Frequently Asked Questions Regarding the Levels of Service (LoS) Approach to Programming for Talent Development

This file contains questions and responses that provide general information and background about the LoS approach, teacher questions, parent questions, and student questions. Additional information about LoS is also available in the “Talent Development” area of the Center for Creative Learning website (http://www.creativelearning.com/talent-development.html). The Center also provides workshops and consultation services on new program development, restructuring of existing programs, and program evaluation.

General LoS information and background

A. What is talent development?

Talent development involves a commitment to create and carry out many opportunities to nurture students’ strengths, sustained interests, and best potentials. It involves creating programming that is commensurate with each person’s characteristics and needs. It involves a dual task of responding to the needs of students who already demonstrate very high levels of accomplishment in any talent area and initiating deliberate actions to seek the talents of all students. Programming for talent development empowers students to reach as high as their talents allow, to work as creators and problem solvers and to function effectively and independently.

At the Center for Creative Learning, we view talent as potential for significant contributions or productivity (in original or creative ways) in any domain of inquiry, expression, or action, over an extended period of time. Talent emerges from aptitudes and/or from sustained involvement in areas of strong interest or passion. It is not simply a natural endowment or a “gift.”

B. Is talent development just another name for gifted education?

Our focus on talent identification and development is not simply a cosmetic change or new terminology for “gifted education;” it is an innovative and contemporary orientation to the nature, scope, and practice of programming. Talents are influenced by, many social, cultural, or circumstantial (or climate) factors outside the person’s internal, testable cognitive abilities. Many factors influence the definition, development, and expression of talents in profoundly important ways, leading researchers and practitioners towards new views of identification, focusing on profiling talents and responding in varied ways, and away from traditional selection models (“gifted or not gifted; in or out”). While talent development certainly focuses upon meeting the needs of high-ability students, many more students have significant potential than have traditionally been identified and served in academic content areas and many talent domains.

C. What is the LoS approach to talent development?

The LoS approach to talent development, developed by the Center for Creative Learning of Sarasota, Florida in conjunction with educational leaders in several school districts and state educational agencies in the United States and Canada, seeks to bring out the best in every student. It involves collaboration among educators, students, parents, and community leaders to form a partnership to ensure that every learner’s educational experience is appropriate, challenging, and differentiated. Programming in LoS includes all of the efforts made— at home, in a classroom, in a school, in a school district, and in a community— to respond to the many and varied potentials of all students. In LoS, we emphasize three broad sets of desired student outcomes: a healthy, effective person; an independent learner; a creatively productive person (Treffinger, Young, Nassab, & Wittig, 2004, Enhancing and Expanding Gifted Programs: The Levels of Service Approach, p. 11).
D. How do students qualify or apply for the Levels of Service program?

Level I of LoS involves services for all students that provide the foundational skills and tools to help them discover and build their personal strengths and interests. In order to know which areas to enhance and/or provide additional services for at levels II through IV, we gather information that will guide instructional planning and stimulate talent development. In the LoS approach to “identification,” rather than asking “is this student qualified,” we prefer to ask, “what does this student need?” Both formal and informal assessment tools can help you to determine a student’s area(s) of strength. Student artifacts (e.g., portfolios of products, work samples, or projects) can demonstrate areas of strength that the student may exhibit. Many kinds of information lead to designing appropriate and challenging learning experiences for a student.

E. How will teachers know the area(s) and extended services for talent development?

Teachers must think of themselves as talent spotters who seek to understand and recognize the diverse behavior and characteristics of high ability students. Many students have talents but some may choose not to use or show them in their daily course work. Observations and simple checklists of characteristics can be useful tools for spotting strengths. Keep in mind that talent can manifest and present itself in non-academic areas as well as in the classroom. For this reason, be open to input about students’ strengths and characteristics from parents, peers, special area teachers, or leaders of youth activities outside the school. Look for information from all who work with students from year to year; keep in mind that talents may emerge or appear over time and as a result of experience or exposure to new topics and activities. Regular conferences involving students and adults who know and work with them can be important in ensuring effective planning and program design.

F. When and where do Levels of Service activities and instructional practices take place?

Even though LoS options are designed as an integrated part of the student’s overall educational program, some services may occur outside of the school day and/or at off-site locations. Appropriate and challenging activities may occur in the classroom, in one’s school, in the community, or at other locations (such as residential programs or camps on college or university campuses).

