

Report on the Identification of diverse populations in Gifted Programs in Mississippi

Submitted to the Mississippi Association for Gifted Children Board of Directors

MAGC Task Force: Identification of Diverse Populations among Gifted Children in
Mississippi

Running head: Diverse Populations

Kenneth Anthony, M.Ed.

Teacher of the Gifted

King Intermediate School

Tupelo Public School District

Tupelo, Mississippi

Alpha S. Humble, Ph.D.

Educational Consultant

Jackson, Mississippi

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Abstract

In 1998, the Mississippi Association for Gifted Children (MAGC) created a task force to study identification practices in Mississippi. MAGC was concerned about minority under representation in gifted programs. The task force worked to answer the question “Is the implementation of the Mississippi referral to placement process equitable?” Results of the study showed that it is not. The research identified practices that some districts have used to increase minority participation in gifted programs. The study also provided information on the identification practices of Mississippi districts. This information showed that districts are not doing all they can to increase minority participation in gifted programs. Recommendations for identifying and serving more minority students in gifted programs are made based on a study of three districts that have experienced success in identifying minority students.

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Task Force Members

The following people assisted at various stages in the work of the task force:

Kenneth Anthony, Tupelo Public School District
Dr. Alpha Humble, Jackson Public School District
Dr. Robert Seney, Mississippi University for Women
Dr. Barbara Hunt, Mississippi University for Women
Linda McDaniel, Lamar County School District
Phyllis Mabowitz, Tupelo Public School District
Leigh Todd, Houston Public School District
Benita Autry, Houston Public School District

The following people contributed by editing the manuscript and providing feedback:

Dr. Sue Smith, Tupelo Public School District
Cynthia Colburn, Tupelo Public School District
Dr. Suzanne Bean, Mississippi University for Women
Dr. Barbara Hunt, Mississippi University for Women
Dr. Bob Seney, Mississippi University for Women

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Background

Gallagher (1994) identified minority under- representation as one of the major issues facing the field of gifted education. He stated that "until recently, one of the most embarrassing secrets in the education of gifted was the differential prevalence of ethnic and racial groups in identification and placement in special programs." His statement is true nationally and unfortunately is true in Mississippi. Recognizing this as a major problem facing gifted education in Mississippi, the Mississippi Association for Gifted Children (MAGC) created a task force in January 1998 to study the issue and to present ways to address and correct this situation.

Research indicates that gifted students are found in all populations (Frasier in Maker, 1989). With this in mind, statistically we should expect that students identified as gifted and served in our programs should be in proportion to their numbers in the general population. Until this study little empirical data existed on the exact level of under- representation in Mississippi; anecdotal evidence and the experiences of many gifted education professionals made it apparent that minority students are under- represented in gifted education programs in Mississippi. Nationally, research has shown that minority students are under- represented in gifted programs (Clark, 1989; Maker and Schiever, 1989; Richert, 1987; Gallagher, 1994).

One might ask why is this a problem? Simply, the failure to identify and serve these students means we are not meeting the educational needs of these students. On another level, this is a problem because failure to identify students in proportionate numbers could be considered a civil rights issue. Mississippi does not have a stellar

history in the civil rights field, and we leave ourselves open to criticism of segregation when we allow such a glaring problem to go unresolved. Nationally, the Little Rock School District is under court order to integrate their gifted programs, and the Starkville, Mississippi School District was ordered in 1987 to "revise the entrance requirements for the PEAK program (intellectually gifted program)... so as to provide additional minority eligibility." (Montgomery v. Starkville Municipal Separate School District, 1987). It makes more sense to prevent a problem by acting proactively to correct it, rather than waiting for a lawsuit to force Mississippi to do the right thing. Gifted children have been called our nation's greatest resource (Sternberg, 1996). They are the one's who will make the greatest impact on our society's future, and when we don't serve all of our gifted students, we short change our whole society. Gifted programs are always under the microscope, and in a time when resources are scarce for education, we cannot afford to be known as elitist or separatist. When we identify different ethnic groups in disproportionate numbers, we have a hard time defending gifted programs against such charges (Richert, 1987).

Identification of gifted students is a difficult process. Many factors make it difficult. There is the question of a definition of giftedness, criteria used to identify, testing questions, social and economic factors, and misunderstanding by many involved in the process about what a gifted student is or is not. These factors are compounded even more when applied to identification of minority students.

