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Why has Illinois lost interest in our gifted students?

By Jim Broadway, Publisher, Illinois School News Service

There was a time, a period of about a decade, when Illinois invested almost \$2 million per year on training educators and developing programs to nurture "gifted" students, young people who - as defined by law - rank in the top 5% of students, especially in math and science. There was such a time.

It wasn't much, really, just a drop in the bucket of even Illinois' meager state support for education, but it put the state among the nation's leaders in gifted education, according to the [Illinois Association for Gifted Children](#). The golden years, that period of solid state support for gifted students, was from 1992 to 2002.

In 2003, the funding was *zeroed out*. Even the statutory language defining what it means for a student to be "gifted," and authorizing the Illinois State Board of Education to offer competitive grants in support of such students' needs - all of that language was simply repealed outright, *erased from the School Code*.

The IAGC has posted a [10-minute PowerPoint](#) presentation describing the history of gifted education in Illinois and the loss - to the exemplary students and to society at large - resulting from its current neglect. "In Illinois, we've gone from being leaders in gifted education to being nearly invisible," the presenter asserts.

Clearly, the [National Association for Gifted Children concurs](#).

What are the consequences of failing to meet the educational and psychological developmental needs of students of unusual ability? One of them is that we often do not get to see them demonstrate that ability. Gifted students currently make the least academic growth in American schools, the IAGC reports.

They constitute 4.5% of school dropouts - a percentage almost equal to their share of the student population. The issue is not unique to Illinois. A [2011 Fordham Institute](#) report documents how large two out of five elementary and middle school "high flyers" become "descenders" in secondary school. They lose their altitude.

An often-cited reason that our schools almost ignore the brightest students is that the No Child Left Behind Act offered educators no motivation to focus on them. Children "on the bubble" - barely under or over the aptitude level at which they would "meet" expectations on high-stakes tests - got most of the attention.

"American schools have brought the bottom up," said the IAGC PowerPoint presenter, "but they have also pulled the ceiling down." This clear impact of the NCLB Act most severely affects the gifted students, but it has also disadvantaged students who are just significantly brighter than average.

Gifted and above-average students are unchallenged, bored and not progressing academically. A recent study published as a [policy brief by Johns Hopkins University](#) found that, in one sampling, "the top 25 percent of fourth-graders outscored the bottom 25 percent of eighth-graders [on NAEP tests] every year but one - for 26 straight years."

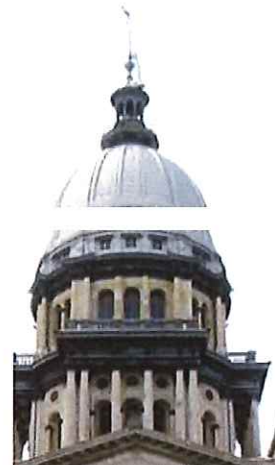
The study sampled Wisconsin students and found "38 percent of third-graders already knew enough fourth-grade math to pass." The study found similar results - above-average students representing high percentages of their class exceeding the performance of average students in the class one year up.

Illinois' failure to nurture its highest-potential students has its [origins in the NCLB](#), of course, but there were political forces at work in its repeal as well. Gifted education funding in Illinois was zeroed out in 2003; that was the first year that former Gov. Rod Blagojevich crafted a budget, and he had other priorities entirely.

The IAGC and other supporting interests were able to get the statutory language defining and authorizing (if funding were available) grants to school districts two years later, and further School Code language was enacted in 2010. For one year, FY 2009 (when Blagojevich was on the ropes), \$7 million was appropriated.

But nothing has been appropriated for gifted education since then.

There are controversial aspects to gifted education. It is an educational topic that has seemed most appealing to legislators representing affluent areas of the state, that is to say, to Republicans. The program sprouted wings in the 1990s, when the GOP controlled the state Senate and the governor's office.



So it was Blagojevich - the first Democrat to be elected governor after 26 years of GOP rule - who erased the funding and got the legislature to erase the statutory definitions and authorizations. Democrats are more connected, politically, to urban areas and rural areas with high incidences of poverty. Thus the focus on kids who are just struggling not to fail, perhaps feeling that the parents of "high flyers" should serve their children's enrichment needs.

There is also "grouping," a policy supported by many gifted education advocates in which gifted children are gathered in their own classrooms and, as an [ISBE PowerPoint presentation](#) suggests, receive "differentiated instruction" from teachers who have been trained to maximize the progress of high achieving students.

A more [detailed discussion of grouping](#) is found on the NAGC web site. Note how the organization struggles to distance the practice from the long-discredited system that was known as tracking. "Tracking is unquestionably bad; ability grouping is arguably good," the NAGC asserts, somewhat unconvincingly.

