

Educating Smart Kids, Too

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The United States has made remarkable progress in providing all its children with access to education, but it hasn't been easy and it hasn't yet been enough. Getting youngsters inside the doors of acceptable schools is only the beginning. To give them a well-aimed shot at the American dream, they need to acquire a full measure of knowledge and skills, which introduces issues of educational quality and effectiveness as well as access and equity. On these dimensions, we still have a considerable distance to travel. And the most recent group of kids to turn up as victims of education that's less than they (and the nation) need is gifted students, particularly those with high potential but low family incomes.

The Access Agenda

The access trajectory is relatively easy to trace. In the country's early days, primary-secondary education was essentially a private good, available to youngsters whose parents cared about—and could afford—it. For the most part, that meant boys from relatively prosperous families.

Beginning in New England as early as the seventeenth century, however, towns started to take upon themselves the responsibility of providing a semblance of “public” education to the children who lived there, mostly at the primary level and often still limited to boys. It was optional for families and, of course, it varied greatly in quality.

In the 1840s, Massachusetts began to make primary education a state responsibility. Other states followed, as did compulsory attendance laws, though initially these required children to attend school for just a few years.

Publicly funded high schools were the next stage. But universal attendance in them was neither required nor expected until after World War II—which is also when the United States began to fixate on high school dropout rates.

That sluggishness, however, was not a product of exclusion or parsimony so much as a corollary of an economy that for many years did fine without everyone acquiring a secondary education. Basic civic participation and parenting required near-universal literacy, but factory and farm work did not really demand the skills and knowledge that we associate with high school. So secondary schooling was long the preserve of those headed toward college and into the kinds of careers that called for it. Hence, as high school participation widened, so did the practice of multiple curricular tracks such that some students followed the college prep sequence while others took vocational classes. Still others were cast into a sort of educational no-man’s-land called the general track.

Even as K–12 education gradually became universalized, however, access to decent school opportunities remained a problem for many.

The Supreme Court began to tackle one of the biggest challenges with its *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling in 1954, which commenced the dismantling of racial segregation. The following two decades brought a cascade of federal court orders, laws,

rules, and programs in the “civil rights” and “compensatory education” realms as well as the requirement that handicapped youngsters (today we say “children with disabilities”) be afforded a “free, appropriate” public education rather than the attics and inferior offerings to which many had been confined. Additional legislation sought to provide suitable courses of study for recent immigrants (bilingual education) and to lower barriers that were believed to constrain educational opportunities for low-income children, homeless youngsters—and girls.

Many of these initiatives created unintended problems and few, if any, achieved all that they set out to do. But there is no denying that the pursuit of “educational equity,” as it came to be known, was the dominant preoccupation of American K–12 education from 1954 until 1983.

The Pursuit of Excellence

Then came *A Nation at Risk*, the clarion declaration by the National Commission on Excellence in Education that the United States faced a bleak future if it did not pull up its socks and pursue quality and performance in its schools with at least as much vigor as access and equality.

This was not a total surprise. Several other reports and studies that emerged in the early 1980s contained similar warnings. And a few voices (my own included) had been cautioning for some time that American education was going overboard on access while neglecting results; that it had allowed “equality” to be mis-defined; and that it was substituting intentions, rules, programs, and expenditures for evidence of actual learning.

A gradual shifting of gears and priorities commenced, led mostly by governors, many of them in the South, who had determined that the future prosperity of their states hinged on getting greater skills and knowledge into many more children’s heads than their current

school systems were producing. (I was then living in Nashville, where I heard Governor Lamar Alexander declare perhaps a hundred times to various audiences that “Better schools mean better jobs for Tennesseans.”)

They knew, however—as the great social scientists James Coleman, Christopher Jencks, and Daniel P. Moynihan had been pointing out for years—that simply pumping additional resources into the existing system would not yield better results. They knew that much must change in a system that was loath to change. And so they embarked on multiple efforts—invariably resisted by the education establishment and its myriad interest groups—to alter that system in spite of itself.

