

**Evaluation of Advanced Education
Services in the Helena Public Schools**

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The purpose of this project was to evaluate the Helena Public Schools' services to support advanced learning. HPS advanced education has proven to be contentious in recent years, and the District leadership and Board of Trustees sought a third-party analysis of these services. In addition, the project was expected to provide recommendations for program improvement.

The following sections contain an overview of the Helena School District context, a description of how the project team gathered and analyzed information, a general overview of findings, and a detailed set of conclusions and recommendations.

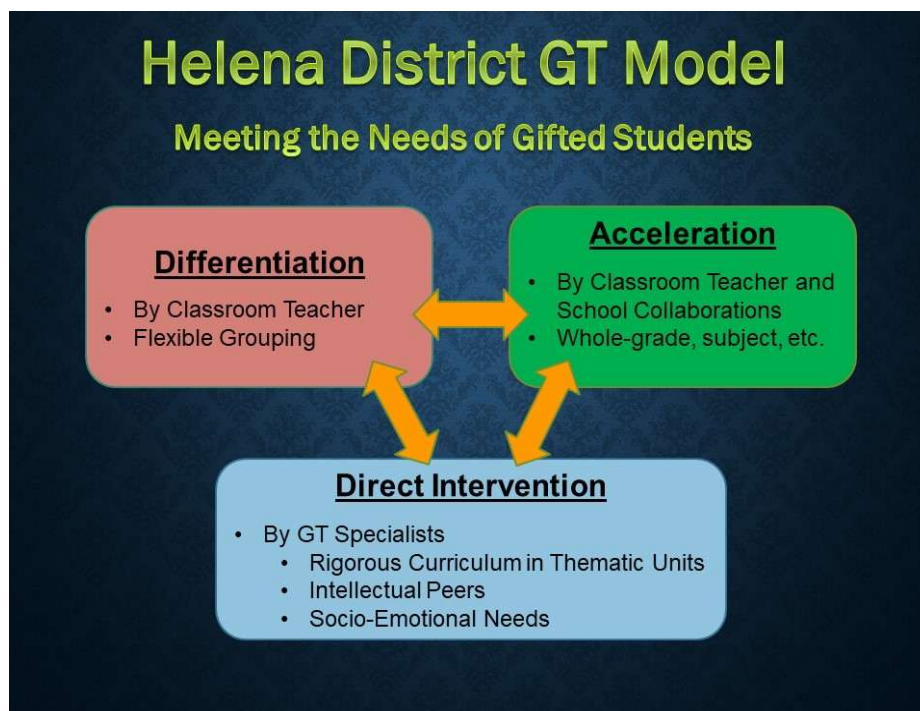
The Helena Public Schools Context

HPS consists of an elementary school district and high school district comprised of eight early literacy program classrooms (four-year-olds), one special education Pre-K program, ten elementary schools, two middle schools, two comprehensive high schools, and four public charter programs — a one-day-a-week STEM program (1-8), a Montessori program (k-5), online virtual learning for middle and high school students, and one alternative high school. The 12 elementary and middle schools enroll just over 5,000 students, a quarter of whom are eligible to participate in the federal free and reduced-price lunch program. The high schools enroll just under 2,500 students, with lunch assistance rates of 18% and 20%. The district is experiencing a slow decline in student enrollment, mirroring the state's downward trend since the pandemic. At the district-level, student performance on state assessments is above the state average, although performance unsurprisingly differs across schools and appears closely correlated with student socioeconomic status.

The district's mission is "to challenge and empower each student to maximize individual potential and become a competent, productive, responsible, caring citizen," which is very much in the spirit of the goals of advanced education. At the state level, Montana defines gifted and talented children as those who are "of outstanding abilities who are capable of high performance and require differentiated educational programs beyond those normally offered in public schools in order to fully achieve their potential contribution to self and society" (Montana Code Ann. § 20-7-901). The district mission statement and state definition serve as the foundation of the district's approach to advanced education.

