# Research Review

**Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory**
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***Talent speaks in a number of tongues; its arts are many.***
**—Daniel Resnick and Madeline Goodman**

**A school that seeks to serve gifted students first must find them.** The children most likely to be identified as gifted are white, affluent, well behaved, and high achieving. Underrepresented in programs for the gifted are certain ethnic or cultural minorities, poor or disabled children, limited-English speakers, underachievers, and kids who act out. Girls are underserved in gifted programs focusing on math and science. Besides limiting participation to a narrow population, gifted programs in America typically restrict the talents they recognize and nurture. Traditional academic and intellectual abilities—being smart in math, science, and language arts—are what most schools look for when they seek out gifted kids. But the virtuoso violinist and the prima ballerina, the potential leader and the inventive genius often fail to surface.
Although published 20 years apart, the two major studies on gifted education from the U.S. Department of Education found the same gaps: too few poor and minority kids, too narrow a definition of giftedness. The Marland Report published in 1972 encouraged schools to define giftedness broadly, including leadership ability, visual and performing arts, and creative or productive thinking along with academic and intellectual talent. When National Excellence: The Case for Developing America's Talent was issued in 1993, it found that most schools had adopted the Marland definition on paper. But in practice, "most continue to restrict participation in programs for the gifted largely to those with exceptional intellectual ability." Although published 20 years apart, the two major studies on gifted education from the U.S. Department of Education found the same gaps: too few poor and minority kids, too narrow a definition of giftedness. The Marland Report published in 1972 encouraged schools to define giftedness broadly, including leadership ability, visual and performing arts, and creative or productive thinking along with academic and intellectual talent. When National Excellence: The Case for Developing America's
Talent was issued in 1993, it found that most schools had adopted the Marland definition on paper. But in practice, "most continue to restrict participation in programs for the gifted largely to those with exceptional intellectual ability."

To locate gifted kids, most schools rely on group IQ tests along with teacher recommendations, National Excellence reports. But studies have found that both teachers and group IQ tests are able to identify only about half of the brightest students. In fact, one study found that "the most highly gifted children were penalized most by group test scores; that is, the higher the ability, the greater the probability the group test would overlook such ability," *Marland notes.*

Mary Frasier, Jaime Garcia, and Harry Passow identify three major reasons for the underrepresentation of minority students in gifted education programs: test bias, selective referral, and reliance on what the researchers term “deficit-based paradigms.” The major culprit keeping minorities out of gifted programs is test bias, according to many researchers. Standardized IQ tests have long been accused of being unfair to disadvantaged and minority populations. Selective referral—the fact that teachers less often refer poor and minority students to gifted programs—stems from teacher attitudes toward and knowledge about minority students, Frasier and colleagues note in a 1995 report from the National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented.
“The inability of educators to recognize ‘gifted behaviors’ exhibited by minority students contributes to a low rate of referral,” they say. Finally, the focus on deficits “makes recognition of the strengths of minority children difficult,” they conclude.

**The traditional methods of finding gifted students tend to favor certain ethnic groups**, studies have shown. The National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988 found that about 8.8 percent of all eighth-grade public school students participated in gifted and talented programs. Racial and ethnic groups were represented as follows:

- 17.6 percent of Asian students
- 9 percent of White students
- 7.9 percent of Black students
- 6.7 percent of Hispanic students
- 2.1 percent of American Indian students

States that use IQ score cutoffs (the 95th percentile, for example) to identify gifted students “are more likely to have larger disparities among racial and ethnic groups,” National Excellence reports. Joseph Renzulli of the University of Connecticut has noted, “more creative persons have come from below the 95th percentile than above it, and if such cut-off scores are needed to determine entrance into special programs, we may be guilty of actually discriminating against persons who have the highest potential for high levels of accomplishment.”

Among the most underserved students are those who are economically disadvantaged. The longitudinal study found that kids from the bottom quartile in family income made up less than 10 percent of students in gifted programs. In contrast, almost 50 percent of program participants were from the top income quartile.

Heavily weighted with vocabulary, simple reasoning, and analogy questions, IQ tests capture only two types of intelligence—what Harvard Professor Howard Gardner calls the linguistic and logical-mathematical intelligences. To these, Gardner has added the intelligences (or talents) of “spatial ability, such as those used by the pilot, the architect, and the chess player; musical intelligence, which allows people to sing, play, and appreciate music; bodily-kinesthetic intelligence, which involves using the various body components in such diverse activities as athletics or surgery; and interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligences, which involve knowing others and ourselves and can form the basis for both human service careers and for personal understanding and

satisfaction," writes Marlene Bireley in *Challenges in Gifted Education.*

Another model that breaks out of a narrow focus on IQ comes from Renzulli, Director of the National Research Center on the Talented and Gifted. As he conceives it, giftedness has three "rings," or aspects, that include behaviors as well as aptitudes. The first ring is above-average general or specific ability (talent). Second is task commitment ("a perseverance, endurance, hard work, dedicated practice, self-confidence, and belief in one's ability to carry out important work"). Third is creativity (the ability to solve problems or undertake endeavors with original ideas and fresh approaches).

