

# Peeling the Onion: Equity in HiCap

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[Abridged for Educators]

Unabridged Version: [www.tinyurl.com/PeelingTheOnion](http://www.tinyurl.com/PeelingTheOnion)

## Executive Summary

Equity in Highly Capable (HiCap) programs in Washington State is a hot topic these days. There's no question that there is a disproportional under-representation of low-income students, students with learning disabilities, English Language Learners, and students of color in our HiCap programs statewide. But what is the root cause behind this disproportionality?

Peeling the onion, first we find that there are many outdated identification practices in common use, that each carry bias: relying on parent or teacher referral to choose students for testing, using only English-language test instruments, yearly testing windows, not providing practice tests to all students, ignoring known biases in the test instruments, relying on the appeal process to catch mistakes, and many others.

Peeling the onion a bit further, we find that even if students were identified properly, there are many outdated practices in how districts provide access to HiCap programming that creates barriers, such as: not providing full transportation to magnet programs, classroom makeup that does not reflect the diversity of the community, believing that differentiation can reliably meet HiCap student needs, assuming that all students have access to technology and homework help at home, and many others.

Peeling to the center of the onion, we realize that the reason better practices have not been prioritized is because most people believe that HiCap students will turn out alright in the end, regardless of whether they were well served at school. This is a myth. In actuality, HiCap students have challenges in social and emotional development, delayed development of executive function, and are at significant risk of not developing grit or growth mindset if school is always "easy" for them.

We need to stop thinking about Highly Capable programs as a coveted "prize," and the equity problem as being primarily about figuring out how to spread that prize around more fairly. That's not it at all.

Rather, we need to reframe the conversation entirely: HiCap programs are a vital "whole child" intervention for vulnerable students who would likely not be successful with a conventional approach. Hence, we need to proactively seek out EVERY child who needs that intervention, in order to best support students' long term outcomes.

With that frame of mind, we realize that some of our most vulnerable children are habitually underrepresented in our state's HiCap programs, which just makes this inequity that much more painful.

This is a social justice issue.

## Introduction

Equity in Highly Capable (HiCap) programs in Washington State is a hot topic these days. There's no question that there is a disproportional under-representation of low-income students, students with learning disabilities, English Language Learners, and students of color in our HiCap programs statewide. If you look closely at the [data](#), you will see under-representation in some groups, over-representation in other groups, as well as quite a bit of variance between different school districts.

This is a national issue as well. In fact, the National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC) recently reported that "[gifted children in poverty and from minority groups are 2.5 times LESS likely to be identified for, and in, gifted and talented programs in schools](#)" – even when measured achievement is the same. This is clearly a sobering statistic.

However, there hasn't been as much discussion of exactly where these disparities come from. What is the root cause behind this disproportionality? What can we do about it?

## The First Layer of the Onion – Identification

The most obvious factor is how we identify students for highly capable programs; let's start peeling the onion there. There are many, many problematic identification practices. What is most troubling is that most of these outdated practices are standard operating procedure for districts across the state – and have been for years. So in a very real sense, we shouldn't be that surprised that we are seeing disproportionality – it's a direct reflection of how we currently go about identifying students.

These outdated practices do not include – or even mention – racism, classism, intentional segregation, or similarly egregious behavior. We know that these [terrible acts do happen](#) in some places, and they absolutely should not be happening, ever, and certainly will have a lasting impact. Despite this, there are larger systemic issues that can have even broader impact, and can easily occur even in communities that consider themselves very supportive of diversity.

The long list of outdated identification practices, and the better practices that should replace them, can be found in the unabridged version of this paper, located here: [www.tinyurl.com/PeelingTheOnion](http://www.tinyurl.com/PeelingTheOnion)

## The Second Layer of the Onion – Equity of Access

But identification problems are far from the only issue. Peeling the onion even further let's consider issues of access to highly capable programs themselves. Even if a student qualifies for highly capable services, will those services be accepted by the parent? If services are provided in a magnet school, will the parent be willing to have their child change schools? Will the student feel comfortable in a highly capable classroom being the only one of a few students of color? There are many problematic practices that limit the equitable access to highly capable programs for all students.