The Helena Approach to Advanced Education

The district has a thoughtful, well-articulated model for advanced education. The HPS model is multifaceted, emphasizing differentiated instruction, acceleration opportunities, and direct enrichment interventions. As depicted on the district's web site:

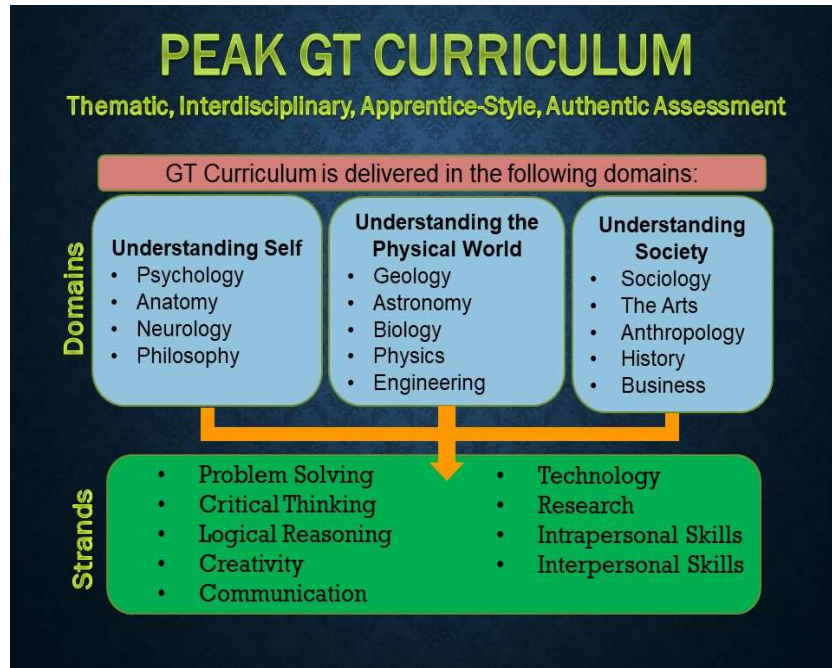


Differentiation can be understood as “classroom practice with a balanced emphasis on individual students and course content” (Tomlinson, 2010, p.14). It focuses on the modification of curriculum content, process, product, and affect based on students’ variation in readiness, interest, and learning profile (Tomlinson, 2010). Strategies such as flexible grouping (i.e., a dynamic arrangement of student groups determined by task nature and individual needs) are used in everyday instruction for all students in their classrooms. We often distinguish between “differentiating down” – modifying curricula and instruction for students working below grade level – and “differentiating up” – making modifications for students working above grade level.

Acceleration refers to students progressing through academic content at a faster pace, often by providing the standard curriculum to students at an earlier age than usual. It includes any educational strategy that leads to advanced placement or potential credit (Rimm et al., 2018). Common types of acceleration include single-subject acceleration, Advanced Placement courses, International Baccalaureate programs, and early admission (to kindergarten or first grade, to middle or high school, to college)(see Assouline et al., 2015). The acceleration options provided by the Helena School District include subject area, whole grade, and early entrance acceleration. It is implemented through collaboration between classroom teachers and the school. The Iowa Acceleration Scale (Assouline et al., 2009) is used as the district-wide protocol to place students.

In addition to differentiation and acceleration, specialists with expertise in identification, curriculum design, and student assessment deliver **direct interventions** for identified students through rigorous curricula. The PEAK curriculum follows a thematic and interdisciplinary design, implemented through apprentice-style learning and evaluated by authentic assessment. It covers 10 curricular strands that represent 21st-century skills and align with National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC) standards, including: problem solving, critical thinking, logical reasoning, creativity, communication, technology, research, leadership, intrapersonal skills, and

interpersonal skills. Furthermore, these strands are assembled into the curricular units across three domains (see next figure from the district web site).



Through this layered service model, the PEAK Program is intended to address both the academic and socio-emotional needs of advanced learners by meeting their needs in regular classrooms, as well as creating opportunities to group them with intellectual peers. Particularly, some specific examples of specialized services include weekly pull-out interventions, monthly intensive seminars, multi-day symposia, and an annual Leadership Conference. Both formative and summative evaluations are utilized to evaluate students' learning progress, including formats of daily PLC meetings, end-of-year comprehensive assessments, and climate surveys by students, parents, and teachers.

Student Identification Process

The district uses a multi-faceted approach to identify students for PEAK. The District employs two avenues for qualifying students for gifted services: group testing (universal screening) at Grade 2 and referral-based individual testing open to all grades K–12.

