

Schools, Facing Tight Budgets, Leave Gifted Programs Behind

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MOUNTAIN GROVE, Mo. — Before her second birthday, Audrey Walker recognized sequences of five colors. When she was 6, her father, Michael, overheard her telling a little boy: "No, no, no, Hunter, you don't understand. What you were seeing was a flashback."

At school, Audrey quickly grew bored as the teacher drilled letters and syllables until her classmates caught on. She flourished, instead, in a once-a-week class for gifted and talented children where she could learn as fast as her nimble brain could take her.

But in September, Mountain Grove, a remote rural community in the Ozarks where nearly three in four students live in poverty, eliminated all of its programs for the district's 50 or so gifted children like Audrey, who is 8 now. Struggling with shrinking revenues and new federal mandates that focus on improving the test scores of the lowest-achieving pupils, Mountain Grove and many other school districts across the country have turned to cutting programs for their most promising students.

"Rural districts like us, we've been literally bleeding to death," said Gary Tyrrell, assistant superintendent of the Mountain Grove School District, which has 1,550 students. The formula for cutting back in hard times was straightforward, if painful, Mr. Tyrrell said: Satisfy federal and state requirements first. Then, "Do as much as we can for the majority and work on down."

Under that kind of a formula, programs for gifted and talented children have become especially vulnerable.

Unlike services for disabled children, programs for gifted children have no single federal agency to track them. A survey by the National Association for Gifted Children found that 22 states did not contribute toward the costs of programs for gifted children, and five other states spent less than \$250,000.

Since that survey, released in 2002, the outlook for programs for the gifted has grown harsher. In Michigan, state aid for gifted students fell from more than \$4 million a year to \$250,000. Illinois, which was spending \$19 million a year on programs for fast learners, eliminated state financing for them. New York was spending \$14 million a year on education for the gifted but has now cut all money earmarked for gifted children, saying districts should pay for them out of block grants. Nearly one in four school districts in Connecticut have eliminated their programs for gifted students.

The new federal education law, known as No Child Left Behind, "has almost taken gifted off the radar screen in terms of people being worried about that group of learners," said Joyce L. Vantassel-Baska, executive director of the Center for Gifted Education at the College of William and Mary.

"In a tight budget environment," Ms. Vantassel-Baska said, "the decisions made about what gets dropped or not funded tend to disfavor the smaller programs."

Missouri was reimbursing districts for 75 percent of the cost of educating gifted children but has reduced the contribution to 58 percent. In Mountain Grove, an aging base of voters rejected a proposed tax levy in February. Schools are now planning to cut seven teachers in the elementary grades, public financing of team sports and transportation service within the town's boundaries.

"There are some mandates that you must do from the feds and the state," Mr. Tyrrell said, citing programs for disabled children as an example. "Those will be the last to go."

No Child Left Behind is silent on the education of gifted children. Under the law, schools must test students annually in reading and math from third grade to eighth grade, and once in high school.

Schools receiving federal antipoverty money must show that more students each year are passing standardized tests or face expensive and progressively more severe consequences.

As long as students pass the exams, the federal law offers no rewards for raising the scores of high achievers, or punishment if their progress lags.

Eugene Hickok, acting deputy secretary for elementary and secondary education at the federal Education Department, called the closing of programs for highly intelligent children an unfortunate, "unintended consequence" of No Child Left Behind. "Laws by definition are rather blunt instruments," Dr. Hickok said.

He said he did not believe that No Child Left Behind alone was responsible, adding that some districts blamed the law unfairly. "It's running for cover to say we can't deal with your needs because our fundamental requirement is to serve these other kids," Dr. Hickok said.

He said the administration was not considering revising the law to protect programs for gifted children, calling such programs a matter of "state and local control."

The tough choices, in Mountain Grove and districts around the country, are fueling emotional debates about educational fairness and where districts should focus limited resources. Among some educators and parents, special consideration for gifted children appears to attract resentment, and here in Mountain Grove, the parents of gifted children, while concerned, seem reluctant to demand extra enrichment.