



Feature Column

By K-8 Gifted Services Lead Facilitator Kim Rensch

Of Glasses and Giftedness Why Do We Have Gifted Education?

I'm nearsighted. This means that my eyes aren't the right shape, causing my retinas to send images to my brain that it sees as blurry. Because of a physical difference in my body, I need vision correction. Would you believe that I've actually had to endure people telling me that it's not fair that I get to wear glasses because they don't get to?

Okay, so no one has actually said that to me, and for good reason. It's not hurting anyone else when I wear vision correction. I need glasses due to a physical difference in my eyes, so I should get to wear them, right?

The fact of the matter is that physical differences in a person's body sometimes call for intervention. Someone with diabetes takes insulin. Someone with a hearing impairment wears a hearing aid. Someone with mobility issues uses a walking aid. Someone with allergies takes an antihistamine.

We don't think twice about addressing those needs. So why would we balk at addressing the needs of a person whose physical brain differences require more rigorous and challenging learning opportunities?

Baby, They Were Born This Way

Neuroscientists have found that the brains of intellectually gifted people function differently from a neurotypical brain due to physical differences between the two. In other words, some peoples' brains have a larger or more active hippocampus, prefrontal cortex, or parietal cortex, which may lead to gifted behaviors. To paraphrase Lady Gaga, "baby, they were born this way."

To meet the needs of these brains, we have gifted education programs, which in recent years have come under fire, justly, for lack of fair representation among certain student groups, most notably students of color and students living in poverty. Citing racism and elitism, some school districts have eliminated gifted programs altogether. Eliminating programs, however, does not eliminate the physical differences in brains that require a heightened level of rigor and talent development strategies to make intellectual growth.

The FPS Gifted Services Model

In 2004, Fargo Public Schools, under the guidance of Professor Karen B. Rogers, PhD., adopted a model of gifted education that is grounded in research and best practice. It is our goal to match students with high intellectual and academic capabilities to a [service](#) that will lead them to the academic success promised in the FPS mission statement, "Educating and empowering *all* students to



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succeed” [emphasis added]. We simply cannot assume that individuals with giftedness will reach their full potential without good instruction; hence, the need for gifted programs and differentiation within the regular classroom. In 2019, with the goal of ensuring fair representation of all student demographic subgroups, our FPS Gifted Services team took steps to minimize the identification gap through the use of thinking skills lessons in grades K-2. These lessons provide students with opportunities to demonstrate strong critical thinking skills that might get missed in traditional academic lessons, providing an alternative pathway to identification for gifted services.

Long-Term Consequences

Our failure to educate students with intellectual giftedness has potential long-term consequences. It is believed that 20% or more of incarcerated individuals are gifted. This is especially so for children growing up in poverty. There is evidence pointing to an increased level of high school and college dropouts among gifted populations, too, with some research reporting almost 25% of children with giftedness leaving high school before completing graduation requirements. So much potential is wasted and so many individuals do not grow into their fully-actualized selves when education systems deny the needs of children with intellectual and academic giftedness.

What Our Students Need

Withholding gifted services is akin to telling a child they can't wear glasses because their classmates don't need to wear them. We need gifted services teachers who specialize in the unique social/emotional and instructional needs of children with neurodiverse brains. We need general education teachers who partner with gifted services teachers to support students with high academic potential. Students need differentiated learning experiences that provide appropriate academic challenges. Embracing the unique physical needs of our students lays the foundation for an education system that helps *all* learners succeed.

