



## Opening Doors to Diversity in Gifted Education

For decades, students of color and ELLs have been underrepresented in gifted and talented programs. Learn how educators are fixing this.

**I**n the early 1900s, it was common for women to be pigeonholed into three types of jobs: secretary, nurse, or school teacher. Women weren't seen as equals to men, and they did not have access to the wide range of jobs men filled.

"We threw away half the talent in the country," says Joseph Renzulli, a distinguished professor at the University of Connecticut's Neag School of Education. Similar cultural biases are being repeated today, he says, but this time, minorities and English language learners (ELLs) are being excluded. Because of language issues and bias, too many of these students are being denied entry to gifted and talented programs in schools nationwide.

In New York City, for example, black and Hispanic students make up 70 percent of the student population, but just 30 percent of the gifted and talented enrollment. And nationally, black and Hispanic students make up 43 percent of the school population but account for just 28 percent of students in gifted education programs, according to the latest federal education statistics.

"That's [nearly] half our talent pool," laments Renzulli, who is one of the most recognized experts in gifted education. "We have to do more with this population. We have to be more open to looking at them and their strengths."

Around the country, educators are doing exactly that. "The awareness [of the gap] has always been there," says Dina Brulles, the director of gifted education in Paradise Valley Unified School District in Phoenix, Arizona. "The willingness to do something about it is changing."

Brulles, who agrees with Renzulli's analogy, works with districts to help them more effectively identify gifted students, especially minorities, and set up educational programs for them.

### Seeing Gifted Differently

Experts agree that identifying minority and ELL candidates for placement in gifted programs is key. Nearly all districts test students to determine if they are eligible, but the breakdown comes

in how students are chosen for a test and which test is used. Renzulli favors universal screening (which comes with a cost), instead of allowing teachers and parents to suggest who should be tested.

If a district relies on recommendations, Brulles advises that teachers receive professional learning to understand how to identify gifted students, especially those who may not be easy to spot because of language barriers.

Seminole County Public Schools in Florida, for example, recently launched Project ELEVATE, an initiative that provides parent workshops and training for teachers to better identify giftedness in its underserved population. So far, the district has achieved 131 percent growth in gifted identification for ELLs, 100 percent growth for black students, and 88 percent growth for Hispanic students.

Paradise Valley also trains language acquisition and ELL teachers to be on the lookout for gifted children. “I want them to understand characteristics of gifted students in general,” Brulles says, “and then consider how these traits may manifest and be recognized in students who are not fluent in English and how these traits may look different in students from diverse cultures.”

In Laguna Beach Unified School District in California, Alysia Odipo is also hoping to change the way students are identified as gifted. Although she’s only in her second year as assistant superintendent, Odipo is trying to expand the ways students are recognized, for instance, by setting up committees that could judge a student’s prowess in music or art.

“When we look at data, we typically look at high-performing students,” says Odipo. “We need to have a much broader definition of a gifted learner. We need students who are creative, even if they are at grade level.” Being able to predict that a student will flourish once they enter a gifted program is even harder than identifying a student who is already academically gifted, but that foresight is important, she says. Students with the ability to home in on a solution or who have specific strengths and talents can contribute to these programs in ways that are just as meaningful as the contributions of students with more traditionally defined “giftedness.”

### Casting a Wider Net

Another decision that can affect a student’s chance of qualifying for gifted education is when the district begins testing. Many districts wait until standardized tests begin in 3rd grade, but Renzulli and others argue that there’s a benefit to testing students earlier because “the longer they stay in school [without being identified], the further behind their test scores go.”

Chad Ransom, a consultant and former director of second language services for Teton County School District in Wyoming, adds that for second language children, “they will never qualify in 3rd grade if instruction didn’t meet their needs” in the previous years.

Finding the *right* test can also influence who makes it into a district’s gifted program. Although more schools are giving students multiple tests to determine their intelligence, many still make the mistake of also running applicants through a standardized test, Renzulli says.

“I call it the multiple criteria smoke-screen,” he explains. That’s because some schools use multiple criteria, such as a writing sample or a project, then funnel all possible candidates into the same type of standardized test that can be flawed for

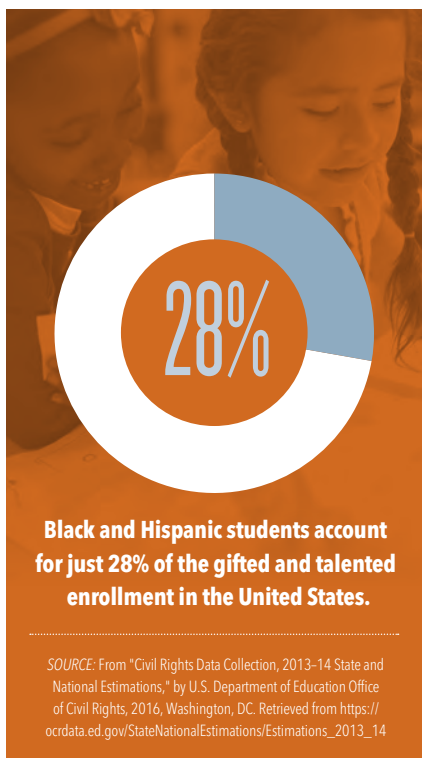


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certain groups. Widening the pool of gifted applicants only to then narrow it through a language-based test defeats the purpose of spreading the net wider, Renzulli says.