There are many reasons cited in the literature why minority students are under-represented in gifted programs. One reason is the confusion about the definition of giftedness (Richert, 1987). Confusion about what giftedness is hurts during the referral

process. Minority students don't always exhibit the types of behavior many people feel that all gifted students should exhibit. Consequently, many potentially gifted minority students are never referred.

During the assessment phase of identification cultural differences are not considered (Van Tassel Baska, 1992). Failure to consider cultural differences results in a static rather than dynamic identification process that is flexible to the needs and characteristics of all students. When one recognizes cultural differences and individual differences during the assessment phase, assessment instruments can be matched to the individual students. We know that giftedness exists in all populations, but the outward manifestations of giftedness look different when filtered through various cultural lenses. Therefore, it is important to recognize and consider cultural differences.

Low referral rates for minority students are another reason that minority students are under-represented in gifted programs (Van Tassel Baska, 1992). Referral is the gateway to the identification process. Whether it is because of prejudice or ignorance of the characteristics of gifted students and minority gifted students in particular if minority students are not referred, they will not be identified later and served in gifted programs.

Testing has always been a major problem in gifted identification. There are many standardized tests that can be used in assessing giftedness. Some are more appropriate than others in the identification of minority students. Failure to use standardized tests that consider the strengths of minority cultures shuts the door on many minority students that might be served in gifted programs (Van Tassel Baska, 1992).

Lack of knowledge by school professionals concerning identification of culturally valued talents (Van Tassel Baska, 1992) and attitudes towards minority students are other

factors that block minority access to gifted programs. In the literature researchers tend to focus on the weaknesses rather than the strengths of minority students (Karnes and Johnson, 1990). Failures to see the strengths of minority students and attitudes that focus on weaknesses make it hard for school professionals to recognize potential giftedness in minority students.

Finally, low socioeconomic status among minority groups has been cited as a reason that minority students are not identified and served in gifted programs. It has even been suggested that it is the low socioeconomic status that causes the underrepresentation rather than culture or ethnicity (Frasier in Maker, 1989; Van Tassel Baska, 1992).

Acknowledging that a problem exists is the first step in correcting it, but next we must look for ways to positively address the problem. Nationally, research has been conducted looking for ways to increase minority involvement in gifted programs. These include:

1. Focus on the inclusion of gifted minority students. (Frasier in Maker, 1989)
2. Use of both subjective and objective data. (Frasier)
3. Use of early identification (Frasier; Karnes & Johnson, 1990)
4. Use of multiple assessment procedures (Maker & Schiever, 1989)
5. Use of case study approach in identification. (Maker & Schiever, 1989)
6. Use of quotas. (Van Tassel Baska, 1992)
7. Use of Staff development on the characteristics of gifted children. (Seney, 1993)

Studies continue to be printed in academic journals, but the fact that they are still being done and reasons still being debated about the cause of under- representation of minority students shows that we have not done an adequate job addressing this problem.

The information cited above focuses on the problem nationally. The task force focused on the problem within Mississippi. It must be realized that the problems we face must be localized and solved through local means. Mississippi's problem has elements that other state's may or may not have to face in addressing this issue. The task force initially identified several areas that affect minority under- representation in Mississippi:

1. Lack of understanding by school personnel about the nature of giftedness.
2. Failure to implement current procedures in place to help increase economically and socially disadvantaged student participation in gifted programs.
3. Lack of consistency among districts in application of State Department of Education regulations.
4. Low referral rates for minority students to gifted programs.
5. Failure to consider the strengths and weaknesses of students when choosing instruments.
6. Current regulations and definitions of giftedness.

One example of inconsistency among Mississippi school districts is Part III of the gifted referral packet. State Department regulations state that Part III is to be completed on all students (Part III established evidence of student economic or social disadvantage and evidence of giftedness). In meetings and conversations with gifted professionals, it is apparent that many districts do not complete this form on students. Many are not even

aware of the form and its application. The use of this form is one way that under current regulations gifted programmers can make efforts to increase minority representation in their programs (Anthony, 1997). Choice of testing instruments is another problem that exists in the state. Many districts operate under the assumption that there is only one or two tests that they can give in identifying students (see Figure 2, question 7). In reality, there are several tests that can be used, and districts can choose the test that best fits the profile of the student as developed during the referral process. Two districts studied in Mississippi have developed protocols that match students to the most appropriate test. They have also had success using outside contract testers for gifted students. Both districts report increases in minority participation in their gifted programs as a result of their efforts.

