

Opportunities for gifted students to excel are limited

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This week, the carefree days of summer are being replaced by the buzz of early-morning alarm clocks, the bumpy ride on a big yellow school bus and the clang of the bell as a new school year begins.

More than anything else, a new school year is about fresh opportunities - opportunities for students to pursue new goals, improve performances and learn and master new content.

But for high-ability students here in North Carolina and in most other states throughout the country, the opportunity to excel and achieve excellence is sharply limited.

Just this year, North Carolina state legislators cut funding to the North Carolina Governor's School. Each summer this invaluable program provides hundreds of our state's most **gifted** high school students the opportunity to deeply study a broad range of academic disciplines. But because of these actions, its future is now in jeopardy.

The North Carolina Governor's School Foundation in partnership with the Governor's School Alumni Association have managed to raise nearly \$200,000 through donations, but this is still shy of the \$1.3 million needed to ensure no student is prevented from attending because of financial hardship.

Failing to cultivate talent

The picture is just as bleak at the federal level. Earlier this year Congress cut the sole federal program on **gifted education**, a modest research initiative known as the Jacob Javits Program that developed strategies and best practices for serving this special-needs population, focusing particularly on disadvantaged students.

This disregard of high-ability students has occurred amidst a flurry of activity by government commissions, panels and task forces to study the nation's decline in the innovation and science, technology, engineering and math or STEM fields. Despite the reams of recommendations that have gone unheeded and the urgent pleas from the president to "out educate and out innovate the world," the facts show we are failing to cultivate our talent.

Contrary to the belief of some, high-ability students do not materialize out of thin air, and they certainly do not retain their capabilities absent ongoing support provided by appropriately trained teachers. They must be identified at the earliest stages possible and developed throughout their academic careers.

System solution required

The United States needs a comprehensive talent development strategy. A half-century ago, we set out to win the space race by making a systemic and sustained investment in developing science and math talent. A meaningful solution to the present challenge requires a similar systemic solution to develop our high-ability students in all subjects.

At the federal level, legislation pending in Congress known as the TALENT Act would begin this process by shedding much-needed light on what states and districts are - or, too often, are not - doing to meet the learning needs of high-ability students. It would also report on how well these students are performing, just as districts report on other students.

These represent modest but important proposals that mirror accountability and transparency requirements for students at the lower end of the spectrum, provisions that have been effective in elevating performance.

Train teachers for the **gifted**

The legislation recognizes that most high-ability students who are identified as **gifted** spend the bulk of their school days taught by teachers with little to no training and experience working with these students. It seeks to address this problem by ensuring federal professional development funds can be used to train teachers in this highly specialized area.

TALENT also would enhance existing research programs to focus on strategies to identify and serve students currently going unidentified. This is a particular challenge here in North Carolina, where African American students make up nearly 31 percent of the student population yet represent 12 percent of the students receiving **gifted education** services. Hispanic students fare little better, accounting for 9 percent of the population but constituting 2.7 percent of students in **gifted education** .

Solving the Governor's School crisis and enacting the TALENT Act are two near-term actions our lawmakers can make to begin ending the neglect of our high-ability students.

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