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Applying Gifted Education Pedagogy to Total Talent Development for All Students

Joseph S. Renzulli*

Everyone has a stake in good schools because schools create and recreate a successful modern society. Unfortunately, traditional methods of schooling can fail to bring about schools as places for developing the broadest and richest experiences imaginable for creating talent in the young. The field of gifted education has been a true laboratory for the many innovations that have subsequently become mainstays of the American educational system. The Schoolwide Enrichment Model comprises strategies for increasing student effort, enjoyment, and performance, and for integrating a range of advanced-level learning experiences and thinking skills into all curricular areas. Every school has students within it who possess the highest potential for advanced-level learning, creative problem solving, and the motivation to pursue rigorous and rewarding work. Rather than merely being sources for the acquisition of information, schools can and should be places for developing the talents of all students.

The Achilles heel of gifted education has been its inability to adequately include children who do not fall into the nice, neat stereotype of good test takers and lesson learners—ethnic minorities, underachievers, children who live in poverty, and young people who show their potential in nontraditional ways. And yet, the field of gifted education has been a true laboratory for many of the innovations that have subsequently become mainstays of general education in American public schools. In many respects, special programs of almost any type have presented ideal opportunities for testing new ideas and experimenting with potential solutions to long-standing educational problems. Programs for high-potential students have been an especially fertile place for experimentation because such programs usually are not encumbered by prescribed curriculum guides or traditional methods of instruction. It was within the context of these programs that the thinking skills movement first took hold in American education, and the pioneering work of notable theorists such as Drs. Benjamin Bloom, Howard Gardner, and Robert Sternberg first gained the attention of the education community. Other developments that had their origins in special programs are currently being examined for general practice. These developments include (a) a focus on concept rather than skill learning, (b) the use of interdisciplinary curriculum and theme-based studies, (c) student portfolios, (d) performance assessment, (e) cross-grade grouping, (f) alternative scheduling patterns, and (g) perhaps most important, opportunities for students to exchange traditional roles as lesson-learners and doers-of-exercises for more challenging and demanding roles that require hands-on learning, first-hand investigations, and the *application* of knowledge and thinking skills to complex problems.

* Joseph S. Renzulli is the Director of The National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented at the University of Connecticut.

Research opportunities in a variety of special programs allowed my colleagues and I to develop instructional procedures and programming alternatives that emphasize the need to (a) provide a broad range of advanced-level enrichment experiences for *all* students, and (b) use the many and varied ways that students respond to these experiences as stepping stones for relevant follow-up on the parts of individuals or small groups. This approach is not viewed as a new way to identify who is or is not gifted. Rather, the process simply identifies how subsequent *opportunities, resources, and encouragement* can be provided to support continuous escalations of student involvement in both required and self-selected activities. This approach to the development of high levels of multiple potentials in young people is purposefully designed to sidestep the traditional practice of labeling some students *gifted* (and by implication, relegating all others to the category of nongifted). The term *gifted* is used in our lexicon only as an adjective, and even then, it is used as a developmental perspective. Thus, for example, we speak and write about the development of gifted behaviors in specific areas of learning and human expression rather than giftedness as a state of being. If we use the g-word, it is to label the service rather than the student. This orientation has allowed many special-needs students opportunities to develop high levels of creative and productive accomplishments that otherwise would have been denied through traditional special program models.

The good news is that practices that have been a mainstay of many special programs for the gifted are being absorbed into general education by reform models designed to upgrade the performance of all students. This integration of gifted program know-how is viewed as a favorable development for two reasons. First, the adoption of many special program practices is indicative of the viability and usefulness of both the know-how of special programs and the role enrichment specialists can and should play in total school improvement. It is no secret that compensatory education in the United States has largely been a failure (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004; Wirt et al., 2003). An overemphasis on remedial and mastery models has lowered the challenge level of the very population that programs such as Title I attempt to serve. Second, *all* students should have opportunities to develop higher order thinking skills and to pursue more rigorous content and first-hand investigative activities than those typically found in today's dumbed-down textbooks. Leon Lederman, Nobel Prize winner, testified before the House Committee on Education and the Workforce in 2000. He stated that children trained in the hands-on inquiry methods not only learn science, but they experience the joy of learning. They even do better on their reading skills (Lederman, 2000).