Outdated Practice	Why it's Problematic	What Would Be Better
<b>Outdated Practice:</b> <b>Being the only student of color, or one of very few girls in a HiCap classroom.</b>	<b>Racial Factors.</b> This is a tough catch 22. It's easy to see how a student of color may feel uncomfortable in a classroom where they are the only student of color, or one of very few. However, until we start getting dramatically better at identifying many more students of color, this becomes a vicious	<b>Schedule a big campaign for outreach and identification in an ethnic/racial/gender group all at once.</b> The goal would be identifying many students in the same year. It is vital to then communicate to all families the diversity of the incoming class of identified students.

and/or

**Outdated Practice: Districts that only provide in-class differentiation as a HiCap model, in a belief that this model will guarantee equitable HiCap access for all students, and will preserve diversity in all classrooms.**

cycle, and a self-fulfilling prophecy. On the flip side, students of color in a heterogeneous classroom may feel significant pressure to not “[act White](#)” in front of their ethnic community. This dynamic can put HiCap students of color in a very tough situation, torn between their racial/ethnic community and their HiCap needs. Only by identifying and placing groups of HiCap students of color together can we satisfy these students’ dual needs for acceptance in both their ethnic and HiCap communities.

**Gender Factors.** HiCap programs can sometimes be heavy on boys, and so girls may be similarly reluctant to accept placement in a HiCap classroom with few other girls.

**In-class differentiation does not deliver equitable HiCap services for the whole child.** While an exceptional teacher can differentiate for the academic needs of a HiCap student within the context of the regular classroom, this is truly difficult to accomplish and not a reasonable expectation of every classroom teacher. Hence, there can be **substantial variations in service level for HiCap students between teachers, which does not constitute equitable access.** But even more importantly, it is nearly impossible to support the unique social and emotional needs of HiCap students in the context of a heterogeneous classroom, regardless of the teacher’s skill level. These students need to have a significant part of their school day in the company of other students like them, in order to normalize (and de-pathologize) their emotional sensitivities, to find authentic social connections with like-minded peers, and to prevent the arrogance and complacency that can result when you are the smartest kid in every classroom.

**Social factors.** It is hard for students, especially as they get older, to leave the familiarity of an established social group in order to access a HiCap program. This is

Holding events where prospective students can meet each other, find friends, and see that these classrooms will reflect their own backgrounds is essential. All students need to feel comfortable in their classrooms, and feel like they are among their peers, and not isolated from their ethnic or gender communities.

**Cohort-based (self-contained or cluster-grouped) programs are the best practice for all HiCap students, including students of color.** Grouping HiCap students with others at a similar cognitive level is the best way to support their social and emotional development, by normalizing their unique emotional characteristics and challenges, especially in the elementary and middle school years. A cohort also makes it easier for a teacher to provide HiCap-specific social/emotional curriculum, guiding whole child development and identity formation in these vulnerable students. Furthermore, for the majority of HiCap students, social fit in a HiCap cohort is better because they are more likely to connect with friends who have similar social asynchronies. These authentic social connections support students’ ongoing social development. It’s unrealistic to expect social development to occur on schedule when a student doesn’t “connect” with their age-mates. Social pressure to not “act smart” in the heterogeneous classroom is reported by many HiCap students, [especially girls](#). The US Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights directed in 2014 that [students of color and other underrepresented groups are best served in advanced classes](#), not in heterogeneous classrooms.

**A HiCap cohort-based model also more reliably meets academic needs, and builds grit and growth mindset.** Grouping students makes it easier for a teacher to provide appropriately levelled instruction, at a faster pace, a higher degree of complexity, and often accelerated in level - which is of primary

particularly problematic for girls and for close-knit ethnic communities. However, despite this, some HiCap students struggle socially in the heterogeneous classroom, because [they do not find authentic social connections](#) with many other age-mates due to different interests, vocabulary, sense of humor, complexity of games, etc. They sense very early on that they are somehow different from their age-mates, and over time this erodes their self-confidence. Lack of authentic social connection can have a long-term impact on progression through social development – in particular, mid/late elementary social development stages rely on forming cliques of kids who are “just like me” which may not be available in a heterogeneous environment.

