Providence Journal

Opinion: Poor, bright suffer from R.I.'s neglect

Monday, June 9, 2008

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AS ANOTHER SCHOOL YEAR draws to a close, the education of gifted children in Rhode Island — particularly poor, gifted children — remains deplorable.

While Rhode Island is home to pockets of effective gifted-education services, the situation as a whole remains uneven and largely bleak, with deserving disadvantaged students the ones losing out. The reason? Decades of neglect toward gifted education at the state and federal levels.

In fact, most if not all of our state's strongest gifted-education programs are found in affluent communities that have the resources to compensate for the state's disregard, as well as vocal and engaged parents who demand such services for their children.

But for those students living in disadvantaged communities confronting far greater challenges, gifted education decays without any support from our state, if it exists at all. Consider the facts:

Year after year, Rhode Island lags far behind other states in supporting high-ability learners. Our state's gifted-education policy was last revised in 1982, requires no specialized instruction for gifted students and — perhaps most telling — dedicates not a single dollar to gifted education. Teachers are not required to have any training in gifted education, and even the part-time state position focused on gifted has sat vacant for more than a year.

As of the most recent state report card issued by the National Association for Gifted Children, Rhode Island ranks at the bottom in nearly all categories, earning the state the dubious label of "most in need" with regard to critical indicators of quality gifted-education. Frankly, those "most in need" are the state's poorest bright children.

Even more disturbing is that Rhode Island's decline comes as other states are increasing their investments in gifted learners, using a variety of strategies from statewide high schools focused on the very best math and science students to the use of acceleration within and across grade levels, and even extending to the establishment of intensive governor's schools to supplement instruction during the summer months.

Instead of developing similarly focused initiatives, Rhode Island is one of only eight states that provides no state funding for gifted education. The students who suffer most are those from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, students whose districts offer little to no support for gifted education and whose parents lack the resources to afford supplemental programming or private schools.

If we are serious about our future, we must take immediate action to reverse this trend.

For starters, state lawmakers can help lift our abysmal ranking by providing dedicated resources for gifted education, helping meet the needs of students who currently go unserved or underserved by their local districts. But to attain maximum effectiveness, any solution must include strong national leadership that bolsters state and local efforts.

Critical to any action by Washington or Rhode Island is an increased investment in teacher training and ongoing professional development that includes mandatory gifted education-specific coursework. Gifted students have a number of educational, social and emotional needs that must be addressed if they are to realize their potential. If we fail to engage these children, history and research tell us that instead of excelling, these students will disengage, regress and even drop out of school.

At the federal level, Congress and the president should enact legislation to ensure equity in access to gifted education. Our country must also change the system to encourage teaching to potential rather than teaching the minimum.

It’s time for Congress to recognize that focusing almost exclusively on elevating performances of remedial students is insufficient if we are serious about strengthening our nation’s ability to compete in the global economy.

As I see it, our state and nation have but two choices: We can make an investment to help identify and develop our gifted students, especially those who come from disadvantaged backgrounds, or we can let this untapped talent waste away.

It is my hope that policymakers at all levels will choose the former, as nothing less than our future is at stake.

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