G. Does Levels of Service support all (gender/ethnic) students equitably?

The LoS approach is predicated upon the belief that all students have worthwhile potentials and interests that can best be developed through appropriate and challenging instruction. It provides opportunities to develop talents and sustained interests as they appear in the student. This means that all students regardless of gender, culture, or ethnic influences have equal opportunity. Since talents exist in many important and worthwhile domains, as well as in non-academic areas, their development can lead to significant achievement and increased satisfaction of all students.

H. Does the LoS approach refer to groups or categories of students?

No. Some people erroneously assume that the four levels in the LoS model refer to categories of students (e.g., “This is a Level IV student”). That is incorrect. The four levels refer to an organizational model for organizing and delivering services, and those services might be appropriate for various students at different times, in different domains, or under certain circumstances, based on their characteristics, needs, and interests. Any students might benefit from some or all of the levels during their educational program.

I. In the LoS approach, do you argue that “all students are gifted”?

No. We believe that all students have strengths, interests, curiosities, and talent potentials that, with encouragement, support, and effective instruction may “blossom” into significant accomplishments. We believe that it is not only the students with the highest scores on a specific test of ability (“IQ”) who will become creatively productive and academically successful individuals in the long term; every student needs to have the benefit of the school’s strongest efforts to “bring out the best” in him or her. Many factors, over an extended period of time, will influence who might be described eventually as “gifted” in
any domain. Our job is to do the best we can to create opportunities for talents to be recognized and to grow.

**Teacher Questions**

A. I am a classroom teacher and have noticed that I have several students who seem to be talented. I do not have any training in gifted education and worry about how to begin meeting their needs.

Simply noticing talents among several of your students demonstrates your readiness for the LoS approach. In LoS, teachers act as talent spotters by deliberately searching for individual characteristics and interests of their students. They identify individual needs and then focus on designing appropriate and challenging responses through differentiating instruction. For example, some students might benefit from an accelerated pace while others might benefit from more depth and breadth. Sometimes instruction might require the cooperation of other teachers either at your same grade level or at higher-grade levels. At other times it might require computer assisted learning or a distance-learning course.

B. I am so busy in the classroom that sometimes I barely have time to think about the talents and exceptional strengths of students in my classroom. How am I supposed to fit this programming into my day?

Thinking about how you structure your day and your current instructional activities might help you to identify ways to provide more opportunities for all learners, including ways to extend or build on students’ strengths, talents, or sustained interests. The LoS approach begins by providing opportunities for all students, which will benefit the talented students in your classroom. These opportunities may well include practices you are already doing, such as using KWL charts to activate prior knowledge and using learning inventories so students can self-identify learning preferences. As you begin to notice certain student skills and talents emerging or developing among students, you can begin to provide opportunities to extend or expand them, using instructional strategies that will be appropriate for many learners. Think about appropriate and challenging instruction for your students as “instead of” rather than “on top of” the basic curriculum. If a student already knows basic information (e.g., basic addition or multiplication facts), he or she should be able to move on to more complex skills without having to rehash over and over what he or she already knows. (There is a difference between appropriate practice and needless repetition.)

C. My school serves a very diverse group of students, many of whom are low-SES. These children’s families are often uninformed or unable to be advocates for gifted and talented services for their children, while other wealthier parents seem to “fight tooth and nail” to get their child involved in programs. What can I do?

The LoS approach is different from traditional gifted education programs. Rather than spending time and resources ascertaining whether a child is qualified and defining categories in which to include (or from which to exclude) students, educators who use the LoS approach place their emphasis on determining what services will best expand, enhance, and extend students’ learning. They identify students’ strengths using both formal and informal assessment tools. They gather information to guide their instructional planning in ways that will “stretch” students and stimulate talent development, not to label or categorize students. As a result, they invest energy and on the students, not on paperwork that does not benefit them. Seek ways to contact parents about their child’s strengths, interests, and curiosities, and to help you discover the students’ needs. Strengths, talents, and interests exist throughout society; they are not found only among the affluent.

D. Our principal says that “the gifted” are those who have exceptionally high, “genius” level IQ scores (probably 170 or higher), and since we don’t have any students like that, there is no need for us to be involved in gifted education. Is this a valid argument?

