

Takoma Park Elementary shifts its focus to ‘school-wide enrichment’

Gifted-and-talented label dropped in favor of broader curriculum changes

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by Agnes Jasinski, Staff Writer

After years as the primary gifted-and-talented program in Montgomery County, Takoma Park Elementary School has dropped the label for the first time this school year and is working under a new model that aims to challenge all of its students.

Students are still regrouped based on their abilities in math, but not in science and social studies as they once were. Enrichment clusters each Wednesday, during which children are placed in semester-long magnet or non-magnet groups based on their interests in computer science, math, writing or social studies/science, have replaced the daily groupings of the traditional magnet program.

“They latched onto the mantra of ‘How do we meet the needs of every child, in every subject, every day?’ That, to a gifted-and-talented community, sounded like voodoo,” said Mia Allen, gifted-and-talented liaison with the school’s PTA. “But, I’d say we’re in a better position now. ... We haven’t lost as much as we’ve gained.”

Discussions about making changes at the school began last fall after administrators were approached by county education officials. According to Montgomery County Public Schools guidelines, students below the second-grade level cannot be labeled “gifted-and-talented,” said Elliot Alter, assistant principal at the school, even though the school had been doing so for years. Rather than simply renaming the program to meet county standards, the school decided to take a closer look at its curriculum for a broader base of changes.

Following a review of the school’s program and a weeklong conference at the University of Connecticut under Joseph Renzulli, an educational psychologist, about how to incorporate enriching activities in the classroom, the decision was made to adopt new guidelines at the school called the “school-wide enrichment model,” or SEM.

“The big thing out of it was how teachers, a lot of times, don’t do enriching activities with all of their students,” said Kendell Matthews, magnet coordinator at the school who also attended the conference. “Different children at different times have different talents and skills.”

What resulted were “enrichment clusters,” or weekly meetings in subjects that students — with the help of their parents — chose based on their interests, rather than through placement testing. Students in the writing cluster, for example, will work on their

research skills by writing articles for the school's newspaper. In the computer science cluster, the only cluster offered solely to magnet students due to a lack of computer space, students are learning the first steps of Web site design. Students are still tested prior to placement in the magnet clusters.

Much of the discontent among parents, however, came from the other set of changes. Since the school was no longer labeled as gifted and talented, students were no longer grouped as such in science and social studies.

“A lot of frustration last year came from parents of very bright children,” said Joanna Hoffschneider, PTA president at the school last year. Hoffschneider's son, who is now a third-grader at Piney Branch Elementary School, was in the school's last group of students labeled gifted and talented. “When you tell them that the value of grouping in this way is that your child can help other children, that's not much of an answer. You didn't send them to school to be a teacher, but to be challenged.”

Administrators saw the mixed classrooms as an improvement. Placing children at all levels together in one block allows the school to function more as a cohesive community, Alter said, rather than operating as a “school within a school.” All the strategies that were used in the grouped classrooms last year are still incorporated into the regular classrooms, he said.

“For me, it's not just the magnet piece of the program ... it's a level of instruction that meets [my daughter's] unique needs,” said Allen, whose son began third grade at Piney Branch Elementary School this year and whose daughter began kindergarten at Takoma Park Elementary School this year. Allen and her children live in Laytonsville, a more than an hour-long bus ride to the school.

Parent activism is not uncommon at the school. Two years ago, when the science and social studies program was cut from 50 minutes per day to 35-minute timeslot, parents with children there began a letter-writing campaign to the county to get the time restored. Jon Lickerman, whose son was in first grade at the school when the cuts were made, said that while the time was restored the following year, concerns about putting science and social studies classes on the backburner remained.

“They have these mandated amounts of time on reading, writing and math, and come hell or high water they have to do that ... but half that time on subjects just as complex, that's not fair,” Lickerman said.

For now, administrators hope an increased amount of parent discussion on the new program and more experience with the enrichment clusters has calmed things down.

“Theoretically, it's a great idea ... making the same opportunity available to every child, regardless of the label applied to them. Most are in favor of egalitarian treatment,” Hoffschneider said. “But at the same time, the same things don't work for everybody.”

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Naomi Brookner/The Gazette
First graders in the science enrichment cluster
at Takoma Park Elementary School hold up
containers of sand for their teacher, Kendell
Matthews, to see during class Nov. 8.