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Gifted left behind by school reforms

Funding cuts, U.S. law hurt brightest

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The gifted program in North Chicago's schools has no budget, no organized group of parent advocates and an admittedly haphazard approach to challenging the district's brightest students.

At the Aurora-based Indian Prairie schools, the gifted program is blessed with a \$2 million budget, 1,200 carefully screened students clustered in special classes and a vocal group of 300 watchful parents.

The two programs may seem worlds apart, but the educators who run them share the same fear: Gifted students will be "left behind" by federal education reform.

Advocates of gifted education have always struggled with the perception that special programs for top-performing students are elitist and unnecessary. But this year, Illinois parents and educators are reeling from a one-two punch they fear could eliminate opportunities for the state's estimated 160,000 students identified as gifted.

In the spring, state lawmakers literally wiped out the concept of gifted education--by eliminating \$19 million in grants that helped fund programs in 800 districts statewide and erasing any mention of gifted education as a mandate in the state school code.

At the same time, the demands of the federal No Child Left Behind law are forcing an increasing number of schools to pour their resources into bringing up the test scores of their lowest-performing students--even in affluent suburban districts that never had to worry about test scores before and long had viewed gifted programs as sacred cows.

"What this means is districts think they no longer have to be accountable for these children, that they are not important, that they will be just fine," said Sally Walker, executive director of the Illinois Association for Gifted Children and the author of two books about gifted education. "If these needs of these kids are not being met, they become disenfranchised or they adapt to mediocre expectations."

In the Seattle Public Schools, parents unhappy over instability in the gifted programs are threatening to keep their gifted kids out of school when state standardized tests are administered next April, which they argue could lower the district's passing rate by 10

percent and virtually guarantee that schools would not meet annual yearly progress as required by the federal law.

The district has said the parents' fears are unfounded and questioned the wisdom of the threat.

"After four years of getting jerked around by the district and their aggressive neglect of this program, we finally said 'enough is enough.' If you're not going to give us some stability, we're not going to take your tests," said Charlie Mas, one of the leaders of the Seattle advocacy group. "What we really want is for the issues to be addressed. If the district shows some genuine action, we will hold the boycott in abeyance."

Parents here say they wouldn't be afraid to organize the same sort of revolt if their worst fears are realized.

Parents band together

Bolingbrook mom Robin Czajka said she's been thrilled with the progress her 4th-grade daughter has made in the Valley View school district's "Challenge" program. Megan Czajka, 9, who was reading the novel "The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn" in 1st grade and once had problems relating to her classmates, now is in a magnet program that offers exceptionally bright kids a chance to spend the school day together learning complex material. They are taught by teachers who understand how to reach and challenge gifted children.

Rumblings about proposed changes in the gifted program have galvanized Czajka and dozens of other parents in the racially and economically diverse suburban district who fear that their program might get squeezed out by the demands of federal reforms.

Czajka hopes that parents' involvement with a task force studying the changes will lead to improvements rather than cuts. But if that fails, Czajka would be willing to fight to preserve the program, including using their children's superior test scores as leverage with school administrators.

"I think [a test boycott] is a great tool, and I wouldn't be averse to using it if they push us into doing that," Czajka said. "The kids with high potential are not being given what they need in Illinois. The way things are taught in the public school system, to be gifted is a learning disability. I think when you say No Child Left Behind, you have to be talking about every child, not just the kids who start off behind."

The label "gifted" has been controversial because it has been used to describe such a broad range of children--from bright kids who are working above grade level to those whose interests and intellectual skills put them in a different academic stratosphere.

Some argue that broadening the label makes it little more than a status symbol for the so-called Volvo vigilantes in affluent communities who push to have their bright children

labeled as gifted.

"It's a battle gifted education has fought for ages . . . it's that whole elitist thing," said Penny Choice, a Lake County specialist who heads the advocacy committee for the state gifted association. "Gifted means they learn differently. Gifted kids learn to memorize really quickly, but they don't learn how to think because the curriculum isn't challenging enough."

Nationwide, at least half the states mandate education for gifted and talented programs, with about 20 providing specific money for programs and teacher training, according to a 2002 survey by the National Association for Gifted Children. Nine states offer gifted students the same protections given to those in special education, with individualized learning plans and the right to challenge a district's decision through formal hearings.

Schools left to decide

Because of the change in state law and the elimination of the gifted grant, Illinois is no longer in that majority. It now falls to individual districts to decide whether to screen for gifted students or offer targeted services, which could be as minimal as a few supplemental assignments or as exhaustive as an all-day program that puts gifted kids into separate classrooms.

Many districts that don't offer gifted programs argue that they are meeting the needs of their brightest students by providing "differentiated instruction"--in which a classroom teacher changes the curriculum based on the needs of individual students.

That sounds great in concept, some educators say, but it takes lots of training and a skilled teacher to pull it off, especially in classes with more than 20 students.

In North Chicago, about 250 of the district's brightest students in grades 2 to 8 are clustered in certain classes and assigned to teachers who have had some specialized training. But the district's gifted specialist, Richard Cunningham, acknowledges this method is far from ideal.

"I don't like my program because it's not a good program," said Cunningham, who is trying to sell a new superintendent on the idea of creating multigrade gifted classrooms. "Too much depends on the teacher. And this is where the cuts really hurt because I have no money for [teacher training]."

Advocates nationwide are concerned that the federal reforms will tilt the classroom emphasis even further toward test proficiency rather than academic progress.

"Who is most at risk now? The gifted child because they are already so far above what is being taught. The gifted children are already meeting or exceeding, so we're not worried about them," said Nina Koelpin, a gifted specialist for Wheaton-Warrenville School District 200. "We're keeping it going, but in a lot of smaller districts these kids just fall

through the cracks."

Danute Krebs, who became a gifted teacher at Brookdale Elementary in Naperville this fall after Indian Prairie School District 204 eliminated her position as gifted coordinator, said it doesn't bode well when even a model program such as Indian Prairie's is under siege.

"We're definitely not a priority anymore," Krebs said. "We can say these kids are going to learn by themselves, but that's just not the case. If you leave someone smart just sitting there for five years, what are you going to end up with? The world's underachievers."

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