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The 'No Child' Law's Biggest Victims? An Answer That May Surprise

By Margaret DeLacy
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Since education is high on the national agenda, here's a pop quiz that every American should take.

Question: What group of students makes the lowest achievement gains in school?

Answer: The brightest students.

In a pioneering study of the effects of teachers and schools on student learning, William Sanders and his staff at the Tennessee Value-Added Assessment System put in this way: "Student achievement level was the second most important predictor of student learning. The higher the achievement level, the less growth a student was likely to have."

Mr. Sanders found this problem in schools throughout the state, and with different levels of poverty and of minority enrollments. He speculated that the problem was due to a "lack of opportunity for high-scoring students to proceed at their own pace, lack of challenging materials, lack of accelerated course offerings, and concentration of instruction on the average or below-average student."

While less effective teachers produced gains for lower-achieving students, Mr. Sanders found, only the top one-fifth of teachers were effective with high-achieving students. These problems have been confirmed in other states. There is overwhelming evidence that gifted students simply do not succeed on their own.

Question: What group of students has been harmed most by the No Child Left Behind Act?

Answer: Our brightest students.

The federal law seeks to ensure that all students meet minimum standards. Most districts, in their desperate rush to improve the performance of struggling students, have forgotten or ignored their

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obligations to students who exceed standards. These students spend their days reviewing material for proficiency tests they mastered years before, instead of learning something new. This is a profoundly alienating experience.

Question: How well is the United States preparing able students to compete in the world economy?

Answer: Very poorly.

Of all students obtaining doctorates in engineering in American universities, just 39 percent are Americans. According to the Third International Mathematics and Science Study, "The performance of U.S. physics and advanced math students was among the lowest of the 16 countries that administered the ... assessments."

Question: What group of special-needs students receives the least funding?

Answer: Our brightest students.

And it's getting worse. For example, Illinois, New York, and Oregon recently cut all state funding for gifted programs.

Given these facts, why has a board commissioned by the National Research Council proposed to make things much worse? The board's report, ironically entitled "Engaging Schools: Fostering High School Students' Motivation to Learn," contains recommendations that amount to a recipe for completely alienating our most capable children. Based on old, discredited, and sloppy research, the committee, which did not include any experts on gifted education, recommended the elimination of all "formal or informal" tracking—even if participation was voluntary—in favor of mixed-ability classrooms.

Does tracking really harm students? Jeannie Oakes claimed that it did in a popular but, to my mind, poorly researched book called *Keeping Track* published nearly 20 years ago. However, a 1998 review of the evidence on tracking over the past two decades, done by Tom Loveless, the director of the Brookings Institution's Brown Center on Education Policy, found no consensus that tracking is harmful or creates unequal opportunities for academic achievement. This review was ignored in the NRC panel's 40 pages of research citations.

Also missing was any reference to a 1993 report from the U.S. Department of Education, "National Excellence," in which then-Secretary of Education Richard W. Riley noted a "quiet crisis" in the education of top students, pointing out that "these students have special needs that are seldom met," and warning that "our neglect of these students makes it impossible for Americans to compete in a global economy demanding their skills."

Although research on schoolwide tracking cuts both ways, research pointing to the importance of advanced classes and grouping for gifted students is overwhelming.

A research review by Karen B. Rogers found that grouping gifted students produces big gains—sometimes exceeding half a year's additional achievement per year in school when curriculum is modified appropriately. On the other hand, she found that cooperative learning within mixed-ability groups produces no gains.

In her 2002 book *Re-Forming Gifted Education* (also ignored by the NRC panel), Ms. Rogers noted that under the mixed-ability-group instruction recommended by the NRC, "few students, except those with exceptionally low ability, will benefit."

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A statistical analysis published in 1992 by James A. Kulik demonstrated that the benefits from advanced classes for talented students were "positive, large, and important" and said that [de-tracking] could greatly damage American education." Student achievement would suffer, Mr. Kulik maintained, and the damage would be greatest if schools "eliminated enriched and accelerated classes for their brightest learners. The achievement level of such students falls dramatically." He also found that students of all ability levels benefit from grouping that adjusts the curriculum to their aptitude levels.

A study of intermediate students' math achievement published in 2002 by Carol Tieso also found that differentiated instruction combined with flexible grouping improved academic achievement. Ms. Tieso concluded that students from all socioeconomic backgrounds made gains, and that students enjoyed working in differentiated groups and were more motivated than peers in a comparison group.

Even the National Research Council board acknowledged that teachers would require a lot of specialized training to carry out its recommendations in "Engaging Minds." Differentiation is hard to do well. Teachers must know how to assess students who are years above grade level and then be able to rewrite the whole curriculum to address their assessed learning needs. Although the board members must know that this training has not been provided and is not going to happen, they went ahead and recklessly recommended a policy that will harm many capable, hard-working students in the hope that it might help some struggling students.

They seem to be unaware of the daily realities affecting American schools. Studies by the National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented have repeatedly found that teachers do not make significant modifications to their instruction to accommodate gifted students.

This past November, Seattle teachers issued a resolution protesting a directive requiring advanced instruction for highly capable students in their classrooms because they had neither the time, training, and class size, nor the resources necessary to carry it out. Ability grouping is significantly more cost-

effective, requires less training, and is more effective in this regard than heterogeneous classes. Do we have education dollars to waste?

Gifted students are truly our forgotten children. Neglected in our schools and ignored by our policymakers, they spend their days dozing through classes in which they aren't learning. Many suffer from depression. It is time to take them out of their holding pens and give them a chance to stretch and to grow.

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