Our Nation’s High-Ability Students  
A Story of Neglect

“In our effort to leave no child behind, we are failing the high-ability children who are the most likely to become tomorrow’s scientists, inventors, poets, and entrepreneurs—and in the process we risk leaving our nation behind.”

—Chester E. Finn, Jr. National Affairs, 2014
“The problem is not that our 15-year-olds are performing worse today than before. The problem instead is that they are not making progress. Yet students in many nations… are advancing instead of standing still.” — Arne Duncan, U.S. Secretary of Education, 2013

Thirty years ago, the National Commission on Excellence in Education published a bold and prophetic report on the erosion of education in the United States and the pervasive mediocrity that would inevitably follow. This report, called A Nation at Risk, found that the United States was squandering its talent, dismantling the support systems that enable that talent, and failing to meet the demand for a competitive and innovative workforce, a dire state of affairs it described as “unthinking, unilateral disarmament.” Although the report briefly brought public education to the top of the national agenda, it did not bring about any far-reaching changes.

Sadly, many of the problems identified so provocatively in 1983 remain unaddressed, and some have only worsened in the face of budget cuts and other reforms. Today, our highest-performing students are routinely outperformed by their global counterparts. And at home, the achievement gap between high-potential students from low-income backgrounds and their higher-income peers has widened to an alarming degree. It has taken the unimpressive performance of U.S. students on international exams such as PISA, TIMSS and PIRLS to elicit some concern on the part of policymakers, but this concern—long overdue—has not resulted in consequential reform.

NAGC recognizes that undoing decades of disregard will not happen overnight and will require systematic and creative strategies that elevate these important issues into the national consciousness again, making them a priority among educators and policymakers. We have long understood that it is critically important that we develop programs and services that identify and serve our most talented students, regardless of the political or economic climate. But we can’t do it alone. We need others to recognize this critical need and join us in reversing the cycle of neglect.

The Cost to a Country that ‘Hates its Gifted Kids’*

- 9% of U.S. students were top performers in mathematics on the PISA exam compared to an average of 13% for the 34 participating countries and 55% in Shanghai-China.

- At current advanced achievement rates in 8th grade reading, it will take 69 years to close the gap between high-achieving white and Hispanic students and more than 200 years to close the gap between high-achieving white and Black students.

- Foreign-born doctorate holders represented about half of the U.S. workforce in engineering and computer science in 2003, up from 41% and 33%, respectively, a decade earlier.

Squandering Precious Human Capital

The federal government provides very little money to educate gifted students, and state financing is spotty, with many states leaving it to local school districts to meet the need. Historically and by law, states and local education agencies are the primary source of support for talented learners and often represent the only source of support. NAGC’s *State of the States in Gifted Education* report describes the situation for gifted and talented education at the state and local levels. In 2012–2013, out of the 44 states that responded to the NAGC survey:

- Only 9 states report on the academic performance and/or learning growth of gifted students as a separate group on state report cards or other accountability measures.
- 14 states provide no funds to local districts to support gifted education.
- Only 3 states require their general education teachers to have some type of training in gifted education even though the regular classroom is one of the top three delivery methods for gifted services.
- 17 states do not collect demographic data about the gifted student population.

“The federal government should require schools to monitor and improve the performance of their gifted students, backed up with financial incentives.” —The New York Times, 2013

A Widening Excellence Gap

In addition to developing a coherent talent development strategy at the federal level, the U.S. should be challenged to move beyond its near-singular focus on achieving minimum proficiency for all students to identifying and developing the talent of ALL students who are capable of high achievement, including our promising low-income and culturally and linguistically diverse students, who too often languish in our schools.

These students must now compete and excel in a fast-paced, technology-driven world where innovation and creativity are critical for solving complex problems that lead to cutting-edge breakthroughs in emergent fields.

“A pioneering study that followed a group of extremely smart students for 25 years found that these students went on to make outstanding contributions to advancing scientific and medical knowledge, earning tenured professorships, developing software and patents, and serving in leadership positions in Fortune 500 companies . . .” —The New York Times, 2013
The Power of NAGC

Since 1953, the National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC) has sought to build awareness and support for the needs of high-ability and high-achieving learners through professional development resources and tools for the parents, teachers, and administrators who support them. NAGC’s Talent Development Initiative is just one program designed to increase awareness, influence positive change, and build expertise and excellence, all toward the vision of ensuring that our country’s gifted and talented youth don’t languish—frustrated and bored in classrooms across the nation—and that they are given the best possible chance to make meaningful contributions to the world.

How You Can Help

As a corporate leader with an interest in education and talent development, you are an integral part of the solution to the problems outlined in this prospectus. NAGC needs your support. There are a number of ways you can get involved:

• Join NAGC’s Corporate Advisory Council.
• Participate in our 2015 Talent Development Summit.
• Become a Summit Sponsor (minimum sponsorships start at $10,000).
• Support NAGC’s cause by inviting us to submit a proposal for funding.
• Partner with NAGC leadership in cultivating strategic relationships that help to shape the national talent development agenda.

I hope you will join NAGC in this important effort. Please contact NAGC Executive Director, Nancy Green, at 202-785-4268 or ngreen@nagc.org.