On a personal note, I'm reminded of my own experience of attending in the schools of East St. Louis in the 1950s and until I graduated in 1961. District 189 was highly rated back then, but there was no tracking. Classroom assignments were seemingly made at random. You got what you got in teachers and classmates.

East St. Louis was a tough town even then. It was okay to be smarter than most. It was okay to *know* you were smarter. But it was *not okay to show* that you know. That just invited trouble. So most above-average students, starting about in junior high, sat in the back, rarely raised their hands, tried to be inconspicuous.

It was not until later, after I had met my military obligation and was comfortably in college, that I heard about tracking. It was controversial even then. Advocates were accused of being elitist and of setting unrealistic expectations for what life would be like as an adult. But compared to what I had experienced, it sounded appealing.

In the years since Blagojevich erased gifted education from state policy, the IAGC and other advocates gained a restoring of statutory authorizations and, for one year, got funding. They will be back in 2017 with the same message: "Our nation's quest to remain 'first in the world' depends on developing America's brightest minds."

Everybody will be competing for state funding in FY 2018, the fiscal year that begins next July 1. The starting point, it has seemed, would be the [Illinois School Funding Commission](#) report that is due February 1. The 25-member commission, chaired by Illinois' first ever Secretary of Education, Beth Purvis, has met three times.

The commission's ambitious goal is to recommend a new school funding formula - to replace the current unworkable mix of General State Aid, mandated categorical program funding, competitive grants and odds and ends - and to get it all done in time for the legislature to take action on it as soon as possible.

There's a video of the August 16th meeting of the commission, but you [have to register to view it](#). It featured Concordia University Chicago Assistant Professor and Research Department chair Michelle Turner-Mangan, Ph.D., and Richard Laine, director of the Education Division of the National Governor's Association.

ISNS readers with long memories [will recall Laine](#) from his days on the ISBE staff. Although he may not have appreciated it at the time, Richard was the subject of some essays that I found most fun to write. It's good to see him back in Illinois. His role August 16 was to show how U.S. schools are [doing such a terrible job](#).

[Turner-Mangan](#), who earned her doctorate at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, made a presentation on the subject of ["evidence-based" school funding](#) for Illinois. She was also lead author of an article on that subject published in the Journal of School Business Management in 2011 and posted by [Illinois Vision 20/20](#). Read it.

But the Purvis Commission is not the only game in town. In fact, it wasn't even the first game in town. Weeks before Rauner created the commission, the irrepressible Sen. Kimberly Lightford had invited legislators, interest groups - and even staff of the governor's office - to a working group of her own formation.

Lightford's group, including representatives of all those key political and education stakeholders, has been meeting regularly. For arguably sound reasons the meetings have not been open to the media or the general public. But Dusty Rhodes, perhaps the best education reporter in the state, [gives us a glimpse](#).

"At some point," Lightford told Dusty, "we have to stop with the politics and focus on the needs of the people. So I'm not concerned about what people have to say. I have a job to do, and I'm going to do the job the best that I can." The Lightford group covers similar ground as Purvis's, but is progressing faster.

Are the two groups likely to develop proposals that clash? It's almost a certainty. While both must address the central purpose of increasing support for the schools with the least funding in a huge way - and include some "evidence based" provisions to cover that base - the proposals are likely to vary significantly.

The Lightford study group's proposals are likely to be far more comprehensive than those of the Purvis Commission, with respect to specific dollar amounts for specific educational constituency groups (like gifted education, for example), and are likely to require specific (and very large) amounts of new revenue.

The Purvis Commission's report will surely mirror the views of the man who created it, Gov. Bruce Rauner. And Rauner has a remodeling streak in him, as indicated by his mostly outrageous ["Turn Around Agenda"](#). This inclination is likely to affect some of the more significant details of the Purvis group's report.

For example, as I explained in [my commentary on Rauner's veto](#) of a seemingly innocuous bill, [HB 5025](#), it appears that Rauner may be interested in a repeat of "the war of '93," the skirmish in which State Superintendent Bob Leininger and all of the state's business and corporate interests sought to abolish the ROEs.

If so, he would be asking the legislators to support a whole new (and costly to create) intermediate education structure headed by administrators employed by the state, as opposed to the current network of elected regional superintendents who are responsive (and loyal) to local constituencies - school districts and voters.

Otherwise, I would expect the Purvis Commission to propose a funding system that does not guarantee the existence of specific education constituencies, especially those that do not receive major support from the federal level, and to focus almost solely on a revised formula for school funding.

We live in interesting times.

By the way, have you seen ... Check out this [amazing time-line of world climate](#) and historical events since the last ice age glaciation. The cartoon drawing's creator is Randall Munroe, a former "roboticist" for NASA, [according to NPR](#).

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