

# Peeling the Onion: Equity in HiCap

Austina De Bonte, President, NWGCA.org

---

## 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. What is the root cause behind this disproportionality?

Peeling the onion, first we find that there are many problematic identification practices in common use, that each carry bias: relying on parent or teacher nomination to identify students for testing, conducting testing on Saturdays, using only English-language test instruments, sending only English-language information about the HiCap program to parents, 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 problematic 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 the onion a bit further, we realize that the driving issue behind these problems of identification and access is a lack of funding in the WA state budget, despite the fact that Highly Capable programs have been part of Basic Education since 2014. Problematic practices arise because there is not enough funding to "do it right." Furthermore, HiCap funding is used almost entirely for identification and professional development (not staff), so **UNDER-FUNDING** highly capable programs in the WA state education budget is **DIRECTLY RESPONSIBLE FOR OUR EQUITY PROBLEM** in highly capable programs across the state.

Peeling to the center of the onion, we realize that the reason Highly Capable funding has 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 faulty assumption; in actuality, HiCap students have marked 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 problematic 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.

You will notice that the problematic practices listed below 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 following list of seemingly well-meaning, but very problematic, identification practices carry insidious bias against various under-represented populations.

| Problematic Practices  | Why it's Problematic  | What Would Be Better   |
|--|---|--|
| <b>Relying on parents, community members, and/or teachers to refer (or "nominate") students for HiCap testing</b><br><br><b>OR</b><br><b>Relying on student grades as an initial</b> | <b>Bias:</b> There are clear biases to relying on individual referrals. A recent study showed that <a href="#">teacher referrals are strongly biased against students of color</a> . Teachers are also unlikely to refer behavior problem students for highly capable testing – yet an underchallenged HiCap student is extremely prone to behavior problems when they are not cognitively challenged by their classwork. HiCap students with a disability (known as Twice Exceptional) often have an uneven pattern of achievement, and are not obvious candidates for referral either. Parent referrals and/or community member referrals aren't much | <b><a href="#">Do universal in-school screening of ALL students in a grade level.</a></b><br>Ideally, ALL students would be screened first in Kindergarten, again in 1st or 2 <sup>nd</sup> grade, and then again in 5 <sup>th</sup> grade prior to registering for middle school. Also, students new to a district should be screened upon enrollment, if they haven't been screened in their previous district. Screening need not be time consuming – a brief CogAT screener is available expressly for this purpose, |

**screen for HiCap consideration**

better. Sure, parents who are native English speakers, are familiar with the U.S. school system, and are culturally comfortable speaking up for their kids' needs are more likely to refer their kids for testing. However, parents who speak other languages or are not familiar the American system may not fully understand district announcements or know how to follow through on the process. This is true even if announcements are made in their native language. The cultural factor is important as well – for instance, many Hispanic cultural backgrounds deeply respect teachers and schools, seeing them as authority figures. Hence, families from these cultural backgrounds would not be comfortable referring a student for testing – they believe the school knows best, and believe the teacher would refer the child if it was warranted.

Technology hurdles. In larger districts, the referral process is often implemented online. There are many possible technology hurdles that families may stumble on – ranging from language accessibility (English vs. other languages), having access to a computer, having an email address, successfully creating an account or password on a new system, or filling out a detailed application asking for potentially unfamiliar information. All of these hurdles can cause families to abandon filling out a referral, thereby biasing the referral pipeline towards families that are computer savvy.

Terminology. This is a subtle semantics issue. Many districts use terminology that says “apply” or “nominate” a child for HiCap services. However, this wording implies that these services are some sort of prize to be won, not a necessary intervention for a population with special needs.

Grades bias. Even standards-based report card grades are a very imperfect measure of ability and even achievement. In order to achieve high grades, not only does the student need to know the material, but they also need to be able to demonstrate that knowledge to the teacher. In addition to scoring well on tests, they need to complete classwork, hand it in reliably, keep track of assigned homework and home projects, remember to actually do the homework, and successfully submit completed homework to the teacher on time. Students lucky enough to have

and can be administered by classroom teachers in less than an hour. The Naglieri Nonverbal test is another option. Note that to maximize results for historically underrepresented groups, it is important to [leave a wider cutoff for screening than for identification.](#)

Lohman recommends setting screening cutoffs to select [3 times as many students as would be anticipated for final identification.](#) (page 7)

**Do a “data sweep” - Use district data to identify candidates for further testing.** This is an important adjunct to universal screening, to ensure that students who are performing at high levels in classroom assessments or standardized tests are referred for HiCap testing. It is especially important to do a data sweep in any grade levels that are not receiving a universal screener. Note that for a data sweep, high grades can be an indicator to look deeper, but the lack of high grades should never disqualify a student from HiCap consideration.

Notably, Federal Way school district has achieved proportional representation in their 2017 HiCap cohort by implementing universal screening and a data sweep.

**Use the value-neutral words “refer” or “referral” when talking about a student who should be assessed for HiCap services.** Do not use the words “apply,” “application,” “nominate,” or “nomination.”

