

EVERY STUDENT SUCCEEDS ACT

Gifted Education Policy Brief

Joshua Dwyer, One Chance Illinois Policy Director
Carolyn Welch, Attorney, Illinois Gifted Education Advocate

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*Illinois Association
for Gifted Children*



INTRODUCTION

Illinois does a poor job of identifying and cultivating the gifts and talents of its students compared to other U.S. states and the majority of developed countries. This lack of investment in high-potential students results in pronounced achievement gaps at the advanced level between subgroups and an underdeveloped workforce that prevents Illinois from being a leader in the 21st century economy.

The Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) should think holistically about cultivating talent in Illinois and use the opportunities created by the reauthorized federal education law known as the Every Student Succeeds Act, or ESSA, to develop a state plan that does right by our high-ability students, especially those from underserved populations. Titles I, II and IV of ESSA provide opportunities and funds for supporting gifted students in critical ways:

- Increasing access to gifted programming;
- Collecting more information about gifted programming and the students served, and including this data on state and local district/school report cards so that parents can make informed decisions;
- Promoting accountability for the growth of gifted students; and
- Improving the quality of gifted programming by training teachers in best practices.

GIFTED CHILDREN LEFT BEHIND

ISBE's last official report on gifted education - issued in 2003 - described a robust sector.

A majority of Illinois districts offered gifted programming to elementary and middle school students.

- 708 of the then 819 school districts, or 85.1 percent, offered a gifted elementary program.
- 659, or 78.9 percent, offered a middle school program.
- In all, 64,327 K-8 students statewide were enrolled in gifted programs.

Unfortunately, thirteen years later, the picture isn't as rosy.

Recent research completed by OCI's Policy Director, Joshua Dwyer, and Carolyn Welch, a lawyer and Illinois gifted student advocate, shows that in 2016 only 27 percent of districts offer gifted programs. Assuming that 5 percent of a district's population is gifted - a well-

researched measure - this means that more than 30,000 high-ability students in Illinois lack access to educational programming that they need to reach their potential.

Districts without gifted programs share similar characteristics. They are more likely to have sizable low-income and minority populations, and they disproportionately rely on the state for education funding. In the absence of appropriate gifted services, affluent families may be able to provide their high-ability children with supplemental enrichment, or move to a public district or private school that can better meet their needs. These options are not feasible for children from poverty. As a result, many low-income gifted students lack access to challenging coursework and appropriately trained teachers throughout their academic careers.

ESSA AND GIFTED EDUCATION

ESSA requires Illinois to move past No Child Left Behind's single-minded focus on competence and ensure that the learning needs of all students - including gifted and talented students - are being met in schools statewide. Under ESSA, the federal government extends its involvement in gifted education beyond Javits grants and incorporates provisions related to gifted and talented students throughout the law. The new provisions create an opportunity to close large excellence gaps based on income and race, focus on previously neglected high-potential low-income students, collect data on gifted students, measure growth for high-ability students, hold schools accountable for the learning of all students, and ensure that teachers are trained to spot and nurture talent.

The following ESSA provisions and corresponding federal funds in Titles I, II and IV will allow Illinois to increase the size and quality of its talent pool by meeting the educational needs of high-ability students from all backgrounds.

Title I.

The purpose of Title I is "to provide all children significant opportunity to receive a fair, equitable, and high-quality education, and to close educational achievement gaps." § 1001. Title I funds should be used in the following ways to support gifted students:

Increasing Access to Gifted Programming - In the absence of state funding for gifted education, districts may use Title I funds to “assist schools in identifying and serving gifted and talented students.” § 1111(b)(13)(A). ISBE should reserve a portion of Title I funds for identifying and serving high-ability students in poverty, many of which lack access to advanced coursework. When money was last budgeted in 2003, Illinois gave \$19 million to districts for their gifted education programming. Funding should be restored to at least that level, adjusted for inflation. Alternatively, five percent of Title I funds may be a reasonable percentage to devote to the learning needs of gifted students, considering that the Illinois School Code defines gifted students as the top five percent in terms of aptitude, using local norms.

These funds could be used by districts to universally screen for gifted and talented programming, purchase assessments appropriate for English learners, or implement portfolio assessments, all of which would help address the underrepresentation of low-income, black and Latino students in these programs. The money could also be used to provide low-income students with a more challenging curriculum or to hire a gifted education specialist to support general and special education teachers in differentiating instruction for gifted learners within classrooms. ESSA allows states to authorize districts to use their Title I funds district-wide even if certain schools within the district do not meet the threshold of a 40 percent low-income student population.

