

**Special**

## **Income, race big factors in rates of ‘gifted’ students**

**By Shannon Gilchrist**

**The Columbus Dispatch**

Posted Mar 29, 2018 at 1:00 PM

Students from low-income families and students who are black or Latino are much less likely to be identified as gifted than more-affluent students and white or Asian students.

Nearly one of every two students in Grandview Heights schools has been identified as gifted — either overall or in a subject area — while only one in 25 students in Whitehall schools has been so designated.

That pattern plays out all over the country. According to research over the years, gifted identification is closely tied to income and race. Students from low-income families and students who are black or Latino are much less likely to be identified as gifted than more-affluent students and white or Asian students.

According to state data, Grandview Heights is classified as a suburban district with very low student poverty (8.9 percent disadvantaged students, and median income of \$54,451) and very few minorities (8.7 percent). Whitehall is an urban district with high student poverty (75 percent; median income \$24,826) and a large minority student population (72 percent).

“The key factor is poverty, to be honest,” said Del Siegle, a University of Connecticut professor in gifted education and director of the National Center for Research on Gifted Education. The groups that are likewise underrepresented in schools’ gifted programs — minorities and English language learners — often share the issues of poverty.

Among the “big eight” Ohio school districts, which are urban with very high poverty, an average of 9.4 percent of students are identified as gifted, according to the Ohio Association for Gifted Children. Small-town school districts with high poverty identify 11.4 percent of students as gifted.

Meanwhile, the suburban districts with very low poverty — the Dublins and Bexleys — identify an average of 31.6 percent of students as gifted.

There is no universal definition for giftedness; each state determines what it means.

Ohio says that any child who scores over a certain threshold on a cognitive test or ranks above the 95th percentile on a national test in a subject area is considered gifted. There's also giftedness in creative thinking and in the arts, but those identifications are less common. Ohio school districts must identify gifted students by law, but they aren't required to serve them.

Siegle's definition of giftedness: Any child who is so much more advanced than his classmates that the normal curriculum isn't enough. Some students are "dying on the vine" for need of challenge, he said.

University researchers in Connecticut published a study in January in the journal *Gifted Child Quarterly* showing that even within districts, schools with resources are more likely to identify students as gifted than those with a higher low-income population. It also found that individual low-income students were less likely to be identified even if they showed similar achievement in reading and math to higher-income peers.

"Our country can't ignore and not develop the talents of this large group of children from low-income households," Siegle said.

He said poverty leads to fewer early learning and cultural opportunities: trips to museums, lots of words heard and read to them. Then, low-income kids often end up attending a school where resources are scarce.

If teachers nominate students for gifted services, they might not recognize the signs in underserved groups. For example, curiosity — a student who doesn't speak much English is unlikely to ask many questions. Some characteristics on the checklist, Siegle said, "better fit a white, middle-class kid."

This school year, Ohio began requiring schools to screen every student for giftedness in elementary school, once within grades K-2 and again within grades 3-6. Siegle applauded that change.

