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## Professional Development Options for Helping Teachers Provide Optimal Educational Opportunities for Academically Diverse Learners Using Tiered Assignments

**Christine L. Weber**



As educators, we know that each child in a classroom does not learn in the same way nor has the same level of prior knowledge about a subject or topic of study. One size does not fit all (Gregory & Chapman, 2007). The ability to challenge academically diverse learners in an setting, which often contains gifted students, is necessary if teachers are to meet the unique needs of all of their students. However, trying to meet the needs of individual learners in classrooms where a range of abilities are present, from those students who may be autistic to those who may be academically advanced, can seem to be an overwhelming and daunting task. Those teachers who vary instruction, curriculum, resources, assessments, and the classroom environment are working to provide an education setting for the diversity of learners found in their classrooms. There are several professional development approaches one can consider to help teachers and other educators understand how to meet the needs of diverse learners and explore the different learning characteristics of children. These options can also help teachers focus on exploring a strategy, known as tiered assignments, which allows for teachers to teach the same objective or standard to students while encouraging mastery to be obtained at various levels. Tiered assignments require teachers to make modifications to the content, process, products, and/or learning environment by addressing readiness, interests, and learning profiles. Tomlinson (1999) describes tiered lessons as “the meat and potatoes of differentiated instruction.”

**Those teachers who vary instruction, curriculum, resources, assessments, and the classroom environment are working to provide an optimal setting for the diversity of learners found in their classrooms.**

One option to help teachers understand and implement tiered assignments is to begin by exploring various classrooms and their diversity of students, especially if the teachers are new to the field or perhaps have not had a variety of experiences working with children. But what if the teacher doesn't have access to an actual diverse classroom? The Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) has a number of DVDs presenting elementary, middle, and high school settings that offer real examples of tiered assignments and other differentiation strategies. These are a great place to start discussions about actual classrooms with mixed ability groups of students who require modification of the curriculum and instruction in order for the learners to achieve success. Many of the DVDs have online study guides to facilitate the dialogue and also provide activities to enhance the discussion. It is helpful for teachers to use a graphic organizer such as a chart when viewing these clips to record their observations of the components of differentiation as they relate to the learning environment, high quality curriculum, appropriate assessments, adjustment of instruction (including the use of tiered assignments), and implementation of flexible structures.

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## Letter From the President



### *Dear Members of The Association for the Gifted (TAG),*

The Association for the Gifted (TAG) is an organization within a larger organization – the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC). In April, the CEC Convention was held in St. Louis, bringing 5,000 educators with interests in gifted education and special education together. TAG offered live streaming of the STEM Opportunities panel, a session that anyone can view on the TAG Facebook site. The 2017 CEC Convention will be held in Boston April 19-22. Proposals for that convention may be submitted beginning on June 1, so watch the CEC website for specifics.

Please note that the *TAG Update* is posted on the TAG website so it is available for you to share with your colleagues. The newsletter highlights important news about gifted education and opportunities for learning, sharing, and advocating. Be sure to read it from start to finish.

The second edition of *EDGE* is also posted on the TAG website. TAG is looking for a co-editor for *EDGE* to work with Dr. Claire Hughes. If you enjoy soliciting articles and editing tasks, please submit a résumé and a letter of interest to me at [julia.roberts@wku.edu](mailto:julia.roberts@wku.edu). We on the TAG board are wanting to get more members involved in the organization.

The recently reauthorized Elementary and Secondary Education Act is known as the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). It is critically important that all educators and parents stay alert to opportunities that have opened up for gifted children with this legislation, since gifted children are named in Title I and Title II. That means that it will be key to be “in the room” when decisions are made at the state and local levels.

I want to extend a big “thank you” to Cecelia Boswell for the time and energy she put into her TAG presidency. Cecelia resigned from the board in order to have time needed for her professional pursuits and her family. Thank you, Cecelia.

Sincerely,  
*Julia Link Roberts*  
President, TAG

### Dear TAG Members,

In this issue of *The Update*, you will find the lead article titled “Professional Development options for Helping Teachers Provide Optimal Educational Opportunities for Academically Diverse Learners Using Tiered Assignments,” written by Dr. Christine Weber of the University of North Florida.