**While individual referrals should still be available,** they should be the backup plan, not the primary pipeline into the HiCap program.

|  |  |   |
|--|--|---|
|  | <p>attentive parents who are familiar with the US school system and who will help their children keep track of their work will naturally fare much better in their grades, but this says little about the child’s actual ability level. The bottom line is that there is a tremendous amount of executive function required to complete the transactions of school. As you will learn on page 16, executive function tends to be delayed in the HiCap population, so beware of using grades to pre-screen candidates for HiCap consideration. Also, consider that students who have experienced under-challenging environments for an extended period of time may mentally “check out” of school and simply refuse to do the work – despite plenty of ability.</p> | <p><b>The referral process should be as simple as possible, and available in multiple languages and formats</b>, in order to be fully and easily accessible to all families, educators, or community members who wish to refer a child for services. Implement systems that are flexible enough to accommodate families that do not have easy access to a computer, email account, or mailing address.</p>  |
| <p><b>Administering all HiCap screening and testing in English</b></p>                                       | <p><u>English Language Learners Bias</u>: For English-Language Learners (ELL), administering a test in their non-native language is clearly not going to give an accurate representation of their abilities. One hesitancy can be concerns about identifying ELL students too early, before they have had sufficient language acquisition to be successful in a HiCap program. At the <a href="#">Diversity &amp; Equity Pre-Conference session</a> at the NAGC 2016 Conference, several speakers reiterated the need for placing HiCap ELL students into HiCap services as soon as they are identified, and providing language acquisition support in the HiCap context. This is a common practice on the east coast.</p>   | <p><b>Provide HiCap screeners and assessments in each student’s native language.</b> Obviously, if we are looking to measure overall ability level, we are going to get the most accurate result in the student’s native language. This isn’t as impossible as it sounds. The CogAT is designed to be a <a href="#">language-free test until 2<sup>nd</sup>/3<sup>rd</sup> grade (Level 8)</a>, and those early elementary levels can be administered in ANY language by a translator who has translated the proctor guide. Spanish language CogAT for all levels is available as well, as is a Spanish ITBS. Other Spanish language achievement tests are also an option.</p> <p><b>Consider fast rate of language acquisition as a valid HiCap identifier.</b> ELL students who are acquiring English much faster than the norm are excellent candidates for a HiCap program. This should be considered a valid data point for possible identification.</p> |
| <p><b>Conducting HiCap testing as a “special event” - outside of the student’s home school, in large</b></p> | <p><u>Transportation/access</u>: Doing testing outside of school hours relies on parents to transport their kids to and/or from testing. There may be conflicts with family activities, faith communities or other obligations. Some families may not prioritize testing during non-school hours, in</p>   | <p><b>Do HiCap screening and testing during the school day, in the student’s home school.</b> Universal screening should happen in the student’s home classroom, by their regular teacher. If a student passes</p>  |

|  |  |  |
|--|--|--|
| <p><b>sessions on Saturdays, or after school hours</b></p>               | <p>favor of family activities. Parents may need to work on Saturdays and are not available to drive their kids. Finally, low-income or urban families may not have a car, and rely exclusively on school busses to get their kids to school, and may have no feasible way to get their child to the test location.</p> <p><u>Stress/anxiety:</u> Testing is often done in an unusual location, proctored by unfamiliar staff, which adds significantly to student stress/anxiety, and reduces the likelihood of an accurate test result. Large Saturday test sessions of hundreds of kids at a time are common in many Seattle/Eastside districts, and are particularly problematic. The chaos of checkin, large crowds, limited parking, stressed parents, getting assigned a group number, lining up by group, and being marched off to an unfamiliar classroom by an unfamiliar proctor all adds up to a stressful situation for a student. If that student is already prone to anxiety, as many HiCap students are, this is even more problematic. There is also a possibility of exacerbating stereotype threat when students of color see large numbers of other kids also testing, and see the variety of well-meaning parents encouraging their students to do their best in very visible ways. For example, some cultures value test taking so highly that the entire extended family comes to wish their student well on test day. Test day is an intense, confusing, sensory-overload experience even when the event is very well organized and the logistics are smooth. All of this unnecessarily exacerbates the high-stakes nature of the testing itself.</p> | <p>the brief screener, or was referred for further testing, that student should be assessed during the school day. Ideally, the student should be assessed in their own school, in their own classroom (or a familiar room), and by their own teacher or a familiar, trusted staff member. This would serve to keep students at ease, by maintaining a familiar, low-key, safe environment free of high-stakes hype or distraction. Keeping the environment calm would improve the likelihood of an accurate result.</p> |
| <p><b>Using Group-administered cognitive &amp; achievement tests</b></p> | <p><u>Twice Exceptional:</u> Group-administered tests will not show consistently accurate results for kids who struggle with anxiety, attention issues, or learning disabilities such as dyslexia, dysgraphia, sensory processing, etc. Of course, if a student has an IEP or a 504 Plan, districts will provide the stated accommodations. However, this is not nearly enough. The vast majority of potential HiCap students with these types of disabilities do not have formal IEPs or 504 Plans, because typically they are able to perform at or near grade level, and so do not meet the typical criteria for school-based Special Ed screening (performing two grade levels below standard, or significant social/emotional/behavioral</p>  | <p><b>Do one-on-one testing whenever there is reason to believe a student might need it.</b> While it is cost prohibitive in today's funding model in Washington state to do one-on-one testing for all students, districts should collect information from parents and teachers that would indicate when a student might benefit from a one-on-one test administration, and arrange an individual testing session for that child - even if there is no IEP or 504 Plan in place.</p>                                    |

