Press Clippings 03-16-21

---Daily Herald---03/16/2021

Elgin expands STEM internships to include high schoolers

By: Rick West

Chris Nawrot started as a geographic information systems intern with the city of Elgin five years ago and was hired as a full-time GIS specialist a year ago. The city is expanding its STEM-related internship program this year to include 10 new positions for high school juniors and seniors. *Rick West | Staff Photographer*

It's not a stretch to say that an internship with the city of Elgin changed the course of Chris Nawrot's career.

Nawrot was a student at Elgin Community College five years ago, working toward an associate degree in engineering science, when his adviser sent out an email blast about a GIS internship with the city.

Nawrot was interested, but had a question.

"I was like, 'what's GIS?'," Nawrot said. After some research into geographic information systems, he decided it looked "pretty interesting" and applied.

Four years of interning later, Nawrot is nearly finished with college courses at Northern Illinois University and has been employed as a full-time GIS specialist with the city for more than a year.

"I was able to use the skills I had already learned in engineering and apply it to something else that I didn't even know existed before," Nawrot said. "I was happy when I got the internship and I'm very happy now. Everything worked out."

The GIS internship that shaped Nawrot's path is now part of a new science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) internship initiative by Elgin geared toward college and high school students.

"The city recognizes the importance of developing a high-quality workforce and the key role that local governments play in preparing its community for careers in STEM fields," said human resources director Gail Cohen. "We have many STEM professions, and this is an opportunity to provide rich learning experiences for local youth, as well as add new talent to our various departments."

Elgin has offered internships in engineering, information technology systems (ITS) and GIS previously, but the new program expands the base to other STEM positions and creates 10 new internships for high school juniors and seniors. The idea was pitched during early discussions on

the 2021 budget. The new program was included in the budget using existing funding, with the new high school internships costing about $33,000 plus payroll taxes.

The 10 summer high school internships will open to applicants by early April. The program is open to students who are residents of Elgin and are interested in a STEM career with the city's ITS, police, water, parks, engineering and fire departments.

Those interns will work 30 hours a week from June 7 to Aug. 13. All internships are paid positions.

The city will continue its summer youth employment program that previously hired 10 high school students, but that program will now be limited to six students.

Elgin also is looking for college students for engineering, ITS and GIS internships. And, there is an ITS fellowship position for applicants with a bachelor's degree or equivalent combination of experience, and an opening for a licensed environmental health professional apprentice.

Elgin's chief technology officer Jeff Massey said that as all facets of the city become more technology dependent, it's important to prepare the young members of the community who will be the future workforce.

"Having high school and college-aged interns provides a dual benefit," Massey said. "Interns provide the city with fresh perspectives and eager minds to help implement projects, and the city also trains interns in specific skills that help them launch successful careers."

Gillespie said the city will promote these opportunities during the U-46 Annual STEM Expo and the Gail Borden Public Library job fair.

---KQED---03/16/2021

How a School District Proved Gifted Programs Can Be Racially Diverse

By: Danielle Dreilinger

Albuquerque students' artwork and a poem about volcanoes, displayed at the 2019 National Association for Gifted Children conference. *(Danielle Dreilinger for The Hechinger Report)*

April Wells grew up west of Chicago, a bright and avid bookworm in a low-income family. Her district, U-46, had gifted classes, but most of the students in them were white, and no one suggested that Wells, who is Black, might benefit from them.

Until middle school, when a U-46 administrator — Wells' friend's mother, also Black — noticed that April's grasp exceeded her classes' reach. She coached Wells on how to talk with her middle school counselor. Wells spoke up for herself and got into honors classes, where she remained through high school.

"I didn't magically become gifted," Wells said. "There was simply someone who had an ability to see my talents and provided a platform."

Wells went on to college, became a teacher specializing in gifted education and eventually took on the gifted coordinator role for her hometown school district, aiming to give more students the opportunities she almost missed. "It would be the equivalent of education malpractice to have a gifted program that does not look like the students we serve," she wrote in a book last year about how to make gifted education racially fair.

