



Let's not fail gifted students

By Del Siegle / As You Were Saying | Saturday, August 2, 2008 |

While no one disputes that the nation has an obligation to support struggling learners, doing so at the expense of high-performing students perpetuates the cycle of inequality. Being a gifted young learner should not mean you lose your right to a quality education.

Unfortunately, the current system of accountability in education epitomized by the federal No Child Left Behind Act creates an environment in which the individual right to a quality education has been all but revoked for bright students, particularly those from underserved and disadvantaged backgrounds.

The increased focus on accountability carries some positives, namely a much-needed change in educator behavior that has led to significant academic progress for our lowest achieving students. But while our political and education leadership should be proud of these gains, a just-released national study says that NCLB's narrow focus on low-achieving students causes educators to ignore high-performers.

If this trend continues, nothing less than our nation's future is at risk.

According to an in-depth analysis of eight years of National Assessment of Educational Programs data by the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, an education think-tank, low-performing students in the bottom 10 percent have made encouraging gains in math and reading, while the scores of students in the top 10 percent have remained stagnant.

Perhaps even more alarming, a companion national survey by the institute found that a majority of our teachers do not feel adequately prepared to meet the special learning needs of gifted students, nor do they feel encouraged to spend time working with high-achieving students to maximize their potential.

While no one disputes that the nation has an obligation to support struggling learners, doing so at the expense of high-performing students - especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds - perpetuates the cycle of inequality and results in continued underperformance.

Instead of raising the bar high by demanding that every student excel, we have instead lowered it to basic proficiency - focusing outsized amounts of resources and attention on those at the lowest ends, leaving behind an entire population of students whose needs continue to go unmet.

Some in education policy circles adhere to an outdated and misguided philosophy of "gifted children will do just fine on their own." Research and experience, however, have proved that if high-ability students fail to receive appropriate instruction and attention, they lose interest in school, underachieve and even drop out.

The most vulnerable students are those high-achieving learners from underserved and disadvantaged backgrounds whose families lack the resources and ability to compensate for the national under-investment in gifted education programs.

Cultural, language and budgetary challenges, among others, have long resulted in under-identification of gifted learners from disadvantaged backgrounds. Continuing to neglect the needs of gifted learners will only guarantee that those who are identified will see few or no resources.

For gifted students, the first challenge most often begins when they walk into the classroom. According to the Fordham survey, 64 percent of teachers received little to no training in gifted education in college, and nearly 60 percent have received no professional development focused on gifted students.

Until we commit to ensuring every child is taught by a well-qualified teacher, little else will make much difference.

In addition to teacher training, it's time for Congress and the White House to enact legislation that ensures all students will have equal access to gifted education resources and services. By setting this standard, policymakers will tell educators that they are not only encouraged but expected to focus on excellence rather than proficiency alone.

Ultimately, the Fordham report sends a clear message that if we continue the current course of action, we will inflict irreparable harm on our nation's strongest learners, with negative repercussions we can only imagine.

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