

Reflections on Rural Gifted Education in Texas: Then and Now

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Rural gifted education historically has struggled with its own identity. Limited research exists on rural gifted programming, effective ways to implement gifted pedagogy and curriculum, and how to maximize limited time, resources, and funding. Rural communities are complex, dynamic entities, full of nuances and guided by a sense of place and rural culture. Faced with limited funding, resources, and time, rural gifted programs struggle to provide consistent quality enrichment to gifted learners. This study reflects on how rural gifted education policies and procedures in Texas have evolved over the last 30 years and the realities of providing gifted programs in rural school districts. Findings highlight a need for written policies and procedures for gifted programming, challenges gifted teachers face in rural districts, and the positives of being educated in a rural gifted program.

Keywords: rural gifted education, rural students, rural education, teacher perspective

Cecelia Boswell grew up in a rural Texas and began her teaching career in a small, rural school in Texas. Her first class was composed of 12 students, grades 4–6. They were the first students to be identified for gifted and talented services and her first time teaching gifted learners. The town itself had a population of only 2,500; towns surrounding it were of similar size. The nearest “large” town, with a population of 8,000, was 20 miles away. The nearest city of more than 100,000 was 100 miles away. As Dr. Boswell looks back at this experience, she wonders, what could the school have done to offer better gifted and talented services than three hours once a week? The fact that the district offered this service over 30 years ago is good, but was it enough? What influences created the opportunity for gifted services? What challenges did both the school and she face? Understanding the evolution of gifted programming in Texas provides a holistic view of the struggles and successes of rural gifted education. With this in mind, the researchers share the historical context in this paper.

In a previous study (Lewis & Boswell, 2020) we explored the types of teaching experiences teachers of gifted had, along with the types of gifted programming and services offered, in small, rural, and remote districts in Texas. In addition, we sought to understand the challenges and value of gifted programming in these communities. Diving deeper with a series of semistructured interviews, we explored the perceptions of teachers regarding the implementation of gifted programming in rural schools. These reflections, coupled with a document review of the available gifted education policy handbooks, provided further insight into the struggles and benefits of rural gifted education.

In the present article, we expanded on this research by exploring the following questions:

1. How do district gifted education policies and programming operate within rural schools?
2. What are some of the best practices for maximizing limited resources, time, and budgets?

Identified Challenges Within Rural Gifted Education

Context of Rural Education

Most educational research focuses on best practices, benefits, and challenges of urban education; limited research addresses education in rural settings. This lack is surprising considering that half of the nation's schools are located in rural areas (Howley et al., 2014). Fifty-seven percent of the K-12 public schools in 2013–14 were located in rural areas, and 24% (~9 million students) of the total U.S. K-12 public school population were registered in a rural school (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020; Rural Poverty Research Center, 2004).

Understandings of the classification of rural school districts are vital to understanding the uniqueness of rural gifted programming. Corbett (2016) stated, “The more we know about rurality, the less we know, it seems, as the old saying goes, if you have seen one rural community, you have seen . . . well, one rural community” (p. 278). Rural school districts and communities are defined by various physical attributes, such as geography (National Center for Education Statistics, 2014; U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2018) and population density (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018), as well as more intangible qualities, such as a sense of place and rural culture (Eppley et al., 2018; Johnson et al., 2014; Lewis & Boswell, 2020). Considering these factors, caution is needed when making generalities about rural education and communities (Burney & Cross, 2006; Coladarci, 2007; Glauber & Schafer, 2017). The working definition of *rural education* for this article aligns with the NCES definition of *rural*, which considers population density as a defining factor, coupled with the influence of a sense of place and the role of rural culture (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020).

Role of Poverty

The United States shows regional differences in rates of poverty, with higher percentages of students living in poverty in the West and South (NCES, 2020). Rural areas tend to have higher per capita rates of poverty than do urban areas, but nationally the percentage of those living in poverty

in rural areas is lower than those living in poverty in cities and towns (National Center for Educational S, 2020). Poverty in rural areas contributes to low educational attainment and higher unemployment rates (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2018). Rural poverty is influenced by relational factors, such as situational and generational poverty, as well as a lack of access to services such as health and education (Jensen, 2009). Situational poverty occurs a family falls below the poverty line due to a sudden event, such as a natural disaster (e.g., hurricane, pandemic) or personal events (e.g., death of the head of the household, divorce, or job loss). Generational poverty occurs when a family has lived below the poverty line for two or more generations. The role poverty plays in educational attainment, or lack thereof, is well documented (Jensen, 2009; Slocumb et al., 2018). Poverty limits the manifestation of gifted characteristics recognized by traditional identification measures (Slocumb et al., 2018). Persistent poverty influences students identified for gifted services in all settings, but because of the reasons cited above, perhaps more so in rural areas (Howley et al., 2009).

Rural Gifted Education

The 2013–2014 Office for Civil Rights report estimated 3.3 million students enrolled in gifted/talented programs, which is about 8% of the total student population across the country (Office for Civil Rights, 2014). The 1971 Marland report to Congress reported that the target percentage of gifted/talented students is 5–7% of the total student population (Marland, 1971). Applying this standard to rural areas, about 500,000–800,000 students should have been identified as gifted in rural settings in 2013–2014.

The National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC) developed the *Pre-K–Grade 12 Gifted Programming Standards* (2010, 2019) as a guide for districts in developing programming and services for gifted/talented learners. The six standards, Learning and Development, Assessment, Curriculum and Instruction, Learning Environments, Programming, and Professional Learning, provide evidence-based best practices based on student outcomes. While the standards set a benchmark for

gifted programs, districts have the leeway to implement them in ways to best fit their area. This is essential in rural areas, where often gifted programming must do more with less and be flexible in program delivery (Lewis, 2015). The struggles of providing high-quality gifted programming in uniquely rural areas is explored in current literature (Azano et al., 2014, 2017; Lewis, 2015; Lewis & Boswell, 2020; Richards & Stambaugh, 2015). Limited funding, resources, and time are the three core factors affecting rural gifted programs.

