Keys to Expand Access to the Gifted Program in the Pittsburgh Public School District

By Sean Caulfield

Introduction

According to the Pittsburgh Public Schools (PPS) website, the Gifted and Talented Education program supports opportunities for students who are identified as high-achieving. “The overall aim of the Gifted and Talented Education at Pittsburgh Public Schools is to provide educational opportunities and experiences to help students extend their learning, develop individual potential, enhance their self-concept and become life-long, independent learners. Pittsburgh Public Schools is committed to providing differentiated activities and opportunities through which students can discover and develop their unique and individual needs, interests, talents and abilities.”

In a nutshell, gifted programs provide students with additional curriculum designed to challenge them. These opportunities may incorporate different styles of learning, access to honors courses, and leaving the homeroom classroom for a different class of other students in gifted. Identification for gifted varies by state and school district, but if the access to gifted is unequal, that fosters inequality of resources for students. Historically, the tests used to identify gifted students possess cultural biases that lower the chances for students of color and English Language Learners (ELL) to achieve the necessary IQ score. While there has been some progress nationally on removing these biases from tests, it is still an unequal system. This issue brief explores several ways that Pittsburgh Public Schools and community members can work within this unequal structure to promote racial equity, and ultimately access to, gifted programming for all students.

The challenge is that Pittsburgh Public Schools’ gifted program uses identification and testing methodology that may cause a discrepancy between eligible students and students that are tested and
selected, while nearby districts and other cities have more inclusive methods to identify more students who may gain access to enhanced learning opportunities. The demographics of Pittsburgh’s gifted program does not mirror the demographics of the district, leading to worries about methods of identification and admittance for students.\(^1\) Additionally, there are differences at the high school level regarding the number of Centers for Advanced Study (CAS) courses available, with high schools with predominantly African-American enrollment have significantly fewer courses.\(^2\) Nearby districts take different approaches, with some reviewing all students to make sure every student has an equal chance for selection and others use school-wide monthly enrichment programs.\(^3\) These examples provide a roadmap that PPS can use to increase equitable access for students and give parents better knowledge of district-wide gifted resources.

**Why is Gifted Programming an Equity Issue?**

A+ Schools’ vision for Pittsburgh students includes:

- Overall achievement rises; 100% graduate; 80% complete post-secondary education or training.
- Race is not a factor in achievement, graduation, or post-secondary education or training.

The district is not there yet. Our belief is that everyone benefits from equitable schools. Equitable schools will help Pittsburgh reach this vision. Better access to the Gifted and Talent Program can lead to better academic supports and outcomes for black and Latino youth in Pittsburgh.

In education, the term equity refers to the principle of *fairness*. While it is often used interchangeably with the related principle of *equality*, equity encompasses a wide variety of educational models, programs, and strategies that may be considered fair, but not necessarily equal. It has been said that “equity is the process; equality is the outcome,” given that equity—what is fair and just—may

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\(^1\) Matson, Amie. “Gifted Programming” presented to Parent Nation on November 20, 2017.
\(^2\) Ibid.
\(^3\) Ibid.
not, in the process of educating students, reflect strict equality—what is applied, allocated, or distributed equally. Inequities occur when biased or unfair policies, programs, practices, or situations contribute to a lack of equality in educational performance, results, and outcomes.

Reforms focused on improving educational equity seek to identify disparities in educational performance or results, and then introduce modifications intended to address or compensate for those inequities—e.g., by increasing funding levels, redesigning school programs, teaching students in different ways, or providing comparatively more educational services and academic support to students with greater needs.4

A+ Schools identified access to gifted programming as an equity issue because discrepancies still exist between the percentage of underrepresented populations in the total student population versus the percentage of underrepresented populations identified in the Gifted and Talented Program. As advocates for educational excellence and equity, our goal is to encourage equitable representation of student populations in PPS’s gifted program.

Who is in Gifted and What Do They do?

Figure 1 shows the demographic breakdown of students, percentage-wise, in the district and the make-up of the gifted program.5 About two-thirds of gifted students in the district are white while roughly 19 percent of students in gifted are black. Contrast these numbers to the district’s overall enrollment, which is: 53 percent black, 33 percent white, 8 percent multi-racial, 3 percent Asian, and 3

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4 [https://www.edglossary.org/](https://www.edglossary.org/) (Accessed the site on June 6, 2018.)
5 Data generated by the 2017 Report to the Community on Public School Progress in Pittsburgh.
percent Hispanic. The gifted program is significantly whiter than the district and less black than the district.