As a scholar-researcher, I have seen a teacher in one of our inner-city schools in Chicago bring her class to instant attention by threatening them: "If you kids don't settle down, we won't do science!" The ways in which students respond to enriched learning experiences should be used as a rationale for providing all students with advanced-level follow-up opportunities. This approach reflects a democratic ideal that accommodates the full range of individual differences in the entire student population, and it opens the door to programming models that develop the talent potentials of many at-risk students who traditionally have been excluded from anything but the most basic types of curricular experiences.

The application of gifted program know-how into general education is supported by a wide variety of research on human abilities by Bloom (1985), Gardner (1983; Gardner & Walter, 2002), Renzulli (1978, 1999), and Sternberg (1984, 2000). This research clearly and

unequivocally provides a justification for much broader conceptions of talent development. These conceptions argue against the restrictive student selection practices that guided identification procedures in the past. Lay persons and professionals at all levels have begun to question the efficacy of programs that rely on IQ scores and other cognitive ability measures as the primary methods for identifying which students can benefit from differentiated services (National Association for Gifted Children, 1997). Traditional identification procedures have restricted services to small numbers of high-scoring students and excluded large numbers of at-risk students.

Special services should be viewed as opportunities to develop gifted behaviors rather than merely finding and certifying them. In this regard, we should judiciously avoid saying that a young person is either gifted or not gifted. It is difficult to gain support for talent development when our rationale includes such statements as "Elaine is a gifted third grader." These kinds of statements offend many people and raise the accusations of elitism that have plagued special programs. But, note the difference in orientation when we focus on the behavioral characteristics that brought this student to our attention in the first place: "Elaine is a third grader who reads at the adult level and who has a fascination for biographies about women of scientific accomplishment." And, note the logical and justifiable services provided for Elaine. Under the guidance of her classroom teacher, Elaine is allowed to select more challenging books in her interest area; she leaves the school two afternoons a month to meet with her mentor, a local journalist specializing in gender issues; and during time made available through curriculum compacting in her strength areas (i.e., reading, language arts, and spelling), the Schoolwide Enrichment Teaching Specialist helps Elaine prepare a questionnaire and interview schedule to be used with local female scientists. Could even the staunchest anti-gifted proponent argue against the logic or the appropriateness of these services?

Young people display, or have the potential to display, their individuality and uniqueness in many ways. Some students learn at faster rates and higher levels of comprehension than others. Sometimes, this learning may be in one or two content areas and, in other cases, it may be across the entire curriculum. Similarly, some students are more creative or artistic than others, and still others may demonstrate potential for excellence in leadership, organizational skills, or interpersonal relations. A total talent development model should give special consideration to schools that serve young people who may be at risk because of limited English proficiency, economically limited circumstances, or attendance in poor quality schools. I believe it is in these schools and among these student populations that extraordinary, indeed heroic, efforts should be made to identify and cultivate the high-level talents of young people, talents that historically have gone unrecognized and underdeveloped.

What Is Schoolwide Enrichment?