Group Testing (Grade 2) – Screening Process. In second grade, all students participate in a universal screening for giftedness. They are assessed with the Cognitive Abilities Test (CogAT) and iReady achievement tests. The CogAT provides measures of verbal, quantitative, and nonverbal reasoning, as well as composite and profile indicators. A score of 130 or above, or Profile of 9 is identified as exceptionality. The iReady achievement tests include Reading and Mathematics in Fall, Winter, and Spring assessments. An achievement of 95th percentile or above is identified as exceptionality. Altogether, students with evidence of three exceptionality areas are identified for services. In addition to test scores, PEAK staff also administer Teacher Behavior Checklists and creativity assessments during this screening phase to capture traits like creativity and other gifted behaviors that achievement tests might miss. Students identified through this approach will enter the following referral process.

Individual Testing (K-12) – Referral Process. Any student from kindergarten through 12th grade can enter the identification process through referrals. Referrals may come from teachers, parents, administrators, or the students themselves. A referral team, which may consist of school psychologists, related educators, advanced education specialists, administrators, and parents, will meet to review information about the referred student, with the aid of individual ability and/or achievement instruments.

Method

With the assistance of an interview/focus group specialist, I interviewed 27 people over the past several months.¹ Although the original intent was to conduct these conversations via focus groups, scheduling and reluctant participants made focus groups the exception rather than the rule. As a result, most of the conversations were one-on-one interviews. The handful of focus groups occurred over Zoom; the interviews were a mix of Zoom and phone calls. A note on reluctant participants: It is very common for stakeholders, even those who volunteer for interviews, to get cold feet when they receive an invitation to speak to a third-party evaluator. In every case, however, the stakeholders in this project eventually agreed to speak with us. Of course, anonymity was promised to all participants; furthermore, as a rule in this type of study, I do not directly quote participants in order to preserve confidentiality. Therefore, any quotes in the following sections are paraphrased and not the exact words of any one participant.

The interviews included the districts' advanced education specialists, former program administrators, current building level administrators, several teachers and at least 20 parents of current HPS students. I also asked to speak with outspoken critics of the services, and four agreed to speak with me. In addition, I also had an exchange with an expert on gifted education in Montana to get a bird's eye view of typical state practices regarding advanced education.

A great deal of material was provided by the district, including identification instruments, PEAK master calendars, daily schedules, curriculum guides, additional identification data, newsletters and other communications for PEAK, and copies of the PEAK comprehensive data reports from

¹ Throughout this report, I use "I" and "we" interchangeably to make the text more readable. Ms. Madsen was a great help in conducting the interviews, but all conclusions and recommendations in this report are my responsibility.

2003-2025, which include demographics of identified and participating students and results of evaluation surveys.

In addition, the Montana state education data system, GEMS (<https://gems.opi.mt.gov/>), was used to gather background data on the district and its schools. GEMS, to put it mildly, is not user-friendly, but it eventually surrendered the necessary data. These data were used to better understand the district context but had little impact on the following observations and recommendations.

Broad Findings and Impressions

Participants were generous with their time, and their input was frank and direct. Both supporters and critics of the program engaged with the project team in good faith (e.g., letting us play devil’s advocate without being offended, re-explaining comments that we didn’t quite follow, providing additional examples when requested, etc.). We conduct this type of study a few times each year and rarely have such consistently informative, professional interviews. Stakeholders were sincere in their assessments of and convictions regarding the district’s advanced services (i.e., there was little evidence of people trying to score political points, engaging in culture war rhetoric for the sake of cultural wars, etc.).

For example, nearly every advocate had detailed suggestions for service improvement, and every critic acknowledged the need to challenge advanced students. This gives me some hope that a “middle ground” can be found for the district that improves services and has broad community support.

Although I found the critics’ perspectives to be constructive and pragmatic – their goal was to improve the district’s advanced services, not burn the system down – I did speak to a couple of stakeholders who shared ideological criticisms of the program (e.g., all children should be given advanced opportunities, etc.). These concerns are typical in communities across the country. Given that the purpose of this study was program improvement, I did not heavily weight criticisms of the entire idea of advanced education.

I want to be clear that I am not implying that these criticisms are invalid; they are sincerely held and genuine. But they are also unconvincing. We differentiate opportunities all the time – both in schools and beyond! – and the concerns over “fairness” never seem to extend beyond a narrow focus on advanced learning. All students should have access to advanced opportunities, but not every student should participate in those activities. For example, all students should have access to opportunities for differentiation (in both directions) and accelerated education; not every fourth grader should have access to seventh-grade math. Students have different levels of readiness, and we should meet each student where they are and strive to help them learn every day they are in school.²

But again, the critics’ perspectives were valuable, and they provided several recommendations that are reflected in my conclusions and recommendations below.

