

## **SAVE THE SELF-CONTAINED GIFTED PROGRAM**

### **History:**

As part of its desegregation plan, in the mid 1990's, the East Baton Rouge Parish School System (EBRPSS) consolidated gifted programs into a handful of inner-city schools. These locations changed often over the years as EBRPSS staff made recommendations to the federal Judge overseeing the process. At its peak around 1990, enrollment was approximately 3000 students. However, concerns about distance, quality, and safety (real and perceived) and the instability of the program (frequent moves) caused many parents to pull their children out of the program and many gifted teachers to leave the program, primarily for private and parochial schools. These issues also caused a number of parents of potentially identifiable G/T students to consider other options and made recruitment for the program an increasingly difficult task.

Concurrent with the establishment of the G/T sites, EBRPSS began to create additional dedicated magnet schools closer to the demographic base that had once served the G/T program. Several of these schools show excellent test scores and have become an attractive option for many parents, even attracting students back from private schools. However, an uneven playing field has been created between the magnet sites and the gifted sites. This has caused even more students to flee the gifted program, this time for the magnet schools.

There is a significant difference between "magnet" and "gifted" programs; "giftedness", in the simplest terms, refers to high IQ (approx top 5%). Magnet programs generally have a particular art, technology, or academic focus, but entrance requirements are not as rigorous; typically at the middle and high school levels students are required to maintain at least a 2.5 GPA.

In the late 1990's, EBRPSS implemented the Scholastic Academy (SA) program to make the gifted program more accessible to minority students who might not initially qualify as gifted due to socio-economic disadvantages. This allowed high-performing non-gifted students in the gifted classrooms for a probationary maximum 2-year period. However, EBRPSS has historically not enforced the requirement for students to qualify as gifted after 2 years in order to remain in the gifted program. Note that state law does not otherwise allow non-gifted students to be taught by gifted teachers. (Side note, EBRPSS expanded SA to also include non-minority students.)

### **Current Situation:**

There are currently approximately 60,000<sup>1</sup> school age children in EBR parish of which 72% (43,400) are enrolled in public school. The National Association of Gifted Children

---

<sup>1</sup> Back-calculated from EBRPSS enrollment of 43,400 (from EBRPSS website) and Advocate article dated 9/22/07 stating that 72% of school aged children are enrolled in public school.

estimates that 4-6% of students are gifted which would be a gifted population of 2400-3600, however only about 1500 (which includes SA) are currently enrolled.

For many years prior to the 2007/2008 school year, there were 5 gifted elementary sites (Buchanan, Brookstown, Glen Oaks Park, Brownfields, Bernard Terrace), 2 gifted middle school sites (Glasgow and Westdale) and one gifted high school site (McKinley). All of these sites are combination gifted and regular education. With the exception of the middle school sites, they are all located in the inner city.

Some parents rightfully object to a blanket indictment of the inner city schools in which the gifted programs currently reside. Indeed, BRAGTS believes that perception is often worse than reality at these sites. That is not to say that serious problems do not exist at some of these sites. It has also been rightfully noted that such conditions are unacceptable for ALL students, not just gifted students. Certainly, the problems at these sites need to be addressed to create a safe, pleasant learning environment for all students. However, having the gifted program at these sites is not doing any particular good for either population (gifted or regular ed) and our organization's primary objective is to meet the needs of gifted and talented students. These needs cannot be met if parents decline gifted services because of unattractive sites.

In its current state, Baton Rouge's gifted program is still excellent. Glasgow Middle School (approx 50% gifted) was recently awarded Blue Ribbon School status by the U.S. Department of Education. In 2006, the gifted students at McKinley High School had the highest ACT scores of all 4-year high schools in the state; even higher than Benjamin Franklin Senior High School in New Orleans. Sadly, very few people know about the success of the gifted program because the program is currently very fragmented.

### **Recent Developments:**

In apparent response to the "long bus ride" concerns, beginning this 2007/2008 school year, EBRPSS added gifted programs at several elementary schools and one middle school in the southeast part of the parish. Only two of these schools currently offer self-contained gifted classes; the others are resource or "pull out" programs only. BRAGTS believes that, although there may be exceptions for certain children, resource classes are not adequate to meet the special needs of most gifted students. EBRPSS expects enrollment in these sites to increase, perhaps enabling some of the resource sites to become self-contained. This may be an acceptable solution for residents in that area of the parish, but does not really help the remaining  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the district.

