

ESTABLISHING A MARYLAND COHORT IN EDUCATION OF GIFTED AND TALENTED STUDENTS

The Maryland State Advisory Council on Gifted and Talented Student Education's Professional Development Subcommittee prepared this paper to answer some questions for local school systems, institutions of higher education and parents/community members who may be interested in establishing a cohort in education of gifted and talented students.

What is an educational cohort?

An educational cohort is a group of educators who develop a relationship based on a common long-term professional development experience. A cohort is one method for delivery of high-quality, standards-based professional development in a field such as education of gifted and talented (GT) students. Cohort groups come together repeatedly over a period of time, forging a professional learning community with a shared vocabulary, vision and understanding that can support participants both during and after the formal coursework.

Cohorts may be affiliated with Institution of Higher Education (IHE) programs that offer a sequence or concentration of courses in a particular topic, such as GT education, and also may lead to an advanced degree. The IHE can choose to offer the approved course sequence:

- As individual courses offered on campus;
- As a sequence of courses offered on campus, or as a regional cohort offered for individual educators from several school districts;
- As a consortium of universities offering different courses to the same educators;
- In partnership with a local school system (LSS) as a cohort for educators in that district and generally taught at a location in that district.

The primary focus of this paper is the LSS-IHE partnership cohort model for delivering graduate courses in education of gifted and talented students.¹

¹Examples of LSS-IHE graduate level cohort programs in Maryland include:

- Towson State University
 - Baltimore County Public Schools (ongoing)
 - Montgomery County Public Schools (ongoing)
- Johns Hopkins University
 - Anne Arundel County Public Schools (completed)
 - Carroll County Public Schools (completed)
 - Howard County Public Schools (completed)
 - Prince George County Public Schools (ongoing)
- CaseNEX – Charles County Public Schools (ongoing)

How may adoption of the Maryland COMAR Gifted and Talented Education Specialist certification affect Maryland IHE graduate course offerings in education of gifted and talented students?

In February 2009, the Maryland Professional Standards in Teacher Education Board adopted COMAR 13.A.12.03.12 Gifted and Talented Education Specialist certification. Requirements for this certification include a master's degree with 15 hours of graduate course work in specific competencies in gifted and talented education and three semester hours in a clinical/laboratory internship, all in a Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE)-approved program.²

As a result of the new COMAR regulation, it is likely that the demand for graduate level courses in gifted and talented education will increase and that Maryland IHEs will develop and/or expand their graduate level course offerings and course sequences in gifted and talented education. In order to gain MSDE approval, these courses must be standards-based.

Why would an LSS and an IHE want to form an LSS-IHE cohort in GT education?

There are many reasons why an LSS may seek to create a GT cohort program. The purposes may range from wanting to educate a substantial number of classroom teachers to work with the GT student population to preparing school and district level leadership with specific expertise in GT education.

Because the cohorts are generally taught in the LSS, the IHE, in turn, gains the opportunity to expand enrollments by reaching potential course participants from across Maryland in addition to those able to take courses on campus or in regional centers.

What are the steps to develop LSS-IHE cohort programs in Gifted and Talented Education in Maryland³

1. COMMITMENT TO DEVELOPMENT OF A COHORT IN GIFTED AND TALENTED EDUCATION BY BOTH AN LSS AND AN IHE

The impetus for starting a GT cohort can come from either an LSS or an IHE. However, since much of the purpose, development, and customizing of the courses in the cohort program is based on the LSS strategic plan, policies and practices, it essential that a person or persons in the LSS be strongly committed to the success of the cohort.

An LSS may initiate the cohort planning, but it is critical to have information from the IHE that details the gifted and talented cohort options. It would benefit IHEs to reach out

² The requirements for the Gifted and Talented Education Specialist can be found at <http://www.dsd.state.md.us/comar/13a/13a.12.03.12.htm>

³ The Advisory Council wishes to thank Kenneth T. Dickson, Coordinator, Gifted Education, Baltimore County Public Schools, for his input and substantive contributions to this section of the paper.

to Maryland LSSs to provide information regarding the availability of the program and the features that may provide a strong match to the needs of educators in the LSS.

2. LSS - STAKEHOLDER DISCUSSIONS TO IDENTIFY THE PURPOSE AND GOALS FOR THE COHORT PROGRAM

These preliminary discussions should be both internal and external (eg. citizen advisory councils) and held with as many stakeholders as possible concerning the rationale and benefits of a GT cohort collaboration. Key LSS and IHE contacts and representatives/stakeholders from all offices involved in establishing the cohort should be involved in planning the cohort to ensure that the plan has the appropriate support from each organization. Some possible involved offices should include:

- Office of Professional Development
- Office of Curriculum, including representatives from the Gifted and Talented Education Department
- Human Resources
- Other affiliated offices such as Title I

3. LSS - OUTCOMES OF DISCUSSIONS DOCUMENT

The LSS should develop a written action plan, timeline for implementation, and outcomes narrative of the discussions to serve as a document/notes to use “down the road” for various stakeholders if needed.

4. LSS - SEEK LEADERSHIP APPROVAL(S)

Using the outcomes document, the LSS should obtain necessary permissions from leadership personnel who can support the project.

5. LSS - IDENTIFY A UNIVERSITY AND LEAD PROFESSOR WHO TEACHES COURSES IN GT EDUCATION

The LSS should identify and connect with a university/professor who conducts GT courses. Various factors may influence this including: the university’s track record in working with school systems’ cohorts; coordination between the time lines of the LSS and IHE; availability of the professor; knowledge of the IHE philosophy about giftedness and professional development; the IHE’s GT courses; relationships of LSS personnel with university personnel.