We haven’t space enough to describe in depth the many elements of the “excellence movement,” as it came to be known. Suffice it to say that it focused—and still does—on setting actual academic standards that students and schools are supposed to achieve; creating reliable measures of performance that are based on results; devising accountability regimens by which incentives induce stronger achievement and interventions are put in place where it flags; providing families with choices among multiple schools while broadening the definition of schools to include charter schools, then “virtual” and “hybrid” schools and much else; strengthening school leadership; ensuring that classrooms are staffed by able, well-prepared, pedagogically competent instructors; and boosting both the quality and the results-based accountability of teachers, principals, and others whose job it is to educate children.

Equity + Excellence?

The push for excellence did not displace America’s concern with equity. We struggle mightily in the abstract with former Health, Education and Welfare Secretary John Gardner’s old question of whether we can be equal and excellent, too. But in the real

world of K–12 education policy, these twin reform impulses were more-or-less combined in such ambitious undertakings as Bill Clinton’s “Goals 2000” act, George W. Bush’s “No Child Left Behind” law, and Barack Obama’s “Race to the Top” program. Stronger achievement was the goal, but that goal was pursued mainly by setting minimum standards of proficiency and narrowing achievement gaps. Nor did any of the special programs and provisions for disabled, low-income, and non-English-speaking pupils go away.

The upshot: our pursuit of excellence has served primarily to benefit the same demographic segments for whom access to a decent education had long posed the greatest difficulty.

This is no bad thing for America. This emphasis on basic proficiency for everyone could even be described as completing the equity agenda. For many of these kids, it has begun to do measurable good. True, overall test scores and graduation rates are still nowhere near where they should be and our secondary schools are mostly still far from satisfactory (and some are truly abysmal). Still, the past decade or two have witnessed measurable gains by younger students, particularly in math and especially among populations that had the farthest to go.

This is worthy, surely, of a sincere huzzah. But we’re a long way from three cheers, both because progress has been halting and modest even for those making it and because we’ve failed to pay suitable attention to students (and schools) that are already above the “proficient bar,” yet far from achieving all they could.

The Education Outcasts of 2014

Barack Obama and Mitt Romney both attended elite private high schools, as did George W. Bush, Al Gore, and John Kerry. Both are undeniably smart and well-educated and owe much of their success to the strong foundation laid by excellent schools. Every motivated,

high-potential young American deserves a similar opportunity. But the majority of smart kids lack the wherewithal to enroll in rigorous private schools. They depend on public education to prepare them for life. Yet American public education is failing to create enough opportunities for hundreds of thousands of these high-potential girls and boys.

In Ohio alone, some 250,000 current pupils—about 15 percent of all children in public education there—have been identified by their school districts as “gifted” (using the several metrics that the Buckeye State employs for this purpose, including superior “visual or performing arts ability”). Yet barely one-fifth of these youngsters actually receive “gifted education services” from their schools. (Such services take various forms but most commonly involve separate classrooms with more challenging curricula and specially prepared teachers, at least for core academic subjects.)

Imagine the outcry across the land if just one in five children identified as “disabled” was receiving “special education services” from his school!

Yet gifted youngsters are widely neglected. Because they’re already above the “proficient bar” in academic achievement at a time when most federal and state policies are fixed on boosting low achievers over that bar, schools and teachers have little incentive to focus on their educational needs or to devote resources to their schooling. And if we can extrapolate from the Ohio data—that state accounts for about 3.7 percent of all K–12 students in the land—the United States may contain as many as six million high-ability youngsters whom it is not educating to the max. (The National Association for Gifted Children estimates about half that number. The fact that nobody really knows also attests to the vagueness of these definitions and to disputation even among advocates as to what exactly qualifies as giftedness.)

This neglect isn’t just a matter of fairness and equal opportunity for kids. It’s also a matter of long-term societal well-being.