For educators in a diverse, multicultural society, the important message behind the new concepts of intelligence, according to Bireley, is that it "wears many faces."

"There are a wide range of gifts and talents that people have," Gardner observed in a 1990 interview for Gifted Child Today. "We had better think real carefully before we decide to promote one ability over others. Resources are limited, and the fact that 90 percent of the programs in the country make their placement decisions on the basis of IQ scores is not very praiseworthy."

**If there are many ways to be talented, there ought to be many ways to search out talent**, most gifted-education experts agree. By expanding the strategies for finding talent, schools will not only serve a wider range of giftedness, they also will pull in a broader spectrum of groups. Patricia Bruce Mitchell suggests that states take the lead in "push(ing) districts beyond the 'one size fits all' gifted program." In State Policy Issues in the Education of Gifted and Talented Students, a 1994 U.S. Department of Education publication, she writes: "Flexibility in identification and services are essential because of uneven profiles of ability and nontraditional expressions of ability. State standards must not encourage, directly or indirectly, narrow concepts of giftedness…. State policies and practices should strongly encourage schools to seek exceptional potential among all populations and to recognize that the potential of diverse students may be exhibited in nonacademic work."

So what should schools do to give all groups and all gifts access to services? National Excellence offers a set of recommendations, saying schools must develop asystem to identify gifted and talented students that:

- **Seeks variety—**looks throughout a range of disciplines for students with diverse talents

- **Uses many assessment measures—**uses a variety of appraisals so that schools can find students in different talent areas and at different ages

- **Is free of bias—**provides students of all backgrounds with equal access to appropriate opportunities

- **Is fluid—**uses assessment procedures that can accommodate students who develop at different rates and whose interests may change as they mature

- **Identifies potential—**discovers talents that are not readily apparent in students, as well as those that are obvious

- **Assesses motivation—**takes into account the drive and passion that play a key role in accomplishment

In a 1990 report from the Oregon School Study Council, LeoNora Cohen notes that multiple means of finding talent are needed because "there is no such thing as a typical gifted child," and single measures miss too much of the evidence pointing to exceptional ability or promise. "Experts agree," she says, "that case studies involving multiple criteria coupled with individually administered tests of intelligence are most appropriate." In addition to formal testing, schools should administer parent questionnaires, gather teacher observations after training (using anecdotal notes or a structured checklist), analyze school records, and assess the child's products, Cohen recommends.

**When schools take the leap from looking at test scores to examining student behavior** for signs of giftedness, teachers need guidance in interpreting the actions of ethnic, cultural, and linguistic minorities, whose outward signs of talent may differ from those of the dominant culture. Frasier and Passow, in a comprehensive 1994 study, Towards a New Paradigm for Identifying Talent Potential, examine the ways in which culture shapes behavior for Hispanics, African Americans, American Indians, Asian Americans, and bilingual students. Leadership talent among Hispanic students, for example, is most likely to emerge in small-group settings, where Hispanic youth typically accomplish more and produce better work than they do on individual tasks. This trait stems from the high value Hispanic culture places on collaboration rather than on competition.

Write Frasier and Passow: "The search for better identification procedures for economically disadvantaged and culturally diverse students should focus on ways of recognizing the specific behaviors or manifestations of these attributes in various cultural, contextual, and environmental settings. For example, there is consensus that all gifted children exhibit a high motivation to learn. However, the manifestation of 'high motivation to learn' by an economically disadvantaged African American child in an inner-city classroom or a Navajo child on an isolated reservation will differ from the way a middle-class White child in a suburban school might display this attribute."
Donna Ford of the University of Virginia offers the following guidelines for finding and serving gifted African American students—guidelines that hold promise for other underserved gifted students as well. The guidelines are found in *The Recruitment and Retention of African American Students in Gifted Education Programs: Implications and Recommendations* published by the National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented in September 1994.

**Guideline 1: A culture of assessment rather than a culture of testing promises to capture the strengths of gifted African American students.**
Research support: Testing provides quantitative information on students (IQ score or achievement level, for example), while assessment describes students' areas of strengths and shortcomings. Assessment is diagnostic, prescriptive, and proactive; it allows educators to develop a more comprehensive profile of the abilities and needs of gifted African American students.