Limited Funding

Persistent poverty in rural areas not only affects the lives of students but also significantly impacts school district budgets. Low-funded school districts must stretch available funds across many programs and resources (Howley et al., 2009). Rural school districts operating on small budgets provide smaller allocations for all aspects of gifted programming (Kettler et al., 2015). Gifted programming may not always receive adequate funding to meet all students' needs or may need to share human resources with other programs. Rural districts are allocated fewer funds and personnel for gifted programming than are nonrural schools and economically disadvantaged schools (Kettler et al., 2015). Gifted specialists may serve multiple buildings, be shared across districts, or serve in other leadership capacities outside of gifted services (Howley et al., 2009). Recruiting and retaining gifted specialists in small rural schools is another challenge caused by limited funding. Without the funding to attract and retain a gifted specialist, districts may assign the gifted and talented program to a teacher without a background in gifted education.

Limited Resources

Another factor impacted by the limited funding is the quantity and type of resources available to rural schools. Rural schools often have fewer opportunities to participate in gifted education (Kettler et al., 2016) and offer fewer advanced academic programs compared to urban schools, where International Baccalaureate programs, AP courses, and honor courses are often the norm. Limited funding directly impacts the availability of curriculum resources for all aspects of gifted

programming. *Funding* refers strictly to the dollar amount budgeted to all aspects of gifted programming. Rural districts may be faced with deciding on spending their budget on curriculum materials or assessment materials. Districts that spend the money on identification materials are left with the basic curriculum within the district or rely on the gifted resource teacher and classroom teacher to design gifted curricula (Azano et al., 2014). In theory, gifted specialists and classroom teachers with a background in gifted curriculum pedagogy are successful in developing curriculum materials. However, the margin of error may be significant here if the teachers are lacking in background knowledge or the planning time to develop a quality gifted curriculum (Burton, 2011; Lewis & Hafer, 2007).

Rural school districts may face an overall decline in the student body population, which contributes to a decline in resources, as well as an additional focus on ways to consolidate programs to ensure program survival (Howley et al., 2009). Consolidation of resources takes many forms, including the number of responsibilities educators must take on in rural school districts. For example, the gifted resource teacher may serve multiple buildings and/or wear multiple leadership hats within the district. As a result, the gifted resource teacher has to be strategic in planning limited time with the gifted students, ensuring time for referring, identifying, and serving gifted students. Limited budgets also play a role for targeted professional learning for classroom teachers and gifted specialists, as well as the resources for identification, assessment, and program delivery.

Limited Time

Limited time is a challenge for providing gifted programming in rural districts (Azano et al., 2014, 2017; Lewis & Boswell, 2020). Often the pressures of state standardized testing result in focusing on raising students to meet proficiency standards rather than excelling beyond proficiency. Some rural districts do not set aside a consistent time block for gifted programming; rather, gifted programming fits in when there is time. In districts with structured time blocks once a week for gifted services, the gifted resource teachers often struggle to meet with all of

their students, as well as juggling multiple hats, which require their attention elsewhere. One effect of this limited time is that the general education classroom teacher is asked to provide differentiation within the curriculum for advanced learners. Unfortunately, these teachers may have limited expertise in effective instructional strategies for the gifted students (Azano et al., 2014, 2017). The impact on gifted students is either more of the same type of work or no differentiation at all in the classroom.

Time is also a constraint of the student schedules, which may not allow for gifted activities due to extracurricular sports, afterschool jobs, or other family obligations. Community influence plays a significant role in rural culture. Athletics, especially football in Texas, is heavily valued and provides a sense of place within rural communities. With the increased value of athletics, the number of opportunities for intellectually challenging afterschool activities are often decreased (Burton, 2011). Additionally, students within rural communities often contribute to the family business and farms or their afterschool job to provide additional income for the family (Petrin et al., 2014).

Rural school districts reflect a population whose diversity includes cultural, linguistic, economic, and geographic diversity. When factoring in the impact of rural culture and sense of place on rural school communities, appropriate services with best practices are challenging (Lewis & Boswell, 2020). These factors combined create a challenge for educators to employ effective gifted curriculum and instructional strategies for roughly half of the nations' school districts (Eppley et al., 2018; Lewis & Boswell, 2020; VanTassel-Baska & Hubbard, 2016).

Rural Gifted Student Perceptions

Few current studies have examined the rural gifted student's perception of gifted education. Gentry et al. (2001) explored the differences in student perceptions of their class activities between rural, suburban, and urban schools. Their findings indicated that rural gifted students had higher levels of enjoyment in elementary school, yet less challenge and interest, than peers in urban or suburban schools. The higher levels of enjoyment

from school may be a benefit of the smaller class sizes and sense of belonging found in rural schools. Within this study, Gentry et al. found that the levels of enjoyment in class activities decreased in middle school for all populations, yet more so for the rural gifted students, along with their challenge and interest levels. Middle school historically is a challenging time socially and emotionally for gifted students, so some decline in enjoyment levels is to be expected; however, it is concerning the rural students all experienced further declines in levels of challenge and interest. Gentry et al. recommended focusing on ways to integrate challenge and collaboration among rural gifted peers, as well as collaboration among teachers to maximize limited resources.

Research shows that rural gifted students thrive when they are given the opportunity to be academically challenged (Azano et al., 2014, 2017; Ihrig et al., 2017). Gifted students benefit from collaboration with like-minded peers, differentiated curriculum, and accelerated curriculum. One challenge in rural schools is the limited accelerated course offerings, such as AP or honors courses. Rural gifted students who are accelerated sometimes face challenges of running out of curriculum or not enough gifted students to make enrollment for a course offering (Seward & Gaesser, 2018). Online courses offer a solution to the limited offerings in rural schools. Blended online learning environments provide accelerated learning through individualized educational plans, where gifted learners excel (Swan et al., 2015).

