Community Consolidated School District 89
Report on Challenge and Advanced Services

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Background

The Center for Talent Development (CTD), which is part of Northwestern University's School of Education and Social Policy, has been a leader in the fields of gifted education and talent development for over 40 years. CTD engages in high-quality research, develops and implements enrichment and accelerated programs for students PreK-grade 12, and provides guidance and support to educators and administrators, using evidence-based practices to improve gifted education services in a talent development framework.

CTD was retained to lead a program review for the district's gifted programs with a focus on strengths, areas for improvement, and alignment with current research and evidence-based practices in gifted education and talent development.

The review team consisted of four CTD permanent staff members who engaged in classroom visits and focus groups and was led by Dr. Susan Corwith. The team gathered data to assist stakeholders involved in strategic planning and decision-making activities to achieve the following objectives:

- Understand the range of learning needs of students in the district,
- Understand the degree to which advanced students' needs are currently being addressed,
- Assure the district is engaged in equitable policies, practices, and services,
- Understand stakeholder values and priorities for the education of advanced students,
- Adjust programs and services as needed to align with evidence-based practices and stakeholder priorities, and
- Set benchmarks for continuous improvement and growth.

The purpose of this review is not to pass holistic judgment on the quality of education provided to students in the district, but rather to identify priority areas for further examination and improvement and to help guide consensus building around desired outcomes.

Overview of the Process and Number of Participants

The review included five principal elements:

1. Administering online surveys to students receiving Challenge and Advanced courses; parents of students receiving services and parents of students not currently receiving services; educators, including grade-level classroom teachers, Challenge and Advanced teachers, special education staff, EL staff, and instructional coaches (specialists); and administrators. Surveys collected information from each stakeholder group about experiences, perceptions, and priorities for improvement related to the Challenge and Advanced Programs in the district and awareness of related policies and procedures. The themes

addressed in the surveys are based on the National Association for Gifted Children's (NAGC) Pre-K – Grade 12 Gifted Programming Standards. The number of survey respondents in each group is listed below.
    a. Students Receiving Services Grades 3-8 – 363 respondents
    b. Parents (receiving services) – 99 respondents
    c. Parents (general) – 39 respondents
    d. Educators - 89
    e. Administrators – 7 respondents

2. Conducting one-on-one interviews and focus groups with stakeholders including administrators, parents of students receiving services, parents of students not currently receiving services, Challenge and Advanced teachers, classroom educators, instructional coaches and special education team members, and students in Challenge and Advanced courses. CTD created interview guides, with input from the district, to probe in greater depth themes identified in the surveys. The guides helped to ensure consistency, but the interviewers had autonomy to ask follow-up questions and probe ideas that would clarify or verify findings from surveys and observations. The number of focus group participants in each group is listed below.
    a. Students (grades 3-8) - 65
    b. Parents (receiving services) – 17
    c. Parents (general) - 7
    d. Educators (Challenge/Advanced and other specialists/coaches) - 16
    e. Educators (general) - 6
    f. Administrators - 7

3. Observing in grade-level, Challenge, and Advanced classrooms which provides a snapshot of instruction and further context to survey and focus group responses. Observations are not evaluative.

4. Analyzing a set of district achievement and growth data points to understand demographics and performance of students receiving and not currently receiving Challenge and Advanced services.

5. Reviewing district materials and documents (e.g., curriculum overviews, policy documents, handbooks, web pages, etc.) and publicly available data (e.g., state report card data, demographics) as reference points.

As a whole, stakeholder participation in the process (combining surveys and focus groups) was within accepted ranges/percentages for research; however, the number of classroom educator and parent focus group participants (not currently receiving services) and parent survey participants from traditionally marginalized groups (as self-reported by race, income, identified disability, or English as an additional language) was on the low end in most categories (not always reflective of the size of each demographic group in the district when accounting for total sample sizes). Additional outreach may be warranted to gather additional input for decision making. Still, our triangulation of the

data, the opportunity to receive input from various stakeholder groups, our knowledge of evidence-based practices, and experience conducting reviews give us confidence in our core findings and recommendations.

Summary of Findings

Analysis of the data revealed common themes in the six categories reflected in the NAGC Pre-K – Grade 12 Gifted Programming Standards. The themes are outlined below with related data points.

Perceptions about Program Transparency and Communication

Stakeholders were asked about their awareness of gifted/advanced programs, the district's acceleration policy and procedures, and the district's goals for students' growth. Transparency and ongoing communication about the full range of services offered and clear expectations for student learning help assure that all students can get access to the services and supports they need to develop their abilities fully. Transparency and communication are also important because Illinois requires districts to report data on gifted identification and services and to both have and make available to families an acceleration policy and procedures to assure that students, regardless of gifted identification or designation, can receive instruction at their level of readiness. Advanced learning services are designed to meet specific instructional and developmental needs, which means they should be fully integrated into a district's offerings, and not an "add on" or "extra" known to and accessed by a select few.

For stakeholders knowledgeable about the current services, their perceptions are largely positive; however, there are gaps in knowledge among stakeholder groups in their familiarity with the services. Familiarity includes the range of services offered, goals for each of the services, and the policies and procedures related to identification and acceleration.

- When asked on the survey if they were familiar with the gifted/advanced programs in the district, approximately half (51%) of parents of students not currently receiving services responded "No", whereas 20% percent of parents who have a student receiving services responded "No". In focus group conversations, many parents of students receiving services commented that they did not know about the programs until they were notified their child was being tested or didn't understand the programming until their child was placed in the class/es.

- 40% of administrator survey respondents, 80% of specialists outside of Challenge and Advanced, and 70% of the general educator group rated themselves as "somewhat familiar" or "not at all familiar" with the programming (most in the "somewhat familiar" category). Over 70% of Educators in Challenge and Advanced Programs rated themselves as "very familiar" with the programming.

When asked if they have access to the information they need about programs and services for students with gifted/advanced learning needs or knew who to go to with questions, we found the following:

- Approximately 60% of parent survey respondents who do not have a student receiving Challenge/Advanced services and approximately 30% of parents who currently have a student receiving services responded “No” to the question of if they have access to the information they need about programs and services.

- The information most often identified as missing in survey comments and focus group conversations was the following: criteria for placement in middle school services, how the cut scores were determined for Challenge, the differences in services between elementary and middle school, what outcomes of programming should be, and gifted services for students who may have an IEP or who are learning English. Several parents requested more detailed information about Challenge and Advanced Programs on the website and in materials sent home at the beginning of the year. Several comments in the parent surveys reflected a concern that parents not familiar with the school district or not comfortable contacting administrators or teachers were at a disadvantage. Suggestions about where to include information to make it more easily accessible included the district website (for example, it appears there is no information specific to advanced courses on the Glen Crest or district website) and more information in the middle school handbook. Parents also mentioned parent nights and giving information to classroom teachers to share during conferences.

- The majority of parents receiving services indicated that they know who to contact with questions about the programs, whereas just less than half of the parents of students not receiving services reported knowing who to contact (49% of respondents).

Most stakeholders were at least somewhat familiar with the identification criteria (test scores) for Challenge and Advanced Programs, but they were less familiar with how the test score criteria were selected and how the placement process happens.

- When asked if procedures for identifying students with gifted/advanced learning needs are communicated clearly, 18% of parent survey respondents who do not have students receiving services agreed or strongly agreed, while 56% of the parents who have a student receiving services agreed or strongly agreed.

- Educators and specialists outside of Challenge and Advanced shared in survey comments and focus groups that while they are generally aware of the identification criteria, they were not prepared to talk with parents about the placement process nor the programming (e.g., content, specific academic goals and outcomes, differences between elementary and middle school). Several educators said they thought they should be asked for input as part of the identification process, particularly to advocate for students that may not be

scoring consistently at the specified percentiles. A few elementary educators also said they would be interested in more collaboration between general education and Challenge, though concerns were lack of time and heavy teaching loads.

