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Parents, district differ on gifted program

Point debates proposed NOVA changes

By Barbara Martin

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School officials say phasing out the NOVA program will allow the Stevens Point Area Public School District to provide more and better services to the rest of the students identified as gifted and talented.

Parents of students enrolled in NOVA counter that dismantling the program only hurts the children by taking away an important piece of their education. Eliminating NOVA and using the program's three teachers to increase services to gifted and talented students at every elementary school in the district would ineffectively serve students and would cause real harm to those dropped from NOVA, the parents say.

"I feel like the research shows that programs like NOVA are the most effective way of dealing with the educational and emotional needs of highly-abled learners," said Christina Rohm, whose two sons attended the NOVA program at Jackson Environmental Discovery Center. "I think there's a perception that because they catch on quickly, they're not in need of special services."

The district's Gifted/Advisory Group will meet Monday to talk about the NOVA program and the possibility of changes. District officials will hold a meeting for NOVA parents on Feb. 26 to talk about the program.

"The difficulty, I think for parents, is they know what the experience has been for them in NOVA," said Karen Halverson, assistant superintendent for curriculum, learning and student achievement. "They don't know what the experience would have been if they had stayed in their home schools."

All of the students deemed eligible to enroll in the NOVA program at Jackson are given the opportunity, but only half of them do, Halverson said. The remainder stay in their neighborhood schools. Those students meet with the district's gifted/talented teacher for 30 minutes every six days to get extra help to meet their academic needs, she said.

Students in the NOVA program at Jackson spend the entire school day in classrooms with other gifted and talented students and classroom instruction tailored to meet their needs, she said. This year, each NOVA class has fewer than 20 students. The

WHERE THEY CAME FROM

The Stevens Point Area Public School District's NOVA program draws students from throughout the district.

Bannach: 5

Jackson: 6

Jefferson: 7

Kennedy: 3

Madison: 4

McDill: 1

McKinley: 3

Plover-Whiting: 7

Roosevelt: 10

Washington: 6

Homeschooler: 1

Total: 53

Source: Karen Halverson, assistant superintendent for curriculum, learning and student achievement, Stevens Point Area Public School District

NOVA students come from all geographic areas of the district and from various socio-economic backgrounds.

NOVA advocates say students in the program are being penalized for the choices that other students' parents made.

"If parents decide they don't want their children in a contained classroom, it shouldn't be taken away from those who do," said Jeanette Handrich, who teaches a third- and fourth-grade NOVA class of 18 students.

"If people choose not to take an option, that's their right," said Susan Collins, whose daughter is in a NOVA class this year. "We happened to choose the academics of this incredible NOVA program, which I can't say enough about what it has done for my daughter."

Parents have many reasons for keeping their NOVA-eligible children in their neighborhood schools, said Elizabeth Felt. She and her husband, Andrew, opted to keep their 7-year-old son, Craig, in second grade at Washington Elementary School rather than send him to the NOVA program at Jackson.

"We didn't like the idea of his being bused there and leaving the neighborhood school and all of his friends," she said.

Halverson estimates the school day is about 40 to 50 minutes shorter for students in the NOVA program because they are bused from their neighborhood schools to and from Jackson. That time is better spent in the classroom, Felt said.

Felt said she likes the diversity of gender and abilities found in a regular classroom.

"I also think gifted and talented kids are an asset for the regular classroom," she said. "I think those kids add something to the rest of the classroom."

The gifted and talented label doesn't come with a guarantee of academic success, NOVA advocates said.

"They have needs that aren't being met in the regular classroom," Handrich said. "It provides appropriate education for children who need a special challenge."

Many gifted and talented students feel awkward or cocky in regular classrooms when they know all the answers, Collins said. Some children feel stigmatized by being the smart child in the class or because they're pulled out for special instruction, she said.

Both sides point to the "Gifted Services Provision in Stevens Point Area Schools" evaluation completed in 2000 by the University of St. Thomas. The St. Thomas report praises the NOVA program and the district for being "cutting edge" in addressing the national concern of providing extra services for highly gifted students.

That report noted, however, that the teacher who provides gifted/talented resources for students outside of the NOVA program is spread too thinly. Among other suggestions, the evaluators called for expanding the elementary program by adding a second NOVA school and "cluster grouping" gifted and talented students in the remaining eight elementary schools.

Such a move would cost money, though. When the School Board already is trimming \$1 million to \$2 million from the district's budget each year, no one suggests that expanding the NOVA and other gifted and talented services is likely.

The district promotes the idea of differentiation in instruction, Halverson said. The idea is that teachers plan lessons and projects that encourage students to work at their ability level, she said.

Collins said that's awkward for high-achieving students who must work alone because their classmates are not working at their academic level.

Halverson objects to the suggestion that an education outside of the NOVA program is inferior. Of the 81 valedictorians chosen at Stevens Point Area Senior High over the past three years, 11 came from the NOVA program, she said. The remaining 70 came from a "regular" elementary background, she said.

Proponents point to the successes they attribute to NOVA as reason to keep the program intact.

"The thing I love about the NOVA program is it allows you to grow without bounds in any field you choose," said Garrick Rohm, 15, a SPASH sophomore who credits his years in the NOVA program with his ongoing academic success. He is enrolled in Advanced Placement Calculus, having completed the equivalent of advanced ninth-grade algebra while a NOVA fifth-grader.

"The point of the NOVA program is to challenge kids if they want to be," he said.