² This is a foundational belief of special education.

Program Design

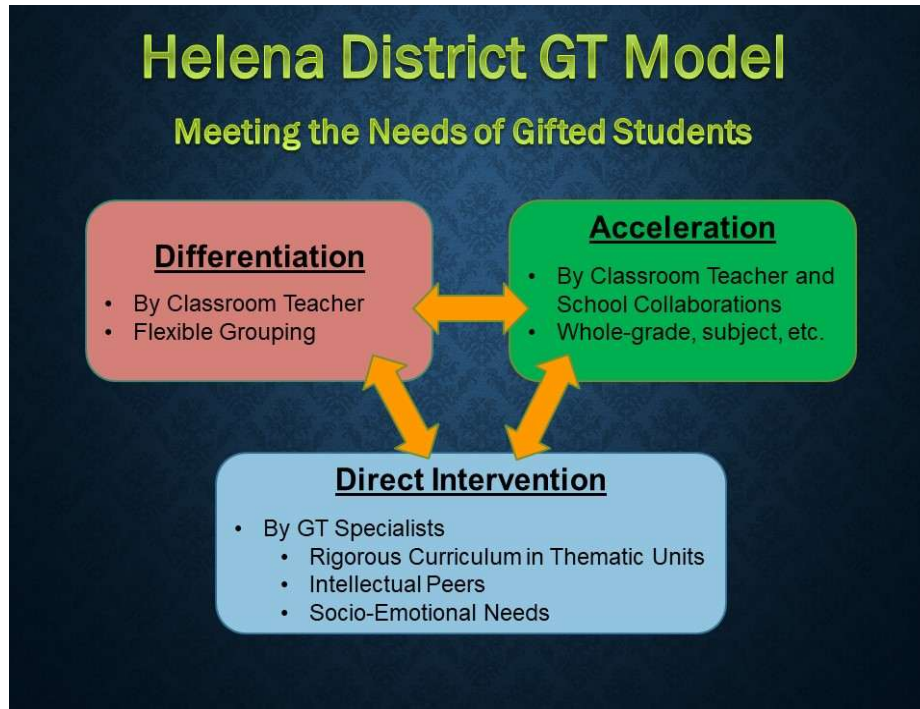
The district's services for advanced learning were redesigned roughly a quarter century ago. As the redesign was explained to me, it incorporated state-of-the-art theory and models (i.e., those of Betts, Renzulli, Delisle, etc.) and was a direct response to a widespread sense that the services could be improved. Both the motivation for this overhaul and the models used to guide it make sense and reflected best practice at the time.

Of course, the program evolved over the past 25 years, and subsequent research suggests that some "best practices" from the early aughts need to be rethought. The recommendations in the following section should be viewed less as judgments about the quality of the service design and more in the spirit of "we've learned better ways to do this."

I should also note an irony that kept emerging during the conversations. As explained to me by several stakeholders, the program used to be considerably larger regarding staffing. Recent budget cuts have forced these services to be curtailed significantly, to the point that most district advanced services are handled by two teachers/specialists. Yet at the same time, most stakeholders (especially critics) expressed a strong desire for services to be expanded, or for the program team to start providing additional, time-intensive services.

When I shared these ideas with the two program teachers, they responded sincerely with versions of "We'd love to do that" each time. But they also acknowledged that they are working as hard as they can to provide current services. To be frank, although they were enthusiastic and energetic during our conversations, they also came across as a bit exhausted. Regardless of their talent and motivation, which impressed me, they can't do it all.

Faced with this reality, expanding advanced services – which would address many community concerns – feels like a non-starter. The district, like most public districts across the country, is financially limited and almost certainly not in a position to add back FTE to the program team. What I recommend instead is refocusing the district's services on the model depicted in Figure 1, which I repeat here:



The district has moved away from this model (although some stakeholders believe the district never fully implemented this model with fidelity). Based on my conversations and the available data, the direct intervention services (e.g., PEAK) have been implemented systematically and have been reasonably maintained despite the budget cuts (and in some ways expanded); acceleration has been ad hoc and under-monitored; differentiation has been patchy and under-monitored. It appears that the district let PEAK = advanced services, which ramps up the pressure on PEAK to be the primary service provider for advanced students and draws most of the ire of critics.

