

What do Seattle and NYC Have in Common?

This article is a joint publication by the following Washington State non-profit organizations:

- WA Educators of the Talented and Gifted (www.waetag.org)
- NW Gifted Child Association (www.nwgca.org)

Over the past month, there have been dozens of articles in the national press about the New York City Public Schools and the recent [proposal](#) to shut down gifted and talented programs across the city. The driving reason behind this proposal is the disproportional representation of students from various demographics in citywide gifted programs, including students of color, low-income students, students with disabilities, multilingual learners, and students in temporary housing.

However, this set of issues is not at all unique to New York City. Here in Washington state, we have the same equity problems, and in fact, a very similar [proposal](#) has just been made in our state's largest metropolitan public school system, Seattle Public Schools.

There's no debate that there is enormous disproportionality in the highly capable services offered in Seattle, and that bold steps are needed to restore equity and justice. See Figure 1.

In response, both Seattle and New York City are considering proposals that seek to restructure their service models away from full-time self-contained programs, and instead, to move highly capable services into all neighborhood schools.

But these proposals distract from the original problem.

The real problem is which students are identified for highly capable services in the first place. Changing the location of the programming doesn't change who gets identified. It just makes who gets identified harder to see, harder to track, and harder for the district to be held accountable. It sweeps the problem under the rug. These proposals can easily allow disproportionality to continue to exist – it just won't be nearly as visible.

How did Seattle and NYC get here? What practices led to this outcome?

Both cities have been using outdated methods for identifying their highly capable students for years. In fact, their methods are similar and exhibit the same structural problems.

The first major barrier to equity is that both cities rely primarily on referrals, mostly from parents, for students to even be considered. This means that only a small slice of families of color know about the opportunity and few students are tested. The vast majority of students of color in both districts have never

Race/Ethnicity	Highly Capable Identified N=4896	District Enrollment 10/1/2018 N=55335
Black/ African American	1.6% (N=82)	15% (N=8016)
White/Caucasian	67% (N=3288)	47% (N=25898)
Hispanic/Latinx	4.5% (N=221)	12% (N=6825)
American Indian/ Alaska Native	0% (N= less than 10)	0.5% (N=277)
Asian	12% (N=610)	14% (N=7623)
Two or More Races	14% (N=688)	12% (N=6464)
Native Hawaiian/ Pacific Islander	0% (N=less than 10)	0.4% (N=232)

Figure 1. [Seattle Public Schools Highly Capable Enrollment](#) (2018).

been considered. Seattle recently piloted a partial screening for second graders in some of their Title 1 schools, but this only reached about 40% of their second graders.

The second major barrier to equity is that both cities conduct their testing outside of the school day, usually on Saturdays, and require parents to arrange a test date and provide transportation. New York City primarily tests preschoolers before they've even started attending school.

The third major barrier to equity is that "late bloomers" have no chance. Neither city has a systematic approach for identifying students after early childhood. In New York City, gifted and talented programs fill up in kindergarten, and they do not even offer testing after second grade. Seattle relies exclusively on referrals for children after second grade.

The fourth major barrier is that both cities use a strict yearly process for referrals and testing. Families must request testing well in advance, for services that won't start until the next school year. This creates yet another barrier for students who move into the district midyear, who are experiencing homelessness, who are in a foster placement, or who are in other highly-mobile situations. In Seattle, referrals are due by the third week in September for potential highly capable services starting 12 months later!

These identification practices greatly favor parents with resources that understand the system. Who loses in this system? Families who work on weekends, who don't have reliable transportation, who don't have language proficiency to understand the referral process, who can't manage the technology involved in filling out an online application, who don't realize that their student is academically advanced, or who are unaware of the program as a whole.

Why won't the proposals work to improve equity?

Both cities suggest that teachers and building staff will best be able to identify students with the need for advanced services, and can meet those needs for accelerated learning in the neighborhood school.

However, there are many research studies that suggest that relying on teachers to identify gifted students will introduce even larger inequities into the system:

- Even when test scores are similar, Black students are referred to gifted programs at significantly lower rates when taught by non-Black teachers (Grissom & Redding, 2016; Elhoweris, Mutua, Alsheikh, & Holloway, 2005; Ford & Grantham, 2003).
- Black students are three times more likely to be identified as gifted if they have a Black teacher than a White teacher (Nicholson-Crotty, 2016).
- Even when students satisfy criteria for gifted qualification, studies find that students of color are less likely than White students to be identified for gifted services (Ford, Grantham, & Whiting, 2008; McBee, 2006).
- Teachers may hold lower expectations for students of color, or be less likely to notice giftedness in these students (Elhoweris, Mutua, Alsheikh, & Holloway, 2005; Ford & Grantham, 2003).
- Classroom teachers play a gatekeeping role in referring students for gifted services (Donovan & Cross, 2002).

