

## **How to Best Serve Gifted and Talented Students Why They Need Special Attention**

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The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) was an Act of Congress that reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. The Act authorized Title I funding to provide additional resources for the education of disadvantaged students. It supported standards-based education reform based on the idea that setting high standards and establishing measurable goals would improve individual student outcomes in education. The premise was that educators, parents, and states should have guidelines allowing students to demonstrate their educational progress relative to their grade level. States were required to develop and implement test-based assessments to demonstrate basic student skills at selected levels. Doing so would qualify a state for federal funding to assist students who were falling behind. (H.R. 1, 2001)

Hypothetically, this sounds reasonable. However, let's consider students who had already mastered their grade level standards and who qualified for little or no Title I resources. Can it be said that these students were being "left behind" when additional resources would have made it possible for them to excel as individuals while, at the same time, benefiting society?

### **What Does it Mean to Be Gifted?**

The National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC, n.d.) provided the following definition in the "Frequently Asked Questions" section of its website:

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Students, children, or youth who give evidence of high achievement capability in areas such as intellectual, creative, artistic, or leadership capacity, or in specific academic fields, and who need services and activities not ordinarily provided by the school in order to fully develop those capabilities.

According to “Gifted Child” (2007), published in the *Encyclopedia Britannica* online:

Any child who is blessed with a high level of mental ability or remarkable skill in a specific talent, activity or knowledge is considered a gifted child. ... A widely used guideline is an intelligence quotient of 130 or above.

In the article “What Is Giftedness”, the NAGC expanded on these ideas explaining that children are gifted when their ability is remarkably above the average level for their age. Giftedness may be visible in one or more areas such as; intellectual, artistic, creative, leadership, or in an academic field such as reading, writing, mathematics or science. In the United States, school districts vary in their identification of gifted students, if they even make an effort to do so. That makes it impossible to determine the number of gifted children accurately. One commonly used target that is used when identifying learners who may benefit from special services is to consider those who are in the top 10 percent compared to national and/or local norms. (NAGC, n.d.)

### **Have we Been Serving Gifted Students?**

In its *Frequently Asked Questions* section, (NAGC, n.d.) stated: “The U.S. Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights estimates that six (6) percent of public school students are enrolled in gifted and talented programs.” To clarify the situation, consider

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an estimated need based on 10 percent of the nearly 51 million K-12 students or who could benefit from gifted and talented programs. If only six percent of the student population is currently enrolled in such programs tells us that four percent of those who would benefit (over 2 million students) are not getting the attention that would help them achieve their full potential as productive citizens.

In the effort to identify those 40 percent, it is imperative to recognize that not all gifted children look or act alike. Gifted children live in every demographic group and have every personality type. Research has shown that in low-income school districts, disabled students, minorities, and those living in poverty are often overlooked when it comes to identifying those who would benefit from gifted and talented programs. Wai & Worrell (2016)

That same research cited a 1996 paper by Camilla Benbow and Julian Stanley that reviewed decades of evidence showing the achievement of students with high intellectual potential had markedly declined. The impact clearly goes far beyond missed opportunities for the students themselves.

Benbow & Stanley's (1996) paper stated that:

Our nation's brightest youngsters, those most likely to be headed for selective colleges, have suffered dramatic setbacks over the past two decades. This has grave implications for our country's ability to compete economically with other industrialized nations.

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At the federal level, the only funds specifically earmarked for gifted and talented education are provided by so-called “Javits Grants” which represent a tiny fraction of the budget allocated to the U.S. Department of Education (U.S. DoED). As strange as it may seem, even that tiny amount (\$12 million in recent years) has been under attack by a few in Congress who fail to see the benefit of identifying and supporting gifted and talented students.

According to Wai & Worrell (2016), this continued lack of attention to, and failure to allocate resources for, gifted students has had a negative impact on workforce and leadership achievement as well as less than expected educational outcomes. These effects exist for both high-income and low-income students, but low -income students are more likely to experience the impact due to the identification issue noted earlier.

Wai & Worrell (2016) expressed their personal view as follows:

As researchers of gifted education, we believe this has significant implications not only for the well-being of these disadvantaged students but also for societal innovation and even America’s GDP.

Schul, J. E. (2011) looked into unintended consequences introduced by the NCLB act. Countless other papers, articles, blog posts, and even mass media stories called for changes to NCLB in the years before and after the publication of this research. Rarely mentioned was the fact that failure to identify and support gifted and talented students meant that many would be “left behind” for decades.