No. While students of the kind your principal describes certainly would demonstrate some unusual strengths and instructional needs that we would recognize and respond to in the LoS approach, they are not the only students who need services beyond the core program. In the LoS approach, we recognize that there are many different kinds of strengths or “gifts,” and that talents cut across many domains.
Students’ needs are not defined only by the limited array of abilities measured by a test such as an IQ test. The efforts you make to apply LoS and address the needs of many students with diverse strengths and talents will enrich every classroom, your entire school, and your community (and perhaps beyond!).

E. I teach at an elementary school that only serves a K-2 population. I have been told that students of that age do not need special programs. Is that correct?

Children’s cognitive abilities certainly grow and change over time, and different abilities mature, change, increase, and decline in different ways. The LoS approach allows teachers, parents, and community leaders to craft instruction for learners of any age that involves differentiation of the core curriculum and engagement in higher-level cognitive activities, such as application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. Appropriate, challenging, and developmental educational experiences are basic responsibilities of an effective school at all levels.

F. I read an article that suggested that acceleration is the best approach for developing a child’s talents. Is this so?

Acceleration is one option that is very effective for some students, although it is only one component of a comprehensive approach to responding to students’ needs. The LoS approach considers several appropriate forms of acceleration for students when their documented needs indicate that it is an appropriate response as part of our plan for talent development. Unfortunately, there are many myths and misunderstandings about acceleration. For an informative and research-supported document, see http://www.accelerationinstitute.org/nation_deceived/ND_v1.pdf

G. I am so busy with students who are functioning below grade level that I scarcely have time or energy for talent development. Is it really possible for me to work with high-ability students, too?

It’s just this simple: all students deserve appropriate and challenging learning opportunities and experiences throughout the day. That’s all, as in everyone. The form that teacher support takes, or how one might plan the day to include these activities, will most likely look different in each classroom. LoS provides program options that use differentiated instructional practices as one means of accommodating students with different readiness levels, interests, and learning profiles in the same classroom. Differentiation also assists teachers and students in managing time and learning resources effectively and efficiently. Learning contracts, centers/learning zones, and tiered lesson plans allow students to be actively involved in managing the course and speed of instruction.

H. Our school does not have the facilities and material resources to respond to some of the needs we have identified among our students. What options are there?

The Level II-IV options in a LoS approach involve services that are for varying numbers of students in accordance with their needs. But that does not mean that you, as one teacher, must be the one who delivers all of those services (or even that they must all be delivered in school by teachers). LoS encompasses activities that may be provided by outside resources such as local businesses, museums or science centers, community youth organizations, arts organizations, or colleges and universities. Once you have identified the needs of your students, you must think creatively about appropriate responses (or ways to meet those needs). Use collaboration time and staff resources to generate ideas that you might pursue. Current technology options (web-based learning, smart phones, etc.) offer many easily accessible avenues to meet a variety of instructional needs. If you have a staff person who is responsible for working with Gifted and Talented students, ask what options she or he might suggest. Don’t forget to ask the parents for ideas; they are great advocates and often have information that buildings do not receive. Challenge the students to search for resources, too!

I. What staff positions are directly involved in delivering services?

The LoS approach can be customized for a variety of school or classroom needs and instructional configurations. We recommend that effective implementation of LoS include a trained professional who serves as the district catalyst to coordinate and oversee the planning, implementation, outcomes, and documentation of talent development programming. The assignment of one staff member per building
who is tasked with leading the building LoS Team would be an optimum level of staffing for effective implementation of LoS options at the school building level, but many other configurations can also be successful. The essential factors are commitment, communication, and collaboration by the school’s staff. You can implement the LoS approach at the classroom, school, and/or district levels (Enhancing and Expanding Gifted Programs: The Levels of Service Approach, Treffinger, Young, Nassab, & Wittig, 2004, p. 111-114). The Talent Development Planning Handbook (Treffinger, Young, Nassab, Selby, & Wittig, 2008) provides a variety of resources to guide planning and implementation of LoS at any of those levels.

J. How might we ensure that all students receive the services they need?

Quality classroom management skills are necessary for any instructional offering to be successful. Effective implementation of LoS builds upon quality instructional practices for all students. LoS also provides opportunities for educators, community members, and parents to participate actively in “talent spotting” that helps to clarify any student’s programming needs. LoS also involves the development of self-management and organizational skills, creative and critical thinking and problem solving skills, and constructive “habits of mind.” In these ways, LoS involves personal responsibility for one’s own talent recognition and development.

