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## Bringing Teaching for the Gifted to All Kids

By [EMILY ALPERT](#)

**Monday, Sept. 21, 2009** | Sandra Ruvalcaba isn't sure if she would have tapped Dominic Satterfield as a gifted child before. His reading was a little weak and he struggled with writing last year at Cabrillo Elementary in Point Loma. But when the teacher began to use strategies for gifted children with all of her students, Dominic suddenly seemed to stand out. He flourished.

His mother Sadie said it was "100 percent different" than the way she was taught as a child, and she liked what she saw. Dominic relished getting into debates with other children about the ethics of playground squabbles. He is a pint-sized philosopher with a karate T-shirt and a frank and surprisingly adult manner, who readily picks out what his teachers call the "Big Ideas" -- one of the buzzwords that mark the new strategies -- in classic stories such as the Tortoise and the Hare.

"The turtle was slow. The hare judged him. No one really thought that the hare wouldn't win -- he's the fastest living creature in the universe," Dominic, now in 2nd grade, explained after school. "So the big idea is, 'Don't judge a person.'"

Cabrillo is also altering how it judges children, and how all youngsters are taught. Teachers there are bringing methods for gifted children, such as searching for details or ferreting out the unanswered questions, into classes for all kids in grades K-2. Their goal is threefold: To nurture gifted children before they are tested for giftedness so that they don't get bored and tune out, to draw more families to the school, and to deepen thinking among all children, whether or not they ultimately are dubbed "gifted."

Now San Diego Unified is taking the same tack at four more elementary schools, by training teachers for the youngest children in gifted and talented education and tracking whether it

### Not Just for Gifted Kids

**What They're Doing:** A handful of San Diego elementary schools are using methods for gifted students with students of all abilities in the youngest grades.

**The Idea:** Educators hope it will keep gifted children from tuning out in their early years and raise the bar for all children to do deeper thinking.

**The Bigger Picture:** The new classes are part of a philosophical shift in San Diego Unified toward using gifted methods for a broader swath of kids.

works. It is still early, even at Cabrillo, but teachers say they are surprised by just how much their students can do. They debate whether a fictional boy who lost a teddy bear should get his toy back from a homeless man who found it in a trash bin. They write about how different characters in a story might view what happened.

"These are things that years ago I would never have done with them," Ruvalcaba said. "At the beginning we were like, 'Will the little ones be able to do it?'"

It is an unusual experiment. In San Diego Unified, this kind of teaching usually happens only in classes for gifted children, which begin in 3rd grade and are available chiefly to children who score well on a special test. The trial classes at the five schools are one sign of a philosophical shift toward plucking the strategies for gifted children out of separate classes and bringing them to a broader range of kids, said Marcia DiJiosia, director of gifted and talented education in the school district.

"And I think everyone agrees -- the younger you start them, the better off they are," DiJiosia said.

At Cabrillo, the hallmarks of gifted education are visible even in kindergarten classrooms, less than two weeks into the school year. The signs are subtle unless you know what to look for: Behind the squirming kindergartners who gather around a wooden piano to sing nursery rhymes with teacher Carmen Barrett, a placard with a daisy and the buzzword "Details" is up on the board. Across the tiny campus, Ruvalcaba has a spate of cards with symbols and weighty phrases such as "Language of the Discipline" that dot the whiteboard. Her students use the daisy symbol, too, scrawling details about themselves in each petal.

These symbols are called icons, and they are part of a teaching method created by Sandra Kaplan, a University of Southern California professor who has focused on depth and complexity as the keys to amp up teaching for gifted kids. The idea is to push kids beyond basic information to analyzing and thinking critically. Ruvalcaba pointed to a diamond symbol labeled "Ethics" and asked a gaggle of 1st graders to talk about the ethics behind a book they read called "The Golden Rule."

One boy said that if people fight, "you have to teach them how to treat you."

"So if you want to be treated kindly?" Ruvalcaba prompted him.

"We have to treat them kindly," he said.

Ruvalcaba later explained that the lesson was a departure for her. In the past she might have read the book and summarized it with the kids, talking about why the Golden Rule was important. Ethics and details might have been part of her lesson, but children wouldn't have been asked to search for them explicitly. Using the new methods, Ruvalcaba tried to free them to talk about what was ethical and why.