Defined that way, "education malpractice" describes almost every gifted classroom across the United States. Including, until recently, those in U-46.

Gifted education has been trying to solve its racism problem for years. The National Association for Gifted Children, or NAGC, reaffirmed its commitment to the issue after the Black Lives Matter protests. The group pledged to review all its policies to prioritize equity.

Yet diversification efforts have borne little fruit. After analyzing the newest U.S. Education Department civil rights data, University of Wisconsin-Whitewater professor Scott Peters found that on a state level "equity got worse" in gifted education from 2016 to 2018, with underrepresentation of Hispanic children in a majority of states and of Black students in three-quarters of states, he wrote in an email.

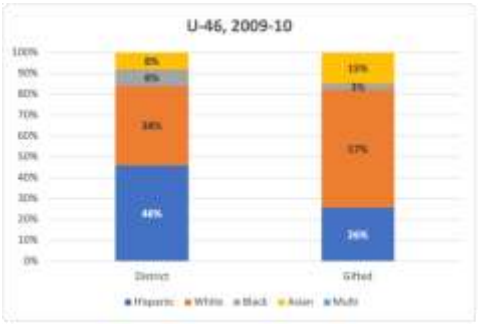
U-46 is a bright point, a sign that change can happen. West of Chicago, it is Illinois' second-largest district, with about 40,000 students. In 2009, Hispanic students made up 46 percent of the student body but just 26 percent of gifted students, according to federal data, whereas white students were about 20 points in the opposite direction, comprising 38 percent of the district but 57 percent of gifted students. By 2017-18, the most recent data available, the district was 54 percent Hispanic — and its gifted classes were 48 percent Hispanic. The percentage of white gifted students, 25, was actually a hair lower than their representation in the district.

What happened between 2009 and 2018? Hispanic parents sued, and a federal court decree gave Wells a cudgel.

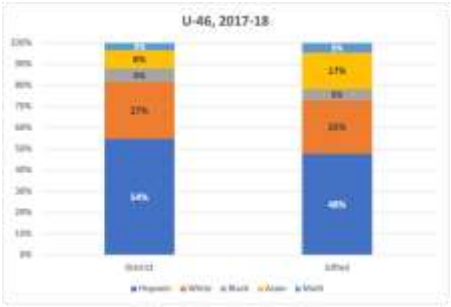
The National Association for Gifted Children has made a point of working on racial diversity. In this poster, the association highlights the fact that traditional methods of finding gifted children often miss children who are low-income, nonwhite or do not speak English at home. *(Danielle Dreilinger for The Hechinger Report)*

Several Hispanic and Black families, represented by the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund, filed a federal class-action suit in 2005 that accused the district of discriminating against Hispanic students in school assignments, school closures and ELL services. They later added gifted education to the list of alleged discriminatory practices.

At that time, students had to be invited to apply for the gifted classes, come to school on a Saturday morning to take an achievement test that favored children with strong verbal skills and score in the top 8 percent of that test to gain entry, according to legal filings. In the 2006-07 school year, only five of the 231 students who entered the program were Hispanic, and only two were Black.



Data source: U.S. Department of Education Civil Rights Data Collection



Data source: U.S. Department of Education Civil Rights Data Collection

However, U-46 created a separate, 100 percent Hispanic, elementary program that allowed those students to study the gifted curriculum. That program was bilingual, with different entrance requirements, including an achievement test given in Spanish. The district said that these students weren't fluent enough in English to succeed in ordinary gifted ed — even though none qualified as an English language learner.

Then-superintendent José Torres had not designed the bilingual gifted program, but he thought it was a great strategy to give Latino students access to advanced work. He grew up in a Spanish-speaking home, and "was in a special-ed classroom because I didn't speak English," he said.

The lawsuit dragged on for eight years and included a 27-day trial. Judge Robert Gettleman, a Clinton appointee, didn't buy the district's contention that the Hispanic students needed a separate class. He ruled that the gifted program was discriminatory. "Segregating public school children on the basis of race or ethnicity is inherently suspect," he wrote in his 2013 decision. He ordered the district to make its gifted admissions policies fair to students of all races and eliminate the separate class for Hispanic kids. If a child needed language support, he said, put them in the general gifted class with language support.