For example, we encountered a wide range of opinions about PEAK, which is not surprising given the longstanding debates about the program among community members. But this was also notable because most conversations began with our questions about HPS advanced services, not PEAK. Indeed, among both supporters and critics (especially critics), when conversations were steered back to advanced services and away from a narrow focus on PEAK, many stakeholders either did not have strong feelings or did not feel like they knew enough about those services to comment.

The overreliance on PEAK is problematic for two main reasons. First, PEAK was never intended to be the only leg in the advanced services stool, so to speak, nor should it be. The human capital devoted to the program is too limited, making it impossible for the two specialists to work with a larger, more inclusive group of students – which they both would like to do. And the model's contact hours are insufficient for providing a comprehensive boost to advanced learning: You need students being regularly accelerated into advanced content, and differentiated instruction is always necessary in every classroom.

Second, I was told by several stakeholders that classroom teachers regularly discourage students from participating in PEAK.³ Interestingly, both advocates and critics noted this. Advocates shared it as a cautionary tale, critics in the vein of “classroom teachers agree that the program isn’t great.” If classroom teachers are occasionally discouraging PEAK participation, then differentiation and acceleration services need to be in great shape. I encountered only one stakeholder who felt that differentiation quality was acceptable; there was more support for acceleration quality, but not much. Some parents and educators feel that the district does a better job supporting teacher differentiation in reading than math; nearly all parents (both advocates and critics) believe the district provides too little support for differentiation in general, especially differentiation up.

I see Helena’s advanced services less as a series of separate interventions and more as a triangle: All students benefit from teachers who have the training and support to differentiate both up and down successfully. Fewer students benefit from acceleration, but recent research (Pedersen et al., 2023; Peters et al., 2017; Rambo-Hernandez et al., 2024) suggests that the percentage of students who can be accelerated is much higher than educators expect – some studies suggest up to a third of students could be accelerated at least one grade level in any particular subject area. Finally, the especially rigorous, differentiated curriculum offered in PEAK is likely appropriate for a smaller group of students whose needs aren’t completely met via differentiation and acceleration.

The district would benefit greatly from a return to the three-services model depicted in the figure above, especially if viewed as a triangle. It is important to note that *this would benefit every student and family in the Helena Public Schools*. Teachers with improved ability and support to differentiate are better able to work with the wide range of student readiness they encounter in every classroom; a culture of acceleration normalizes intellectual and academic rigor and can have a transformative impact on school culture; a strong direct instruction model can help fill in the gaps in the curriculum for our brightest students and allow them to spend time with intellectual peers. Implementing the three-services model comprehensively would be transformative for all students.⁴

Identification

Given concerns about the demographics of students receiving advanced services in the district, I focused considerable time on analyzing the district’s identification procedures. For the most part,

³ Parents shared that some teachers are quite negative in their comments to students about PEAK participation. Regardless of teachers’ feelings about the program, students should never be pulled into adults’ educational battles. Put differently, educator concerns about any program are an adult problem, not a child problem. I hope stakeholders’ concerns are overblown, and that this is not occurring as often as portrayed during the interviews. But if it is occurring, building-level leaders should put an end to it.

⁴ This point deserves more than a footnote, but there is not a good place to squeeze it into the body of the report: I was impressed by the list of high school courses eligible for distinguished recognition. In particular, the inclusion of so many Fine Arts and CTE courses on the advanced-accelerated course list is excellent.

they are research-supported and reasonably well-aligned with service delivery. Regarding PEAK, universal screening with multiple data points has been used in the district for some time. Field-based research over the past decade suggests other possible improvements to the identification process, which are detailed in the recommendations section below.

My biggest concern is the socioeconomic discrepancies in identification, which are significant and need to be addressed. Those discrepancies are likely bigger than they first appear, given the school-within-a-school Montessori model in the lowest-SES schools (i.e., some stakeholders note that identified students within lower-SES schools tend to come from the magnet Montessori students and not the neighborhood student population).⁵

Despite concerns about gender discrimination in the identification process, I did not find evidence of such discrimination. When identification and participation data are controlled for gender composition of each grade, no pattern emerges favoring either boys or girls.

