

The Hunter School

Evaluation Experience:

A Special School's Journey

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Making value judgments about the educational import of what has been seen and rendered is one of the critical features of educational criticism, as it also must be in the conduct of conventional educational research.

—Elliot W. Eisner (1991, P. 176)

The purpose of this chapter is to describe and assess the experience of evaluating the internationally recognized Hunter College Campus Schools from the beginning of the process to the final report. What the evaluation team learned can be applied to any publicly funded program for gifted students. Accountability for public funding provides an opportunity to demonstrate excellent educational practice.

Located in the heart of Manhattan, Hunter College Campus Schools (HCCS) are publicly funded schools for intellectually gifted students, grades pre-K through 12. Hunter College High School (HCHS), which currently encompasses grades 7—12, was founded in 1869 as a Female Normal and High School. In 1902, the normal school component evolved into Hunter College, and, in 1955, HCHS became a laboratory secondary school for intellectually gifted girls. By 1974, in response to legal challenge, Hunter College High School began admitting boys. The Hunter College Elementary School (HCES) was established in 1870 as a model demonstration school for the Hunter College teacher education program. In 1940, Hunter College reorganized the school as an experimental center for intellectually gifted students, grades pre-K to 6.

The goal of HCES [from 1940 to the present] is to teach students to think critically and creatively, to appreciate the diversity of this educational environment, to develop the skills needed to further one's knowledge base in areas of individual interest and to prepare students to be leaders, thinkers, and doers of the future. (Hunter College Elementary School, 2001, p. 2)

Selection Criteria

Selection Criteria for the High School

In order to be admitted to Hunter College High School, one must be a resident of New York City. The process begins each year in September, when school principals throughout the five boroughs are asked to identify sixth-grade students who are eligible to take the Hunter College High School (HCHS) entrance exam, as determined by students' performance on fifth-grade standardized tests. A percentile cutoff on standardized tests of reading and mathematics is determined each year that will yield 3,000 to 4,000 test takers. The HCHS entrance exam, developed by the mathematics and English departments of the school, is then administered each year in January. In order to be accepted to Hunter College High School, a student must earn a score at or above a designated cutoff on the objective section of the exam and write a passing essay. Approximately, 170 top scorers on the entrance exam who also wrote a passing essay are

offered admission. The top 30 economically disadvantaged students, ranked by objective score, who wrote a passing essay, are also offered admission. Students from the elementary school enter the high school automatically.

Selection Criteria for the Elementary School

The elementary school admission procedure is different from that of the high school. In response to written requests, application packets are mailed to the primary residence of custodial parents/legal guardians. Candidates for admission must reside in Manhattan and be between the ages of 3 and 5. In the first round of testing, after receiving an appointment card from the admissions office, parents arrange for their child to be tested by an approved private psychologist using the most recent edition of the Stanford-Binet individual IQ test. Children testing at or above the cutoff score (usually 97th percentile and above) are invited to “Round 2.” During this next phase of the admissions process, children are observed negotiating individual and group tasks while interacting with peers and teachers. A school faculty committee reviews applications, test scores, and Round 2 data without access to candidates’ names. Based on the faculty reviews, the director of admissions offers 50 placements per year and maintains a waiting list.

An Invitation for Evaluation

When Jennifer Raab became president of Hunter College in 2000, she was returning home. A graduate of Hunter College High School, President Raab invited an evaluation team of national experts in gifted education to conduct a review of HCCS. The goal for the evaluation was to provide concrete recommendations for fostering HCCS’s role as a model of gifted education and talent development.

The evaluation team was selected according to the following criteria. One member was deeply familiar with the schools by way of a 15-year career in the Hunter College School of Education. Her area of scholarship was gifted education and talent development, and in that capacity she had served as curriculum and research consultant to the schools. The second member of the team was selected for his experience as director of a selective high school and scholar in the area of the social and emotional needs of gifted students. The third member of the team brought expertise in the area of curricula for the gifted, as well as a broad understanding of applying gifted education to various settings. All three of the team members were experienced evaluators.

The evaluation team designed the following objectives for the evaluation process and completion of the report:

- Collect information from all relevant constituencies, including teachers, parents, administrators, students, representatives from Hunter College’s School of education, and the president’s office.
- Develop a data—driven report that includes recommendations for policy implementation that will aid the HCCS community in generating a strategic plan.
- Design recommendations in the form of desired outcomes that can be reviewed annually.

