



Where  
Are All the  
**Students**  
of **Color** in  
Gifted Education?



New strategies  
are opening  
gifted programs  
to culturally  
and linguistically  
diverse students.

Kathleen A. King, Elizabeth B. Kozleski,  
and Kimberly Lansdowne

**T**he Equity Alliance at Arizona State University is one of 10 regional Equity Assistance Centers in the U.S. that are funded by the U.S. Department of Education to support the work of the Office of Civil Rights and the Department of Justice in enforcing federal civil rights laws. While the efforts of the Office of Civil Rights have improved educational opportunities for formerly excluded and marginalized students, there is still much work to be done to address achievement gaps and to ensure that all students are provided with high-quality education (Artiles, Rueda, Salazar, & Higareda, 2005; Donovan & Cross, 2002; Klingner, Méndez Barletta, & Hoover, 2008; Losen & Orfield, 2002).

Many principals across the U.S., working with regional assistance centers like the Equity Alliance, are presently engaged in exploring and improving the quality of learning opportunities for students who are culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD). The need for such work has been recognized in the fields of special and gifted education.

While most concerns lie with the disproportionately higher number of CLD students who are placed in special education, there are also concerns about the under-representation of CLD students who are identified as gifted. For instance, while black students made up 7.4 percent of the total school enrollment in California in 2007 (California Department of Education, 2008c), they accounted for 22 percent of all students identified as emotionally disturbed (California Department of Education, 2008b), and only 4.13 percent of those in gifted and talented educational programming (California Department of Education, 2008a). On the contrary, white students, who made up 28.5 percent of the total student enrollment, accounted for 41.7 percent of gifted and talented enrollment (California Department of Education, 2008c, 2008a).

### An Unmet Need

The field of gifted education in the United States, much like special education, is grounded in beliefs that some students demonstrate a need for specialized education that, historically and currently, has not been provided in U.S. public schools. Special and gifted education scholars and practitioners alike recognize that opportunities to learn need to be improved so that all students have equitable educational access and participation. Yet, as principals strive to achieve this goal, they often experience tensions around: the purpose, scope, and location of the education they provide; the preparation of teachers for an increasingly diverse student population; and determining the extent to which the needs for specialized instruction create educational fields separate from general education.



Although specific federal mandates (i.e., the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004; Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act) provide some guidance for addressing the needs of students with disabilities, there are no similar mandates for gifted education services.

### Recruitment and Retention

Ford, Grantham, and Whiting (2008) note that black, Hispanic, and Native American students have always been under-represented in gifted education, and that this under-representation has increased over time for black students in particular (Ford, 1998). Principals can confront this issue by:

- Addressing lower expectations of CLD students through professional learning and teacher preparation that is grounded in multicultural and culturally responsive pedagogy and practice. The National Center for Culturally Responsive Educational Systems has many tools principals can use.
- Adopting culturally responsive definitions of giftedness, explicitly acknowledging that giftedness occurs across gender and cultural, linguistic, and income groups. Principals should work with district administrators, school psychologists,

and classroom teachers to examine the current definitions of giftedness and work to ensure these definitions convey that giftedness is found in students of all backgrounds and life experiences.

- Broadening definitions of giftedness to include those students who under-achieve as well as those who achieve at or above comparison groups. Giftedness should not be reserved only for those students who are achieving high grades or test scores.
- Building systemic evaluation of under-representation of CLD students into evaluation of all gifted education programs and services. Principals should continuously assess, on a year-to-year basis, the racial, ethnic, gender, and linguistic demographics of students accessing gifted instructional programming, as compared with the demographics of all students.

### One District's Mission

In our work at the Equity Alliance, in conjunction with the National Center for Culturally Responsive Educational Systems and the National Institute for Urban School Improvement, we have examined the efforts of local school districts that are addressing the problem of under-representation of CLD students identified as gifted and talented. One

such district is Scottsdale, Arizona.

