ISSUE BRIEF

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GIFTED AND TALENTED STUDENTS AT RISK FOR UNDERACHIEVEMENT

Throughout elementary and middle school, Tamara was at the top of her class. With an intelligence quotient (IQ) of 145 and achievement scores in the 95th percentile, she usually finished her work long before other students and was happy to help her peers who were struggling. She produced a winning experiment at the science fair, was a member of the Math Olympiad team, and sang in the school chorus. But when Tamara entered high school, life changed. Her parents divorced, she moved to a new neighborhood, and her mother took on a second job to make ends meet. It fell on Tamara's shoulders to care for her three younger siblings. As a result, she often arrived late to school, usually missed her first-period class, and then would fall asleep during second period. Tamara's new friends filled a void. They were in school to have fun—something she was desperately missing. As Tamara's grades plummeted, she lost interest in school. By 10th grade, she had dropped out because of pregnancy.

A master storyteller, Luis was known in his extended family as a crafter of magical tales and extraordinary fantasies. He showed great leadership and compassion with both young and old, always taking time to help as needed. It was not unusual to find Luis tending to an ailing relative or engaging younger siblings in discovering something new in the environment. But to find work, Luis's family moved frequently. By the age

of 10, Luis had attended seven elementary schools. Although he could speak English, he could not yet read or write it fluently, which was frustrating for him, especially given his high intelligence. Increasingly, he grew tired of paper-and-pencil drills and begun daydreaming to pass the time. He imagined himself leaving school and becoming a writer.

At 13 years old, James learned that it is better to say nothing than to try to explain himself. Because of his high cognitive abilities and his ability to absorb information presented verbally, James was able to hide a learning disability. He slid by until middle school, when the heavy text and vocabulary requirements became too difficult for him. James had no trouble understanding higher level concepts, but he rarely completed assignments and typically performed poorly on tests. Then he began withdrawing more and more. Although his mind was racing with questions about the world around him, James had difficulty articulating his thoughts to teachers, whom he perceived as being hostile. Instead of talking, James filled his notebook with drawings of characters from other worlds—characters who faced challenges in unfriendly environments—and the technology solutions they developed to survive. He longed for the weekend, when he would go to the public library and listen to science fiction books on tape.

Each day in the nation's schools, gifted and talented students like Tamara, Luis, and James are at risk for underachievement—especially if they are from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds or low-socioeconomic status (SES) families. Gifted and talented students have the potential to excel academically, but often they are underachievers who fall through the cracks (Reis & McCoach, 2000). In general, gifted and talented students are a heterogeneous group that is very diverse in terms of behaviors, interests, and abilities (Lukasic, Gorski, Lea, & Culross, 1992). Although various circumstances contribute to the underachievement of gifted and talented students, the fact remains that most of these students are underserved by their schools and districts.

Educators and policymakers can address gifted underachievement through changes in classroom and systemwide practices. This Issue Brief summarizes the issues underlying promising practices for supporting the gifted and talented. It also offers a series of questions to ask when planning schoolwide improvement efforts that address the needs of gifted and talented students—especially those from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds and low-SES families—who are at risk for underachievement.

Considering the Issue in the Context of School Reform

More than a decade ago, practitioners identified gifted underachievement as a major reform issue (Renzulli, Reid, & Gubbins, 1992). The federal government also has acknowledged this need. (See "A History of Federal Activity" below.)

A History of Federal Activity

The federal government has long been aware of the underrepresentation of gifted students who are from culturally and linguistically diverse or low-SES families. Following are several milestones in federal activity:

- In the early 1970s, *Education of the Gifted and Talented: Report to the Congress of the United States by the U.S. Commissioner of Education* (U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, 1971) called attention to the fact that there were too few culturally and linguistically diverse students and students from low SES families represented in gifted programs.

- In 1988, the U.S. Congress passed the Jacob K. Javits Gifted and Talented Students Education Act to promote the interests of gifted students. Its major goal was to support efforts to identify and serve culturally and linguistically diverse students and students from low SES families.

- In the early 1990s, a federally commissioned report, *National Excellence: A Case for Developing America's Talent* (Ross, 1993), called on schools to take two actions: (1) eliminate barriers that prevent economically disadvantaged and culturally and linguistically diverse students from participating in services for students with outstanding talents, and (2) develop strategies to serve students from underrepresented groups.

