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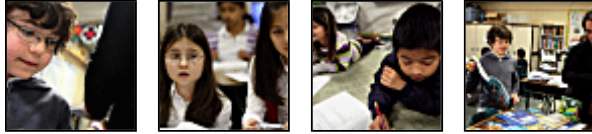
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School funding leaves gifted students behind

Jill Tucker, Chronicle Staff Writer
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(05-04) 13:02 PDT SAN FRANCISCO -- As

California's public schools have increasingly poured attention and resources into the state's struggling students, high academic learners - the so-called gifted students - have been getting the short shrift, a policy decision that some worry could leave the United States at a competitive disadvantage.

Critics see courses tailored for exceptional students as elitist and not much of an issue when compared with the vast number of students who are lagging grades behind their peers or dropping out of school. But a growing chorus of parents and advocates is asking the contentious question: What about the smart kids?

"We have countries like India, Singapore, China, and they realize the future productivity of their country is an investment in their intellectual and creative resources," said gifted education expert Joseph Renzulli.

By ignoring the needs of gifted students, the achievement gap separating the best students from the worst will be closed "by pulling it down from the top rather than jacking it up from the bottom," he said.

Gifted and Talented Education (GATE) programs even in the best of economic times have gotten only a token nod in school budgets, but in recent years, funding for those programs has eroded further as school districts have grappled with ever-shrinking budgets.

Meanwhile, spending on programs to help the lowest-achieving students has increased with a boost from federal stimulus money and statewide efforts to target struggling schools.

At the federal level, \$8 billion has been set aside this year to help the country's worst schools, while the entire \$7 million budgeted for GATE - the equivalent of about \$140,000 for each of the 50 states - is on the chopping block.

At the same time, California set aside about \$39.9 million for the state's 490,000 gifted children. That's about 8 cents for every \$100 spent on education - and down from \$46.8 million in 2008-09.

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On top of that, a new state law allows local school districts to divert any or all of its GATE money to help cover budget shortfalls.

School districts have had to make tough decisions.

Earlier this year at Berkeley High School, for example, district officials proposed cutting extra science labs for honors and advanced placement students, citing a need to spread the funding out to meet the needs of a greater number of students.

Trying to cover shortfall

San Francisco schools have proposed siphoning off a third of that district's GATE funding to cover a major budget shortfall over the next two years. Officials hope to fill the void using grants and other sources of money, including 2004's Proposition H funds designated for art, music and other student programs.

"It's not a rosy time for gifted education," said Renzulli, of the University of Connecticut Neag Center for Gifted Education and Talent Development.

With little funding for services, GATE supporters say gifted children are too often parked in the corner of classrooms and given busywork while their peers catch up.

'Bright kids told to wait'

"Literally, some teachers tell kids to stop reading a book because they'll get too far ahead of their classmates," said Jane Clarenbach, director of public education for the National Association for Gifted Children. "Why are the bright kids told to wait for the others to catch up? Why can't we feed that passion?"

Historically, GATE programs have identified and then served students who post high IQs or show an exceptional academic ability - children, for example, who show up on the first day of school already knowing a third to half of what they'll be taught that year. Because the criteria determining whether a student is qualified for the program are left to each school district, the percentage of children identified as gifted can range from 2 to 25 percent.

The National Association for Gifted Children believes about 6 percent of U.S. schoolchildren fall into the academically gifted category.

Advocates say supporting gifted students isn't just about creating a bright future for the nation; it's also a commitment to meet educational needs of exceptional students and just as valid as programs for low-achieving students.

But as the achievement gap widened between white, Asian or wealthy students and their black, Hispanic or low-income peers, education policymakers have set a laserlike focus on the poorest performing students in the past decade.

Under No Child Left Behind, schools have faced penalties for students who don't reach proficiency, giving school districts little incentive to focus on their gifted students. There is no legal obligation to serve exceptional students.

"It's never been federally required," said Pat O'Connell Johnson of the U.S. Department of Education.

A rare commitment

In the San Mateo-Foster City Elementary School District, officials say they are committed to meeting the needs of the brightest students, kids like Cate Stoehr.