When asked about the district's acceleration policies and practices, most stakeholder groups were only somewhat familiar with them, with administers reporting the most familiarity.

- Over 80% of parent survey respondents (receiving services and not currently receiving services) reported that they were not familiar with the district's policies on acceleration. This is important to note, since the Illinois Acceleration Act does include a provision about communicating policies to families.

- As is generally the case, administrators reported being more familiar with the acceleration policy and procedures, with 100% rating themselves as at least "somewhat familiar". Ideally, all administrators would be "very familiar" with the policy and procedures.

- Of the general educator group, 41% of survey respondents said they were "somewhat familiar" and 56% said they were "not at all familiar" with the acceleration policies. Among Challenge and Advanced educators, just over half reported being "somewhat familiar" and another 30% very familiar. Among other specialists, approximately 85% reported being "not at all familiar" or "somewhat familiar" with the acceleration policies.

Administrator and educator stakeholders were asked if the growth goals for both students generally and for gifted/advanced students are clearly articulated.

- 80% of responding administrators, educators, and specialists (not Challenge/Advanced) "agree" or "strongly agree" that goals for students' growth are clearly articulated in the district. When asked specifically about growth goals for gifted/advanced learners, on average 50% of those same groups selected "agree" or "strongly agree". Challenge and Advanced educators had a much higher rate of agreement about goals for gifted/advanced students, with approximately 75% responding "agree" or "strongly agree".

- Comments from surveys and focus groups suggest that the higher rate of agreement for the Challenge and Advanced educators is likely because they work directly with the students and are responsible for their curriculum and instruction.

- Questions were raised by several educator and parent stakeholders in both surveys and focus groups about achievement and growth data for gifted students, specifically what the expectations should be based on current services and students' achievement levels.

- Many individuals in the general educator and administrator stakeholder groups also expressed concerns about meeting the needs of students performing in the top quartile but who are not receiving Challenge or Advanced programming. Effective general and advanced programs are built on clearly defined and articulated goals for students' growth, and a growth measure for all students is part of the ESSA plan requirements in Illinois.

In survey responses, parents largely agreed that the district recognizes the varied abilities of students and has services that are of high quality. Still, approximately 33% of parents, overall, saw room for the district to challenge students to maximize their academic potential. In focus groups there was discussion about students who were high achievers but did not meet the criteria for Challenge/Advanced or students who had specialized needs (IEPs or EL services). A few parents of students receiving advanced middle school services shared that they felt that the current programming was not challenging enough.

Educators who teach Challenge or Advanced courses generally report being clear about their role in providing programs and services for gifted/advanced learners since they are directly engaged in offering the services. However, general educators reported less clarity about their role, with 44% of survey respondents indicating that they “agree” or “strongly agree” that their role is clear. In focus groups and survey comments, elementary educators explained that having Challenge students leave the classroom for instruction created some ambiguity or confusion about their roles. Some of the elementary teachers also mentioned that having them provide the grades for Challenge students when they are not in the classroom full time can be problematic. For both elementary and middle school grade-level educators, there were questions raised about their role in identifying and serving students not qualified by test score for gifted programming, since those students may still require significant intervention or differentiation to meet their needs.

Perceptions of the District’s Approach to Identification for Services

Current programming standards in gifted education put a focus on identification for services as opposed to identification as gifted. This is not a shift away from recognizing that students have varied abilities, but rather an understanding that giftedness exists in many forms, in many domains and encompasses a wide range of needs. In other words, “one size does not fit all” and identification practices need to reflect that.

A first step in designing a strategic continuum of services and related identification procedures is to determine the current range of readiness and learning needs among each grade band of students. For many students, this can be largely accomplished by making thoughtful use of extant data, utilizing local norms, to produce a body of evidence about the range of learning needs among the student population. A body of evidence is critical to equitable decision-making given the documented limitations of standardized tests, particularly for minoritized populations and for students performing at an advanced level.

Identification practices should be clear, transparent, and equitable, but many district approaches do not meet these requirements. To better understand stakeholder perceptions and experiences related to identification for services in the district, they were asked in survey questions and focus groups about the identification practices for Challenge and Advanced programming.

First, stakeholders were asked if the criteria used to place students in or recommend students for advanced academic services (Challenge or Advanced classes) are clearly defined. Clarity and transparency are keys to access and equity.

- Agreement was higher among Challenge parents than it was among Advanced parents (62% “agree” or “strongly agree” versus 43% “agree” or “strongly agree”).
- 67% of specialists and educators not affiliated with the Challenge and Advanced programs agreed or strongly agreed (skewed toward “agree”), while approximately a quarter of the administrators agreed or strongly agreed.
- Challenge and Advanced educators agreed most strongly with 72% of respondents selecting “agree” or “strongly agree” (skewed toward “strongly agree”).

When discussed in focus groups, the common themes were that the score criteria are defined, particularly for Challenge, but that sometimes there seem to be other factors considered in placement that are not necessarily shared nor consistent. As noted earlier, several grade-level educators asked to what extent teacher input could or should be involved, and parents wondered what role grades do or should play in decisions.

When asked if the district places an appropriate amount of attention on identifying and meeting the needs of gifted/advanced learners, there was a split between agreement and disagreement among and within stakeholder groups. When asked to explain in survey comments and focus groups, we received the following insights:

- For those who disagreed because they felt there was not enough attention paid to identification, the issue was mainly about access to programming and concerns about underrepresentation. There were several comments about missing students in the process and examples of students who have gone on to advanced courses in high school with much success.

- For those who disagreed because they felt there was too much attention paid to identification, the issue was also connected to equity, but they questioned how much specialized programming is appropriate for students already doing well or where the attention is placed (on labels versus learning needs).

Since equity is a concern of district leaders, stakeholders were asked if criteria used to place students in or recommend students for gifted/advanced academic services are inclusive of students from historically underserved or marginalized populations.

- All administrator respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed that the criteria were inclusive, as did the majority of specialists outside of Challenge and Advanced.
- The general educator group was more varied with 29% disagreeing or strongly disagreeing, 38% agreeing or strongly agreeing, and 34% neither agreeing nor disagreeing.
- 59% of parents of students receiving services agreed or strongly agreed that the criteria are fair, while 29% of parents of students not receiving services agreed or strongly agreed.

Standardized test cut scores on MAP and CogAT are the criteria for identification in the district, which raised concerns from stakeholders about missing students whose abilities might show up in different ways or who are frequently missed on standardized achievement or cognitive abilities assessments. All standardized tests have error in them, have some level of cultural bias, and are affected by opportunity to learn. Stakeholders pointed to underrepresentation of student groups within the current services and a lack of services available that specifically address the unique needs of twice exceptional students and English language learners as issues of inclusiveness.

The data shows that while the district is high performing overall, with norms above the national and state norms in many categories, there is underrepresentation in advanced learning services for the EL population (no students identified for services), students with identified disabilities, low-income students, and some racial groups compared to their numbers in the district.

In the chart below, the representation index tells us the extent to which a demographic group is over or underrepresented in gifted education services as compared to their overall numbers in the district. An index of 1.0 is equal representation, so a number over 1.0 indicates overrepresentation and a number under 1.0 indicates underrepresentation.

Demographic Group	Representation Index
English Learners	0.0
Low-Income	.29
IDEA Identified	.13
Female	.97
Male	1.03
Asian	1.02
Black or African American	.27
Hispanic or Latino	.64
Two or more races	1.38
White	1.13

Ideally, the demographics of students receiving advanced services should align with the demographics of the district, considering both demonstrated achievement and potential for advanced learning, but disproportionality will occur for a variety of reasons and is influenced by the intersection of factors. Still, it is a starting point for discussion and deeper analysis.