You will also find abstracts from the articles published in the most recent edition of *Journal for the Education of the Gifted (JEG)*. Remember that your membership entitles you to online access to the journal.

You will find two regular columns that relate to issues confronting those advocating for and working with gifted students from diverse populations. Dr. Julia Roberts, “Speaking Out” columnist, has written an article about advocacy related to the Every Student Succeeds Act. Claire Hughes discusses strengths, interests, problems, and skills to be considered when working with twice-exceptional students in her column “Double Lines.”

Please see the photos from the CEC conference held in St. Louis from April 13 to 16, 2016. The 2017 conference will be held in Boston, Massachusetts, from April 19 to 22. The Call for Proposals will open June 1 and close June 30, 2016. We encourage you to consider sharing your work!

We hope that this newsletter will provide you with some useful suggestions for working with your students.

Best regards,  
*Kimberley L. Chandler*  
TAG Update Editor





## Speaking Out: **Advocacy**

Julia Link Roberts

### Staying Involved as the *Every Student Succeeds Act* Takes Shape

*What will the Every Students Succeeds Act (ESSA) look like in your state and district?*

Two levels of decisions will determine answers to that question. Currently, rulemaking is occurring at the national levels. When you see opportunities for input, jump right on that opportunity to be sure the needs of gifted children are heard. One of the major changes with ESSA will be to have less national and more state involvement in education. Once rulemaking at the national level is completed, states will be involved in determining what ESSA will look like state by state. One important lesson in advocating for gifted children is that it is very important “to be in the room” when decisions are made.

What does it mean to be in the room? Perhaps you have heard the saying that “if you are not in the room, you may be on the menu.” Now is the time for you to talk with members of your state gifted advocacy organization to make sure the leadership realizes the need to offer, no, insist, that a member or members of the group be included in decision-making groups that are put together to determine the rules and regulations for Title I and Title II. Remember that gifted children are specifically included in Title I and Title II; that is a “first” in the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA).

Strange as it may seem, some folks have not seen how gifted children fit into Title I. Of course, those are the individuals who believe the myth that gifted children come from middle and upper income families. All of us need to counter that myth and let decision-makers know that Title I funds can be used to develop gifts and talents in children who have been underserved. Title II focuses on professional development. Once again, it will be key to be in conversations that will set the state and district plans regarding how Title II funds will be used.

Don't wait for others to provide the leadership for gifted education in regard to ESSA! Everyone may do just that, which would mean no one is the “watch dog” for gifted children as new regulations are put into place for ESSA. No Child Left Behind was in place for more than a decade. Don't risk ESSA being implemented without having the voices of gifted children heard. **IT IS TIME TO “SPEAK OUT.”**

**One important lesson in advocating for gifted children is that it is very important “to be in the room” when decisions are made.**

**REMEMBER – IF NOT YOU, THEN WHO?**

## Double Lines by Claire E. Hughes

### Twice-Exceptional: Four Directions



There is a quote attributed to Fred Rogers of the television show, "Mr. Roger's Neighborhood." "When I was a boy and I would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me, 'Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping.'" This quote emerges far too often in today's world of terrorism and fear and crisis. Yet, I have been struck by how talent development is the very definition of "helpers" in times of educational crisis.

At a talk I recently did in Greece, I presented the concept of developing talents among students with disabilities. One of the teachers, who was clearly frustrated, asked "How can we add one more thing to what we are supposed to do?" It is a cry often heard in the United States as well. Teachers in Greece are fed up. Salaries have been cut far below the comparable level in the USA. Their buildings are falling apart. They have no supplies, and class numbers are high. Students are identified with disabilities, but IEPs are not provided. Supplemental services have been cut. To add to the woes imposed by ongoing and continual economic crisis, immigrants have been washing up on their shores; these immigrants have children who need an education. Greek teachers have a challenging situation. Yet, those who are passionate about children continue to teach.

