

# SYSTEM SUPPORT FOR GIFTED STUDENTS IN POLAND WARSAW GIFTED SUPPORT SYSTEM AND WARS I SAWA PROGRAM

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**Abstract.** Poland has a long tradition of working with gifted and talented students. Although for decades it was more often the result of enthusiasts' teachers than an element of state or local government policy. Despite this, many children received support in the development of their abilities, implementing, for example, the Individual Learning Program, taking part in knowledge competitions, sports competitions, subject Olympiads, or being under the care of scholarship institutions<sup>1</sup>. The research was also conducted on the issues of gifted students and their achievements. The subjects were dealt with by pedagogues, psychologists, and sociologists. In this regard, an important place should be attributed to The Maria Grzegorzewska University in Warsaw, in which, apart from scientific research, a program for educating gifted children's teachers has been implemented for years.

In the presented article, however, we will focus on the initiative taken by the Education Office of the Capital City of Warsaw, which is creating a cooperation network between schools that have developed a system of support for gifted students. The Warsaw Support System for the Gifted is a program created and monitored for over 10 years by the Education Office of the Capital City of Warsaw and is called WARS and SAWA<sup>2</sup>.

**Keywords:** gifted students, achievement, support programs

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<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that in individual schools the level of care for gifted students varied. Many researchers have recognized the fact that the school equals the possibilities of students capable of the requirements of average education, and even that a talented student is not an object of teachers' care because it is considered to be the one who can handle it (Limont, 2004). This last observation was confirmed by the Supreme Audit Office report showing disproportions between the level of scholarship care in various voivodships, the lack of consideration of the needs of talented students in school documents, the lack of strategies for recognizing and working with talented students (NIK, 2007). These negative phenomena were also visible in the research of Teresa Giza (2005), which showed that 40% of schools do not have any solutions related to supporting gifted students.

<sup>2</sup> It is also the name of the certificate, granted to schools that belong to The Warsaw Support System for the Gifted and developed their own program, adequate to the needs of students, and possessed housing and human resources.

### **The origin of the WARS and SAWA program (WiS)**

The concern for the development of gifted students, as an element of the state's strategy, has appeared in subsequent documents (so-called strategies) for years. The establishment of the WiS program is part of the strategy set out by the Ministry of National Education (Ministry of National Education) for the years 2007-2013 (Ministry of National Education, 2005), in which one of the elements is the development of student interests and help for gifted students through, for example, conducting scientific clubs and scientific care, adequate to the environment in which the school operates<sup>3</sup>.

Changes related to the actions taken in an attempt to create a coherent system of care for gifted students within the state<sup>4</sup>, as well as within municipalities or individual establishments should be to some extent due to the audit of the Supreme Audit Office (2007) and the guidelines developed on its basis. These changes also included legal provisions that took into account the special educational needs of talented students. The Warsaw WARS and SAWA program was created as a response to social and economic changes and the city's demand for people with high potential who will contribute to its development. As a consequence, great importance was also attached to the special educational needs of gifted students and the need to create conditions for learning adequate to their capabilities<sup>5</sup>. Thus, schools began to be expected to recognize and support talent development. At the same time, Warsaw as a city created conditions for cooperation between schools and other education and culture institutions that support the development of gifted students.

### **Wybrane aspekty realizacji program**

The WARS and SAWA program was established in the ordinance of the President of the Capital City Warsaw in 2009 and since then every few years its assumptions have been updated, adequate to the changing educational situation of the country and city<sup>6</sup>. Despite this, these assumptions are always consistent with the education strategy adopted by the city of Warsaw, which emphasizes the importance of caring for and supporting gifted students and enabling them to be competitive not only in the domestic but also in the international area. In the perspective of 2013-2020, the main directions of development of talented students were: creating conditions for the development of interests, passions, and abilities in the context of

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<sup>3</sup> This strategy was in line with the guidelines of the Lisbon Strategy and programs created within the European Union aimed at strengthening human capital.

<sup>4</sup> In this regard, it should be mentioned that two large projects were carried out whose purpose was to develop guidelines for systemic solutions in work with gifted students. One of them was also attended by The Maria Grzegorzewska University.