Perceptions about Curriculum and Instruction

In our experience, it is common to find discrepancies in stakeholder groups' perceptions of the match between students' learning readiness and the district's curriculum and instruction. Each group has a different perspective based on their role and level of involvement with the curriculum and the classroom. Though the perceptions are different, each perspective is important to understand when considering any instructional and programming modifications.

For this review, stakeholders were asked their perceptions about various aspects of their experience with the curriculum and instruction in the district both overall and by subject area. CTD staff also visited classrooms and had an opportunity to review examples of grade-level scope and sequence documents, curriculum maps, and course materials.

- Students in Challenge and Advanced courses had generally positive perceptions of the programs and when asked in focus groups if they would recommend the program to a friend who had similar interests and abilities most would. Students spoke about caring and knowledgeable teachers and recognized the importance of being challenged to learn and grow. Following are findings from the student survey regarding the perceived level of challenge they experienced in their courses.
    - Overall, 88% of Challenge students rated themselves as "satisfied" or "very satisfied" with their Challenge courses. 71% of middle school students rated themselves as "satisfied" or "very satisfied" with their Advanced courses. Comments from students who were "dissatisfied" had two themes: need for more challenge or dissatisfaction with the teaching approach or type of learning activities.
    - 73% of Challenge students in LAH reported the level of difficulty as "just the right level of challenge" while 15% responded "sometimes too hard." 67% of middle school students taking Advanced Literacy rated the level of difficulty as "just the right level of challenge" and 8% rated it as "sometimes too hard." The benchmark to aim for is a rating of 50% at just the right amount of challenge and 50% at sometimes too hard, which reflects more students being regularly in their zone of proximal development. Students are good judges of their effort and engagement; still, they tend to underestimate what they can do.
    - Middle school math stood out compared to other subject areas on ratings of the difficulty level. Students rated it closest to the 50/50 benchmark. 54% of students reported that Advanced Math courses provided the right

amount of challenge while 41% reported that their class was “sometimes too hard”. For Challenge STEM, 63% of students reported the level of difficulty as “just the right amount of challenge” and 27% reported “sometimes too difficult.”
    - For middle school Advanced Science, 60% of students reported that the course provided “just the right amount of challenge” while 14% reported that their class was “sometimes too hard”.

- 60% of parents of students not currently receiving Challenge or Advanced courses and 75% of parents of students receiving services agreed that the curriculum and instruction their child was receiving met their academic needs. 24% of parents of students not currently receiving Challenge or Advanced courses disagreed, while the number was 12% for parents of students receiving services.

- Many parent survey and focus group comments were positive, highlighting dedicated teachers and responsiveness to parent inquiries. When asked to explain any “disagree” ratings on the survey, comments were that some courses, even Challenge or Advanced courses, were not challenging enough for their students. A couple of parents reported unsuccessful requests for acceleration. A handful of parents specifically mentioned pressure to achieve, volume of work leading to anxiety, and curriculum not adapted to students’ individual needs (sometimes too easy, sometimes too difficult). There were a few requests for more differentiated instruction or a greater level of challenge in the early elementary classrooms (K-1) for students who need that. In the surveys, a handful of parents mentioned that they had seen their children’s MAP scores decline and growth wasn’t what they expected, which made them curious about the match between their child’s readiness and the programming. Also, one parent asked how growth is measured when a child is at the 97th, 98th or 99th percentile or higher on MAP.

Several questions in the surveys and in the focus groups addressed the use of enrichment for identification of learning needs, the use of differentiated curriculum, and the use of advanced materials with varying degrees of difficulty. These items help assess understanding of evidence-based practices and responsiveness to diverse learning needs.

- Almost all the educator survey respondents reported differentiating curriculum at least sometimes, with 67% of general educators and 90% of Challenge and Advanced educators reporting that they regularly differentiate to assure the most advanced students in the classroom are challenged academically.
- When asked about the use of flexible grouping to allow students with similar levels of readiness for advanced content to work together, 70% of general educators and 36% of Challenge and Advanced educators reported they grouped this way “on a regular basis”.

- Other stakeholders reported the following about differentiation and flexible grouping:
    - Administrators and Differentiation: About a third of respondents reported that they regularly observe teachers differentiating the curriculum to assure advanced students are challenged academically. A few responding administrators were unsure.
    - Administrators and Flexible Grouping: 60% agree or strongly agree that teachers regularly use flexible groups to allow students with similar levels of readiness for advanced content to work together.
    - Parents (receiving services) and Differentiation: 35% report teachers "sometimes" differentiate, and another 49% report that they do it "frequently" or "all the time" for their children.
    - Parents (not receiving services) and Differentiation: 37% report teachers "sometimes" differentiate, and another 45% report that they do it "frequently" or "all the time" for their child.
    - Challenge and Advanced Students: 34% of Challenge students reported teachers modified the curriculum half of the time or more and that they were often grouped by what they knew. Approximately 30% of Advanced students reported their teachers modify or change activities to make sure they are challenging enough at least half of the time and approximately 48% reported that teachers group by what students know at least half of the time.

Students were also asked to describe what learning looks like in their classrooms.

- For Challenge LAH, the top four phrases and the percentage reporting were "do the same work as everyone else" 65%, "explore new ideas or topics" 58%, "listen to teacher talk" 40%, and teacher assigns work 40%.
- For Advanced Literacy, the top four phrases and the percentage reporting were "teacher assigns work" 83%, "listen to teacher talk" 67%, "do the same work as everyone else" 67%, and "work with others" 57%.

Approximately 25% of courses observed during the review involved visible grouping and/or curriculum differentiation. The observed differentiation was generally centered around interest, though there were examples of differentiation by readiness. Often, teachers report differentiating at a higher rate that what is perceived by students, administrators, and parents, which is what we saw in the district's data. Differentiation and grouping can be done in many ways and for different purposes. One of the more interesting questions is to what extent differentiation is done in tandem with preassessment and flexible grouping or other strategies to align instruction with readiness. Because of the differences in perceptions, it would be useful to explore this topic further, focusing on strategies that increase rigor and responsiveness for even the most advanced students.

To be used effectively and consistently, differentiation requires supportive structures (e.g., co-teaching/collaboration, clustering/deliberate placements, technology), resources (e.g., curricular materials, software, support staff), and ongoing professional

learning or coaching. Administrators mentioned these structures in focus group discussions and surveys, recognizing that there was a need for them if they wanted frequent, sustained differentiation in classrooms. Research suggests that teachers differentiate less frequently and less effectively than they realize or desire to, but that with curriculum resources, coaching, and supports such as access to specialists, cluster grouping, or smaller class sizes frequency and effectiveness can be increased.

Perceptions of the PreK – Grade 8 Continuum of Services and Impact of Services

In focus groups, parents, educators, and administrators expressed support for having advanced learning services expand in two ways: 1) addressing the needs of students who are high achieving yet not identified for and placed in the current structure of programs, 2) adding services in other subjects, for example science in elementary school or social studies.

The most effective and inclusive programs consist of a continuum of services akin to MTSS, which provides tiers of intervention from least intensive to most intensive.

- Educator and administrator stakeholders have similarly high regard for the quality of instruction in the district's gifted programs, but there is disagreement about to what extent the district provides the services necessary for advanced learners to achieve growth commensurate with their abilities. Administrators and specialists outside of the gifted program expressed concerns about equity in identification practices and questioned how well aligned current services were to the range of abilities in the district. Several stakeholders stated that special education, gifted education, and other specialized services in the district largely operate independently from each other. General educators noted that students who are high achievers but who do not qualify for the current services need more enrichment than they feel prepared to provide.

- Nearly all the Challenge and Advanced educators agreed or strongly agreed that the district provides the services necessary for gifted/advanced learners to achieve growth commensurate with their abilities. The average "agree" or "strongly agree" response for other stakeholder groups was 50%.

