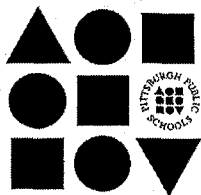


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INDEPENDENT REGULATORY
REVIEW COMMISSION

Program for Student with Exceptionalities
Middle/Secondary Gifted Support District Facilitator
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October 3, 2007

Dear Mr. Buckheit,

I am Michelle Bazala, the Middle/Secondary Gifted Support Facilitator for the Pittsburgh Public Schools. I apologize for the late nature of this testimonial, but due to an emergency, I was unable to get this letter to you any earlier concerning the proposed changes in Chapter 16 and the ramifications it poses to gifted programming in the Pittsburgh Public Schools, especially at the secondary level which I shall address first.

In order for me to raise my concerns with the proposed class size changes in Chapter 16, it is vital that you understand the unique nature of the Centers for Advanced Study (CAS) Program design which is unlike that of other programs state-wide. The CAS Program been nominated on two occasions by PDE for our exemplary program and we are proud of this accomplishment. However, the design of this program hinges on many components, one of which is class size. Hopefully, the description below will give you a better understanding as to why it is of utmost importance that we maintain the current class size of eighteen in this district. It is vital that we maintain the integrity of our program and serve our gifted learners appropriately.

The Centers for Advanced Study, CAS Program, is a four year accelerated program for gifted students offered in the Pittsburgh Public High Schools. CAS classes are composed only of gifted students with a limit to the class size of eighteen. A Gifted Individualized Education Plan (GIEP) is developed annually which defines the student's program for the year and includes goals, objectives, and evaluation procedures based on core curricula, enrichment, community-based experiences, and independent study projects. The curriculum for each CAS class follows an appropriate sequencing of tasks from teacher-led foundation activities to small group creative problem solving tasks to culminating independent study projects. The curriculum, along with the GIEP's of each student, determines the specially designed instruction for each CAS student and delineates the exact activities for each course. The CAS Program has been designed to meet the special needs of gifted students for individualized, accelerated, and enriched learning.

All CAS classes emphasize an inquiry approach to learning, problem solving techniques, and the higher cognitive skills of analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. The Purdue Three Stage Model provides a valuable guideline for curriculum development for gifted education. Its classification of learning activities into three stages provides an appropriate sequencing of tasks. These tasks begin with teacher-led foundation activities and progress through small group creative problem

solving tasks. The culminating tasks are independent study projects. The goal of the program is to develop independent lifelong learners, researchers, and creators of knowledge.

Whenever possible, an interdisciplinary approach has been used. Because the class size is limited to 10-18 students, individualization becomes a vital component of the program. Creative production opportunities and access to technology enhance and further individualize the program. This is one of the most vital components to the program design on file with the state.

Beyond the core academic curricula of the program, there is a Long Term Project (LTP) requirement. This project is an independent research and presentation project that requires a minimum of 30 hours of work outside the classroom. Students choose topics or subjects of interest to research in depth. In addition, each student makes a presentation of his/her findings to a panel of teachers and peers. The Long Term Project is required three of the four years a student normally spends in high school. The project is not required the year that the district graduation project is being completed to fulfill district and state graduation requirement.

Based on all these components, the class size issue proposed in Chapter 16 to raise class size from eighteen to twenty-five students in a class would make the specially designed instruction in these core classes impossible. The Purdue Model would virtually be impossible to implement in a classroom of twenty-five gifted learners. Please keep in mind that our classes contain only gifted learners on a daily basis, unlike other districts which have a mix of honors and gifted students with GIEP's in a classroom. This program design is unique and services over **1400 students** district-wide. Many families remain in the Pittsburgh Public Schools because of this program and its unique design. Class size is a primary focus as to why it is so successful. Without small class sizes in the CAS courses, individualization would be extremely challenging, specially designed instruction would be much less focused, classroom instruction would suffer, and consequently so would the needs of the gifted learners resulting in classrooms which look very much like a regular education classroom.

Caseload is the second issue I would like to address. In the Proposed Chapter 16, caseload is reduced from 75 to 60. Given our secondary model, this causes much distress. Once again, our CAS Program incorporates only gifted students within the classroom with up to eighteen students per class. In a large comprehensive high school, there may be multiple sections of the same CAS course per content area, i.e. English 1 CAS (4 sections) or there may be high schools which vertically team their content area CAS teacher in ninth and tenth grade CAS classes to meet the needs of the gifted learners, (i.e. English 1 CAS and English 2 CAS have Mr. Smith both years. Mr. Smith may have a total of four or five CAS sections.) With eighteen students per class, the teacher's caseload is virtually going to be more than 60. Gifted learners should benefit from the direct instruction of the teachers who are best able to give them the **most appropriate specially designed instruction to meet their needs**. Research shows that gifted students learn well from teachers who are very much like them or understand their needs. Many of the CAS teachers in this district have been hand chosen to teach these courses for their creative and unique teaching styles, as well as, their rapport with gifted learners. If the caseload is decreased, it will harm the gifted learners in this district. In essence, it will force principals to issue CAS courses to teachers who are unprepared and sometimes unwilling to teach the courses because of caseload. Teachers

of the gifted who have been teaching the courses well for many years will be punished for having done so, but primarily, the gifted students will lose an appropriate education to meet their needs.

As far as the K-8 program is concerned, we have enrichment, one day a week, pull-out program. This school services the gifted learners district-wide, both public and private, encompassing close to 1300 students. Once again class size becomes an issue, but caseload is truly unique. The teachers at the Pittsburgh Gifted Center are full-time teachers of the gifted. They may see over 125 students a week with no regular education students on their roster whatsoever. I realize that this was an issue in Chapter 16 as it stands currently, but reduction of the caseload possibly heightens this.

It is with great concern that I write you as I have been a teacher, advocate, facilitator, parent, and now district facilitator of gifted learners and children for the past nineteen years. The proposed changes to Chapter 16 will have a tremendous impact on the gifted students and families within the Pittsburgh Public Schools; an impact counterproductive to what we as educators want to occur in our classrooms on a daily basis. I truly believe that with both the design models in the Pittsburgh Public Schools and the proposed changes in Chapter 16 addressed previously, the needs of our gifted learners can not be met.

Sincerely,

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