

THE EFFECTS OF NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND POLICY ON GIFTED EDUCATION
IN THE UNITED STATES, KANSAS AND A MIDWESTERN SUBURBAN SCHOOL

A Thesis by

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The following faculty members have examined the final copy of this thesis for form and content, and recommended that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Education with a major in Special Education - Gifted.

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DEDICATION

To my supportive, generous, and patient
family, friends, colleagues, and students

Nothing you do for children is ever wasted.
They seem not to notice us, hovering, averting our eyes, and they seldom offer thanks,
but what we do for them is never wasted.
Garrison Keillor

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ABSTRACT

While its intent is commendable, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) has created a less than desirable learning environment for our nation's gifted children. NCLB has mandated all students achieve a level of proficiency by 2014, thereby, creating an environment where states, school administrators, and classroom teachers are compelled to focus on students who are functioning below a proficient level.

This research assessed the effects NCLB has had on gifted education at the national, state, and local levels. Literature and data were collected and analyzed in order to summarize the effects NCLB has had on gifted students and programs including those in Kansas and one midwestern suburban school district. The most prevalent topics included funding, low prioritization of gifted education, inconsistency in gifted standards and programs, the need for differentiated curriculum, testing, and the underrepresentation of ethnic minority groups in gifted programs.

The evidence supports that NCLB has had negative effects on gifted education. The conclusions and recommendations focus on encouraging, facilitating, and monitoring individual growth to ensure the advancement of all students to their highest potential.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), most commonly referred to as the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), has dominated U.S. education for more than seven years. Since before it was signed by President George W. Bush in 2002, NCLB has been the cover story of national news magazines, the subject of editorials, articles, and books, and the topic of countless discussions and debates in teacher's lounges, living rooms, and halls of government. NCLB strategies for improving American education include increased accountability, flexibility in how federal monies are spent, a stronger emphasis on Reading and Mathematics, and greater choice for parents of students in schools failing to meet adequate yearly progress (AYP) (U.S. Department of Education, 2006). In order to hold schools accountable testing occurs to ensure that all students are meeting standards; and test scores are analyzed by sub-group to ensure all groups are achieving the set standards.

As a result of my conversations with colleagues, parents, and students, as well as my observations of events and practices taking place in the school in which I worked, I began to wonder if and how NCLB policies would affect gifted education. Would gifted students be ignored in the regular classroom because they already function above the proficiency level? Would school funds be funneled into the education of those students who were functioning below the proficiency level? Would classroom teachers be forced to focus on the students below proficient levels in order to keep their jobs, and in order for the school districts to keep their funds?

In my teaching experience in a midwestern suburban school district after the passage of NCLB, parents of gifted children began to question how or whether the school district is meeting

their gifted child's needs. I have heard students complain they find assignments easy or unchallenging and the repeated practice in classes to prepare for the standardized tests frustrating. Having taught in middle school, I witnessed gifted students becoming frustrated, even angry, with classroom teachers who require the same work from everyone or the repeated practice of concepts and skills most gifted students have already mastered. I have heard stakeholders attest that the amount of time lost to prepare and take tests is time that is not educationally sound or productive.

In order to document and demonstrate a school's adherence to NCLB and consistent improvement, evaluation occurs at regular intervals during the school year (U.S. Department of Education, 2006). I have reviewed standardized test results for gifted students who score in the 99th percentile, and function at the same percentile level year after year. In my opinion, these numbers imply that the student already knows much of the material being taught and tested. However, many classroom teachers seem pleased with a student who maintains a high level of achievement on the tests, no matter that the student knew the material prior to entering the classroom. I believe this is a student who will pass the test without much input on the teacher's part, thus freeing the teacher to work with those students who will need more coaching, instruction and practice to obtain a proficient score.

As classroom teachers, I believe we should never have a child who has shown no academic growth in a school year without seeking out strategies to keep the student engaged in learning. If a child is functioning below grade level, we implement interventions and strategies to help the child perform in the classroom and document outcomes. We consult and refer the child for additional assessment and assistance from support staff and professionals in the school when necessary. However, under NCLB when the student's academic achievement is well above grade

level and she/he maintains an „A“ average, it seems to me, classroom teachers express satisfaction with the student“s performance and turn their focus to the students who are struggling to meet the proficiency standards.

