



**Position Paper on Twice-Exceptional Learners
Presented by CANDO's Twice-Exceptional Network (T.E.N.)
at the Gifted Committee/Professional
Development Meeting,
Rosalie Jones Administration Center; February 22, 2016**

Serving gifted students is a challenge for any school district, but one particular group of gifted students—those who also have a disability—face particular challenges in being identified and in receiving accommodations and services. These students are designated as twice-exceptional learners. We are fortunate that many individual teachers at BPS101 go out of their way to help our twice-exceptional students. CANDO's goal is to contribute to the district's knowledge base and help build a system so that all BPS101 teachers, both those familiar with twice-exceptionality as well as those who are not, are supported in their efforts to manage the complexities of meeting these students' needs.

To prepare for this meeting, we have reviewed the literature on twice-exceptionality and drawn on the experiences of CANDO's parents of twice-exceptional children. Here, we offer a summary of some of the characteristics of these students, the challenges they face and suggestions for BPS101.

Definitions

CANDO uses the National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC) description of twice-exceptional learners. NAGC describes them in this way:¹

¹ National Association for Gifted Children, Twice-Exceptional Special Interest Group, <http://nagc.org>

Twice-exceptional learners are students who give evidence of the potential for high achievement capability in areas such as specific academics; general intellectual ability; creativity; leadership; AND/OR visual, spatial, or performing arts AND also give evidence of one or more disabilities as defined by federal or state eligibility criteria such as specific learning disabilities; speech and language disorders; emotional/behavioral disorders; physical disabilities; autism spectrum; or other health impairments, such as ADHD.

Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) Advisory Council on the Education of the Gifted adopted "**Twice-Exceptional Students / Gifted Students with Disabilities**" by the Colorado Department of Education as their official stance on twice-exceptional students.² This publication uses the definition below.³

Twice-exceptional students are:

- *Students who are identified as gifted and talented in one or more areas of exceptionality (specific academics, general intellectual ability, creativity, leadership, visual or performing arts); and also identified with:*
- *A disability defined by Federal/State eligibility criteria: specific emotional learning disability, significant identifiable disability, physical disabilities, sensory disabilities, autism, or ADHD.*
 - *The disability qualifies the student for an Individual Education Plan (IEP) or a 504 Plan*

Characteristics of Twice-Exceptional Learners

Twice-exceptional learners have many of the same strengths as gifted students without disabilities. However, interaction between their gifted characteristics and the challenges created by co-existing disabilities result in additional challenges for the twice-exceptional student. Conflicts between strengths and weaknesses can make school frustrating for the students, teachers and parents.

The following are just some of the characteristics often exhibited by twice-exceptional children.⁴ Twice-exceptional students are a very heterogeneous group and not all will exhibit all of these characteristics.

² Minutes, Illinois State Board of Education Gifted Education Advisory Council, December 5, 2011 Available online <http://www.isbe.net/GAC/>

³ Colorado Department of Education (2009). *Twice-Exceptional Students / Gifted Students with Disabilities*. Denver, CO.

⁴ Trail, Beverly (2011). *Twice-exceptional Gifted Children: Understanding, Teaching and Counseling Gifted Students*. Waco, TX: Prufrock Press.

- Discrepancy among standardized test scores
- High level of reasoning and problem-solving abilities
- Slow processing speed and/or problems with fluency and automaticity
- Executive functioning deficits in planning, prioritizing, and organizing
- Highly creative, curious, and imaginative
- High energy level
- Distractible, unable to sustain attention, or problems with short-term memory
- Demonstrates inconsistent or uneven academic skills
- Advanced ideas and opinions
- Hates drill and practice assignments
- Difficulty expressing feelings or explaining ideas or concepts
- Work can be extremely messy
- Poor penmanship and problems completing paper-and-pencil tasks
- Avoids school tasks, and frequently fails to complete assignments
- Difficulty relating to peers, poor social skills, and/or antisocial behavior
- Target of peer bullying
- Cannot read social clues
- Disruptive or clowning behavior
- Highly sensitive to criticism
- Behaves impulsively
- Self-critical, has low self-esteem and self-efficacy
- High levels of anxiety and/or depression
- Easily frustrated, gives up quickly on tasks

Identification Challenges Faced by Twice-Exceptional Learners

Twice-exceptional learners face difficulties in being identified as gifted and in the identification of a learning disability. Many bright children with learning disabilities are not identified as having a learning disability early due to their ability to compensate for the disability by their giftedness. Additionally, twice-exceptional children often do not get identified for gifted services because their disabilities interfere with some assessment measures.⁵

- A student may be identified as gifted but not as having a disability. In this case, the student may be considered to be lazy, lack motivation, or have a low self-concept. Gifted students with disabilities may be able to achieve grade-level expectations until middle or high school, when the demands and difficulty level of the curriculum increase.⁶

⁵ Gilman, B. J., *et al.* Critical Issues in the Identification of Gifted Students With Co-Existing Disabilities: The Twice-Exceptional. *SAGE Open*, 3(3). 1-16. Doi: 10.1177/2158244013505855

⁶ The National Education Association (2006) *The Twice Exceptional Dilemma*. Washington DC.