In conclusion, the problem of under- representation is a serious one that stares Mississippi in the face. It is imperative that we address this problem for the sake of those students who are being denied educational services that can provide additional opportunities for success. Failure to do so will result in continued criticism of gifted programs as elitist and separatist and could result in costly litigation for our schools.

Method

This report shares information found by MAGC Task Force on Identification of Diverse Population during its study of identification procedures in Mississippi. It also offers potential solutions and areas for further study.

The Task Force developed a problem statement based on their goals and initial work:

Is the implementation of the Mississippi referral to placement process equitable?

The task force initially studied three school districts that have had success in reversing the trend of under-representation in their gifted programs. The results showed that it is possible to increase the rate of identification of minority students for gifted programs. The task force then developed a survey designed to find out how the districts in Mississippi implement the identification process. Of the 150 surveys mailed, 56 surveys were returned. The results of the survey are detailed later in the report.

Limitations

The relatively low number of responses from the survey was one limitation. Of 150 mailed 56 were returned. Though this is an adequate sample size when one considers the number of the population, the sampling was not random. The task force had to depend on school districts to return the surveys. Though the sampling was not random, a variety of different districts were represented: large and small, from various geographic areas, and from rural or suburban areas. The districts represented serve over 60% of the gifted students in Mississippi.

Results

Studies of three Mississippi school districts' approaches to identification of diverse populations showed that by taking proactive measures districts could increase minority participation in or referral to gifted programs. The chart in Figure 1 details the problem each district faced, solutions implemented, and the results. All three showed

increases in identification of minority students overall or increases in minority referrals and increases in the efficiency and accuracy of identification.

Figure 1

Studies of three Mississippi School Districts

	PROBLEM	SOLUTION	RESULTS
DISTRICT ONE	49% Eligibility rulings from gifted referrals.	Contract testing and diversification of instruments, use of culturally disadvantage form, training of school personnel on identification and characteristics of gifted.	69% eligibility rulings overall, 74% minority rulings from referrals.
DISTRICT TWO	Lack of nomination for minority students. 18% of students referred minority students. 62% minority eligibility from gifted referrals	Teacher education and training in characteristics of gifted, test selection based on data collected, use of culturally disadvantaged form, district wide priority to identify gifted students.	71.4 % minority eligibility from gifted referrals. Increased referral rate of minorities by 28%.
DISTRICT THREE	41 % eligibility rulings from gifted referrals.	Diversification of instruments, development of student profiles, training of psychological personnel, training of counselors and teachers on culturally disadvantage form.	68% eligibility rulings overall 71% eligibility for minorities from referrals.

Data from the survey indicates that minority students are under-represented in gifted programs by 19.08 percentage points in the districts surveyed. This number was obtained by comparing the difference between percentage of minority students in the

district to the percentage of minority students in gifted programs. The numerical difference was then assigned to each district. A negative number indicated under representation of minority students. The numerical difference ranged from +1.34 to -54.32, $M = -19.08$, $SD = 15.69$, $n = 53$.

The results of the other questions are listed in Figure 2. The results show that though most districts are doing a poor job of identifying minority students (based on data above), most think they are doing an adequate job (see question 5 in Figure 2). Other data shows that districts are not using all procedures available to them under the state regulations to assist them in identifying minority students.

Figure 3 lists the various instruments used by the districts for referral during the referral to placement process. It shows that the districts use a variety of tests to screen for potential giftedness. The instruments most used were the EBY Checklists (73.31 %), the Gifted Evaluation Scale (23.21 %), the Woodcock Johnson Achievement Test (17.86 %), Ravens Matrices, and the Otis Lennon School Abilities Test (10.71 %). Other instruments included various group intelligence tests, checklists, and individually administered achievement tests.

Thirty-five of the districts surveyed listed what they felt were barriers to identification of minority students in their districts. Figure 4 lists those barriers. Teacher attitudes and knowledge of giftedness and gifted students were cited by 40% of districts. Twenty percent noted instruments and instrumentation (failure to choose and use the proper instrument or availability of proper instruments). No barriers to identification were reported by 20% of the districts.

