Non-fluent, gifted students sought

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Just because students aren't fluent in English doesn't mean they're not gifted, says the director of the parish's gifted and talented program.

That's why Nilda Aguirre applied for a grant to fund a program that not only identifies gifted children who are still learning English, but also puts them in special classes so they have a better shot at getting into the gifted program in a year or so.

"They're very much under-represented" in the program, Aguirre said. "It's a national problem."

The competitive grant — $140,000 each of the next two years — is from the Office of Bilingual Education and Language Minority Affairs in the U.S. Department of Education.

The money is funding what's known as Project IGNITE — Identifying Gifted LEP Students In and Through the ESOL project. LEP stands for Limited English proficient, and ESOL means English for speakers of other languages.

The program relies on Bertha Hinojosa, a resource teacher with the gifted program who's heading up the initiative, to screen elementary school students who are either in or have just graduated from ESOL classes.

The program will expand to middle schools next year, she said, and reach more than 500 students in grades one through eight.

It's hard to say how many of the 1,078 students in the gifted program this year have been in ESOL classes, officials said, but they're under-represented because the current test used to get them there is an IQ test.

"They use some kind of provisions for the children, but it's basically a verbal test," Aguirre said. Hinojosa added that it's especially tough for the students in ESOL classes because they're from other countries and, even if they can speak English well, don't have the same knowledge of the American culture.

Through Project IGNITE, Hinojosa gives the students a non-verbal screening that tests their problem solving and critical thinking skills, their reasoning and other traits common among gifted students.

For instance, she asks the students to look at a design on a piece of paper, then create that design using a set of green and white cubes.

Hinojosa said she plans to finish screening the elementary school children -- most of whom attend University Terrace, Park Forest and LaBelle Aire elementary schools -- this fall.

The ones she and Aguirre determine are gifted will be put into special "pre-gifted" classes that Hinojosa and three aides — two Hispanic and one Vietnamese — will teach, starting in December.

Each student identified will be pulled out of his or her regular classroom for at least three hours of instruction per week. Students in the ESOL program are pulled out of their regular classrooms for English classes as well.

Once they've been in the IGNITE program for a year and can speak English, Hinojosa said she'll recommend the students to the office of pupil appraisal to get tested for the gifted program.

Hinojosa said at that point, the students will have a better shot at getting into the gifted program because they won't be "starting from scratch."

Project IGNITE is modeled after Project GOTCHA, which Aguirre developed when she was with the Broward County school system in Florida. The same curriculum used in that program will be used here, she said.

Aguirre met Hinojosa in 1992 when she was conducting a training session in connection with that program. Now, the two are conducting their own training sessions across Louisiana to introduce officials from other school districts to the details of Project IGNITE, they said.