**Emotional factors.** Many HiCap students have characteristic emotional challenges including [perfectionism](#), [emotional sensitivity](#), and [super-sensitive central nervous systems](#) (“Over-Excitabilities”) which can cause many issues ranging from overly active psychomotor behavior, to sensory issues with clothing, to significant anxieties and fears about imagined problems. [Advanced moral thinking, concern with social justice, empathy, and existential depression](#) are also common. These emotional characteristics can have real impact: for example, it is not unusual for a HiCap student to cry with frustration at a challenging math problem in class – even in the middle school grades. While this would be socially stigmatizing in a heterogeneous classroom, in a HiCap classroom it is a non-issue, because many other students have had a similar experience. Self-confidence and identity formation suffers when HiCap students are left to face their unusual emotional challenges alone, as an oddball in the heterogeneous classroom.

importance for developing grit. (When it’s not possible to group HiCap students, such as in rural areas, subject acceleration or full-grade acceleration is the next best choice. For some, acceleration is sometimes needed even beyond the HiCap cohort.) Angela Duckworth, the famous “grit” researcher, reports, “In our data, [grit is usually unrelated or even inversely related to measures of talent](#).” When academics are too easy, grit and growth mindset do not develop. The lack of grit in talented students is conditioned by an under-challenging school environment – which means it can be improved with attention to the environment. This is not a theoretical problem: a [recent report from Johns Hopkins](#) shows that 35% of 5<sup>th</sup> graders are already achieving above grade level at the beginning of the year, and many other data points showing large percentages of students ready for advanced curriculum. Yet, in a heterogeneous classroom (even based on common core), it is extremely difficult for teachers to differentiate to the degree where HiCap students would be truly challenged. Sufficient challenge is absolutely essential for developing grit & growth mindset – without the student feeling a clear sense of growth and struggle, there is no need for grit, or to recognize the necessity of a growth mindset. And, we know that grit and growth mindset is far more important for our students’ long term success than raw talent. Hence, we do our students no favors leaving them in a school environment that does not genuinely challenge them, even if they are easily meeting grade level standards. Eventually, even a HiCap student will encounter material that is not intuitive for them, perhaps not until middle or high school or even college, and they may have no experience, no emotional coping skills, no study skills. Some students rise to the occasion – but many do not, and instead fall into a frustrating pattern of underachievement and disengagement, despite significant academic talent.

<p><b>Outdated Practice:</b>  <b>Teachers assigned to work with HiCap students, with little or no training about the unique needs of HiCap students</b></p>	<p><b>Misunderstanding.</b> Many different teachers may be asked to work with HiCap students: a teacher for a full-time HiCap class, a regular classroom teacher who is expected to differentiate for a HiCap student in the class, a resource room teacher delivering intervention in speech or OT; a specialist teacher such as a librarian, music, art. When these teachers are unsupported, with little or no training about the unique needs of HiCap students, they are left to figure it out on their own. They may have unrealistic expectations – such as expecting HiCap students to act like older students, to be able to self-manage and work independently, to lead cooperative learning groups, or to tutor struggling students. While there is certainly individual variance, most HiCap students are not good at any of these things. Teachers may find themselves ill-equipped to handle these students’ complex emotional needs, sensitivities, and perfectionism. They may fundamentally misunderstand their students’ needs, harming the teacher-student relationship.</p>	<p><b>Provide baseline professional development for all building staff.</b> Just like for Special Education students, all staff need to be trained in the basics of HiCap student characteristics and best practices. If we want school communities to be welcoming and inclusive, all staff need to have a solid basis in research. We also want all staff to be able to appropriately refer a student for HiCap assessment if they recognize HiCap characteristics.</p> <p><b>Provide detailed professional development for all classroom HiCap teachers.</b> Whether a teacher has an entire classroom of HiCap students, or a small cluster group, that teacher should receive detailed, ongoing professional development about HiCap students. At minimum, topics should include social &amp; emotional characteristics, acceleration/compacting strategies, differentiation strategies, and enhancing curriculum for greater depth and complexity.</p>
<p><b>Outdated Practice:</b>  <b>HiCap curriculum does not reflect the demographics of the student population</b></p>	<p><b>Racial bias.</b> When students do not see their racial and cultural background reflected in the staff of a school, or the curriculum they experience, they feel like outsiders who do not belong. This is true in the context of a HiCap classroom as well as in curriculum choices: novels should feature protagonists with a variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds. Curriculum should include themes and history relevant to the diverse experiences and backgrounds of the students.</p>	<p><b>All teachers, including HiCap teachers, must be trained in cultural competency.</b> These are crucial tools for all modern classrooms, including HiCap ones.</p>
<p><b>Outdated Practice:</b>  <b>Assuming that all students have access to technology after school for homework</b></p>	<p><b>Low income bias.</b> Teachers may have implicit expectations about students’ access to a computer with internet access at home for completing homework and projects. Low-income and homeless students may not have ready access to technology that is expected for homework.</p>	<p><b>Provide technology to low-income students, or ensure that teachers do not expect access to technology for homework.</b> Note that it is not enough to simply assign a laptop or iPad to a student – often the limiting factor is Internet access at home, which would also need to be provided.</p>
<p><b>Outdated Practice:</b>  <b>Assuming that all students have access to</b></p>	<p><b>Parent support bias.</b> One of the more surprising characteristics of HiCap students is a delay in the development of executive function, due to a <a href="#">markedly different</a></p>	<p><b>Teachers must be extra supportive of executive function for HiCap students, all the way through middle school and early high school.</b> These students need</p>

