

# University partnership fuels Sandusky gifted school



*A student reacts to a classmate's question at Sandusky City Schools' Regional Center for Advanced Academic Studies. Serving grades three through six, the school is thought to be the only public school in Ohio designed exclusively for gifted students.*

## District going the extra mile to serve gifted kids

*Gary Motz, managing editor*

**O**n a chilly morning last month, a 99-year-old building on the edge of downtown Sandusky was teeming with 21st century learning, innovation and enthusiasm.

Opened in 1916 as an auto dealership, **Sandusky City Schools** bought the building in 1937. Since then, it has served the district as an industrial trades school, junior high school, preschool and, today, a self-contained, full-time gifted education school: the Regional Center for Advanced Academic Studies.

Launched in 2013, the center is the academic home to more than 100 students in grades three through six. It is thought to be the only public school in Ohio serving just gifted students.

The center is the brainchild of Sandusky City Schools Chief Academic Officer **Julie McDonald** and her staff. After submitting proposals for the school for seven years, her plans finally came to fruition thanks to her persistence, the support of Superintendent Dr. **Eugene T.W. Sanders** and a generous grant from a local foundation.

"When Dr. Sanders came to the district, I pulled out the proposal one more time and literally threw it on the table," McDonald said. "I told him it was our wish list for gifted students and that it had become kind of a running joke for me to submit it to every new superintendent. He looked at it, asked some questions and then charged our staff with coming up with the finer details of what this could look like."



Surprised and pleased to be moving forward, McDonald returned with a plan for operating the center without increasing overhead costs. The district already had a home for the center: the preschool, which had transferred its students to the elementary buildings in 2012. An administrator was retiring, so that salary could go toward hiring a principal. The district, whose school board has long supported gifted education, already had four gifted intervention specialists on staff. The clincher was a five-year, \$1 million grant from the Randolph J. and Estelle M. Dorn Foundation in Sandusky, with half designated for the gifted center and half for the district's early childhood education initiative.

To enroll in the center, students must meet state standards for being gifted in reading or math, or be identified as having superior cognitive abilities. Originally serving grades four through six, the center added third-graders this year. Specially trained teachers provide gifted services to seventh-graders at Sandusky Middle School, a practice that will extend to eighth-graders next year. The middle school students take classes with the same team of students they attended the gifted center with.

The center's goals include meeting each student's needs by providing a world-class education through innovative curriculum and instruction; maximizing their academic potential to the fullest; building collaboration among students, families, staff and the community; and reaching out for services and options to enhance students' ability to succeed in a global economy.

"Our goal here is to help these kids reach their potential through advanced academics, giving them opportunities that they don't have in the regular classroom," said gifted intervention specialist **Jami Scott**. "We have to cover the same standards here, but we can take it to a deeper level and cover a broader topic base; it's more advanced."

Students start the day with a free breakfast, then gather in a college-style commons area to watch a student-led "newscast." Topics include news, weather, sports, history, riddles and routine announcements. If someone has a birthday, the birthday boy or girl is serenaded. Each class takes turns producing and presenting the newscast.

After that it's off to class, where the advanced level of the curriculum challenges and engages students, and also keeps the teachers on their toes. In one classroom, a teacher was having trouble logging on to a math website to present a lesson, and students provided no shortage of suggestions for fixing the problem. In another class, students enthusiastically competed to answer questions and provide input.

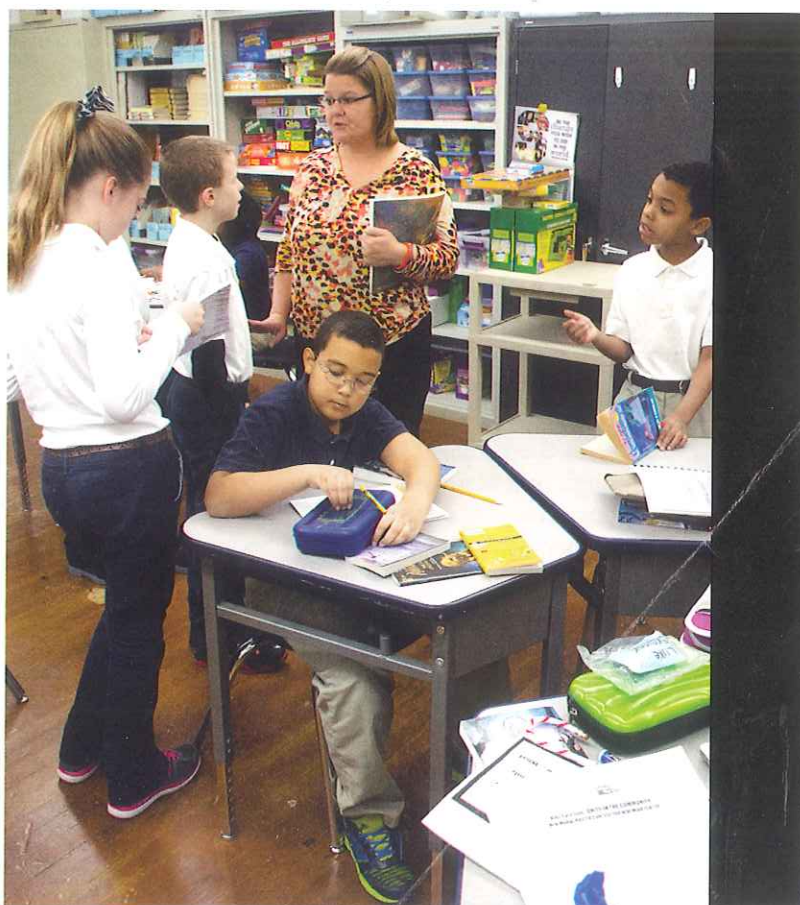
"This year we adopted a math ... and social studies curriculum that were designed with gifted in mind," said center Principal **Tara Toft**. "Both have online components, textbooks and