Calling on kids to do deeper thinking with explicit prompts and symbols for patterns and ethics is meant to make such habits routine, both for teachers and students. Katie Pedersen, a retired teacher from Cabrillo who is helping train teachers in the methods, said the

symbols help trigger children to go beyond the basics. Using the pictures also helps children who don't speak English.

Pedersen points to an example in a spare room at Cabrillo where teachers are trained, which shows the life cycle of ducks from hatching to growing new feathers to laying eggs of their own. Next to a symbol for "Unanswered Questions," two questions are neatly lettered: "Why do things have babies? Why do things die?" The big idea in the lesson is, "Living things grow and change. Non-living things don't."

"You're pushing their thinking instead of just saying, 'Give me the facts,'" Pedersen said.

Other strategies that the schools are testing are talking circles, which are an early form of Socratic seminar, and lessons in which all children work on the same skill but at different levels, such as telling the whole class to show different ways to calculate a number -- but using bigger and more complicated numbers for some kids and simpler numbers for others. On a blistering summer day, Pedersen coached nine teachers from different schools on how to re-tailor lessons for all levels.

"I don't usually teach the (gifted) class," said Stacie Wright, who teaches a combined 4th and 5th grade class at Webster Elementary, where many students are refugees from Burma, Somalia or elsewhere. "But even if they aren't classified, I need to push them. And you need to have someplace for those higher kids to go" once they get the basics.

The results will be gauged across the school district to see if and how well they worked. Cabrillo has yet to measure its results, and other schools are just beginning to try out the strategies this year. Though Pedersen had been informally training other Cabrillo teachers for years, the official pilot program began there in the middle of last year, as the school made sure that all teachers had the necessary training. Principal Nestor Suarez said this year, researchers from San Diego State University will comb the data from tests created by the school district to see if children succeed with the new tack.

"We need to specifically see, 'Did each child make a year's worth of growth?'" said Elizabeth Nagy, a parent and the former head of a district committee on gifted students. She likes the new program, but worries that the demands on teachers may be unreasonable. "I don't think we can expect them to teach to all ranges of the class, including special education, in one classroom. Is it really fair to our teachers?"

Teachers are also tracking how well they are able to predict which kids will ultimately be labeled as gifted. Long before children are given a nonverbal test called the Raven, their teachers go through a checklist that notes unusual talents such as whether a child has a witty sense of humor and whether she likes to wrestle with ethical issues. It has proven fairly effective at sussing out which children will ultimately score "gifted," allowing teachers to target them earlier. There was no set method before.

Cabrillo is not the first school to try using gifted methods for all children or for younger children. An Encinitas charter school with the same philosophy was wildly popular among parents before it was shuttered for financial reasons. Different studies have shown that exposing children at all levels to methods and materials for gifted children can be fruitful,

although each study tends to be highly specific, focused on a particular kind of method, said Margie Kitano, associate dean in the College of Education at San Diego State University. It ties into a [building body of research](#) that suggests that giftedness is not necessarily a fixed talent. It can be nurtured -- or it can be cut short.

"It's really hard to say" whether the research backs what Cabrillo is doing, Kitano said. She added, "But one of the problems we have with so-called average learners is that we set our expectations too low."

Changing how classes worked was relatively easy for Cabrillo. Teachers got additional training in how to use gifted strategies in grades K-2; Suarez estimated that the added training cost roughly \$90 per teacher, paid for out of its special funds for gifted education. The school district also paid roughly \$5,000 total for Pedersen, now retired, to devote her time to training more teachers, DiJiosia said.

Seven-year-old Dominic said he feels like he can do so much more now that he's learned how to use big ideas and other weighty concepts. He talks excitedly about all the things he can read, his favorite debates and the history of his school.

"It makes me want to learn to read the sun," he said suddenly, looking up as if from a reverie. "You know how people can look up at the sun and tell what time it is?"

Moments like that still make Sadie Satterfield grin. After Cabrillo changed its ways, "he didn't even want to wait to do homework," she said, shaking her head. "He went right into it. So I think it worked for him."

*Please contact [Emily Alpert](#) directly at [emily.alpert@voiceofsandiego.org](mailto:emily.alpert@voiceofsandiego.org) and follow her on Twitter: [twitter.com/emilyschoolsyou](https://twitter.com/emilyschoolsyou). And set the tone of the debate with [a letter to the editor](#).*

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