Data Collection

Data were collected by way of mailed questionnaires and from a variety of activities during a site visit. Surveys were distributed in two waves a month apart to students, parents, and teachers. The second wave was instituted to elicit additional responses.

Surveys

The surveys consisted of 14 items about admissions, curricula and instruction, assessment of learning, special student services (including talent development), counseling and other support services, and collaboration with the Hunter College School of Education. Respondents were instructed to answer items 1—12 using a Likert Scale (1 = Strongly Agree, through 5 = Strongly Disagree). For each question, respondents were also provided with space to write comments. Questions 13 and 14 were open-ended items (see Figure 1). Question 13 addressed ideas for a successful collaboration between HCCS and the Hunter College School of Education. Question 14 asked respondents to list what skills, knowledge, and attitudes students should have at various points in their career at Hunter Campus Schools and whether those aspired outcomes are appropriate to a gifted education. A total of 499 surveys out of 1,200 (42%) were returned: 23 from HCES students, 118 from HCES parents, 8 from HCES teachers, 153 from HCHS students, 168 from HCHS parents, and 29 from HCHS teachers (see Appendix C for a copy of the survey).

Site Visit

The 3—day site visit began in the president's office with the president,

The Hunter School Evaluation Experience /1/ 193

provost, the president's liaison to HCCS, the dean of the School of Education, faculty from the School of Education, and the evaluation team. At this meeting, President Raab gave the evaluation team its charge and, during the next 3 days, the team toured the site, attended classes, and met individually and in focus groups with all constituencies of HCCS.

Focus groups were comprised of students, parents, faculty, and administration from HCES, HCHS, and the Hunter College School of Education. From HCES, the team met with 60 parents, 20 faculty and staff, 16 selected fifth and sixth graders, and the principal. From the high school, the team met with four administrators and the director of admissions, all HCHS seventh and eighth graders, eight selected juniors and seniors, 30 parents, three staff from the guidance office, and all the department chairs. Four administrators from the Hunter College School of Education conferred with the team, as well. Notes from all the focus group interactions were recorded, and index card responses were collected from 84 HCES parents, 16 HCES students, 64 HCHS parents, and eight HCHS students. In addition to the survey and focus group responses, the team received 18 highly detailed comments from HCES parents.

During the focus group meetings, the team requested and enforced constructive responses from the participants. Focus group participants also recorded their comments and responses on index cards. Each group was asked the following questions, tailored to the specific audience:

1. What is best about HCCS? What would you not want changed?
2. What support is available to students who need help? What support is available for those students who have already demonstrated mastery of classroom requirements?
3. What classroom/instructional strategies best help the gifted child?
4. If you could change only one thing about HCCS, what would it be?

Document Requests

The evaluation team requested access to archived and public documents available to outside educators or the general public. Appendix D lists the documents and other materials that HCHS was asked to submit to the evaluation team for review.

194 / Subotnik, Soller, & Hood

Data Collection Experiences

The site visit was organized and facilitated through the efforts of the president's office and administrators of HCCS. Students led the team on a building tour. Evaluators observed a seventh—grade music class, a French 6 AP class, an eighth—grade social studies class, a high school physics class, a pre—K and a kindergarten/first—grade class, fifth—grade mathematics and language classes, a fourth—grade mathematics class, and an elementary science class. The majority of the visit was devoted to daytime and evening meetings with the HCCS community, including the administration, faculty, staff students, and parents.

Translating Analysis Into Specific Recommendations

In order to present the data in the most useful form, the report followed a three-part format. The first portion of the evaluation report summarized the evaluation team's activities from the site visit and a review of available materials. The second part provided an analysis of the data in the following areas: 1) admissions, 2) communications, 3) curricula and instruction, 4) assessment of learning, 5) special student services, 6) counseling and other support services, and 7) collaboration with the Hunter College School of Education. The final section of the report translated the results across all data collection methods into specific recommendations. The team's recommendations were premised on the strengths of the school and were designed to inform the strategic planning process encouraged by President Raab.