**Guideline 2: There is no "one size fits all" intelligence or achievement test. Multidimensional identification and assessment practices offer the greatest promise for recruiting African American students into gifted programs.**
Research support: The (over) reliance on unidimensional tests for identifying gifted African American students has proven ineffective. Multidimensional assessment examines such factors as learning styles, test anxiety, and motivation; multimodal assessment examines students' particular area(s) of giftedness (creativity, intelletual, psychomotor, or social) using various assessments such as students' products, portfolios, and autobiographies. The combination of qualitative and quantitative assessment practices provides a comprehensive profile of giftedness among African American students.

**Guideline 3: Identification instruments must be valid, reliable, and culturally sensitive. If any of these variables is low or missing, the instrument should not be adopted for use with African American and other minority students.**
Research support: African American students tend not to score well on standardized tests that are normed on middle-class White students. Further, standardized tests often lack cultural sensitivity relative to African American students' learning styles, values, and experience. Thus, they are biased against racially and culturally diverse students. As a result, standardized tests often provide little if any diagnostic and prescriptive information for educators.

**Guideline 4: To increase the representation of African American students in gifted programs, educators must adopt contemporary definitions and theories of giftedness.**
Research support: Howard Gardner, Joseph Renzulli, and Robert Sternberg have proposed culturally sensitive theories of giftedness. These definitions are inclusive because they support the notion of talent development, they acknowledge that giftedness is context-dependent and multifaceted, and they avoid the exclusive use of unidimensional tests and related identification practices.

**Guideline 5: Comprehensive services must be provided if the recruitment and retention of African American students in gifted education is to be successful.**
Research support: To increase the sense of belonging and ownership of African American students in gifted programs, educators must address their academic as well as psychological, social, and emotional needs. Gifted African American students who feel isolated, alienated, and misunderstood by teachers and peers are less likely to persist in gifted education programs than students who feel empowered. Services

should focus on counseling needs, including academic counseling and vocational guidance. Options for individual, peer, and small group counseling should also be available to facilitate guidance experiences.

**Guideline 6: Teachers who are trained in both gifted education and multicultural education increase their effectiveness in identifying and serving gifted African American students.**
Research support: Teachers, counselors, and other school personnel can increase their effectiveness with gifted African American students if they have substantive preparation in multicultural education and counseling. This training increases their sensitivity, understanding, and respect for individual differences among students.
Such training can also increase their ability to identify and serve gifted African American students. Ultimately, experienced teachers are more likely to ensure that a philosophy of pluralism permeates gifted education programs.

**Guideline 7: To prevent underachievement, gifted students must be identified and served early.**
Research support: Underachievement among African American students often begins in grades three and four—the time at which gifted programs often begin. Without early identification and services, promising and capable African American students will have diminished opportunities for being identified or referred for assessment in later years.

**Guideline 8: Qualitative definitions of underachievement offer more promise than quantitative definitions in describing poor achievement among gifted African American students.**
Research support: Quantitative definitions of underachievement rely exclusively on high test scores. Gifted students who suffer from test anxiety, who confront test bias, who have learning-style differences, and who have poor motivation are unlikely to receive high test scores. Qualitative definitions take into consideration motivation, self-concept, self-esteem, learning styles, and other factors not examined on traditional, standardized intelligence and achievement tests.

**Guideline 9: The representation of African American students in gifted programs must be examined relative to both recruitment and retention issues.**
Research support: Much of our effort concerning the representation of African American students in gifted education has focused on the recruitment component—identification and placement. Considerations regarding retention must be addressed as well. After successfully identifying and placing gifted African American students, educators must focus on such variables as school climate; the demographics of faculty and students; school personnel preparation in gifted and multicultural education, curriculum, and instruction; and program evaluation.

**Guideline 10: Family involvement is critical to the recruitment and retention of African American students in gifted education. Parents and extended family members must be involved early, consistently, and substantively in the recruitment and retention process.**
Research support: Parents are effective and reliable sources of identification for gifted

children. Parents and extended family members (such as grandparents, uncles, and aunts) can provide invaluable information on the academic, social, and emotional needs of gifted African American students. Information on development, health, interests, extracurricular activities, learning styles, peer relations, and identity issues can only be provided by family members in many instances.

Another publication by Donna Ford, *Reversing Underachievement Among Gifted Black Students: Promising Practices and Programs*, published in 1996 by Teachers College Press, examines the social, cultural, and psychological needs of gifted African American students, particularly those with untapped potential.

*–Lee Sherman*