

Gifted, Talented, and Underserved

Chester E. Finn, Jr.

EDUCATION POLICY IN RECENT DECADES has been focused primarily on ensuring that all children—especially poor and minority children—attain at least a minimum level of academic achievement. As educators and policymakers struggle to close gaps and ensure equal opportunity through education, however, many of the country’s most talented young people—rich and poor alike—are left unable to surge ahead, languishing in classes geared toward universal but modest proficiency.

In our effort to leave no child behind, we are failing the high-ability children who are the most likely to become tomorrow’s scientists, inventors, poets, and entrepreneurs—and in the process we risk leaving our nation behind. This failure is due more to ideology, political correctness, distorted priorities, and fallacious theories of education, than it is to scarce resources, as many administrators and politicians would have us believe.

The truth is that high-ability students do not need more money spent on their schooling as much as they need to be allowed to learn at a faster pace with other gifted students. This will require more “gifted and talented” classrooms and programs in elementary schools, more honors and Advanced Placement courses at the secondary level, and, in particular, more opportunities to enroll in specialized schools such as “exam schools,” STEM schools, and no-excuses charter schools. Perhaps most important, solving this problem will require moving toward a culture that celebrates achievement and the institutions that foster it rather than one that laments “cream skimming” and “wasting” resources on the most talented young Americans.

CHESTER E. FINN, JR., is president of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute and a senior fellow at Stanford’s Hoover Institution.

Continuing on our current path and ignoring this problem would be bad for the economy, for society, and for the hundreds of thousands of gifted children who now lack the opportunities they need to thrive. There is no excuse for neglecting our best and brightest students.

GIFTED IN AMERICA

Economists and social scientists have been concerned for years about evidence that the American education system is falling behind those of other developed countries — and particularly with regard to the way we hone and train our ablest young people. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development administers tests to 15-year-olds every three years through its Programme for International Student Assessment. The tests are used to evaluate education systems worldwide. Paul Peterson of Harvard, Eric Hanushek of Stanford, and Ludger Woessmann of the University of Munich analyzed the results of the PISA math test and found that, for the high-school graduating class of 2009, the percentage of students in the United States who were highly accomplished was well below that of many of our allies and rivals:

No less than 30 of the 56 other countries that participated in the PISA math test had a larger percentage of students who scored at the international equivalent of the advanced level. While just 6 percent of U.S. students earned at least 617.1 points on the PISA 2006 exam, 28 percent of Taiwanese students did. . . . At least 20 percent of students in Hong Kong, Korea, and Finland were also highly accomplished. Twelve other countries had more than twice the percentage of highly accomplished students as the U.S.

The American education system is not producing enough high achievers to sustain the country's long-term well-being in an internationally competitive world. It is important to note, however, that our problem is not that we lack smart children; it's that gifted students are not being given the tools they need to realize their potential and compete.

The United States has far more intellectually talented young people than we have seats in accelerated programs. That there aren't enough spots in publicly funded advanced programs should come as a surprise to no one, but the scale of this shortfall is shocking. In New York City in 2013, almost 12,000 kids qualified for the school system's 2,700 "gifted

and talented” openings. The same year, Ohio schools identified 254,000 gifted children statewide—the equivalent of 15% of the state’s student population. In a time of tight budgets, rival priorities, and apathy regarding giftedness, however, Ohio public schools can accommodate only one in five of these “identified” youngsters in gifted-education programs or accelerated classrooms.

At least Ohio requires its school systems to identify gifted students; many states do not bother to find them at all, in part because determining just who is considered gifted is complicated and controversial. Ohio legislators settled on a multi-part definition of “gifted,” which recognizes “superior cognitive ability” in addition to special talent in fields like “creative thinking” and “visual and performing arts”—but even this vague, inclusive definition is controversial. In a meritocratic society that prizes grit, enterprise, and persistence at least as much as innate endowments, what exactly does it mean to be gifted? Everyone knows someone who has tremendous intellectual capacity but lacks the motivation to do anything with it, just as everyone knows someone who makes up in hard work what he may lack in raw intellect. Indeed, the very term “gifted” is part of the problem, implying as it does that one’s prospects and eventual fate have more to do with luck than pluck, more with the blessings that accompanied one’s birth than with one’s capacity to make the most of opportunities.

