Expanding the Federal Role in Gifted and Talented Education

Background

Federal education policy has historically neglected its high-ability students, which has resulted in our nation scoring well below other industrialized countries in international assessments. According to analysis of 2010 PISA scores by Harvard University, not one state scored well in international comparisons, in fact results for many states are at the level of developing countries. Moreover, this underachievement is particularly acute in underserved and disadvantaged communities which not only impacts our global standing but perpetuates cycles of poverty. If our nation’s ability to compete globally rests on the shoulders of our students, significant changes must be made to ESEA to grow future our leaders, innovators, and a highly skilled workforce.

Indeed the statistics for America’s students with gifts and talents from disadvantaged backgrounds are staggering:

1. High-achieving students from disadvantaged backgrounds, when compared to their more advantaged peers, are twice as likely to drop out of school; more likely to lose ground as they move forward in their schooling; and are less likely to attend or graduate from college.

2. There is a growing “excellence gap” in achievement at the top levels of academic performance on state and NAEP assessments between African American, Hispanic, and students from low-income backgrounds and their Caucasian and more advantaged peers that will take decades to close.

- 9.4% of Caucasian students scored at the advanced level on the 8th grade NAEP in 2007, yet only 1.8% of Hispanic, 1% of African American, and 1.7% of students eligible for free or reduced lunch scored at the advanced level.

- 44% of children from low socioeconomic backgrounds who are considered high achieving when they enter school are no longer high achieving by 5th grade.

- African American and Hispanic students are underrepresented in gifted education programs: African American students represent 17% of the total student population, while their enrollment in gifted programs is 9%; Hispanic students represent 20% of the total student population while their enrollment in gifted programs is 12%.

- 90% of teachers surveyed would like more professional development to better educate high-ability students.

Recently, funding for the Jacob K. Javits Gifted and Talented Students Education Program – the only federal program designed to address the needs of gifted and talented students – was eliminated. State support of gifted and talented education is uneven and largely insufficient, leaving local school districts to bear the burden of supporting gifted and talented programs. The students who are hurt the most by this unequal access to gifted education services are the high-potential students from underserved and disadvantaged communities, who may go through their entire educational experience without being identified as gifted or having access to quality gifted and talented programs or to teachers trained to meet their needs.

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Failure to recognize this national problem will only result in a failure to best prepare our future leaders.

**CEC’s Recommended Administrative/Congressional Action**

CEC urges Congress support legislation that comprehensively addresses the needs of students with gifts and talents through:

1. **Restoring Funding for the Javits Act**

2. **Co-Sponsoring the TALENT Act (S. 857/H.R. 1674) which proposes to:**
   - **Change Assessment & Accountability Systems:** Revisions to the assessment and accountability system to ensure that assessments more accurately measure the knowledge and skills of high-ability students and changes to the accountability system to emphasize the highest performance levels.
   - **Increase in Professional Development:** Recognizes the critical role of teachers as the catalyst for learning and academic growth and as such expand professional development opportunities in gifted education pedagogy for teachers nationwide.
   - **Focus on Underserved Populations:** Address research demonstrating a growing “excellence gap” at the top achievement levels between students from low-income backgrounds and their more advantaged peers by directly addressing this population of students: students who are economically disadvantaged, English language learners, individuals with disabilities, and individuals from rural geographic areas.
   - **Emphasize Research and Dissemination:** Recognize the expansion of research in gifted education as the foundation on which the success of our nation’s high-ability students depends by expanding research grant opportunities, developing best practices and expanding the mission of the National Research Center for the Gifted and Talented.
The TALENT Act (H.R. 1674/S. 857): To Aid Gifted and High-Ability Learners by Empowering the Nation’s Teachers Act

Overview
There is a clear national need to develop the talent of the more than 3 million high-ability learners in the U.S., whose performance is falling behind that of students in other industrialized nations. It is well documented that gifted and talented students have special learning needs requiring specialized educational services if they are to reach their potential. Unfortunately, a lack of federal investment in this population means that access to these services depends solely on state and local funds, which is highly variable and unpredictable.

The students hurt most through this dynamic are those high-potential students in underserved urban and rural districts who go unidentified and unserved. This underinvestment in excellence has resulted in a new and widening achievement gap – the gap between minority and economically disadvantaged students who are gifted and talented and their more advantaged, high-ability peers. Researchers have documented a growing gap on both statewide assessments and on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) that, at current achievement rates, will take decades to close.

Limited federal leadership, coupled with a singular focus on grade-level proficiency, has resulted in an educational system that too often fails to address the unique learning needs of gifted students and those who could become high achieving with appropriate supports.

TALENT Act: Key Provisions
The TALENT Act meets the needs of gifted and high-ability students in four key areas:

1. **Focus on Underserved Students**: The TALENT Act responds directly to recent research demonstrating a growing “excellence gap” at the top achievement levels between students from low-income backgrounds and their more advantaged peers by:
   - Requiring Title I schools to describe how they will identify and serve students with gifts and talents, including high-ability students who have not been identified as gifted.
   - Requiring states to include in their Title I plans the steps the state will take to assist local school districts in supporting students with gifts and talents, including high-ability students who previously have not been identified.
   - Expanding the Small Rural School Achievement Program to better address students with gifts and talents who live in rural communities, through activities such as professional development for teachers.
   - Priority in Research Grants that seek to develop instructional practices, assessment tools used for gifted identification, materials, and gifted education programs through the Professional Development and Best Practices Grant Program and the National Research and Dissemination Center for the Education of the Gifted and Talented.
2. Increase in Professional Development: The TALENT Act recognizes the critical role of teachers as the catalyst for learning and academic growth and as such seeks to expand professional development opportunities in gifted education pedagogy for teachers nationwide by:

- Requiring states to include in their application for funds under Title II, Part A Grants a description of the comprehensive strategy that a state will use to improve the knowledge and skills of school personnel, including teachers, principals and counselors, in identifying specific learning needs of gifted students and tailoring instruction to meet such needs.

- Authorizing the Professional Development and Best Practices Grant Program, a targeted, competitive grant program that will conduct school-wide and classroom-based research to develop innovative instructional practices and provide high quality professional development for teachers, principals and other school personnel on strategies known to be successful with this special-needs population.

3. Changes to Assessment and Accountability Systems: The TALENT Act would ensure that assessments more accurately measure the knowledge and skills of high-ability students and proposes changes to the accountability system to emphasize the highest performance levels by:

- Requiring that state assessments are vertically aligned and able to measure student knowledge of standards above their grade level.

- Establishing a requirement that states, districts, and schools report learning growth for their most advanced students on state report cards.

4. Emphasis on Research and Dissemination: The TALENT Act recognizes that expanding research in gifted education is the foundation for the success of our nation’s students with gifts and talents through provisions such as:

- Establishing a Professional Development and Best Practices Competitive Grant Program as described above.

- Continuing the National Research and Dissemination Center for the Education of the Gifted and Talented focused on conducting evidence-based research on methods and techniques for identifying and teaching students with gifts and talents, developing resources for teacher training and professional development systems and parents in supporting their child’s education, as well as disseminating its findings broadly, including to the technical assistance centers already established by the ESEA, the Education Technical Assistance Act, and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act.

CEC – together with the National Association for Gifted Children -- urges support of the TALENT Act to systematically ensure that all high-ability students, regardless of their zip code, are able to maximize their potential. The nation cannot afford to delay.

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