<sup>5</sup> It is worth noting that this was not the first such program in Poland. From 1999 The Lower Silesian Support System of Lower Silesia "zDolny Ślązak" was operating, under which schools connected with the idea of working with talented students were supported (Lower Silesian Network of Supporting Giftedness).

<sup>6</sup> For example, education reform has forced changes to the curriculum, taking into account the new school structure.

career selection, not only educational but also professional; supporting the development of students' creativity, by using such activities as chess, programming, media education, debates; encouragement to seek out-of-school forms of developing passion, with the participation of universities, NGOs and other institutions; supporting active and innovative teachers. Warsaw's educational resources should play an important role in these activities, which is perceived as a place conducive to lifelong education (Education Office of the Capital City of Warsaw, 2013). It is worth noting that joining the WiS program does not bring any financial benefits to the school.

As part of the program, several unique and distinctive solutions can be distinguished.

The development of a school program to support gifted students is associated with the possibility of being awarded by the President of the Capital City Warsaw WARS and SAWA certificate, which is a symbol of the quality of school work. This certificate is granted for four years and after this period it can be extended for an indefinite period, but it has to be provided that the results of the evaluation of work with talented students are presented. Both the gifted support program and its evaluation is evaluated by a group of specialists appointed for this purpose.

Creative Feasts at WARSA and SAWA are meetings organized by schools that have a WiS certificate. They are cyclical and have an open formula. They are prepared adequately for the possibilities of the host school. Sometimes methodical or organizational solutions are shown, sometimes students present their achievements. There is time to exchange experiences, discussions, and search for new inspirations. These meetings integrate teachers from different schools and enable them to establish cooperation.

An important solution developed under the WiS program is the teachers' handbook of a gifted student. These are workshops on various school subjects and different levels of education, led by practitioners from networked schools. Teachers present selected methodological solutions developed by them in working with gifted students. Workshops are conducted in the schools of conducting classes teachers.

Since 2016, in cooperation with the University of Warsaw, a series of meetings "Master and student" has been conducted, addressed to teachers and students of Warsaw high schools.

The summer seminar for teachers has been organized since 2011 in cooperation with the Copernicus Science Center. It is a combination of lectures led by experts from various fields and workshop work. The practical part is run by the staff of the Copernicus Science Center and allows teachers to use the resources of this institution. Thanks to these annual meetings, an atmosphere of innovation is created in teaching talented students.

Great attention under the WiS program is paid to the issue of teacher improvement, including both sensitizing them to the special educational needs of gifted students and strengthening their competences when working with gifted students. Hence, teachers can take advantage of the offer of a self-government teacher training facility (Warsaw Center for Educational Innovation and Training -

WCIES). Training for all teachers from Warsaw schools is free of charge. On the other hand, teachers from WiS schools are dedicated to special workshops, conferences, and consultations related to the creation and evaluation of the program, identification of abilities, or methodology of working with gifted students. It is worth adding that for many years Warsaw was the only city in Poland that had a methodological advisor for work with talented students<sup>7</sup>.

### **The WiS program in the scope of scientific research**

It is important that although initially the program was addressed to the so-called ranking schools, whose students had objective achievements, e.g. they were winners of the subject knowledge competitions, with the following years, covered more and more new institutions whose achievements were not so obvious. Regardless of which school decided to introduce the WiS program, the main motive was the care for gifted students, to some extent the experience of the school at work with the gifted, but also the hope of changing the image of the school in the local environment, which will be associated with the quality of school work (Łukasiewicz-Wieleba, Baum, 2015).

The most frequently mentioned benefits noticed in connection with the school's participation in the program include supporting the development of talents, increasing the motivation of students to develop interests, talents, and passions, as well as identifying the interests and talents of students. The benefits also apply to organizational aspects. The school is adapting its educational offer to the individual needs of students better, has staff able to diagnose the interests and talents of students, as well as having the competence to support their development. Schools participating in the program are expanding their offer of additional classes. Students can implement their own initiatives. A talented student is noticed by the teachers so the impact of education on him increases.

