

Rural Communities Test Ways to Hook Gifted Students

Identifying and Supporting Gifted Students in Rural Districts



By **Sarah D. Sparks**

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Carroll County, Va.

[← Back to Story](#)

Sometimes, the only thing harder for Shanda Sinnett than finding academically bright students in her rural Virginia schools is figuring out how to keep them engaged in their communities as they grow.

"We want to teach them to appreciate where we are and what we have here in the county, but also to go off to college," said Sinnett, the gifted education coordinator for the Carroll County public schools. "If they went to college, then came back and started a business, that would be ideal."

Each week, Sinnett rides circuit through 14 classes at seven elementary schools nestled among the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains. Like many rural districts, the 3,800-student Carroll County system has struggled to find and support its academically advanced students, as well as nurture students' entrepreneurial spirit in a community where the median family income is less than \$37,000. But for the past two years, the district has gotten a leg up in finding and engaging gifted children through Promoting PLACE— for Place, Literacy, Achievement, Community, and Engagement, an ongoing research project to improve rural gifted education.

One of the goals of Promoting PLACE is to help bright students think about challenging professional jobs needed in their own towns; in agriculture and education, yes, but also in environmental science and advanced manufacturing, two areas where the community is trying to build its businesses. Sinnett and colleagues in a dozen Virginia and Kentucky districts weave local history, art, economy, and environment into rigorous academic projects that get elementary students engaged in their communities and thinking of

ways to build their future there. In the process, the gifted educators also help fellow teachers look beyond stereotypes of giftedness to find promising students.

'Living Resources' for Education

Smaller districts often struggle to support gifted education. A 2015 study in the *Journal for the Education of the Gifted* looked at gifted education in more than 1,000 school districts in Texas. It found that compared with districts located in cities, suburbs, and towns, rural districts dedicated a significantly smaller percentage of their budgets to gifted education, spent significantly less per gifted student, and had the smallest percentage of gifted education teachers. Basically, the higher the poverty level in the district, the less money dedicated to identifying and serving gifted students.

For example, when the PLACE project launched in 2014, Fairfax County, a large district in the Virginia suburbs of Washington, provided \$10.6 million, or more than \$241 per student, for its gifted education program, more than twice Carroll County's per-student spending for gifted education.

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Yet if there is less overall money for gifted services, the rural schools consider themselves rich in history and culture, as well as a supply of local adults willing to help students. "We have a lot of small museums and living resources here; I lean heavily on those," Sinnett said. For instance, the courthouse in Hillsville still sports bullet holes from a famous shootout in the 1800s, while down the road, the town of Austin, Va., lays claim to being the birthplace of Stephen Austin, the "father of Texas."

The PLACE districts use a common gifted education framework developed by the National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented at the University of Connecticut. Co-investigators of the project, Carolyn Callahan, an education professor at the University of Virginia, and Amy Price Azano, an assistant education professor at Virginia Tech, surveyed educators in all of the participating districts in Kentucky and Virginia about local folklore, history, and landmarks, as well as the businesses and resources available and how connected the community is to other areas. The results were used to tweak curriculum plans for local contexts, as *Education Week* wrote about two years ago when the project was in development.

"We're finding the kids in the program are doing better. Their language development has been noticeably better, and the kids loved doing things we wouldn't have predicted," Callahan said, such as writing poems personalizing the "so much depends upon" theme of William Carlos Williams' poem "The Red Wheelbarrow" by finding easily overlooked items upon which their own communities depended. "Who would have thought 3rd graders would be saying, 'Can we write poetry today?'"

One day in October, a handful of 3rd graders at Laurel Elementary in Hillsville worked out how to lay out a research project for the semester.

"If you are trying to answer a question, where would you go to find information?" Sinnett asked.

"Google!" piped up one boy, Colby. "The library," added Lucas, sitting across from him.

Sinnett gently prodded the group to think of more immediate sources—people they know, experts they can find at local businesses and colleges, data they could collect themselves. The students talked about how to choose "thick," multifaceted problems to study, rather than "thin" questions involving easily searchable questions.

For example, Colby, a 4th grader, initially wanted to study where fresh water comes from. Sinnett expanded the conversation to the class: "Have you heard your parents, your grandparents talk about the watershed and the fertilizers and pesticides rolling down from the cabbage farms?"

Colby perked up. "A place I like to go a lot, it flooded recently, and a lot of the fish that need fresh water can't survive with the stuff that washed in," he said. Over the course of the class, his research idea evolved into a project to look at how pollutants enter and leave local streams as they work their way down the mountain.

At the end of each semester, Sinnett's gifted students do presentations of their research projects for parents and teachers. The demonstrations help bolster Sinnett's professional development for teachers, by countering some teachers' skepticism about the children's abilities.

"I get questioned quite a bit by classroom teachers," Sinnett said. "I'll say, 'Yes, this student has been identified by [testing],' and the teacher will say, 'But in my class, he seems to have the symptoms of attention deficit disorder.' ... So because of those factors, because of seeing students come in either [English-learners], high poverty, or with ADHD characteristics, we're now looking at our students and our testing differently. We don't just go by the cutoff; we're looking at these children more holistically."

Virginia does not require or pay for universal screening for entry into gifted programs, and before joining the PLACE project, Carroll County relied on teachers to refer students for testing. But that often left out students.

"Giftedness looks different in different communities," Callahan said. "We had a child reading manuals for machines, things that are adult-level advanced. We're trying to elicit those stories from students, getting away from just looking at the kids who love *Harry Potter*."

'What It Means to Be Gifted'

The PLACE project paid to screen all 2nd graders in participating districts using the Cognitive Abilities Test-Verbal, a gifted education assessment. A teacher behavioral-rating tool also identified students performing above the norms for the nation, district, or even the class. While many gifted education programs have a cutoff score for students at the top 5 percent to 10 percent of all test-takers, Azano, the project's co-investigator, identified the top 25 percent of Carroll County 2nd graders as eligible for gifted services in 3rd and 4th grades.

A recent study in the journal *Global Education Review* found in the first two years of the project, the additional screening more than doubled the number of academically promising students identified in 10 pilot districts from 124 to 254. In Carroll County, the additional screening boosted the size of the district's gifted education program from a single 2nd grade student to 36 in grades 2 to 4.

Sinnett hopes to persuade the district to increase support for identifying and serving more students. "If we can show these additional kids can keep up with the ones traditionally identified, we can show the opportunity gap and hopefully get more support" from the school board, she said.

Some of the students identified for PLACE in the past two years, Azano said, ultimately performed at the 98th and 99th percentiles nationally on standardized assessments, but had never before been referred for testing; one was "radically shy," a few others came from homes with drug problems and often missed school.

"We try to get schools to look at patterns of need, patterns of testing or growth or leadership, not just recommending based on a cutoff," Azano said. After a year in which students identified in that way at times

outperformed students identified by the districts on their own, she said, "We are seeing a paradigm shift in the staff. There's been some mindset growth for the districts, not just the kids, on what it means to be gifted."

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