- Among parent stakeholders, 31% of parents of students not currently receiving gifted/advanced services agreed or strongly agreed that the district provides the services necessary for gifted/advanced learners to achieve growth commensurate with their abilities and another 42% neither agreed nor disagreed. Parents of students currently receiving services more strongly agreed that the current range of offerings meets students' needs (62% agreed or strongly agreed, 23% neither agreed nor disagreed). Several of their comments referenced a need for more supports for twice exceptional students, interventions for students just below the score criteria or in K-1, and options for acceleration for the highest performers (beyond Challenge or Advanced options).

Offering services is one issue, but the impact or effectiveness of the services is another. Student performance data should be collected and reviewed regularly as one measure of effectiveness. In this review, we asked stakeholders about their perceptions of the effectiveness of the current programs.

- When asked how well the current services provided are meeting students' needs, 60% of administrators responded "somewhat" and 40% responded "adequately". In focus groups, elementary school administrators wondered if the currently available data could really assess the impact of the services, since Challenge is not a replacement program. Questions were raised by several stakeholders about the effectiveness of the current process for evaluating Challenge student performance.

- 62% of general educators responded that current programs "somewhat" or "adequately" meet students' needs. The most noted issues were students "on the bubble" and students that may have gaps in knowledge and skills because of the pullout structure of Challenge.

- Among Challenge and Advanced educators, who are most familiar with the services and performance of students within their classrooms, 64% responded "to a great extent" and another 36% responded "adequately" to the question of how well the programming meets students' needs.

- When educators and administrators were asked about how growth is being tracked and how the district is evaluating impact, few quantitative measures specific to advanced learning were identified. Educators and administrators are looking at MAP data, particularly growth percentiles, but there are limitations to that data for advanced learners, specifically students at the top of the grade range of the platform. While there are some measures in place for tracking student growth, there also need to be measures in place to understand program effectiveness.

A high-level review of student achievement and growth data for 2023 shows high achievement and lower than expected growth for advanced learners in the district. Below are the average of Fall to Spring 2023 Growth Percentiles for Challenge/Advanced students and Non-Challenge/Advanced in Math and Reading:

Grade Level	Challenge/Advanced Growth Percentile - Math	Challenge/Advanced Growth Percentile - Reading	Grade-Level Students - Math	Grade-Level Students - Reading
2-5	53.17	46.91	48.77	47.00
6-8	63.31	52.69	48.53	45.99

According to NWEA, a growth percentile in the range of 40-60 is average. A growth percentile in the range of 60-80 is high average. While achievement remains high on

MAP and IAR, because of their academic strengths, we would want to see more of the district's advanced learners growing in the high average range. One important item for consideration with students in grades 7 or 8, though, is that the older advanced students are the greater the chance that MAP isn't capturing the full extent of their growth (not enough advanced items to capture their level of performance).

High-quality programs make use of multiple forms of acceleration within a continuum of services. Per Illinois law, the district has an acceleration policy in place for early entrance, subject, and whole grade acceleration. However, only two students in the data set provided are whole grade accelerated, indicating that whole grade acceleration is likely an under-utilized approach. Further, the current procedures for making acceleration decisions contain several components that warrant review and revision so that they align with research and evidence-based practices.

In a forced-choice question, stakeholders were asked if exploring grade level content in greater depth (enrichment) or providing opportunities to move on to higher level content when grade level standards are mastered (acceleration) should be the higher priority in the district. Every stakeholder group except administrators selected acceleration as the higher priority. 80% or more of the respondents in the Challenge/Advanced, Specialist (non-Challenge/Advanced) and Parents of students receiving services groups selected acceleration. 62% of General Educators and 67% of Parents of students not currently receiving services also selected acceleration. When asked to define their choice further in focus groups and in the survey, the following themes emerged:

- Both acceleration and enrichment are viewed as important and desired, but students who are ready for the next level of content should be able to access it.
- The way acceleration is provided matters. Most parents and educators do not want students to have to work independently on a regular basis.
- Subject and whole grade acceleration could be used more frequently. Several parents reported requesting acceleration but not having it approved. CTD's review of the district's criteria found that it is extremely restrictive and is likely to miss good candidates for acceleration.
- The most frequently mentioned concerns about acceleration are social emotional wellbeing and development, aligning schedules, and managing gaps in learning.

Perceptions of the Learning Environment and Culture

The learning environment includes academics, developmental needs, and social-emotional well-being. It speaks to factors that assure optimal development. Stakeholders were asked several psychosocial and social-emotional related questions in surveys and focus groups.

When asked if the district recognizes and values the students' varied academic abilities, stakeholders had varied perspectives:

- 60% of administrators agreed or strongly agreed
- 82% of Challenge and Advanced educators agreed or strongly agreed

- 87% of general educators agreed or strongly agreed
- 80% of parents of students receiving services and 63% of parents of students not receiving services agreed or strongly agreed

The lower ratings from administrators and parents of students not receiving services deserves additional exploration. Focus group discussions suggest that this lower rating stems from concerns about underserved groups of students and students who score just below the current score criteria for program placement. Because of the smaller percentage of parent survey respondents who identified themselves as parents of students not receiving services and parents identifying themselves as individuals of color, low-income, or primarily speaking a language other than English, their perspectives may not be well represented and could be different in meaningful ways.

In surveys and focus groups, stakeholders were asked if the culture of the district reflects a belief that students with learning disabilities, students regardless of income, students receiving EL services, and students of all races and cultures may also require advanced instruction and should be provided specialized programming. While Challenge and Advanced educators largely agreed or strongly agreed in all categories (75% or more), less than half of each of the other stakeholders agreed or strongly agreed that this is the current culture in the district regarding students with disabilities and students receiving EL services. Responses were mixed for the culture around students from low-income households.

Students were asked about what they liked best about their Challenge and Advanced courses. The most frequent responses across all grade levels and services were the following:

- Advanced classes are beneficial because they push students out of their comfort zone.
- There is more new information and effort required than other classes (“work my brain”, “challenge me to the point where I have to work hard”).
- Supportive and helpful teachers and peers
- Peers who had similar abilities and could relate to their academic needs

Students were also asked about what they dislike about their Challenge and Advanced courses. The most frequent responses were the following:

- A few comments that LAH could be more challenging or in general several comments that the courses are not challenging enough.
- Several comments that it can be difficult to transition back into regular classes. Students want more time in Challenge and do not like going back to the regular classroom (“time feels wasted”, “should not have to do the regular work too”)
- A feeling of sometimes not fitting in or being “good enough”
- Nothing

Assuring all students feel a sense of belonging is an ongoing challenge of advanced learning services both in K-12 settings and higher education. Creating inclusive communities requires that several dimensions of equity are addressed from services to

curriculum and staff to leadership. (See Appendix D.) It was not possible to do an extensive analysis of representation in curriculum or to explore the demographics of the staff. However, a cursory review of the curriculum indicates that there is room for more diversity reflected within the materials assure a range of races/ethnicities and backgrounds are represented at each grade level.

Since educators, administrators, and parents often have questions about whether or not students feel stressed or pressured by their advanced courses, students were asked about how often they feel stressed because of schoolwork. Overall, survey responses were as follows:

- Grades 2-5
    - 3% “nearly all the time”
    - 7% “often”
    - 25% “sometimes”
    - 57% “rarely”
    - 8% “never”
- Grades 6-8
    - 18% “nearly all the time”
    - 24% “often”
    - 44% “sometimes”
    - 13% “rarely”
    - 1% “never

For those who reported feeling “rarely” or “never stressed”, the level of challenge across courses was perceived as “just right” or “too easy” in most subject areas. Students reporting stress “often” or “nearly all the time” reported a higher percentage of courses that were “frequently” too challenging for them, but there was no consistent pattern. Several middle school students spoke about homework and volume of work as a stressor for them, especially when considering they have more than one advanced class.