Curriculum compacting, learning style-based instruction, learning contracts, tiered lessons, service learning projects, inquiry-based projects, internships, and mentorship options will allow for students to have learning experiences that are appropriate and challenging. Students with exceptional strength in a specific talent domain may work at their own pace and progress through relevant material without having to spend time in whole class explicit instruction on material they have already mastered. Dual-credit and/or dual-course options are often available for those who qualify, based on appropriate assessment of their background and skills.

**PARENT QUESTIONS**

A. My child is in the fourth grade [or any grade] and has a variety of strengths and talents. How can we support these so that she will continue to grow and excel?

It is vital that you establish and maintain ongoing communication with the school regarding mutual efforts and services for your child. Start with the belief that you and your child’s school are partners, not adversaries. Keep the focus on a constructive conversation about your child’s behavior and activities, interests, experiences, and learning needs, rather than on labels or categories. (The Center for Creative Learning website has a valuable feature, “Dear School People” at: http://www.creativelearning.com/talent-development/dear-school-people.html. It contains 25 questions that are more important to discuss with your child’s teachers than whether she is or is not gifted or should be “in a program.”) Exploring additional opportunities outside of school, such as classes, groups, activities, websites, books, and the like, that buttress the child’s areas of passion and strength also will assist her. Finally, parents and teachers should assist the child in seeking peers with similar talents, all the while ensuring that the child also enjoys fun activities that are age appropriate, so that her talent is recognized but keeping in mind that academic pursuits are not seen as drudgery.

B. My fifth grader [or student in any grade] is bored in her classroom, which seems to focus largely upon preparation for standardized tests. While I understand the need to focus on other children, what can her school do to provide her with more of a challenge?

We always encourage both parents and students to ask for more challenging course work with increased rigor if the regular education offerings are not meeting the child’s needs. Some people with whom to consult about an appropriate level of challenge can include: the classroom teacher, an administrator, or the school’s guidance counselor. Talk directly to your child’s teacher, and ask him or her how your child might be able to engage in more appropriate work. Some solutions in an LoS approach might include independent investigations, mentoring opportunities, grade skipping, single-subject acceleration, dual enrollment, distance learning or other options. Teaching your child to be self-directed and to take responsibility for her own learning will allow her to overcome boredom. Too often children and parents complain about not being challenged and expect the teacher or the school to do something for the child. It is often more productive for the child to take the initiative by demonstrating to the teacher that she
already knows how to do the task and suggest that she be allowed to do a more challenging alternative task.

C. How can I confident that a school will really provide challenging, rigorous, and relevant experiences? Do I risk developing a bad reputation as “just another pushy parent”?

Parents and students should expect that a school will provide all students with an appropriate, challenging, and rigorous curriculum. LoS provisions extend above and beyond minimum required expectations, adding depth and breadth of knowledge, development of thinking processes, encouragement of positive “habits of mind,” and development of independence and self-direction to the students’ learning experiences.

Every parent should always feel free to ask direct questions about how the school is addressing these responsibilities, and to expect an honest and understandable response. Although there is a tendency today to place considerable emphasis on “letter grades” of schools and overall performance on standardized achievement tests, it is really more important to dig deeper and ask more challenging questions. The key is to approach the school constructively, rather than in an accusatory or adversarial manner. We have found that outstanding schools value opportunities to discuss their programs with parents. Once again, the “Dear School People” list of 25 questions from the Center for Creative Learning website (http://www.creativelearning.com/talent-development/dear-school-people.html) may be a valuable resource for the conversation.

D. In what ways might LoS options provided to students include community options and experiences?

Community offerings can provide for services and additional offerings that many school corporations could not provide otherwise. Building a community support component into the Levels of Service offerings within a school or district enhances and strengthens the social-emotional development of the child, creates opportunities for advanced learning and real-life applications of learning, and contributes to positive school-community relationships.

E. If our school (or district) does not have a gifted program, can we make up for its absence through extra things we do at home with our children?

