

POLICY NOTE

How school officials can end racial disparities in programs for gifted children

By Liv Finne, Director, Center for Education

September 2018

Key Findings

1. Highly capable children from low-income, minority backgrounds are underrepresented in Washington's gifted programs.
2. There is widespread agreement that this racial disparity must be corrected.
3. The legislature's solution, of placing new rules on school districts, will not work.
4. The solution is to move away from the controversial, politicized, centrally-controlled public education system to one founded on individual family choice.
5. School officials can end these racial disparities by allowing families to place their children directly into the school that works best for them.
6. School choice includes magnet schools, inter/intra-district public school choice, homeschooling, and online learning.
7. Charter schools are the fastest-growing form of school choice, with 3.2 million students attending one of the nation's 7,000 charter schools.
8. Many states also offer families vouchers, tax-credit scholarships and Education Savings Accounts (ESAs) to send their children to private school.

Introduction

The mission of public education is to give each child an equal opportunity to fulfill his or her full academic potential. Yet public schools are organized in a highly standardized centrally-planned way, providing instruction at a predetermined pace in reading, writing, math and science, from kindergarten through twelfth grade, and delivered by regional monopoly agencies.

Many students are ill-served by this model.

Some students find the pace of learning too slow, while others find it too fast. Students with dyslexia and other unique learning styles need specialized instruction.

The diversity of student needs has forced public schools to develop specialized programs within the standardized model. One of these programs is the highly capable program for gifted students with high levels of academic, cognitive or creative performance. Until recently, students were offered these programs only after being identified as eligible by parents or teachers, and after obtaining a certain score on a test.

Highly capable classes offer gifted students advanced, more rigorous coursework. Participation in these programs prepares students for college-level work after high school.

Gifted classes vary by grade level and district. For example, Seattle Public Schools serves grades 1-8 through self-contained classrooms composed entirely of highly-capable students. Evergreen Public Schools serves some of its gifted students in grades 2-5 through weekly enrichment at a separate site. Other districts offer differentiated instruction in regular classrooms, independent study, honors, cluster grouping, advanced grade and subject placement, mentors, Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate, and other programs.

Gifted programs are exclusive, and serve about 55,000 students, about five percent of Washington's 1.09 million students. In 2017-18, the state provided districts \$24.5 million in highly capable funding,¹ adding \$455

¹ "Form 1193, Apportionment for July, 31 2018, Computed Payments," Superintendent of Public Instruction, State of Washington, at <http://www.k12.wa.us/safs/rep/app/1718/00000app.pdf>.

per student. (Total average per-student revenue in Washington state for 2017-18 was \$13,181, from all state, local and federal sources.²)

Lack of access to gifted programs

Many parents want access to highly capable programs for their children. Parents complain the test to determine “giftedness” only identifies narrow aspects of talent, and is inherently limited. Parents observe children develop cognitive and mental abilities at different rates, and that students should not arbitrarily be excluded from a beneficial program based on the results of a test given on one day.

Statistics also show highly capable children from low-income, minority backgrounds are underrepresented in Washington’s gifted programs.³

A variety of reasons have been suggested for this racial disparity, including racial discrimination by school officials. There is widespread agreement this racial disparity must be corrected.

Accordingly, in 2017 the legislature required districts to make the equitable identification of low-income students for gifted programs a priority.⁴ The Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction will now instruct school districts on how to identify low-income students for Highly Capable programs across the state.

This approach will not work, for reasons discussed below.

This study presents a better way to offer low-income and minority children access to gifted programs, based on a policy of parent involvement and giving parents access to greater school choice.

Racial disparities in gifted programs

As mentioned, many parents would like to get their child accepted into a highly capable program. Investigative news reports, however, find that the benefits of these public school programs are not equitably distributed to students of color. *The Seattle Times* reports that:

“Minority students make up nearly half of all those educated in public schools here, but the vast majority are overlooked when it comes to classes for the academically talented.”⁵

2 “Statewide Workload/Staffing/Finance, K12 Finance Data, Washington State,” Legislative Evaluation and Accountability Program, Office of Financial Management, at <http://fiscal.wa.gov/K12>.

3 “Highly Capable Students Report, 2013,” Title I/LAP and Consolidated Program Review, Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, December 2013, at <http://www.k12.wa.us/LegisGov/2013documents/HighlyCapableDec2013.pdf>. This report shows Hispanic, Alaska Native, American Indian, Black and Multiracial students are underrepresented in these programs, and whites and Asian/Pacific Islanders are slightly overrepresented. For example, only nine percent of students in these programs are Hispanic, even though 19 percent of the total student population is Hispanic. And 65 percent of Highly Capable students are white, even though they represent 60 percent of the total student population.

4 “Funding fully the state’s program of basic education by providing equitable education opportunities through reform of state and local education contributions,” Engrossed House Bill 2242,” passed and signed by Governor Inslee June 30, 2017, at <http://apps2.leg.wa.gov/billsummary?BillNumber=2242&Year=2017&BillNumber=2242&Year=2017>.

5 “Gifted programs across Washington leave out black and Latino students – but Federal Way is one model for change,” by Claudia Rowe, *The Seattle Times*, April 2, 2017, at <https://www.seattletimes.com/education-lab/gifted-programs-across-washington-leave-out-black-and-latino-students-except-in-federal-way/>.

