner may be overlooked. While heterogeneous grouping can benefit students socially, gifted students must have the opportunity to work at least part of their instructional time in homogeneous groupings with students of similar intellectual abilities. Flexible grouping with ongoing assessment is necessary so all students' academic settings are appropriate for their level of learning.

Cooperative Learning is an instructional strategy that can be appropriate for early adolescents, but when a cooperative learning group is used for academic learning, the group for gifted students should be composed of high-ability learners. To be of value, the group must emphasize collaborative, problem-solving activities rather than skill development. Cooperative Learning is inappropriate for high-ability students when it is used to teach information and skills in heterogeneous groups.



Meeting Affective Needs

All middle school students face challenging social and emotional pressures. Recent research indicates that gifted middle school students express many worries similar to that of the regular student population. For all groups of students, popularity is ranked as their most significant worry. Effective strategies for building social-emotional skills include placing gifted students on school teams and in advisory groups that have a significant cadre of intellectual peers, encouraging gifted students to participate in one or two extracurricular

activities that appeal to their personal interests and talents, and providing summer enrichment and acceleration opportunities. Gifted students often demonstrate an idealism and optimism combined with heightened awareness of global issues. Such interests may be supported through meaningful service projects that allow them to make a difference in their community.

Middle school is a time when students' priorities may be changing, and fitting into a peer group may overshadow the desire to succeed academically. In addition, middle school is organized departmentally and the transition from a single teacher and class to multiple teachers and classes can be daunting for some students. The support of an accessible, caring adult who can guide and respond to concerns while emphasizing the importance of accountability is very valuable to the incoming middle school student. Culturally different students and adolescent girls may especially benefit from interaction with successful and accessible mentors who take a personal interest in their futures. Parents should be encouraged to remain actively involved in their child's academic planning. Middle schools should have defined procedures for intervention and support for gifted students who are struggling with academic and/or social-emotional issues. In addition, vertical articulation must occur to ease the transition from middle school to high school.

Meeting Learning Needs

Teachers, counselors, and administrators who are knowledgeable about gifted education, appropriate assessment tools, challenging instructional methods, materials, and strategies that provide for cognitive and affective growth of gifted adolescents are critical to the success of gifted students in the middle school. Teachers must be able to: provide a curriculum that challenges and motivates; use a wide variety of developmentally appropriate instructional and grouping practices; and communicate and collaborate effectively with colleagues, students, and parents. It is critical that districts provide opportunities for teachers and counselors to receive specialized training on the academic and affective needs of gifted learners. Personal qualities that will benefit the teacher of middle school students include flexibility, patience, a sense of humor, emotional stability, and, most of all, a genuine affection for their young adolescent students.



The California Association for the Gifted believes that middle school programs must provide for both significant cognitive and affective growth for all students. For gifted students the challenge is to support their continuing high levels of intellectual development while building their social-emotional skills and understanding of their intense affective needs. For all middle school students, adolescence is a time of critical change both cognitively and affectively. For gifted students, achieving a balance presents an even greater need for knowledgeable educators, as the range of development may be atypically wide and the possibilities for advanced achievement unusually high.

References:

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