In this article, I describe a plan that has demonstrated its effectiveness in bringing about significant changes in schooling. That plan, the Schoolwide Enrichment Model, is a systematic set of specific strategies for increasing student effort, enjoyment, and performance, and for integrating a broad range of advanced-level learning experiences and higher order thinking skills into any curricular area, course of study, or pattern of school organization. The Schoolwide Enrichment Model is based on the broadened conception of giftedness discussed earlier. This

definition focuses on the many kinds of aptitudes, talents, and potentials for advanced learning and creative productivity that exist in all school populations. The goal is not to certify some students as gifted and others as nongifted but rather to provide every student with the opportunities, resources, and encouragement necessary to achieve his or her maximum potential, to support continuous escalations of student involvement in both required and self-selected activities. In the Schoolwide Enrichment Model, the language of the model is that of *labeling the services, not the student.* The general approach of the Schoolwide Enrichment Model is one of infusing more effective practices into *existing* school structures. When programs focus on developing the behavioral potentials of individuals or small groups who share common interests, we can avoid the controversies surrounding the g-word by labeling the services rather than the students. Through the use of the Schoolwide Enrichment Model, we can serve both traditionally high-achieving students like Elaine, and students who show their talents in a variety of other ways. A detailed description of the model is beyond the scope of this article. However, the essence of the plan is based on a thorough assessment of students' strengths through a vehicle called the Total Talent Portfolio, and a broad continuum of services purposefully designed to capitalize on various strengths. Interested readers can obtain descriptive information about the Schoolwide Enrichment Model in Renzulli and Reis (I 994, 1997).

Schoolwide Enrichment and Educational Reform

Most efforts to make major changes in schooling have failed. Although there is endless speculation about why schools are so resistant to change, most theorists and policymakers have concluded that tinkering with single components of a complex system will give only the appearance of school improvement rather than the real and lasting change so desperately sought by educational leaders (Schmoker, 2004). Examples of single-component tinkering are familiar to most educators. Creating more rigorous curriculum standards, for example, without providing improved curricular materials and teachers able to use the materials effectively, negates any potential value that new standards may have for improving academic performance. Similarly, single-component tinkering designed to force change in classrooms (e.g., high-stakes testing) may create the illusion of improved achievement, but the reality is increased pressure on schools to expand the use of compensatory learning models that, so far, have contributed only to the dumbing down of curriculum and the lowering of academic standards. Teacher empowerment, school-based management, an extended school day and year, and revised teacher certification requirements are merely apparitions of change when state or central office regulations prescribe the curriculum by using tests that will determine whether schools get high marks for better performance.

How, then, do we establish an effective change process—one that overcomes the long record of failed attempts? The leverage for meaningful change depends on breaking two mindsets: (a) one person or single group knows the right answer, and (b) change is linear. The only reasonable solution is to develop a process whereby the adoption of policy and the adoption of practice proceed simultaneously! Policymakers and practitioners need to collaborate, during all phases of the change process by examining local capacity and motivation in conjunction with the desired changes. Thus, neither policymakers nor practitioners, by themselves, can reform schools; instead, both must come together to shape a vision and develop the procedures that will

be needed to realize and sustain that vision. Senge (1990) compares "visioneering" to the hologram, a three-dimensional image created by interacting light sources:

> When a group of people come to share a vision ... each sees his or her own picture. Each vision represents the whole image from a different point of view. When you add up the pieces of the hologram, the image does not change fundamentally, but rather becomes more intense, more lifelike, more real in the sense that people can truly imagine achieving it. The vision no longer rests on the shoulders of one person [or one group], but is shared and embodies the passion and commitment of all participants. (p. 312)

The Schoolwide Enrichment Model has been developed around a shared vision that my colleagues in The Neag Center for Gifted Education and Talent Development at the University of Connecticut and I have had for a number of years. This vision is also embraced by thousands of teachers, school counselors, and administrators with whom we have worked in academic programs and summer institutes that date back to the 1970s. Simply stated, this vision is that schools are places for talent development. Academic achievement is an important part of the vision and the model for school improvement described in the book; however, we also believe a focus on talent development places the need for improved academic achievement into a larger perspective about the goals of education. The things that have made our nation great and our society one of the most productive in the world are manifestations of talent development at all levels of human productivity. From the creators and inventors of new ideas, products, and art forms, to the vast array of people who manufacture, advertise, and market the creations that improve and enrich our lives, there are levels of excellence and quality that contribute to our standard of living and way of life.