I have personally observed how a principal“s decision making was influenced by the pressures of meeting AYP. In the school where I taught, some classroom teachers argued that gifted students should be left in their classroom so they will have those test results accredited to their class scores, and never consider or question if this is where the student will receive the greatest educational benefit. For example, in a meeting with a parent, a principal, a classroom teacher, and me, the parent suggested that their gifted child would benefit from placement at another building in the district that had a full time gifted facilitator. The parent asserted their child was gifted in many areas and needed the challenges of a more rigorous curriculum. The principal and teacher argued that the child“s needs were being met in the regular classroom with the part time gifted teacher consulting with the child“s teacher. However, the principal later confided in me that the child“s test scores were needed in this elementary building, and that if this child were to transfer then other parents of gifted students would want the same, thus resulting in a “brain drain” for this building.

In the school district in which I taught, standardized testing took place three times in less than eight months. Each round of testing was preceded by drills and practices to prepare for the test. Each round of testing was coupled with a special schedule that disrupted the students“ regular school routine for a week or more. This disruption was due to the lack of accessible computers in the school, and because testing was taking place in a computer lab other classes did not have access to the computer lab during those days.

Frequent test taking appears to become a source of frustration and anxiety for many students including those who know the material and are capable of performing well (Berliner, 2009; Golden, 2004; Tomlinson, 2002). I have seen some of these frustrated students become infamous troublemakers in the school. I have also sensed some school staff that seem to resent these students, and the students seem to resent the teachers and staff.

In my experience, a few very bright and capable students have purposely preformed poorly on the standardized tests in an effort to protest the testing itself. As a result of poor test scores and poor behaviors, I have heard teachers and administrators speak in terms of whether or not a child deserves to be in a gifted program as if it were a reward and not a form of differentiation to meet the needs of the student.

In this „No Child Left Behind world“, the classroom teacher is compelled to focus on students who are below the proficient level, with the result that the child who tests well above this level is given little attention (Plucker, Burroughs, & Song, 2010). With scripted lessons and paced curriculum, NCLB has created a „one-size-fits-all“ educational program (Berliner, 2009). In my school, benchmarks were set up to ensure that all students reach a prescribed appropriate level of functioning at a given chronological age. Many gifted and high achieving students sit through class assignments repeatedly practicing concepts they previously have mastered, while school administrators are forced to channel their limited resources meeting the standards set in NCLB (Van Tassel-Baska, 2006).

In its defense, NCLB has been responsible for spotlighting the achievement gap between sub-groups; shedding light and bringing much needed attention to the academic needs of low socio-economic and certain minority ethnic groups (Oakland & Rossen, 2005). At the same time, it has created a punitive environment for school districts and forced teachers to focus on the

group of students who could pass the standardized tests if given additional coaching and tutoring (Ward, 2005). I believe the ideals and concepts of NCLB are admirable; after all, the idea of „No Child Left Behind“ is what American education is founded upon. After all, I believe equality is what the United States Constitution guarantees, but equal is not always equitable. One would not use a bandage to treat a headache, nor would one use an aspirin to treat a scratch. Educators must learn to teach children based on their individual needs to enable every to student continue to grow intellectually and to ensure that no child is left behind (Johnsen, 2007; Ruf, 2005; Van Tassel-Baska, 2007).

I began to wonder if other teachers, parents, and gifted facilitators and coordinators were having similar experiences. Are my observations a common occurrence in other school districts? The purpose of my study was to focus on the following questions: Does the No Child Left Behind policy focus on all children or just those children functioning below proficiency level? Have school districts changed the services offered to gifted students since NCLB was passed? How can schools and individual teachers best serve gifted students and still meet the requirements of NCLB?

For the purpose of this study, the literature review and interviews functioned as the research. I have analyzed, summarized and reported my findings from the literature and interviews; and concluded this report with explanations and interpretations of the results, as well as implications for future research and recommendations.

CHAPTER 2

METHODOLOGY

To best understand if or how the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) has affected gifted education, it is essential to understand the history of NCLB. I have investigated the state of gifted education at the beginning of NCLB and compare it to gifted education at the present. I have researched and compiled expert recommendations for gifted education in the future.