Writing and Presenting the Report

Toward the end of the site visit, the consultants convened for several hours to review and synthesize the data. They found that the results were consistent across all the data sources available on site in a number of areas. All stakeholders agreed that the students were outstanding. In addition,

1. This chapter does not include discussion of data under the categories of School Organization and Structure. Nor are the recommendations under other categories reported comprehensively its order to protect the privacy of the school and to honor the client—evaluation team relationship.

The Hunter School Evaluation Experience /1/ 195

parents, teachers, and HCCS administrators clearly wanted to make HCCS the most exemplary schools for the gifted possible. Everyone wanted a strong partnership with Hunter College.

The evaluation team developed a set of overheads to address each of the categories of analysis for the president, provost, dean of education, and HCCS administrators. The discussion helped to clarify the task and organize the report into sections that would be public and those that would serve as a reference only for the president and her cabinet.

After the site visit, the team then set about the task of entering and analyzing survey data and focus group cards and writing the report. The evaluators were geographically distant from one another; therefore, follow-up report writing took place electronically. Because all the data were housed at one location, referring back to particular documents was sometimes difficult for the

evaluators at the other locations. Nevertheless, the team was able to produce a finished document for Hunter within 3 months.

Recommendations to the Campus Schools

From the Evaluation Team

The following recommendations offered by the evaluation team could be applied to any publicly funded gifted program. Schools that function optimally to serve gifted students integrate their admission criteria, curricula, support services, ongoing assessment, and desired outcomes at graduation. An institution's true mission is reflected in its selected population. For this reason, the evaluation team began by asking the HCCS community to answer with clarity, "Whom do the Hunter Campus Schools serve?" In the course of deciding whom to serve, a school for the gifted can select:

The most brilliant young people from among those who apply. This arrangement is what most closely describes the current admissions process.

The most brilliant young people in New York City. In order to carry out this mission, outreach must be strenuous and the school must be prepared to accept a more economically and ethnically homogeneous student body due to variations in the quality of schooling and extracurricular opportunities available around the city.

- The most brilliant from among those whose families have the fewest educational options because they are too poor or too uninformed to be "in the loop" for private education or other selective schools. Embracing such a mission would provide a unifying ideal and a unique niche in the specialized school community. However, taxpayers whose children would then be excluded from the admissions process would feel disenfranchised, ultimately undermining support for the school.
- Those most accomplished or brilliant young people in at least one academic area. The focus of the school would be to develop the specific talent areas of students while providing a rigorous college-bound course of study to all. This solution may provide a more diverse population and one more closely aligned with the adolescent profiles of adults who have transformed our society.

Each of the above listed missions has attractive qualities and serious constraints. The evaluation team strongly urged the HCCS community to select a mission (population to serve) or devise one of its own. A clear mission allows a school for the gifted to offer a cohesive curriculum and set of support services, making it even more likely that students will receive the special kind of education they should expect from a selective school for gifted students.

Once HCCS decides which students they wish to serve, the evaluation team recommended that the community delineate desired outcomes for these students at the end of their HCCS career. Although the most commonly reported desired outcome on the part of parents and students was admission to the most reputable postsecondary institutions, the team thought this short-term goal was too limited. From the perspective of talent development, the schools should also aim for generating transformational leaders in scholarship, the professions, business, and the public sector.

The evaluation team presented recommendations in the hope that HCCS would embrace long-term goals that integrated admission criteria, curricula, support services, ongoing assessment,

and desired out— comes at graduation. Wherever possible, the evaluation team built on suggestions offered by previous evaluation reports conducted at the school that still required attention and framed the recommendations in a way that could be useful for the school's upcoming strategic planning process.

The Hunter School Evaluation Experience /// 197

Admissions

Curricula and Instruction

In general, the evaluation team commended the HCCS faculty committees and the director of admissions for their continuing efforts to improve the quality of the admissions process. In addition, the evaluation team recommended the following:

- The process should continue to be guided by best practice in gifted education, including the use of multiple criteria for selection and an optimal match between program delivered and student population selected.
- Admissions criteria for HCES and HCHS should be aligned as closely as possible to address desired outcomes for the end of 12th grade.
- Admissions decisions should remain data-driven.
- The process should ensure that all New York City elementary schools—public, private, and parochial—have equal access to admissions information.
- The admissions director should design and implement an aggressive yearlong preparation program for underrepresented groups prior to each entry point.

Because of the central role of admissions in carrying out the mission of the school, the director of admissions should also serve as an advisor in other matters central to the mission of the schools (organization, curricula and instruction, etc.).