America's ability to compete economically on a shrinking planet, as well as our national security and cultural vitality, depends to a great extent on whether today's ablest girls and boys are well-prepared to become tomorrow's scientists, inventors, entrepreneurs, engineers, and civic leaders. Yes, it's important to impart proficiency to every young person in the land. But it's at least as important to equip those likely to be the next generation's path-breakers with all the learning they can absorb. Our education system at every level needs to view human capital development more comprehensively than it has. The system also needs to be able to "walk and chew gum at the same time," i.e., to tackle the challenge of underachievement even as it devotes concentrated attention to youngsters with enormous high-end potential.

Compared with the rest of the world—at least the parts we're most apt to compete with—we're not doing this very well. Roughly 6 percent of US students score at the advanced level in core subjects on the National Assessment of Educational Progress. When this is equated to other countries via the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), we find (in math, for the high school graduating class of 2009) that sixteen other nations had at least twice as large a fraction of their fifteen-year-olds scoring at that level. World leader Taiwan was at 28 percent but even Germany clocked in around 13 percent. (To their credit, several US states, led by Massachusetts, did notably better than the American average. Ohio—discussed above—was just a hair above that average. In the spirit of rising tides lifting boats, states that did well overall also generally showed gains at the high and low ends of the achievement distribution.¹)

Most apt to be neglected are those who are smart but poor. Upper-middle-class families with educated parents, by and large, do an acceptable job of steering their high-ability daughters and sons through the education maze. It's surely possible for smart kids

to get a strong education in today's America—but most of the time that requires adults in their lives who are education-minded, ambitious, pushy, well-enough connected (and confident enough) to “work the system” and, in many cases, to buy their way into private schools or posh suburban districts.

Smart *poor* kids seldom have those assets at home. They are generally educated not according to how much they could learn but according to the norms of the public schools in their neighborhoods. Since these are usually poor neighborhoods, the schools are apt to concentrate energies and resources on the large numbers of students below the proficient line.

Poor parents may not know what their children are capable of and probably lack the resources to purchase supplemental courses, educational software, weekend and summer programs, and much else that similarly gifted youngsters from more prosperous circumstances are apt to have showered upon them.

One consequence, as economist Caroline Hoxby and colleagues have shown, is that high-ability, high-achieving youngsters from poor and minority backgrounds tend not even to *apply* to the country's elite colleges and universities, although they could likely gain admission, obtain financial aid, and thrive academically.²

A Four-Part Problem

Today's systemic failure takes four main forms:

1. We're weak at identifying “gifted and talented” children early unless their parents push for it. Without early identification, youngsters are apt to lose out on opportunities to accelerate, to get into such special classrooms and supplemental programs as do exist, to enroll in magnet or charter schools designed to challenge them, and to gain access (when they reach high school) to Advanced Placement courses, International Baccalaureate programs, and other offerings that typically presuppose a solid education in the early grades. Those that do get

spotted and invited into gifted and talented classes and such are less apt to be poor and members of minority groups. In Ohio, for example, where 48 percent of all public-school students qualify as “economically disadvantaged,” among those flagged as gifted that figure is 21 percent. As for race, while 18 percent of white youngsters in the Buckeye state are deemed gifted, along with a whopping 28 percent of Asian students, that’s true of just 5 percent of black pupils and 6 percent of Hispanic children.

2. We don’t have enough gifted-education classrooms and specialized schools (with suitable teachers and curricula) to serve even the existing demand, much less what might be induced by more thorough talent identification. Faced with budget crunches and federal and state pressure to close achievement gaps and turn around awful schools, many districts are cutting their advanced classes. In political, policy, and philanthropic circles alike, educating high-potential children ranks low on the priority list. It seems faintly elitist—and there’s a widespread belief that “these kids will do fine anyway.”
3. Surprisingly little is known about what strategies, structures, and programs work best in educating high-ability youngsters. Educators and parents alike tend to assume that if it carries the “gifted” label or is academically selective at the front end, it must be effective. Yet the (all too meager) research and evaluation that have been conducted in this realm—both in the United States and overseas—yield a mixed picture when it comes to the academic “value added” by gifted-and-talented programs and selective-admission schools. This poses a challenge for scholars, advocates, and policymakers alike, a challenge that is deepened by the immense variability of programs dubbed “gifted” within American public education.³
4. When students finally reach high school, especially if they live in poor neighborhoods, they may find just a smattering of honors or AP classes, nothing like the ample course offerings of well-resourced suburban districts and elite private schools.⁴