The patterns at the school level are exacerbated further. Eleven schools: Pittsburgh King PreK-8, Pittsburgh Arsenal PreK-5, Pittsburgh Miller PreK-5, Pittsburgh Westwood PreK-5, Pittsburgh Spring Hill K-5, Pittsburgh Arlington PreK-8, Pittsburgh Langley K-8, Pittsburgh Concord PreK-5, Pittsburgh Faison K-5, Pittsburgh South Hills 6-8, and Pittsburgh Lincoln PreK-5 have 40 students total between the 11 schools that identify as gifted, out of a total of 4,220 students. That means only 0.947 percent of the students at those schools receive these extra resources. In contrast, Pittsburgh Colfax K-8 has 203 gifted students out of a student body of 903, meaning 22.48 percent of students in just that one school identify as gifted.

The Gifted and Talented program in PPS includes: K-8 gifted programming, Centers for Advanced Study (CAS), and Advanced Placement (AP). Students in kindergarten through eighth grade (K-8) are bused weekly to the Pittsburgh Gifted Center at Greenway and participate in additional curriculum. The curriculum involves hands-on courses at a faster pace and include topics such as humanities, math, and science. These classes rely on project learning skills and technology integration and gives students the chance to participate in independent projects that match their interests. Students at the K-6 level are enrolled in one course that lasts all year and two additional semester-long courses. Students attending the middle school enroll in 3 classes each semester for a total of six different courses each year. Course offerings typically change each year and focus on the project based, real world applications of each subject area. The district has also implemented an on-site gifted support program which offers students differentiated, accelerated instruction at their home school five days a week. On-site gifted teachers

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7 https://www.pghschools.org/Page/822
8 Ibid.
9 Ibid.
provide both pull-out instruction as well as push-in services to the regular classroom to offer differentiated instruction to gifted students on a daily basis. Currently, this model is implemented at two schools within the district: Pittsburgh Grandview PreK-5 and Pittsburgh Dilworth PreK-5.

At the high school level, schools such as Pittsburgh Allderdice have 23 CAS courses and Pittsburgh Brashear with 14 CAS courses, whereas Pittsburgh Milliones 6-12 (University Prep) and Pittsburgh Perry have six CAS courses, while Pittsburgh Westinghouse 6-12 only offers three advanced courses. Each of these schools, with the exception of Allderdice, have predominantly African-American enrollment.

In high school, students apply to take CAS courses. These courses provide weighted grades, and each student receives additional support by a school-based CAS facilitator. The facilitator has a mentorship role and oversees the students Gifted Individualized Education Plan (GIEP). These courses use long-term projects and give students opportunities to find areas of interest and research them at length. Pittsburgh Public Schools expanded access to CAS courses for students that do not identify as gifted. However, to qualify students must complete an application, have a 3.0 grade point average, 90 percent attendance rate, proficient or advanced standardized test scores, and an “A” or “B” in the area of interest.

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11 Ibid.
12 https://www.pghschools.org/Page/825
13 Ibid.
14 Ibid.
The Selection Process for PPS

Figure 2 lays out the process for having a student qualify for the gifted program in PPS. The process from start to finish can take several months. One thing to note is that only through a recommendation by a parent or teacher will a student start the gifted identification process. Not all parents are aware of the district’s gifted program. The lack of awareness can stem from a variety of factors, but it is clear, based on information and listening sessions conducted by A+ Schools, that PPS must do a better job to reach out to immigrant families, refugee families, and families in the district’s highest-needs schools. Parents unfamiliar with the district, and how the gifted screening process works, may not know how to request that their children be tested. Thus, leaving many qualified children out of the gifted and talented program. Additionally, PPS has acknowledged that recommendations from teachers can cause inequities as well. The district has said that it is exploring a “teacher checklist” for identifying potential students and the gifted and talented program. All teachers would receive training on how to use the checklist within the next school year. This checklist, when completed, would help teachers identify gifted students that may be overlooked otherwise, and factor in culturally relevant aspects.