Rural gifted students may experience barriers related to their language, cultural background, and/or poverty, which influence their identification as well as retention in gifted programs (Howley et al., 2009). Negative or indifferent student perceptions toward being identified as gifted are often the result of misconceptions of gifted education, teachers without gifted expertise, and vague gifted programming.

Gifted Education in Texas

Educators across the United States view Texas as a leader in the field of gifted education due to its program policies and curriculum requirements. Texas passed its first gifted education legislation in

1977, which addressed the specific needs of gifted students. Texas also provided funding in 1979 for districts that elected to develop and implement gifted education programs. A decade later, the Texas legislature mandated that all districts identify and serve gifted and talented students at all grade levels. As a result, funding was no longer optional for districts but part of the district budgets. The *Texas State Plan* (Texas Education Agency, 2019b) mandates that teachers of the gifted have a minimum of 30 hours of professional development focused on nature and needs of gifted, how to assess gifted students, and curriculum and instruction for gifted learners. Additionally, an annual update of 6 hours for both teachers and administrators is required. Gifted education in Texas continued to evolve over the next 20 years, with the development of the Texas Performance Standards Project for Gifted/Talented Students in 1999. These standards not only set benchmarks for gifted education in Texas but also were influential in the development of the national gifted programming standards (Texas Association for the Gifted and Talented, 2008).

Because there are no annual requirements to submit data on the implementation of gifted education in school districts, limited data has been collected on how districts are meeting the requirements of the *Texas State Plan*. This changed in 2019 with the passing of House Bill 3, a school finance bill (Texas Education Agency, 2019a), which requires school districts to

1. adopt a policy regarding the use of funds to support the district's program for gifted and talented students;
2. certify annually to the commissioner that the district has established a program for gifted and talented students; and
3. report the use of funds within the gifted program.

With the passing of House Bill 3, Texas legislation also repealed the gifted and talented allotment funding. No longer a direct budget line, gifted funding is now a part of the basic allotment of funds for districts. The concern with the reallocation of the gifted funding is that districts will not spend all of the funding on gifted programs and services, as House Bill 3 only requires 55% of any money allotted to

gifted and talented to be spent on gifted and talented programs. While the changes to House Bill 3 have added accountability measures, it also raises concerns of a loss of funding for gifted programs, especially for rural school districts operating on limited budgets.

What Do Successful Gifted Rural Education Programs Look Like?

Rural gifted education programs are faced with many challenges in the development of and implementation of all aspects of gifted programming (Azano et al., 2014, 2017; Lewis, 2015; Lewis & Boswell, 2020; Richards & Stambaugh, 2015). However, several questions remain to be answered, including what works for rural gifted education, and how rural gifted programs are successful. The two major components of gifted programming are identification/assessment and curriculum/enrichment. Examining best practices from the field of gifted education within these two categories provides a baseline for developing effective rural gifted programming. However, these best practices must be adjusted for the unique rural culture and demographics of rural communities.

Identification of Rural Gifted Learners

Gifted education begins with the student identification process. NAGC recognizes that all cultural groups have gifted individuals, that giftedness presents differently in various contexts and domains, and that giftedness is transformative (National Center for Gifted Education, n.d.). Rural gifted learners manifest their giftedness in different ways based on their lived experiences, which vary from student to student and from one rural community to another. Students may be impacted by poverty, diversity, and language barriers, as well as missed opportunities of prior enrichment experiences. While districts maintain control of their identification process, there are many commonalities among gifted programs. The identification process begins with a referral, followed by a screening, and ends with placement. Most districts tie their identification process back to the state requirements and utilize a standardized test and review of the students' records. Careful selection of the standardized tests is essential to ensure that all rural students have an equal

opportunity to be successful on the exam. Promoting PLACE (Place, Literacy, Achievement, Community, Engagement) in Rural Schools, a Jacob Javits grant, explores alternative identification for rural gifted and the use of the CLEAR (Challenge Leading to Engagement, Achievement, and Results) curriculum model (Azano, 2013). Promoting PLACE expanded the pool of eligible gifted students, as the rural schools participating had initially identified only zero to two gifted students. Adjusting the identification process based on the opportunity to learn (Lohman, 2013) takes into consideration the prior experiences, or lack thereof, for the rural student population. Localized norms, the process of comparing rural students to other rural students within the same district, adjusts for the opportunity to learn versus utilizing nationalized norms (Azano et al., 2017). Findings from Promoting PLACE validate the need for localized norms for identification and services for gifted rural students.

Practice-Based Evidence

There is a long-standing call in the field of education to utilize instruction supported by strong research-based practices in the classroom. Evidence-based practices (EBPs) rapidly expanded under the call of Every Student Succeeds Act (2015). Within the field of gifted education, the NAGC programming standards provide guidelines regarding EBPs, which are established through rigorous research studies where data are collected on instructional practices and student performance on standardized tests (Walsh et al., 2015). While the concept of standardization of EBPs is commendable, the generalizability of these practices to rural areas is questionable. The myriad attributes that contribute to the uniqueness of rural school districts (Flora et al., 2015; Howley & Howley, 2006) confound the effectiveness of EBPs in rural schools (Eppley et al., 2018). Rural school districts must account for the lived experiences within their communities when determining what works. Therefore, rather than EBP, practice-based evidence (PBE) plays a more important role in determining effective gifted programming and services in rural settings.

