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Gifted students need a hand

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Multiple crises are forcing elected officials to focus almost exclusively on near-term challenges, ignoring areas that could lead to more vexing predicaments. Perhaps nowhere is this shortsightedness more apparent than in our nation's disregard for educating our most promising students.

While emerging nations are redoubling their investments in their brightest minds, the United States has opted for neglect. Washington invests a pittance in gifted education - about 2.6 cents of every \$100 in federal education funds. States and local districts vary widely, with islands of strength - typically in more affluent communities - scattered in a sea of underinvestment or total abandonment.

The picture in our region is bleak. Although Pennsylvania requires services for gifted students, implementation varies greatly across its 500 districts. This makes for sharp differences in key areas and results in little or no support for professional training.

The situation is similar in New Jersey's 600-plus school districts, where services range from individualized education plans at one extreme to absolutely no services at the other. New Jersey spends no state money to support gifted education, requires no specialized courses for teachers, and offers not a single course on gifted education in any state undergraduate teacher program.

Delaware neither requires gifted education programs and services nor provides a single dollar to support them.

As a result, we are fast approaching a gifted-education crisis. Our state and national leaders must address it now if we are serious about closing the widening gaps between U.S. students and workers and those in other countries.

Too often, gifted-education programs are seen as expendable based on the flawed logic that gifted students "don't need any help." But volumes of research show that the opposite is true. Gifted students have learning, social and emotional needs that must be addressed. If these needs go unmet, gifted students tune out and drop out.

Some states and districts have tried to address this crisis in misguided ways. Instead of

providing advanced, challenging content, teachers load students up with work they already have mastered or take a piecemeal approach. Teachers need to be prepared with a variety of strategies to educate gifted students effectively.

Nationwide, gifted education is in short supply, complete disarray or totally nonexistent. Washington should create incentives for districts to develop sound gifted-education programs and training. States, school districts and colleges that have achieved successes should be supported and imitated.

Striving to train all teachers in gifted education will help identify the untold numbers of undiscovered, disadvantaged and underserved gifted students who now languish without appropriate services. These students have little chance of maximizing their potential unless their gifts are recognized and developed.

It is tragic that, in schools throughout our country, brilliant minds sit in the dark, waiting for a teacher to flip the switch that leads to excellence.

We face no shortage of challenges and crises requiring urgent and thoughtful attention. But only by redoubling our commitment to educating our brightest minds will we foster the long-term ability to solve the problems of tomorrow.

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