For advanced learning to be fully integrated into district priorities and plans, collaboration among parents, teachers, specialists, and administrators is critical. Each group was asked if parents, educators, and administrators work as partners to address the needs of students. Following is the percentage of “agree” and “strongly agree” responses by group: 79% of parents of students receiving services, 66% of parents of students not receiving services, 64% of general educators, 82% of Challenge and Advanced educators, and 50% of administrators. Ideally, all stakeholder groups would have response rates of 75% or higher in the agree or strongly agree category. When we see lower numbers, it is often a reflection of communication, transparency about processes and policies, and opportunities to engage with other stakeholder groups on a regular basis.

Perceptions about Professional Learning

NAGC Programming Standard 6 includes a student growth outcome based on interactions with educators "who possess content pedagogical knowledge and meet national teacher preparation standards in gifted education and the Standards for Professional Learning", so stakeholders were asked about professional learning opportunities and current level of knowledge and skills in gifted education.

- Approximately 25% of general educator and specialist respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they had adequate opportunities for professional development to help meet the needs of advanced learners, while 54% of Challenge and Advanced teachers agreed or strongly agreed. All Challenge and Advanced educators agreed or strongly agreed that they have the expertise they need to teacher their advanced courses effectively.

- When specifically asked if they had adequate training to use data to guide their work with advanced learners, 38% of general educator respondents agreed or strongly agreed, while 62% of Challenge and Advanced educators agreed or strongly agreed.

- In the administrator group, approximately half of the survey respondents agreed that they have received adequate training to support staff to meet the needs of advanced learners and that they have received adequate training to create and implement effective policies and programs to support students with advanced learning needs. Policies, evidence-based programming models, and gifted education standards are commonly an area where administrators feel a need for more information and guidance. When specifically asked about acceleration, several of the administrator participants shared that they had not been provided training on accelerative approaches and were not aware of the research on the effectiveness of acceleration. However, there is some experience among elementary administrators with cluster grouping as a model.

- Each stakeholder group except for specialists outside of the gifted program identified providing professional development to educators on meeting the needs of advanced learners as a top priority to improve the quality of education for advanced students in the district. All stakeholder groups also identified improving policies and procedures for identifying students in need of accelerated/enriched learning opportunities as a priority and for general educators and parents of students not receiving services this was their top priority.

Classroom educators are interested in assessment and differentiation training, but many expressed concerns about how they can manage more time and new expectations without getting some support or relief from other expectations first. This is where district coaches and gifted education specialists can likely play a role.

Community Priorities for Action

Four priorities emerged during the program review.

- *Come to Consensus around the Approach to and Goals for Services and Communicate with Stakeholders* – There is currently a lack of consensus among stakeholders about what the approach to services should be and the conceptual framework around which the services should be built. While no single definition of giftedness or best model of programming exists, there are research-backed practices, standards for the field, and guidance from the National Association for Gifted Children. Effective practice is responsive to needs on a continuum, much like we see in Special Education, and is inclusive. To assure the best use of resources and greatest impact on student outcomes, the district is advised to invest time in building consensus around the framework and goals for services. The current services focus on a relatively small, narrowly defined group of students, and there is evidence that many more students have unmet learning needs than are being provided services. Administrators, educators, parents, and specialists have different views about and clarity around current goals and outcomes. Shared vision, goals, and transparency will result in meeting the greatest number of needs in the most efficient, effective, and community driven way. Recommendations to address this priority are found under Standards 1, 4, 5, and 6.

- *Expand the Continuum of Services, Focusing on the Rigor of Tier 1 Instruction, Enhanced Tier 2 Services, and More Frequent Use of Acceleration* – The NAGC Programming standard's Cohesive and Coordinated Services student outcome is that students with gifts and talents demonstrate yearly progress commensurate with ability because of a continuum of PreK – 12 services and coordination between gifted, general, special, and related professional services, including outside of school learning specialists and advocates. Its evidence-based practices call for services offered in relevant student talent areas responsive to students' different levels of need for intervention. The district has many high achieving students (defined as ~75th percentile or above) not served through Challenge or Advanced courses and for whom the core curriculum is difficult to differentiate. Additionally, historically marginalized groups of students are underrepresented in the district's current model of service provision. Therefore, a priority is expanding the continuum of services, connecting it to the district's current MTSS model. There are already goals for increased rigor at Tier 1 in the district's priorities. Program review data shows there is interest in more collaboration among the gifted program, instructional coaches, and special education and EL specialists; the expanded use of enrichment for all students; and more frequent use of acceleration for the most advanced learners. Recommendations to address this priority are found under Standards 2, 3 and 5.

- *Revisit the Identification Process and Acceleration Criteria* – The district currently screens all students for program consideration using MAP and CogAT (at select grade levels) and does not assign weights or points to criteria that would result in arbitrary outcomes. These are evidence-based practices. However, several identification-related priorities for change surfaced through the review process. First, identification is currently focused on one set of services, and is limited to cut scores on achievement and cognitive ability tests. This means there are students, particularly in commonly underserved populations, who could benefit from advanced instruction that are not receiving it consistently, and it reinforces an "in or out" mentality that does not reflect the research on ability and achievement. Additionally, the criteria for acceleration are more restrictive than the research supports. Recommendations to address this priority are found under Standards 2, 3 and 5.

- *Onboard New Administrators and Educators and Provide Professional Learning Opportunities for All Staff* – If gifted education services are going to be systematic, continuous, and fully integrated into the district's MTSS model, professional learning for all staff and administrators is a critical element for success. Stakeholders identified as priorities both professional learning about evidence-based practices and policies and training specific to the district's services, identification procedures, and philosophy. Recommendations for professional learning are found in Standards 1, 2, and 6.

Recommendations

The following sections contain recommendations based on triangulated findings from the stakeholder surveys, focus groups, observations, and analysis of district data and materials. The recommendations are categorized using the NAGC Pre-K – Grade 12 Gifted Programming Standards they represent. The standards are attached to this report as Appendix B. Recommendations may be unique to a standard or may be repeated across standard areas with additional elements specific to each area.

Standard 1: Learning and Development

The Learning and Development standard is about understanding and communicating the characteristics and needs of advanced students to provide appropriate instruction and affective support. It involves role-modeling for students and helping students recognize their own strengths and long-term goals. The standard also speaks to clear and transparent communication among stakeholders about gifted education programs and services.

<u>Recommendations Related to the Standard</u>

- **Build consensus around a conceptual framework for programming and a clearly articulated, districtwide continuum of services for gifted education.** Effective programs must be foundationally sound, inclusively designed, and cost

effective (Robinson, 2022). A conceptual framework serves as the "foundation for services", informing practice, guiding decision making, and supporting transparency. Stakeholders in the district have varied opinions about the purpose of gifted education, and the goals for services are unclear to many stakeholders. It is hard to measure impact and implement defensible services without clear purpose and goals. Several frameworks exist, but any framework selected will "require services on a continuum from modest adaptations to more intensive and comprehensive delivery models" (Robinson, 2022) and must reflect the needs and priorities of the community, aligning services with defined outcomes. The district already uses the term "continuum of services" for its special education services, and gifted education services can be designed to address a range of learning needs also served on a continuum. A continuum of extended enrichment and accelerated services modeled after Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) is supported by research that ability is malleable and exceptional talents are cultivated with appropriate levels of challenge and support. This philosophy can be used as a foundation for conversations about educational goals and growth over time for all students but particularly advanced learners. Modeling after MTSS also creates opportunities to use MTSS monitoring as an "on ramp" for growing into services. Special education services are mandated while gifted education services are not, and that distinction is important. Still, advanced learning has similarities to special education in many ways and can provide an avenue for comprehensiveness and consistency.