Many schools use the Naglieri Non-verbal Ability Test (NNAT), but Renzulli favors performance-based tests. Completing a challenging task, such as putting the right pieces of a puzzle together, can show creativity and good critical thinking skills, he says. Drawbacks to this approach, however, are that the tests can be time-consuming; require personnel to be trained in how to grade results; and usually involve specific equipment, such as puzzles and other manipulatives. All these factors can drive up testing costs in an area of education that is typically underfunded.

Still, Ransom cautions against using one system universally. Although it might seem equitable, it offers advantages to some while unwittingly penalizing others. “If you have the exact same system for all students, you’ll have a problem,” he says. “You have to look at a matrix of input rather than just one cut score.” This method will allow students who aren’t advanced verbally to be able to show their talent in alternate ways, such as solving problems or doing artwork, he adds.



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By creating a screening protocol with multiple measures that looks for reasoning and cognitive skills (and uses more visuals than typical screening instruments), Teton County School District is hoping to engage ELLs who might not otherwise qualify for accelerated programs.

### Putting It on Parents' Radar

In every district, there are parents who aggressively push for their child to be included in a gifted program (even paying for private screenings or test preparation). But parents of typically underrepresented students may not speak up as vocally, either because they are unaware of the existence of such a program, may feel uncomfortable talking with school staff, or could feel they are in danger of being deported, Brulles says.

"These parents won't speak up, won't draw attention to themselves, in part because of their respect of school authorities," she says. "And some families are undocumented."

As the former gifted and talented coordinator of Teton County School District, Christi Roberts (who now consults with Ransom) says it has always been an option for parents to nominate their child to be tested. "In nine years, never once did a Hispanic parent nominate their child. They were not fully aware [of the program]."

However, when a teacher identified and recognized their children's gifts, she explains, these families became excited by their success. "It was really touching to see how important it was and how proud they were of their children."

One way Paradise Valley is working to change this dynamic, Brulles says, is to tirelessly promote its gifted program. By alerting more parents to the program's existence, she hopes to encourage diverse families to consider whether their child should be selected. This attention also has unexpected side benefits, she adds: "Parents from neighboring districts, charter schools, and private schools started bringing their gifted children to our district. The increase in students increases the funds we obtain from the state, which also encourages district-level support."

### Overcoming a Lack of Funding

Funding is a perennial problem for many school programs, and gifted education is no exception. "The biggest barrier for gifted education is the view, 'That's nice, we'll do that if we can,'" says Ransom. Because results don't show up on state test scores, he adds, "it can be hard for districts to make a change in this area."

California, for instance, eliminated funding for all gifted and talented programs during its last budget crisis. When that happened, some districts asked parents of gifted children to self-fund these programs, says Odipo. A system like this, however, could stonewall families who are unable to afford the extra cost.

Still, a lack of resources isn't a reason to abandon gifted education, Brulles insists. In Arizona, which ranks lowest in the country in education spending and 49th in teacher salaries, districts such as Paradise Valley have protected funding for thriving gifted programs.

### Seeing the Forest for the Trees

Yvette Jackson, the former director of gifted programs in New York City Public Schools, believes that gifted education has run its course. One way to address the participation gap, she suggests, is to eliminate such programs altogether. "We should continually educate students to their highest level," she says, calling for differentiated learning for each student. "All kids are capable of having enormous potential," says Jackson, who now runs the National Urban Alliance for Effective Education. Some school districts, such as the affluent district in Scarsdale, New York, don't offer gifted programs.

Brulles agrees with the idea in theory. If schools could recognize every student's needs, gifted programs could be eliminated. But because this recognition is not happening, trying to serve gifted students with curriculum and standards geared for average students tamps down the potential of gifted learners. "We ID kids for special education, we ID kids as ELL or for language development because they have special learning needs. That's why we identify kids as gifted—they have different needs."

### Mirroring School Diversity

To help meet these diverse needs, Brulles recommends that schools cluster gifted



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students. In Paradise Valley, gifted students are typically placed together in accelerated courses with a curriculum that is at least two grade levels higher. One benefit to this model, she says, is that it limits the number of teachers who need to be trained how to best teach gifted learners.

"If you try to train all your teachers, you're not going to have a concerted effort to help," she says. She recommends teaching your gifted staff strategies to develop lessons that cover a range of abilities in their classrooms.

When Brulles came to Paradise Valley in Phoenix, the district already had gifted teachers and a gifted program in place. She sought to strengthen the program and help boost participation among students of color. Currently, 32 percent of the district's gifted students are nonwhite, while 46 percent of the overall student population is nonwhite.

"I won't say that what we are doing in Paradise Valley for gifted students is perfect," explains Brulles, "but I can say that we make a consistent effort to ensure that the diversity in our gifted programs reflects the diversity in our schools." ■

*Wayne D'Orio is an education writer and former editor-in-chief of Scholastic Administrator magazine.*