**Impact of the Every Student Succeeds Act on Gifted and Talented Funding.**

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In older references, including some of those above, you will see the NCLB Act of 2001 mentioned as if it were still in effect. In fact, NCLB was terminated in 2015 and replaced by the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) and administration was moved to the state level. Like NCLB, ESSA is focused on low-income schools. It addressed some of NCLB's shortcomings by recognizing the full range of student abilities at every grade level. Most importantly, states may now use some of the federal funds they receive to make special resources available to students identified as gifted and talented. It is vital that teachers, administrators, and school board members be aware of what their state can do compared to what it is doing in terms of making these resources available at the local school district level.

An online *Comprehensive Guide to ESSA* (ESSA, n.d.) is a valuable resource as an authoritative source of detailed information about the law.

Under ESSA, local school districts may allocate a portion of gifted and talented funding from grants authorized by the act. As of 2019, available funding is defined under two Titles described by the act.

As described in the *TITLE I* section of ESSA (n.d.), its purpose "is to provide all children significant opportunity to receive a fair, equitable, and high-quality education, and to close educational achievement gaps."

To these ends, the state may grant funds to local school districts to provide supplemental funding (over and above funding based on state and local revenue) to

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help high poverty schools improve. The stated objective is to achieve equitable access to a high-quality education. ESSA (n.d.)

Title II offered a source of funding for critically needed teacher recruitment, training, and preparation. Unfortunately, as part of cuts made to the 2019 U.S. DoED budget most of this funding has been eliminated. Many references, including ESSA (n.d.) have not been updated as of this date. This means that even low-income school districts will have to rely on state and local funds when recruiting and training teachers for gifted and talented programs.

*Title IV* allows districts to allocate funds for promoting access to accelerated learning opportunities including Advanced Placement (AP), International Baccalaureate (IB) programs, dual or concurrent enrollment programs, and early college high schools. (U.S. DoED, 2016)

If a school is to have optimal resources for gifted and talented students, taking advantage of these resources is vital. In addition to the information provided by (U.S. DoED, 2016), see if your state has published a guide or policy related to accessing ESSA funds. For example, *The Illinois Association for Gifted Children* has published a “Gifted Education Policy Brief” (Dwyer & Welch, 2016).

### **Do Gifted Students Deserve Special Attention?**

It is not uncommon to hear adults say that gifted students don't need special attention because they will be successful on their own. While that may be true for a select few, this author proposes that it is not the case for most of our gifted students.

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In a recent report for the *Fordham Institute*, Yaluma & Tyner (2018) examined the so-called “gifted gap” that exists when it comes to gifted education in high-poverty schools. The report shows that the U.S. has a long road ahead before it eliminates the inequity in student identification and participation in gifted programs among diverse student groups. For example, Black and Hispanic students in these programs participated at a much lower rate than their White and Asian classmates.

In a follow-up article, Tyner (2018) made the following comment:

But what is the rationale for gifted education in the first place? For those of us who are concerned about persistent inequities in American society and in our schools, “gifted education,” which through its name (somewhat offensively) implies that God or nature has “gifted” a special few, requires a strong justification.

Many researchers and educators recognize the need for gifted education. They make a case for it based on the undeniable fact that students do not enter grade levels at the same level of mental development. For any given grade, students begin with a range of skills and abilities in each subject. While this may seem instinctive, those differences are much more significant than many realize.

After the adoption of the NCLB Act, we began to give specific populations of students attention and allocated resources to support that attention. The problem is that we still tend to leave high achieving, talented, and gifted students in low-income, disabled, and other underrepresented populations behind.

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Vickroy (2018) quoted Carolyn Welch in a Chicago Tribune article:

In Illinois, one-third of students are already at proficiency and in many cases well-above. When high-ability students are not provided for in education policy, attention and resources often get directed exclusively to students below the proficiency bar, resulting in the dismantling of acceleration and enrichment programming.

Rochester Sage (2011) provided these quotes to spark your thinking on the importance of gifted education programs:

Keeping a child who can do sixth-grade work in a second-grade classroom is not saving that student's childhood but is instead robbing that child of the desire to learn. – Ellen Winner, *Gifted Children: Myths and Realities*

Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire. – William Butler Yeats

Bright kids go to school and never encounter anything that makes them extend effort. They grow up thinking that being smart means they don't have to work very hard. The first time they encounter something difficult they think they are not smart enough. – Sally Reis Renzulli

The goal of this article is to provide information that will help the reader decide whether enough is being done to engage and ignite a passion for learning among gifted and talented students regardless of income, skin color, culture, or background. Achieving

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that passion for learning will ultimately result in the advancement of our nation in an ever more competitive global economy.

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