

Re-evaluating how we evaluate gifted students

By MYLES COOLEY, Ph.D.

In a recent article, "Are We Failing Our Geniuses?" (*Time* magazine, Aug. 27, 2007), John Cloud correctly asserts that our education system is not nurturing the students who have the greatest potential. Gifted students are dropping out of school at the same rate as non-gifted students. The federal education budget provides 10 times more money for the lowest-performing students than for the brightest students. The No Child Left Behind Act only exacerbates the situation. It forces schools to increase resources for students performing at below minimum standards at the expense of high-performing students.

Mr. Cloud, a staff writer for *Time*, advocates a new model for educating our brightest students that might provide a better chance of challenging and retaining them. He would have teachers compact and differentiate instruction for students who have different skills. Gifted students would be allowed to accelerate their work, skip grades and dual-enroll in college while in high school. Breaking out of the "one size fits all" model of education provides the only hope of challenging and retaining these students.

But Mr. Cloud's proposal doesn't go far enough. While advocating a new model for teaching gifted students, he missed the opportunity to propose a new model for defining how we might identify and qualify these students for special educational programs. He accepts the status quo of the IQ score as the sole measure of giftedness.

It is hard to find an academician or educator who believes that IQ should be the sole qualifier for eligibility in gifted programs. Other factors deemed equally important are extraordinary academic skill, artistic and musical talent, leadership and creativity. Harvard Professor Howard Gardner proposed his theory of multiple intelligences almost 25 years ago.

Given the consensus that defining giftedness should consider many factors, why do most school districts persist in the exclusive use of the IQ score? Because it's easy to measure. It's much harder to quantify creativity, leadership, musical or artistic talent. One of the most influential thinkers in gifted education, Joseph Renzulli, directs the National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented at the University of Connecticut. He defines giftedness as consisting of three traits that, in combination, predict extraordinary accomplishment. One trait is well above average ability in overall cognitive ability or in a more specific academic skill. Task commitment is the second quality. This refers to the perseverance and commitment an individual puts forth. Creativity is the third factor. This might be considered "out of the box thinking." All three characteristics are considered essential for giftedness, but relative strengths and weaknesses in respective traits can compensate for each other.

To redefine giftedness in this way, Mr. Renzulli admits that we'll have to be willing to include subjective judgments about students' task commitment, creativity and other traits that can't be quantified. These judgments would provide alternative or additional ways to qualify a student as gifted. This will not be easy to do, but easy should not be our guiding philosophy. Easy means perpetuating the model of identifying gifted students based exclusively on high IQ scores.

This is not a philosophical or academic issue for some segments of our population. Mr. Cloud points out that girls, as well as some racial and ethnic groups, have limited access to gifted programs because they tend to score lower than boys on IQ tests. Some minority groups have alleged discrimination. That is for the courts to decide. But it is true that equal access will be difficult to achieve when the sole criterion for eligibility limits access. Additionally, by relying exclusively on IQ scores, we're not responding to other talents and educational needs of many students. We're not doing our best to cultivate a resource pool of adults who might make unique contributions to society and civilization.

Meanwhile, some reassurance to parents whose children's IQs aren't high enough to qualify them for gifted programs. IQ has little correlation with life success. Creativity and hard work are considerably better predictors of adult accomplishments. Social skills, emotional control, empathy and other factors comprising emotional intelligence (EQ) are much more predictive of the quality of relationships we'll develop.

If schools would devote at least equal attention to these characteristics, we might really be on the road to identifying and nurturing our best and brightest.

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