HCCS has many outstanding teachers whose professional skills are channeled into curriculum development. Because of the uniqueness associated with each classroom, the curriculum is not as aligned as it might be across grades and from grade to grade. If gifted programs are to serve as purveyors of excellence in the public domain, they need curricular frame works. These documents should address, in a sequential manner, expected goals and outcomes for students in each grade. Along with the statement of goals and outcomes, the document should delineate how the goals and outcomes meet and exceed those expected for students in New York State.

- Each subject area in the elementary school should have a faculty member whose special responsibility lies in curriculum development, coordination, mentoring, and monitoring.
- Each department chair should work collaboratively with the other chairs in order to synchronize the sequence of topics and skills taught to students so that the curriculum makes sense as a whole. Hunter College School of Education and School of Liberal Arts faculty should be available to collaborate in the curriculum development process.

In order to carry out these recommendations, the evaluation team suggested the following to the president of Hunter College:

- released time for faculty to write curricula and plan cross—disciplinary units/projects;

- ongoing staff development differentiated by teacher expertise and experience, with a special focus on teaching gifted students;
- development of materials for external audiences that document and describe the schools' curricula and projects;
- competitive funding, perhaps generated by parents, to support teacher presentations at national and local conferences;
- a program of electives for all students at all grade levels based on interest, a specific talent, or both;
- a scope and sequence guide to pre-K—6 curricula; and
- development of a mechanism for compacting the curriculum in basic verbal and quantitative skills for exceptionally talented pre—K—6 students.

Assessment of Learning

Gifted education is a form of special education. Therefore, a system needs to be in place whereby each student's academic profile is easily accessible and reviewed regularly. The evaluation team recommended:

- a long—term (3 years) and short—term (coming academic year) staff development plan;
- for secondary—level programs, an evaluation design that focuses annually on (a) student awards and distinctions, Advanced

Placement examination performance, PSAT/SAT scores, and college acceptance data; (b) perceptual data from students and parents on program effectiveness; and (c) self—assessment by faculty and staff and

for elementary—level programs, an evaluation design that focuses annually on (a) standardized test scores, (b) student distinctions, (c) secondary school acceptance data, (d) perceptual data from students and parents on program effectiveness, and (e) self- assessment by faculty and staff.

Talent Development

Within the gifted student population are those with exceptional abilities in particular subject areas or domains. Learning services should include a purposefully designed program for the talent development of specific academic talents. These services may come in three forms: acceleration, electives, and extracurricular activities. Recommendations included:

- Provide access to acceleration into more advanced classes.
- Offer electives for students in all grades in order to maintain special interests that help students prepare for competitions and other extracurricular experiences that require portfolios or research experiences.

Create an activities director position. This person would guide especially talented students to extracurricular classes, mentor— ships, internships, and experiences before the senior year and serve as a liaison for parents.

Create a program in coordination with counselors and the activities director to help highly talented students develop the social and practical intelligence needed to open doors for them in their areas of deep interest.

Counseling/Guidance Program

High—quality counseling is essential to the success of a gifted program. Students, their families, visitors, and potential funding organizations should be able to ascertain from the materials presented to them by the counseling staff what services are being offered and how they are uniquely suited to the gifted students. In that light we recommended the following to the school's counseling department:

- Identify the goals of the counseling program in the elementary school and the high school and make them explicit and well known to the school communities.
- Delineate and publicize how the social, emotional, and college and career guidance needs of each gifted student are being addressed.
- Indicate to the HCCS community how the special needs of students in grades 7, 8, and 9 are being addressed in the context of a 7th—12th-grade school environment.
- Institutionalize ways to plan together and solve problems with classroom faculty.
- Delineate and publicize how the counselors collaborate with special service agents (e.g., learning specialist in the elementary school and advisor to high school seniors conducting special projects) and throughout the city.

These suggestions could be developed into a brochure or guidebook that could be made available to all members of the HCCS community, Hunter College, and to school visitors. The brochure should be periodically revised and reevaluated in light of changes in program or goals at the Campus Schools.