Cate, 10, calls herself just a regular kid - albeit one who ranks within the top 1 percent of the population when it comes to intelligence.

She's one of 60 fourth- and fifth-grade students in the district's special class for highly gifted students at College Park Elementary School. In this class, teachers cover the state's grade-level curriculum, but in a way that delves well past the basics. A fourth-grade lesson on electricity and magnetism, for example, might include several days spent drawing a schematic and building an electrical device, said school Principal Diana Hallock.

Huddled over a worksheet filled with story problems related to the mathematical order of operations, Cate said her previous elementary school in the district wasn't challenging enough and she struggled to fit in.

"Sometimes, I felt sort of embarrassed when I answered a question," she said. "A lot of the friends I found here were better. They were nicer to me."

Cate's special day class - a term often associated with special education - is part of the district's comprehensive GATE program, which includes separate classes and services at the elementary and middle school levels.

It's a rare level of commitment to gifted and talented students.

The district gets about \$65,000 in state GATE funding to administer the program, enough to pay for a part-time administrator, testing and identification of students, teacher training, parent orientations and some materials.

District officials say they vowed a long time ago to serve all students' needs - struggling, gifted and everyone in between.

"Our district is not just for students who aren't proficient," said Associate Superintendent Toni-Sue Passantino.

Too costly to ignore

Ignoring the needs of gifted children can be costly, experts say. A bored child can have behavioral problems.

"A lot of gifted kids don't look gifted in the classroom, they're so tuned out," said David Palmer, licensed educational psychologist and instructor with the UC Irvine Extension Education, which provides gifted education training to teachers. "Not all gifted kids are high achievers."

Some struggle with social or emotional problems and others are misdiagnosed with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, autism or behavioral disorders, Palmer said.

Children in low-income communities have historically posted lower numbers of gifted students - the result of underidentification rather than student intelligence.

Districts like San Francisco and Oakland have made concerted efforts to find gifted children among all socio-economic levels.

In Oakland, district officials test every third-grader after getting parent permission. The policy, implemented within the past three years, nearly doubled the number of gifted students in the city's schools. Last year, 4,145 students were identified as gifted - a rate of nearly 1 in 4 students.

With limited funds, Oakland decided to focus on training teachers in differential instruction - that is teaching the same topic in a way that will reach all spectrums of student achievement, including its most advanced learners.

In San Francisco, officials abandoned using IQ or standardized tests as the sole determinant of giftedness and evaluate students comprehensively looking for academic, musical, artistic or other indicators that qualify them for GATE.

But once students get into GATE, the programs vary wildly. Some districts create special schools or classrooms like the one in San Mateo's College Park. Others, including Oakland, assign gifted students to once-a-week, special pullout classes where the pupils do hands-on projects. Other students are given different classroom work from their peers, including advanced reading material or special homework. Other GATE students are assigned to be teacher's aides or peer tutors.

And in some schools and districts, students are increasingly given a gifted status attached to their permanent academic file, but are offered no services. That's inadequate, experts say.

"Children who could have a tremendous impact on our planet are shortchanged," said Angela Jeantet, director of UC Irvine's Extension Education. GATE "is more like a bother because they have to focus on other things."

What is a gifted and talented student?

Definitions vary widely across districts and states. The U.S. Department of Education, in 1993, defined gifted students as those who show the potential to perform at high levels of accomplishment compared with others of their age and experience and who require services and activities not usually provided by schools.

How is giftedness determined?

The criteria used to identify gifted and talented children vary from district to district:

Oakland Unified: A score of at least 97 percent on the Raven intelligence test given in third grade; in other grades, a score of 500 in math and 425 (or 875 combined) on the California Standards Test for two years. About 11 percent of district students are identified as gifted.

San Francisco Unified: A point system that includes a point each for a student's special circumstance such as economics or physical disadvantage; a 3.0 or higher grade-point average; parent or teacher recommendation; high academic or intellectual achievement on screening/standardized tests; evidence of leadership, creativity or visual/performing arts. About 20 percent of district students are identified as gifted.

San Mateo-Foster City Elementary: A district evaluation of nominated students, including scores from a comprehensive abilities test. About 8 percent of students are identified as gifted.

This chart has been corrected since it appeared in print.

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