This vision of schools for talent development is based on the belief that *everyone* has an important role to play in societal improvement, and that everyone's role can be enhanced if we provide all students with opportunities, resources, and encouragement to aspire to the highest level of talent development humanly possible. Rewarding lives are a function of ways we use individual potentials in productive ways. Accordingly, the Schoolwide Enrichment Model is a practical plan for making our vision of schools for talent development a reality. We are not naive about the politics, personalities, and financial issues that often supersede the pedagogical goals that are the focus of the model. At the same time, we have seen this vision manifested in schools ranging from hard-core urban areas and isolated and frequently poor rural areas to affluent suburbs and combinations thereof. We believe that the strategies are flexible enough for making any school a place for talent development.

There are no quick fixes or easy formulas for transforming schools into places where talent development is valued and vigorously pursued. Our experience has shown, however, that once the concept of talent development catches on, students, parents, teachers, and administrators begin to view their school in a different way. Students become more excited and engaged in what they are learning; parents find more opportunities to become involved in all aspects of their children's learning, rather than only in around-the-edges activities; teachers begin to find and use a variety of resources that, until now, seldom found their way into classrooms; and administrators start to make decisions that affect learning rather than merely enforcing tight-ship efficiency.

Everyone has a stake in schools that provide all of our young people with a high-quality education. Everyone has a stake in good schools because schools create and recreate a successful modem society. Although everyone has a stake in good schools, America has been faced with a school problem that has resulted in declining confidence in schools and the people who work in them, drastic limitations in the amount of financial support for education, and general public apathy or dissatisfaction with the quality of education our young people are receiving. A great deal has been written about America's school problem, and studies, commissions, reports, and even a Governor's Summit Conference have been initiated to generate solutions to problems facing our schools. However, the hundreds if not thousands of conferences, commissions, and meetings, and the tons of reports, proclamations, and lists of goals, have yielded minimal results, mainly because they generally focused on tinkering with traditional methods of schooling.

Three Key Ingredients of School Improvement

If the traditional methods of schooling have failed to bring about substantial changes, we must look to different models that show promise of achieving the types of school improvement we so desperately need. New models must focus their attention on three major dimensions of schooling—the act of learning, the use of time, and the change process itself.

Focus on the Act of Learning

School improvement must begin by placing the act of learning at the center of the change process. Organizational and administrative structures, such as vouchers, site-based management, school choice, multi-aged classes, parent involvement, and extended school days, are important considerations, but they do not address *directly* the crucial question of how we can improve what happens in classrooms where teachers, students, and curriculum interact with one another. One of the things we have done in developing the Schoolwide Enrichment Model is to base all recommendations for school improvement on the learning process. It is beyond the scope of this summary to explain all components of the act of learning, but a figural representation of the learning process is depicted in Figure l. The Learner Circle highlights important components that students bring to the act of learning. Thus, when examining the learner we must take into consideration: (a) present achievement levels in each area of study, (b) the learner's interest in particular topics and the ways in which we can enhance present interests or develop new interests, and (c) the preferred styles of learning that will improve the learner's motivation to pursue the material that is being studied. Likewise, the teacher and learner dimensions have sub-components that must be considered when we place the act of learning at the center of the school improvement process (Renzulli, 1992).

The Use of Time

Although it would be interesting to speculate about why schools have changed so little over the centuries, at least part of the reason has been our unwillingness to examine critically the issue of school time. If the ways we currently use school time were producing remarkably positive or even adequate results, there might be an argument for maintaining the traditional schedule and calendar. But such is not the case.