Complicating the issue is the tricky question of whether all “gifts” are equal. Artists, for example, bridle at the suggestion that being good at math or astrophysics is more valuable—and more deserving of special attention by the education system—than being a great dancer or pianist. Many educators have been powerfully influenced by theorists such as Harvard’s Howard Gardner with his doctrine of “multiple intelligences.” He has identified nine distinct intelligences, including “bodily kinesthetic” and “existential” intelligence. As a result of this trend toward inclusion, advocacy groups such as the National Association for Gifted Children and its state affiliates resist precisely defining and counting the gifted, preferring instead more general, inclusive statements like this definition on its website: “Gifted individuals are those who demonstrate outstanding levels of aptitude or competence in one or more domains.” (A definition this broad applies as much to the young man who does a terrific job mowing the lawn as to the young woman who earns perfect “fives” on all her Advanced Placement tests.)

In a culture that claims that “every child is gifted in his own way,” it is far more difficult to get youngsters with truly strong intellectual potential the help they need to realize that potential. It is difficult to lobby effectively for improved opportunity for a population that can be neither defined nor enumerated. Indeed, if “gifted” cannot be usefully defined, it is hard to make a compelling case for gifted education at all.

To be sure, American public education should be improved for everyone. Today, however, it is far more popular to advocate for programs to boost the achievement of disabled or disadvantaged children than to call for increasing the number of programs for high achievers. Politicians who do so are likely to be accused of championing those kids who will “succeed regardless” at the expense of the poor, the disabled, or racial or ethnic minorities. Pressing the education system to pay more attention to high achievers (or high-ability youngsters capable of becoming high achievers) is easily depicted as elitist in a country where “top one percent” has become almost a curse and any number of civil-rights advocates and enforcers are poised to allege discrimination and “disparate impact” at the drop of a hat.

GIFTED AND DISADVANTAGED

The people advocating the loudest for gifted-education programs are typically middle-class white and Asian parents seeking to maximize advantages for their kids and others like them — which renders the whole project suspect for many advocates of the disadvantaged. The students who are the most let down by the present state of affairs, however, are the high-potential children from poor and minority backgrounds whose gifts are badly neglected in today’s education system.

Smart kids from well-connected, upper-middle-class families more often than not will receive a solid education. This is not because the education system is designed to deliver them a challenging, tailored learning experience; it’s because their families have the resources necessary to navigate the maze of education offerings. They can find the best schools and teachers, pull political strings, and, if necessary, move to a different school district or pay for private school. These families often steer their children into classrooms and schools that enable them to learn alongside other high achievers, at a fast pace, from knowledgeable instructors, and in school cultures in which it is acceptable and even “cool” to be smart.

High-ability students who are not from such families, however, are too often left to fend for themselves. The current political climate does not allow for policymakers to focus on smart students and high achievers by advocating separate classes, schools, and other special programs for them. Without the help of such policies, lower-income families often lack the know-how and resources that are required to tap into the limited educational resources that do exist for their gifted children. This shortchanges high-ability boys and girls who lack the options and family support of the educated elite and exacerbates our society's "coming apart," as Charles Murray terms the widening gap between our "new upper" and "new lower" classes.

The data from Ohio paint this picture in painful detail. Statewide, 48% of public-school students qualify as "economically disadvantaged"; among those identified as "gifted," however, that figure is 21%. The share of poor, gifted students actually being served by gifted-education programs is even lower than that. And while 18% of white students and 28% of Asian students in the Buckeye State are deemed gifted, only 5% of black students and 6% of Hispanic students are identified as such.

Talented students from poor, minority families can easily become nearly invisible in our education system — especially when they attend the often-struggling schools that serve their communities. Getting onto the right educational path early is vital in today's demanding global economy, but doing so requires guidance from someone knowledgeable and determined, whether at home or at school. The schools attended by poor children, however, are often awash in challenges that appear, at least in the near term, to be more urgent than serving the gifted. And the breakdown of family culture in impoverished and minority communities has made it less likely that smart children from these communities will end up in the challenging classes they need to thrive. Without sophisticated, driven parents who can focus on getting them into the right classrooms with the best teachers, these gifted children are likely to find themselves in struggling schools with teachers, counselors (if there are any), and administrators who either do not identify childrens' talents or simply do not have the time and resources to help them because there are so many other kids who need attention right away.