- **Define learning and growth goals for advanced learners and set annual targets for students' academic growth commensurate with assessed ability and current achievement.** Clearly articulate for educators and parents what the growth goals and learning outcomes are for advanced learners receiving each type of service and how the services, particularly in-class differentiation and enrichment, Challenge and Advanced courses, and subject or whole grade accelerations are designed to meet those goals. Use assessment data (e.g., MAP, CogAT, above-level-testing for older students) to benchmark students' current performance and set growth targets for students, making sure that even the highest achieving students demonstrate growth commensurate with their ability. District data indicate that advanced learners as a group are not growing at the rate expected given their high achievement (which would be high average or better), particularly in reading, although students in 7th and 8th grade advanced math at the middle school demonstrated accelerated growth but still in alignment with non-advanced peers.

- **Make the framework, learning goals, continuum of services, and related policies accessible through multiple channels to all stakeholder groups, but particularly families. Provide training for classroom educators, instructional coaches, special education teachers, and EL specialists, about local services to help them provide accurate information to parents and students.** During the review process, many parents and educators shared that they only have a basic understanding of district's gifted programming,

including the scope of services K-8, the curriculum, and the expected outcomes. Parents asked about the transition between elementary and middle school services and how well the services were aligned. Communication and transparency can be increased by posting and regularly updating information on the school website (and integrating or grouping it with other student services), providing materials in the most common languages used by families, and hosting annual meetings about gifted education services. Liaisons within special education and EL services can share information with families receiving those services. Policies and procedures (about identification, acceleration options, appeals, etc.) should be presented in easy to read and/or easy to access digital formats.

Standard 2: Assessment for Identification and Learning Progress

The assessment standard encompasses identification of students' strengths and learning needs and measurement of learning progress. This program review resulted in recommendations related to assessment, particularly adjustments to the identification process and measurement of growth.

Recommendations Related to the Standard

- **Continue with universal screening, and as the continuum of services is expanded, align placement criteria with the service objectives (low entry/no entry criteria for enrichment, higher entry criteria for accelerated services).** Based on the district's achievement data and identification process, we recommend the following:

    - **For accelerative or selective services, universally screen at least annually using MAP data and classroom performance data (e.g., grades, assessments of content mastery).** Regular reviews identify new students who need services and students who may need an adjustment to their current services. Consider a mid-year review for students "on the bubble" between core classroom and Challenge or Advanced courses, focusing on growth and match between instruction and readiness, supporting classroom teachers in differentiating and compacting instruction. Use MTSS monitoring as an "on-ramp" for growing into qualification as a goal (or an "off ramp" when needed). Conduct more extensive data reviews for identification at key transition periods (e.g., moving from elementary to middle school) and the most accelerated services.

    - **Because all tests contain error and are impacted by opportunity to learn, account for standard error instead of using rigid cut scores**. MAP provides RIT ranges and standard error because a single test cannot capture a student's true score. Educationally, there is no meaningful difference between a student who has a score at the 92nd percentile and

the 93rd percentile, given the standard error of measure (which is typically 2.8 to 3.5 on MAP). As we get to standard deviations, variability is more noticeable. Using a score plus or minus SEM or considering standard deviations along with aligning measures to the service being provided (math, science, leadership, etc.) can identify more students who could benefit from a service. Additionally, MAP and CogAT provide learning progressions and performance profiles that can be used to determine which score profiles best align with learning readiness for a particular type of intervention, especially when accounting for an educator's ability to differentiate and provide reasonable scaffolds.

- There is a discrepancy in the current cut scores in the district. The elementary advanced enrichment programming has higher cut scores for placement than the advanced and accelerated programming at the middle school. Challenge qualification is set at 93rd percentile on MAP and CogAT while Advanced courses, which are replacement courses with math and science being accelerated pathways, have a cut score at the 90th percentile or above.

- In the early stages of talent development, potential and ability measures are more relevant, while in later stages, demonstrated achievement becomes a more critical measure for success in accelerated, school-based programming. Therefore, identification processes and criteria may need to differ by grade level and type of service provided.

- Guidance from NWEA: "Any time you are making a placement decision or another high-stakes decision for a student, we recommend using the RIT range with the SEM, rather than a single RIT score, to determine whether the student meets the criteria established by your district. We also recommend using no less than three points of data to make important decisions about students." NWEA also recently published new guidance on making decisions about Algebra I.

- **The district's four elementary buildings vary in population size but are relatively similar demographically. For the variation that does exist, building norms may be a better tool to find and serve students who are high achieving within their context and need advanced learning services and frontloaded enrichment, particularly students receiving EL services, students with disabilities, or students in low-income households**. EL students, students with disabilities, and students who are free/reduced lunch eligible should be carefully considered for supplemental services. Students in these populations who do not meet the automatic criteria may need the consideration of additional learning profile

indicators. Additions could include grades, a teacher rating scale, CogAT nonverbal score, or rapid growth rates (particularly for EL students). For example, a student scores in the 92nd percentile on the CogAT and in the 85th percentile on MAP. Consider standard error and look at additional indicators that would make a case for inclusion in Challenge or Advanced programming or other accelerative options. Research demonstrates that students from underserved populations scoring in the top quartile on assessments such as MAP generally perform as well as peers with higher scores in advanced and accelerated programming, but educators must be prepared to offer temporary, targeted scaffolds (e.g., language support, frontloaded skills teaching, additional background content).

- **Make sure students are being considered for services starting at the 75th or 80th percentile or above locally (by building) on MAP (the top quartile of performance among students of the same age, experience, and environment).** Even if students are not placed in the most intensive, accelerated services, students at those performance levels typically still need more intensive classroom differentiation/enrichment services.

- **When possible and appropriate to the service under consideration, assess students in the language that best allows them to demonstrate their abilities.** Consider scaffolds needed for placement in various services (the impact of language, in which environment services should be provided to balance students' needs). Use the CogAT non-verbal subtest as a "plus, inclusion" indicator for EL students and students identified as low income or dual score CogAT for EL students.

- **Make use of above-grade-level assessments as an alternative to MAP to determine the learning needs of the highest achievers.** Despite the adaptability of MAP, students can still experience ceiling effects at the top end of the platform. An initial look at the district data for middle school suggests this phenomenon may be present in data sets. Indicators to look for include larger standard error of measurement and the appearance of stagnant or slow growth or drops in percentiles over time. Using an above-level assessment (like SAT suite) may be helpful to differentiate achievement and growth measures for the most advanced learners (historically above the 90th percentile) and/or those included in accelerative services. For math courses like Pre-algebra, Algebra 1 and Algebra 2, MAP's course specific assessments are more reliable for measuring readiness for instruction and growth throughout the course. These tests would also be valuable in placement decisions for middle school accelerated math courses.

- **Transition from test scores only to a profile approach to placement in any selective or accelerative services. The NAGC Programming Standards**

require multiple entry points (qualifying pathways) to services to provide the greatest opportunity for students' needs to be identified. Test scores do not tell the whole story of a student's learning readiness, so allowing for other means of identifying needs is a best practice. It is important to identify the content knowledge and academic skills students will have to have to benefit from a service and the types of scaffolding that can be provided. Finding evidence of a match between readiness and the course content can come from a variety of sources. If test data is used, the knowledge and skills the test measures should align with the knowledge and skills required in the service. For example, you do not need a verbal test to place a student in a math course, and a non-verbal assessment can provide insight into cognitive ability but will not tell you what level of math the student is ready to learn. Enrichment opportunities do not require the same level of test scores as accelerative options.