Measuring Growth - ESSA requires that Illinois add an academic indicator, such as a “measure of student growth,” to the state plan. § 1111(c)(4)(B). Illinois should choose an academic indicator that allows it to measure the annual growth of all students, including high-performing students. States have the right to use Title I funds to develop and administer computer adaptive tests that may measure student “growth using items above or below the student’s grade level, including for use as part of a State’s accountability system.” § 1111(b)(2)(J). Assessments that have higher ceilings can measure student mastery of above-grade level standards, allowing schools to accelerate or compact instruction and appropriately place students to keep them engaged and avoid repeating content already learned. Additionally, state assessment grants are available under Title I for the development of new assessments and/or the review of current assessments to determine quality, redundancy, etc. ISBE should make sure to select an assessment or other academic indicator that allows the growth of high-ability students to be measured.

Promoting Accountability - In connection with the ESSA compliance process, ISBE should address gifted students in a revised state accountability system. Currently, there is no system in place for ensuring that the needs of gifted students are met. If

Illinois wants to become a leader in the 21st century economy, accountability for all children, including high-ability students, must be a priority. ESSA requires that the state create an accountability system that “meaningfully differentiates” among schools and districts annually based on prescribed indicators (§ 1111(c)(4)(C)), including an academic indicator such as growth and “not less than one indicator of school quality or success,” e.g., “access to and completion of advanced coursework” (§ 1111(c)(4)(B)(v)). The state plan should incorporate accountability for the performance and growth of high-ability students and for equitable access to educationally appropriate services for these students.

Improving Data Collection and Reporting - ESSA requires the revision of state and local district/school report cards. § 1111(h). The Illinois Report Card should include information about how well districts and schools are serving gifted students. ISBE should insert a “Gifted and Talented” tab on district and school profiles on the Illinois Report Card that includes the following information

1. whether the district or school offers gifted services;
2. how many students in the district or school are identified as gifted;
3. the demographics of identified students;
4. the continuum of services available to identified students; and
5. a student academic growth metric.

With this information available on district and school report cards, along with a summary on the state report card, parents of high-ability students will finally have access to the information they need to make informed decisions about which schools will best meet their children’s needs.

Title II.

ESSA recognizes that improving gifted education requires training teachers and school leaders in best practices for identifying and serving high-ability students.

States applying for Title II professional development funds under ESSA must supply “a description of how the State educational agency will improve the skills of teachers, principals, or other school leaders in order to enable them to identify students with specific learning needs, particularly children with disabilities, English learners, students

who are gifted and talented, and students with low literacy levels, and provide instruction based on the needs of such students.” § 2101(d)(2)(J).

Districts receiving Title II funds must also “address the learning needs of all students, including children with disabilities, English learners, and gifted and talented students.” § 2103(b)(2).

ESSA gives examples of professional development that districts may provide for meeting the needs of advanced learners, including “training to support the identification of students who are gifted and talented, including high-ability students who have not been formally identified for gifted education services, and implementing instructional practices that support the education of such students [within or outside of the grade level classroom], such as— (i) early entrance to kindergarten; (ii) enrichment, acceleration, [differentiation], and curriculum compacting activities; and (iii) dual or concurrent enrollment programs in secondary school and postsecondary education.” § 2103(b)(3)(J).

ISBE should ensure that this required training is conducted by qualified gifted education professional development providers and is in alignment with best practices for identifying and serving high-potential and high-ability students. ISBE should collect information about which teachers and administrators are receiving this training, and what instructional practices are being used, within each district that receives Title II funds.

Title IV.

The new “Student Support and Academic Enrichment Grants” under Title IV, Part A, are designed to “improve students’ academic achievement by increasing the capacity of States, school districts, schools and local communities to...provide all students with access to a well-rounded education.” § 4101(1). A particular focus is on “*female students, minority students, English learners, children with disabilities, and low-income students who are often underrepresented in critical and enriching subjects.*”

District activities that may be supported through these grants include:

- “increasing student access to and improving student engagement and achievement in high quality STEM courses;
- accelerated learning programs that provide postsecondary level courses, instruction, examinations for credit;

- reimbursing low-income students to cover part or all of the costs of accelerated learning examination fees.” § 4104(b)(3)(A).

In the absence of state funding for gifted education, low-income high-ability students are in dire need of academic enrichment. Illinois should use the Title IV funds to give sub-grants to districts for establishing, improving or expanding gifted programming and accelerated coursework.

CONCLUSION

ESSA represents a unique opportunity to use federal funds to provide gifted services to Illinois students who currently lack access or to help struggling districts maintain their programs, as well as offer valuable professional development for teachers in gifted identification and services. Illinois has the ability to direct these federal Title I, Title II, and Title IV funds toward providing a high-quality and expansive educational experience for the state’s high-ability students.

Now should be the time for the state to invest in gifted education so that high-potential and high-ability students get the education they need and deserve. This will reduce academic excellence gaps and help Illinois and its citizens be leaders in the 21st century economy.