The district settled without admitting guilt, paying the plaintiffs $2.5 million for legal costs, according to legal filings, and signed an agreement to follow through on the judge's orders.

The case was the biggest legal development for gifted education in a generation, NAGC board president Jonathan Plucker says. Gettleman's decision "sent shock waves through the field, because everyone thought these types of programs were the right thing to do to try to address equity problems," Plucker, who is white, said of the bilingual gifted program.

Torres felt disgruntled about the lawsuit — gifted education in his district, he pointed out, was no more racially segregated than "99 percent of all districts." However, he saw the legal challenge as an opportunity to make real change. He said that "there's always resistance from what I call the elite … who think that gifted children look a particular way." He hired Wells to overhaul the gifted program in November 2012 even before the judge issued his ruling. In fact, Wells helped write the legal settlement, hoping that it would begin to address not only the symptoms of inequality, but also the cause: centuries of white supremacy. Even well-meaning teachers had "thought patterns, values, and beliefs that interfere with identifying and serving diverse learners in gifted education," she wrote in her book.

Nothing was wrong with the kids, in other words. The problem was with the system. And it required a multifaceted solution.

The district stripped away the barriers to entry that favored families with money and know-how. Now, rather than making parents apply, the district considers every third and sixth grader for gifted classes. Students take the CogAT, a cognitive abilities test that measures reasoning ability, during the school day, so that parents don't have to bring their children in on a weekend. The district triangulates those results with scores from the popular Measure of Academic Progress achievement test and a teacher checklist the Teacher Inventory of Learning Strengths, and students are evaluated against other kids in their school, not the entire district or a national sample that's heavy on privileged kids. Parents may still request that their children be considered to be allowed to skip a grade or sit in on particular subjects in higher grades, opportunities that are required by Illinois law, according to the Illinois Association for Gifted Children; to make those decisions, the district uses the Iowa Acceleration Scale, Wells said.

And because experts say that even tests that purport to measure native ability in fact measure exposure to learning opportunities —scores improve with practice, and savvy parents know to prepare their kids — the district also instituted weekly "talent development" lessons to cultivate all students' creative and analytical thinking in second and third grade in all its low-income schools. While there's still a Spanish-language gifted option, now it's part of a two-way, dual-language immersion program, a practice that has become popular with white parents nationally.

Gifted education teachers at the National Association for Gifted Children's 2019 conference work on a toothpick-and-gumdrop tower, an exercise sometimes done in "talent development" classes. *(Danielle Dreilinger for The Hechinger Report)*

Beyond the specific policy changes, the district realized that educating its employees and the public was also important. "Anytime there's been a perceived removal of privilege, there's a

challenge," Wells said. To preempt resistance to changes that will open up gifted seats to a more diverse group of students, she argues, you have to convince everyone, or just about everyone, that it is a good idea. "You're moving the entire community."

It helped that the district expanded the number of seats in gifted classes, so that it wasn't a zero-sum game. "There's not a single thing we've done that's taken seats away," Wells said. "We still serve the students who demonstrate the need for this kind of programming."

U-46 also now trains teachers on anti-racism; requires all elementary gifted teachers to become certified in English as a second language; and has all teachers and administrators take an in-depth, 45-hour course on giftedness. The district invites parents and teachers to activities such as the annual conferences of two Illinois gifted education groups. This February, ten administrators, 19 teachers and four parents attended the Illinois Association for Gifted Children's Equity and Inclusion virtual summit, U-46 spokeswoman Mary Fergus said. Presenters included Peters and Wells herself, who talked about moving people from "courageous conversations" to "courageous actions."

One day last fall in U-46, Ed Chau's Horizon Elementary gifted fifth graders met on Zoom to discuss their "Genius Hour" projects — investigations into topics of their own choosing. The children's screen names were often fanciful, such as "☐ Mr. cheese is back!!!," and Chau, a former architect, addressed them as such: "What about you, Potato?" he asked.

