

## Reflection on Leadership

Kathleen Kennedy

*"All students will realize their unlimited potential."* Alvord Unified Schools District Promise

*"We will develop a learning environment that challenges all students to achieve excellence."* AUSD Strategic Plan, Board Adopted May 15, 2014

*"If we believe in fostering a climate in which individual differences are valued and accepted, we must include the gifted learner."* Author Unknown

Gifted and Talented Education took a back seat in the state of California about nine years ago when the State changed GATE funding from a categorical allotment to general budget expenditure. This brought the wheels of operation to a halt in many districts, including Alvord. Enrichment programs were stopped, teacher leadership was no longer compensated and staff development for the cognitive needs of students no longer took place. Additionally, in Alvord, there was a sharp decline in teachers seeking their Gate certification and an increase in those seeking CLAD certification. With the accountability movement, Professional Development turned to instructional techniques for reading and math intervention. Our neighboring school districts continued to provide funding for gifted instruction, and their programs remained visible to the community. As a result, Alvord parents began requesting transfers at an increased rate to surrounding districts.

GATE programs began changing in the State of California in the year 2000 with the amendment of the California Education Code requiring that programs be planned and organized as differentiated learning experiences within the regular school day. Alvord and many districts began omitting after school enrichment activities, homogeneously grouped classes, exploratory field trips, pull-out instruction programs and parent advisory meetings. In Alvord elementary schools, we have one school holding an after school enrichment program, and one school providing *pull-out* during the school day. All elementary schools are expected to cluster their identified GATE students in groups of 4-8 to simplify the differentiation process for the teacher, to provide like-peers for the gifted student, and to provide strong learning models for the typical student. A modified GATE program structure has been in place, but teachers were untrained in providing the required differentiation. This resulted in many stake-holders believing and expressing to the community that we "don't have a GATE program."

Recently, Alvord parents have been rallying for a return of programs for the identified gifted learner. They have responded to community surveys, held meetings with our superintendent and met with school board members seeking understanding and asking for program development. Through the LCFF process, funding for GATE has returned as a line

item to the budget. The voice of our community and the clear programmatic connections indicate that now is the time to make some changes. Beginning in January 2016, 40 Alvord teachers, coaches, instructional specialists and the GATE Coordinator were involved in a series of professional development.

The focus of the professional development was on modifying core content and differentiated curriculum to meet the needs of inner-city, urban gifted learners.” It is from this lens that our training was developed. Of key importance is the connection to ALL learners. By providing GATE instructional techniques for all students, teachers provide meaningful and successful opportunities for developing thinking skills and the depth and complexity required by the Common Core Standards. By studying the content and pedagogy designed for gifted learners, we enhance our programs, and begin to see the affiliation rather than the isolation of these instructional practices.

We have sparked a renewed interest and dialogue with our colleagues by identifying common instructional goals. When we study GATE pedagogy, we enhance the learning of all learners. Thinking skills are developed when we implement the practices that naturally lead to a “spill over” between programs. Rigorous Curriculum Design, as adopted by the Alvord school district, requires the development of strategies and concepts such as: “big idea,” “essential questions,” “depth of knowledge” and “academic language.” Gate pedagogy emphasizes these same concepts with the labels: “universal idea,” “unanswered questions,” “depth and complexity” and “language of the discipline.” The alignment between GATE standards and Common Core standards is clear, and Alvord School District is moving towards a pedagogy that develops depth and complexity for all students.

Kathleen Kennedy  
Alvord Unified School District  
Coordinator of Instructional Support Services,  
Gifted and Talented Instruction