Dr. Donna Y. Ford, a Black gifted scholar at Vanderbilt University says, "We cannot close the achievement gap or address the overrepresentation in special education of our subgroups - until we address their underrepresentation in highly capable programs." She reminds us that when students find their classwork too easy, that disengagement, behavior problems, and underachievement are likely. When

there is a poor educational fit, our students furthest from educational justice are more likely to be referred for special education services for their behavior, than to be tested for highly capable programs.

What works? What does the science say?

It may appear that this is an unsolvable problem. But that's not true. Well-reviewed national research and local examples give clear direction on feasible, cost-effective approaches that work.

Universal screening is strongly supported by research as being an effective practice to identify traditionally underrepresented groups. The most cited [study](#) comes from Broward County, Florida which universally screened all 2nd grade students with the Naglieri Nonverbal Abilities Test and saw impressive results:

“With no change in the minimum standards for gifted status, the screening program led to a 174% increase in the odds of being identified as gifted among all disadvantaged students, with a 118% increase for Hispanics and a 74% increase for Blacks.”

Here in Washington state, Northshore School District universally screened all students in grades K-8 in 2017-18 using the Naglieri Nonverbal Abilities Test (NNAT), an effort involving 16,000 students that was conducted in the month of January in students' regular classrooms, and cost \$10/student. Through this process, Northshore identified 30% more highly capable students in special populations, including English Language Learners, low-income students, and students with disabilities. Other districts in Washington state have found universal screening to be effective as well, including Federal Way, who has been universally screening all of their 2nd grade students for 5 years now with the Cognitive Abilities Test (CogAT) Screener. West Valley School District #208 is in its third year of universally screening all 2nd grade students during the school day with the Cognitive Abilities Test (CogAT) Screener.

In addition, West Valley, Federal Way, and Northshore also conduct data sweeps of other already-available test scores, such as the Smarter Balanced Assessment (SBAC) results, to identify high-performing students. This is another application of universal screening.

However, universal screening alone is not enough to achieve our full goals for equity. Despite much improvement in test instrument design in recent years, and a move to using culture-fair, non-verbal instruments, there are still flaws in the available tests that cause low-income students to score statistically lower than their peers. States like Florida have recognized this discrepancy and codified alternate criteria for low-income students into state law, to correct for this; in Florida, this is called “Plan B.” This is one of the reasons why the Broward County, Florida universal screening was so effective. Washington state has also recognized this challenge, and state law has been directing school districts to “prioritize equitable identification of low-income students” since 2017. ([WAC 392-170-030](#) and [WAC 392-170-045](#))

As a complement to universal screening, research also suggests using local norms. Local norms select students for gifted programs by comparing students to others from their own school. A 2019 [study](#) looked at student data from schools in ten different states over a ten-year time period, and found:

“when the criteria for gifted is set at the top 5 percent of a school instead of the top 5 percent of the nation, we observed a 300 percent and 170 percent increase in African American and Hispanic student representation, respectively, in math. In reading, these increases were 238 and 157 percent, respectively.”

Since data on every student is needed to be able to create school-based norms, the local norms technique requires universal screening.

A directive for school districts to use local norms was added to Washington state law in 2018: “Highly capable selection decisions must be based on consideration of criteria benchmarked on local norms, but local norms may not be used as a more restrictive criteria than national norms.” ([WAC 392-170-055](#))

Consensus on Universal Screening

The cornerstone of equitable identification techniques is universal screening, and this is now widely recognized both nationally as well as in Washington state.

The Washington Education Association (WEA) passed a resolution in April 2019 to: “Conduct universal screenings for highly capable services for each student at least once in or before 3rd grade. Conduct screening for highly capable services within the school day and at the school the student attends.”

The Washington State Parent Teacher Association (WSPTA) passed a resolution in October 2018 stating: “Washington State PTA supports using best practices to remove barriers to the identification of ALL students who would benefit from highly capable services, including the use of universal screening in early elementary grades, and again before secondary school, conducting all screenings and assessments during the regular school day, and other best practices known to improve equity of access.”

The National Association of Gifted Children (NAGC) and the Thomas B. Fordham Institute both [recommend](#) universal screening as well as local norms. The Jack Kent Cooke Foundation, an organization that is “dedicated to advancing the education of exceptionally promising students who have financial need,” [concurs](#).

Conclusion

It’s admirable that both Seattle and NYC are ready to take bold steps to tackle this equity problem. It’s a big problem and bold steps are needed.

However, changing the service models will do nothing to fix the equity problems. What it will do is make everyone feel better, because the inequity won’t be so immediately visible anymore. But this sweeps the problem under the rug, and will allow inequities to continue unchecked.

Let’s focus our efforts instead on actually removing the barriers and using research-based practices to identify highly capable students in all of our demographic groups.

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