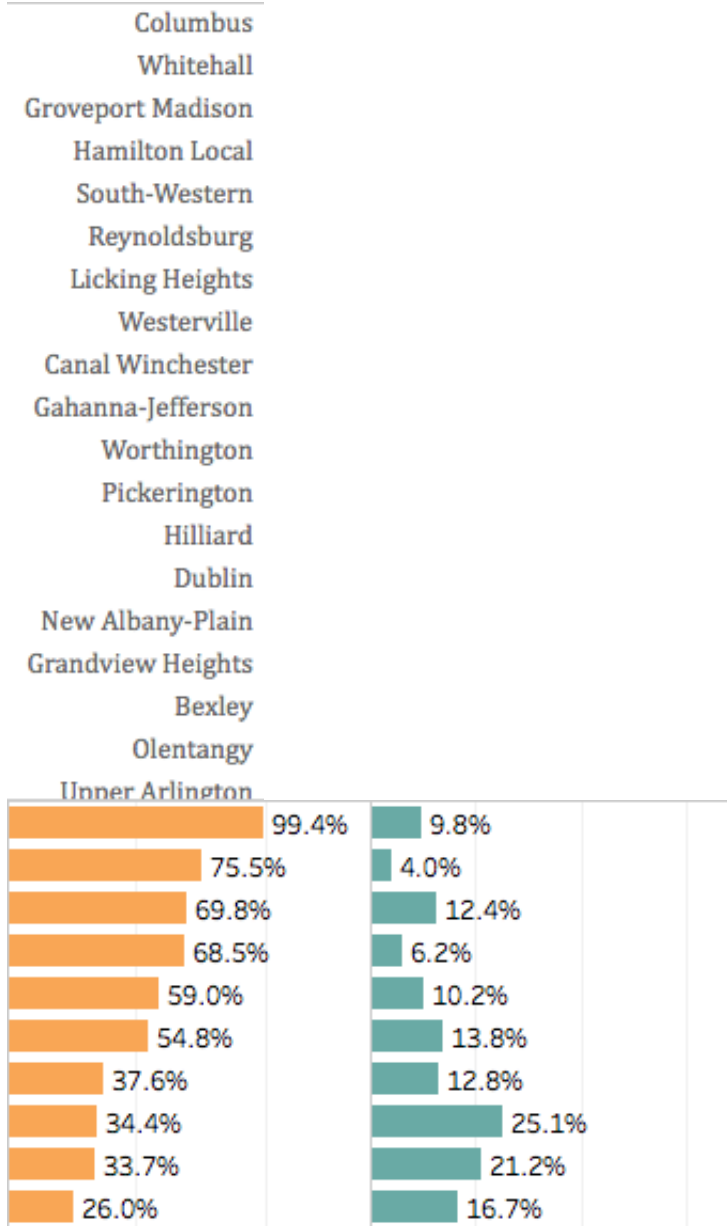
Columbus City Schools has been screening entire grades for years. It identified 9.8 percent as gifted for 2016-17, the third-lowest on the list.

“The old numbers, they were bad,” district spokesman Scott Varner said. “You could see that disparity, that gap. We’ve actually made some major investments and seen some good results.”

In 2015, the district began using a nonverbal cognitive test, with pictures instead of words, which immediately increased the number and diversity of students identified as gifted, Varner said.

About 150 regular teachers have been trained to provide gifted services in the classroom. For children in need of more, there’s a standalone program in Victorian Village, the Columbus Gifted Academy.

**Gifted Identification Rates by District** | A school or district, the lower the identification rate of gifted students tends to be. | Source: Columbus Public Schools, Education data, 2016-17



And this is the third year for a program called PETS, or Primary Enrichment Thinking Skills, in 38 Columbus elementary schools where the fewest gifted kids are identified. An intervention specialist for gifted students teaches every K-2 student in those schools lessons about critical thinking. Advanced students are pulled out for work in smaller groups. The curriculum is cost-effective at only \$75, said Colleen Boyle, the district's gifted director.

The first class of kindergartners to get PETS lessons are now second-graders. The class will be screened this year, and Boyle is hopeful that it made a difference.

The Whitehall school district, likewise, has been screening entire grade levels for years, said Assistant Superintendent Kristin Barker. The district follows state guidelines as to the cutoff scores and might retest with a different method if a student is close, she said. She offered no speculation on why Whitehall might have a low rate of gifted identification.

Jamie Lusher, Grandview Heights' chief academic officer, said the bulk of the district's rate involves students who tested highly in a subject — and once identified, always identified. But she said many parents in the district hold advanced degrees and put a huge priority on education.

"Kids come to school ready to learn," she said.



---

**SIGN UP FOR DAILY E-MAIL**

Wake up to the day's top news, delivered to your inbox

---