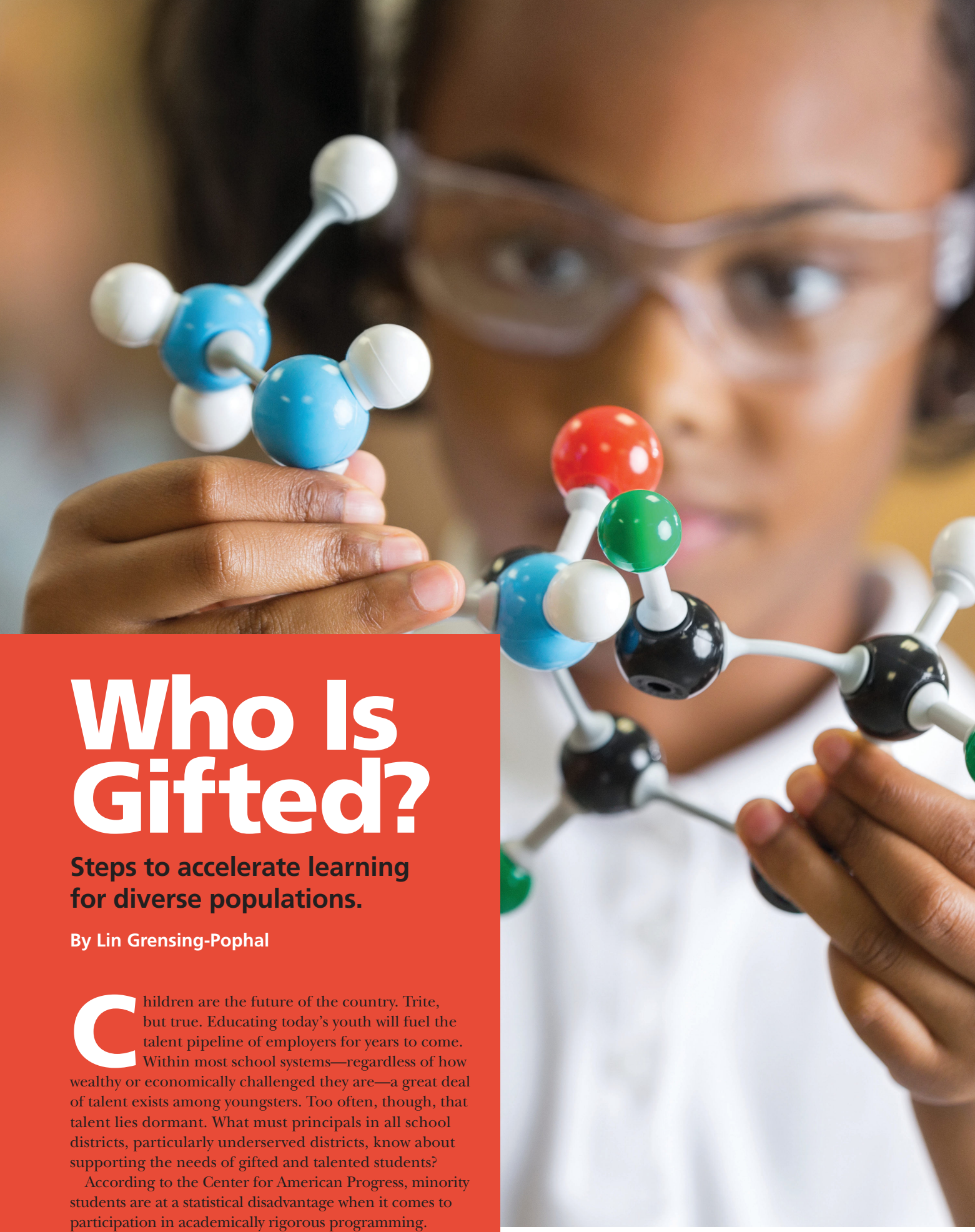

Who Is Gifted?

Steps to accelerate learning for diverse populations.