- The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act was signed into law in 2002 as the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. The Javits program was included in NCLB. It was expanded to offer competitive statewide grants that emphasize serving students who are traditionally underrepresented in gifted and talented programs—particularly economically disadvantaged students, English language learners, and students with disabilities. The goal was to help reduce the serious gaps in achievement among certain groups of students.

Although underserved gifted students can be found in all demographic groups, culturally and linguistically diverse students continue to be underrepresented. Data from the National Center for Education Statistics (2007) for 2002 and 2004 point out the continued underrepresentation of culturally and linguistically diverse students—with the exception of Asian students—identified as gifted nationwide:

- Hispanic students represent approximately 17.8 percent of the total school population, yet they represented only 3.7 percent of students identified as gifted in 2002 and 4.3 percent of students identified as gifted in 2004.

- African-American students represent approximately 17.1 percent of the total school population, yet they represented only 3.1 percent of students identified as gifted in 2002, and 3.5 percent of students identified as gifted in 2004.

Significant changes in educational practices have resulted in the identification and support of increasing numbers of gifted students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds (Seeley, 2004). Among the most promising practices are the following:

- Identifying underserved students through the use of nondiscriminatory tests and sophisticated assessment procedures.

- Retaining gifted students in school after they have been identified.

- Understanding the needs associated with gifted students who are at risk for underachievement and providing them with prevention and intervention support.

Identifying Underserved Students

Some gifted students underachieve because they were not identified as gifted and, as a result, did not receive opportunities for excellence. Three practices that address underidentification issues are as follows:

- Comprehensive and culturally responsive definitions and criteria that are used to determine giftedness

- Culturally and linguistically responsive assessments

- A referral process that promotes nonbiased and well-informed responses

Comprehensive and Culturally Responsive Definitions and Criteria for Giftedness

Many definitions of *gifted and talented* have been advanced during the last 30 years. Recently, the trend has been to ensure that definitions embrace gifts and talents found throughout all cultural and ethnic groups. The NCLB Act defines *gifted and talented* as the following:

> Students, children, or youth who give evidence of high achievement capability in areas such as intellectual, creative, artistic, or leadership capacity, or in specific academic fields, and who need services and activities not ordinarily provided by the school in order to fully develop those capabilities. (Title IX, Part A, Sec. 9101[22])

This definition addresses the criticism that previous definitions of giftedness were too focused on intellectual ability and academic achievement. It encourages identification that is not based solely on standardized test performance—a practice that experts have cautioned against (Ford & Thomas, 1997; Lukasic et al., 1992). It also expands the gifted concept and recognizes the abilities of students from other cultures.

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Educators can begin to address identification issues by adopting definitions that reflect a broad, culturally responsive view of talents and gifts. Culturally responsive definitions meet the following criteria:

• Result in the use of nondiscriminatory assessment practices (Joseph & Ford, 2006).

• Allow for multiple criteria rather than a cutoff score on a particular test, which may or may not be the best measure of a student's potential (Reis & McCoach, 2000).

• Reflect an ongoing effort to identify underachievement, which can occur at different points and in different forms (e.g., chronic, situational, or temporary) in a gifted student's life (Ford & Thomas, 1997).

Culturally and Linguistically Responsive Assessments

Giftedness often is defined as a function of high intelligence. As a result, intelligence or achievement tests are used extensively to identify it. However, such tests are frequently ineffective for the purpose of identification because they often ignore the strengths of students who are culturally diverse, are linguistically diverse, live in poverty, or are poor test takers (Ford & Harmon, 2001).

Since the early 1980s, researchers and experts have advocated the use of multiple assessment measures when identifying gifted students who are culturally and linguistically diverse (Castellano, 1998; Kitano & Lewis, 2007). The use of multiple criteria can help to ensure nondiscriminatory assessment (Castellano, 1998; Garcia, 1994; Joseph & Ford, 2006; Landrum & Shaklee, 2000; Ortiz, 2002). (See "Multiple Assessment Criteria" below.) Nonverbal tests of intelligence—such as the Naglieri Nonverbal Ability Test or the Raven Matrix Analogies Test—also show promise in assessing the strengths of culturally and linguistically diverse students (Ford & Harmon, 2001).