- A student may be identified as having a disability but not as gifted. These students may have significantly underestimated intellectual abilities, low self-esteem and exhibit behavioral problems. These students risk boredom, disengagement, engaging in disruptive behavior, and the development of social and emotional problems.⁷
- A student may be identified as neither gifted nor having a disability facing the difficulties experienced by both of the groups above.

Twice-exceptional students are often excluded from special education and related services. This practice is so common, that the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services of the U.S. Department of Education issued a memo in April of 2015 to State Directors of Special Education to clarify eligibility for special education and related services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) for children with high cognition.^{8 9}

The article “Critical Issues in the Identification of Gifted Students With Co-Existing Disabilities: The Twice-Exceptional” provides a concise overview of the challenges twice-exceptional learners face in receiving appropriate services and accommodations for their learning disabilities as well as impacts through high school.¹⁰

The U.S. Department of Education’s Office for Civil Rights found that only 1% of students with disabilities served under IDEA participate in gifted and talented education programs compared with 7% of students without disabilities.¹¹ The problem continues in high school, where students with disabilities served by IDEA comprise 12% of all high school students, but only 2% of the students enrolled in an AP courses.¹²

What CANDO Parents Tell Us

Many of our parents report tremendous work done by gifted coaches, classroom teachers and district staff to try to meet the needs of their twice-exceptional children.

⁷ See, for example: Eide, B. & Eide, F. (2006). *The mislabeled child: Looking beyond behavior to find the true sources and solutions for children's learning challenges*. New York: Hyperion. Lovecky, D. V. (2004). *Different Minds: Gifted Children with AD/HD, Asperger Syndrome, and Other Learning Deficits*. Philadelphia 2004: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

⁸ Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services of the U.S. Department of Education. (2015). *Letter to Delisle: Children with disabilities with high cognition*. Washington, DC: Musgrove, M.

⁹ Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services of the U.S. Department of Education. (2013). *Letter to Delisle*. Washington, DC: Musgrove, M.

¹⁰ Gilman, B. J., et al. Critical Issues in the Identification of Gifted Students With Co-Existing Disabilities: The Twice-Exceptional. *SAGE Open*, 3(3). 1-16. Doi: 10.1177/2158244013505855

¹¹ Civil Rights Data Collection. (2014). *INSIDE THIS SNAPSHOT: College and Career Readiness Highlights* (Issue Brief No. 3). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education’s Office for Civil Rights. <http://ocrdata.ed.gov> .

¹² *ibid*.

Reports of advocacy and interventions by individual teachers, staff and administration at each school are remarkable. We know of many twice-exceptional students who do have services of one type or another provided by the district. However, many CANDO parents of twice-exceptional students report difficulties in a few key areas:

- 1) Many CANDO parents of gifted students with learning disabilities report having to go outside the district at great expense to have learning disabilities diagnosed. Once the student is identified as having a disability, parents have been told the district has no interventions to offer their child due to the child's above average academic abilities.
- 2) Many CANDO parents feel that their child's learning disabilities interfered with their students being identified for gifted services. Families respond to this difficulty in a variety of ways: resignation, seeking external (outside of district/private) testing, advocacy, and even transferring children from BPS101 schools to private schooling.
- 3) We also find parents who have encountered both of the situations above.

These challenges are not unique to Batavia, but rather mirror challenges twice-exceptional students face nation-wide.

Although BPS101 has services for both gifted students and students with disabilities, these are often treated separately. There is no district policy that we know of that addresses twice-exceptionality. Research on twice-exceptional students shows that identification and interventions for the children is best served by policies and procedures created for this population, rather than relying separately on existing policies for gifted students and students with disabilities.

In addition to the challenges to identification, without a published handbook detailing philosophy of practices/procedures for gifted services, there is the additional risk of services and other experiences varying across the district. Our CANDO parents of twice-exceptional children do report significant variability across the district. This includes how and when twice-exceptional students are identified as having a disability, as well as whether or not their student is identified for gifted services. Parents often feel like they have to advocate on multiple fronts for their children. In many cases, parents rely on informal information chains as a primary resource for learning about how BPS101 handles twice-exceptional learners.

CANDO proposes that BPS101 undertake a number of initiatives to provide a structural framework for improving identification and services to meet the needs of twice-exceptional learners and to provide more consistency in services offered to this student population across the district.

Suggestions for the Short Term

We suggest the following goals for this academic year.

(1) Adopt an existing definition of twice-exceptional learners.

(2) Form a 2e team of administrators, teachers, and parents to share information and develop timelines for addressing goals. (Suggest formation before May 1st.)

- Share best practices and suggested accommodations across buildings for twice-exceptional learners.
- Share challenges across buildings and between parents, teachers and administrators to provide more communication between these different groups.
- Develop a timeline for addressing medium and long-term goals.

(3) Develop a framework for improving identification of 2e learners within BPS101 with the goal of earlier identification of disabilities and more inclusion of twice-exceptional students in gifted services.