It was difficult to determine how identification for accelerated options is working. As best I could tell, those decisions are largely made by building-level administrators. A more objective, systematic approach is warranted.

In general, I suspect a more inclusive approach to identification would improve access to services, improve the services themselves, and reduce criticisms of the program. For example, a letter from a parent to the central administration was shared with me, in which the parent made the case that their child had just missed various cut-off points and perhaps would have been selected for PEAK if they had taken a different set of tests. My general rule of thumb is that if you are arguing about which tests would be best to use for identification, you have already lost the plot. Put differently, the current approach is to use an identification system to determine who will and will not benefit from the PEAK program; a better approach is to use an identification system to determine who would benefit, then aim bigger and see who benefits by letting them participate in the program.⁶

PEAK

Our conversations with critics of the program generally focused on PEAK. As several noted, many of the PEAK activities would benefit the majority of students, not just advanced students (advocates for the program occasionally made similar observations). In a similar vein, Dr. Scott Peters, an expert on gifted and talented education, often notes that, “if it is good for everyone, then it isn’t advanced education.” For example, a few parent advocates shared that, although they

⁵ That said, despite some critics’ assertions, not all PEAK students come from privileged families. Many do not, and those parents shared that they are hurt by those criticisms.

⁶ This is also another reason to strengthen the district’s differentiation and acceleration capabilities: If a student does not appear likely to benefit from PEAK (or tries it but finds it to be too challenging), having access to high-quality acceleration and differentiated services makes the decision about PEAK participation much less high-stakes.

appreciated their children having access to arts content via PEAK, all students should have access to the arts.

The core PEAK curriculum and related activities are impressive. The problem-based learning focus is consistently obvious within the materials, and many parents and educators indicated that they value the rigorous instruction (which appears to provide students with curricula that is up to 3-4 grade-level equivalents beyond their chronological grade).⁷ The emphasis on providing opportunities for presenting student work to multiple audiences, both within the district and across the broader community, is especially laudable. Such opportunities are a key feature of major gifted education, talent development, and creativity models, yet those aspects are rarely implemented (probably because it involves significant extra work to set up and support). Having it be a key piece of Helena's advanced services was both surprising and impressive.

Most critics questioned whether the problem-based curricula should be used by all classroom teachers. Although that seems impractical (if teachers are struggling to differentiate, would introducing additional, challenging curricula make it easier or harder for them to differentiate in both directions?), the broader point of helping classroom teachers learn more about delivering high-quality, differentiated instruction would be of great benefit to the district. The good news on this issue is that the district has two specialists who are experts on this topic, and who expressed a willingness to train and coach their colleagues in this area (the limitation being, of course, a severe lack of time).

As a thought experiment, we often asked stakeholders how the educational experience in Helena would change if PEAK did not exist. The opinions of those *without* children in the program ranged widely, from "we'd all be better off" to "what kind of message would that send about academic excellence?" This is a typical set of responses to this question. However, parents *with* children in the program had strong feelings about the negative impact that program elimination or reduction would have on students. This was especially true for parents of twice-exceptional students, who believe that classroom teachers do not currently have the necessary training and experience to help twice-exceptional students thrive.

In that vein, two of the stated goals of PEAK are to allow students to spend time with intellectual peers and help them develop skills that address social and emotional issues that can be unique to advanced students. Every parent of a participating student believes PEAK is achieving these goals; some parents feel very strongly about this, noting that their child is much happier and better adjusted than before their PEAK participation. Many lamented the possibility that PEAK would be further downsized, sharing versions of, "I'll don't know what we'll do if she/he loses this support network." I saw little evidence that these goals are readily met by educators and staff in the schools; of course, having PEAK removes the pressure to provide those services. But if PEAK were weakened or eliminated, does each school have the capability to pick up those services for advanced students? That seems unlikely.

⁷ In my experience, most districts are the country would love to have such an advanced, differentiated set of curricula so readily available (see Tyner, 2024).

Communication

The need for stronger communication about the district's advanced services was frequently mentioned by stakeholders (including both advocates and critics). One educator noted that advanced services are rarely mentioned in the superintendent's communications, and several people recommended that the goals and benefits of advanced services, especially PEAK, should be better communicated to parents and classroom teachers. One community member questioned whether the Board of Trustees was up-to-speed on the district's advanced services. Although communication issues were rarely considered to be a major problem, they were among the most frequently mentioned problems.

