



Challenge Advocacy Network Development Organization

*Advocating support and challenge for Batavia's gifted and talented students*

14 April 2014

Dear Gifted Committee members,

Thank you for your invitation to offer feedback as families who have experienced the first year of the gifted cluster team grouping at Rotolo Middle School. In preparation for today's meeting, CANDO invited the participation of middle school parents at two focus group meetings last week. The summary that follows is based on their comments at those focus groups. We have grouped their feedback into two areas: praise for the implementation of the gifted cluster team grouping at RMS, and suggestions for further improvement of this experience for families and students who are participants.

### **Praise for the gifted cluster team grouping at RMS**

Gratitude and pride have been common themes in our discussion of gifted services in general this year. As parents, we are so pleased that BPS continues to innovate and capitalize on the talents and expertise of our talented faculty and staff to benefit gifted and high-ability students. This is particularly true this year at the middle school. BPS and the RMS community have embraced the philosophy and recommendations of NAGC and the National Association of Middle Schools by constructing a cluster group of gifted students within teams at each middle school grade level.

- *Parents were generally pleased with the process of identification and the letters that informed families about the evaluation process and subsequent placement.* Specifically, the letter to parents that included the matrix of scores used to determine student placement was a very valuable and concise communication tool.
- *Students have reported very positive experiences learning alongside their gifted peers.* Parents have seen the benefits to both student achievement and identity and self-esteem that the professional body of research sites as advantages in the gifted cluster model.
- *Rotolo Middle School faculty have worked together to enrich curriculum in the language arts area of instruction, providing students an opportunity to explore content in that subject area with greater depth and breadth. Mathematics at accelerated levels continues to be a course offering at RMS.*
- *Parents report effort by many teachers in Science and Social Studies to provide differentiated learning opportunities for gifted students in their subject areas, as well.*

- *The Rotolo administrative team has demonstrated their support of the cluster grouping service delivery model by encouraging its rapid implementation at RMS. Mrs. Fiorenza met at RMS early in the 2013-14 school year with CANDO Executive Board members to discuss the early experience of gifted cluster families, and address concerns about differentiation in Science and Social Studies, as well as for high-ability students not placed in the cluster teams. Both Mr. Maciejewski and Mrs. Fiorenza attended the CANDO-sponsored seminar on gifted learners offered for educators and parents at RMS. In addition, two members of the BPS Board of Education were in the seminar audience that evening.*
- *This invitation from the Gifted Services team to present feedback represents a continued commitment to innovation and positive change benefiting gifted and high-ability students. It is a meaningful demonstration of commitment to providing the best possible learning environment for gifted and high-ability students at RMS. It embodies the BPS motto: "Always learning, always growing".*

### **Suggestions for further improvement of the gifted cluster team experience, and differentiated learning opportunities for other high-ability students**

- *Information about the gifted cluster team model of service delivery at Rotolo Middle School needs to be included in the Gifted Handbook available on-line at BPS101.net.*
- *Parents continue to express desire for inclusion in the gifted Lit/Lang section for students who test in the top 5% in the Lit/Lang area, but not in the top 5% of Mathematics scores. Their conclusion is that students whose Math scores are not in the top 5% should not automatically be excluded for consideration in the gifted section of Literature and Language. The feeling is that these scores should be considered only for the subject area to which they apply, and students should be able to benefit from one or both gifted sections (Math and/or Literature/Language).*
- *Mathematics learning opportunities for gifted and high-ability students at RMS are accelerated, but the curriculum does not seem reflect the learning style of gifted math students. Students have expressed a desire for more creative problem-solving and real-world application opportunities in their Math learning experience. They would like to spend more time outside the lessons contained in their text to augment their understanding of Math concepts they are learning. Some students report that there is still too much repetition and practice of new skills.*
- *There is a group of Math students receiving instruction at the highest acceleration levels offered at RMS (two grade levels of acceleration) who would like further acceleration (three grade levels), and the process to petition for evaluation for this additional level of acceleration is not clear to parents. Parents who have discussed this desire for additional acceleration with classroom teachers or elementary school Gifted Specialists (in 2012-13) report that they were discouraged from pursuing further acceleration, and no evaluation opportunity was offered to their students.*
- *Some parents felt that Lit/Lang curriculum in the gifted cluster section was not significantly different from that offered to students in other sections of Lit/Lang at their student's grade level.*
- *Students who show high-ability and interest in the Lit/Lang subject area should be noted, and receive differentiated/enriched instruction in that subject area, just as students are differentiated in Mathematics by the various levels of coursework offered at the middle school. Students whose Lit/Lang subject area scores fall in the top 5-10% range would enjoy and benefit from more depth and challenge*

in this subject area of their interest and high-ability. This might look similar to the flexible grouping utilized for reading at the elementary school level, or may more closely resemble the clustering used within the Math department that reflects students' aptitude and ability in Mathematics.

- *More staff development for teachers and guidance counselors focused on gifted and high-ability learners and their learning and social-emotional needs would further enhance the experience of students and teachers at the middle school.* Parents expressed some concern that even in the gifted sections of Mathematics and Lit/Lang, some instructors lack knowledge about characteristics of gifted learners and how to differentiate curriculum to help students meet their learning potential.

Overall, parents are pleased at the learning and social opportunities the gifted cluster grouped teams at Rotolo offer their students. We are grateful for the innovative, creative approach teachers in the cluster teams have used to design curriculum and classroom environments better suited to the needs of gifted students. CANDO will continue to advocate for differentiation in instruction for other high-ability students, and for enriched curriculum in other subject areas of core academic instruction.

As always, thanks to BPS Gifted Services personnel and BPS Administrators and teachers who continue to attend to the needs of gifted and high-ability students and who work to provide opportunities for our students to learn and grow at their full potential.

Sincerely,

The 2013-14 CANDO Executive Board

The CANDO School Liaisons