Figure 2
Case Studies

Mt. Lebanon School District

We do not have to look outside of Southwestern Pennsylvania or even Allegheny County to see examples of where greater access to gifted programming is available to more students. For instance, the Mt. Lebanon School District examines test scores annually for students in grades 1-3 based on Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) and uses that approach as a basis for gifted enrollment. Every spring, the district psychologist examines the scores and compiles lists of students that are in the top 5 percent of the district in reading or math, and students in the top 10 percent of both reading and math. The psychologist sends the finalized lists to each school, and the principals send letters home to qualifying parents. The letter informs parents that they should consider having their child tested for gifted, and asks for written permission for the Otis-Lennon School Ability Test (OLSAT). From there, the gifted process mirrors the testing and results used by PPS. If a student does not qualify, a parent or teacher can

16 http://www.mtlsd.org/page.cfm?p=1126
17 Ibid.
18 Ibid.
19 Ibid.
request for a gifted evaluation. These options ensure that more students have an opportunity to take a test to see if they qualify, and if they are not the best test-takers, parents and teachers can still nominate children for consideration.

_Columbus, Ohio_

About three hours away across the Ohio border, Columbus City Schools (CCS) somewhat mirrors PPS in demographics, but they review all students in grades K-12 multiple times per year. CCS enrolls approximately 50,000 students. The racial breakdown is: 54.5 percent African American, 22.68 percent white, 11.77 percent Hispanic, 6.78 percent multi-racial, and 3.89 percent Asian. In 2015, approximately 79 percent of students identify as economically disadvantaged. Presently, approximately 8.8 percent of students identify as gifted in the district. Each year, students’ MAP scores in reading and math are reviewed. If they reach a certain threshold on the MAP test, students are formally identified as gifted. Notifications are usually sent in November, February, and May. Students in grades 2 and 5 are tested additionally for other cognitive abilities and tested further for creative thinking. Furthermore, parents or teachers can refer students for gifted evaluation up to twice a year. This process in a nearby city ensures that all of their students have multiple chances to qualify no matter their school or background.

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20 Ibid.
21 http://ccsdashboard.eastus.cloudapp.azure.com/viewer/content/dashboard.html
23 http://ccsdashboard.eastus.cloudapp.azure.com/viewer/content/dashboard.html
24 http://www.ccsoh.us/IDProcess.aspx
25 Ibid.
26 Ibid.
27 Ibid.
28 Ibid.
Several school districts in the state of Florida, including Orange and Broward counties, have explored universal screening processes for their students. Universal screening is an identification practice where all students in a targeted grade are administered an initial screening instrument. Scoring at or above a pre-determined cut-score on the screener leads to further consideration for placement and/or services in a gifted and talented program. In general, universal screening was more effective than the teacher and parent referral system in addressing the under-identification of African-American, Hispanic, female, low socioeconomic status, and ELL students in gifted programs.

Figure 3 shows the impact of universal screening on underrepresented groups. Black students and Hispanic students made large gains as a proportion of the gifted program, and students eligible for subsidized lunch now made up 35 percent of the gifted program, up from 20 percent. Figure 4 shows the increase in total number of students for gifted. During universal screening, the percentage of students eligible for gifted increased, while comparison schools remained stagnant. Together, these figures showed a gifted...
program that grew in size and diversity within a few short years. This increase in identification shows that there are structural biases that prevented historically marginalized groups from participating in gifted programming.

Each district approaches gifted identification in a slightly different way. However, each ensures a different way to make sure that students can qualify and identify as gifted. Further, if a student tests poorly, there are multiple opportunities to re-test, and the parent/teacher referrals still exist to a degree.

**School-wide Gifted**

Within PPS, Dilworth PreK-5 and Grandview PreK-5 have gifted programs contained within their schools. The district’s on-site gifted support program offers students differentiated, accelerated instruction at their home school five days a week. On-site gifted teachers provide both pull-out instruction as well as push-in services to the regular classroom to offer differentiated instruction to gifted students on a daily basis.

A few miles away, in the elementary schools in the Upper St. Clair School District they use a three-tiered enrichment program that gives every student a chance to participate in gifted and talented opportunities. The School-Wide Enrichment Program (SWEP) begins at SWEP I, which are science, technology, engineering, art, and math (STEAM) focused activities for all students. This stage is led by the homeroom teacher. SWEP II involves activities for students identified as gifted. These students go to a different classroom and choose course options to pursue in addition to their coursework in the main classroom. Lastly, SWEP III consists of special “Investigative Enrichment” activities for students. Students work in teams on a project and have a chance to explore and improve upon collaboration skills, library and research skills, and working through extended timelines, typically six to nine weeks.