PBE is the process of examining what works for this student in this place. Being contextually responsive, PBE explores local gifted standards, local needs, and place-conscious interventions that utilize local assets (Eppley et al., 2018). The process of establishing PBE begins with a review of current EBPs, reflecting on how and why they are not generating effective outcomes in the rural setting. Next, PBEs are established by reflecting on the contextual factors, including localized gifted norms, followed with the creation of a local PBE, as well as measures for assessing student outcomes (Eppley et al., 2018). Utilizing PBE as a standard for creating gifted programming that works for the uniqueness of each rural community ensures gifted education in rural settings provides meaningful experiences that reflect the unique time, resources, and funding available for gifted students in that locale (Lewis & Boswell, 2020).

The CLEAR curriculum draws on the theoretical frameworks proposed by Tomlinson (2017), Kaplan (1996), and Renzulli (1999) but focuses on sustainability beyond the Javits Grant (Wu, 2017). The CLEAR curriculum is a low-cost built-in curriculum framework aligned with Common Core State Standards and is prestructured, ready for implementation, reducing the amount of planning for classroom teachers. Thus, the CLEAR curriculum is more likely to be utilized effectively by classroom teachers in the long term (Wu, 2017).

Rural school districts grapple with many logistical challenges in serving gifted students, including small numbers of identified gifted learners, where there may not be enough students per grade or building to allow an advanced class to be delivered, and limited resources for curriculum and gifted specialists. Flexible thinking that upholds an expectation for quality curriculum and instruction is essential in developing a gifted programming model that works for the rural district (Lewis, 2015). Rigorous gifted curricula that require only the use of current district resources, are easily integrated, do not require a huge time investment, and are not cost-prohibitive enable rural gifted programming to provide meaningful experiences for the gifted.

Methods

Participants

A convenience sample of four rural public school districts in Texas participated in this study in 2017 (Lewis & Boswell, 2020). Multiple school districts, located within four different Regional Education Service Centers (RESCs), were invited to participate through verbal and written invitations. The RESCs serve as liaisons between school districts and the Texas Education Agency. Their focus is to offer services to support districts in improving student performance, increasing efficiency, and implementing legislative initiatives. Four rural public school districts volunteered to part take in the study. The following district descriptions provide a visual image and feel for the rural culture of each of the four districts (pseudonyms are used for purposes of confidentiality):

District 1: Golden Independent School District (ISD)

Golden ISD's Golden Eagles fly on flags all around the small town of 2,000. As with many small towns in Texas, the school and its athletic teams are central to the community. This central Texas community voted in a bond to build a new high school, which is nearing completion. The elementary school is 2 years old. Most of the families of the students who attend Golden ISD are involved in some form of agriculture, primarily ranching. The community of Golden has an economy based on cattle, sheep, pecans, and grains. Other support businesses include a bank, a couple of cafes and convenience stores, an insurance agency, a dollar store, a newspaper office, and a hardware store. It is the county seat, with the courthouse square as the focal point of the town. The K-12 population was 572 students; 278 (38%) are identified as economically disadvantaged, and 40 (7%) are identified as gifted. Students in grades 2–12 may participate in University Interscholastic League academic contests, and students in grades 7–12 can participate in league athletics. Future Farmers of America membership and family and consumer science classes are available to all high school students. The marching band and orchestra are active throughout the school year for grades 7–12,

and music is a part of the elementary curriculum. Gifted students in the elementary school have time for a half day once a week to go to a class with the music/gifted-and-talented teacher. Their curriculum is not formalized but meets the needs of the students creatively.

District 2: Goodman ISD

Driving into the west central town of Goodman inspires the traveler to wonder where the town has gone. Only one main street can be seen, and most of the buildings are abandoned. The economy of the town of 1,100 is based on two factories, one for the agricultural cash crop and the other that mills feed for farm animals. In addition to the two factories, much of the population works in the nearby county seat or the university town of 15,000 less than an hour away. The school is the central focus of the community. With only 305 students in K-12, the school district and its athletic teams offer opportunities for community-wide gatherings. Among these students, 208 (68%) of the students are identified as economically disadvantaged, and 12 (3.9%) are identified as gifted. The elementary school is 20 years old, the middle school is housed in the former high school, and a new high school and gymnasium were constructed in 2010. The football stadium and old gym have been well maintained throughout the years since it was built under the Works Progress Administration program in the 1930s. The superintendent and principals have determined to focus on services for the gifted students. The 3.9% that are identified received services through pull-out classes once or twice a week. When possible, at least twice a month, the science teacher pulls out the high school students to work on projects as specified by the state. High school students also have college dual-credit courses for juniors and seniors.

District 3: Heinemann ISD

Near the top of Texas Hill Country, at the crossroads of three state highways, Heinemann, population 1,100, is 2 hours away from two major metropolitan areas. Its economy is based in agriculture, including cattle and horses; hunting and fishing; and the town. The main street and one street over house a variety of antique stores, high-end home furnishing stores, boutiques, tea rooms,

and a restaurant. The boulevard area offers casual seating and live music on weekend nights. The school campuses are separated, with the elementary campus in the town proper and the middle and high schools in new buildings at the edge of town on one of the major highways. The district has 591 students enrolled in K-12; 333 (56%) are defined as economically disadvantaged. Gifted services are hit-or-miss, and only 12 (2%) students are identified for services. The elementary provides a pull-out once a week, with students completing a variety of projects. No gifted and talented classes are available in middle and high school. AP and dual-credit college courses are available, but these classes have no differentiation.

District 4: Nueces ISD

In southwest Texas, this area is known for its commercial pecan businesses. Pecan orchards and a variety of sheep and cattle ranches are the heart of industry in this area. The town has created a new city park that offers a variety of venues for skate boarding, swimming, and music performances. A winery has a store front on Main Street, and a bakery presents pastries and breads that reflect the culture of the town and county. Two major highways run perpendicular through the town. All school buildings are gathered in a four-block area. One of the buildings is new, an elementary campus, but all are well maintained. Separate buildings for extracurricular classes are found on the perimeter of the school plant. There are 734 students in K-12; 130 (17.7%) of its students are economically disadvantaged, and 58 (7.9%) are identified as gifted. Gifted services are scattered. Elementary students receive services once a week in a pull-out. Middle and high school students are served through pre-AP and AP classes, along with dual-language college credit courses.