Teaching emerges in the most dire circumstances. Even among the refugee camps, small schools have sprung up. Immigrants who were teachers in Syria, Afghanistan, and Iran are starting small schools. The schools are keep children busy, but also provide a sense of direction and hope to children who are mired in terrible, dramatic events and circumstances. In the midst of hunger, dirt, and issues with water and sanitation, small circles of children form around a teacher who is scratching out words in the dirt. The words are often English words, as they are trying to teach the children a language through which they can communicate in this strange new continent that has many languages, many cultures; English is the designated commonality. There are no smart boards. There are no debates about pedagogy or teacher evaluation systems. There are sticks and dirt and hope for a future that will allow

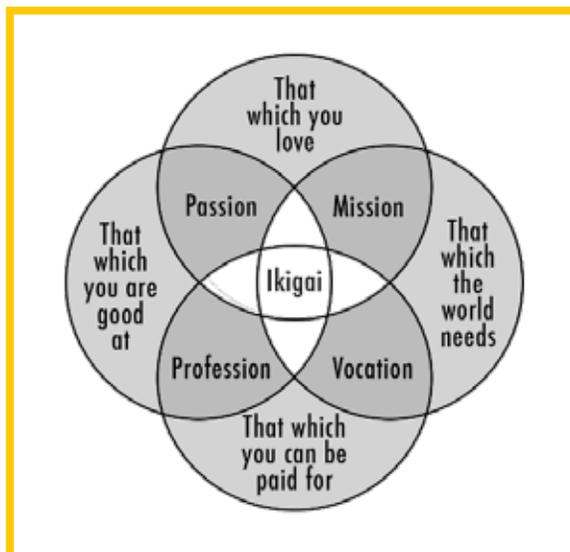
children more opportunities and choices than where they came from.

To me, that is the very definition of education: helping a child to have access to more opportunities. There is a visual circulating on the Internet recently about finding one's "ikigai" or "purpose" (original author unknown).

This is a lofty goal, but one that is an ongoing pursuit and is the peak of talent development. What is notable is that nowhere is the concept of "that which you need help in," or "that in which you struggle." It is only hinted at in the element of "that which you can be paid for" because this element depends on other people.

Disability is defined by the context and in comparison to other people. If you are around others who can read quickly and fluently and you cannot, you might have a reading disability. If you are around others who easily respond to social cues and you do not, you might have a form of autism. If you are surrounded by others who can hear and you cannot, you might have a hearing impairment. If you are very short and in an environment in which everything is placed for people who are taller, a disability has been created. Attention deficit disorder did not come into identification annals until the advent of formal, stay-in-your-seat schooling and jobs that required sustained attention and lack of physical movement. New disabilities are created when the requirements for that which you can be paid for change.

The area identified as "that which the world needs" can be summed up by Jaime Casap (2015), the Google Chief Education Evangelist, who stated, "Often we ask our students the wrong question, 'What do you want to be when you grow up.' I don't like this question. First, there is a very good chance your 'job' doesn't exist. Second, I do not expect kids growing up in communities like Hell's Kitchen to tell me that they want to be a microbiologist or a sustainable materials



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architect. Instead, I want to ask you, 'What problem do you want to solve?' What problem occupies your thoughts? I want you to think about the knowledge, skills, and abilities you need to solve this problem." (p. 1). By asking children to look at the world and the problems within, they can find their place.

In contrast, the elements of "that which you love" and "that which you are good at" are within a person, and only dependent upon comparison within oneself after exposure. After all, how is a child to know that they are passionate about ocean animals unless they are exposed to ocean animals?

From these two sources, the model of ultimate purpose and the hard-scrabble school using a minimum of resources, comes a clear answer to the question posed by the Greek teacher, "How can we add one more thing...?" The answer is not to add, but to focus. It is only through focusing on strengths, interests, problems, and skills that we can help children to hope. Whether a teacher is using a stick and dirt, teaching in a falling-down school, or struggling to incorporate yet more testing into their children's schedule, the job is clear: expose students to more than they have, help them reach beyond where they are, and identify what they can contribute. Twice-exceptional education is so much more than identifying areas of talent and areas of disability and focusing on both. We help children to hope and to find their purpose, whether those children are in successful schools in the USA, failing schools in the inner city in Greece, or in immigrant camps. These are the helpers that Mr. Rogers was talking about.



## Join CEC-TAG, the nation's most dynamic professional association devoted to twice-exceptional children, educational excellence, and diversity.

### MEMBER BENEFITS

Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) is the leading voice for special and gifted education. CEC-TAG establishes professional standards for teacher preparation for the field, develops initiatives to improve gifted education practice, and ensures that the needs of children and youth with exceptionalities are met in educational legislation.