<p><b>homework help &amp; executive function support</b></p>	<p><a href="#">timetable of brain maturation – on average, a 4 year delay</a>. (This is one of many examples of <a href="#">asynchronous development</a> in the HiCap population.) Because of this developmental difference, HiCap students typically need much more executive function support for much longer than other students with managing homework, project timelines, scheduling, remembering to bring things to school, etc. Lack of parental support for executive function can be a significant impact to students’ ability to keep up with their school work, or manage extra-curriculars. When the academic work is challenging a student at their cognitive level, these supports at home become even more important. If this support is not available in the home, these students are at a significant disadvantage in being successful at school, which typically is reflected in their grades, and can create a downward spiral in self-confidence and motivation.</p>	<p>much more executive function support even than typically developing students. For example, providing planners, reinforcing the user of a planner in all classes every day, scaffolding for breaking down large projects into manageable pieces, reminding students every day to hand in homework. An important corollary to this is having supportive policies for late/missing/incomplete work that encourages students to stay engaged, wrestle with the topics, get credit for their effort, and thereby reinforce a growth mindset. Teacher education is key here: providing executive function support is not coddling students, but rather, is an essential accommodation for a bona fide developmental difference.</p>
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## The Third Layer of the Onion – The Funding Issue

So let's peel the onion a little further. Why don't districts do these practices, which they know would do a better job of identifying and serving their highly capable students?

In large part, the answer comes down to funding. To implement all of the above recommendations would go far, far beyond the current level of funding for HiCap programs across the state. For the most part, districts know that they should be doing more; most of them just can't afford to actually do it.

The vast majority of the highly capable program funding in the state budget is used by districts for two things:

- **Identification.** This includes procuring test instruments, administering the tests, proctors, grading, making placement decisions via the Multi-Disciplinary Selection Committee, communicating with parents throughout the process, handling the state-mandated appeals process, placing students in classrooms/programs, and sufficient administrator staffing to handle all of this. This is by far the biggest district cost today, and that's without fixing many of the problematic identification practices listed above, which would cost much, much more if districts were to "do it right."
- **Professional Development.** This is training not just for teachers of highly capable students, but also training for ALL staff on the characteristics and needs of highly capable students so that they can better identify students to refer for screening, as well as better support these unique students' needs as members of their school community. This includes the building principal, school psychologist, nurses, OT, resource room, office staff, as well as specialist teachers such as library, music, PE, art, etc. Much like for Special Education, it is vital to have building-wide awareness and training. This also could be a significant line item, though today most districts focus their limited resources on training the teachers of HiCap students. Again, to "do it right" would cost much, much more. Broad professional development directly affects equity, as staff referrals will always be an important back up plan for catching students that even universal testing may miss.

Now that EHB 2242 is providing more funding to districts for their HiCap programs starting in 2018, we are hopeful that districts will implement better, more equitable practices. However, we know that funding is still not adequate for everything that districts could and should be doing.

## The Fourth Layer of the Onion – The Myth about HiCap Students

Peeling the onion one more time, we find ourselves asking: why hasn't there been adequate state funding? Why haven't these better practices been implemented? In large part, the lack of attention on these issues is because most people don't consider the needs of HiCap students to be very important. Highly Capable programs may legally be considered Basic Education in WA state, but behind closed doors, for many people, HiCap still feels like a "nice to have," not an absolute must.