I have presented a brief history and summarization of NCLB. Through the review of historical evidence I was able to develop theories that led to hypotheses (Patten, 2007). As suggested by Patten (2007), I used qualitative methods to examine documents to identify themes and quantitative methods to collect and analyze existing data.

Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2000) define historical research as the systematic and objective location, evaluation, and synthesis of evidence in order to establish facts and draw conclusions. Cohen et al. states that historical research involves the identification of an area of study; sometimes the formulation of a set of questions; the collection, organization, verification, validation, analysis and selection of data; answering the questions when appropriate; and writing a research report. Through this sequence one is led to a new understanding of the past and its relevance to the present and future. They also note that historical research is of unquestioned value, stating that it provides insights into problems, and through our understanding of the past and present we can develop a basis for progress or change (Cohen et al., 2000).

Both primary and secondary sources were used. As Cohen et al. (2000) suggest the function of the literature review in historical research provides the data for research, including primary data from written and oral testimony. This research used primary data gathered from

interviews of education professionals working under the NCLB policy to establish effects of NCLB Policy on gifted services in a midwestern suburban school district. Secondary data was gathered from books, professional and governmental education websites, and peer-reviewed professional journals.

An application was made to the Wichita State University Office of Research Administration (ORA) for permission to interview education professionals. The Institutional Review Board granted approval for the interviews in October, 2010. The interviewees signed consent forms as is required by the ORA.

Interviewees were two education professionals who worked in a midwestern suburban school district over a number of years. Interviewee 1 has 20 years experience with gifted students; and Interviewee 2 has 16 years experience in gifted education. Their lengthy experience has been with gifted educational services in the previously mentioned school; and it has given them the opportunity to have a longitudinal perspective on the gifted education program in their district.

As a result of thorough research I have attempted to answer my focus questions.

1. Does the No Child Left Behind policy focus on all children or just those children functioning below proficiency level?
2. Have school districts changed the services offered to gifted students since NCLB was passed?
3. How can schools and individual teachers best serve gifted students and still meet the requirements of NCLB?

CHAPTER 3

IMPORTANCE OF STUDYING THE EFFECTS OF THE NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND POLICY ON GIFTED EDUCATION

Now that the No Child Left Behind policy has been in place for several years, it is important to step back and evaluate its effectiveness. As an instructor and advocate of gifted students, I believe it is important to examine the effects that the NCLB policy has had on gifted programs and gifted students. Through the collection and analysis of data from recent history I was able to summarize the effects NCLB has had on gifted students and programs, including those in Kansas and one midwestern suburban school district; to conclude and recommend the best possible practices with regards to gifted education; and suggest future studies in this area.

Gifted people possess substantially higher than average intellect and have the ability to revolutionize the world in which we live. Therefore, it is important to all of society that these individuals be allowed to grow to and function at their highest potential. More than seven years have passed since NCLB was signed into law and the time has come to evaluate its effectiveness in all areas of our educational system. This report focuses on the effects NCLB policy has had on gifted education specifically.

Does No Child Left Behind policy focus on all children or just those children functioning below proficiency level? Have school districts changed the services offered to gifted students since NCLB was passed? How can schools and individual teachers best serve gifted students and still meet the requirements of NCLB?

CHAPTER 4

THE HISTORY OF NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND

The second Bush Administration proposed an overhaul of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) scheduled for reauthorization in 2001. The administration called its proposal the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). While the ESEA governs the education of students K-12, it is the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) that governs the education of K-12 students with disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, 2006). Like any legislation, the ESEA reauthorization signed in 2002 is a compromise between the executive and legislative branches of the U. S. national government. One such compromise, the Javits Act, authorizes federal funds for research and grants to support programs and services for gifted and talented students. NCLB defines:

...the term 'gifted and talented', when used with respect to students, children, or youth, as those students, children, or youth who give evidence of high achievement capability in areas such as intellectual, creative, artistic, or leadership capacity, or in specific academic fields, and who need services or activities not ordinarily provided by the school in order to fully develop those capabilities (Title IX, Part A, Section 9101(22) Public Law).

