

Pennsylvania

Commentary

Nurture gifted students' growth

Keep them excited about learning while their struggling peers get extra help.

By Kim Maguire

Programs for gifted students are disappearing from America's public schools at an alarming rate, as educators feel forced to shift their limited resources toward remedial courses for struggling learners. The federal No Child Left Behind Act requires school districts to demonstrate an annual increase in the number of students who are "proficient" in basic skills. Rewards for making adequate progress are both financial and political; failure results in bad press, funding cuts, tutoring costs, and the possibility that parents will take their children and tax dollars to another district. This leaves administrators nationwide with little choice but to direct their attention and funds to remedial programs and troubled students, sacrificing excellence for a flawed vision of equity.



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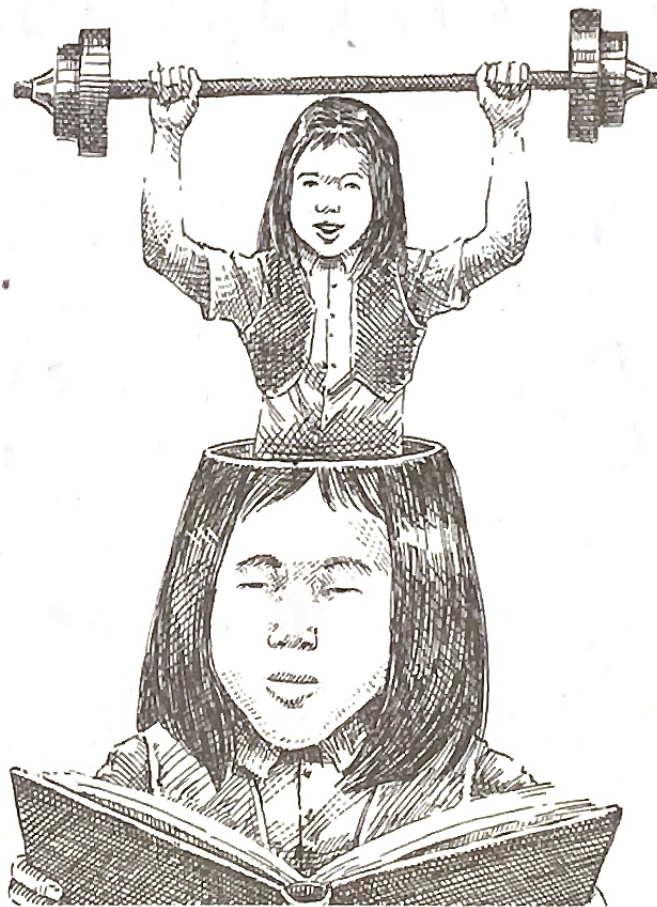
While proficiency in basic skills is a prerequisite to excellence, it is only the beginning. Many students already are proficient or advanced according to the federal standard, but there is no reward for nurturing

their development further, and no consequence for letting them remain forever merely proficient. An unintended effect of No Child Left Behind is that, in many school districts, our most accomplished students actually are kept behind as they tread water in classes where they already have mastered the material. If this trend continues, gifted low-income or minority students whose parents cannot afford to supplement their public schools' programs will be marginalized further because there is simply no incentive for accommodating high achievers. The achievement gap will widen, and growth will be hindered for the nation's best students, all in the name of equity.

ment offerings, encouraging appropriate acceleration, and developing partnerships with local universities and cultural institutions. These forward-moving steps resulted from open and ongoing dialogue among teachers, administrators, parents and students about how we can best serve our students' broad needs. We support all students with opportunities to advance at their own pace, whether or not they meet the Pennsylvania Department of Education's criteria for "giftedness," which includes an IQ of 130 and above-grade-level performance on various tests and evaluations. We coach our teachers to identify students who have mastered the grade-level curricula.

Left unchallenged and unexcited in the early grades, gifted learners can fail to develop the strategies, study skills and motivation required for tackling the intellectually demanding content they will encounter as they move to the upper grades, virtually guaranteeing a premature end to their educational growth and academic success.

This is nothing short of a national crisis. We can ill afford to force enthusiastic young learners to languish in classrooms unchallenged and uninspired, in effect punishing them for reaching "proficiency" at an early age. And once our struggling students reach proficiency, there is no federal incentive to further foster



TIM BRINTON