|  |   |   |
|--|---|---|
|  | <p>challenges). These Twice Exceptional kids get caught in the middle – without recognition, accommodations, or services for their disability, which in turn means that they are much less likely to be able to demonstrate their advanced cognition on a group administered test. The best placement for most Twice Exceptional students is in a HiCap program with accommodations for their disabilities – but most are not recognized as highly capable with the current group-administered instruments. Sadly, many families with Twice Exceptional kids have had such a hard time in the public school system, that <a href="#">Twice Exceptional has become a common reason to homeschooler.</a></p>  | <p>In some states, such as Florida, state law mandates one-on-one gifted testing for all students who pass a screener – and the state funds it. The Miami-Dade County School District in south Florida is a prime example of equity – they identify 11% of their K-12 student body as gifted, and this in a district that is more than 80% Black and Hispanic.</p> <p>For a local example, Highline School District has been administering the CogAT test one-on-one to all referred students, and have found that this one practice has improved their equity picture significantly.</p>   |
| <p><b>Waiting until 2<sup>nd</sup> grade to “really” identify HiCap students</b></p> | <p><u>Opportunity gaps:</u> There is a concern that if we test kids too early for HiCap, then we risk over-identifying kids who simply had early exposure to academics and/or an enriched home environment, and may not “truly” need HiCap services. However, the inverse problem is actually the bigger equity concern. If we wait until 2<sup>nd</sup> grade before we really look hard to find our HiCap kids, for students who may have the cognitive horsepower but not the enriched environment, we unwittingly allowed the opportunity gap to grow even larger. While we would all like to believe that public schooling is an equalizing factor, the data shows otherwise: <a href="#">gaps that existed as kids entered kindergarten sadly tend to get larger over time</a>, not smaller. Waiting to identify reduces our ability to notice “diamonds in the rough,” especially as higher grade level tests expect students to have had exposure to that many more academic skills and life concepts.</p> <p><u>Twice Exceptional bias:</u> In my experience, Twice Exceptional students (HiCap students with a learning disability) are more likely to score highly on HiCap entrance tests at a young age. I think this is because the differential between expected academic achievement and their limitations due to their disability is comparatively small, but that gap will widen over time. One of the reasons why this may be true is because the CogAT test prompts are read to young students, and there is no time limit; these practices dramatically reduce</p> | <p><b>Prioritize identifying in Kindergarten and 1<sup>st</sup> grade to minimize further widening of the opportunity gap.</b> While admittedly there are larger SEM (standard error of measurement) ranges for lower grade level cognitive tests, that doesn’t mean that we shouldn’t bother trying to identify at this age. It is imperative for equity that we look hard to identify HiCap kids as early as possible to provide services early – this is optimal for the best academic outcomes, but is absolutely crucial for social &amp; emotional outcomes, which are vital for supporting whole child development. Because of the relative deficits in test instruments available, for this age group, a more portfolio-based identification approach is particularly helpful (see next topic).</p> <p>It’s worth noting that the Miami-Dade County School District in Florida mentioned earlier (11% identified as gifted in an 80%+ Hispanic district) focuses their identification efforts on grades K-2.</p> <p><b>Use performance-based assessments</b> as a data point, especially for young and/or</p> |

|   |   |  |
|---|---|--|
|   | <p>the impact of any dyslexia and low processing speed on test results, which are common disabilities in the HiCap population. By identifying early, we're more likely to properly identify Twice Exceptional students as HiCap. Ironically, this will also speed discovery of their disability – if the student is in a HiCap classroom where the work is targeted at their cognitive level, learning disabilities will become more obvious sooner. In comparison, a Twice Exceptional child in a class that is “too easy” may be able to get by for years before the disability is noticed. Indeed, in high IQ students, it's common for disabilities to not be diagnosed until middle or even high school, even for significant diagnoses like dyslexia and ASD.</p> <p><u>Early childhood:</u> Early childhood is among the most difficult times for a HiCap student. Academically, very little at school is engaging because they already know it or learn it so quickly that very little repetition is needed. Socially, it is challenging as well - they speak with a more complex vocabulary, have different interests, and create intricate rules for games before their peers even fully understand the concept of rules. The socially astute HiCap child may consciously or subconsciously “dumb themselves down” to better fit in with the group – shockingly, this happens commonly by Kindergarten. Emotionally, HiCap kids tend to lag in emotional regulation, struggle with perfectionism, <a href="#">experience heightened sensitivity to various sensory input</a>, and can be quite emotionally fragile. The combination of all of these factors is a ticking time bomb: Behavior problems are rampant for unidentified young HiCap students, and can easily become a bad habit.</p> | <p>historically underrepresented populations. These types of assessments use exposure to an enriched environment and complex task, and watch how students can work with it in a specific situation. While harder to administrate, these assessments can be extremely helpful to see how students perform in a real situation with advanced concepts and complexity.</p>  |
| <p><b>Having hard cut-off scores or entrance criteria for HiCap programs</b></p> <p>and/or</p> <p><b>Relying on appeals to catch mistakes in the identification process</b></p> | <p><u>State law:</u> The WAC specifically states that a Multi-Disciplinary Selection Committee should be using <a href="#">professional judgment</a> for all highly capable identification. It is against state law to have a single cut-off score or matrix for entrance criteria. Furthermore, OSPI guidance to districts is that using multiple measures means that “No single data point should disqualify a child from highly capable services, but any data point could be used as a qualifier.”</p> <p><u>Biased and imperfect tests:</u> The unfortunate truth is <a href="#">that every test out there is biased</a> – in one</p>  | <p><b>Use a portfolio-based approach for HiCap identification, using diverse types of data points and professional judgment.</b> Also, the committee should regard positive indicators as MUCH more important than negative indicators. In particular, no single low score should disqualify a student from services – the testing process is imperfect, and spurious scores are not uncommon. For example, Lake Washington School District recently changed their</p> |