For this article we focus on the findings of the semistructured interviews and a document review of each district's local educational plan.

Semistructured Interviews

Over several months, we collected data from all four districts through an online survey provided to teachers and administrators within the districts (see Lewis & Boswell 2020). Ninety-one (78%) of the 117

respondents completed the survey in its entirety. Respondents included teachers and administrators. Survey data related to the teaching experiences, types of gifted programming and services, community support, major challenges, and the value of gifted programming to the community are presented in Lewis and Boswell (2020).

Participants indicated their willingness to participate in semistructured interviews after completing the survey. Ten respondents volunteered to participate. These respondents, who represented all four districts, were representative of demographic data of the survey respondents: 8 (80%) had 16 or more years of teaching experience in rural schools, and 1 (10%), with 16 or more years of teaching experience, was in their first through fifth year of teaching in rural schools; 1 (10%) participant was in their first through fifth years of teaching; 7 (70%) had over 16 years of experience working with gifted and talented learners, while 3 (30%) were in their first through fifth years of working gifted learners; 3 (30%) had completed the 30 hours of professional development in gifted education; and 1 (10%) also held a Gifted and Talented Supplemental Certificate from Texas.

Four semistructured group interviews were conducted with the 10 participants. The semistructured interviews took place over during one month at four different district campuses. Each semistructured interview lasted about 30 minutes and consisted of a similar format: scripted questions followed by an opportunity for participants to share any lingering thoughts. The scripted questions were as follows:

1. How do you believe gifted students are best served?
2. What does it mean to the student to be identified for gifted services?
3. Describe optimal gifted services.
4. What challenges or barriers do rural and small schools face when developing services for the gifted?
5. What did I not think to ask?

Content analysis was used to analyze the semistructured interviews. First, we identified responses and/or phrases, which were coded based on similarities as well as the central idea of

the phrases. Next, commonalities between codes were identified and categorized; finally, we identified overarching themes (Glesne, 2016; Rossman & Rallis, 2003).

Document Review Process

NAGC's 2010 *Pre-K–Grade 12 Gifted Programming Standards* set the standard for developing high-quality policies and procedures for gifted programming. The six programming standards were developed using gifted education theory, research, and practices. While there are many different ways to implement the programming standards within districts, they provide a framework for the creation of gifted programming models at the local levels. These standards provide EBPs of effective gifted programming. We therefore selected the 2010 *Pre-K–Grade 12 Gifted Programming Standards* as the guidelines for the document review of the districts' local educational plans.

First, a systematic document review of each district's local education plan and a review of the 2010 *Pre-K–Grade 12 Gifted Programming Standards* was conducted. Second, each student outcome and EBPs for the standards were reviewed. We examined the districts' local educational plans for any phrasing or reference that may indicate that either the student outcome or EBPs were being met. Any evidence of alignment or discrepancy was noted.

Results

Rural Gifted Programming

To help explore the realities, regarding how district gifted education policies and programming are operating within rural schools; we pulled the local educational plans for each of the four districts from the district websites. The local educational plan for gifted and talent programs are written roadmaps of the policies, processes, and procedures for all aspects of gifted programming within a district. In 2016, while the Texas Education Agency legislation required gifted and talented students to be identified and served, it did not require reporting annual data on gifted and talented programming to the state. However, this changed in 2019 with the passing of House Bill 3. As part of this study's data collection process, we

reviewed the local educational plans for the four districts.

Document Review Results

Discrepancies between the NAGC programming standards and the written local educational plans were extensive. A major factor in these discrepancies was the lack of a handbook on gifted and talented education policies and procedures. District 2 was the only district with a handbook; although it was a bare bones document, it provided more information than the local educational plan from the other three districts. Interestingly, District 2 is not one of the two districts meeting the 5–7% recommendations of the Marland Report to Congress for the total number of gifted students. Examining each programming standard individually, one is able to identify the alignment and discrepancy among the four districts.

• 5.1. **Comprehensiveness.**

Students with gifts and talents demonstrate growth commensurate with their abilities in cognitive, social-emotional, and psychosocial areas as a result of comprehensive programming and services.

None of the four districts identified measures to evaluate this outcome.

District 2 did identify the types of gifted programming available: Elementary: pull-out, Middle school: interdisciplinary units of study, High school: dual-credit course offerings, and meets academic needs as well as nurture gifts in other areas such as a fine arts and athletics.

• 5.2. **Cohesive and Coordinated Services.**

Students with gifts and talents demonstrate yearly progress commensurate with ability as a result of a continuum of pre-K-12 services and coordination between gifted, general, special, and related professional services, including outside-of-school learning specialists and advocates.

Districts 1, 3, & 4 identified state standardized testing. However, no evidence of cohesive

and coordinated services were found for these three districts.

District 3 offers dual credit for government, economics, college algebra, English, and history.

District 4 offers: K-6: pull-out, Middle school: interdisciplinary units of study, High school: dual-credit course offerings as well as curriculum differentiated through depth and complexity, pacing, grouping, tiered assignment, independent study.

- **5.3. Career Pathways.**

Students with gifts and talents create future career-oriented goals and identify talent development pathways to reach those goals.

There was no evidence in districts 1 & 4 of career pathways.

District 2 indicated that it encouraged students to graduate with distinguished achievement program diploma.

District 3 goal was to offer 24 college hours available to qualifying students

- **5.4. Collaboration.**

Students with gifts and talents are able to continuously advance their talent development and achieve their learning goals through regular collaboration among families, community members, advocates, and the school.

District 2: Community relationships critical to the success of program, evaluated annually by teachers, students, and parents as well as community feedback collected through surveys.