By Lin Grensing-Pophal

Children are the future of the country. Trite, but true. Educating today's youth will fuel the talent pipeline of employers for years to come. Within most school systems—regardless of how wealthy or economically challenged they are—a great deal of talent exists among youngsters. Too often, though, that talent lies dormant. What must principals in all school districts, particularly underserved districts, know about supporting the needs of gifted and talented students?

According to the Center for American Progress, minority students are at a statistical disadvantage when it comes to participation in academically rigorous programming.

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- Hispanics make up 24 percent of the total student population, but only 17 percent of enrollees in gifted and talented programs.
- Black students represent about 16 percent of the student population, but only 9 percent of those in gifted and talented programs.
- The situation with Native American and Pacific Islander students is even more dismal.

M. René Islas is the executive director of the National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC) in Washington, D.C. "The real issue here," he says, "is that we know that gifted and talented students from diverse populations, specifically those from minority backgrounds, from poverty backgrounds, and even English-language learners, are 2.5 times less likely to be identified and served in gifted and talented programs, even if they're achieving at the same level as their white, more majority peers." That, he says, should send a clear message that something is wrong.

As the United States becomes more diverse, it is important for all administrators and educators to be prepared to recognize and support the gifted and talented children who exist in every school, in all cultural groups, and at all socioeconomic levels. Unfortunately, gifted children from underrepresented populations, including students who are culturally and linguistically diverse, students from rural areas, and high-ability students with learning disabilities, are often overlooked for gifted services. Educators must provide an educational environment that meets gifted students' needs and allows them to flourish.

Overcoming the Barriers

Where are these gifted children? They're in the classroom. They're not hiding; there are no physical barriers to identifying them. Barriers exist due to misconceptions, misperceptions, and a lack of awareness or knowledge of what to look for. Overcoming those barriers represents an opportunity for principals, Islas says. "Every teacher, in every classroom, probably has some students who are performing significantly higher than the rest of the students," he says. "They need to be able to spot talent; they need to be open and flexible to helping those children reach their personal best, not just the professional level or the minimum standard—and that takes training and exposure."

One of the most effective strategies for assisting gifted and talented students, Islas says, is acceleration—whether that means grade skipping or moving students ahead in a particular subject. There is resistance to this, though, among both teachers and parents. "The principal's role is helping everyone understand that the job of educators is to help students achieve at their maximum level," Islas notes.

Alina Adams, the author of *Getting Into NYC Kindergarten* (2015) and *Getting Into NYC High School* (2016), agrees that acceleration is an important strategy. But, she notes, gifted students—particularly minority students—are often overlooked. In New York City, she says, "the majority of children are tested at the age of four for entry into a gifted program at the kindergarten level. The score cutoff is firm, and no other factors are considered. This has led to gifted and talented programs that are primarily white and Asian in a city where the majority of students are black and Hispanic." To counteract this, she says, New York City has launched pilot programs in underserved neighborhoods targeting children in higher grades based on the quality of their work and teacher recommendations.

New York City, she says, does not have a gifted and talented curriculum. "It is here that principals are vital. They must make sure that each child is accelerated according to their abilities and supported as to their needs. No program is one-size-fits-all; pretending that all children—gifted or not—develop on the same timetable is a sure way to make the program useless at best, redundant at worst."

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Islas and his organization hope to raise awareness of the issue and, ultimately, drive policy changes that will boost the odds that underserved students will be identified and provided with the opportunities they need to excel.

NAGC has organized a Giftedness Knows No Boundaries campaign to support organizations and individuals interested in promoting equity and excellence in homes, schools, and communities by sharing information about the nature and needs of gifted children. The campaign will begin with awareness building and will ultimately focus on improving policies and practices to help students thrive. "We are especially concerned with children from economically disadvantaged backgrounds and from racial and ethnic minority groups who are traditionally underserved in gifted programs," Islas says.

The first step: recognizing that gifted minority students are likely already in your classrooms. The next: taking steps to identify them by ensuring that teachers have the information and resources they need to make a positive impact. P

Lin Grensing-Pophal is a writer based in Wisconsin.