Some public high schools do focus exclusively on high-ability, highly motivated students. But when Jessica Hockett and I searched for them in connection with a Hoover-Fordham study that led to our book, *Exam Schools*, we found just 165 that met our criteria within a public-school universe of more than 20,000 high schools.⁵ These specialized institutions educate about 1 percent of students. Nineteen states have none. Only three big cities have more than five such schools (Los Angeles has zero). Almost all of these schools have far more qualified applicants than they can accommodate. Hence they practice selective admissions, turning away thousands of students who could benefit from what they have to offer. Northern Virginia's acclaimed Thomas Jefferson High School for Science and Technology, for example, receives about 3,300 applicants a year—two-thirds of them academically qualified—for 480 places.

Many such schools are urban—a few are even statewide residential schools—and they're free, making them terrific opportunities for high-ability youngsters from straitened circumstances. Critics call them elitist, but we found the opposite. These are great schools accessible to families who can't afford private alternatives or pricey suburbs. We learned that 37 percent of their pupils qualify for the federal subsidized lunch program, almost the same as the 39 percent in the national public high school population.

The schools we studied, by and large, are educational oases for families with smart kids but few alternatives. They're safe havens, too—schools where everyone focuses on teaching and learning, not maintaining order. Yes, they even have sports teams, but their orchestras are better. Yes, some have had to crack down on cheating, but in these schools it's fine to be a nerd. You're surrounded by kids like you—some smarter than you—and taught by capable teachers who welcome the challenge, teachers more apt to have doctorates or experience at the university level than high school instructors elsewhere. You aren't searched for weapons at the door.

And you're pretty sure to graduate and go on to a good college. Many more students could benefit from schools like these—and the numbers would multiply if our education system did right by such youngsters in the early grades. But that will happen only when we acknowledge that leaving no child behind means paying as much attention to those who've mastered the basics—and have the capacity and motivation for much more—as we do to those who cannot yet read or subtract.

It's time to end the bias in American education against gifted and talented pupils and quit assuming that every school must be all things to all students, a simplistic formula that ends up neglecting all sorts of girls and boys, many of them poor and minority, who would benefit from more challenging classes and schools. Smart kids shouldn't have to go to private schools or get turned away from Bronx Science or Thomas Jefferson simply because there's no room for them.

The Role of Research & Advocacy

Even getting the “gifted student problem” onto the policy radar screen is a heavy lift, due to its political incorrectness and the belief that smart kids don't need special attention. Because upper-middle-class parents, as noted above, often succeed at navigating the education system on behalf of their own progeny, the loudest “squeaky wheel” doesn't squeak very loudly—and, when it does, it sounds like special pleading on behalf of the already privileged. Though states have advocacy organizations on behalf of gifted and talented education—loosely joined under the National Association for Gifted Children—mostly they agitate for more money and do so in old-fashioned ways. This is not a sophisticated, modern lobbying operation.

Despite all the alarm over international economic competitiveness, essentially nobody in Washington—certainly nobody at the Education Department or White House—is paying attention to this

problem (save for boosting science, technology, engineering, and math—the STEM cluster—though not necessarily for smart kids).

Nor have the business and scientific communities made it a priority. They are likelier to focus on immigration laws that determine the difficulty of importing advanced talent from abroad.

One might expect higher education leaders to focus on this issue, but the elite universities have plenty of smart, qualified applicants—huge proportions of them from the upper middle class, of course—and many other campuses accept all who apply, then “remediate” them as needed.