The children's topics included the extermination of the dinosaurs, helping parents around the house, the use of Legos to increase imagination and how cheetahs run so fast. "Mr. cheese" presented Google Slides on echolocation. "I haven't finished dolphins," he apologized.

The students encouraged each other to go beyond parroting research, to analyze and draw new conclusions. "Take it to the next level," one student chimed in.

Chau is the child of Cambodian immigrants; like Wells, he grew up in U-46. Teachers always gave him accelerated work, but he was never identified as gifted. Diversity "really is a great advantage" in gifted classrooms, Chau said. It gives his students the ability to relate to each other and see things from different viewpoints. (Horizon's gifted program is diverse, although not quite at the level of the rest of the district, federal data shows — the program is 47 percent white, 4 percent Black, and 18 percent Hispanic in a school that is 33 percent white, 10 percent Black and 35 percent Hispanic.)

U-46's diversity work is not over. "We continue to push the bounds, we continue to try to innovate," Assistant Superintendent for Teaching and Learning Josh Carpenter said in November.

Last summer's racial justice protests jarred the district's leaders, as did the results of a May survey in which one-fifth of responding students said that they had personally experienced discrimination or unequal treatment at school based on their ethnicity or culture. The board's "Call to Action for Equity," written in June, commits to "remedying any practices that lead to under-representation of students of color in programs such as gifted programs, honors academies, and advanced placement courses."

That will include the reinvention of Elgin High's Gifted and Talented Academy program, according to a September presentation to the school board. As of 2017-18, per federal data, Elgin High's gifted students were 37 percent white, 28 percent Hispanic and 3 percent Black in an overall student body that was 10 percent white, 74 percent Hispanic and 7 percent Black. (The

high school magnet was not connected to the elementary and middle school gifted classes.) Until this year, applicants to the program had to submit an essay and teacher recommendations and take what the district brochure called an "Elgin High Academy Test" — in fact, the CogAT. The program consisted largely of Advanced Placement classes, which other Elgin High students could take as well.

Now the Gifted and Talented Academy is becoming the International Baccalaureate Academy. The new application requires only recommendations and a 2.0 GPA. Priority goes to low-income and homeless students as well as to people living nearby, siblings of those in the program and students who have taken advanced math, speech, engineering-like classes such as robotics or an array of extracurriculars including video game club.

"Will the demographics of our [high school magnet] programs change overnight? No, that is not likely. We need to work to provide more support and opportunities for students at earlier grades," Superintendent Tony Sanders wrote on the district's website. "However, if we all believe that all students in U-46 should have access … and if we believe that every child will rise to the level of our expectations, then why would we perpetuate a system that we have identified as an artificial barrier for some children, particularly students of color?"

Can other districts push the changes necessary to diversify gifted education without a lawsuit? "This is a really hard question," Peters said. "When I think about places that have made big changes or have at least given this topic their attention, it's been because of a state complaint, lawsuit, et cetera. It's rarely been because it in itself has been a priority for a district." That said, "there's nothing about it that can't be done absent a lawsuit, but I think schools just have so many other things that are demanding their attention that … equity within gifted ed doesn't rise to the top."

Any school system can fix gifted inequity if they believe "that all children deserve to learn in an environment that matches their talents and abilities," Wells said. Just about every district has an equity plan, she pointed out, and gifted education should be part of that.

For example, the Baltimore City school district, twice as large as U-46, now also screens all kids for gifted services; measures kids against their peers, not against a white, privileged norm; and has nearly quadrupled its number of gifted seats. The district, which is 8 percent white, went from having 38 percent white gifted enrollment in 2015 to 28 percent in 2017, according to federal data. New York City has chosen to address inequity by simply ending testing for its gifted elementary school program altogether, and Seattle is considering phasing out gifted classes.