Morrison and Rizza (2007) present an excellent overview of the challenges associated with the identification of twice-exceptional students and provide suggestions for how to overcome them.¹³ The National Association for Gifted Children has a position statement calling for comprehensive assessment with recommendations.¹⁴

(4) At the district level, acknowledge and promote awareness of how IEP's and 504's can address giftedness and disabilities. If both needs are addressed, such plans can better meet the needs of twice-exceptional learners. For example, gifted students with disabilities who are not appropriately challenged are at risk of being bored, having behavioral problems, disengagement and underachievement.¹⁵ They are also at more risk for social-emotional problems such as anxiety, depression and low self-esteem.¹⁶

Identify coordinators for 504/IEPs at all levels to enhance the effectiveness of these plans for twice-exceptional learners receiving accommodations.

- Share list of characteristics of twice-exceptional students with all stakeholders in 504 and IEP meetings.

¹³ Morrison, W.F. & Rizza, M. G. (2007). Creating a Toolkit for Identifying Twice-Exceptional Students. *Journal for the Education of the Gifted*, 31(1), 57-76.

¹⁴ The National Association for Gifted Children. (20013). *Ensuring Gifted Children with Disabilities Receive Appropriate Services: Call for Comprehensive Assessment*. Washington DC.

¹⁵ Lovecky, D. V. (2004) *Different Minds: Gifted Children with AD/HD, Asperger Syndrome, and Other Learning Deficits*, Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

¹⁶ The National Education Association. (2006). *The Twice Exceptional Dilemma*. Washington DC.

- Develop a working list of accommodations for addressing and incorporating twice-exceptional challenges into 504 plans and IEP plans.
- Develop ways to incorporate strengths into 504 and IEP plans due to interaction between disabilities and giftedness. (For example, meeting needs for appropriate level of challenge can help with disruptive behavior for students with disabilities such as ADHD and ASD.)
- Identify likely twice-exceptional candidates to refer for alternative testing/identification for gifted services.

Suggestions for the Medium Term

We suggest the following goals for 2016-2017.

(1) Develop a broad district-wide awareness of twice-exceptional characteristics and provide resources for teachers.

- Increase faculty development in 2e across all grades.
- Identify personnel that can be designated sources of support for teachers working with 2e learners.

(2) Enhance administrative buy-in and structural support to meet the unique needs of 2e learners.

- Improve early identification of 2e:
 - Faculty development in K-2 in early signs of 2e
 - Develop mechanisms for referral for testing throughout K-12 (see below)
- Clarify district administrative infrastructure for twice-exceptionality, such as statistics on twice-exceptional learners as a population, designated administrators with 2e expertise, referral mechanisms throughout K-12.
- Provide workshops for parents and educators.
- Work with parents to create support networks for common learning disabilities.

(3) Develop referral mechanism for suspected twice-exceptionality

- Use identification mechanisms developed specifically for twice-exceptional students. For example: Remove or modify cut scores for MAP for gifted placement for students with identified disabilities. Similarly, for children with demonstrated areas of strength, modify criteria for screening for learning disabilities.
- Utilize variability in test scores, discrepancies in sub-scores and/or across tests to flag for twice-exceptional consideration.

- Use additional measures to identify giftedness in students with identified disabilities such as alternative tests, utilizing individual sub-scores rather than composite index scores, and non-test mechanisms.
- Offer faculty development to develop a broad knowledge across district of how learning disabilities influence test results in gifted students.
- Consider how ceiling effects in standardized tests like MAP impact identification of gifted students.

(4) Consider creative ways to address the remediation needs of high performing students with specific learning disabilities.

- For students with documented strengths in one or more areas, use a discrepancy model rather than cut scores on screeners for learning disabilities.
- Early identification of dyslexia would allow twice-exceptional students with dyslexia (“stealth dyslexia”) to receive multisensory structured language intervention with other students. Dyslexia can be reliably diagnosed after one semester of formal reading instruction.¹⁷

Note: Many parents cannot afford the expense of external/private testing and remediation. Twice-exceptional students of color and students with parents in lower socio-economic groups are likely to be disproportionately affected by the lack of school-based interventions for higher-performing students with learning disabilities.

Goals and Suggestions for the Long Term

Future changes to identification for gifted services should address twice-exceptionality directly, rather than requiring appeals and advocacy.

- Policies should insure that accommodations are routinely applied when testing for eligibility for gifted service and these should be communicated to parents.
- Other testing methods for gifted identification beyond MAP should be considered, especially for suspected twice-exceptional students.

Consider twice-exceptional students as a component of Universal Design for Learning.

Universal Design for Learning, or UDL, (also called Inclusive Design) is a flexible approach that considers incorporating changes into the structure of the curriculum that can be helpful for all students, but ultimately makes learning more accessible to a diverse population. UDL is an approach that can remove the need for some accommodations. For example, more physical movement incorporated within K-5 may reduce the need for movement breaks for students with ADHD.

¹⁷ Shaywitz, S. E. (2004). *Overcoming dyslexia: A new and complete science-based program for reading problems at any level*. New York: A.A. Knopf.