Into this vacuum have come a handful of scholars, studies, think tanks, and private funders. Research undertaken at Brookings, Hoover, the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, and the American Psychological Association has documented the problem. International assessments have added worrisome statistics. *Education Next* has published revealing articles. Individual scholars with strong track records of research, analysis, and advocacy in this realm include at least half the members of the Hoover Institution’s Koret Task Force on K–12 Education. And a few private funders—perhaps most notably the Kern Family Foundation—have helped with these and other endeavors.

But much heavy lifting lies ahead and the think tank world is probably best situated to engage in it. This isn’t the sort of politically correct topic that professors of education favor; when it’s docketed for discussion at national education-research symposia and conclaves of private funders, such sessions draw sparse attendance. It is, in fact, particularly well-suited to entities with natural linkages across economics, public policy, research, and advocacy, and places that are adept at bringing issues like this into the spotlight in compelling ways. (A vivid recent example was the front-page *New York Times* treatment of Hoxby’s and Christopher Avery’s meticulously documented revelation of the failure of high-ability twelfth-graders even to apply to the nation’s best colleges and universities.⁶)

Among many questions that deserve deeper probing and tracking in the years ahead are these:

- Just how effective are the various forms of “gifted and talented” education at adding value to their students, both in the short run and over time? Programs range widely, from separate classes and schools to ability grouping within classrooms to “enrichment” activities of various kinds. Their impacts are likely as diverse as their approaches.
- Insofar as programs show positive effects, which elements matter? Curriculum? Instructors? Culture? Peer influence? Resources? Others?
- What are the advantages and disadvantages of various ways of identifying children for participation in gifted-education programs and how do these differ with children’s ages or education levels?
- How successful is “differentiated instruction” at meeting the educational needs of high-ability students within conventional classrooms? What determines its success (e.g., teacher quality, teacher preparation, technology, relatively homogeneous classes)?
- What are the pros and cons—and effectiveness—of accelerating children’s progress through K–12 education? How well does “mastery” (instead of traditional grade levels) work?
- What can be learned from other countries about the successful education of high-ability students?

Research and evaluation alone won’t solve the neglect problem, but they can surely contribute to the development and implementation of workable solutions, provided that the political and policy will is there. This much is already clear: without that will and in the absence of focused attention, the United States is destined to continue under-educating vital parts of its human capital that could make enormous contributions to the country’s future well-being.

Notes

1. Eric A. Hanushek, Paul E. Peterson, and Ludger Woessmann, “Achievement Growth: International and US State Trends in Student Performance,” Harvard’s Program on Education Policy and Governance and *Education Next*, July 2012, http://www.hks.harvard.edu/pepg/PDF/Papers/PEPG12-03_CatchingUp.pdf.
2. Caroline Hoxby and Christopher Avery, “The Missing ‘One-Offs’: The Hidden Supply of High-Achieving, Low-Income Students,” Brookings Institution Press, Spring 2013, http://www.brookings.edu/~media/Projects/BPEA/Spring%202013/2013a_hoxby.pdf.
3. This National Bureau of Economic Research working paper by Atila Abdulkadiroğlu, Joshua D. Angrist, and Parag A. Pathak (“The Elite Illusion: Achievement Effects at Boston and New York Exam Schools”) describes very modest effects from selective-admission high schools in two US cities and also contains citations to most of the (very limited) research that has been done on this and related topics in the United States and internationally, <http://www.nber.org/papers/w17264>.
4. In the 18,647 high schools in the College Board database for 2012, for example, one third do not offer AP biology and barely half offer AP calculus, <http://research.collegeboard.org/programs/ap/data/participation/2012>.
5. Chester E. Finn Jr. and Jessica A. Hockett, *Exam Schools: Inside America’s Most Selective Public High Schools* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), <http://press.princeton.edu/titles/9811.html>.
6. David Leonhardt, “Better Colleges Failing to Lure Talented Poor,” *New York Times*, March 16, 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/17/education/scholarly-poor-often-overlook-better-colleges.html?pagewanted=all&_r=1&.