Districts 1 & 4: Community invited to nominate students for a gifted referral.

There was no evidence of collaboration in Districts 1, 3 & 4.

- **5.5. Resources.**

Students with gifts and talents participate in gifted education programming that is

adequately staffed and funded to meet students' interests, strengths, and needs.

There was no evidence of how the Texas gifted allotment is spent annually in all four districts.

- **5.6. Policies and Procedures.**

Students with gifts and talents participate in general and gifted education programs guided by clear policies and procedures that provide for their advanced learning needs (e.g., early entrance, acceleration, credit in lieu of enrollment).

All four districts had local educational plans available.

Only District 2 had a gifted and talented policies handbook available.

- **5.7. Evaluation of Programming and Services.**

Students with gifts and talents demonstrate yearly learning progress commensurate with abilities as a result of high-quality programming and services matched to their interests, strengths, and needs.

Districts 1 & 2 noted annual program evaluation shared with school board, administrators, teachers, counselors, students, and community as well as the results used to revise/update programs.

District 4 indicated that program evaluation shared with school board, administrators, teachers, counselors, students, and community as well as that the results were used to revise/update programs.

Districts 1, 2 & 4 indicated that routine reassessments of students not performed.

In district 3 there was no evidence of evaluation of programming and services.

- **5.8. Evaluation of Programming and Services.**

Students with gifts and talents have access to programming and services required for the development of their gifts and talents as a

result of ongoing evaluation and program improvements.

Districts 1 & 2 stated that the annual program evaluation shared with school board members, administrators, teachers, counselors, students, and community and that the results used to revise/update programs.

District 3 indicated that periodic program evaluation was shared with school board, administrators, teachers, counselors, students, and community and that the results were used to revise/update programs.

There was not a detailed program evaluation, past or present available in any of the districts.

The local educational plans (see Table 1) essentially highlighted the *Texas State Plan* requirements related to identification and assessment—in fact, the language was taken directly from the *Texas State Plan*. While it is commendable to follow the state plan so closely, these local educational plans not provide any specific wording related to the processes and procedures for identifying or serving gifted learners.

Table 1

Districts' Local Educational Plans

	District 1	District 2	District 3	District 4
Date Local Educational Plan Issued	5/17/2016	2/5/2001	Unknown	11/24/2009
Gifted education policy handbook	No	Yes	No	No
Nomination referral	At any time by teachers, parents, school counselors, parents, or other parties	At any time by teachers, parents, school counselors, parents, or other parties	Unknown	At any time by teachers, parents, school counselors, parents, or other parties
Parental consent	Written consent required	Written consent is required	Unknown	Written consent required
Screening/identification process	Once per school year	Once per school year	Unknown	Unknown
Identification criteria	Board-approved program tied to the state definition of gifted and talented -Fair assessment of students with special needs, culturally diverse, economically disadvantaged	Board-approved program, tied to the state definition of gifted and talented	Unknown	Board-approved program, tied to the state definition of gifted and talented

	District 1	District 2	District 3	District 4
Assessment	Objective and subjective assessments: achievement test, intelligence test, creativity tests, behavioral checklists; student/parent conference, student work product	Fair assessment of students with special needs, culturally diverse, economically disadvantaged	Unknown	Fair assessment of students with special needs, culturally diverse, economically disadvantaged
Selection	Committee, three professional educators who have been trained in the nature and needs of gifted and talented students	Objective and subjective assessments	Unknown	Objective and subjective assessments
Reassessment	Routine reassessments are not performed	Achievement test, intelligence test, creativity tests, behavioral checklists, student/parent conference, student work product	Unknown	Achievement test, intelligence test, creativity tests, behavioral checklists, student/parent conference, student work product
Program evaluation	Annually; results shared with school board members, administrators, teachers, counselors, students, and community -Results used to revise/update the programs	Committee, three professional educators who have been trained in the nature and needs of gifted and talented students	Unknown	Committee, three professional educators who have been trained in the nature and needs of gifted and talented students

	District 1	District 2	District 3	District 4
Community awareness	Information is available to parents and community so they can understand and support the program	Information is available to parents and community so they can understand and support the program	Unknown	Routine reassessments not performed
Learning opportunities	Unknown	Instructional opportunities for student collaboration A continuum of learning experiences to lead towards the development of advanced products In and out of school options Acceleration	Pull-out instruction to inclusion of lesson extensions and exploration with in the regular classroom	Periodically, evaluation information shared with school board members, administrators, teachers, counselors, students, and community
Program design	Unknown	Annually, results will be share with the Board members, administrators, teachers, counselors, students and community results should be used to revise/update the programs	Follows Texas state standards	Information is available to parents and community so they can understand and support the program

Semistructured Interview Results

Without a well-developed gifted education program whose mission and purpose are understood by the administration, faculty, students, families, and the community, challenges may be associated with student participation in the program. Misconceptions about the purpose of gifted/talented education may influence attitudes and decisions of

students to participate. When the teachers reflected on what it means to the students to be identified as gifted (question 2), they reflected on how they perceived students felt. The following overarching themes emerged from our analysis of the semistructured interviews:

1. Honor; for example, “They feel it is an honor to be in our GT program.”

2. Opportunity: "A great deal of extra opportunities."
3. Validation: "It validates to them that they are smart. I know how that is when you feel like you're the only one that thinks that way."
4. Means more work: "They feel as though being gifted means extra work in addition to what everyone must complete"
5. Means nothing: "I don't think it means much, honestly. It's hard to find time to meet. I'm starting as the GT 'teacher'/sponsor this year. We can't do much this semester, but next semester we will tackle those projects and present them. I know many students have been disappointed in the past."

