

## **The Importance of Equity Based Talent Identification**

Unless everyone counts, no one does. The Wisconsin Association for Talented and Gifted believes all students deserve appropriate and enriching learning opportunities ([Advanced and Accelerated Learning in WI - WISCONSIN ASSOCIATION FOR TALENTED & GIFTED](#)).

Developing equitable learning environments requires analysis of quantifiable evidence from all students.

Traditional instruments for identification focus on either math or reading, creating a limited scope of student abilities. On one hand, this appears logical; schools work primarily in these two academic areas. On the other hand, tools limiting the scope and understanding of abilities foster higher inequity in schools. Utilizing culturally neutral identification tools allows for a greater understanding of student strengths to emerge.

COVID, the pandemic that turned the world upside down, created a huge divide between students and their access to educational resources. Right or wrong, families of means discovered ways to continue providing enriched learning experiences for their children. Conversely, families in stress faced more uncertainty. In an effort to recognize this disparity, the call to eliminate identification, reduce services, and reassign teachers, becomes the norm. Yet, these solutions often create and exacerbate the very issue they wish to solve.

Gifted students exist whether an educational system addresses their needs or not. Not servicing these children does not make them less gifted, or less needful of services. Not servicing these students creates added frustration with and within our educational systems. The question arises then, how do we identify these children especially in light of the COVID pandemic?

There are specific steps that any system can take to address these issues, including early and ongoing identification for all learners. For equity and social justice issues, this identification **MUST** be as bias-neutral as possible. Rather than relying on vocabulary-heavy tests, for example, non-verbal inventories, observational tools, and interest questionnaires can provide data on students' innate abilities. Looking at the data helps a district develop local norms. Local

norms simply show how many students in a particular setting exhibit similar abilities. Local norms create larger pools of Students of Promise.

Identification does not end with data; rather that is where it begins. Once the data is collected, a deeper diagnosis of, and discussion about, student services can ensue. Looking at the data, a system may recognize that portions of their demographic already possess the skills deemed necessary at their grade level. For example, a group of students might already possess the grade-level skills expected after a year of instruction in math or language arts. Those students should have access to developmentally appropriate programming and services, fostering a sense of agency and community for the child. Everyone benefits when the work targets their strengths and provides the tools and challenge for them to move forward.

So, what does this all mean during a pandemic and post-pandemic? For starters, many parents realized (sometimes for the first time) how much time their advanced learners spend waiting to learn new things (<https://raisinglifelonglearners.com/pandemic-schooling/>). Many parents observed zoom or google meet classes and finally understood their child's frustration with the pace, depth, and intensity of their schooling. For some families, the pandemic created opportunities not bound by traditional timelines or curriculum, and their gifted learners advanced ([An Educational Refuge For Gifted Teens On The Autism Spectrum : Shots - Health News](#)). The pandemic has given us much to think about, and has disrupted "school as usual." What have we learned? What can we utilize in the future?

As we emerge from this pandemic, we must re-evaluate everything, including our assumptions about student abilities. Clearly, our educators need more professional development about meeting the needs of advanced learners; after all, these learners spend most of their time in heterogeneously grouped classrooms, and most teachers have little or no training in meeting their needs. Carol Ann Tomlinson, national authority on differentiation, advocates for "[teaching up](#)" as one way of meeting the needs of gifted learners. According to Tomlinson, *"teaching up" means planning instruction for the broadest possible range of learners. It means aiming high and then building scaffolding that helps all students reach those heights, including the students who may not have seen themselves as capable of making the climb. It is not a casual statement that "all*

*kids can learn," but rather an enacted commitment to working with all students—step by step and regardless of what their entry point into a discipline, unit, or topic may be—in a way that makes their growth evident to them and fuels their motivation to keep moving forward. In this way, we serve gifted learners, AND we serve all learners.*

Administration must also be included in professional development about serving the needs of gifted learners; administrators set the tone for what is valued, measured, and accomplished in a school or a district. As one district observed, and gifted educators have long promoted, when data is used correctly, all learners benefit, ([How a Diverse School District Is Using a Strategy Usually Reserved for ‘Gifted’ Students to Help Everyone Overcome COVID Learning Loss](#)).

A disturbing trend arose during this pandemic, and could conceivably continue post-pandemic -- some districts shifted gifted specialists and resources to other areas of education. Many districts report that their gifted education specialists were reassigned to classroom teaching, supporting other educators with large class sizes, and given “other duties as assigned.” This halted identification of, and programming for, advanced learners. In any other area of exceptional education, this would be a travesty. As we move forward, these practices need to be called out and rectified; all children deserve an education that fits their needs.

This trend, unfortunately, is not new ([The Effects of the Elimination of Gifted and Talented Programs On Participating Students and Their Parents - Jeanne H. Purcell, 1993](#)). That it keeps arising, speaks to bigger misunderstandings about this population of students. As pointed out by the American Psychological Association, giftedness exists and is multi-faceted ([Rethinking Giftedness and Gifted Education: A Proposed Direction Forward Based on Psychological Science](#)). Undeniably, it behooves a system to provide services for all its students.

Further, the pandemic accelerated many districts' attempts to eliminate advanced placement coursework. Applying economic metrics allowed districts to claim fiscal insecurity as necessitating this move. Data, however, suggests this trend began before the pandemic ([Unintended Consequences of NCLB Mandates on Gifted Students](#)). Ironically, local data shows growth in students participating in and benefiting from advanced placement programs ([More](#)

[Wisconsin students taking, outperforming national average on AP exams](#)). This, in turn, leads us to wonder, is there a better way?

The Wisconsin Association for Talented and Gifted advocates for a tiered approach to talent identification and development that includes multiple entry points. Instead of eliminating courses/schoolwork which could strengthen the preparation and skill of all learners, why not concentrate on keeping the entry “gate” to this high-end learning wide open, and helping teachers reach and teach a wider variety of students, including those not traditionally found in AP/Honors or other advanced learning opportunities? As Rios pointed out, when educators shift to an “at promise” mindset, amazing things happen ([Help for kids the education system ignores | Victor Rios](#)).

Better yet, why not begin by expanding the talent development pipeline early on? Let’s find talent in diverse learners early and often - give them the skills, the support, and the courage to tackle coursework on an ever-increasing trajectory of difficulty. Let’s bring all educators (psychologists, school counselors, social workers, administrators, central office, as well as classroom teachers and specialists) into this “big tent” idea. Let’s also communicate often and effectively with parents to dispel the myths and fears that have plagued gifted education for decades. Parents can be outstanding allies in this quest.

The call for action is daunting, but doable. Education has just undergone a huge transformation as a result of the pandemic; let’s use this disruption and momentum to reimagine gifted education.

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