Effective July 2007, the state Department of Education (DOE) is requiring EBRPSS to enforce the 2-year limit on Scholastic Academy for students coming into the program after July 2007 (those already in SA before that date are grandfathered in). No new in-district SA students will be allowed for 7<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> grades. While BRAGTS takes no position on this decision, we recognize that this will cause enrollment numbers to decline further.

A few years ago, the EBRPSS Magnet School office created a magnet school “succession plan” which guarantees a “highly-coveted”<sup>2</sup> slot in Baton Rouge Magnet High School for students that attend magnet elementary and middle schools (assuming entrance criteria are met). In past years, many students attended gifted programs in grades K-8, and then attended Baton Rouge Magnet High School. Now, we are seeing students jump the track from gifted to magnet even earlier because of the succession plan.

### **Concerns:**

Gifted students need a specialized education program to be appropriately challenged and, if they get it, they soar to incredible heights. Studies show that they need to be in an environment with other gifted students. When parents opt for private and magnet schools for their gifted children, these students often merely coast along, without being challenged, and occasionally develop boredom-induced behavior problems.

October 2006 enrollment (gifted + SA) was 1528 students with 0% in resource programs. October 2007 enrollment (gifted + SA) was 1508 students with 9% in resource programs. The number of identified gifted (excluding SA) enrolled in self-contained gifted programs declined from 878 to 766 students in that 12-month period (a 13% decrease). In one year, all of the self-contained sites except one experienced a double-digit percentage reduction in identified gifted students. For example, Westdale Middle School showed a decline of 32%, and, as the DOE restrictions on SA 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> graders begin, this site will experience even greater losses. In any decaying growth curve, as a lower critical mass threshold is reached, the curve declines increasingly faster; we have obviously crossed this point in this district.

### **The Future:**

BRAGTS believes that to save the self-contained program, EBRPSS must create DEDICATED gifted schools (not combined with regular education), just like Baton Rouge has for magnet schools. If EBRPSS created dedicated gifted schools, gifted students would flock back to the program and test scores would soar off the charts at the dedicated gifted schools. As a side benefit, when the gifted students return to the gifted program, it will free up slots in magnet schools for students currently on waiting lists for those excellent programs.

As of July 2007, EBRPSS is no longer bound by the requirement to keep gifted programs in the current sites. BRAGTS believes that creating dedicated gifted schools will reverse the decline of students enrolled in the self-contained gifted program and, through economies of scale, allow more efficient use of resources. This is not just the right thing to do for gifted students, but it would show off Baton Rouge as a leader in gifted education and help to attract and retain parents of gifted children in Baton Rouge. Because details regarding location(s), entrance criteria, and courses offered should be

---

<sup>2</sup> BRAGTS believes that gifted students are better served at McKinley High, but this is unfortunately the common perception around town.

worked out with the school system, we are not specifying any details (such as particular locations). We don't object to the dedicated sites being combined with an academic magnet and/or talented arts school. The primary goal is to situate sites that are stable and attractive to any parents considering G/T education for their children.

Although no longer required by the desegregation plan, EBRPSS seems to prefer the current arrangement for gifted sites because the gifted students bring up the test scores for schools that might otherwise be deemed “academically unacceptable” by state standards. So, after years of being used as a desegregation tool, now the gifted students are being used again to mask failing school scores. This is a huge disservice not only to the gifted students, but also to students in those inner-city schools, who are not getting the extra help that they may need.

In 1998, shortly before he retired, then Associate Superintendent E. Don Mercer commissioned an outside evaluation of the G/T program. While the report was generally laudatory of the program as a whole, the main point made was that the G/T program should “drive” the rest of the system. Subsequent administrations have generally ignored the findings in the report, and certainly have not placed the program as a priority.

### **A Sense of Urgency**

BRAGTS believes the enrollment decline must be reversed by next school year to save the self-contained program. EBRPSS is making plans to redraw attendance zones for next school year. If they are ever going to create dedicated gifted schools, it has to be done as part of this rezoning. They will be completely unwilling to make any changes after the rezoning is complete.