Become a member of a team of professionals devoted to (a) improving educational opportunities for individuals from all diverse groups with gifts, talents, and/or high potential; (b) sponsoring and fostering activities to develop the field of gifted education; (c) supporting and encouraging specialized professional preparation for educators; and (d) working with organizations, agencies, families, or individuals who are interested in promoting the welfare and education of children and youth.

Member benefits include:

- Four issues of the *Journal for the Education of the Gifted* (JEG) per year (includes online access to current and past issues)
- Six issues of *Teaching Exceptional Children* per year
- Two issues of the online journal *Excellence and Diversity in Gifted Education* (EDGE) per year
- Four issues of *Exceptional Children* per year
- Quarterly newsletters from CEC and from CEC-TAG
- A discounted member rate for all meetings of CEC and TAG
- 30% discount on all CEC products
- 10% discount on Prufrock Press products
- Peer-to-peer support
- A network of colleagues who are leaders in the field of gifted education

To join CEC-TAG, go to <http://cectag.com/membership/> or contact Yara Farah, Membership Chair, at [ynfarah@wm.edu](mailto:ynfarah@wm.edu).

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Another approach for helping teachers implement tiered assignments is to analyze the use and implications of tiered assignments in a case study format. Case studies that capture varied assignments found in daily lesson plans created by real teachers can be used to evaluate the effectiveness of teaching strategies thus providing a more authentic method of enhancing understanding. The Indiana Tiered Assignment Project at <http://www.doe.in.gov/highability/tiered-curriculum-project> is a useful place to explore examples of lesson plans in various grade levels, subject areas, readiness, interests, and learning styles. To create a more structured and in-depth professional development option utilizing case studies, consider the resource *Implementing Differentiated Instruction for Gifted and Advanced Learners: A Case Studies Approach* (Weber, Behrens, & Boswell, 2016) which can help educators examine issues related to modifying the curriculum and instruction in a variety of classroom settings. Such problem-based learning scenarios can facilitate discussions among educators hoping to refine their knowledge and skills by analyzing the role and purpose of differentiation in classrooms implementing strategies such as tiered assignments. These discussions can lead to a better understanding of how to ensure that children with various academic needs participate actively in a differentiated classroom. Differentiated instruction, including the use of tiered assignments, supports student engagement in the classroom. Educators can explore how to match a task to the particular needs of a learner through an analysis of a case study. Tasks which are respectful motivate and engage learners. It is also important to note that research supports a link between motivation and learning achievement (Danzi, Reul, & Smith, 2008; Akey, 2006; Heller, Calderon, Medrich, 2003). Consequently, providing opportunities for teachers to strengthen their skills in this area is crucial for supporting a philosophy of differentiation and making a positive impact on learners in the classroom.

Two particular cases found in Weber, et al. (2016) provide an opportunity for additional discussion about tiered assignments focusing on children in a primary classroom. Miss Wendell is a kindergarten teacher with a very diverse group of learners. As a new teacher, Miss Wendell is modifying her assignments because she knows that her students have come to school with a variety of knowledge, skills, and experiences. She realizes that if she does not provide different activities some of her students will be bored and some will misbehave. She wants to provide challenging activities that require each of her students to learn something new. Although there are a few students with special needs who require intervention, there is one student, Brian, who has been tested and diagnosed with autism. Miss Wendell uses techniques such as preferential seating, extended time, and teacher assistance as needed so Brian can be successful in and out of the classroom. There are several

students who have not been labeled, but are struggling academically. One student, Matt, is below grade level and is having a difficult time academically, needing significant support/assistance in all activities. Another student, Keri, seems to be on grade level; however, she is struggling with fluency and comprehension in reading. She is a slow worker and tends to use recess time or free center time to finish her work. Another student, Ernesto, is an English Language Learner (ELL) student from the Honduras. Though he speaks English, his home language is Spanish. Ernesto seems to be on grade level; however, he struggles with staying seated and has a constant need for getting self-recognition. There are four students, Nick, Mason, Gabe, and Sophia, who are consistently achieving at grade level and beyond. The two cases provide lesson plans where Miss Wendell attempts to tier her assignments. Discussion questions follow both cases which allow the educator to determine if the activities were tiered and encourage a discussion to determine if Miss Wendell was able to meet the needs of all of her students.