direction or another. [No test is perfect](#). So, having a firm cut score on a test known to be biased against non-native English speakers is clearly going to be problematic. Even individual IQ tests like the WISC have substantial bias toward U.S. cultural background. Another surprising example is that the CogAT quantitative subtest appears to be biased towards boys (only about 38% of the students who score above 90% in that subtest are girls). The analogies section of the CogAT nonverbal is notorious for being misunderstood or "overthought" by highly capable students who notice much more complex relationships than the test designers intended. Simple failures of students lining up bubble answer sheets incorrectly can also cause wildly divergent scores. All tests have a Standard Error of Measurement (SEM) that provides for a range of equivalent scores, per the measured accuracy of the instrument. SEM is an even bigger factor when identifying for highly capable; "Commonly the SEM is two to four times larger for very high scores than for scores near the mean." (Lohman & Foley Nicpon, 2012) There are many such known issues that need to be accounted for in interpreting test scores, which is why multiple measures and professional judgment is essential.

Twice Exceptional: Most [Twice Exceptional](#) students (students with a high IQ as well as a learning disability or other challenge) will have trouble showing their full level of ability on group-administered test. It's common to see several very high scores, and a couple low scores. Sometimes those low scores are an artifact of the test format and performance would be very different if you retest – e.g. reliance on writing (dysgraphia), visual fatigue, low processing speed. Sometimes those low scores indicate a disability such as dyslexia that would be relatively stable on retest. Either way, group tests are biased against Twice Exceptional students, who are usually best served in a highly capable program, with accommodations for their disability. Too many of these kids fall through the cracks today – not qualifying for highly capable services, but also not struggling visibly enough to qualify for support or intervention in their area of disability. Eventually this will become a problem, typically in secondary school – but early intervention provides the best long term outcomes. It is in all of our best

criteria to only consider the two highest CogAT subtest scores, and to discard the lowest score. Even Lohman, the primary author of the CogAT recommends using ["OR" criteria rather than "AND" criteria to maximize diversity in identification](#). That is, a student needs to have a qualifying score in either one subtest OR the other, but not both. Lohman also states, ["The ability test score needs to be one of the more lenient criteria in the selection procedure rather than the most restrictive criterion."](#) When looking at scores, account for SEM ranges, which differ by subtest and by level. Also, beware of over-valuing non-verbal tests – [recent analyses](#) show that they are not particularly robust indicators of future academic performance, nor do they do a better job of identifying underrepresented populations.

**Consider both age-normed and grade-normed scores in decision making.** Percentile scores can vary tremendously for "young" versus "old" students who got the exact same number of questions correct – a percentile score difference as much as 20% in the extreme, and differences of 5% are common. Professional judgment is essential.

**Be willing to use professional judgment to [normalize known biases in the tests being used](#).**

There is a surprising bias against girls in the CogAT quantitative subtest. All CogAT subtests are known to underidentify African American students. CogAT recommends using the Alt-Verbal score rather than the Verbal score for ELL as well as under-represented ethnic groups. If using the CogAT, be sure to use the CogAT Form 7 or higher, which was [redesigned to be more ELL-friendly and less culturally-loaded](#). Consider the work of Dr. Carol Carman, who



interests for our students' long term achievement to identify Twice Exceptional students early – and provide the appropriate support for both of their exceptionalities.

Appeals. Relying on appeals to catch mistakes is fraught with bias. There are many cultural factors mentioned in previous items that would discourage parents from certain backgrounds to consider appealing an official, district-communicated decision about their child. While an appeals process is mandated by state law, it should be a process of last resort, not the mainstream way that Twice Exceptional students are identified (because they often have a high/low testing profile, requiring a much more portfolio-based consideration), or how borderline or high/low test results are analyzed and considered thoroughly. That said, while intuitively, appeals can appear to be a large factor in identification bias, this does not seem to be true. The appeals process largely just perpetuates the existing disproportionalities, it does not make them any worse.

For example, Seattle Public Schools analyzed their demographic breakdown of their successful appeals compared with their mainstream HiCap admits, and found that the demographic breakdown between both groups was nearly identical. Appeals did not exacerbate the disproportionality in the identification of Seattle HiCap students, it merely reflected the same disproportionality as in the mainstream testing and placement process.

The default answer is no. Many districts have the policy that unless a student shows HiCap need in ALL areas tested and all subtests, the default answer is not to place that student. Many prospective HiCap students fall in this category. However, the tests available are just not that precise or robust, and there are many reasons for divergent scores. This hard-line approach to identification amplifies any subtle factors of luck, prior preparation, environment – which likely would exacerbate the bias against underrepresented populations. When a student is showing us that they are demonstrating 97-99% ability or achievement in something, the onus should be on the district to consider that student

calculated Opportunity To Learn (OTL) factors to correct for variances in various demographic groups, and is available to work with districts who would like to calculate OTL factors for their local populations. (carman@uhcl.edu)

**Allow a student to qualify for HiCap services in just one subject.**

Just because a student doesn't qualify in all subjects does not mean that they don't need HiCap services at all. A student should be able to qualify for just math, or just reading, etc. However, be mindful that when a student only qualifies in one subject, this is also a possible flag for a hidden disability.

