

Highly Capable Equity in Identification



Laura Schonberg

is currently in her fifth year as Director of K-12 Highly Capable Services in the Mount Vernon School District. After a decade of building administration in elementary and secondary schools, the challenges and opportunities of highly capable programming in the diverse setting of her local community has been astonishing. Working across the district and grade levels with a wide variety of professionals has offered the most exciting work of her life, with the best yet to come.

lschonberg@mvsd320.org

Highly Capable learners are a consistently present population across all student demographics. In the past, Highly Capable identification practices and services have been limited to a narrow band of students, typically based on English speaking families that have an understanding of how school systems “work” as well as access to resources that reflect a more affluent population. Historically, “good students” have been equated with Highly Capable learners. However, some of our most exceptional learners are not necessarily good students. Districts across the country have been charged with diversifying students who are identified as Highly Capable to reflect their community’s range of racial/ethnic/language backgrounds, economic statuses, gender identities, and home addresses.

Washington State has made concerted efforts at the state level to provide guidance, codes, and legislation to promote a move toward equitable identification and services across schools within districts. Highly Capable directives can be found under WAC 392-170s and RCW 28A.150.220(3)(g)(3); RCW 28A.185.020. Within Washington, Highly Capable learners are defined as follows: highly capable students are students who perform or show potential for performing at significantly advanced academic levels when compared with others of their age, experiences, or environments. Outstanding abilities are seen within students' general intellectual aptitudes, specific academic abilities, and/or creative productivities within a specific domain. Our state has deemed that Highly Capable services are part of basic education, and identification must be equitable across protected classes of students. This includes English Language Learners and students of low socioeconomic status.

In order to remove students’ barriers to Highly Capable opportunities, there are several basic practices that districts can implement to support equitable identification:

- Universal screeners: assessing an entire cohort of students (e.g., all 3rd-graders across the district in all elementary schools). Instead of depending on parent or teacher referral for identifying students, this practice allows for every student within the district to be assessed. It also allows districts to utilize local norms for identification as well as longitudinal data across a grade band.
- Assessment during school hours: in the past, testing was often done on a Saturday. This is a tremendous barrier for some families and is dependent on parents transporting their child, necessitating parents to accommodate other children or responsibilities outside of the school day. At a minimum, if a student is being considered for

highly capable services, the assessment should be at their home school during the school day.

- Composite scoring: typically, Highly Capable testing/screeners employ distinct categories (e.g., verbal, quantitative, non-verbal). It is important to look at discrete strand data within an assessment, especially as a screener, to avoid a low average score where a student may have done an exceptional job in one area but scored low in another (resulting in a low composite score). For example, if a student got 17/18 on the verbal portion but a 5/18 on the quantitative, their overall score would be relatively low even though the student demonstrated verbal ability worth taking a closer look at.
- Native language: if it is possible, and when appropriate, administer Highly Capable assessments in a student's native language. At a minimum, directions should be offered in a student's first language, and questions that they have about the assessment should be responded to in their native language.
- Variety of assessments: Highly Capable identification should include a variety of data points, not one specific test. These can include non-verbal assessments, ELL data (rate of language acquisition is a powerful data point for Highly Capable learners), growth in classroom and/or state tests, state testing (the SBA), reading fluency tests (like the BAS), on-line assessments (like STAR or

MAP), CLED scores (available free online) and other classroom-based assessments (pre- and/or post-unit assessments). No one assessment can or should be used to prevent a student from qualifying.

- Multi-faceted identification team: as part of the identification process, it should be a process that includes a variety of stakeholders familiar with data that is available across the district as well as specialists who know and work with specific student populations. This group can include, but is not limited to, ELL specialists, school psychologists, migrant specialists, family liaisons, school counselors, classroom teachers, bi-lingual educators, and program directors.

Identifying and serving culturally and linguistically diverse students is a critical component of providing basic education to our students as well as growing strong Highly Capable services. To do so often means overcoming bias, past practices, and entrenched belief systems. There are several organizations that are tremendously helpful in this process: OSPI, Northwest Gifted Child Association, National Association for Gifted Children, and Washington Association of Educators of the Talented and Gifted. Reaching out to your local Educational Service District is also a way to seek information and support. While it often takes several years for an equitable service model to emerge, every step makes a difference for our highly capable learners.