Although one can find heroic exceptions here and there (generally in schools led by extraordinary, beat-the-odds and damn-the-torpedoes principals), far too many public schools in tough neighborhoods and

poor communities fail to get beyond the challenges of discipline, truancy, turnover of both students and staff, the ever-present risk of drop-outs, students' lack of basic skills, and such fundamental human needs as feeding breakfast to kids who come to school with empty stomachs. It is no surprise that these challenges obstruct the development of a school culture of lofty academic goals and college aspirations. Nor is it surprising that even the best of teachers in such circumstances have scant energy left to cultivate the learning—or the potential—of exceptionally bright, earnest, and well-behaved pupils. This is simply not a good environment in which to be gifted.

Even school districts that offer special, separate programs for gifted students cannot entirely counteract these forces. Austin's Liberal Arts and Science Academy (LASA) is the city's sole selective-admission academic public high school. It's a great school with fine teachers, excellent discipline, and a solid curriculum—everything needed to maximize the learning and life opportunities of a high-ability student. It is also free, meaning that families face no tuition barrier. But while LASA's student body is racially diverse (it is one of the most diverse public high schools in Austin), only 20% of its pupils are poor. This is problematic because, in the Austin Independent School District, two-thirds of the students are poor. According to LASA's admissions data, most entering students come directly from one of the city's two academically oriented magnet middle schools. In practice, this means that Austin's public education "fast track" begins in fifth grade, when children and their parents determine which middle school to attend.

Consider which families are most likely to figure this out far enough in advance to position their 11-year-old to eventually enroll in LASA. It is unlikely that the uneducated, low-income (possibly non-English-speaking) parents of a high-ability child will know which steps to take, especially so many years before their child will be ready for high school. For such students to be recruited in large numbers to schools like LASA—and to gain access to the future success that such an education often makes possible—the education system would need to identify these gifted children in early elementary grades in order to counsel them and push them onto the right path. The primary schools that such children often attend, however, have many other problems to solve, and all their current policy incentives point toward getting more kids up to a low "proficient" bar—not paying attention to those who have already cleared it.

Such failures to develop talent have long-term consequences. Stanford's Caroline Hoxby and Harvard's Christopher Avery have painstakingly documented the extent to which this neglect affects college admissions, even for the gifted but poor students who manage to succeed brilliantly in their schools. Their research shows that

[A] large number—probably the vast majority—of very high-achieving students from low-income families do not apply to a selective college or university. This is in contrast to students with the same test scores and grades who come from high-income backgrounds: they are overwhelmingly likely to apply to a college whose median student has achievement much like their own.

Hoxby and Avery suggest that low-income high achievers do not even apply to elite universities because they don't have people at home or at school to encourage them to do so. The adults in their communities often lack experience with highly selective colleges, and few of their teachers and advisors take the trouble to supply the students with information about the opportunities that such institutions afford them or the feasibility of gaining admission and financial aid. Lacking the necessary awareness and encouragement, these young people frequently settle for colleges that are less likely to challenge them or advance their prospects (that is, if they go to college at all). Other research led by Hoxby has shown that simply providing such young people with a low-cost packet of information can significantly raise their sights regarding where to apply to college. And yet, these students frequently go unrecognized, and their talents often go unrealized.

This is a tragic waste of national resources and a failure on the part of our education system. It is also a brake on the upward mobility for which America has long been celebrated. We owe these talented young people more than this. We owe them a shot at the American dream. Yet solutions to these problems remain politically unpopular.

CHALLENGES TO REFORM

In addition to the “No Child Left Behind” era's overall focus on low achievers, the key controversy regarding education reforms that would benefit high-ability children involves the idea of separating them from everyone else. In today's culture, paying more attention to such students

is apt to bring allegations of discrimination and disparate impact. Many teachers also object to such separation, as education schools decry “tracking” as an outdated, unfair way to label children. They are not entirely wrong: The old, inflexible tracking schemes, such as the “college prep,” “vocational,” and “general” high-school tracks of past decades, had a deterministic, immutable aspect that tended to limit social mobility. Any successful approach to education must understand America as a “land of opportunity” and public education as a source of second chances.

Far more fashionable in education today is the concept of “differentiated instruction,” in which — in theory — every teacher instructs every student at his appropriate level of ability and prior achievement, all within the same classroom. This approach is understandably appealing in the abstract as both equitable and individualized. In practice, however, it is rare to find a teacher who can pull it off with 20 or 30 kids of widely differing levels of interest, aptitude, behavior, and previous learning. Some countries, like Finland, have reported success using differentiated-instruction techniques, but it is likely that this success can be attributed to their taking far greater pains than the United States to select and prepare highly accomplished individuals to teach in their schools. Unable to reach every student at his present level, American instructors are likely to compromise by focusing on slow and middling students, leaving the brightest students to fend for themselves. After all, “proficiency” is the target their administrators and policy guidelines have emphasized, and their success in getting low achievers to that level is the standard by which they will likely be judged.