**Proactively gather more data when a student has ambiguous scores. Do not rely on parents to appeal.**

If professional judgment is still uncertain in a particular case, seek out additional data points. For instance, a student with some scores in the 97-99 range, but also some much lower scores is a typically ambiguous case. Doing some additional one-on-one testing to get more data would be appropriate. This is a case where doing one-on-one IQ testing with the school psychologist may be indicated, looking at prior year scores or other district data, or administering a different supplemental test to get additional data points. (Doing a retest of the same instrument the student just took is not recommended – the recent practice provides a significant boost in scores.) The bottom line is that when a district gives a HiCap placement decision about a student, they should be confident that a no means no, and a yes means yes. A not-quite-yes is not the same as a no – it means the district needs to seek more data in order to give a reliable placement

|  |   |   |
|--|---|---|
|  | <p>for HiCap services thoughtfully. Extremely high scores are unlikely to be false positives.</p> <p><u>Teacher recommendation bias.</u> Similar to teacher referral biases, there are many reasons why teachers may not write a glowing recommendation for a student, even if they really need HiCap services. Whether that student has a disability, has behavior issues, or simply doesn't pay attention can have meaningful impact on a teacher recommendation. There are a few teacher rating scales that have been built specifically for identifying gifted students. These rating systems attempt to take some of the bias and subjectivity out of the process, by asking about specific social/emotional characteristics that are common in HiCap kids. However, even these rating scales are not fully culture-neutral – these HiCap characteristics can manifest in different ways in different ethnic groups. The bottom line is a positive teacher rating or recommendation can be a valid data point. However, a negative one doesn't tell you much one way or the other.</p> | <p>decision that they believe in and can stand behind. Ultimately, careful consideration will help districts avoid testing the same kids year after year, and will also limit the number of appeals, making the process more efficient in the long run. Note that districts could choose to allow parents to provide outside testing as an additional data point to consider (This would save some money by offloading this additional work to parents, who sometimes already have this data available). However, this should only be offered if districts also <b>proactively</b> provide similar testing in-house to ALL students with similarly ambiguous test scores. Relying on parents to have to ask for an appeal or provide further testing simply perpetuates many of the biases already discussed.</p> |
| <p><b>Once-a-year testing process, with no leniency for missing deadlines.</b></p> | <p><u>Yearly timelines.</u> If a student is not referred for testing by the deadline, but a parent, community member or teacher notices indications of highly capable needs, many districts will insist that the student wait until the next referral window the following year. For example, if referrals are due in November for services the following year, a student referred a month late, in December, may need to wait a whole year until the following November to even apply for testing, and then wait until the following September to actually start receiving services. In total, that student may need to wait more than 1 ½ school years until they receive any HiCap services at all.</p> <p>This situation is particularly dire for migrant students, homeless students, and other situations where students enter a school district midyear, and may not stay for the entirety of a school year in one school or district.</p>   | <p><b>Allow students to be nominated at any time of year, and have a process for rolling admissions.</b> Yes, large districts rely on economies of scale for processing large numbers of applicants in a consolidated testing window. However, there must be a parallel process available for students to be nominated for consideration outside the standard testing window, and if they qualify, to be transferred into appropriate services midyear, if necessary.</p>   |
| <p><b>Not providing practice tests to all students</b></p>                         | <p><u>Low-Income Bias.</u> It is increasingly common for <a href="#">parents to seek practice tests</a> for their students, to familiarize them with the format of the test. There are even afterschool programs that expressly prepare students to do well on the CogAT. While we would prefer that parents not prep their kids</p>  | <p><b>Have ALL students do a guided practice test before being screened or assessed.</b> The CogAT publisher makes an extremely helpful practice test, along with a teacher guide and detailed script, available</p>  |