Multiple Assessment Criteria

Castellano (1998) indicates that the following types of assessments can be used to identify gifted students from culturally and linguistically diverse groups:

"Multiple criteria may include, among other items,

• Ethnographic assessment procedures (the student is observed in multiple contexts over time)

• Dynamic assessment (the student is given the opportunity to transfer newly acquired skills to novel situations)

• Portfolio assessment

• The use of test scores (performance based and/or nonverbal) in the native or English language (depending on the child's level of fluency)

• Teacher observation

• Behavioral checklists

• Past school performance

• Parent interview

• Writing samples and other samples of creativity and/or achievement

• Input from the cultural group with which the student identifies in the local school community"

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When using nondiscriminatory assessments, educators should do the following:

- Select the least biased instruments.

- Avoid making decisions based on stereotypes.

- Ensure that assessment policies and procedures are fair and accessible to students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

Nonbiased and Well-Informed Referrals

Teacher referral often is the point of entry for students into the gifted identification process. Research on gifted identification (Ford & Harmon, 2001; Moore, Ford, & Milner, 2005) suggests that culturally and linguistically diverse students are not referred for gifted identification to the same extent as other students.

Research on teacher referrals (Donovan & Cross 2002; Frasier, Garcia, & Passow, 1995; Frasier, Hunsaker, et al., 1995) indicates that teachers underrefer culturally and linguistically diverse students because of a number of factors:

- Bias against certain culturally and linguistically diverse groups

- Lower expectations of achievement for students from low-income families

- Unfamiliarity with the unique characteristics of giftedness that may manifest in different cultural and linguistic groups

- Failure to consider the effect that disadvantaged life circumstances may have on student behaviors and attitudes toward school

Even teachers who come from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds themselves may tend to act on assumptions that result in underreferral (Ford, Harris, Tyson, & Trotman, 2002; Neumeister, Adams, Pierce, Cassady, &

Dixon, 2007). Several practices show promise in addressing teacher underreferral:

- Establishing multiple entry points for gifted referral, including practices that allow families and others who understand the unique gifts and talents associated with different cultural and linguistic groups to initiate referrals (Ford et al., 2002). This approach may include outreach programs in which parents learn to recognize giftedness and underachievement using multiple identification criteria.

- Providing teachers with professional development on recognizing the characteristics of giftedness in culturally and linguistically diverse students and on using multiple identification criteria (Bernal, 2002; Elhoweris, Mutua, Alsheikh, & Holloway, 2005; Hunsaker, 2000; Masten & Plata, 2000; Siegle & Powell, 2004).

- Forming a gifted education committee in each school (Clarenbach, 2007). Such committees may examine data to track rates of identification and to compare referral rates between culturally and linguistically diverse students from high and low SES families, explore reasons why referred students fail to meet criteria, and examine profiles of culturally and linguistically diverse students who score high on intelligence tests but low on achievement indexes.

- Establishing goals for referral of culturally and linguistically diverse students that reflect their number in the general population (Joseph & Ford, 2006).

Retaining Gifted Students in School

Some gifted students whose needs are unmet will eventually drop out of school. Research shows that between 18 percent and 25 percent of high school dropouts are identified as

gifted (Renzulli & Park, 2000; Robertson 1991; Russo, Harris, & Ford, 1996). The majority of those students are from low-SES families and culturally and linguistically diverse groups (Renzulli & Park, 2002).

Retaining gifted students in school involves ensuring that instruction and support meet their individual needs (Moore et al., 2005). Two of the most frequent reasons given by gifted students for dropping out of school are that they are failing or they do not like school (Renzulli & Park, 2000). Other school factors associated with decisions to leave school include nonchallenging academic work, poor teacher to student relationships, too little time to understand the material, an unsupportive classroom climate, and general disinterest in school (Ford, 1995; Seeley, 2004). On the flip side, students who have begun to experience success often cite one special teacher who helped them or took an interest in them (Emerick, 1992; Reis & McCoach, 2000).

Schools can do much to ensure that instructional and school practices meet students' individual needs. Promising practices include the following:

- **PROVIDING A CONTINUUM OF SERVICES.** A continuum of services ensures that gifted students achieve to their potential (Reis, 2007). Services can range from general enrichment for all students across all grade levels to curriculum differentiation procedures such as enrichment and acceleration for rapid learners, advanced classes, talent development, counseling, and other services to meet affective needs (Renzulli & Reis, 1985). Strategies such as peer and cross-age tutoring, clustering, acceleration, homogeneous grouping, schoolwide enrichment, compacting, integrated curriculum, and metacognitive strategy training are associated with positive gains for gifted students (Donovan & Cross, 2002; Kulik, 1993).

