



# PITTSBURGH TRIBUNE-REVIEW

State expands rules for gifted students

By Bill Zlatos  
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David Badamo composes a sports fight song, goes on a scavenger hunt and uses books about sports to learn literary techniques at the Senator John Heinz History Center.

Badamo, 11, visited the center with 200 other gifted students from 20 school districts in the area.

"Most people think we're different because they think we're brainiacs," said Badamo, a fifth-grader at Ross Elementary School in the North Hills School District. "I don't think we're different at all. We do a lot more advanced work. We still like to do sports and the things other kids like to do."

The state Board of Education has approved new regulations that will make it easier to identify students as gifted.

Gifted education -- a form of special education -- ensures that schools meet the needs of its most able students, who might otherwise become bored with the regular instruction. The new state rules will allow more students, including gifted students with learning disabilities, to get the special instruction they need.

"This is about a more flexible, open process," said Jim Buckheit, executive director of the state board. "It opens it up to students who may not test well on the IQ test."

Current state rules say students must have an IQ score of at least 130 and do well on other measures -- grades, teacher observation, other standardized tests -- to be identified as gifted. The new standards, which after a review process could kick in for the new school year, say districts can use an IQ test or other measures.

Amanda Godley, associate professor of English and an expert on gifted

education at the University of Pittsburgh, likes the change.

"Many states and school districts (in other states) do not use traditional IQ tests to designate students as gifted," she said.

Pittsburgh Public Schools is the only district in the area that sends its 2,800 gifted students to a special school one day a week. J. Kaye Cupples, executive director of student support services, said the district is thinking of ending its gifted center at Greenway School because of concerns the program might not meet students' needs the rest of the school week.

The district will experiment this fall with five schools -- Colfax, Dilworth, Fort Pitt, Grandview and Northview Heights -- where gifted children will be taught with other students.

Many districts "cluster" gifted students in a classroom with regular students.

"Research shows that they need to be with intellectual peers a good part of the day to share ideas and to push each other to excel," said Cathy Ekis, the elementary gifted coordinator at Penn Hills.

The youngsters might also be pulled out of their regular classrooms and be taught by special teachers elsewhere in their school.

Gifted students can acquire knowledge two times faster than regular students, said Bonnie Dyer, curriculum and instruction coordinator for the Allegheny Intermediate Unit.

Teachers of gifted students give them more material and harder work because they can handle it faster.

"I tell my parents we will start two levels above what is being taught in the regular education classroom," said Sue Mackulin, gifted support teacher for the West Jefferson Hills School District. "That's a minimum."

Districts also offer "enrichment" activities, like the trip to the Heinz Center, that expand on what students learn in class.

Gifted high school students at Franklin Regional School District in Westmoreland County take Advanced Placement or college classes or shadow professionals in jobs that interest them. Middle and high school students in the district compete in contests like Model United Nations, quiz bowls or chess tournaments.

Linda Prah, 38, of Elizabeth Township, has a son, Tyler, a fourth-grader

at Central Elementary School in the Elizabeth Forward School District. He goes to a special program for gifted students one period every two weeks.

"I know their resources are kind of stretched," Prah said. "(His teacher) doesn't have as much time to serve the kids as she needs."

Joe Novak, 11, is a gifted student at Shenandoah Elementary School in the Penn Hills School District.

"Our teacher really pushes us to do our best," he said. "Even though it isn't the most exciting class, it is the most helpful."

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