Schools benefit from participation in the program, as the number of winners and finalists of subject competitions is increasing. Parents of gifted students are more likely to get involved in school life. The quality of education is improving. The prestige of the school associated with having a certificate increases, which promotes the school in a local environment. The school becomes more attractive for students who are more likely to attend classes (their attendance is increasing). In addition, schools may apply for additional funds under the Warsaw Educational Initiatives and the School with an Idea program, which allows the development of the didactic base and creating opportunities for students to learn in a modern educational environment.

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<sup>7</sup> The role of the methodological advisor is to support teachers of specific subjects in their didactic work. And so the methodological counselor in mathematics includes teachers of mathematics, early childhood education - teachers working in classes 1-3 of primary school. The role of the methodological advisor on working with talented students was to support teachers of all subjects in their activities for talented students and to coordinate cooperation between schools participating in The Warsaw Support System for the Gifted.

Teachers themselves declare that participation in training allows them to raise competences and acquire knowledge related to work with a gifted student, which translates into higher commitment and greater job satisfaction. Teachers also implement innovative and diverse work methods that allow you to work more effectively with students. The teaching staff participating in the project have the opportunity to exchange experiences and further development through dialogue among practitioners.

Interestingly, the beneficiaries of the project are not only the most talented students. Medium and weaker students are also activated. The atmosphere of creative improvement is given to everyone (Łukasiewicz-Wieleba i Baum, 2015, strony 159-167).

Many good practices have also been developed during participation in the WARS and SAWA program. Systematic diagnosis of all students regarding their talents, interests, and special educational needs, as well as their learning styles, began. Documenting the results of the diagnosis and student achievement was systematized. The offer of free extracurricular activities focused on the development of talents and creative competences were expanded. The level of didactic activities directed at the individualization of work with talented students was raised, and innovative course education programs were implemented. Students were involved in working in student councils, organizing projects, and taking part in subject knowledge competitions. Care was taken to provide psychological and pedagogical support to the gifted student and his parents. These activities translated directly into an increase in the level of student achievement and prestige of the school. In addition, schools established cooperation with institutions (universities, culture and art centers), specialists (organization of lectures for students and trips to interesting places) and parents of talented students (support of students) (Łukasiewicz-Wieleba i Baum, 2015, strony 167-171).

### **Summary**

A gifted student and his special educational needs remain not only in scientific, but also local government interests. Despite collecting examples of many good practices from various parts of Poland<sup>8</sup>, it is obvious that Warsaw stands out against this background. In the 2019/2020 school year, as many as 195 Warsaw schools belonged to a network of schools supporting the development of WARS and SAWA gifted and certified students. After 10 years of developing systemic solutions for working with gifted students, we can talk about specific changes in schools that are favorable to the situation of gifted students. In teachers' reports, the attitude to special educational needs of gifted students has clearly changed. There was a greater readiness to better recognize the potential of students and indicate ways to develop

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<sup>8</sup> For example, in recent years, as part of an EU project, the Association of Polish Cities in cooperation with the Center for the Development of Education took the initiative to analyze the education management system. One of the development modules was to support students with special talents in Polish municipalities (Łukasiewicz-Wieleba, 2018).

it. When new teachers are employed, their tasks include joining in the support of students in their subjects, which means that whole school staff is activated to include gifted students in their teaching activities. What is more, schools, by monitoring and evaluating their work, constantly adapt programs and activities to emerging problems. They notice that after several years, many solutions were accepted by the entire school community. Also worth noting is the fact that students' willingness to consciously build their achievements in various fields has increased (e.g. the number of people taking part in various forms of competition increases every year), and that teachers are aware of the need to deepen their knowledge about the specifics of work with talented students. A measurable indicator is also a significant number of pedagogical innovations in Warsaw schools.

A new strategy for Warsaw is currently being developed (Strategy # Warsaw2030), by the Education Office of the Capital City of Warsaw and the academic staff of the University of Warsaw. One of the modules of this strategy is the quality of education, including urban activities undertaken for gifted students' development. As part of the strategy, the Creative Environment area, a goal has been separated (4.1) We are developing the creative potential in which the Culture Office will be leading in its implementation. This objective will also apply to support the development of gifted students.

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