We would always encourage parents to engage in a variety of activities that will help their children to recognize and develop their strengths, talents, and interests, and activities you pursue at home can be rewarding and valuable for the family. At the same time, if the child is enrolled in school, a major portion of every week of the child’s life takes place there and has a major impact on the child’s ongoing learning, development, motivation, and the joy of learning and discovery. Therefore, it is also important for you to work to be a constructive advocate for effective programming. Begin by conferring with your children’s teachers, and others at the school. Ask pertinent questions. Become active in the parent organization (either a general PTA or PTO or a specific parent organization for gifted and talented if there is one). Explore whether your state has a gifted/talented organization, and learn about the National Association for Gifted Children (www.nagc.org) and the resources it offers for parents and for advocacy for programming. Share resources about LoS from our website or draw general resources from many other sites that you can find easily with a Google search (“parenting gifted students” will get you started).

STUDENT QUESTIONS

A. How do I approach my teacher if I think I need to be challenged more?

Have you ever heard the statement, “Attitude is everything. Is yours worth catching?” Be sure that the way you ask for help cannot be viewed as a judgment about the teaching efforts of those who work with you in the classroom. Demonstrate your initiative by asking to have a conversation with your teacher in which you may both talk privately and freely about your concerns and needs. This will allow you to share information your interests and goals and what you expect from your teachers and coaches through the learning process. Be sure to have a plan for demonstrating your achievement levels and an alternative assignment to suggest.
B. I already know most of the information in my course work, so what other options might there be to enable me to move ahead?

Parents and students should always have to right to ask for more advanced course work with increased levels of rigor. Your school counselor may be an important person to support you in finding an answer to this question. It is also important to talk directly with your teacher about your needs and concerns, and to ask how she or he might be able to help you. If you have a strong interest or talent in a specific area, speak with a teacher who works in that field. Also, think about community activities or organizations that are directly related to your talent, and find out more about what they might have to offer you. Do some active web searching on your talent area to find local, state, national, or even international organizations. Then, look at their web pages to explore resources or programs they might offer. Searching social networking sites can also help you make contact with people and groups in various talent areas (assuming you also maintain appropriate caution that not everyone on these sites is who or what they might say they are!). Your state or district may have policies or documents to help students discover and make connections with programs and talent development opportunities; a teacher, counselor, administrator, or school secretary may help direct you to useful offices. Dual-enrollment/dual-courses, distance learning, or virtual learning experiences may be available through colleges and universities, community colleges, and a growing network of virtual schools for those who qualify. Keep in mind that you must also be prepared to demonstrate a positive work ethic, effort, and a “track record” of quality work in your products or performance to gain access to many options.

C. I really am interested in science related technology, but my school doesn’t offer any courses on this subject and our computer lab is ancient.

LoS program options for Levels II-IV do not have to occur in the classroom. They may be provided at a different location or as a resource depending on the needs and challenge level of the student. The flexibility that comes with the LoS approach provides a framework so specific and diverse opportunities can enrich the classroom learning experience. Discuss with your teacher the idea of contacting business and universities in this field and ask for their assistance as a service option that will also build community relationships. Consider a number of the networking and information searching suggestions in the response to the previous question, too.

D. What if my friends want to try some of these things (or if I want to try something that some of my friends are involved in)?

In schools and classrooms that celebrate diversity, all students are honored for their abilities. The LoS approach is not like joining a “club” or a social activity. However, if you and your friends share some common interests and talents, it may be quite appropriate (and enjoyable) to participate together in a variety of activities, in school or in the community, that relate to that talent. If you’re curious, but not 100% certain of your interest and talent, there may be ways for you to “try it out” without having to make a firm, long-term commitment. However, if it’s just “following your friends,” and not really exciting and challenging for you, you may move away from that activity and still enjoy being with those friends in other activities. It doesn’t mean that there’s anything “wrong” with you, or with them, or with your friendship. Do keep in mind that self-motivation— your sustained interest and the desire to develop or enhance a talent or gift— can be a powerful starting point for talent development.

E. If people at school say I am “gifted,” does that mean that they expect me to do outstanding work in every area at school? If I am really good in some areas, but not all, does that mean I am not really “gifted” after all?

One of the unique features of the LoS approach to talent development is that it recognizes that people may have strengths, talents, and interests in specific areas. We shouldn’t expect (or demand) everyone to be outstanding in everything (and there might be some areas in which you might be strong, but you don’t really care about at all). Our goal is to help each person find what he or she excels at, and is passionate about, and help them grow in that area. You will need to be competent in many academic areas, but you certainly do not have to excel in everything to have your talents recognized and developed.