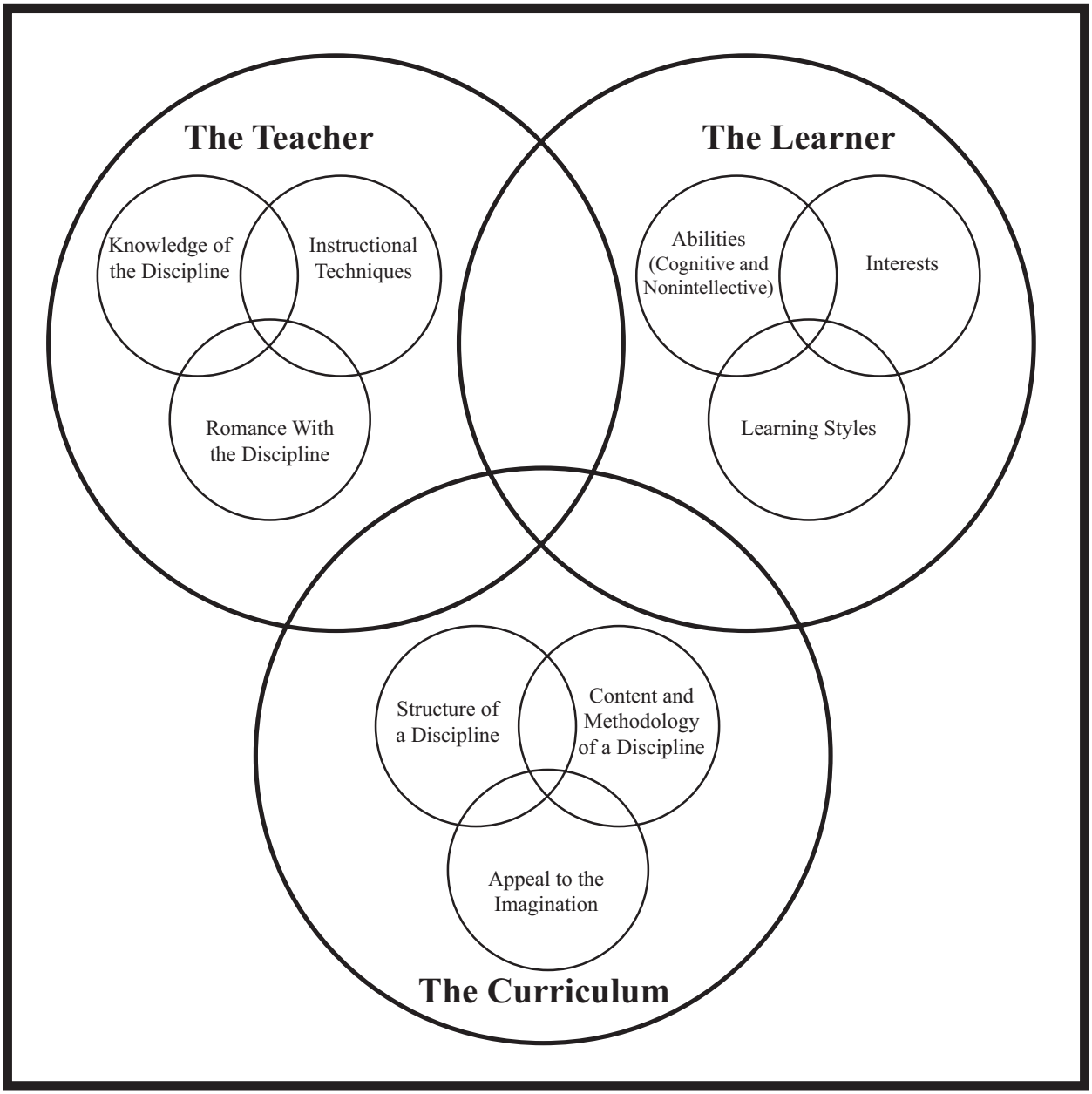

Figure 1. Figural representation of the act of learning.

A universal pattern of school organization that has emerged over the years has contributed to our inability to make even the smallest changes in the overall process of learning. Our uncontested acceptance of the elementary and secondary school schedule causes us to lose sight of the fact that it is based on a fundamental flaw in education design: the assumption that learning is regulated by the clock and defined by an annual calendar (Jones & Schwartz, 1994). In dealing with current reality, however, the Schoolwide Enrichment Model proposes a number of alternative scheduling patterns based on selectively borrowing one or two class meetings per month from the major subject areas. This approach guarantees that a designated time will be available each week for advanced-level enrichment clusters.