It is important for the LSS to approach the IHE with specific details about the educators to be involved and the objectives for the program. The professor will need to develop a cohort proposal and syllabus for presentation for the school system stakeholders. This may require several meetings for LSS and IHE personnel to address enhancers and obstacles.

6. LSS AND IHE - COLLABORATE TO DEVELOP AN IMPLEMENTATION PLAN FOR THE GT COHORT, INCLUDING BOTH THE INSTRUCTIONAL AND NON-INSTRUCTIONAL BUSINESS COMPONENTS OF THE COHORT

LSS and IHE representatives from appropriate offices should plan the *instructional* and *non-instructional business* components of the GT cohort. The university representative(s) should present their syllabus, course materials, time lines, participant requirements, outcomes for participation, minimum and maximum numbers of participants, university staff or their qualified designee's availability to conduct the cohort. While coursework must be standards-based, an IHE may customize course curriculum, instruction, and assessment to meet the specific needs of the LSS partner and their educators and student populations. The cohort may be designed to allow participants in the cohort program to complete the coursework for an advanced degree and/or for Maryland certification as a Gifted and Talented Education Specialist.

It is also necessary to discuss the *non-instructional, business components* related to the cohort development. These meetings may include local school district "business" issues and logistics connected to professional development processes (example: scheduling of courses based on the IHE's fiscal and LSS reimbursement policies, teacher stipends, legal issues, teachers union issues associated with staff development, and expectations of both parties). Additionally, other items such as agreements related to local responsibilities and university responsibilities may be included in this step. Representatives from district professional development and human resources offices and the university office for cohorts may be the participants.

7. LSS AND IHE - PREPARE AN AGREEMENT OR MEMORANDUM OF UNDERSTANDING

A formal agreement known as a memorandum of understanding (MOU) should be established between the LSS and the IHE. The MOU, which is typically signed by the superintendent of schools and the IHE partners, includes specifications for offering the cohort and may include:

- IHE and LSS contacts
- Minimum and maximum number of participants
- Cost and payment procedures
- Instructors
- Site for the cohort and any affiliated costs
- Admission procedures
- Enrollment procedures, including minimum qualifications and selection of participants
- Courses and/or course sequence including on-line requirements, if applicable, and option for completion of concentration of gifted and talented courses and/or an advanced degree, if available

- Differentiation of existing courses to meet the needs of the LSS and participants (eg. screening and identification policies and processes) with standards-based content
- Communication processes including notification of the availability of the cohort program
- Other implementation and operational requirements

8. RECRUIT COHORT PARTICIPANTS - ANNOUNCE/ADVERTISE/PROMOTE

After approvals, educators/course participants need to be recruited. Parameters set by the school system and the university regarding recruiting teachers for professional development should guide this step. The university will have detailed descriptions of the courses, their calendar, teacher application requirements and teacher interests for taking the courses. Such information should be included in the announcements. The LSS and IHE may wish to develop a plan for prioritizing applicants that aligns with district needs. Consideration should be given to determining whether applicants have the capacity, interests and experiences to work with a GT special needs population and to recruiting participants from diverse populations. Applicants should apply to the university for acceptance.

Advertising the GT cohort can be system wide or targeted, depending on the LSS focus of the cohort. Generally, in the recruitment stage the following should occur:

- The LSS receives prospective participants' names and related information and communicates these to the lead professor of the cohort. A data base may be developed to manage the process between the LSS and the IHE.
- The IHE lead professor contacts the participant prospects regarding cohort specifics.
- The LSS arranges a site where the professor can meet the teacher prospects to provide information about the cohort the University enrollment information, grading, participation expectations and related cohort information.

9. FACILITATION AND COORDINATION OF COHORT OPERATION

The LSS and IHE lead personnel should establish communication protocols that serve to facilitate the cohort during its operation. This could range from sending and receiving information connected to the cohort to having LSS staff participate in a class activity. Close communication among the IHE contact, the instructor, and the LSS is critical.

Conclusion

Planning a cohort is a collaborative process that requires commitment from all stakeholders and the establishment of reasonable and clear expectations on the part of the IHE and LSS. It can also be a very rewarding process. Key issues are finding qualified faculty and adjuncts and being aware of resource limitations. It is important to remember that individuals from the IHE are employed full time to teach and run on-campus

programs in addition to some off-campus responsibilities. Likewise, LSS personnel are also assuming additional responsibilities.

Partners in recent Maryland GT cohorts report that the planning process took about 1½ - 2 years. However, each district is unique. Some may be able to work through the process to implement a cohort relatively quickly, particularly if they have already partnered in a cohort. For other LSSs, this may be a new process and will take additional time.

Is it worth the effort to plan and implement an LSS-IHE cohort in education of gifted and talented students? The answer is a resounding “**YES!**” The LSS-IHE cohort offers teachers an attractive opportunity to pursue graduate level coursework in gifted and talented education. The LSS gains educators trained in GT education, and the IHE gains additional students whom it might not have enrolled without the opportunity to complete graduate coursework and/or an advanced degree in a customized program that is located close to their place of work and is with their colleagues.

Followup

Members of the Maryland State Advisory Council on Gifted and Talented Student Education’s Professional Development Subcommittee have visited a number of cohorts and have noted the high level of learning and the dedication of the course participants and their professors. Participants have indicated enthusiasm for meeting the needs of gifted and talented students and for encouraging and helping their non-cohort colleagues to do the same. And, most importantly, LSS-IHE cohorts expand the cadre of Maryland educators who are knowledgeable and qualified to meet the needs of gifted and talented students.

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Questions? Contact

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