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29 https://www.uscsd.k12.pa.us/Page/4443
30 Ibid.
average, students meet with their team once a week during the school’s “Boost Time”, a 25-minute window where no new curriculum is taught. Usually students must be in second grade or higher to participate, but are not required to participate. At the end of the investigation, the team will present their findings. This model gives every student a project to look forward to that goes beyond the usual classroom activities.

Across the river in Fox Chapel Area High School, that school district expanded opportunities for gifted enrichment by allowing all students in good academic standing to participate. Every month, QUEST, their program responsible for pulling students out of the classroom for gifted instruction, releases a school-wide document of activities. These activities include a mixture of competitions inside the school, contests from science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) and creative arts, and postsecondary opportunities such as apprenticeship dates, college academies, and college summer programs. Students can find more details of each event on their student portal or going to the QUEST office. Opening up these opportunities to all students promotes fairness in the high school by letting students, regardless if they are identified as gifted or not, participate in the events. This creates a larger applicant pool and ensures more people are exposed to greater academic enrichment.

Ways Forward

Each district approaches gifted differently, but the programs examined in this brief work toward making the applicant pool as large – and more diverse – as possible. By examining some of these case studies and further evaluating its own program, PPS can advance equity within an unequal system.

Expand Testing Opportunities for All Students

Mt. Lebanon and Columbus School District screen students during the school year using required standardized tests for students. PPS could use Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA) testing and look at results on the district level and aggregate the top 5 percent of math, the top 5
percent of English Language Arts, and the top 10 percent of students of both to use as an additional base evaluation. This mirrors a similar method to Columbus Schools, which uses the Measure of Academic Progress (MAP) as the test, and if students score at a certain level, they are formally identified as gifted.

PPS should follow through with the implementation of a “teacher checklist” that allows teachers to make sure all students in the classroom are being considered for gifted – equally. This will help promote a fairer identification process in the classroom, and account for cultural biases that exist. The district can make the checklist public after its creation so external stakeholders, community members, parents, and students have the opportunity to verify the strengths of the checklist and recommendation additional refinements to the tool.

*Implement Gifted Opportunities at the Individual School Level*

Pittsburgh Public Schools can expand on-site gifted access such as at Dilworth and Grandview. A model for in-class access can mirror the SWEP system used at elementary schools in Upper Saint Clair that gives all students the opportunity to be involved.

At the secondary level, expanding announcements so all students have a chance to participate in activities inside and outside the school broadens access for everyone. Students would not feel pressured to do every activity, but pursue the ones that match their interests, or try out something new in a welcoming and supportive environment.

Additionally, at the secondary level, expanding CAS course options for schools so regardless of which school a student attends, they can have access to quality and challenging courses.

*Increase Awareness of Gifted Application Process to Families*

PPS relies on parents and teachers to recommend students for gifted identification. The district could increase awareness of its Gifted and Talented Program by putting statistics about gifted
enrollment on the main page of the website. Columbus City Schools uses a digital dashboard on a wide metric of outcomes, including gifted enrollment, breakdown by grade, gender, and race, and a breakdown on the activities that students identified as gifted participate in. Additionally, PPS could hold regular information sessions about the Gifted and Talented Program in under-represented communities. With increasing numbers of new immigrant and refugee families enrolling students in PPS, the district should target outreach to these communities and translate marketing materials and information into several languages.

Gifted enrollment varies by school, with some schools having less than a handful of students enrolled while other schools have upward of 20 percent of students enrolled. The district must devise better ways to ensure all families have the knowledge of the gifted identification process so any discrepancies between schools is by chance alone.

### Conclusion

Pittsburgh Public Schools, like most other districts across the country, offer students that qualify for gifted resources to enhance their education and prepare them for the world after high school. With great opportunities available, it is imperative that every student that qualifies has the chance to receive such services. Implementing procedures to ensure every student and family has access to the
identification process is the first step to creating fairer opportunities to participate in more rigorous learning that could lead to greater academic success. Whether it is through the expansion of testing and identification methods, the expansion of onsite gifted access such as those provided at Dilworth and Grandview, or exploring models for in-class access that mirror the School-Wide Enrichment Program used in elementary schools in Upper Saint Clair that gives all students the opportunity to access enhanced learning and instruction; when all students are held to high standards, they will aim to meet those standards. PPS must ensure that every child is challenged and empowered to maximize their learning opportunities in order to prepare for life-long success.