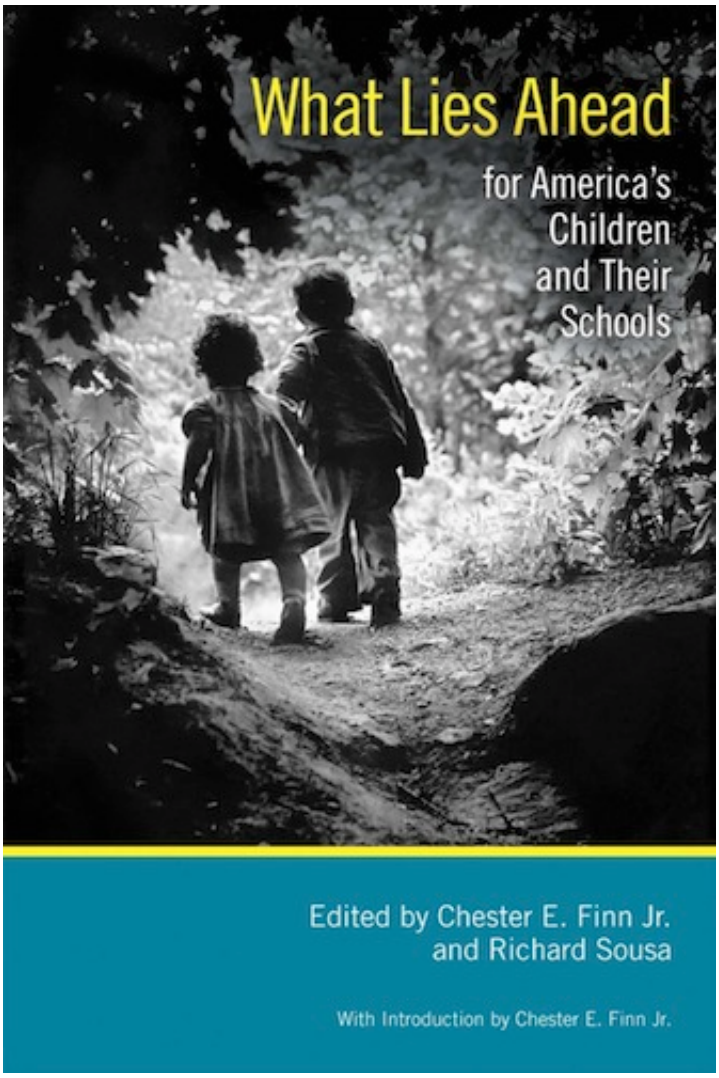
Ending Our Neglect of Gifted Students

By Chester E. Finn, Jr. 07/03/2014

The following is an excerpt from What Lies Ahead for America's Children and Their Schools, a new book edited by Chester E. Finn, Jr. and Richard Sousa for Hoover Institution Press. This excerpt comes from a chapter called "Educating Smart Kids, Too" by Chester E. Finn, Jr.



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.

Chester E. Finn, Jr. is president of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute and senior fellow at Stanford University's Hoover Institution.

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 Abdulkadiro˘glu, 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.

Business Office

Program on Education Policy and Governance

Harvard Kennedy School

79 JFK Street, Cambridge, MA 02138

Phone (877) 476-5354 Fax (617) 496-1507