Figure 2: Results of survey of Mississippi school districts

QUESTION	n	YES		NO	
		TOTAL	%	TOTAL	%
1. Do you screen intact classes for potentially gifted students?	55	27	49.09	28	50.91
2. Does your district rely solely on teacher nominations for referrals?	55	4	7.27	51	92
3. Does your district require a standardized achievement test score for referral into the intellectually gifted program?	54	26	48.15	28	51.85
4. Does your district have a protocol to help match the referred student to the best individually administered intelligence test for his or her needs?	53	7	13.21	46	86.79
5. Do you feel that your district is doing an adequate and efficient job identifying gifted students from all populations?	54	41	75.93	13	24.07
6. Would you be interested in what some districts have done to improve their identification procedures?	54	53	98.15	1	1.85
Identification Instruments 7. Which intelligence tests does your district use to identify intellectually gifted students?	N		Districts that use One instrument $\geq 70\%$ of time		Districts that use one instrument 70% of time
			TOTAL	%	TOTAL %
	49		31	63.27	18 36.73
	n		Districts that use WISC $\geq 75\%$ of time		Districts that use WISC $< 75\%$ of time
			TOTAL	%	TOTAL
	49		30	61.22	19
Which of the following best describes the personnel who conducts testing for the gifted program in your district?	N= 54 (districts responding)		Total	% of districts responding	
Psychometrists who also conduct special education assessment.			42	77.77	
School Psychologists			12	22.22	
Outside contracted testing personnel			16	29.63	
Psychometrists who only conduct gifted testing			2	3.70	
School Counselors			1	1.85	
Outside testing paid for by parents			1	1.85	
	N= 54	Total		%	
7. Districts that use multiple assessment personnel		31		57.41	
8. Districts that use only Psychometrists who also conduct SPED assessment		21		38.89	

Figure 3 Instruments used in referral as reported by districts (n = 56)

INSTRUMENT	NUMBER	PERCENTAGE OF DISTRICTS THAT REPORT USE OF INSTRUMENT
EBY	41	73.31
Gifted Evaluation Scale	13	23.21
Otis Lennon School Abilities Test	6	10.71
Kaufman Test of Educational Achievement	1	1.79
Woodcock Johnson	10	17.86
WIAT	4	7.14
Ravens Matrices	8	14.29
PIAT	6	10.71
District created checklists	3	5.36
Slossin	2	3.57
TONI	2	3.57
Hewett and Forness Gifted Characteristics	1	1.79
COGAT	3	5.36
Goldman- Friscoe Group Intelligence Test	1	1.79
GATES	1	1.79
SAGES	1	1.79
TAP	1	1.79
SDE Checklist	2	3.57

Based on the survey findings it is evident that the implementation of the Mississippi referral to placement process does not result in equal treatment of all students. Students from minority groups are not represented in a proportional amount and districts are not making efforts on a large scale to make the process more equitable. The data also shows that most districts do not recognize that they have a problem and report that they do an adequate job of identifying students from all populations (75.93% see question 5 Figure2). There is evidence that districts are interested in making

improvements. 98.15% responded that they would be interested in seeing what other districts are doing to address this problem.

Figure 4

Barriers to identification as listed by districts

Barriers to Identification as listed by districts	Number of districts N = 35	Percentage
Teacher attitudes towards and knowledge of giftedness and gifted students.	14	40.00
Instruments and Instrumentation (failure to chose and use the proper instrument or availability of proper instruments)	7	20.00
None	7	20.00
Socioeconomic/ cultural background of minority students	5	14.29
Reliance on test scores for identification	3	8.57
State regulations/ Identification process	3	8.57
Lack of referrals by teachers	2	5.71
Race of testers	1	2.86
Cultural bias of tests	1	2.86
Teacher racial bias	1	2.86

Discussion

The findings in the initial study of the three school districts are promising. It is evident that through organized and targeted proactive measures designed to increase referrals of minority students and matching the student to the appropriate instruments we can improve and make the identification process more equitable. From these findings the task force identified six lessons learned. These are things that made an impact in the three districts ability to improve the referral to placement process.

Lessons Learned from initial study of three school districts:

1. Use of appropriate instruments will result in more equitable results in the referral process;
2. Education of parents, teachers, and administrators is key to fixing this problem;
3. Diversity in our gifted programs must be a priority if we are to address this problem successfully;
4. All available information collected on students in the referral process must be used;
5. Advocacy efforts are important to increasing minority participation;
6. The number of minorities referred must be increased. These districts have shown they can identify minorities if they are referred at an appropriate rate.