- **Do not transfer students out of services based on a new test score if they are succeeding in a service. Test scores vary for many reasons and advanced students who are scoring in top percentiles can regress toward the mean.** If students are successful in the services they are receiving, they should be able to continue without further review or testing. However, if students are struggling or if they are being considered for a different type of service (more accelerated, for example) as they transition to middle school with students from other schools (e.g., from grade 5 to grade 6), they should be re-evaluated. Re-evaluation needs to consider performance data, student and parent input, and transition plans/supports. The process should be like that used for MTSS monitoring.

- **Teacher observations and referrals can be part of a needs identification process but provide professional development about the programming to help teachers identify the knowledge and skills required for success in each type of service.** Teacher input is useful to provide context to other data sources and to include, rather than exclude, students in services.

- **Consistently track and report demographic trends and the representation of students throughout the identification process and their participation in gifted education services.** NAGC Standard 2 component 2.1 is "all students in Pre-K through grade 12 with gifts and talents have equal access to the identification process and proportionally represent each campus [school]." Equitable, optimally matched services demand careful attention to who is identified, who is "missing" and how successful students are once placed. Comprehensive data analysis is required and should be conducted annually to assess the impact of identification procedures and programming.

Standard 3: Curriculum Planning and Instruction

The curriculum planning and instruction standard addresses content as well as teaching and learning. The standard requires a comprehensive, sequenced core

curriculum, which is aligned with state and national standards. It also emphasizes advanced, cognitively challenging content that is culturally responsive and instruction that makes use of both enrichment and acceleration. Best practice in this standard means educators make regular use of formative and summative assessments and adjust their instruction in response to student data. Educators are to facilitate learning and engage students in critical and creative thinking, using inquiry-based approaches.

Recommendations Related to the Standard

- **Continue efforts to increase the rigor of grade-level curriculum and create a comprehensive, continuous curriculum scope and sequence for core and advanced coursework.** The district aspires to "employ rigorous, relevant curriculum and learning opportunities" which is laudable and appropriate. This starts with assuring that what constitutes grade-level curriculum aligns with the learning readiness and achievement profiles of students in the district. Proficiency levels (as measured by IAR) for the district are higher than state averages and MAP achievement is also strong. However, growth for advanced learners, and overall, as reported on the State Report Card, lags in the district. According to the survey data, less than half of parents and administrators responding agreed or strongly agreed that the district is doing an effective job of helping advanced students grow to their full potential in each of the subject areas. Middle school parents and parents of students not receiving services expressed the strongest disagreement, particularly for science and social studies. The district's Guide to Access & Achievement is a strong foundational guidance document, but grade-level expectations set the bar too low for many students. In addition to providing more students with access to above-grade-level content it is important to continue adopting curriculum and instructional models that feature higher level thinking, inquiry-based approaches, and student-driven activities for all students.

- **Provide coaching and instructional support for educators in grade-level classrooms to compact and replace content for advanced learners.** To meet the needs of students who are high achieving but not yet ready for acceleration educators requested dedicated time and coaching to work with pre-differentiated units, create centers, or incorporate above-grade-level resources. Coaches can also help teachers expand their use of unit pre-assessments and become more familiar with content standards at least one year above the grade level they are teaching to help them differentiate based on assessment data.

- **Work with EL and Special education staff to develop structures for identifying students in these programs with advanced learning needs and provide access to appropriate services.** Families should not have to choose between which of their child's varied learning needs get met each school year. Bring together EL, Special Education, and Challenge/Advanced staff members to review data sets and identify opportunities for collaboration to support students overlapping learning needs. Collaboration, co-teaching, coaching and targeted

services (pull outs, supplemental opportunities) can make it possible to embed enrichments, extensions, and accelerative practices within other specialized programs the district offers. There are helpful resources available from the National Research Center on Gifted Education about EL services and identification and from the Belin-Blank Center at the University of Iowa for twice exceptional students.

Standard 4: Learning Environments

The learning environments standard focuses on creating environments that foster personal and social responsibility as well as emotional well-being. It speaks to cultural competency, leadership, self-efficacy, and communication skills that assure optimal development above and beyond academics. This standard requires inclusive learning environments.

Recommendations Related to the Standard

- **Given the disproportionality data and stakeholder perceptions about the inclusiveness of services, create a task force or team to identify and remove barriers to advanced learning services and identify available or implement new supports or scaffolds.** Barriers often include cut scores that are more rigorous than the programming requires for success, requiring significant levels of parent involvement to access programs, or limited information sharing (hard to find materials, no shared time for data analysis, no translation services). Make sure services do not require additional fees or materials. Identify liaisons to help families access program information as well as scholarships and financial aid for clubs, competitions, and other extracurricular or co-curricular activities. Assure curriculum and classroom materials reflect many voices and include role models and authors of diverse backgrounds.

- **Provide regular opportunities for all parents/families to learn more about giftedness, talent development, and district services**. In surveys and focus groups, parents were interested in receiving information/resources about how they can be effective partners in developing their children's talents. Parent webinars/workshops (education opportunities), open to any interested parent, are opportunities to educate about topics of interest and foster positive relationships. A few resources are already listed on the district website, which some parents said that they have found and appreciate. Take advantage of currently scheduled school and district events to include advanced learning topics and resources.

- Explore and prioritize dimensions of equity in the district as they relate to gifted education services in the district (Appendix D).

Standard 5: Programming

In this standard, the emphasis is on the structure of programs and the services provided. Evidence-based practices emphasize the importance of collaboration across stakeholder groups and the development and implementation of comprehensive services. Programming should include acceleration and enrichment and apply best practice grouping models.

Recommendations Related to the Standard

- **Expand the district's K-8 continuum of services, creating a model like MTSS, that includes both enrichment and acceleration.** The district's current programming is targeted to the most advanced students as measured by achievement and cognitive ability tests (what might be identified as tiers 2 or 3 in an MTSS framework). While the programming meets the needs of some students, it is missing many others, and it does not cultivate the potential of students not yet demonstrating high performance. Moving to a continuum of services replaces binary "in/out" thinking, leverages more students' strengths, makes the roles of teachers and specialists clearer, and supports optimally matched learning environments that should result in more students meeting and exceeding growth targets. Below are basic descriptions of tiered services.

    - Tier 1 – Rigorous curriculum aligned to the district's performance profile and enrichment activities provided to all students (e.g., Schoolwide Enrichment Model). Differentiation that enriches and extends beyond grade level for students demonstrating mastery of unit objectives. Cluster grouping and/or co-teaching. Regular pre-assessment and flexible grouping for interest and readiness.

    - Tier 2 – Targeted small group interventions for students who need instruction beyond what the classroom teacher can provide. Short-term scaffolds for students with IEPs or EL needs. Can include small group pull-out or push-in with a specialist, cross grade grouping for instruction, or technology tools. Subject area acceleration. Schoolwide Enrichment Model Type II activities.

    - Tier 3 – Highly accelerated or individualized services for students well beyond grade level expectations. Could include whole grade acceleration, self-contained classes, and the flexibility to do multiple grade skips for students. Schoolwide Enrichment Model Type II activities.

- **Consider Total School Cluster Grouping in elementary school buildings.** Total School Cluster Grouping maintains heterogeneous classrooms but reduces the range of learning needs represented, allowing teachers to differentiate more effectively. It is a research- and evidence-supported model that helps meet the needs of advanced learners while also improving achievement for all students and avoiding the negative outcomes of tracking. Even with the current self-contained Challenge courses there is a range of student needs in the grade level

classrooms that cluster grouping can address. Cluster grouping may be less effective in the buildings with smaller enrollments where there are only two classrooms per grade level. In those buildings, supplementing with co-teaching, instructional coaching, and push-in specialist support can accomplish the same results.