A Gentle and Evolutionary (But Realistic) Approach to School Improvement

The approach to school improvement being recommended in this model is realistic because it focuses on those aspects of learning and development over which schools have the most influence and, therefore, the highest probability of achieving success. We believe that school improvement can be initiated and built on through gentle and evolutionary strategies for change. These strategies must first and foremost concentrate on the act of learning as represented by the interactions that take place between and among learners, teachers, and the curriculum. In the early stages of the change process, these strategies should make minimal but specific suggestions for change in existing schedules, textbook usage, and curricular conventions. And, these strategies should be based on practices that have already demonstrated favorable results in places where they have been used for reasonable periods of time and with groups from varying ethnic and economic backgrounds. We also believe that the individual school building is the unit-of-change for addressing school improvement, and that effective and lasting change can only occur when it is initiated, nurtured, and monitored from within the school itself. A simple but sincere waiver of top-down regulations; a plan that involves consensus and shared decision making on the parts of administrators, parents, teachers, and school counselors; and incentives for specific contributions to the change process are the starting points and the only big decisions policymakers need to make to initiate a gentle and evolutionary school improvement process.

Our goal in the Schoolwide Enrichment Model is not to replace existing school structures, but rather to apply the strategies and services that define the model to improve the structures to which schools have already made a commitment. We view this process as an infusion rather than an add-on or replacement approach to school improvement. The main targets of the process are those factors that have a direct bearing on the act of learning. Evaluations of Schoolwide Enrichment Model programs have indicated that the model is systematic, inexpensive to implement, and practical in a common-sense sort of way that makes it appealing to both professionals and lay persons (Olenchak & Renzulli, 1989).

How to Start a School Improvement Process

As is always the case with any change initiative, a person or small group becomes interested in something they believe will be good for their school. It is my hope that the persons reading this article and the full-length referenced materials will fulfill this role. If this happens, the following series of actions are recommended for examining and implementing the model.

The principal and representatives of groups in the nuclear family should form a steering committee. There are only three guidelines for the steering committee as it embarks on a process for *exploring* the plan presented in this model (the word exploring is emphasized because consensus must be reached at each step of the process for the plan to work.). First, all steering committee members should be provided with information about the Schoolwide Enrichment Model so that they are well informed and can engage in an intelligent discussion and debate about whether or not they are interested in the plan. All steering committee members should have equal rights and opportunities to express their opinions. If a majority decision is reached to recommend the plan to the school community at large, information should be made available to all faculty and parents. Older students (middle grades and above) should also be asked to participate in the discussions.

Second, the steering committee should arrange a series of discussion-group meetings that are open to and include members of all subgroups in the school's nuclear family. In setting up the discussion groups, it is important to avoid separate parent groups, teacher groups, and administrator groups. Grouping by role is a classic error that has plagued understanding and communication in the school community, and it is the main contributor to the us-and-them mentality that pits one group against another. Printed information, key diagrams and charts, and the results of steering committee deliberations should be brought to the attention of the discussion groups. The discussion groups should elect a chairperson and recorder, they should remain intact for the duration of the examination process, and they should set a mutually acceptable schedule of meeting dates and times. The meetings should continue until everyone has had a chance to express his or her opinions, after which a vote should be taken as to whether or not to proceed with the plan. Voting results from each discussion group should be reported to the steering committee, and a report of all the votes should be issued to the nuclear school family. The report should also contain each group's suggestions and concerns. If at least two-thirds of the persons voting express an interest in going ahead with the plan, the steering committee should make arrangements to meet with the superintendent or appropriate central office personnel. Once again, descriptive material about the model should be provided, and the model characterized as a pilot or experimental venture. Assurances should be given that there is no intention to replace any of the programs or initiatives that the district has already adopted. The fastest way to get a polite but firm rejection from the central office is to threaten existing programs or policies to which decision makers already have made a commitment. It is worth repeating that our goal is to *infuse* exemplary learning and teaching opportunities into the existing school frameworks.

