Treating Every Child as Gifted and Talented

These are tough economic times that are unparalleled in terms of the need to invest in human capital—our children. In his first address to Congress, President Barack Obama made it clear that educating our nation’s children to be career- and college-ready, and to lead the world in innovation, will be “top priority” for his administration. Further, he urged the entire nation to stand ready to expand the promise of education. Education leaders have long made the argument that enriched education opportunities not only improve students’ lives, but benefit their communities economically as well. School leaders, in particular, know the impact—on the child and on the community—of making sure that all children learn to their highest abilities.

NAESP has long recognized the importance of providing enriched learning environments for all children, including students identified as gifted and talented. To this end, NAESP urges principals to assume leadership roles in the development and implementation of programs for gifted students.

Differentiating education for students who are gifted, demonstrate high performance capability, and are in need of enrichment is a practice that relates directly to the education of the whole child by focusing on individualized instruction to benefit the social, emotional, and academic development of each student. That means that we must create an atmosphere in which teachers are not compelled to “teach to the middle” in order to meet state and federally mandated accountability measures. Instead, teachers must be encouraged to teach to the abilities of each individual child, taking into account his or her specific needs and talents.

Equalizing Opportunity

In a recent survey of elementary and middle-level principals, the majority of respondents indicated that No Child Left Behind legislation has positively influenced the focus on historically underserved groups, such as racial and ethnic minorities, and students with disabilities. However, they also reported a significant downturn in meeting the needs of the whole child. Because there are gifted and talented students in all student groups (i.e., racial, ethnic, socioeconomic), educators must be more diligent in meeting their needs by seeking them out and making sure they receive equal opportunities for the enhanced learning they deserve.

Inequitably offering enhanced learning opportunities for members of underrepresented groups has far-reaching consequences, as indicated by the telling disparities existing between the number of minority students in public schools and the percentage of minority students in gifted and talented programs. This imbalance undoubtedly affects the overall achievement gap.

Inequities in which children receive gifted and talented services exist because states and districts develop their own criteria for determining which students are eligible, and because we are all probably a little guilty of bringing our own notions about giftedness to the table.

I believe every child has unique gifts and talents that must be developed, but not necessarily in accordance with prescribed programs and rubrics. It is just as important to develop the aptitudes of all students as it is to develop the talents of students who are officially categorized as gifted and talented. To this end, schools should ensure that they do not fulfill the needs of some children at the expense of others. Policies and programs should consider the unintended consequences of categorizing students by ability and avoid capricious decisions that may be politically driven.

I recall a time when my own daughter, a proud fourth-grade honor roll student, felt that she was “stupid” because she did not “qualify” for her school’s gifted and talented program. It turned out that this was not a reflection on her gifts, talent, or lack thereof, but rather an unintended consequence of the district’s policy allowing not more than 5 percent of the host school’s student body to be admitted to the program! I recall being discouraged and disappointed when my daughter’s principal told me that about 80 percent of her classmates met the “requirements” for the program, but could not be admitted, and I was even more disappointed when her principal offered to make an exception for my daughter and place her in the program, based on our discussion.

The principal didn’t grasp the root of my objection at first: I wasn’t advocating for my daughter to be admitted to the program. Rather, I was calling attention to the need for sensitivity training to change the social dynamics that caused my daughter’s self-esteem to plummet. Fortunately, my daughter’s principal followed through with this training, and within a few months there was a marked difference both in the school’s culture and my daughter’s own self-perception.

Enthusiasm for helping each child realize his or her unique gifts goes a long way toward inspiring students to have confidence in their own abilities, as evidenced by one school’s ability to help my daughter flourish, regardless of her participation in the gifted program. However, there are many children who are not as fortunate as my daughter, who benefited from an enriched learning experience outside the gifted and talented program. That is why it is important for our nation’s schools to focus on meeting the unique learning needs of each child and assuring that all students, regardless of race, ethnicity, or disability, are not excluded from consideration for gifted and talented programs.

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