

gifted underachievers

Some schools, despite having active district GATE programs, fail to identify those gifted students who are English learners or from low-income families.

In school districts throughout California, teachers and parents have the ability to refer children to be identified and served through the Gifted and Talented Education program. The reality is that in some districts, some schools have referred no children at all, while others are active in making such referrals.

This problem takes on added meaning when the schools making no referrals serve predominantly students from low-income families, or those who are English learners. The principal of one such school was asked about this pattern and responded, "We don't have any gifted children at this school."

Unfortunately, these incidents are not hypothetical cases. Members of the board of directors of the California Association for the Gifted say these stories have actually happened to them, in recent years, here in the state of California.

In one case, the principal allowed a "pilot" project to screen students using an assessment that was not based on English fluency. Twenty-five students were identified as gifted. In another case, after all third-graders were screened, teachers

expressed surprise at the abilities demonstrated by students they had felt were "low-performing."

One boy came to a school with a preliminary diagnosis from another school in the same district of mild retardation. The student had a history of poor grades, was disorganized in his schoolwork and had terrible handwriting. But the teacher recognized some traits that are common in gifted students and arranged for a formal assessment. The student scored so high that he received a scholarship from Johns Hopkins to participate in its summer institute, and he is now excelling in science, math and computers.

What's at stake?

The incidents described above are real examples from several school districts in this state. The patterns are clear. Despite active GATE programs in the district, there are schools, marked by high percentages of students who are English learners or from low-income families,

By Peter Birdsall and State Sen. Lou Correa

March/April 2007 **21**

from which virtually no students are referred for GATE.

California is estimated to have almost half a million gifted students in its public schools. Given an appropriate education, these students can grow up to become leading scientists, mathematicians, artists and writers. Unfortunately, for many of these students, their gifts represent a lost opportunity.

Some people believe that GATE programs need not be a priority because gifted children will excel regardless of the education they receive. That clearly is not the case. What would have happened to the student now excelling in science and math if he had remained labeled "mildly retarded"?

Some children have the advantage of educated, economically successful families that will expose them to museums, books, parks and travel. Other children, however, live in families that can't afford these experiences. The parents in many of these families may not know how to advocate for their children.

This problem is particularly acute in schools that tend to have large percentages of low-income and/or English learners. In a school faced with the pressures of Program Improvement status, how much attention can school staff typically give to the needs of gifted students? How likely is it that those parents are the active, well-informed parents who will force the school to pay attention?

The cost of under-identification

Unfortunately, research shows that when gifted students are required to work at the same pace as their non-gifted classmates, their achievement levels drop dramatically. Not only can the boredom of this situation lead gifted students to become underachievers, they may become behavior problems in the classroom.

A recent report by the Gates Foundation, "A Silent Epidemic: Perspectives of High School Dropouts," surveyed high school dropouts about their reasons for dropping out. About 47 percent responded that a major factor in their deci-

sion was that classes were not interesting. This response was particularly prominent among students who had high GPAs.

To properly serve GATE students, the basic curriculum must be modified, or "differentiated," in order to appropriately motivate and challenge gifted students. Differentiation techniques can encompass a wide range of approaches, including acceleration, studying subjects in greater depth, adding more complexity to the curriculum, and introducing more novelty into the curriculum.

These approaches are not unique to gifted education. In fact, most educators will tell you that good instruction for gifted students is also good instruction for all students. Many teachers who complete professional development training for GATE students indicate that the techniques they learn will help them better serve all their students.

State funding for GATE

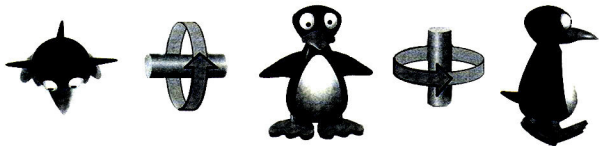
To obtain state GATE funding, districts must develop and submit plans that describe how they are going to identify GATE students and the services they will provide. The funding involved is modest — only about \$9 per ADA in California's public schools.

The power of the funding is that it requires school districts to consciously think about how GATE students are identified and how they are served. It essentially is a block grant for gifted and talented education. The examples given above are cases where districts used this opportunity to question the existing referral process and create procedures to screen and identify gifted students among under-represented student populations.