A third guideline is concerned with strategies for overcoming roadblocks that might occur during one of the stages of the examination process. Any plan for school change is a lightning rod for naysayers, self-proclaimed experts, and people who are reluctant to endorse almost anything involving thinking or doing something differently. The problem is an especially sticky one if these persons occupy positions of authority or informal status in the school community, or if they are particularly adept at creating negative energy that is not easily overcome. Such persons, like all others, should have an opportunity to express their opinions in a democratic process. However, for a majority opinion to be the deciding factor in determining whether or not the model is adopted, it may be necessary to pursue strategies that ensure majority rule.

What's in it for Me?

Although everyone has a stake in good schools, it would be naive to assume that already overburdened professionals, or parents who have historically had a limited impact on school change, will make a commitment to a new initiative which requires time, energy, and participation in activities that are a departure from the status quo. Each person examining the Schoolwide Enrichment Model should ask himself or herself: What is in it for me? What will I have to do? What will I have to give or give up? And, what will I get out of it? Policymakers and administrators should examine these questions with an eye toward the kinds of public support necessary for adequate and perhaps even generous financial commitments to public education. The tide of criticism that is constantly being directed toward our schools has taken its toll in the

extent to which the public is willing to pay for public education, and it has also resulted in low morale at all levels of the profession. Education is rapidly becoming a profession without an ego because of this criticism. Schools in other nations are constantly being held up to us as mirrors for pointing out our own inadequacies; hardly a month passes without someone writing yet another article or news story about the crisis in educational leadership. It would be nice to think that some magical force will save us, but the reality is that leadership for better schools can come only from people who are responsible for schools at the local level.

More than any other group, teachers will have to ask themselves these hard questions. Almost every teacher has, or at one time had, an idea about what good teaching is all about. And, yet, it is not an exaggeration to say that most teachers are dissatisfied with their work and with the regulations and regimentation imposed on their classrooms (Plitt, 2004). We still, however, must raise the questions: Are there benefits for teachers who are willing to take on the challenge of variations in traditional practice? And, can we avoid the cynicism, frustration, and burnout that seem to be so pervasive in the profession? The Schoolwide Enrichment Model is designed to provide opportunities for a better brand of teaching through the application of more engaging teaching practices.

Finally, parents must examine these questions with an eye toward the kind of education they want for their sons and daughters. The Schoolwide Enrichment Model is not intended to replace the schools' focus on traditional academic achievement, but it does emphasize the development of a broader spectrum of the multiple potentials of young people. Schools do not need to be places to which so many of our young people dread going. However, to make schools more enjoyable places, parents must have an understanding of and commitment to an education that goes beyond the regimentation and drill that is designed only to "get the scores up." Schools are places for developing the broadest and richest experiences imaginable for young people. The atmosphere is favorable for a broader application of the strategies and techniques that originated in special programs, and they can serve as a basis for making all schools laboratories for talent development.

Dr. Leon Lederman, the Nobel Prize winning physicist, said in 1990,

> Once upon a time, America sheltered an Einstein, went to the Moon, and gave the world the laser, electronic computer, nylons, television, and the cure for polio. Today, we are in the process, albeit unwittingly, of abandoning this leadership role (Berger, 1994).

Every school and classroom in this country has in it young people who are capable of continuing this remarkable tradition. However, the tradition will not survive without a national resolve to invest in developing the talent potentials of *all* of our young people. Every school has within it students who possess the highest potential for advanced-level learning, creative problem solving, and the motivation to pursue rigorous and rewarding work. It is time to view schools as places that go beyond the acquisition of information that will make us look good on tests—*schools are places for developing the talents of all students.*

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