President Bush's strategies for improving education include the following principles: increased accountability for states and school districts, greater choice for parents and students, more flexibility for state education administrations (SEAs) and local education administrations (LEAs) in regards to the use of federal dollars, and stronger emphasis on reading (U.S. Department of Education, 2006). Increased accountability requires annual testing for all students in grades 3-8 based on state standards in Reading and Mathematics with objectives ensuring all

sub-groups of students attain proficiency within 12 years, by the year 2014. Sub-groups are poverty, race, ethnicity, disability and limited English proficiency. Schools failing to meet adequate yearly progress (AYP) towards goals are subject to improvement, corrective action and restructuring aimed at bringing them up to standards (U.S. Department of Education, 2006). Schools that fail to make AYP for five years may be restructured. LEAs must give parents of students attending schools failing to make AYP, a choice of another school within the district (U.S. Department of Education, 2006).

NCLB allows some flexibility to state and school districts in how funding is applied. LEAs and SEAs may transfer up to 50% of the funds under four major state programs to any of those programs or Title 1. The four programs include Teacher Quality State Grants, Educational Technology, Innovative Programs and Drug-Free Schools (U.S. Department of Education, 2006). Reading First extends funding to screen students to determine which K-3 students will be at-risk of reading failure and provide professional development to help teachers deal with reading instruction. It also provides funds to support early language, literacy, and pre-reading development of preschool-age children especially those from low-income families (U.S. Department of Education, 2006).

CHAPTER 5

LITERATURE REVIEW

In a recent survey by the National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC), 28 of 41 SEAs claimed that federal policy—in the form of NCLB—had had a detrimental effect on gifted education, due to the law’s focus on underperforming students, effects on the level of gifted education funding, the lack of gifted education language in the law, and a concentration on standardized testing that discourages investment in service to gifted children. (Plucker, Burroughs, & Song, 2010, p. 24)

In analyzing the research and literature on the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) and its effects on gifted education, several common themes arose. The most prevalent topics include lack of funding, concerns that gifted education is a low priority in the overall education of children in the United States, inconsistencies in gifted education standards and programs, concerns over meeting students’ needs and differentiation, inconsistent testing and test bias, and identifying gifted minority students.

5.1 Lack of funding

Many state and school administrators assert that the federal government has failed to provide adequate funding for the testing mandated in NCLB legislation (Clarke et al., 2003; Pedulla et al., 2003; Wallis & Steptoe, 2007). Additionally, Ward (2005, p. 46) states that the NCLB Act “creates powerful incentives for schools to focus on raising the test scores of their lowest-performing students, and some schools are doing this by cutting elective programs for gifted children and spending the money from these programs on the effort to comply with NCLB Act requirements.”

Although President Bush promised funding for his proposals in 2001, funding falls short by millions of dollars (Baker, 2003; Rebell & Wolff, 2009). Meanwhile, the existing funds are focused on the lower performing students to ensure they pass the tests at the appointed level. In turn, SEAs and LEAs have been forced to reassign funding in order to make AYP. Many critics see the requirements of NCLB and its funding as limiting local control and increasing the federalization of education (Baker, 2003; Rebell & Wolff, 2009).

5.2 Viewing gifted education as a low priority

With NCLB's emphasis on proficiency and AYP in order for schools to retain their funding, the focus has been on those students who are below proficient levels. NCLB neither excludes nor includes gifted learners, which has led to many states marginalizing gifted funds and services in order to focus on the specific mandates of the NCLB legislation (Brown et al., 2006; Davidson & Davidson, 2004; Gentry, 2006). Johnson (2005) reported that a Texas law allows students above proficiency levels on state tests to take two weeks off while teachers prepare the lower students for tests, reinforcing the idea that the educators' job is done once a student reaches proficiency.

Another reason for the lower prioritizing of gifted education seems to be America's struggle with equality and the fact that many people view gifted programs as elitist (Ward, 2005). Rather, Ward (2005) states educators should meet students' needs on an individual basis, providing education in a manner that is respectful of each student's level of ability to learn. This concept of education provides both equality and excellence in education (Ward, 2005).

Ward (2005) also reports that many opponents to gifted education believe that by removing gifted students from regular classrooms, non-gifted students feel less valued. Ward points out that under NCLB Act some schools cut elective programs for gifted students, and

instead, spend the funds to raise the scores of their lowest-performing students; while at the same time neighborhood schools are seeking to retain their gifted students for their test scores. Some believe this is the result of high-stakes testing. Instead of pride and valuing a student's giftedness, schools and teachers try to hold on to those students to improve their overall test scores (Golden, 2004).

