

COMMENTARY

Do GATE Programs Take Resources Away from Needier Students, or Do They Reflect an Equal Commitment to All Children?

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In a forthcoming article titled “Gifted Education: Robin Hood or the Sheriff of Nottingham,” I examine the issue of [gifted and talented education \(GATE\)](#) from the perspective of public policy. In times of tight budgets, as California has experienced for the last several years, many districts can be tempted to abandon funding for GATE programs. For example, when categorical funding for GATE was ‘flexed’ in 2007, many schools dramatically scaled back gifted programs. [San José Unified School District](#) no longer reimburses schools for expenses related to the education of gifted students, including teacher pay and additional books and materials. The [Oakland School District](#) cut funding for gifted programs by 25 percent.

Supporters of these cuts often justify them with the argument that gifted children will excel without additional resources. However, I find that as a whole, gifted students in America are underachieving relative to their peers abroad. Specifically, I examined data from the [Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study \(TIMMS\)](#), which provides international comparative information on mathematics and science achievement in the fourth and eighth grades. Focusing just on the top 10 percent of scorers, America’s gifted students place no higher than third on each and every exam (third is America’s rank in both fourth and eighth grade science). Achievement for the top scorers on the TIMMS mathematics exam is particularly disturbing. In fourth grade mathematics, the United States places behind seven other nations including Moldova and Lithuania. On the eighth grade examination, the average math score for America’s highest scorers is lower than that of eight nations, falling behind nations like Bahrain and Estonia. In contrast, gifted children from Asian nations perform particularly well on each exam.

I argue that some of the underachievement among gifted children could be the result of inequities in our system of financing gifted education. The average school district in the United States receives only \$3.38 per pupil for gifted education from the state, and only 20 percent of all school districts receive any additional funding at all. This inequity for gifted students is consistent with the current focus in education finance on adequacy, which emphasizes all students reaching some baseline minimum, but I argue that the new paradigm in education should be based on *maximizing* the potential of all students, including the gifted. From that perspective, not providing the resources so that gifted children can reach their full potential is to suggest that their needs are somehow different or less important than the needs of other children.

Additional funding for gifted education does not create inequality, it restores it. The current variations in GATE funding imply that the needs of gifted children are more important in some states and school districts than others, a clear shot against the bow of horizontal equity. Whether a gifted child lives in a rich district, a poor district, an urban district, etc., should not mean they are

deprived of resources for achieving their goals. When combined with the findings of [Bruce Baker](#) and [Reva Friedman-Nimz](#), that wealthier districts are the ones more likely to provide gifted education programs, the inequality of funding for gifted education becomes even more egregious. State and federal governments can and should be responsible for ensuring that gifted children in poor districts or states are offered the same opportunities as gifted children in wealthier districts or states. It is for these reasons that additional funding for gifted education is far closer to Robin Hood than the Sheriff of Nottingham.

*The [full study](#) is in Ryan Yeung, *Gifted Education: Robin Hood or the Sheriff of Nottingham?* Education and Urban Society, forthcoming.*

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