Administrator Support

Many parents – and some educators – questioned building-level administrators' commitment to advanced education. I led two focus groups with administrators near the end of the data collection and found them to be committed to meeting the needs of advanced students. More to the point, each administrator offered real examples of students whose advanced needs they had recently addressed. To be sure, the administrators held a wide range of opinions about advanced students and advanced education, some of which are research-supported and some of which are not, but their commitment to helping advanced students within the context of a fiscally-challenged school district was noticeable.

Stakeholders also voiced a widespread belief that the district's central administration was not supportive of current advanced programming, especially PEAK. Although Dr. Alberts was specifically mentioned by multiple stakeholders as being supportive of advanced learners and services, it was also noted that she is spread thin by a large portfolio of responsibilities and is able to devote little time to issues related to advanced education. I suspect addressing some of the communication issues would help send an improved message of support for advanced achievement and advanced learners.

As mentioned above, the district's fiscal challenges were a frequent topic of conversation with stakeholders. The FTE devoted to advanced education was sharply reduced (from ~5 to 2), and that had an unsurprisingly negative impact. However, there is some evidence that the impact was more moderate than many expected. The two remaining specialists are working hard to come up with program enhancements and structural modifications that maintain and even expand services. The available data suggest they have increased PEAK participation despite the budget cuts.

However, *I caution the district leadership and board not to overinterpret the moderate size of the budget cuts' impact*: Current services depend on the extra efforts of the specialists and many hours from parent volunteers. Further cuts would probably push the district's advanced services to the breaking point. Ironically, a major criticism of the existing program is that it isn't doing more – serving more students, helping more teachers, offering more services. I left those conversations wondering how two educators and a small group of parent volunteers, regardless of their commitment and talent, could possibly do more. It's essentially a Catch-22: Resources are reduced, making it hard to do much more; then the programming is criticized for not doing

more. The fact that access to some services has expanded despite the district's financial realities is exceptional and should not be taken for granted.⁸

Specific Conclusions and Recommendations

Conclusion 1: The district is doing lots of commendable things regarding advanced education: A theoretically sound, empirically-supported set of interventions; a defensible identification system for PEAK; impressive, differentiated curricula for PEAK; comprehensive, annual self-evaluation of PEAK; highly committed specialists who have found ways to increase access to advanced services despite budget cuts; a wide range of advanced coursework at the secondary level; generally supportive administrators at the building and district level. However, PEAK has become synonymous within the district with “advanced services.” District materials and the history of Helena’s advanced offerings make clear that PEAK was never intended to be the primary advanced education offering in the district.

- Recommendation 1.1: Emphasize the three-services model for advanced education in Helena Public Schools, with a heightened focus on “differentiation up” and single-subject acceleration.
- Recommendation 1.2: Conduct a differentiation audit of randomly selected classrooms to determine the extent to which differentiation is actually occurring. Most such studies find little evidence of differentiation, but at least the district would gain valuable information for service improvement.
- Recommendation 1.3: Focus PEAK on differentiated services. There is some evidence that PEAK has become the home for other services, such as arts education, that have been cut elsewhere in the budget. Keep PEAK’s focus on rigorous instruction and curricula for students who need much more challenge and socioemotional support.

Conclusion 2: Acceleration is more obvious than differentiation, but its use appears unsystematic and leader-dependent.

- Recommendation 2.1: Conduct an “acceleration audit” to determine the extent to which best practices in accelerated instruction are currently being used.
- Recommendation 2.2: Implement automatic enrollment in advanced coursework across content areas, but especially math and ELA/reading. Use of automatic enrollment would likely necessitate expansion of advanced coursework in the district middle schools, which is currently limited outside of math and music.

Conclusion 3: Program funding reductions due to district fiscal pressures have significantly impacted advanced service delivery.

- Recommendation 3.1: Focus PEAK on elementary and middle school. Participation in high school is too low to justify the specialists’ time at the high school level. Stakeholders

⁸ “Expanded” is a tricky word here: Parents acknowledged the increased participation numbers in some grades but also noted that contact hours are very limited. Ideally, more students would be receiving more intensive services; in Helena, more students are receiving limited services.

frequently noted that the demand for PEAK services drops off in high school due to the other advanced services being offered at that level (again, further evidence for improving differentiation and acceleration K-8) and to a lack of available time on the part of students.