workbooks, and are very inquiry-based. With science, we're part of an iEvolve STEM grant with Bowling Green State University. In reading, we use Junior Great Books and we also are very novel-based. We don't have a library at the center, but there is a public library two blocks away, so we take advantage of that."

In addition to academic courses, students have classes in art, vocal music, physical education and computer science. Most also take part in a strings program that allows them to start playing instruments in fourth grade, two years earlier than their traditional school counterparts. Students can rent the district-owned instruments for just \$40 a year.

"They have violin, viola, cello and bass from which to choose," Toft said. "We encourage every student to do it, and most have. We encourage them all to participate by pointing out the benefits, the link between learning to play an instrument and other kinds of learning. Our middle school strings program has improved greatly, thanks to the head start kids are getting here."

Besides the teachers, professors from Bowling Green State University help students reach expanded levels of learning. The Dorn grant also established the Dorn Fellowship Series,



*Gifted intervention specialist Karen Foss answers a student's question at the Regional Center for Advanced Academic Studies.*



which enables the center to recruit professors to work with students and teachers at the center; on the Bowling Green Firelands Campus in Huron and its main campus in Bowling Green; and on field trips. The professors' areas of expertise include history; social studies; environmental chemistry; marine biology; anatomy and physiology; and criminal justice.

"The Dorn partnership pays stipends to professors to commit to us one semester at a time," Toft said. "That involves at least an average of six hours a week of consultation with our teachers, direct contact with our students at the center in person or via Skype, and on campus or off campus in any way that we can extend their standards and take their understanding deeper with the help of the professors."

Among the projects students have worked on with the professors are water quality studies on the Huron River, Lake Erie and Old Woman Creek national research reserve; field trips to Fallen Timbers, Fort Meigs, Cuyahoga Valley National Park and other historic sites; criminal justice research; and forensics field work. Future projects include Underground Railroad and Native American studies and field trips. Students also have access to the archive library at Bowling Green's main campus. In addition, the professors and center staff conduct special summer programs.

"Part of our mission is getting kids college and career ready," McDonald said. "What better way to do that than expose them to college-level thinking and vocabulary and just the experience of being on campus?"

"And by working with the professors, college becomes less scary, they get comfortable with doing that and being on campus. That's what we want, for the kids to be comfortable with their gifts and not shy away from them like they might have done when they were singled out in regular school for being smart. Here, everybody is smart ... so what they can do with their talents here is a different story."

"I really want these kids to be challenged and know how to work through that academic challenge," Scott said. "Because studies show that a lot of students identified as gifted drop out in college; they don't know what to do because they weren't really challenged in school. Being at the center lets them learn early on that it's OK to make mistakes — you don't need to be perfect. They also learn what to do if they don't know something."

Working with the professors has made a big impression on fifth-grader **Nevaeh Richardson**. She already has her eyes set on college and knows where she wants to go.

"One professor came and talked about the Black Swamp and we went to see where it used to be," Nevaeh said. "A couple of weeks later we got to go and actually see the campus. It was really fun. We were in a classroom, went to a library to look at

old documents and walked around the campus. I want to study to be a vet and Bowling Green is the college I want to go to."

Fifth-grader **Kye Scott** said he thinks the center's advanced curriculum will help him graduate from high school and college earlier. He plans on becoming a doctor or engineer.

"They give you harder things to work on here; we're learning seventh- and eighth-grade stuff," Kye said. "My brother is in eighth grade and I'm already learning some of the things he is."

"My favorite subject is math, and I really like the field trips. Plus, we have iPads and other technology here that they didn't have in my old school."



*A student enjoys visiting with some of the dozens of fish, lizards and other animals housed in a classroom at Sandusky City's gifted school. Students are responsible for caring for the menagerie that lines the classroom's walls.*

Toft likens creating a school for gifted children to providing programs for special needs students. She said it is schools' responsibility to meet the particular needs of *all* children.

"If you had a child who had what we all consider special needs, you wouldn't hesitate to put them on an IEP (Individualized Education Program) and give them all the services they need to learn at their best and reach their full potential," Toft said. "This is no different. These kids here are the ones who sat in the back of the class and waited to be challenged. Here, they wait no longer — from the minute they walk in, we are challenging them." ■

*Editor's note:* For more information on Sandusky City's Regional Center for Advanced Academic Studies, contact Tara Toft at (419) 984-1349 or toft@scs-k12.net. Information also is posted online at <http://links.ohioschoolboards.org/45451>.