Relationship With the Hunter College School of Education

Association with a university or school of education can be extremely fruitful. The evaluation team suggested some of the following ways in which such collaboration would benefit the Hunter community:

- clinical placement of undergraduate and graduate students in relevant HCCS contexts, including, but not limited to, counseling, classrooms, and administrative internships;
- School of Education faculty consultation on special-needs students, beginning with observation and assessment and leading to prescribed interventions;
- establishing a gifted education program in the School of Education; and
- research conducted on gifted learners, their families, and effective school interventions used with them. Some ideas for potential research include:

Table 10.1

Data Needing to be Examined in a Gifted Program Evaluation

Type Data to be Examined

Curricula • a curricular framework and scope and sequence of

curricula for each grade in each subject.

Services	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•services available to students with special learning needs and to those with exceptional ability in a given subject admissions criteria
Staffing	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• faculty accomplishments, including published research• criteria for selecting teachers
Outcome/ Impact data	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•longitudinal and other study data on the school•data on alumni accomplishments•number of Advanced Placement courses available, taken, and annual performance data from AP exams•number of students taking college-level courses (beyond AP)•awards and recognition received by students•mean Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) and PSAT scores

1. case study research on twice—exceptional children, and
2. collaborative action research and publication about what works in the classroom with gifted children at different levels of development and in different content areas.

Communication

Communication with the outside world about the Campus Schools and its role in gifted education needed to be enhanced. The team urged the president of Hunter College to provide resources that could be applied to broad casting the special features and accomplishments of the schools. All publicly funded schools for the gifted should have the data about curricula, services, staffing, and outcome/impact data available for visitors (see Table 10.1).

Practical Tips

The Hunter College Campus Schools evaluation experience provided lessons for both evaluators and personnel of gifted schools.

Tips for Evaluators

Make your life as an evaluator easier. A well—designed evaluation plan will ensure that your clients are satisfied. Some rules of thumb:

- Include clients' goals as central to the evaluation objectives. You may want to negotiate presenting a report that comes in both public and private formats so that the clients may find out what they need even if it does not reflect directly on improving the school.
- Triangulate data by asking similar written and focus group questions to each group of stakeholders.
- Generate questions that elicit positive, solution-oriented responses from focus group participants. This helps to reduce the amount of nonproductive complaining or defensiveness that may come from stakeholders.

2. *Learn from mistakes.* The evaluation team's experience in data collection led them to a number of conclusions about how to collect data more efficiently. Sometimes, focus group sessions may be too large or too small, which calls for adjustments. Second-round mail-outs to survey participants may prove cumbersome and impractical, thus necessitating that the evaluators settle for a lower rate of return. Report writing is difficult to effect once the team disperses. Thus, there are real advantages to finishing a draft report on site.

Tips for Specialized Schools

1. *Publicly funded schools for gifted students need to be held accountable.* Publicly funded schools for gifted students have a special responsibility to demonstrate to the public that they are fulfilling a need that cannot be met as well in a regular setting. Without clear indication that this is the case, our field can be accused of elitism and depleting the public coffers to "cream" students who might otherwise boost the quality and test scores of their home school and classroom. This means that mechanisms for monitoring student growth and achievement must be employed unhindered by ceiling effects.

2. *Schools need to reflect on definitions of success.* Schools that are successful at getting their graduates into excellent schools at the next level may be reluctant to change. Gifted education programs should certainly provide the best possible opportunities for its students, but the school community needs to discuss whether that is a sufficient goal to rationalize the use of public funds.

3. *There is a need for clarity and consistency in outcome measures used to assess the effectiveness of gifted programs.* Perhaps the best way to determine whether a school is contributing to the growth of individual students, no matter where they started, is to use a value-added model (Sanders & Rivers, 1996; Wright, Horn, & Sanders, 1997). Such a model shows how much each year of instruction contributes to the academic development of each student. In order to implement such a plan, however, a program of consistent and well-organized on-level and off-level testing and record keeping needs to be in place.

4. *Gifted schools need to demonstrate alignment of mission, admissions, curricular goals and outcomes, and assessment.* There are two kinds of problems that can plague institutions that serve gifted students. One kind is specific to the personalities, locale, and financial status of the stake—holders. Another kind of problem, misalignment, is common to many gifted programs. Unless the key factors of mission, admission, curricula, assessment, and outcomes are aligned, there will be uneven quality of services, claims of inequities, and a climate of stress on the part of stakeholders.

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204 /// Subotnik, Soller, & Hood

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