



Don't Overlook Gifted Students

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As students throughout Florida settle into the new school year, the time has come for lawmakers and education policymakers to address the looming gifted education crisis.

A recent national study by a leading education think tank has confirmed what many of us have long recognized - our education system as a whole is neglecting the needs of our highest-achieving performers, and the majority of our teachers are neither adequately trained nor encouraged to help these students maximize their potential.

For those who educate or parent gifted students, this dismal national picture is no surprise considering that our nation has no comprehensive policy on gifted students and allocates a pittance - about 2.6 cents of every \$100 in federal education dollars - toward gifted education. Given this grand underinvestment, how can we be surprised at the Thomas B. Fordham Institute's conclusion that the performance of our highest-achieving students has been stagnant over the past eight years?

This shortsightedness of policymakers has resulted in a grossly uneven patchwork of gifted education policies at the state, county and local levels. In too many states, this means not a single state dollar invested to this purpose. Local districts are forced to tackle this complex challenge on their own, with a handful of (mostly affluent) districts doing a stellar job in an overall sea of mediocrity.

Florida has earned some above-average marks thanks to a more proactive approach that includes dedicating some state funding to gifted education and requiring that teachers of gifted students receive training. But comprehensive reform at all levels is still needed if we are to ensure students will be well-prepared.

For starters, lawmakers must recognize that an effective solution cannot revolve around one or two narrow strategies, like promoting grade skipping or adding more advanced placement courses. Instead, we must focus on the heart of the matter - that gifted students need specialized education - and develop a comprehensive set of policies to address the needs of advanced learners in a systematic manner.

The single most important reform must begin in the classroom by ensuring all teachers have at least some background in methods and strategies to address the learning needs of gifted students, ideally through a combination of college courses and ongoing professional

development.

Just think what a difference a well-trained set of eyes in the classroom could make in the life of a student from a disadvantaged background. When teachers are taught to recognize attributes of giftedness - behaviors that might appear as boredom or disinterest - students who currently go unnoticed will finally be identified and afforded the opportunities they require to achieve. It is a national tragedy that our lower-income gifted students mirror their more affluent peers when they start school, yet steadily decline with each succeeding year.

To better prepare our nation's teachers, Congress should create programs to develop sound gifted education professional development and pre-service course guidelines. States, school districts and colleges that have attained successes should be supported to ensure widespread replication.

Our nation faces a clear choice: We can continue deluding ourselves with the belief that gifted students exist only in certain populations and can thrive educationally without prudent attention to their learning needs. Or we can begin working toward a solution that finally leaves no child behind.

Del Siegle is the president of the National Association for Gifted Children.

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