|   |  |   |
|---|--|---|
|   | <p>for these tests, the reality is that this does happen much more than most people realize. For example, thoroughly preparing a child for a high stakes test is a strong cultural expectation in many East Asian cultures. A cottage industry of internet resources and after-school test prep classes is very firmly established in the Seattle/Eastside area. Access to test prep may be a significant factor behind why Asian students qualify for HiCap programs at the highest rate in the state.</p>  | <p>for free to all customers. Ideally this practice activity should be completed in school a few days before any screener or assessment is given.</p> <p>Even the author of the CogAT, Lohman, publicly recognizes how <a href="#">prior practice significantly affects student performance</a> on the CogAT. He now recommends that ALL students be provided a practice test prior to testing in order to level the playing field.</p>   |
| <p><b>Public notice style of communication about the Highly Capable program</b></p> | <p><u>Cultural Bias.</u> There is a language barrier issue here to consider, as well as a cultural one. The first step is making sure that communication about highly capable programs is translated into each family's native language, for obvious reasons. In addition, for some cultural groups, such as many Hispanic cultures, information directly from the classroom teacher or school principal carries much more weight than impersonal information from the district central office, which may be ignored entirely. Personal contact is even better. There is also an assumption that all families understand the US school system. Many of our low-income or students of color come from cultural backgrounds that see the school as an authority, and would not question school placement, or the school's judgment. Any undocumented families will seek to remain invisible in the school system, and would not call attention to their child's unique needs. Families in any of these situations are not likely to advocate for their child's needs, even if they recognize a poor fit.</p> <p><u>Not Enough Communication.</u> Sometimes districts post information about the highly capable program on their website and maybe on a few school newsletters and that's it. This can easily result in large groups of people never even hearing about the existence of a highly capable program, nevermind an application or testing process. Again, this puts a huge bias towards families that are savvy about the school system, and can result in highly capable programs feeling like a well-kept "secret." I've heard time and again - after feeling like we've been shouting into a megaphone all year - that a parent had no idea</p> | <p><b>Provide detailed, community-specific communication about both the process of highly capable assessment, as well as the benefits of highly capable programs.</b></p> <p>Communication must be translated into the family's native language, including providing translators at information nights. For Hispanic communities, a best practice is going to local community centers, as well as knocking on doors to get the word out effectively, one family at a time. It is also important to reassure undocumented families that having a child in the highly capable program does not make them more susceptible to immigration trouble. District communication should convey the benefits of highly capable programs (social, emotional, academic, grit, growth mindset), in addition to the logistics and testing timelines.</p> <p><b>Advertise the program proactively.</b></p> <p>Public notices are not enough – the program needs to be advertised and even actively marketed to make sure that all families are aware of it. Use multiple ways to ensure that every family in the district knows that a highly capable program exists, how to tell if it is possibly relevant to their child's situation, and how to get more information.</p> |

|   |   |   |
|---|---|---|
|   | <p>there even was a HiCap program available, nevermind the process to have their child considered.</p> <p><u>Myths.</u> Most district communication about highly capable programs is focused on logistics about applications, dates, timelines, and the like. Parents lack information about the benefits of these programs, how they improve academic outcomes, how they improve social/emotional growth, and other overall benefits of these programs for the students that they serve. There is much mythology in popular culture about highly capable students being geeks, nerds, misfits, etc. Many families find it culturally distasteful to think that their child may be highly capable, and worry about being labelled elitist. This cultural effect is exacerbated by the fact that many parents of HiCap students had difficult school experiences themselves as HiCap kids, and therefore want their children to just be “normal” and fit in, despite the fact that appropriate services would likely have prevented the social, emotional and school fit problems they had personally experienced as a child. These factors may discourage parents to seek out services for their child, even if they are aware that their child may be highly capable. Proactive parent education with current research and information is desperately needed, especially to encourage parents to actually accept the HiCap placement if their child qualifies. An additional bias in the system can easily result if certain cultural or demographic groups are more or less likely to accept an offer of HiCap placement.</p> | <p>For example, <a href="#">a new law in New York City</a> will mandate proactive notification of gifted programs to Pre-K families, because the current system of communication feels “top secret, and you really have to dig around.” This article reported that after mailing postcards with testing information to all pre-K families and also proactively getting this information out to homeless shelters, the number of incoming Kindergarteners taking the placement test rose by 14.5% last year.</p> <p><b>Help families understand the benefits of HiCap programs so that they actually accept HiCap placement.</b> Until an offer of placement is in hand, many parents don’t seriously consider HiCap services, especially if it requires changing schools. This is the crucial time to provide robust information about the social, emotional, and academic benefits of a HiCap program. If a HiCap student does not accept placement, ultimately we still have not achieved our equity goals. Reach out to individual families to answer questions and provide decision making support, as well as enlist current HiCap parents and students to help get incoming families questions answered and help them feel at ease.</p> |
| <p><b>Multi-disciplinary selection committees that do not reflect the district population, and do not have subject matter expertise</b></p> | <p><u>Ethnic and Gender Bias.</u> It is easy for a multi-disciplinary selection committee to be unintentionally blind to the cultural context of the students being evaluated for highly capable services. This is especially important when a student has test scores or other data points that are “on the line” – most typically, some high scores or performance measures, but not all. A committee that understands the student’s cultural context will be able to make better judgments.</p> <p><u>Lack of expertise.</u> State law requires a Multi-Disciplinary Selection Committee to review</p>   | <p><b>Members of the Multi-Disciplinary Selection Committee must represent the district population in gender, cultural background, race, and ethnicity.</b> This committee is asked to make professional judgment based on a portfolio of data for each student. It is essential that members of that committee represent the breadth of backgrounds of students being discussed, so that they have appropriate cultural background to</p>  |

|  |   |   |
|--|---|---|
|  | <p>student data and make HiCap placement decisions. However, not all members of that group may have sufficient expertise in HiCap characteristics, Twice Exceptionality, identification best practices, limitations of the test instruments being used, etc. This can seriously jeopardize the validity of the decision making. Even if one of the members of the committee is an expert in giftedness, they can be easily outvoted or overpowered by other voices on the committee that may not have that depth of background.</p> | <p>use as context for that decision making.</p> <p><b>All members of the committee must have sufficient expertise about HiCap and Twice Exceptional students, and be up-to-date on the best practices for identification.</b> The committee must have significant subject matter expertise on HiCap identification, biases/limitations of test instruments, HiCap characteristics, and Twice Exceptional characteristics in order to make valid professional judgments.</p> |
| <p><b>Qualifying HiCap students based on available space</b></p> | <p><u>Bias:</u> When administrators believe that HiCap program space is limited, it is hard to make the argument to spend effort and resources on many of the more inclusive identification strategies listed here, since there probably won't be enough seats for all qualifying students anyway. This resource-limited thinking causes districts to inadvertently favor students who are "easier" to identify, which will create a bias against most of our underrepresented groups.</p>  | <p><b>Create HiCap program space for every qualified student.</b> Plan for the fact that cohorts may shrink and grow year to year, based on the number of kids qualifying. Allow for flexibility in classroom assignments, using split-grade classrooms as needed to accommodate all students who qualify.</p>  |

As you can see, there are many specific things that districts could do that would dramatically affect the demographics of kids who are assessed for highly capable programs.