These lessons learned can be viewed as "best practices," possible interventions districts can use to address the problem of under-representation of minority students in their gifted programs. It should be noted that the use of one or two or a shotgun approach to addressing this problem will not work. It must be an organized, concerted effort if districts are to show improvement. The research of current practices conducted shows that these are not necessarily silver bullets, but rather must be a part of a district wide effort to increase minority participation in gifted programs.

The findings of the survey into current practices of identification procedures in Mississippi were disturbing and disappointing. District responses showed that there was a large gap between minority representation in the general school population and those

students in gifted programs. Although it was apparent this gap exists, most districts (75.93%) responded that they felt they were doing an adequate job of identifying students from all populations. These two pieces of information are hard to reconcile, especially when one looks at responses from the question "Would you be interested in what some districts have done to improve their identification procedures?" All but one respondent said "yes" (98.15%). Although they felt they were doing an adequate job, from the responses it is apparent that districts feel they can do more than they already are doing to improve equity, efficiency, and accuracy in the referral process. This is promising because one of the problems in the process is misunderstanding about what can and cannot be done during the referral process. This is an opportunity for MAGC and the Mississippi State Department of Education to step in and conduct training to clarify what practices are acceptable and desirable in the process.

Other responses in the survey indicated that districts could make more efforts to address this problem. Research nationally and in the three districts initially studied pointed to various interventions that show promise in increasing minority participation in gifted programs. Screening intact classes in second or third grade is a good way to cast a wide net early in students' school careers. It has been noted earlier that early identification is important to identifying minority students (Frasier in Maker, 1989; Karnes & Johnson, 1990). Intact screening is one way to do an early search for gifted students; 49.09% of districts responded that they conduct intact screening.

Many districts operate under the assumption that an achievement test score is necessary under state regulation for referral. This is not so. If a district places that in their assessment plan then they must use one, but there is no state requirement. Most involved

in the Mississippi referral process recognize that achievement test scores tend to screen minority students out before they can complete the assessment process. Understanding that achievement test scores are a barrier to minority identification and involvement in gifted programs, districts should look for other criteria during the assessment phase that serve as indicators of potential giftedness. Districts need to rewrite their program plans to include provisions that allow for the use of other objective data in the referral stage of the identification process. Districts should not automatically eliminate a student from the identification process based on achievement test scores.

Choosing the appropriate test or instrument during the identification process is important. There are many tests that measure intelligence. It is important to recognize that some tests are more appropriate for some students than others. Tests can be either verbal or performance based. Some students are better at one or the other. If we know a student is poor verbally, we should not give that student a test that is verbally based. A performance test would be more appropriate. The initial studies of the three districts showed that the development of protocols designed to assist in test selection helped improve the identification rate of minority students. The survey showed that only 13.21% of districts use a protocol to match the referred student to the best individually administered intelligence test. There is much room for improvement. This is one area that many districts can use to try and reverse minority under-representation in gifted programs.

The above question focused on choosing the appropriate instrument for the student. The survey of districts showed that most districts rely on one test $\geq 70\%$ of the time (63.27%). Results also showed that 61.22% relied on the WISC $\geq 75\%$ of the

time during identification. This indicates that most districts are not taking advantage of other instruments that may be more appropriate for a given student or population of students. Although most districts relied primarily on the WISC for identification, a few districts (two) erred in the opposite direction and relied on the KABC or Lieter over 90% of the time. These districts make the erroneous assumption that all minority students have to take one of these tests for successful identification. It is necessary to look at all of the data collected on a student and then decide what the appropriate test is for the student. It is disturbing to find that districts limit their ability to match students to the appropriate instrument by relying primarily on one instrument.

Who conducts testing was an issue that came out of the initial study of the three school districts. Two of the districts reported that they improved the efficiency of their identification of minority students and students in general. These districts were concerned that psychometrists that conduct primarily special education assessment were not doing an adequate job testing for giftedness. There were several factors that lead them to this conclusion. One was that the psychometrists prefer to give certain tests. Regardless of what is the most appropriate instrument, many psychometrists gave the test they were more comfortable giving, took less time, or was easier to give. Many districts met resistance when they asked their psychometrists to use other instruments or to chose the instrument based on student's needs and strengths. Because of these factors, these districts decided to use outside contract testers. Two of the districts reported increased efficiency in overall referrals and increases in minority referral rates in general. An encouraging trend is that 29.63% of districts reported that they have used outside contract testing personnel and 38.89% of districts rely only on psychometrists who also conduct

special education assessment. Whoever conducts testing should be encouraged to choose the appropriate test for the student. This can be done when districts develop protocols for that purpose, insist that they be used, and provide multiple instruments to testing personnel.