In another case study, Ms. Renaldo has been placed in a fourth grade reading/language arts classroom (Weber, et al., 2016). The fourth grade students are in a homeroom class of 22 students who switch with another teacher's class of 21 students. The homeroom class is an inclusion class that includes five Exceptional Student Education (ESE) students, two ELL students, and three gifted students. The switch class consists of one ELL student, one Emotional and Behavioral Disorder (EBD) student, and four gifted students. Educators can examine a lesson on writing narratives to determine the effectiveness of the instructional strategy for meeting the diverse needs of the learners in Ms. Renaldo's classroom.

All of the cases are followed by discussion questions along with various activities and extensions for a more focused exploration related to specific classroom needs. Discussion questions, activities, extensions, and suggestions for additional readings support the standards of excellence set forth in the revised NAGC – CEC Teacher Preparation Standards in Gifted and Talented Education (2013b) and the NAGC – CEC Advanced Standards in Gifted Education Teacher Preparation (2013a). Case studies require a connection to formal learning with real-life situations while relying on personal experiences to collect, interpret, and explain circumstances presented in the case. They also require a reflection of a situation for learning, while providing different perspectives on common problems. Through case studies, educators can explore various options for improving services and programs for diverse learners. Finally, case studies, used in conjunction with DVD clips, can be powerful tools for helping educators understand how to provide optimal educational opportunities for academically diverse learners.

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## Additional Resources

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## ***Journal for the Education of the Gifted***

The *Journal for the Education of the Gifted (JEG)*, the official journal of CEC-TAG, offers information and research on the educational and psychological needs of gifted and talented children. Devoted to excellence in educational research and scholarship, the journal acts as a forum for diverse ideas and points of view on gifted education, counseling, and parenting. The June 2016 issue of *JEG* will be arriving in your mailbox soon. The article abstracts are shared below. Should you be interested in submitting a proposal to the journal, please visit <http://jeg.sagepub.com>. In addition, Dr. Tracy L. Cross, Editor-in-Chief, is always looking for reviewers. Please e-mail the journal at [cfgejeg@wm.edu](mailto:cfgejeg@wm.edu) if you would like to be added to the reviewer list.

### **ABSTRACTS FOR JEG, JUNE 2016, 39(2)**

**Project Promise: A Long-Term Follow-Up of Low-Income Gifted Students Who Participated in a Summer Enrichment Program, Corina R. Kaul, Susan K. Johnsen, Terrill F. Saxon, and Mary M. Witte** - "Overlooked gems" is the term used in gifted education to describe high-potential, low-income students who are unable to excel because of significant barriers in their homes, environments, and educational systems. To address these barriers, educators have offered enrichment and other types of talent development programs to this at-risk group of students. Using a retrospective survey, this study examined the perceptions of 89 low-income gifted students who participated in a summer enrichment program for 3 or more years and reports their impressions regarding social, emotional, motivational, academic, career, and generational benefits of participation. These findings expand the extant literature related to identifying components perceived as most beneficial and offer insight into potential multigenerational benefits.

**Barriers to Underserved Students' Participation in Gifted Programs and Possible Solutions, Del Siegle, E. Jean Gubbins, Patricia O'Rourke, Susan Dulong Langley, Rachel U. Mun, Sarah R. Luria, Catherine A. Little, D. Betsy McCoach, Tawnya Knupp, Carolyn M. Callahan, and Jonathan A. Plucker** - Gifted students' learning gains result from complex, advanced, and meaningful content provided by a knowledgeable teacher through high-quality curriculum and instruction at an appropriate pace with scaffolding and feedback. These elements exert influence that increases with dosage and within structures that facilitate student engagement in rigorous experiences, including interactions with one another. Talent development is a two-part process. First, educators and parents must provide opportunities for talent to surface, and then they must recognize the talent and provide educational opportunities that engage the emerging talent and move it to exceptional levels. Unfortunately, a variety of barriers exist that limit underserved students' participation in this process. We discuss these barriers within a proposed model of talent development.

