

Does No Child Left Behind Require that No Child Can Get Ahead?

Davidson Institute for Talent Development

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An analysis of the impact of the *No Child Left Behind* Act on gifted and talented students by the Davidson Institute for Talent Development.

It's been nearly four years since President George W. Bush signed into law the *No Child Left Behind* Act (Jan. 8, 2002) – perhaps the most ambitious reform of American education ever attempted. Although it may be too early to tell what the results will be, per-student spending has increased at the federal level from \$7,950 in 2001 to \$9,940 in 2003¹ with an unprecedented focus on students whose performance is below grade level. The United States now spends \$11,152 per student in all levels of education, making the U.S. the second highest spender in the world.² According to the U.S. Secretary of Education, Margaret Spellings, “The president has delivered on his promise - thanks to *No Child Left Behind*, our nation's schools are making great strides toward ending the ‘soft bigotry of low expectations; and ensuring that all children have the opportunity to learn.’”³

The reality is not so rosy. Our brightest students are not learning in school. The fact is that *No Child Left Behind* is promoting underachievement among our nation's brightest students, denying an appropriately challenging education to millions. That is because although the plan promises that every child will learn how to read by the third grade, it does nothing to ensure that students who already knew how to read in kindergarten will continue to learn. For these exceptionally gifted students, *No Child Left Behind* means no child can move ahead.

The 2006 federal education budget contained approximately \$9.6 million for gifted education research grants, known as the Javits Act.⁴ This amount is the only federal funding allocated towards gifted education, which equates to a mere fraction of a penny of every federal dollar spent on education. Things are just as bleak at the state level. Since *No Child Left Behind* became law, state funds for educating our highest-achieving students have been steadily cut – Illinois eliminated its gifted education budget altogether; California cut its gifted education budget by 18 percent; in Connecticut 22 percent of districts slashed their gifted programming.⁵ This is in addition to the 21 states that offered no educational programs for gifted learners.⁶ What does this say about our nation's commitment to ensuring that “every child learns?”

Students cannot learn unless they are being taught something new. Focusing on minimum performance standards to the exclusion of everything else neglects students who learn faster than the minimum standards. Consider that:

- roughly 1.5 million students need a curriculum more rigorous than the current standard;⁷
- between 10 and 20 percent of all high school dropouts test in the gifted range;⁸

- as many as 40 percent of all gifted students are underachievers.⁹

The solutions are not expensive. Proven methods such as grade and subject acceleration require little or no funding because they take advantage of resources that are already in place. James Kulik reports that highly gifted students that are grouped with their intellectual peers gain as much as a year of academic development than if they had remained in the regular class. Skill-based grouping of students rather than age-based grouping has been found more effective for learners at all levels.¹⁰ Unfortunately, because *No Child Left Behind* focuses on reducing shortfalls instead of promoting excellence, it has created an environment where average test scores are more important than successful learners. Some administrators are denying high-achieving students opportunities for more challenging learning environments to boost schools' average test scores.¹¹

Every child should learn to read, but the student who already knows how to read should not be ignored. Every third-grader should master multiplication and division, but the third-grader who can learn algebra, should not be denied that opportunity. If underachievement is truly unacceptable, and we are sincerely committed to ensuring that every child learns, our educational system must give every child the opportunity to maximize his or her potential with an appropriately challenging education. *No Child Left Behind* should not prevent a child from soaring ahead.

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