A few Washington state districts are seeing remarkable improvements even after just implementing a few more inclusive practices this year, which is very encouraging. For example, Federal Way is reporting proportional representation in their 2017 cohort in all demographics. This was accomplished by implementing universal screening in 2<sup>nd</sup> grade, coupled with a district-initiated data sweep to refer students in other grades. Highline School District tried a different approach; they are administering the CogAT one-on-one for all students (rather than the typical group CogAT administration), and report strong improvements in their equity picture from changing that one practice.

However, I don't know of any district in the state that does all of these best practices, or really even comes close.

Given that, we really shouldn't be that surprised that our programs statewide are not reflecting the demographics of our communities. Our typical identification processes definitely favor parents of native English speakers who understand the US school system, and that is exactly what we see reflected in our highly capable programs today.

## 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 student of color? There are many problematic practices that limit the equitable access to highly capable programs for all students.

| Problematic Practices   | Why it's Problematic  | What Would Be Better   |
|---|---|--|
| <p><b>Not providing transportation, or only providing limited transportation, such as with a shuttle and hubs.</b></p>  | <p><u>Low-income bias.</u> Without full transportation to a magnet HiCap program, low-income students are unlikely to be able to provide their own reliable transportation to/from school. Families without the ability to drive their kids to school will be excluded if transportation is not provided. This is especially concerning when needing to travel a long distance to a magnet school, or for a family who will have multiple kids in different schools across the district.</p>  | <p><b>Provide full transportation to all students.</b> Highly capable programs are part of basic education in WA state, which implies that districts have a responsibility to transport all students to their needed programs.</p>   |
| <p><b>Being the only student of color, or one of very few girls in a HiCap classroom.</b></p> <p>and/or</p> <p><b>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.</b></p> | <p><u>Racial Factors.</u> 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 cycle, and a self-fulfilling prophecy. On the flip side, students of color in a heterogenous classroom may feel significant pressure to not "<u>act White</u>" - which is associated with being smart, using complex vocabulary, caring about school, etc. 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 <b>placing a cohort of HiCap students of color together can we satisfy these students' dual needs for community and acceptance.</b></p> <p><u>Gender Factors.</u> 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. As an example, a decade ago, Northshore school district historically had full-time HiCap classrooms which started in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade and were very male heavy. Classrooms with as few as 4-8 females were common. In</p> | <p><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. Holding events where prospective students can meet each other, find friends, and see that these classrooms will reflect their own background 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.</p> <p><b>Identify early, in grades K-2, in order to help mitigate social concerns.</b> Contemplating a move to a different school (or a different program within a school) is a lot easier in the younger grades, before friendship groups have been established.</p> <p><b>Cohort-based (self-contained or cluster-grouped) programs are the</b></p> |

2010, when a 2<sup>nd</sup> grade classroom opened, the gender balance shifted dramatically, with many more girls testing for services and choosing to accept placement in the full-time HiCap classroom. Parents reported that it was much easier to move their daughters to a new school and a new social circle for 2<sup>nd</sup> grade than for 3<sup>rd</sup> grade. Now, 6 years later, Northshore's HiCap classrooms are still gender balanced, and even have had a few classrooms over the years that were noticeably skewed female.

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 teacher. 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 depathologize) their emotional sensitivities, to find authentic social connection with like-minded peers, and to prevent the arrogance and complacency that can result when you are the smartest kid in every classroom. While diversity is important, we can go overboard; a HiCap student feeling like an oddball in every classroom will take its toll, and is not healthy for the development of any child. This is true for all students, including students of color.

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 particularly problematic for girls and for close 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

**best practice for all HiCap students, including students of color.** ([In rural or small districts, when cohorts are unavailable, acceleration is the next best approach – for social as well as academic growth. Acceleration can also be needed for profoundly advanced students.](#)) Grouping HiCap students 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. More than 100 pieces of related research are reported on and synthesized [here](#).

**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, which is of primary importance for developing grit. Angela Duckworth, the famous "grit" researcher, reports, "In our data, [grit is usually unrelated or even inversely related to measures of talent](#)." When academics