Torres is now president of the Illinois Mathematics and Science Academy (IMSA), a residential public magnet high school for grades 10 through 12. Applicants must have taken the SATs, but there are no minimum scores. "Absolutely," districts can diversify gifted education without a lawsuit, he said. From 2017 to 2021, under his leadership, the school increased its percentage of Black and Latino students from 15 to 22 percent, and of students from culturally, linguistically and economically diverse backgrounds from 31 to 35 percent, he said.

His email signature says, "Have you experienced racism, microaggressions, or bias at IMSA? Report it here."

Torres has a reminder for other superintendents who think diversifying gifted education is too hard to fix or not important enough to prioritize.

"Don't wait to be sued," he said.

---The Courier-News---03/16/2021
Elgin's U-46 ready to bring all hybrid students back to school on a full-time basis starting April 7

By Karie Angell Luc

More than 1,000 people were signed on to watch the District U-46 School Board meeting Monday at which it was announced hybrid students would return to school full time on April 7. (Karie Angell Luc / Naperville Sun)

Exactly one year after the COVID-19 pandemic shut down all schools in Illinois, U-46 administrators told the school board Monday the school district will able to reopen them on a full-time basis April 7.

"It's been a certainly challenging year," said Suzanne Johnson, the district's deputy superintendent of instruction. "None of this has been easy."

After spring break, which is scheduled for March 29 to April 2, students who are signed up for hybrid learning will return to school for full days five days per week.

"We don't have a perfect model this year," Johnson said. "We know that, in our preference, we wouldn't be here having this discussion in March about what our next instructional model looks like for the last two months of the school year."

Superintendent Tony Sanders said that 47% of district students are in the hybrid education model, which is a combination of in-person and remote learning.

The state's decision to reduce social distancing from six feet to three combined with fewer students in the buildings helped make the switch to a full-time, in-person schedule possible, Sanders said.

"Bringing back the students in this manner, with the three feet of social distance, is plausible right now because 53 percent of our students have chosen to remain in distance learning," Sanders said.

Students who are doing remote learning full time right won't be able to return to school because there's not enough space for social distancing, he said. However, "we will put together some protocols, working collaboratively with our teachers, principals and others, if opportunities do arise for that to happen," he said.

"We have to really build out our model based on what we have in front of us right now in terms of the students who we know are in hybrid and work to grow from there. ... I appreciate the community's patience on that front," Sanders said.

Families who selected e-learning over a hybrid schedule were told they couldn't change their minds later.

"If we opened it back up for more students to return in person, it lowers our ability to serve every kid every day," Sanders said. "So I just want the public to realize that this is going to be an ever-changing thing until COVID is at a place where it's controlled."

Every district staff member — about 6,800 employees — has been offered the chance to receive a COVID-19 vaccination. So far, about 3,900 have received the first dose and another 3,700 have received both, officials said.

"Anybody who wanted it, got it," Sanders said. By April 7, employees who opted to receive vaccines through the district will have had their second doses with enough time passed to be fully vaccinated, he said.

More than 1,000 people were in the Zoom audience to watch the school board meeting. The issue of when to return students to class on a full-time basis has been a contentious one, with many parents arguing there was no reason to delay reopening the schools.

Some remained angry because the return-to-school option will not be available to all students, and used the "Return to Learn Update" Facebook page to post comments while the board was meeting.

"Am I the only one that is furious with the decision? The option to go back should be given to all kids!" one social media user posted.

Board member Eva Porter acknowledged there'd still be some unhappy parents.

"The presentation that we saw tonight, it is not going to please everyone," she said. "A plan today might not be the plan tomorrow (but) I see the light at the end of the tunnel."

Board member Kate Thommes said her concern was for teachers, who are "hanging by a thread."

"I just want to be sure that we do everything we can to support them because we're asking them to do their first day of teaching all over again," she said.

It's been a tough year for all school districts, many of who will be reopening their schools after spring break as well, board President Sue Kerr said.
"One of the things I've learned this year is we've had really bad choices to make, often it's been between a bad choice and a worse choice," Kerr said. "I think we would really cheat our students if we didn't go ahead and offer this to them."