

## Unmasking the Egalitarian Fiction

**My son knows most of the math being taught in his class and is bored with the slow pace of instruction in other subjects. Classmates sometimes make fun of his advanced vocabulary, and he has fewer friends each year. But school personnel brush off my concerns and act as if I want special favors. Why are they treating me and my child as the problem?**

Gifted children unmask the fiction that we are all born equally intelligent. Americans have always been ambivalent about talent: insisting that individuals should be able to advance as far as their abilities and effort take them but resenting those who outdistance everyone else. It seems that individual success is "undemocratic."

### Nowhere is the American ambivalence about talent stronger than in the public schools.

Nowhere is the American ambivalence stronger than in the public schools. They are supposed to be the nation's great equalizers, leveling social and economic inequalities. But Mother Nature is no egalitarian; she grants gifts and talents in differing amounts. Schools have quietly worked to erode mountains of talent and fill in the valleys.

As national efforts to eradicate social inequality intensified in the 1960s, grouping and tracking, once used to accommodate ability differences, were attacked as tools for perpetuating social privilege. An ideologically sympathetic research community pronounced grouping undemocratic and purported to show that degrouping (mixing students of all ability levels in

the classroom) helped all students and harmed none; that acceleration hurt gifted children more than it helped them, especially in the development of social skills; and that gifted children were likely to develop elitist attitudes if not educated in the company of less able peers.

Where not eliminated altogether, programs for the intellectually gifted now tend to be explicitly "democratized," either through a definition of giftedness broadened to include nonacademic talents or through content adjusted to accommodate a wider range of abilities.

Educators have long argued that all students could achieve at a high level if only the public schools were given enough resources. Accepting the egalitarian fiction but not the standing request for more resources, Congress enacted the No Child Left Behind Act in 2001. It requires all school districts to bring all students up to the same high performance standard by 2011, or the schools will suffer serious consequences. Most gifted children already far exceed those standards, so schools have every incentive to ignore them and direct their limited resources to the lowest-performing students. The law seems to sanction the belief that advocating for gifted programming is elitist.

It is no wonder that some school administrators do treat the parents of gifted children as a problem, or that myths about gifted children are rife and continue to impede services for them. Those myths and the evidence disproving them are itemized in *A Nation Deceived: How Schools Hold Back America's Brightest Students*.

Parents who understand the American ambivalence about talent and how this ambivalence affects schools will be better able to obtain services for their gifted children. The following suggestions will help you work with schools to develop an appropriate educational experience for your gifted child:

- Don't be put off by school administrators who treat you like a problem. It's not personal.
- Do your homework to avoid being misled. Learn the facts about gifted children and what best meets their needs.
- Help the school personnel help you. Don't go to them empty-handed; go to them with information on options for accelerating your child. Keep in mind that it is easier administratively and safer politically to provide gifted children with early access to existing programs, on a case-by-case basis, than to develop new programs.
- Look behind the label, if your school already has a gifted and talented program. Avoid programs that serve the forces of "democratization" more than they do the welfare of gifted children.

Questions to consider:

- Is the program's definition of giftedness too broad to be meaningful? Does it extend beyond the intellectual arena to include, say, physical skills or social service?
- Are its entry criteria demanding enough to restrict entry to fast learners? Is evidence of high ability or achievement required, or can anyone be nominated to the program?
- Does the program accelerate instruction so students can move faster through the curriculum, or does it only divert them into "enrichment" activities?

The public schools' egalitarian sensitivities make them reluctant to establish procedures for identifying and accelerating gifted students. Their failure, however, allows you to seize the initiative. Most important, it gives you the flexibility to tailor a plan to your child's strengths and needs and to modify it as needed. Exploiting that freedom is well worth the effort.

—Linda S. Gottfredson, PhD

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#### Suggested Reading

*A Nation Deceived*  
www.nationdeceived.org

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