

Excerpt from
Failing Our Brightest Kids:
The Global Challenge of Educating High-Ability Students
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Introduction

AMERICAN EDUCATION has focused in recent decades on ensuring that all children, especially those from poor and minority backgrounds, attain a minimum level of academic achievement. That is an absolutely worthy goal—and the country has made modest progress toward reaching it, particularly in the early grades.

But what about students already above that minimum? Those for whom reaching “proficiency” is no challenge? How well has the U.S. education system been serving them? How are they doing academically compared with their age-mates in other countries?

A number of studies, books, and commentaries have raised the disquieting possibility that our focus on boosting the performance of students “below the bar” has neglected girls and boys who have already cleared it; in an era committed to leaving no child behind, *these* kids are at considerable risk of languishing in classes geared toward universal but modest proficiency and taught by instructors admonished to raise the floor but under no pressure to lift the ceiling.

These are the same children who, in the words of the American Enterprise Institute’s Frederick M. Hess, “may be those most likely to one day develop miraculous cures, produce inspiring works, invent technological marvels and improve the lives of all Americans.”¹

They are, in other words, an important element of the nation’s human capital—and they, too, deserve an education that meets their needs, develops their potential, and maximizes their attainments. Yet far too few of these children, especially the poor and minority

youngsters among them, are getting that kind of education today. Our goal in this book is to persuade U.S. educators and policy makers to attend more purposefully and systematically to their schooling.

This is a steep hill to climb. Many Americans don't think these kids need special attention and are loath to divert resources in their direction. But it's a hill that others have struggled up long before we reached its foot. A full century before *No Child Left Behind*, some local public school systems—concerned lest the education of exceptionally able children be consigned to private schools accessible mainly to the wealthy—undertook in various ways to address the specific learning needs of such pupils. Worcester (Massachusetts) opened the first special school for gifted pupils in 1901. A decade later, the Dayton (Ohio) public schools created “The Make-Time School” in which high-ability youngsters (and those who had for some reason missed a year of formal education) could speed through the curricula of both eighth and ninth grades in a single year.² By 1920, many cities had made similar arrangements, though these tended to fade amid the Great Depression and the weighty, costly distractions of World War II.

The education of high-ability and high-achieving students emerged as a national concern during the 1950s in the aftermath of Sputnik—part of America's worry that its long-assumed scientific and technological prowess was being eclipsed by its chief Cold War enemy.

The National Association for Gifted Children was founded in 1954, the same year as the Supreme Court's *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. And as the country began to desegregate its schools and concern itself with educational equity, a seminal 1961 book by Carnegie Corporation president (and future Health, Education, and Welfare secretary) John W. Gardner posed the provocative question, “Can we be equal and excellent too?”³ U.S. Education Commissioner Sidney P. Marland reported to Congress in 1972 that “Gifted and Talented children are, in fact, deprived and can suffer psychological damage and permanent impairment of their abilities to function well which is equal to or greater than the similar deprivation suffered by any other population with special needs.”⁴

Then 1983 brought *A Nation at Risk*, the celebrated commission report that—echoing Sputnik-era concerns—declared that weaknesses in American primary and secondary education augured serious threats

on the international front, and indeed that “[o]ur once unchallenged preeminence in commerce, industry, science, and technological innovation is being overtaken by competitors throughout the world.”⁵ Five years later, Congress enacted the first (and only) federal program focused on gifted students, named in honor of the late senator Jacob K. Javits (R-NY), one of the rare lawmakers to pay attention to this issue.

The topic has resurfaced in recent years, owing partly to deepening concern about America’s economic competitiveness and (again) its scientific/technological leadership, partly to alarming international test score results, partly to concern that new academic standards and tests will have a homogenizing effect on school curricula and instruction, and partly to highly visible revelations that few successful students from disadvantaged backgrounds are proceeding from high school into the challenging colleges that would maximize their educational attainments and their prospects for upward mobility.

We’ve known for more than two decades that few students—especially poor and minority pupils—reach the “Advanced” level on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), and that most of those trend lines are close to flat. But gifted and talented education is often viewed as an elitist enterprise that benefits mainly the daughters and sons of ambitious middle-class families, and is hence irrelevant to disadvantaged youngsters. In many places, these kids have been left to make it through school as best they can. And some—though not enough—of them have excelled there, only to encounter yet another form of neglect, this one more surprising. In fact, it made the front page of the Sunday *New York Times* in March 2013 when Stanford economist Caroline Hoxby and a colleague revealed that “Only 34 percent of high-achieving high school seniors in the bottom fourth of (sic) income distribution attended any one of the country’s 238 most selective colleges.”⁶

These are young people, mind you, who *succeeded* in American K-12 education despite their families’ poverty, yet the system still failed to do right by them. A few other analysts and commentators, along with us, have begun to ask, How many more boys and girls with strong potential yet limited means never make it to the ranks of high achievers because they languish in the earlier grades of school?⁷

At least as concerning as the domestic data is evidence from international assessments that a number of other countries are doing better than the United States at propelling their young people, including more of those from disadvantaged circumstances, to impressive academic achievement. In 2012, twenty-seven of thirty-four countries in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) had larger percentages of their test takers score in PISA's top two tiers in mathematics than did the United States. While just 9 percent of American fifteen-year-olds reached these levels, 31 percent of Korean students and 16 percent of Canadians did so.