The themes of "means more work" or "it means nothing" to the student reflect misunderstandings of what gifted education is. The themes highlight possible areas where improvements could be made to the gifted education program. First, the theme of "means more work" centered on the development of quality enrichment activities. If gifted education means more work to students, this suggests that the curriculum is not being implemented effectively. Instead of increased rigor, depth, and complexity, the teachers are assigning students more work to complete. This is not best practice in gifted education, yet it is an unfortunate misconception of gifted education. Second, if being identified as gifted "means nothing" to students, this implies that students are not receiving quality enrichment on a regular basis in the classroom. There may be room to further develop the gifted programming. Another possible implication is that students do not understand what it means to be identified as gifted and how gifted education could provide challenging academic experiences as well as increased opportunities for career development.

To gain an understanding of the types of academic experiences gifted learners in these rural schools' districts participated in, the semistructured interview participants were asked to share how they felt their gifted students were best served within the district (question 1). Participants indicated that the pull-out program model along with in-class group work or projects was the best method for serving gifted children. This aligns with NAGC's 2010 *Pre-*

K-Grade 12 Gifted Programming Standards recommendations for providing multiple learning opportunities, collaboration with peers of like ability, and cohesiveness throughout the gifted program. The theme of "anything would be better than what they are getting now" also emerged from this candid discussion. Several participants suggested anything would be good for gifted students. Participant 6 stated, "Whatever comes your way and some activities would be good." These comments allude to the lack of organized gifted curriculum and instruction for the identified gifted students in these districts.

Participants were also encouraged to dream big and to describe optimal services for gifted students (question 3). The participants identified three components of optimal services. First, participants focused on the pull-out program model. Participant 1 felt that "it is good for them to be in a group with kids who are working together," and participant 8 stated that having "to work together with high achievers because it challenges the gifted." Participants were also quick to point out that, optimally, the students would have services every day, not just once a week during a pull-out session. When asked to expand on this notion, participants compared gifted education to special education, where the students receive services throughout the day in an inclusion setting, as well as with a special education teacher. Participants 10 and 2 felt optimal services would be gifted and talented students having interactions with other gifted kids, because in their building there were only a handful of identified gifted students per grade.

Participants felt that, along with the pull-out program, it would be important for there in-class differentiation by the general education classroom teacher. Participant 5 felt that the students "need both in-class and pull-out with teachers who have training in gifted and talented." This second component of optimal services reflects the small size of rural schools and understanding that these gifted students spend most of the day in the regular education classroom. A few participants suggested a special school for gifted and talented students but did not feel this would be realistic given how few gifted students were enrolled in these districts.

The final component necessary for optimal gifted programming centered on teachers who have had professional development in gifted and talented. Participant 2 said “a teacher who has training in gifted and talented” was important to the development of projects and the small group instruction. Participant 3 stated “a gifted and talent specialist would be optimal.” These reflections recognize two major barriers to effective gifted programming in rural schools: the limited number of teachers with training in gifted pedagogy and the lack of time the gifted resource teachers have due to multiple leadership roles.

The participants’ thoughts centered on consistent time blocks for gifted instruction, the need for a gifted and talented coordinator and teachers trained in gifted instruction and pedagogy, and collaboration amongst teachers, which are consistent with the best practices in gifted programming. Yet, the qualifying comments participants inserted even as they suggested optimal services reflected a hopeless view toward gifted programming. The ideas of qualified teachers, consistent time blocks, and collaboration among peers of like ability seemed to be unattainable based on their rural school experiences.

Participants were also asked to reflect on challenges or barriers they face in developing services for the gifted (question 4). With limited time, funding, and resources, these rural gifted programs struggle to implement best practices for program development and evaluation. Participants shared that one of the barriers was the lack of qualified educators to work with the gifted students. Participant 1 stated “lack of knowledge about gifted/talented by some personnel” was a barrier. Several participants echoed these sentiments recounting the lack of professional learning time for classroom teachers, lack of number of qualified teachers with a background in gifted pedagogy as well as a lack of mentors.

Overwhelmingly, the major challenge facing these districts, from the participants’ perspective, centered on the lack of time. Participants expressed concerns related to limited time for instruction, whether it is pull-out with a gifted trained teacher or working on gifted assignments during the regular

education classroom; limited time for quality professional learning for classroom teachers; and limited time for identification, assessment, and evaluation. Participant 5 stated, “Time is the barrier. Time for kids, for professional learning for teachers, time for identification and testing, time for enrichment. There is nothing for these students after identification.” This statement provides some insight into the the district’s greater focus on identifying gifted learners than on providing services for gifted learners. Interestingly, none of the participants identified funding as a barrier to provide gifted education in their rural school district. Participant 9 stated, “We really don’t have any challenges because we have all of the resources we need.” This was an unexpected statement, considering the literature in gifted education suggests funding is a limitation within rural areas.

Last, we ask participants if our questions had left anything out (question 5). Several themes were identified (see Table 2):

1. *The identification process is difficult.* Participants expressed concerns about the lack of balance between their responsibilities and the amount of time to complete the tasks. Concerns centered on the time-consuming nature of the identification process impeded their ability to consistently provide quality gifted programming for identified gifted/talented students.
2. *Misunderstanding of what is gifted education.* Participants shared concerns that not only did families and community members not understand the value of gifted programming, but also teachers did not understand what it means to participate in gifted education. Participants felt that if there were a greater understanding of what gifted is, more teachers would embrace the program.
3. *We are lucky.* Participants were quick to express their beliefs that, even with the limitations with rural schools, there are many positives. These benefits included opportunities to explore nature, local mentors, and the advocacy role that the gifted resource teacher plays within the

community. The small size of rural schools was also seen as a benefit as the teachers

really know all of the students, which helps with the identification of gifted students.