There is a widely held myth that HiCap kids do not need special services. People assume that HiCap students will ultimately turn out OK no matter what happens to them in school, even if they might be bored from time to time. In fact, they are quite sure that HiCap kids are all destined for greatness – great colleges, eminent careers, etc. Most people think that HiCap students should be thankful that they reach mastery at standard so quickly, and that they – and their parents – should just relax and take time to "be a kid." There is a particularly damaging corollary to this line of thinking – that HiCap programs are largely serving affluent, privileged families, and that the only reason kids qualify for HiCap services in the first place is because they got early exposure to academics, and other enriched environments.

This is all a myth. In fact, HiCap students have many, many unique social and emotional challenges that render them [particularly vulnerable](#). They come from every ethnic and socio-economic group. In fact, HiCap students from poor families are much more numerous than affluent ones – simply because there are proportionally more poor people in our state. These students particularly rely on public school HiCap programs, while more affluent families can afford to consider private school, move to a different school district, or homeschool if the public school is not meeting their child's needs.

Without support and understanding for their challenges, HiCap kids can easily feel like "outsiders" in a heterogeneous school environment, often never even knowing where these challenges come from, or realizing the root cause behind their differences. This can result in many maladaptive behaviors, ranging from becoming the class clown or becoming the ultra-studious straight "A" student who ignores her peers, to disengagement from school, underachievement, acting out, social withdrawal, or worse.

I spoke to a room full of truancy officers in King County Juvenile Court last year, and they recognized HiCap characteristics in many of their toughest cases. One truancy officer told a story about a Hispanic student who talked his ear off about Physics – but the school refused to place the student in a Physics class because of behavior issues, and the student was rapidly disengaging from school. Others spoke about very bright kids who were bored in school and habitually truant – or being suspended for behavior issues. One surprise was how many of their truancy cases were elementary students, not just high schoolers. We know that students of color are suspended at a [much higher rate than average](#). I wonder how many of them are actually unidentified or under-served HiCap students?

HiCap students exist in every demographic group, and we have no reason to believe that any demographic group should produce more (or fewer) HiCap students than any other. We should be finding them everywhere, but due to all of the biases of identification and access listed above, obviously, that is not currently reflected in our programs. This needs to change.

HiCap students need special services. While some of our HiCap students do have that magic combination of motivation, highly developed executive function, and grit – the vast majority of our HiCap kids do not, and in fact are below average in many of these areas. We risk them disengaging from school and from society if we do not

proactively find them and support their unique needs. This is doubly true for HiCap students who have even more complexity in their personal situations, whether that is being new to the US and still learning the language, facing stereotype threat because of their race, struggling with poverty or even homelessness, or dealing with a learning disability or a lack of parental support at home – or perhaps multiple of these issues at the same time.

Public schools have a moral obligation to accurately and thoroughly identify HiCap students in every demographic group. Then, we must serve them well: we must challenge our HiCap students at their cognitive level to help them steadily develop grit from elementary onwards, provide a safe social and emotional environment to help normalize their unique vulnerabilities (especially in the elementary and middle school years), support their developmental difference in executive function, and support the overall development of the whole child. This is a social justice issue.

Note that the goal of HiCap programs is not academic excellence per se. In fact, you may be surprised to learn that most HiCap students are not straight A students – largely because of their executive function challenges and asynchronous development. **The reason we need HiCap programs** has nothing to do with creating more genius entrepreneurs, winning math competitions, or sending more kids to Harvard – it **is about supporting a specific neuro-diverse population** to more reliably produce well-adjusted citizens who can function in the world, pay their taxes, and contribute in some way to society.

We need to stop thinking about Highly Capable programs as a coveted “prize,” and the equity problem as being primarily about figuring out how to spread that prize around more fairly. That’s not it at all.

Rather, we need to reframe the conversation entirely: HiCap programs are a vital “whole child” intervention for vulnerable students who would likely not be successful with a conventional approach. With that frame of mind, we realize that some of our most vulnerable children are habitually underrepresented in our state’s HiCap programs, which just makes the inequity that much more painful.

## The Heart of the Onion – Equity

So what is the root cause of our equity problems in Washington state – and nationwide?

**The root cause is that we imagine HiCap kids to have it made - to be star students with bright futures. Until we see this population for what it really is - a vulnerable special needs population that needs specialized support for reliably good outcomes, which we need to proactively identify and serve in EVERY demographic group, which all requires substantial funding to accomplish - we will continue to have equity problems.**

This is the heart of the equity onion.