“Lost in the mantra of No Child Left Behind is the reality of gifted students daily losing their motivation to learn and perform at high levels in school” (Van Tassel-Baska, 2006, p. 209). This statement reiterates the sentiment throughout gifted education; students need challenging material to motivate and stay engaged in learning. When not presented with challenging new material gifted students become bored and frustrated (Berliner, 2009; Bleske-Rechek et al., 2004; Davidson & Davidson, 2005; Gallagher, 2004; Gentry, 2006; Glass, 2004; Kaplan, 2004; Plucker et al., 2010; Van Tassel-Baska, 2007).

Gallagher (2004) recommends a policy in *excellence* that would create an optimal learning environment for all students to perform at the limits of their capabilities. Gallagher goes on to state, “Another misguided assumption of NCLB is that test performance equates with learning” (Gallagher, 2004, p.123). He says that instead, it is the ability to problem find and problem solve we should assess, but “the more complex and sophisticated the cognitive function, the more difficult it is to measure” (Gallagher, 2007, p. 83).

5.3 Inconsistencies in gifted education standards and programs

Vast inconsistencies exist between the states and often between districts within the same state in regards to gifted programs. According to the National Association for Gifted Children, funding for gifted programs varies from state to state with zero to millions of dollars appropriated for gifted education. How or if states allocate funds seems to be a major concern

(Baker & McIntire, 2003). Formulas used to determine funding most often include funds allocated on a per-student basis, flat grants, and discretionary grants; and allocation is determined by a different means in almost every state. Baker and McIntire (2003) conclude that we need a cohesive and consistent set of policy models for funding gifted programs in schools across the nation.

Funding is not the only area of inconsistency. Policies on identification and structure of the programs differ from state to state and district to district (Brown, et al., 2006; Shaunessy, 2003). According to Brown and her colleagues (2006), gifted education has experienced cuts or elimination in states without mandated gifted education. In 2003, Shaunessy found no gifted mandate in 21 states and only 9 states required an Individualized Education Plan (IEP). Although Kansas mandates gifted programs and requires an IEP for gifted students, LEAs determine the program structure, which leads to gifted services that vary from district to district. Shaunessy (2003) suggests we need future research in the effectiveness of the varying policies to extract the best features and policies.

5.4 Concerns over meeting students' needs and differentiation

Nearly every article reviewed as part of this research expressed concerns about the needs of gifted students and the need for differentiation in the curriculum. As previously mentioned, every state has some legislation for gifted students; but how their needs are met vastly differ from state to state; and sometimes district to district (Brown, et al., 2006). Brown, et al., note that by neither excluding nor including gifted learners, NCLB has encouraged many states to compromise services for the gifted.

NCLB has been referred to as a "one-size-fits-all" educational format seemingly ignoring the fact that children are individuals and as such come from different backgrounds and learn at

varying rates (Gentry, 2006). Some children simply learn at a faster pace while others may need extra time and practice to learn a concept. This is where many teachers and parents of gifted students voice their concerns about how their students sit in classes that are focused on the proficiency level material that the students already know; therefore, these children are not learning (Gentry, 2006). Moon et al. (2007) observed the pressures of high-stakes testing in disadvantaged schools results in drill and practice instruction which is often material the high ability learner already knows or can learn quickly.

Every person learns at a different pace and has varying abilities. Multiple researchers (Bleske-Rechek, 2004; Gentry, 2006; Glass, 2004; Meier et al., 2004; Neal & Schanzenbach, 2007; Tomlinson, 2002; Van Tassel-Baska, 2006) agree that NCLB policy of „proficiency for all“ lacks consideration for basic human individuality. Tomlinson (2002) maintains that proficiency is not enough, and by setting minimal expectations, we are creating an environment of mediocrity. In an effort to individualize learning, New Mexico gifted programs are developed using the research-based concept that gifted students are best served when provided with the opportunity to be educated with their ability-peers (Shaunessy, 2003).