- **Introduce a model for school-wide strengths-based enrichment units in grade-level classrooms and create a menu of clubs, competitions, after school activities or outside of school opportunities.** Ability is domain specific, largely malleable, and affected by opportunity. Early and ongoing enrichment, available to all students and more intensely targeted as interests and relative strengths come to light, builds critical and creative thinking skills and helps identify potential in students who have had less exposure to formal schooling. It is the basis for inclusive, strengths-based services. One model to explore for in-school enrichment is the Schoolwide Enrichment Model or SEM. In this model, students are grouped based on relative strength and indicated interest in enrichment clusters quarterly, focusing on science, language arts, mathematics, and the arts. Schedules are coordinated to allow for cross-grade grouping for enrichment clusters and to increase the number of options available to ensure all students have access to activities in their area of strength and high interest. Enrichment clusters are taught by teachers who receive professional development and planning support from a talent development specialist. Students who excel in their enrichment cluster and show continued interest are provided more targeted, intensive activities (Type II or Type III activities). Early enrichment can help minimize excellence gaps (performance gaps that often exist between students from lower and higher income backgrounds) and allow teachers to observe and encourage behaviors that indicate exceptional academic potential.

- **As decisions are made about the conceptual framework and continuum of services, adapt the current Challenge Program to best align to service goals and desired student outcomes**. Self-contained programs like Challenge and Advanced can offer a level of instruction not possible in a grade-level classroom, access to intellectual peers, and critical psychosocial supports, but they are resource intensive and must have a well-defined set of measurable outcomes. The following are issues raised during this review that will require further examination and discussion:
    - What should be the learning outcomes for students in the Challenge program? While students enjoy their Challenge courses and are taught by skilled educators, it is not clear what the impact of the services is on student growth, assuming that is the desired outcome.

    - Is enrichment and extension preferable to replacement? Students identified for Challenge are, by test score measures, good candidates for subject-area or whole grade acceleration (depending on the domain specific strengths of the student). With Challenge not offered 5 days per

week, students must transition in and out of the grade-level classroom, which many students and parents describe as difficult and disruptive. Several grade-level educators told us it is difficult to meet the students' needs on the days they are in the regular classroom and they have concerns about gaps in knowledge because Challenge is not a replacement for the core content.

- Is placement based solely on test score criteria appropriate? As stated in the recommendations under Standard 2, multiple entry points are the standard for practice. Test scores are not the only indicators of a student's learning readiness. Relying on rigid cut scores and combining data sources (AND rather than OR) required for placement, restricts access and often misses students who could benefit, particularly from "lower risk" services (enrichment based versus highly accelerated, credit-bearing). Finding evidence of a match between readiness and the course content can come from a variety of sources (a profile of readiness).

- How is Challenge programming aligned to both the core curriculum and to middle school programming? Are students in Challenge receiving appropriately sequenced content and instruction that prepares them for middle school? Are there gaps in content knowledge and skills or are some students still being underserved even by Challenge's advanced curriculum? The Challenge units at each grade level reference above-grade-level standards and concepts. However, they do not appear to be sequenced to build mastery or aligned to core grade level units. Students are graded by classroom teachers at the grade-level at which they are assigned, which means it is not possible to know the learning outcomes specific to Challenge.

- **Expand the use of subject area and whole grade academic acceleration.** The State of Illinois' Acceleration Act requires districts (as of July 1, 2018) to have developed policies and procedures for early entrance to kindergarten, subject acceleration, and whole grade acceleration. The district has a policy and related procedures; however, the criteria and process for requesting acceleration are very restrictive, and most stakeholders reported that they were not very familiar with the policy and process for requesting acceleration. Acceleration is the most extensively researched and cost-effective strategy for meeting students' advanced learning needs. Subject area and whole grade acceleration used in tandem with differentiation, cluster grouping, and flexible grouping can meet an array of needs, reducing reliance on self-contained services and maintaining the diverse make-up of classrooms. Based on survey and focus group data, district educators, specialists, and parents support acceleration as an approach. Administrators were the only group to preference enrichment. Therefore, we recommend additional professional learning and guidance about how and when to implement various accelerative options most effectively. The IAGC (Illinois

Association for Gifted Children) and NAGC have both published guidelines and model policies that can inform policy and practice.

- **As services are added or modified, regularly analyze achievement and growth data to measure the impact of services.** This review included a snapshot of student performance data, but regular, in-depth data analysis is necessary to establish benchmarks and track continuous improvement. For the most advanced learners, additional above-grade-level assessment tools may be necessary to determine both readiness levels and growth.

Standard 6: Professional Learning

Ongoing professional development for all stakeholders is critical to defensible and effective programs. Professional development related to gifted education should align with district goals and be tailored to the needs of specific audiences (e.g., educators, parents, specialists, etc.). Gifted education staff should be highly qualified and be able to provide the leadership necessary to implement and evaluate programs that reflect best practice.

<u>Recommendations Related to the Standard</u>

- **Include advanced and accelerated learning into all district and school-level priorities for professional learning.** Advanced learners have specialized learning needs that require adjustments to classroom instruction and supplemental services, much like what is done for special education. Speaking to the cognitive and psychosocial needs of advanced learners when developing professional learning helps assure that educators and administrators recognize and are prepared to identify and meet the full range of learner needs. Additionally, the district's Guide to Access & Achievement should be reviewed to include additional references to advanced learning, acceleration, and above-grade-level content given the district's relatively high-performing achievement profile.

- **Create an induction program for new staff (educators, administrators, support staff) about the district's gifted education services and the needs of advanced learners**, including
    - The district's conceptual framework
    - Assessment of advanced learning needs (classroom level data and school/district level data)
    - Instructional and psychosocial needs of advanced learners
    - The role of enrichment for the identification and development of talents
    - The district's continuum of services, growth goals for advanced learners, and policies and procedures

- Depending on the services to be provided, professional learning for educators and administrators may include the following:

    - Cluster grouping
    - Co-teaching strategies
    - Identifying advanced learning needs of EL, twice exceptional and other underserved populations
    - Formative assessment, pre-assessment, and differentiated assessment strategies
    - Compacting instruction
    - Planning for whole grade acceleration

- Administrators might also benefit from professional learning on the following topics:
    - MTSS tiers of service for enrichment and acceleration (continuum of services)
    - School-wide Enrichment Model
    - Data-driven instruction for advanced learners, including the role of ability tests and above-grade-level assessment
    - Establishing appropriate growth targets for advanced learners and measuring growth
    - Models of acceleration, best-practice policies, and current research findings

- **Keep abreast of professional learning opportunities, curriculum resources, standards, and state/federal laws.** Take advantage of membership in the National Association for Gifted Children and the option for institutional bundle memberships for the Illinois Association for Gifted Children. These organizations provide professional learning and regularly send out communications about resources, policies, and practices.

Summary and Commendations

Following a review, it is important to recognize areas of strength, celebrate successes, and address thoughtfully the priorities for improvement, particularly those that run counter to research and effective practice. We commend the district for undertaking this process and being committed to meeting the needs of all students. As noted in the report, there are many knowledgeable, passionate, and committed educators, administrators, and families in the district interested in advanced learning, and while they may not share all the same ideas and perspectives, there is a culture of working in partnership to meet students' needs.

The investments the district has made in its services over the years, and the strong support for services from varied stakeholder groups, should make adoption of many priority area recommendations possible.

There are many recommendations presented in this report, and it is not possible—nor always necessary—to address them all. An important next step is to examine and prioritize them within the district's short- and long-term plans. We suggest starting with

the *Community Priorities for Action* identified in this report, as they represent areas of consensus among stakeholder groups.

Doing a self-examination of this sort is not easy but it is important. The district deserves recognition for undertaking a critical review of the opportunities it provides to promote talent development and support advanced learning opportunities. The CTD team is grateful for the engagement of district staff members throughout the review process, and the leadership of Jill Kingsfield.

It has been a pleasure to work with the district on this review, and we appreciate everyone's time, participation, and patience with the various steps in the process. We hope to continue working with the district as it takes the next steps in its continuous improvement process.

References

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