What next?

If there is funding and a plan, how can these problems still remain? As with many education issues, the answers must be found at both the state and local levels. At the local level, school administrators and school boards must begin to ask for the data about GATE referrals and services. Who is being referred and served? Are the needs of gifted and talented children who are in low-performing schools being overlooked? Current law provides a

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Books worth reading: *Breakthrough; What Video Games have to Teach us*

Reviewed by George Manthey, assistant executive director of ACSA's Educational Services Department

With the readable, 100-page book **"Breakthrough,"** Michael Fullan, Peter Hill and Carmel Crévola make the case that we are nearing a tipping point (or breakthrough) in which it will be possible to sustain school systems that truly are capable of helping most all students reach high levels of learning and achievement.

The authors believe that we know enough about how people learn for this to happen. They write, "Our book is not about prescription; it is about precision — the kind of precision that is tailored to the individual needs of each and every child in the classroom."

At least four key ingredients are required to create such personalization: a set of powerful and aligned assessment tools, a method of gathering formative assessments that is not time-consuming, a means of using the data to design instruction for each student, and a means of monitoring this learning.

The development of CLIPs, or Critical Learning Instructional Paths, is advocated as a tool to implement these ingredients. The purpose of CLIPs is to bring "expert knowledge to bear on the detailed daily decisions that every classroom teacher must make in teaching a coherent domain of the curriculum."

This approach caused me to wonder if the development of CLIPs should be the direction of my professional work. A change like that would require a "breakthrough."

Breakthrough (2006), by M. Fullan, P. Hill, & C. Crévola. Publisher: Corwin Press.

In his book **"What Video Games have to Teach us about Learning and Literacy,"** Paul Gee declares, "[T]he theory of learning in good video games fits better with the modern, high-tech, global world today's children and teenagers live in than do the theories (and practices) of learning that they see in school." The book then discusses 36 principles of learning, and shows how these are built into good

video games. Rather than an argument to make better use of video games, the book is a "plea to build schooling on better principles of learning."

For example, one of the 36 learning principles cited is the "probing principle." This principle argues that "learning is a cycle of probing the world (doing something); reflecting in and on this action and, on this basis, forming a hypothesis; reprobating the world to test this hypothesis; and then accepting or rethinking the hypothesis."

We know that Robert Marzano has identified "generating and testing hypotheses" as one of the nine best learning strategies. The question Paul Gee would ask is, "Where are we most likely to see students generating and testing hypotheses? In a classroom or while playing a video game?" His book is a challenge to educators to create schools that would require that "classrooms" be the answer to that question.

What Video Games have to Teach us about Learning and Literacy (2003), by J.P.Gee. Publisher: Palgrave Macmillan.

perfect mechanism for this dialogue, because the GATE plan is developed by the local school district to address the specific needs and resources of that community.

At the state level, the GATE program must not be implemented in isolation from other high priority state initiatives. For example, when new professional development activities are developed to address the needs of English learners, that professional development should include training on the identification of gifted and talented students.

Legislation to encourage recognition

This year, Sen. Lou Correa intends to introduce legislation to encourage the state and districts to recognize that students can be both English learners and gifted; poor and gifted. Specifically, the state should:

1. Require that State Board of Education review and modify its criteria for the approval of school district GATE plans so that such plans specifically address how the district will identify and serve GATE students from among under-represented groups, including low-income students; English learners and students in low-performing schools.

2. Require that the state implement various programs in a manner that supports the screening, identification and differentiated instruction of GATE students and the training of teachers to provide a differentiated curriculum. These programs would include: SB 472 professional development programs, AB 430 principal training, the High Priority Schools grant program, after-school programs, Beginning Teacher Support and Assessment, Economic Impact Aid, Pupil Re-

tionment Block Grant and state preschool.

3. The Commission on Teacher Credentialing should review its criteria for approving teacher and administrator preparation programs to include pre-service on the identification and appropriate instruction of gifted students.

4. Recognizing that it makes no sense to identify English learners or low-income students and then not be able to serve them, GATE program funding should be increased by the modest amount of \$2 per ADA. ■

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