When we probe deeper into those data for evidence of high achievement by disadvantaged youngsters, the U.S. performance turns out to be even worse. In science, for example, PISA (Program for International Student Assessment) results indicate that just 1 percent of American fifteen-year-olds with poorly educated parents reach the high-scoring ranks, versus 5 percent in Australia, 6 percent in Germany, and 7 percent in Japan.

How do those countries do it? Is there some secret sauce for educating high-ability youngsters that other nations are sprinkling on their schools but that the United States has failed to discover or refuses to use? Are others neglecting their low achievers in favor of gifted students? Or have they figured out how to support both at once? Are they doing it for reasons of equity or economic competitiveness? Are they not plagued by worries about elitism and the diversion of resources from the "truly needy" to populations that "will do fine anyway"?

Such questions begged for answers and we resolved to seek some. Encouraged by the organizations and colleagues (and funders) identified in the acknowledgments, we embarked on visits to a dozen sites in eleven countries during 2012 and 2013, gathering insights and opinions from knowledgeable individuals in those locales, and examined other studies and data from international and domestic sources. In the pages that follow, we describe what we learned—and what we think should be done to change our own country's trajectory.

Part I reviews the twin rationales that we find most compelling for renewing America's focus on the education of high-ability youngsters; documents our present weak performance in this realm; underscores

our domestic “excellence gap” whereby advantaged children are far likelier to become high achievers than are their poor and minority classmates; and examines the principal obstacles and arguments that deter us from strengthening our performance as well as some authentic dilemmas regarding how such strengthening is best done.

In part II, we explore how schools around the world educate their high-ability students and distill the main lessons that we draw from our study of them. Then in part III, we apply those lessons to the U.S. education system.

Because the topic of “gifted” education is fraught with definitional challenges—who warrants such a designation and according to what criteria—we should make our own focus clear.

We recognize that extraordinary ability and performance come in many forms, including (for example) sports and the arts. In these pages, however, we concentrate on academic or intellectual prowess, the forms of achievement measured by PISA, TIMSS, PIRLS, and NAEP. With apologies to those who contend that other forms of talent and accomplishment are just as important to the nation’s future, we accept the economic and political reality that American prosperity and security over the next half century hinge more directly on intellectual ability and academic achievement.

Even within those limits, debates rage over who, exactly, qualifies as “gifted” and how to determine this. Some claim that “everyone is gifted in his or her own way and it’s wrong to make distinctions.” Others assert that only the kind of intellectual aptitude purportedly measured by IQ tests qualifies, and that the gifted population is therefore best defined by setting “cut scores” on such tests. Still others insist that effort and attitude always trump aptitude or ability and that it’s therefore pointless, even harmful, to make any distinctions between individuals’ potential to achieve great things.

There’s no clear path through this thicket, which we reenter in chapters 3 and 18. But after much thought and considerable research, we reject all three of those perspectives, and find ourselves in broad agreement with such thinkers as the University of Connecticut’s Joseph Renzulli, the University of Quebec’s François Gagné, and the American Psychological Association’s Rena Subotnik, all of whom have developed “models” of giftedness that are taken seriously in other

countries (and by many gifted education specialists in the United States). Though their models differ somewhat, each considers several factors in determining which students deserve this consideration. Renzulli's "three-ring" version focuses on the intersection within an individual of "above average ability," "task commitment," and "creativity." Gagné's "differentiated model" combines "giftedness" (based on natural aptitudes) with "talent" (depicted as "outstanding mastery of systematically developed abilities, called competencies [knowledge and skills], in at least one field of human activity.") And Subotnik (often working with colleagues Paula Olszewski-Kubilius and Frank Worrell) has usefully added the element of "eminence," or outstanding achievement, in specific domains that "ought to be the chief goal of gifted education" and should influence the identification process.

Because these models are complex, relatively expensive, and involve subjective judgments about individuals, they're hard to apply to large numbers of children. That's why many educators end up relying instead on straightforward test scores—or throwing up their hands and either denying the existence of exceptional ability or insisting that it doesn't matter. We understand the challenges here, yet remain convinced that such multifactor models are the best way to think about the blend of potential and accomplishment that warrant the strongest claim on our attention. And, to repeat, we also concentrate in these pages on policies, practices, and programs that bear primarily on the education of young people whose potential and accomplishment are manifest in traditional "academic" realms.