In 2004, the Scottsdale Unified School District discovered large discrepancies between the racial and ethnic demographics of the overall student population and the demographics of the student population in gifted education programs at its Title 1 schools. While white students represented only 38 percent of the overall population, they made up 72 percent of those in the gifted education program. Conversely, Latino students represented 50 percent of the overall population, yet made up only 14 percent of the gifted student population. Under the direction of Kimberly Lansdowne, director of gifted student services, the district began a three-year action research project to determine ways to identify CLD students who qualified for gifted learning programs (Lansdowne, 2008).

As a first step, the district systematically distributed teachers who were

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qualified in both gifted education and teaching English-language learners to its five Title 1 schools. In all of its schools, the district developed and implemented curriculum that was culturally responsive, paying special attention to Latino students.

Next, the district looked more closely

at the methods used to identify and recruit students for the gifted education program and compared those methods against criteria for culturally responsive assessment, including ways that students demonstrated their knowledge, learning, and talents. The district began using the Javits Gifted Characteristics Checklist for Underrepresented Students as part of its process of assessing multiple criteria in order to create a “thick picture” (Castellano, 2003) of students’ skills and abilities. This checklist moves beyond collecting evidence of individual academic achievement in school settings by focusing also on students’ abilities to work collaboratively in groups, to question and challenge routine procedures, and to relate well to peers and adults in informal settings and with informal language.

Consequently, more students from CLD backgrounds were selected for gifted and talented development

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opportunities and were provided with supplemental learning experiences, including field trips to museums and science/nature centers. Families became involved by participating in open houses, family game nights, and Parent University, which addressed topics related to characteristics of gifted learners and how to address students' strengths and needs.

A survey of May 2008 data showed a 357 percent increase of gifted students identified, and of this impressive increase Latino students accounted for the largest percentage of gain. Currently, the ethnic population of Scottsdale's gifted programs more closely mirrors the ethnic population of the district's Title 1 schools. For example, white students account for 40 percent of the overall Title 1 school population, and make up 41 percent of the gifted student population. Latino students represent 47 percent of the school population and make up 41 percent of the gifted student population.

### A Focus on Giftedness

A focus on giftedness and finding student strengths is a powerful strategy for discovering and encouraging the development of the multicultural assets that students bring with them to school. As teachers gain more confidence in using the self-directed strategies often employed in gifted education programs, principals will find teachers transferring those strategies and approaches to everyday practice in their classrooms. It will be important to examine how an emphasis on gifted instruction changes referrals to special education as well as to gifted education.

The representation of CLD students in gifted education is just one area of focus within a much larger mission of creating equitable access and participation in instruction and pedagogy that is matched to students' strengths and needs. Principals should contact their regional Equity Assistance Center for strategies that can provide equity for CLD students in their gifted programs. 

**Kathleen A. King** is co-director of Technical Assistance and Professional Learning for the Equity Alliance at Arizona State University. Her e-mail address is [kathleen.a.king@asu.edu](mailto:kathleen.a.king@asu.edu).

**Elizabeth B. Kozleski**, a professor of curriculum and instruction at ASU, is principal investigator for the Equity Alliance at ASU and project director for the National Center for Culturally Responsive Educational Systems and the National Institute for Urban School Improvement LeadSpace Principal Leadership Project. Her email address is [elizabeth.kozleski@asu.edu](mailto:elizabeth.kozleski@asu.edu).

**Kimberly Lansdowne** is director of gifted programs at the Scottsdale Unified School District in Arizona. Her e-mail address is [kimberly.lansdowne@asu.edu](mailto:kimberly.lansdowne@asu.edu).

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### WEB RESOURCES

The National Center for Culturally Responsive Educational Systems provides many resources for principals, such as professional learning modules and rubrics for assessing culturally responsive practices in districts and schools.

[www.nccrest.org](http://www.nccrest.org)

Access the Javits Gifted Characteristics Checklist for Underrepresented Students.

[www.azed.gov/asd/gifted/downloads/Project%20BrightHorizonGiftedCharacteristicsChecklist.pdf](http://www.azed.gov/asd/gifted/downloads/Project%20BrightHorizonGiftedCharacteristicsChecklist.pdf)

The Web site of the Equity Alliance at ASU is a clearinghouse for students, families, and educators of all roles who are concerned with attaining equitable educational systems.

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