- **ENSURING THAT TEACHERS HAVE COMPETENCY IN DIFFERENTIATING CLASSROOM INSTRUCTION.** Gifted students typically are educated in general education classrooms, where teachers may or may not have expertise in differentiating instruction. Studies reveal that teachers rarely differentiate instruction or make accommodations for gifted students (Archambault et al., 1993; Gubbins, 2002; Moon, Tomlinson, & Callahan, 1995; Tomlinson, Callahan, & Lelli, 1997). Even when teachers want to individualize for gifted students, they may lack the necessary skills. Professional development may help teachers develop the necessary competencies and skills to differentiate instruction.

- **CREATING CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE CLASSROOMS.** Students need to feel safe and respected in classrooms. Culturally relevant curriculum and materials can help to motivate culturally and linguistically diverse students (Butler, 2003; Flowers, Milner, & Moore, 2003; Ford, 2006; Ford, Howard, Harris, & Tyson, 2000; Ford & Thomas, 1997).

Some practices, such as modifying classroom grouping strategies, have no cost or are inexpensive. Other practices, such as professional development, may require additional time and funding. Nonetheless, when viewed within the context of school improvement efforts, the benefits of such practices for all students may be significant (Hanninen, 1994). For example, classroom teachers can learn to differentiate curriculum and instruction for all students. In addition, a rich multicultural curriculum benefits all learners.

Understanding Student Needs: Prevention and Intervention

Considerable attention has been given in the literature to understanding and to helping underachievers. Research has looked

at identifying the unique characteristics of these students, isolating causal factors, and developing interventions to reverse the pattern of underachievement (Baker, Bridger, & Evans, 1998; Clasen & Clasen, 1995; Colangelo, Kerr, Christensen, & Maxey, 1993; Emerick, 1992; Ford & Thomas, 1997; Peterson & Colangelo, 1996; Reis, Hébert, Diaz, Maxfield, & Ratley, 1995; Reis & McCoach, 2000; Rimm, 1997; Seeley, 2004; Whitmore, 1985).

One of the most consistent findings reveals a link between poverty and underachievement. Culturally and linguistically diverse students who live in poverty are likely to be underachievers because of a lack of opportunity—not a lack of intelligence (Begoray & Slovinsky, 1997). Although schools cannot undo the negative effects of children's situations and environments, they can develop strategies and interventions that support achievement (Ouyang & Conoley, 2007).

As part of a comprehensive continuum, educators can ensure the availability of services and practices that specifically address the needs of underachieving gifted students. The following practices have been found to be successful:

- **EARLY SCREENING AND EARLY IDENTIFICATION.** Early identification often prevents underachievement by ensuring that student needs are met early (Donovan & Cross, 2002; Lukasic et al., 1992). Universal screening for underachievement among gifted students can occur as early as kindergarten.

- **EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITIES.** Gifted students who are involved in extracurricular activities typically are not underachievers (Colangelo et al., 1993; Reis et al., 1995). Providing meaningful extracurricular activities—including opportunities to engage in meaningful work such as community service—may prevent gifted students from dropping out (Renzulli & Park, 2000).

- **COUNSELING.** Counselors who have a demonstrated understanding of the factors that contribute to gifted underachievement—such as low parental expectations, poor general health, poor teacher relationships, low teacher expectations, and poor intrinsic motivation— can help students reach their potential (Ford & Thomas, 1997; Landrum & Shaklee, 2000; Whitmore, 1986). Counselors also can help gifted students address peer issues, such as being ridiculed for being gifted or choosing to underachieve to fit in with peers.

- **MENTORING.** Gifted students who have reversed the pattern of underachievement often cite the influence of an adult in helping them (Hébert & Reis, 1999). Mentors can fill this role by helping gifted students refine their interests and examine their career goals (Tomlinson et al., 1997). Pairing culturally and linguistically diverse gifted students with culturally and linguistically diverse professionals also has resulted in positive achievement (Hébert, 2002; Hébert & Olenchak, 2000).

- **TUTORING.** Tutoring students in targeted literacy skills has been shown to support gains in reading achievement for gifted English language learners (Kitano & Lewis, 2007). Tutoring and explicit training in the development of good work habits and the metacognitive skills of planning, monitoring, and evaluating progress also have helped students reverse their underachievement (Moore et al., 2005).