**After the Marland Report: Four Decades of Progress?, Jennifer L. Jolly and Jennifer H. Robins** - The release of the Marland Report in 1972 is often described as a watershed moment in the field of gifted education and remains a touchstone for the field today. The report presented the federal government's formal definition of giftedness and outlined the unique learning needs of gifted students and the challenges faced by these students in U.S. schools. This article presents an examination of the goals and outcomes set forth in the Marland Report, the context within which the report evolved, and lessons learned, which can lead to an improved understanding of this legislation and the state of the field today.

**Finnish Teachers' Conceptions of Giftedness, Sonja Laine, Elina Kuusisto, and Kirsi Tirri** - This article presents two independent studies of Finnish teachers' conceptions of giftedness and considers whether it is a malleable or fixed quality. The first qualitative study examined elementary school teachers' ( $N = 212$ ) conceptions via inductive-oriented content analysis, whereas the second study measured teachers' (elementary  $n = 184$ , secondary  $n = 279$ ) conceptions with a quantitative approach. According to teachers' open-ended definitions, giftedness was seen to be multidimensional and a characteristic that differentiates the person from others. Giftedness was also described via cognitive, creative, and motivational features of the gifted. Furthermore, the two independent studies suggest quite different views on how Finnish teachers understand the developmental nature of giftedness: The first indicates that the developmental nature of giftedness was not frequently mentioned, whereas the second found that a malleable view of giftedness (i.e., a growth mindset) was dominant. Thus, this article highlights a need for in-depth and mixed-methods research designs to study how teachers see the developing nature of giftedness.

## Society Member Activation Instructions for your SAGE Journals Online (SJO) Account

The electronic version of the Journal for the Education of the Gifted (JEG) is available through SAGE Journals Online (SJO). To activate your account please follow these steps:

1. Go to the SAGE Journals Online site: <https://online.sagepub.com/cgi/activate/basic>.
2. Where it says "Activate Your Online Subscription:" enter your Member ID then select The Association for the Gifted-CEC (TAG-CEC) from the Society drop down menu and click "Submit."
3. On the "Instructions" page be sure to check your personal data. Enter a username and password and click submit to confirm activation. Do not click the Journal Title link until the confirmation process is complete.
4. Once complete, return to the electronic Journal homepage and select the Journal cover for access to the current issue or click "Current Issue."
5. To select an issue from the archive, click "All Issues".
6. To search for articles either click "Search this journal" or use the "Advance Journal Search".

The username and password you create you will use when returning to the site <http://jeg.sagepub.com/>. If you forget your username or password, go to the "Subscribe" tab and look for the link "What to do if you forget your User Name and/or Password" under "Managing your Subscription to Journal for the Education of the Gifted" which will take you to the following link <http://online.sagepub.com/cgi/recnamepwd>. You will be asked to provide some information about yourself. Upon confirmation of the information your username and/or password will be emailed to you.

If you require further assistance, please contact your Society's Member Services Dept. or contact SAGE directly at [societymember@sagepub.com](mailto:societymember@sagepub.com).



**Find CEC-TAG at:**



**CEC TAG**

**The Association for Gifted**

*website:*

**[cectag.com](http://cectag.com)**

# snapshots from CEC Conference in St. Louis, April 2016



## ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTORS

### **KIMBERLEY CHANDLER** - [klchan@wm.edu](mailto:klchan@wm.edu)

Dr. Kimberley Chandler is the Curriculum Director at the Center for Gifted Education at the College of William and Mary and a Clinical Assistant Professor. Her professional background includes teaching gifted students in a variety of settings, serving as an administrator of a school district gifted program, and providing professional development for teachers and administrators nationally and internationally. Kimberley has served as the editor and contributing author of numerous curriculum materials from the Center for Gifted Education. She co-authored a CEC-TAG Educational Resource (with Dr. Tamra Stambaugh) titled *Effective Curriculum for Underserved Gifted Students* and is the co-editor (with Cheryll Adams) of the CEC-TAG Educational Resource *Effective Program Models for Gifted Students From Underserved Populations*. Currently Kimberley is the Network Representative on the NAGC Board of Directors, co-author (with Barbara Dullaghan) of "The Primary Place" column in *Teaching for High Potential*," and the editor of the CEC-TAG newsletter *The Update*.

### **CLAIRE HUGHES** - [cehughes@ccga.edu](mailto:cehughes@ccga.edu)

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