Benjamin Bloom’s cognitive taxonomy has been a cornerstone of education for decades, helping educators understand that knowledge and comprehension are only part of an individual’s learning process; but there must also be an application and transference to novel situations to establish a full grasp of a concept (Hanna & Dettmer, 2004). Instruction and assessment in today’s classrooms leave little time for application in new situations (Hanna & Dettmer, 2004). “This is problematic for very able students in particular, who already have mastered much basic content or can do so readily and need to move on” (Dettmer, 2006, p. 70). Not only are these

students not challenged in an academic manner, Dettmer expresses concern for meeting the social/emotional needs of students in the era of NCLB and AYP.

Finally, many people from a variety of professions have pointed to the statistical impossibility of 100% of students reaching the proficiency level. There are just too many variables in the life of a child that are not within the school's or the teacher's realm of control. For instance, the school has no control over a child's home life, what he/she does after school, how much sleep the child gets, what or if the child eats, or the child's genetics (Ford, 2006).

5.5 Inconsistent testing and test bias

Inconsistency in testing is another issue of concern. States were given the option to develop a test or to choose a test that was already commercially available. The problem is the tests are different and assess different content. With the states developing or choosing their own test, some states have tests that are less rigorous than others. Wallis and Steptoe (2007) concluded from information from the National Center for Education Statistics a significant discrepancy exists between most states' tests and the federal exam called the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). For example, according to Mississippi, 89% of fourth graders in the state achieved a proficient or higher score; however, when the same students were given NAEP, only 18% scored at or above the proficient level. On the state test, Mississippi had tied for the top score in the country, but according to the NAEP results, they were 50th (Wallis & Steptoe, 2007). Additionally, Brown, et al. (2006) pointed to glaring disparity among the states and the need for national or more cohesive policies. Neal and Schanzenbach (2007) reported that stressing proficiency testing and punishing districts that do not meet the standards, sets up an environment for teaching to the test and cheating.

Critics of NCLB contend the system is motivation for manipulation of statistics related to dropout rates (Neal and Schanzenbach, 2007). Critics also point to surveys of teachers who say that standardized testing has led them to teach to the test or to focus on the state standard to be tested which, in turn, has led to a narrowing of the curriculum (Berliner, 2009; Golden, 2004).

In reference to proficiency testing, Tomlinson (2002) and Van Tassel-Baska (2006) argue that proficiency is not enough and that we should instead strive for excellence. By not seeking out excellence, we are building a world of mediocrity. In a system that pushes for proficiency, students who have already achieved that level are often ignored while the focus turns to those students who are struggling to meet proficient levels. They suggest that if we had instead a system that tracked individual growth, the needs of all students would be met. It is important for educators and policy makers to remember “achieving success for all students is not equated with achieving the same results for all students” (Ward, 2005, p. 46).

5.6 Identifying gifted minority students

Not only has NCLB brought the educational learning gaps of some students to light, it has also caused the education community to scrutinize more closely the numbers of minority students identified as gifted (Oakland & Rossen, 2005). An article published in the *Wall Street Journal* reports that the students most affected by NCLB may be gifted, low-income, minority students whose parents do not have the option to transfer them to private schools or the means to provide enrichment (Golden, 2003).

Reporting for the Center for Evaluation and Education Policy in 2010, Plucker, Burroughs, and Song state that according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) since the passage of NCLB excellence achievement gaps among ethnic groups, high and low-socio-economic groups, gender groups and English Language Learners (ELL) have

widened. Oakland and Rossen (2005) reported on the underrepresentation of most minority students in gifted programs. They noted that 7.5% of White students and 10% of Asian students have been identified for placement in gifted programs; however only 3% of African American students and 3.5% of Latino students have been identified as gifted according to the Information Center on Disabilities and Gifted Education in 2003. This lower percentage of African American and Latino students in gifted programs is attributed to several causes.

Among the possible reasons for the racial/ethnic disparities, Oakland and Rossen (2005) include failure to nominate, qualities that are screened and constitute the gifted program, and the use of national norms. Those students not nominated are not considered for the program, and teacher nominations may contribute to the underrepresentation of minority students (Oakland & Rossen, 2005). Parents of ethnic minorities have a lower referral rate than White parents. In programs that rely heavily on standardized tests Black and Hispanic students tend to score lower than White and Asian students (Ford, 2006; Oakland & Rossen, 2005; Ward, 2005).

