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Report finds wide disparities in gifted education

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ATLANTA (AP) -- When Liz Fitzgerald realized her son and daughter were forced to read books in math class while the other children caught up, she had them moved into gifted classes at their suburban Atlanta elementary school.

Just 100 miles down the road in Taliaferro County, that wouldn't have been an option. All the gifted classes were canceled because of budget cuts.

"If they didn't have it, they would get bored and distracted easily," said Fitzgerald, whose children are 14 and 12. "It just wouldn't be challenging."

Such disparities exist in every state, according to a new report by the National Association for Gifted Children that blames low federal funding and a focus on low-performing students.

The report, "State of the States in Gifted Education," hits at a basic element of the federal government's focus on education: Most of its money and effort goes into helping low-performing, poor and minority kids achieve basic proficiency. It largely ignores the idea of helping gifted kids reach their highest potential, leaving those tasks to states and local school districts.

"In the age of Sputnik, we put money into math and science, and we ended up on the moon," said Del Siegle, a University of Connecticut researcher who wrote the report. "We really need to consider that again. We cannot afford as a country to ignore talent."

The federal government spent just \$7.5 million last year on research and grants for the estimated 3 million gifted children in the U.S. Both the Bush and Obama administrations have tried to eliminate that money entirely, but Congress put it back into the budget each year.

Gifted programs are typically paid for by local districts or states and vary dramatically. In some states, it's as stark as one county with multiple gifted programs - magnet schools, honors courses and separate classrooms for advanced learners - next to a county with nothing.

"The quality of gifted services is dependent on geography, and it shouldn't be," said Laura Carriere, president of the Maryland Coalition for Gifted and Talented Education and the mother of two gifted children.

Just six states pick up the whole tab for gifted programs, and 13 don't put a single dollar toward such curriculum, according to the study. That means poor urban and rural school systems are often have no money left for their highest achievers, according to the Nov. 12 report.

"There is a markedly insufficient national commitment to gifted and talented children, which, if left unchecked, will ultimately leave our nation ill-prepared to field the next generation of innovators and to compete in the global economy."

For Bellevue, Wash., mother Julie Plaut Warwick, a gifted program was the only option for her now 16-year-old son, who is in a magnet high school in the Seattle suburb.

"He would be very bored and would have gotten in trouble," she said. "If you're in a regular classroom and you repeat things two or three times, he gets incredibly bored and frustrated."

The federal No Child Left Behind Law, which was passed in 2003, forced states to focus on bringing struggling children up to grade level - inadvertently exaggerating the problem even more, Siegle said. A Fordham Institute study released last month showed gifted students are still improving their standardized test scores,

but not as quickly as low-performing children.

As the economy has tanked, some states are shifting money away from gifted programs to help balance their budgets. The report shows that 13 states - more than half of the 23 that actually fund gifted education - made such cuts in 2008-09.

In the Oxnard School District just north of Los Angeles, that means Martha Flournoy, who ran the district's gifted program for a decade, is back in the classroom.

She said the students who are suffering the most are bright children from poor families.

"If I'm middle class and my kids are identified gifted and talented, I'm going to find a charter school or go to a neighboring district or find a private school," Flournoy said. "That does not happen with all kids."

Some oppose having separate classes for gifted kids. Mara Sapon-Shevin of Syracuse University argues that gifted programs create "haves and the have nots." She prefers grouping students together and then tailoring the curriculum to each child. Sapon-Shevin kept her own daughter out of a second-grade gifted program in the 1980s.

"In the unit on birds, the gifted children would learn myths about birds, go bird watching, build bird houses, learn bird calls, do bird identification," she said. "The problem came when I raised my hand and asked what the other second-graders were doing. They said 'work sheets.'"

But for educators like Sally Walker, gifted programs help bright children reach their highest potential, putting future doctors, scientists and engineers in classrooms where they don't feel embarrassed for being smart.

Walker recalls the day she was testing a particularly bright 5-year-old boy in her gifted program in a Rockford, Ill., elementary school in the 1980s. She asked him what color coal is and gave him three options: black, purple and gray.

The boy marked all three answers and told Walker that coal was black indoors, purple in the sunshine and gray if it burns.

"These are students who are ignored because of the myth that they will make it on their own or succeed without help," said Walker, now executive director of the Illinois Association for Gifted Children. "They get frustrated because they feel they are not being understood."

On the Net:

National Association for Gifted Children: <http://www.nagc.org>

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