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Changing the Future: Ensuring High-Ability Low-Income and Minority Students Succeed

Although many students in the U.S. do well in advanced K–12 coursework and beyond, a closer look at national and international data shows that only a tiny fraction of minority and low-income students in the U.S. reach the highest levels of achievement. As the number of minority students increases and income disparity in the U.S. grows, it is imperative that we address these “excellence” gaps in student achievement. According to one report, closing the performance gap between low-income and other students could increase GDP by as much as 5%.¹ The nation cannot flourish if children from all racial and economic groups do not maximize their full potential. Although we need more research on how to remove barriers and create the climate where all children can succeed at the highest levels, there is much we already know.²

What the Data Show³

Top achievers from minority and low-income backgrounds do not perform at the same level as white students and more financially well-off peers

- Between 2003 and 2011, the percentage of reduced-price lunch program-eligible students who scored at the advanced level on the 8th-grade NAEP math exam increased from 3% to 5% compared to the increase from 7% to 13% for non-eligible students.
- Between 2003 and 2011, the percentage of African American students scoring at the advanced level on the 4th-grade NAEP math exam increased from less than 1% to 1.1 %; the increase for Hispanic students increased from 1% to 2%. During the same period, White student performance increased from 5% to 9%.
- Data from state tests show a similar failure to support minority and low-income students to advanced levels of achievement.⁴
- Just 56% of low-income first grade students who were achieving in the top quartile were still in the top quartile in fifth grade, compared to 69% of higher income children.⁵
- High achieving, low-income students are more likely to attend less selective colleges than their more advantaged peers (21% vs. 14%), are less likely to graduate from college (49% vs. 77%), and are less likely to receive a graduate degree (29% vs. 47%).⁶

¹ McKinsey and Company. (April 2009). *The economic impact of the achievement gap in America's schools*. Retrieved from <http://mckinseysociety.com/the-economic-impact-of-the-achievement-gap-in-americas-schools/>

² See Olszewski-Kubilius, P., & Clarenbach, J. (2012). *Unlocking emergent talent*. Retrieved from www.nagc.org

³ Unless otherwise cited, achievement data provided is from the National Center for Education Statistics webpages on the Nation's Report Card. See <http://nationsreportcard.gov/>

⁴ Center for Evaluation & Education Policy. (2012). *Excellence gap 2012*. Retrieved from <https://www.iub.edu/~ceep/Gap/state.shtml>

⁵ Wyner, J. S., Bridgeland, J. M., & DiIulio, J. J. (2009). *Achievement trap: How America is failing millions of high-achieving students from lower-income families*. Lansdowne, VA: Jack Kent Cooke Foundation.

Teachers have neither the training nor time to support advanced learners

- Although the majority of gifted students receive their education in the regular classroom, 65% of teachers report that their education courses and programs focused either very little or not at all on how to teach academically advanced students.⁷
- 32% of teachers say that advanced students are a low priority in their schools.⁸

Schools that serve minority and low-income students lack rigorous curriculum and instruction⁹

- 55% of all high schools, but just 29% of high schools with the highest enrollments of African American and Hispanic students offer calculus.
- 66% of all high schools, but just 40% of high schools with the highest enrollments of African American and Hispanic students offer physics.
- The availability of gifted education programs and services varies widely and, in the absence of federal or state funds, depends solely on local funding, further limiting students from receiving rigorous, appropriate instruction.¹⁰

Removing Barriers: What Can be Done?

- **Increase teacher and staff training.** We need to reverse low expectation and correct misconceptions about promising low-income and minority learners, including the view that giftedness is limited to only already high achieving students. More teachers need information about the indicators of talent and how to develop it.
- **Monitor and report all levels of student achievement,** including at the high end of the achievement spectrum. Schools need data to be proactive in closing their excellence gaps.
- **Support new research and disseminate best practice information.** There is much more to learn, and share, about program models and strategies that have been shown to be successful with low-income and minority students. These include the impact of increased instructional time and the adaptive strategies used by minority and low-income students who succeed.

Our country's increasing income disparity and growing diversity puts more children at risk for sub-optimal development. The singular focus on minimal levels of achievement, coupled with a reduced investment in gifted students at the state and federal level, contrasted by an increased demand for high-level skills in the workforce, creates an ever widening gap between what this country needs and what it is producing. It is imperative that we develop program models, best practices, and policies that will support these students; to reverse the failures to date in supporting promising learners. Our nation's success depends on developing the talents of high-ability students in every community.

⁶ Wyner, Bridgeland, & DiIulio (2009).

⁷ Farkas, S., & Duffett, A. (2008). *High-achieving students in the era of NCLB: Results from a national teacher survey*. Washington, DC: Thomas B. Fordham Institute.

⁸ Farkas & Duffett (2008).

⁹ Data comes from the U.S. Office for Civil Rights. (2012). *The transformed civil rights data collection (CRDC)*. Retrieved from <http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/crdc-2012-data-summary.pdf>

¹⁰ National Association for Gifted Children, & Council of State Directors of Programs for the Gifted. (2011). *State of the states in gifted education 2010–2011*. Washington, DC: Author.