The resulting racial disparities in public school gifted programs is what one would expect in a top-down monopoly system in which children are assigned to schools based on zip code.⁶

The result is that if parents want a better education for their children they have to work the system, and some parents are able to put more time into lobbying education bureaucrats than others. Consequently, these bureaucratically-astute families are more likely to get their kids transferred into favored programs.

It could be that Seattle school administrators are making race-influenced decisions, as news reporting implies, or that the assignment system is so complex and politicized that some families are better at taking advantage of the arcane paperwork procedures than others, or some combination of these two factors.

The final answer may never be known, because race considerations by school officials are often assumed to be part of the cause whenever enrollment numbers show a difference in student populations.

Solving the problem of education access

The solution, then, is to move away from a controversial, politicized, centrally-controlled public education system to one founded on individual family choice. If an assigned public school is not working for their child, for whatever reason, parents can choose another school, without having to seek permission from the district's Central Office.

A shift to a policy of family choice would make education similar to other vital aspects of a child's life, decisions that involve little or no public controversy because they are directed by parents, not by government administrators.

News reports point to the administrative problem of defining which students are considered "gifted," and this definitional confusion only underscores the main problem. Centrally-run government programs have to identify children, often arbitrarily, and then decide what category into which to put them. Parents, however, know that every child is "gifted," just in different ways.

Seeing children as talented individuals

The best way for school administrators to help kids to develop their particular gifts, beyond getting a basic education, is to find out what area of learning a child is excited about and then help him or her excel in that area.

The advantage of school choice programs is they let families do an end-run around all the rules, procedures, high-stakes tests, politics, lobbying and union-influence of a traditional school district, and place their children directly into the school that works best for them.

⁶ Ibid.

The reason charter schools are popular

This is happening in a small way in Seattle, where three public charter schools have already opened. A fourth charter school also operates in south Seattle, and this fall another charter school will open in Tukwila, just south of Seattle.

Most charter schools are over-subscribed. Parents are excited about being part of a public school that they picked, instead of being sent to one because of their street address. These families have solved the problem of racial discrimination by taking control of their children's education into their own hands.

Today, public charter schools operate in 44 states and the District of Columbia. Over 3.2 million students attend one of the nation's 7,000 charter schools. Charter schools are the fastest-growing form of school choice in the country.⁷

Other forms of public school choice include magnet schools, inter/intra-district public school choice, homeschooling, and online learning.

Many states also help families send their children to private school. These programs fall into four general categories, including Education Savings Accounts (ESAs), school vouchers, tax-credit scholarships and individual tax credits and deductions.

ESA's are offered in five states; some programs are for all children, and some are only for special needs or other narrow populations of students. Vouchers are offered to families by 25 states and the District of Columbia and also vary in size and scope. In addition, 31 states offer tax credit scholarships or individual tax credits to help families choose a private school for their children.⁸

These private school choice programs are growing rapidly; for example, in 2017-18 they served 466,000 students.⁹

All in all, across the United States, one in five students benefit from one form of school choice or another.¹⁰

Conclusion – only parent involvement can end the legacy of racism in public schools

Every child deserves a chance at a better education and a better life. No amount of top-down reforms, rule changes, quotas or central management will fully resolve accusations of discrimination in the way administrators run gifted programs in public education. No matter how much school district officials work the numbers, some kids will lose out, or at least it will be perceived that way.

7 "Charter school FAQ, 2018," National Alliance For Public Charter Schools, at <https://www.publiccharters.org/about-charter-schools/charter-school-faq>.

8 "The ABCs of School Choice, The comprehensive guide to every private school choice program in America, 2018 Edition," *EdChoice*, at <https://www.edchoice.org/research/the-abcs-of-school-choice/>.

9 Ibid.

10 "Overview of public school choice programs," Liv Finne, *Washington Policy Center*, October 2017, at <https://www.washingtonpolicy.org/library/doclib/Finne-Overview-of-public-school-choice-programs-10.11.17.pdf>.



Liv Finne is the Director of the Center for Education at Washington Policy Center. She is the author of *An Option for Learning: An Assessment of Student Achievement in Charter Public Schools*, which in 2011 reignited the charter school debate in Washington state. She wrote “*Why parents will love charter schools*,” “*Why teachers will love charter schools*,” and many other publications during the 2012 public debate on Initiative 1240, the nation’s first charter school initiative. When charter schools came under attack from the state teachers union, she wrote “*Analysis: Why the state supreme court ruling against charter schools is wrong*.” She is also the author of Washington Policy Center’s widely-read education blog, and of Washington Policy Center’s Education Reform Plan: *Eight Practical Ways to Improve Public Schools*. Liv holds a law degree from Boston University School of Law and a Bachelor of Arts degree from Wellesley College. She retired from civil litigation practice to raise two children and work as business partner for a small business she owns with her husband.

Washington Policy Center is an independent research organization in Washington state.

Nothing here should be construed as an attempt to aid or hinder the passage of any legislation before any legislative body.

Published by

Washington Policy Center

© 2018

washingtonpolicy.org

206-937-9691

More bureaucracy, conflict and politics won’t help. The only lasting solution is to bring parents into the process as key decision-makers in guiding the education of their children. After years of forced busing, affirmative action and other non-voluntary top-down schemes, one outcome is clear – the legacy of racism and discrimination in public education will not be ended without involving parents.

Family choice in education, whether through vouchers, ESAs or public charter schools, brings fairness and equity to every child, and is the best way to end the problem of real and perceived racial disparities in public education programs.