Instrumentation during assessment, particularly those used for screening of potentially giftedness or used to obtain more data on students besides standard achievement tests required by the state, is very important in identification of minority students. It is necessary to have three pieces of objective criteria at the assessment stage. Checklists as well as individual achievement tests are allowed under regulation. Data obtained from the districts surveyed indicates that districts use a variety of instruments to obtain information on students referred. Both less objective checklists and more objective individual achievement tests are used. This allows districts to use instruments that show student strengths rather than weaknesses. It also allows districts to choose the appropriate instruments to get a fair accounting of student ability. Accurate knowledge of student abilities results in more accurate identification. Further research into the effectiveness of the various instruments will lend more knowledge to our ability to successfully identify gifted minority students.

Earlier, barriers to identification were listed from the literature. The districts surveyed also listed what they felt were barriers to more equitable identification. The results highlight the need for education on a large scale concerning giftedness and the characteristics of gifted students. Forty percent of the districts surveyed stated that teacher attitudes and knowledge of giftedness and gifted students was a barrier. The results also indicate that districts (20%) realize that instruments and instrumentation is a

barrier. This shows that there is room for education of districts. Many do not see instrumentation as a problem or barrier. This provides an opportunity for education of the districts concerning proper instrumentation and the development of protocols to help choose appropriate instruments for the student referred.

Of concern in the list of barriers is the third item. None. Twenty percent of the districts reported that they had no barriers to better identification. This is disturbing when one looks at the overall amount of under-representation in gifted programs. Once again this piece of information highlights the need for education of school districts concerning the identification of gifted students.

Only 8.57% noted State regulations and the identification process as a barrier. This is significant because it shows that many recognize that the regulations allow for equitable identification. It is the implementation of the process that is the problem.

In conclusion, it is possible to do a better job of identifying minority students. The system is not equitable as implemented. There is evidence from studying districts, that through targeted and planned intervention, we can do better. Research has indicated that many districts are not implementing interventions that could reduce the amount of under-representation in gifted programs.

Recommendations

Research has shown that the referral to placement process is not equitable as implemented. Research has also shown that there are interventions that do work when planned and targeted, effectively implemented, evaluated, and then adjustments made based upon evaluations. This study showed that districts can do much more than their current practices show to help reduce under-representation in gifted programs. In order to

reverse this problem in Mississippi, districts should develop targeted intervention plans with effective evaluation systems in place. These plans should be based on the lessons learned or best practices identified in this report. The State Department of Education and Mississippi Association of Gifted Children should develop training sessions to assist districts in their efforts to address this problem. Included in the training should be information on what intelligence tests are permissible for use in identification, what data is necessary at the referral phase, and general information about what is allowed or not allowed during the referral to placement process.

Further research should be conducted in districts that are making efforts to implement intervention to see if there is any positive effect over time. Research into appropriate instrumentation for various populations would help provide guidelines for districts to use when developing protocols for matching tests to student profiles. There are other areas of research that can be conducted to investigate the effectiveness of various interventions.

Conclusion

Minority under-representation is a major problem in gifted education nationally and in Mississippi. It is a difficult problem to address and correct, but there are examples where individual districts have made improvements. Research shows that a huge gap exists between the proportions of student representation in gifted programs and in districts as a whole. Although our study shows that several districts have been successful in improving their identification procedures through targeted intervention, many districts have not implemented them. The good news is that almost all districts involved expressed an interest in learning what other districts were doing to improve identification. This is an

opportunity for the Mississippi State Department of Education and MAGC to provide the knowledge, expertise, resources, and support in these districts to develop intervention plans and implement them across the state. We are faced with a decision: continue to fail at fairness with the inequitable implementation of the referral to placement process, or to change and intervene using all expertise, knowledge, and resources available to address this problem. Ultimately, this problem affects the very piece of the system we care most about, the children. Remember, it is a child that is hurt when we fail to be equitable in the identification process. The numbers translate into children.

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