|  |  |  |
|--|--|--|
|  | <p>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. (Ironically, even students who have had trouble connecting socially in the heterogeneous classroom may be reluctant to move to a HiCap environment – their social progress has been slow and hard-won, and they are concerned about resetting the clock back to zero.)</p> <p><u>Emotional factors.</u> Many HiCap students have characteristic emotional challenges including <a href="#">perfectionism</a>, <a href="#">emotional sensitivity</a>, and <a href="#">super-sensitive central nervous systems</a> (“<a href="#">Over-Excitabilities</a>”) which can cause many issues ranging from overly active psychomotor behavior, to sensory issues with clothing, to significant anxieties and fears about imagined problems. <a href="#">Advanced moral thinking, concern with social justice, empathy, and existential depression</a> 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 heterogenous 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 heterogenous classroom.</p> | <p>are too easy, grit and growth mindset do not develop. The lack of grit in talented students is conditioned by an underchallenging school environment – which means it can be improved with attention to the environment. This is not a theoretical problem: a <a href="#">recent report from Johns Hopkins</a> 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 &amp; 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> |
| <p><b>HiCap teachers do not match the demographics of the student population</b><br/><br/>and/or</p> | <p><u>Racial bias.</u> 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. HiCap teachers should reflect the demographics of the student population. This should be reflected in curriculum choices as well: novels should feature</p>  | <p><b>HiCap teachers and curriculum should reflect the demographics of the students.</b> This is the foundation for culturally-responsive instruction. This must be fully in place in our HiCap classrooms if they are to be a welcoming place for students of color. The importance of this cannot be overstated;</p>   |



|  |  |  |
|--|--|--|
| <p><b>HiCap curriculum does not reflect the demographics of the student population</b></p>             | <p>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>nothing says “I support you” like having a teacher who shares your background or culture or experience.</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>Assuming that all students have access to technology after school for homework</b></p>           | <p><u>Low income bias.</u> 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>Assuming that all students have access to homework help &amp; executive function support</b></p> | <p><u>Parent support bias.</u> One of the more surprising characteristics of HiCap students is a delay in the development of executive function, due to a <u>markedly different timetable of brain maturation.</u> (This is one of many examples of <u>asynchronous development</u> in the HiCap population.) Because of this developmental difference, HiCap students typically need substantial executive function support 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, manage extracurriculars, or even handle something as simple as remembering their gym clothes. 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><b>Teachers must be extra supportive of executive function for HiCap students, all the way through middle school.</b> These students need much more executive function support even than typically developing students. For example, providing planners, reinforcing the user of a planner in all classes, scaffolding for breaking down large projects into manageable pieces, reminding students 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> |

## 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.

There is very little funding allocated for highly capable programs, even though highly capable is legally considered part of Basic Education in Washington State. The [Washington Coalition for Gifted Education](#) estimates that state funding only covers 15 to 20% of districts' actual cost of running their highly capable programs. Put another way, the state provides a minimum level of funding for approximately ~25,000 HiCap students statewide; but 63,551 HiCap students have actually been identified and are currently being served in their districts today. No matter how you put it, HiCap is an unfunded – or severely underfunded – mandate, not unlike Special Education was, years ago.

This is not a new problem. The total state budget allocated to Highly Capable programs has hardly changed in a decade, despite HiCap now being part of Basic Education since 2014 and mandated for K-12 statewide.

Most people assume that the "highly capable" line item in the state budget is used to pay for all aspects of highly capable programs: teacher salaries, highly capable curriculum, transportation - as well as identification and professional development. However, this isn't really true. Transportation is its own budget, and for most HiCap program models, teacher salaries and curriculum would typically come out of the overall basic education budget, not the highly capable program line item. (One possible exception would be pull-out teacher salaries.)

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 ed, 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.

The bottom line: UNDER-FUNDING highly capable programs in the WA state education budget is DIRECTLY RESPONSIBLE FOR OUR EQUITY PROBLEM in highly capable programs across the state.

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

Peeling the onion one more time, we find ourselves asking: why isn't there adequate state funding?

In large part, the lack of funding 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.

I spend my time speaking to parents and educators across the state to counter this myth. In fact, HiCap students have many, many unique social and emotional challenges that render them [particularly vulnerable](#). (Several of these issues were discussed above on pages 12-15; to cover them fully would require this article to be even longer.)

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.

Do I dare to mention that the [Columbine school shooters \(and others since then\)](#) have been suspected to be unidentified or under-served HiCap students, who had built up rage against a school system and a social environment that did not understand them and did not serve their needs? While it's hard to prove causality, and certainly other factors may also be at play, that fact alone should give us all pause.

I spoke to a room full of truancy officers in King County Juvenile Court last year, and they recognized the 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. 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 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. We risk losing them 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 build grit, 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 neurodiverse population to 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. Hence, we need to proactively seek out EVERY child who needs that intervention, in order to best support our student’s long term success. 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 – Our Legislators

Here is the grand irony.

When I go to Olympia to talk with legislators about the unique social and emotional needs of HiCap population, I am always struck by how many legislators tell me about their own kids - very bright, but often troubled in some way. They resonate with much of what I tell them, and reflect back on things that they might have done differently with their own older kids, or what they should try now with younger ones. I often fall into the familiar role of parent coaching, rather than just advocating.

Our legislators are experiencing these characteristic social-emotional-grit difficulties firsthand with their own highly capable sons and daughters - but each believes the challenges they see are unique to their own kid. They still believe that all of the **other** HiCap kids have it smooth sailing, or perhaps that their kid isn’t really as smart as they thought. That’s how powerful the mythology is.

(It's not just legislators, by the way. That same mythology is common in the audiences of parents and teachers of HiCap students that I speak to in communities across the state. Parents and educators see these issues firsthand as well, but until you point it out, they don't realize that what they are seeing follows a well-researched pattern of HiCap characteristics. Yes, every individual student is unique, but as a population, the patterns are unmistakable.)

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 is - a vulnerable special needs population that needs specialized support for 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.