

The Nova Program 1987-2011

The Nova Program, the first self-contained academically accelerated program in the Stevens Point Area Public School District, began in the fall of 1987. It was begun primarily due to concerns of parents who felt their children's academic needs were not being challenged enough in the regular classroom, and the existing GT pull-out program only met the students' needs part-time. Dr. Emery Babcock, the district's curriculum director, hired three teachers to write curriculum for this new program and teach it. The teachers were Santha Bickford, first and second grades, Jeanette Handrich, third and fourth grades, and Shirley Gibb, fifth and sixth grades. The program was named the Nova Program as a reflection of the bright young students, or "stars."

The first Nova Program location was at McKinley School where the program was a school within a school. Students were tested, and those with an IQ of 130 or above were selected from the 10 elementary schools in the district. A creativity component was also used and added to the IQ score in the selection process. Parents were notified and had the option to have their children attend the Nova Program or remain at their home school and not receive the compacted and accelerated program. Approximately 20-28 students were served in each classroom and a waiting list was formed and kept at Dr. Babcock's office.

The first year was a challenge for both the students and the teachers. A number of the students found a new camaraderie with their classmates, while others found not being the "smartest" kid in the class disconcerting. The energy level was extremely high and most of the students selected utilized the accelerated program to complete academic progress of at least two grades ahead of their regular education class peers. Students practiced for and entered the International Math Olympiad and spelling bees and did extremely well. During the third year of the program, the fifth and sixth graders also participated in the National Academic Decathlon.

The program was moved to Jackson School in 1991 and then to Jefferson School in 2005 where, due to budget problems, it was phased out over a number of years ending with the remaining sixth graders during the 2011-2012 school year being served on a part-time basis.

Mrs. Shirley Gibb retired from teaching in 2001 and Mrs. Betty Wright was hired to replace her. Santha Bickford retired in 2003 and Mrs. Jenny Graboski was hired in her place. The first and second grades were phased out during her period with the program. In 2009 Mrs. Wright retired and Mrs. Stephanie Birchler was hired. Then, in 2010, the third and fourth grades were phased out leaving only fifth and sixth grades for the 2010-2011 school year. Mrs. Handrich retired at the end of this school year and Mrs. Ullman was hired to teach the remaining sixth graders half days for the final year of the Nova Program.