

EDUCATION

Gifted education reviewed

State policies reshaped to track students earlier, shift oversight locally

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Gifted education is getting a review around Virginia and a new expert at the College of William and Mary is adding to the state's already strong presence in the field.

Retooled regulations to guide school districts in forming gifted education plans at a local level are currently before Gov. Timothy M. Kaine.

Meanwhile, renowned researcher



Cross

Tracy Cross started this fall as the Jody and Layton Smith Professor of Psychology and Gifted Education and executive director of the Center for Gifted Education at William and Mary.

Cross gave the keynote address at the

Virginia Conference on Gifted Education, which was held Oct. 22-24 in Williamsburg.

Earlier in his career, Cross served as executive director at a residential high school in Indiana for nine years, which is similar to Virginia's Governor's Schools. He has looked at what's available for gifted students here.

"In reviewing what Virginia offers, it's a wonderful array of Governor's Schools, perhaps better than any other state in the U.S.," he said. "That's very laudable."

In past eras, Cross pointed out, the only alternative for helping gifted students was to have them skip a grade. Now, there are all sorts of options.

Governor's School programs in Virginia are tailored to specific areas of study, such as science and technology, or the performing arts. Other programs available in local schools include International Baccalaureate studies for students who typically are

Gifted education programs

■ Virginia's local school districts each have a coordinator of gifted programs.

■ Academic-year, summer residential and summer regional Governor's Schools are considered

the top tier of gifted education programs.

■ International Baccalaureate, Advanced Placement and honors courses are accelerated programs at the secondary level.

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strong in the humanities, while Advanced Placement and honors courses are topic specific.

Vikki Wismer is director of the Governor's School for Science and Technology and the Governor's Academy for Innovation, Technology and Engineering, or GAITE, that serves all six local school districts.

"What we're doing is providing that student an opportunity to meet his fullest potential in an environment with peers with the same strengths and interests," Wismer said.

Surroundings and psychology affect the learning process. And sometimes the outcome is adverse.

Cross has written five books on the possible link between gifted students and suicide, and has researched it extensively.

"It's a myth that gifted kids have a heightened degree of emotional disturbance," Cross said. "As a whole, gifted kids tend to be healthier both physically and psychologically than those that aren't."

"Being gifted brings with it other kinds of experiences that children who aren't gifted may not have, and it makes growing up more complicated. Being proactive about their social and emotional development is very important."

Current review of the Virginia Department of Education regulations for local gifted education programs is intended to bring them up to current research, according to Ruth Grillo, who coordinates gifted education for Hampton City Schools.

Options available to gifted students won't change. But school districts will be required to identify and track students starting in kindergarten, and to show that those students are making progress.

The changes to the regulations are mostly technical, Grillo said. For example, the regulations shift the responsibility for approval of gifted programs back to local school boards and gifted education advisory boards.

Grillo has heard rumblings that emphasis on No Child Left Behind and Standards of Learning as minimal standards beg the question of what's being done for the more advanced students.

"The gifted kids are included, too, and that's really one of the places the new regulations will help, is making sure that progress is documented for all of these students," Grillo said.