This problem could be solved with separate schools for the gifted, albeit with a more flexible selection method than traditional tracking—above all, one with multiple entry points instead of a single opportunity. But principals do not like losing their best-performing students to other schools. A principal is likely to argue that such cream skimming will demoralize his school’s staff, lower its rank in national-rating systems (like *U.S. News & World Report’s*), and reduce its talent pool to the point where there aren’t enough students to justify an AP course in calculus, world history, or music theory. Indeed, many selective-admission high schools enter into de facto treaties with the regular high schools in their communities, promising not to take more than a few students from any one school or neighborhood.

The concerns of administrators, however, ought not deter forward-looking policymakers from finding ways to help poor and gifted students.

TOWARD A SOLUTION

As we seek ways to serve disadvantaged yet gifted students better, it must also be acknowledged that the few evaluations done thus far of gifted-education programs and selective-admission high schools raise questions about their effectiveness. Granted, such programs and schools are difficult to study precisely because they are selective. Admission is not random, which means analysts seldom have a true control group to which existing programs can be compared. But several studies have shown unimpressive effects from such programs in terms of additional academic achievement for their participants. In short, the evident success of these schools may have more to do with receiving than with producing sharp students.

There has, however, also been evidence in recent years that separate (often charter) schools can change the trajectory of the lives of gifted, poor children—as long as families are willing to enroll them, get them to school regularly, and tolerate a demanding academic schedule.

The best known example of such success has been the Knowledge Is Power Program. There are now more than 140 KIPP schools around the United States, all requiring longer days, weeks, and school years. They foster a culture of high expectations, with firm discipline, keen teachers, forceful leadership, and solid community backing. Such schools are showing powerful effects not only on their (mostly minority) students' achievement in the short run but also on their long-term aspirations. Every classroom is named for a college and every child is imbued with the expectation that he will go to college, even if no one from his family ever has. In effect, KIPP and schools like it set out to transform the culture in which their students live. Moreover, having discovered that escorting them to the ivy gates is not enough to see them through to graduation, the KIPP organization has recently organized programs to counsel and encourage them all the way to a diploma. Other high-powered charter networks (such as the BASIS schools of Tucson, San Antonio, and Washington, D.C.) have also shown good results—including lofty test scores—from similar efforts on behalf of their disadvantaged clients.

It is important to note that these results are coming from schools that serve motivated but not necessarily gifted youngsters from poor

and minority backgrounds. Nevertheless, the point is identical: Having a separate special school not only allows administrators to organize the program, staff, and curriculum around the needs and challenges of its students; it also provides the opportunity to build a different school culture attuned to those challenges. This is ultimately what high-potential students need most: a culture of maximum achievement and high aspiration, encouraging advisors who pay attention, stimulating peers, a coherent and challenging curriculum, and well-prepared teachers who are eager to work with challenging, bright young people.

This type of school culture is found in ordinary schools in high-achieving countries like South Korea, Finland, and Poland, according to Amanda Ripley's fine recent book, *The Smartest Kids in the World*. Ideally, this culture of purposefulness and academic achievement would be fostered in all American schools. Until that can be achieved, however, the best solution is to create environments in which such a culture can allow high-ability students — especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds — to thrive.

To do this, we must start by acknowledging in policy, rhetoric, and resource priorities that the education system's main function is to develop human capital in children of every ability level — including high-potential children. To this end, accountability policies should track and reward schools and educators for progress in *all* their students — not just those who previously earned low scores — by replacing today's "proficiency" standards with incentives to drive individual gains by all students across the achievement spectrum. Such reforms should be made at the state level and in local school systems, as well as at the federal level when Congress rewrites the No Child Left Behind Act — a task already six years overdue.

Importantly, instead of rationing these opportunities with politically contentious screening procedures, one possible solution to the problem of deciding just who qualifies for a gifted-education program would be to allow ability and motivation to be expressed organically — and to enlarge such programs to accommodate more qualified youngsters. With sufficient capacity, these programs could welcome all who think they might benefit, even as they make clear what standard of performance must be met in order to continue. In effect, the school or program would say to prospective students, "You're welcome to enroll, but know in advance that our academic standards are high, our intensity is great, our

pace is fast, and you'll have to earn high marks in challenging courses to remain here." Such an approach will surely lead to student attrition and the woes that come with it, but these may prove more tractable than the problem of hyper-selectivity in situations where student demand greatly exceeds supply.