- Recommendation 3.2: Use the specialists' "found time" to (1) increase training and coaching on PBL and differentiation-up for classroom teachers and (2) conduct differentiation and acceleration audits.
- Recommendation 3.3: Any PEAK activities that are not obviously connected to the program's core goals should be avoided.

Conclusion 4: Identification procedures are carefully designed but can be modernized. In particular, the socioeconomic discrepancies in identification rates need to be addressed.

- Recommendation 4.1: Be more inclusive. If a student's data fall into a gray area, there is little harm in letting them experience PEAK to see if it works for them.
- Recommendation 4.2: Use teachers as safety nets rather than gatekeepers. Rather than use teacher input as a screener or as one piece of a multi-indicator system, use it as the last step in the process by asking teachers, "Who did we miss?" (vs. "Who should we screen?")
- Recommendation 4.3: Expand universal screening. One universal screener in Grade 2 is insufficient. This need not be more expensive: Some districts just use the annual state assessments as their universal screener (i.e., don't let the perfect be the enemy of the good). This would lessen the use of referrals, which tend to be an equity bottleneck, in that referrals tend to be an entry point for higher-SES families more often than lower-SES families.
- Recommendation 4.4: Move to a combination of district and local norms. A major driver of the district's socioeconomic disparities is the use of district-wide norms. A better approach is to use district norms (any student about a district-wide threshold is identified) *and* building-level norms (the top 10% of students regarding academic readiness in each school are identified). *This strategy will not close socioeconomic identification gaps*; it will, however, give lower-SES students significantly greater access to advanced services (Peters et al., 2019).

Conclusion 5: Communication about advanced services can be improved. Indeed, some stakeholders criticized issues with the current programming that had been addressed years prior, suggesting a big communications gap. Improving communications should be low-hanging fruit.

- Recommendation 5.1: Create a one-page (double-sided) handout for parents and caregivers that clearly depicts and explains the three-services model. If you can't do it in one page, you can't expect parents to understand the various options and services, and many teachers also will not understand how they fit into the model.
- Recommendation 5.2: Similarly, the web page should have more information on differentiation and acceleration. Parent understanding of their child's advanced services should not depend on social capital and the parents' prior experiences. Consider using resources from the Acceleration Institute's web site (<https://www.accelerationinstitute.org/>).
- Recommendation 5.3: The annual report on advanced services should include *all* advanced services, not just PEAK. For example, what progress did the district make last year in helping teachers differentiate up? How many students were accelerated at least one grade level in math? ELA? Science? Etc.

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About the Evaluator

Jonathan Plucker is a Professor at the Johns Hopkins School of Education. Previously, he served as the Associate Dean for Faculty Affairs and the Julian C. Stanley Endowed Professor of Talent Development at Johns Hopkins, Raymond Neag Endowed Professor of Education at the University of Connecticut, and Professor of Educational Psychology and Cognitive Science and Associate Vice Provost for Research at Indiana University. He graduated with a B.S. in chemistry education and M.A. in educational psychology from the University of Connecticut, then after briefly teaching at an elementary school in New York, received his Ph.D. in educational psychology from the University of Virginia.

In his time at Indiana University, he was the founding director of the Center for Evaluation and Education Policy and led over 200 research and evaluation efforts that took place in all 50 states and several other countries. These projects covered a wide range of education topics, from large-scale evaluations the Cleveland voucher program and Indiana and Georgia charter school systems, to evaluations of state after school programs to evaluations of instructional materials for gifted students in Ohio. For several years, he served as the primary provider of evaluation technical assistance for grantees of the Office of Innovation and Improvement at the U.S. Department of Education. He frequently conducts evaluations of school districts' advanced education programs.

Dr. Plucker is an APA, APS, AERA, and AAAS Fellow and recipient of the Arnheim Award for Outstanding Achievement in the Psychology of Creativity from APA and the Distinguished Scholar and Distinguished Service Awards from the National Association for Gifted Children. He is a past-president of the Society for the Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts and of the National Association for Gifted Children. He serves as principal investigator for the National Research Center on Advanced Education.

Dr. Plucker was assisted during this project by Jennifer Madsen, a parent advocate who serves on the board of directors for the New Jersey Association for Gifted Children and the National Association for Gifted Children. Ms. Madsen has extensive experience conducting interviews and focus groups with parents of advanced and twice-exceptional students.