Table 2

Final Thoughts From the Semistructured Interviews

Theme	Selected Quotes
The identification process is difficult	<p>“Testing is a nightmare; I have to do it at my conference time and all among my other assignments and teaching [gifted/talented students] once or twice a week”</p> <p>“Identification is hard, even though we are identifying more ESL students.”</p>
Misunderstanding of what is gifted education	<p>“Teachers’ attitudes about it are not good; they don’t know what it is.”</p> <p>“Teachers are afraid for gifted students to be pulled out because they will miss class.”</p>
We are lucky	<p>“[Gifted/talented education] is great for kids.”</p> <p>“We are lucky to be in a rural area. The kids get to do many things they might not in a large school.”</p> <p>“The rural setting is a blessing”</p> <p>“Because it is a small school, the teachers know the students so they can identify gifted ones who have not been identified before.”</p>

Discussion

Historical Review

We sought to explore how gifted/talented education in Texas has changed over the last 30 years. Overwhelmingly, positive strides have been made within gifted education in Texas. Texas has emerged as a leader in the field of gifted education due its long-standing legislative mandates for identification and services gifted populations. The *Texas State Plan* has evolved over the last 30 years to include more accountability measures, which were previously lacking. The passing of House Bill 3 and the requirement of annual reporting of gifted programming data to the Texas Department of Education will ensure that all districts are following through on the *Texas State Plan*. The annual report

will also help rural gifted programs develop gifted policies and procedures within a gifted programming handbook. This handbook should provide some clarification and direction for educators as to the questions related to how to provide services within the district, as well as the professional learning hours related to gifted education for teachers and administrators. As rural school districts revise their gifted programming, it is important to keep in mind the importance of being flexible, utilizing resources readily available (Lewis, 2015). Rather than blindly adopting a programming model, each rural district should consider their unique situation, and modify standardized gifted programming models to best fit their needs. Additionally, the *Texas State Plan* mandate for 30 hours of professional development and annual

updates has played a key role in developing effective gifted programs. The Texas Association for the Gifted and Talented and the 20 RESCs play a significant role in providing professional learning through conferences, research, and online activities.

House Bill 3 repealed the gifted allotment funding, which may negatively affect gifted programming in rural areas. It is likely that rural school districts will continue to have to overcome localized struggles of limited funding, time, and resources to provide gifted education. Keeping these struggles in mind is necessary as rural districts develop their gifted programming models and handbooks, so that they are able to ensure a high level of rigor and expectations.

Research Question 1: What are the realities regarding how district gifted education policies and programming are operating within rural schools?

The first research question sought to explore the realities regarding how district gifted education policies and programming are operating within rural schools. While the findings here, based on our document review and semistructured interviews, are disheartening, they do reflect the heart of rural culture. Even though these gifted teachers experience struggles related to all of the findings in current literature—limited time, limited budget, limited resources (Azano et al., 2014; Howley et al., 2009; Kettler et al., 2015; Lewis & Boswell, 2020)—they feel rural gifted schools are a good place for gifted students. We collected these data in 2017, prior to the legislative changes in Texas. At this time, the policies and procedures for gifted programming were not required to be published in a handbook, so measuring the alignment between policy and implementation was difficult due to the lack of documentation. However, the lack of published policies and procedures illuminates the need for greater alignment between the gifted education policies and programming implementation. One can surmise that these mandates for accountability will only strengthen these rural gifted policies and procedures, which will in turn provide greater gifted programming for the rural gifted students. Texas rural school districts are

making strides in delivering effective gifted programming to their diverse student populations.

Research Question 2: What are some of the best practices for maximizing limited resources, time, and budgets?

To answer this question, we reviewed the literature and gathered participant feedback on the best practices for maximizing limited resources, time, and budget. When the participants discussed the optimal services for rural gifted programming, they focused on the pull-out programming model, where students would remain in the general education classroom and be pulled out for enrichment opportunities. The participants recognized the need to work closely with the classroom teacher to provide differentiated gifted curriculum. The pull-out service model, coupled with differentiation for higher levels of learning, reflects the participants' recognition of limited funding and resources within their districts. The final best practice proposed by the participants was targeted professional development focused on differentiation for higher levels of learning for the classroom teacher and the gifted teacher.

Rural school districts would benefit from tapping into their teachers as a resource. It is likely that the gifted specialists have created curriculum and materials that are effective at meeting the needs of their students. Successful rural gifted programs are flexible and adept at utilizing resources readily available (Lewis, 2015). The use of EBPs is essential to providing quality-gifted programming (Eppley et al., 2018; Wu, 2017). However, these practices do not necessarily need to include pricey purchased curriculum materials. Rather, it is the implementation of PBE using the readily available resources within the district and the community with an emphasis on targeted professional learning, not only for the gifted resource teachers but also for the classroom teachers. Providing professional learning on the nature and needs of gifted learners and ways to differentiate curriculum for an advanced learner is necessary to enable classroom teachers to effectively meet the needs of advanced learners.

Conclusions

Rural gifted education in Texas has changed over the past 30 years, evolving along with understandings of what is gifted, the characteristics of giftedness, and the role culture plays in the manifestation of giftedness. Nationally, rural gifted education is receiving more attention as researchers are seeking to understand the benefits and struggles present in these communities. Researchers are recognizing the significant impact rural culture plays in the development of gifted education. The findings of this study suggest that gifted education in rural school districts needs to be further developed in all areas of program delivery. As a characteristic in qualitative research, the findings in this study are representative of the school districts where they were collected and are congruent with findings in similar studies (Azano et al., 2014; Kettler et al., 2015; Lewis & Boswell, 2020; Slocumb et al., 2018).

There is a need for more understanding of PBE, which provides depth and complexity in rural gifted programs operating with limited time, budgets, and resources. With the passing of House Bill 3, Texas rural gifted education programs will develop gifted education policies and procedures handbooks. This increased accountability and clarity of what is gifted education should result in positive changes in rural gifted education programs. The future of Texas rural gifted education is looking bright.

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