- **HOME-SCHOOL PARTNERSHIPS.** Family outreach can prevent or reverse student achievement (Tomlinson et al., 1997). Home-school partnerships in which giftedness is discussed can help parents advocate for their child or assist their child in dealing with peer pressure (Emerick, 1992).

- **SCHOOL-BASED CONSULTANTS.** School-based consultants can assist classroom teachers in differentiating curriculum and

instruction to meet the needs of gifted students (Ouyang & Conoley, 2007). Consulting with schools and families about assessment strategies also can enhance identification practices (Gandara, Garcia, Wilkinson, & Ortiz, 1995).

- **DUAL DIAGNOSIS.** A student may be *twice exceptional*—a term used to describe students who are gifted and identified with a disability. Disabilities (e.g., learning disabilities, hearing impairment, attention deficit disorder) can contribute to academic underachievement. Gifted students who have a disability can be at risk for underachievement if there are insufficient services and supports to assist them (Brody & Mills, 1997; Hinshaw, 1992; Lupart & Pyryt, 1996; Reis & McCoach, 2000; Rizza & Morrison, 2007). Screening and identification efforts are necessary to identify these students so that their needs can be addressed (McCoach, Kehle, Bray, & Del Siegle, 2001). School personnel can screen underachieving gifted students for a wide variety of physical, mental, or emotional problems before treating scholastic difficulties (Moon & Hall, 1998).

Conclusion

Amid growing challenges—changing demographics, increasing diversity of the student population, and limited fiscal resources, to name a few—addressing the needs of underserved gifted underachievers is a key issue. Gifted underachievers may include students who are already the focus of reform efforts: dropouts, students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, and students who live in poverty. Educators can do much to improve the circumstances of these students by ensuring that needs are met through school improvement efforts. They can begin by asking a series of important questions. (See "Questions to Ask" above.)

Questions to Ask

Educators can ask the following questions to ensure that school improvement efforts are meeting the needs of gifted students:

Identifying Underserved Gifted Students

Have we adopted comprehensive and culturally responsive definitions and criteria to determine giftedness? Do the definitions and criteria accomplish the following:

- Result in the use of nondiscriminatory assessment practices?

- Allow for multiple criteria—rather than a cut-off score on a particular test, which may or may not be the best measure of a student's potential?

- Reflect an ongoing effort to identify underachievement that can occur at different points and in different forms (e.g., chronic, situational, or temporary) in a gifted student's life?

Are we using culturally and linguistically responsive assessments? Does our assessment process include the following:

- Culturally sensitive assessments?

- Multiple criteria?

- Policies, processes, and procedures that are fair, that avoid serotypes, and that are accessible to students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds?

The direction and continuity of local gifted services and supports are heavily influenced by the state in which one resides and the strength of state policy initiatives. However, providing for the needs of gifted students is still an important component of local school

Have we ensured that the referral process promotes nonbiased and well-informed responses? Have we addressed issues by doing the following:

- Establishing multiple entry points for gifted referral, including referral opportunities for families and others who have an understanding of the unique gifts and talents associated with different cultural and linguistic groups?

- Offering community outreach programs that show parents how to recognize giftedness and underachievement using multiple identification criteria?

- Educating teachers in how to recognize characteristics of giftedness for minority students and how to use multiple identification criteria?

- Providing teachers with knowledge of gifted underachievers and how to recognize them?

- Forming a committee on gifted education in each school?

- Establishing goals for referral of students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds and from low-income families?

Retaining Students in School

Do we offer instructional supports and services that meet the needs of gifted students? Have we provided the following:

- A continuum of services for students that includes strategies and approaches associated with positive achievement?

- Professional development for teachers on differentiating instruction for gifted students?

- Culturally responsive classrooms in which students feel safe and respected?

- Multicultural education throughout the curriculum?

Intervening to Prevent Gifted Underachievement

Do we make interventions available that help prevent or reverse underachievement? Have we provided the following:

- Early screening and early identification?

- A variety of extracurricular activities?

- Counseling services that are culturally responsive?

- Mentoring programs, including matching culturally and linguistically diverse students with professionals from similar backgrounds?

- Tutoring as needed?

- Home-school partnerships?

- School-based consultants?

- Screening and appropriate programming for gifted students who have a disability?

reform efforts (Brown, Avery, VanTassel-Baska, Worley, & Stambaugh, 2006). Using multiple measures to identify gifted and talented students and providing various strategies to meet their needs will go a long way toward helping these students excel academically, stay in school, and be successful in their lives.

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