



Field Notes—Michele Riggs

A Son's Struggle Becomes a Passion

"I think one of the greatest challenges we face is getting parents to realize they should get their kids tested for giftedness. Many of our families want their kids to stay in their neighborhoods and not commute long distances to magnet schools. They want to keep their kids close. Also, our children aren't always college bound, so sometimes families don't see the need."

Michele Riggs knows firsthand the challenges facing gifted children in schools. She witnessed her own son's struggle for years. "It was frustrating to watch Merrill in school," shares Michele. "First, his teachers would complain that he wouldn't do the work ('Why should I do it when I already know it?'), then when he finished his work before everyone else, his teachers would say, 'You must be doing it wrong.'" There was no gifted program for her son. "I tried to advocate for him," says Michele, "but as is true for many gifted students, his grades were poor and his standardized tests were very high. Throughout his life he has always resisted doing things the customary way. Subsequently, he was a bit of a loner in school, struggled to make friends, and by the 6th grade, he'd already started to check out."

Unfortunately, such experiences are all too common for advanced learners, but they also can be catalysts for change. Her son's experience prompted Michele to pursue a career in gifted education. Now in her 28th year as an educator, Michele has taught every elementary grade except first. She is now an administrator for the Salt Lake City School District, where she works with 27 elementary schools in the Extend-



➤ Michele Riggs confers with a gifted middle school student on a website he developed for National History Day.



ed Learning Program and Supervision. The gifted teachers she supervises offer 90 minutes of programming a week that includes William & Mary Language Arts Units, Junior Great Books, Math Olympiads Problem Solving, and Jacobs Ladder Reading Comprehension. "There is a lot of depth and complexity in what we're teaching them, says Michele. "In addition, we work with students to advocate for their own needs, which will help them at every level of their education. One project was to ask students to write to an elected official about the needs of gifted learners (*see below*). There is so much more we'd like to do with the students, but schools are very regimented now, with an overemphasis on testing."

Dear Senators,

Before I came to Fox Hills in the gifted program, I would get in trouble for doing things like trying to check out a 5th grade level book in 1st grade. My teachers thought that I was cheating when I had finished and reviewed a test in half of the time I had to do it. It wasn't fair that I was not able to show my potential.

When I took the test and came to this school I was making friends and actually having a challenge. In my old classes I got bored and did not want to learn how to multiply numbers by two for the 10th time. Now I am able to learn things I didn't know before and have fun. I can read books at a college level and make machines, without people making fun of me or thinking I cheated.

Being in class is fun because I actually have to try to master a subject. At my old school that wasn't really possible because I couldn't skip a grade or learn harder things that were my level. In my 5th grade class I like to do Math Olympiads because the questions can be really challenging and hard to figure out. In my home in Utah, not even my parents are able to figure out the problems. I also like doing Junior Great Books discussion (You read a short story and take turns talking about it.) I like doing this because it helps me understand a book more. My teacher Mrs. Riggs teaches really well and she will not review everything a million times even though everyone understands it. I hope I can be in the Gifted Program next year too. The Gifted Program at Fox Hills Elementary is great.

Sincerely,
Harley Bills

Dear Senator Hatch,

My name is Lydia, I'm a 5th grader, and I'm in the Advanced Learning Program. In 2nd grade I had a lot of fun, but it was the worst school year I've had so far. We always wrote in our journals for a while, but I write fast and I was always done first. I would just sit at my desk bored and hope my teacher would come and ask me to write math problems for the class to solve, but even when she did ask me it took only five minutes or so and I would have to sit and be bored again. When I first got to this program, I really wasn't too happy about passing the test, but now that I'm here it's easier to make friends, so for once I have someone to talk to. After the first year I had learned a lot more than I would have in a regular school, and I didn't want to leave. I've been in this program for almost 3 years now, and I feel like I've learned more than I have in the rest of my life.

I like this program because it's on my level. I'm bored at grade level because I learn faster than other students. I can remember things if I've only heard them once, where as other students have to hear things two and three times. Here I get challenging work, and finish at the same time as the rest of the class, and if I finish faster I always have something to work on.

I now believe that this program really is the best place for me. I get challenging work, rather than boring work, and I have the opportunity to learn something new every day.

Sincerely,
Lydia,
Fox Hills Elementary
Taylorsville, Utah

Salt Lake City School District is an inner-city school system with a highly varied student population made up of Pacific Islanders, Hispanics, Native Americans, and African Americans. Learning how to best meet the needs of these students became a passion of Michele's after she was awarded a Javits-Frasier Scholarship in 2009, the 4th class of scholars. One of the benefits of her scholarship experience was that she learned a lot about diversity issues. "Diversity was not something I knew much about," confesses Michele.

However, over the years she often saw how easily students could get pigeonholed, especially when English is a second language. She shares a story: "Years ago, I had a 4th grade student from Mexico who spoke no English. But she was the most advanced math student I've ever had. This girl was amazing. At the end of the year, I asked the students to write about their favorite field trip, assembly or program for their memory books. When it was her turn, she asked me, 'Spanish first?' I said, 'Yes!' She had written her experience in English, but she spoke it in Spanish. When she had finished, she smiled and read the entire piece again in perfect English. We were all in tears because that was the first time she had spoken so much English. This child was an extremely fast learner. We had no gifted program at the time, but I had worked shoulder to shoulder with her all year. It was a great experience and one

I will always treasure. Thanks to the scholarship, my understanding is so much greater. I'm now in a position where I can advocate for all kids, and help to eliminate some of the barriers to success that they face."



» Sheila Harrington and Janet Marisco from Pearson Education with Javits-Frasier Program Coordinator Jeff Danielian at the 'Meet the Scholars' Reception. Pearson contributed \$10,000 to the 2014 Annual Fund in support of the Javits-Frasier Scholarship program.



Thanks to the 2014 Annual Fund Campaign, NAGC successfully raised more than \$21,000 to support the Javits-Frasier Scholarship Program, sending 12 scholars to the annual convention in Baltimore. However, the need is great and NAGC is forced to turn away many worthy applicants each year. Greater funding support will allow NAGC to provide scholarships to many more educators, to broaden the scope of its scholarship outreach and publicity, and to connect local funders to local teachers in cities/regions where NAGC holds its convention. NAGC has set a goal to send at least 20 scholars to the Phoenix convention in 2015.

We are what we celebrate. We celebrate actors and athletes and aspire to be like them, but we don't do that for scientists and engineers.

—Marc Shulman, Executive Director, USA Science & Engineering Festival