

Race and Equity



Up to 3.6 million students should be labeled gifted, but aren't

New report argues that schools are overlooking gifted students who would benefit from services, including large numbers of black and Latino students

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A poster from the recent annual convention of the National Association for Gifted Children promotes finding more gifted children of color. Photo: Danielle Dreilinger for The Hechinger Report

A LBUQUERQUE, N.M. — As many as 3.6 million gifted children are being overlooked in school — more than the 3.3 million U.S. public school children already labeled as gifted.

That’s according to a report from Purdue University’s Gifted Education Research and Resource Institute, GER2I, released this month at the annual convention of the National Association for Gifted Children, or NAGC.

Four of 10 children attended public schools where not a single student was identified as gifted, even though most states legally require schools to find and serve gifted children and provide money to do so.

Mind/Shift

This story also appeared in Mind/Shift

There’s “untapped potential around the country,” [the report’s](#) co-author Gilman Whiting of Vanderbilt University said.

The report comes at a time when [New York City](#) and [Seattle](#) are arguing over proposals to eliminate gifted education altogether due to racial discrimination and inequality in gifted programs.

Research has shown for many years that Asian, white and higher-income students are disproportionately likely to be classified as gifted. The GER2I report paints a dismal picture of ongoing

inequality in gifted education despite efforts to find more gifted children of color and gifted children from low-income families.

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After analyzing public school civil rights data from the federal Education Department for the 2015-16 school year, the most recent available, researchers were startled to find very few bright spots.

“Nothing has actually changed,” GER2I director Marcia Gentry said to a room of educators at the conference. “You came here to be depressed, right?”

Attendees at the National Association for Gifted Children convention, mostly teachers and administrators of gifted education programs, work on an engineering project given to Minnesota first graders to let them demonstrate creative thinking, logical reasoning and other behaviors that might mean they’d benefit from gifted services. Photo: Danielle Dreilinger for The Hechinger Report

On average, in the six of 10 schools that have identified gifted

children, 10 percent of students were classified as gifted. However, there was a wealth gap: Low-income schools identified 8 percent of their students as gifted, compared to 13 percent of students at wealthier schools, according to the report.

Gentry estimated that two-thirds to three-quarters of gifted African American students are overlooked. “We’re losing talent,” she said.

Gifted students typically get to jump ahead in lessons, take more challenging classes or participate in enrichment activities, such as engineering or drama. As with special education students, gifted children may attend separate programs, or they may receive services in an ordinary classroom. Some bright students who don’t get extra resources do fine on their own but lose the opportunity to, say, take college math in high school, experts at the conference said.

However, some get bored, disengage, underperform and even drop out, or are simply never noticed or encouraged.

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Student work from Zia Elementary, a low-income Albuquerque school. According to federal data, 54 percent of its students are Latino, 30 percent white, 3 percent African American and 2 percent Asian American. The gifted enrollment of 59 students is 37 percent Latino, 48 percent white and 3 percent African American; none are Asian American. Photo: Danielle Dreilinger for The Hechinger Report

Dreilinger for The Hechinger Report

A majority of states required schools to find gifted children at the

time the data was collected. Most, Gentry said, based their definition of giftedness on federal guidelines: “Students, children, or youth who give evidence of high achievement capability in areas such as intellectual, creative, artistic, or leadership capacity, or in specific academic fields, and who need services and activities not ordinarily provided by the school in order to fully develop those capabilities.”

And yet, a child considered gifted at one school might not make the cut in the state next door, or even in a nearby district. State rules and oversight for identifying gifted students vary widely, and education departments generally don’t do a good job of communicating the parameters. This year, Ohio approved [27 different tests](#) for identifying gifted students. The GER2I report measured access to special gifted services, not the quality of those services.

“We’re losing talent.”

Marcia Gentry, Purdue University

In some states, racial disparities are vast. In Virginia, black students make up one-quarter of public school students, but 11 percent of gifted students. Idaho, Montana, New Hampshire and Wyoming each identified fewer than 35 black children — statewide — as gifted. South Dakota has no state mandate to find or specially educate gifted students. The number of identified gifted students of

color there is vanishingly small: Just 31 of the state's almost 4,000 African American students and 56 of its 15,000 Native students were labeled as gifted. Alaska found only 241 of its almost 31,000 Native students to be gifted. The research team is currently calculating gifted identification among English language learners.

Student work from Lew Wallace Elementary, a small, low-income school in Albuquerque. According to federal data, 74 percent of its students are Latino, 13 percent white, 2.5 percent Asian American and 2.5 percent African American. Of the 21 students classified as gifted, 48 percent are Latino, 33 percent white and 10 percent Asian American; none are African American. Photo: Danielle Dreilinger for The Hechinger Report

Across the board, the share of white and Asian students in gifted education was about the same as, or higher than, their presence in their overall student body. Gentry told the conference attendees that she preferred not to call them “overrepresented” in gifted education but instead to say “well-represented,” because “I don’t want to un-identify kids.”

To calculate the number of 3.6 million overlooked students, the researchers first applied the 10 percent average to the roughly 4 of 10 schools that had identified no gifted students at all, Gentry said. Then they adjusted that number for the thousands of Latinx, African American, Native American/Alaska Native and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander students who would have been included if they were found to be gifted at the same rate as their white and Asian peers.

The NAGC conference had an intense focus on remedying inequality in gifted education. “There is no question that there is a systemic bias within our system,” the association board president Jonathan Plucker said at the opening session, which was titled, “Giftedness Knows No Boundaries.” Dozens of sessions focused on “equity” or “cultural competency” or “underserved populations.”

Experts at the conference argued that screening all children for giftedness, not just those whose parents or teachers request it, can ameliorate inequality. They also advised erring on the side of helping more children, not fewer; using tasks and tests that don’t rely on children being good at math or English, to avoid mistaking early academic advantages for an overall ability to learn; and ranking low-income and minority children against their peers, not against an overall, national set of test scores.

Gentry said that the inequities are stark, and “I don’t want to whitewash it anymore.” But she believes that gifted education should be fixed, not eliminated, otherwise “maybe we hurt the underrepresented kids the most.”

This story about [gifted students](#) was produced by [The Hechinger Report](#), a nonprofit, independent news organization focused on inequality and innovation in education. Sign up for [Hechinger’s newsletter](#).

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