Elected officials, educators, and opinion leaders must also widen their set of concerns. Those in charge of shaping contemporary education policy tend to focus almost exclusively on achievement gaps between racial and socioeconomic groups. At least as worrisome, however, for gifted but disadvantaged students, is the gap between what they learn in today's schools and how much they *could* learn if provided with more opportunities and suitable instructional environments. Closing *that* gap requires allowing more flexibility about the pace at which individual students move through the K-12 system while also offering more classes, programs, schools, and supplemental opportunities for high-potential youngsters.

Putting gifted students into separate programs is a tricky business politically, but the country's 3.7 million teachers cannot all be expected to become expert practitioners of differentiated instruction. Expanding suitable gifted-education programs, then, is the surest way to develop exceptional attainment in the largest number of students. Such programs can take many forms, including specialized charter schools; "blended learning" schools in which students take accelerated online courses that supplement traditional, teacher-based instruction; curricular plans that allow students to graduate in fewer than 13 years; and "early college" high schools and "dual enrollment" programs in which they can simultaneously take high-school and college courses. If creating a separate school is not an option, other solutions could include expanding the number of gifted-and-talented classrooms in the many communities where demand already dwarfs supply and offering more after-school, weekend, and summer programs.

Legislators are not the only ones who can bring about such reforms. Philanthropists, entrepreneurs, and non-profit groups can also play useful roles in this effort by facilitating schools and programs, supporting after-school and non-school options, and aiding able youngsters to access better opportunities. A program like "Prep for Prep," which has helped thousands of young, minority New Yorkers of high ability to enroll in well-regarded private schools, could be replicated in other communities. Hoxby's experimental intervention — providing college-information

packets to high achievers from low-income schools—and existing efforts such as “Leadership Enterprise for a Diverse America” should expand to help more low-income students with strong high-school records gain access to elite colleges. Summer “talent search” programs for middle-school students, such as those run by Johns Hopkins University’s Center for Talented Youth, should proliferate and deepen their reach into disadvantaged communities. It is vital, however, that such programs be hard-nosed about their goals and not conflate giftedness in gymnastics or sculpture (worthy pursuits though they are) with singular potential in science, technology, and medicine.

Another worthy undertaking for donors and analysts would be to invest in evaluating, comparing, and reporting on the effectiveness of different kinds of programs. It is important to identify which approaches work best in different circumstances. Those that work as intended will be good for kids, good for social mobility, and good for developing and diversifying the nation’s human capital. Successful programs will also benefit the high schools, colleges, and universities that such young people later attend.

Perhaps the most badly needed initiative would involve outreach and informational activities to identify, cultivate, and counsel starting from the earliest grades those children who have uncommon intellectual promise. This initiative should target especially those children from families unable to pursue (or unaware of) better opportunities. This needs to work at many points along the way, and should flex and adapt as children change schools, as they mature, as they move faster or slower in school (and possibly at varying speeds in different subjects), and as more families become aware of their options.

HELPING THE GIFTED

These initiatives will inevitably court opposition from those who believe that all resources should be focused on those “who need it most”—low-achieving youngsters from poor families who live in bad neighborhoods. These politicians and advocates will accuse reformers of elitism. But if the country is to remain competitive internationally, as well as facilitate individual opportunity and social mobility, we must face the reality that cultivating tomorrow’s intellectual and scientific leaders is a key part of the education system’s function. There are more potential high achievers among our 55 million students than are currently getting the

opportunity to thrive. And plenty of them are hiding in plain sight in neighborhoods and schools where adults are unaccustomed to recognizing such potential and are ill-equipped to challenge such students.

These high-ability young people deserve to be taught in schools in which high achievement is the norm and not the exception; where the teachers are excited and capable of teaching eager, able pupils; where the students reinforce one another, even as they compete fiercely; where the only discipline problem is cheating; and where it is safe, even laudable, to be seen as “brainy.”

This culture can be fostered inside individual AP classrooms, “schools within schools,” “honors” tracks, and International Baccalaureate programs. It can grow outside regular school, on the weekends, and during the summer. But these approaches are not sufficient to maximize the potential of high-ability youth who lack other educational opportunities. The challenge for the education system must be to deliver these children a set of full-time, self-contained opportunities to learn as much and as fast as they can.