This would suggest test bias, which could be remedied by focusing on the specific educational needs of the individual student during the nomination process (Neal & Schanzenbach, 2007; Oakland & Rossen, 2005; Van Tassel-Baska, 2007; Ward, 2005). Oakland and Rossen (2005) recommend educators consider qualities such as passion for learning, persistence, learning styles and strategies, as well as other qualities that may contribute to academic success when nominating students for gifted programs. Another difference seems to be that the lower the grade in which the students are nominated the more likely minority students will be identified (Ford, 2006; Gallagher, 2004; Oakland & Rossen, 2005). Ford (2006) suggests that gifted education can play a role in closing the achievement gap by taking steps to identify more of the underrepresented African American and Latino students, thereby, raising

expectations for ethnic students and providing a more rigorous and challenging education for them. Educators must eliminate barriers that exclude diverse students and consider how environment and opportunity affect the development of high potential (Ford, 2006). Policy makers must reconsider definitions, instruments, procedures, and expectations for diverse students (Ford, 2006). Ford notes this must include preparing educators to be culturally competent.

Gifted education should also rely on nomination methods based on specific educational needs for a greater racial-ethnic balance (Mendoza, 2006; Oakland & Rossen, 2005; Ruf, 2005). These methods would include the use of checklists, behavioral observations, and interviews with students, parents, teachers, and peers regarding intellectual abilities, as well as, creativity, task commitment, and problem-solving skills.

5.7 Summary

In regards to the questions in this thesis: 1) Does NCLB policy focus on *all* children or just those children functioning below proficiency level? 2) Have schools changed the services offered gifted students since NCLB? The literature and research show that NCLB creates an environment filled with incentives to bring children up to a proficiency level, but no incentives to take children beyond that level. NCLB, in general, is underfunded; so SEAs and LEAs have been forced to reallocate funds to meet with the mandated changes. Gifted programs, among others, have suffered. Proficiency testing has taken priority over many other budgetary demands in education.

NCLB focuses on the lower performing students leading to a narrowing of the curriculum and teaching to the test. Studies show that all students learn best when challenged; but in a classroom where the focus is bringing below proficient students up to a proficient level, the

student already above proficiency can suffer from boredom and frustration, thus becoming disengaged from learning. Many researchers have advocated for more individualized instruction in order to meet the needs of all students (Colangelo et al., 2004; Gentry, 2006; Glass, 2004; Mendoza, 2006; Shaunessy, 2003; Van Tassel-Baska, 2007).

The NCLB Act has mandated analysis of student test scores by sub-groups of low-income and ethnic minorities. This has highlighted discrepancies showing that these sub-groups are underrepresented in gifted programs. The educational community could be overlooking gifted ethnic minorities and those from low-income families through the use of biased tests and lower referral rates from these groups' families and teachers. There should be a similar distribution of gifted students from all ethnic minority and low-income backgrounds.

Inconsistency in tests across the nation is another major issue. States have been delegated the job of devising or choosing a commercially available standardized test; however, some tests are more rigorous than others and what one state calls proficient another might call far less than proficient. For instance, a child might be considered just above proficient in one state, but upon moving to another state find that he/she is well above proficient or well below proficient according to that state's test. A national standard seems to be in order here. The NAEP is just such a test, but is only administered to a sampling of students each year.

CHAPTER 6

RESULTS OF NCLB POLICY ON GIFTED PROGRAMS IN KANSAS

Most educational decisions are made at the state and local levels although there are certain programs and funds mandated and regulated by federal policy. For gifted students all decisions are made at the state and local levels. “In the absence of federal minimum standards, there is wide variability between states, and in many cases, an even wider unevenness between districts in the same state” (National Association for Gifted Children, 2010, p.2). Therefore, it is important to look at the state and local levels. On the local level, I will discuss the details of one particular midwestern suburban school, as it is the school with which I am most familiar and have the most contacts. Considering that each school district differs in how to serve the needs of gifted students, it is beyond the scope of this research to examine every school district in Kansas.

6.1 Kansas gifted education

In 1978 the Kansas legislature mandated Gifted Education Services effective in July, 1980. As of 2010, there were 439 gifted education specialists serving nearly 14,000 identified gifted students in Kansas. In the 2010 Kansas Special Education Regulations (91-40-1), “Gifted” is defined as “performing or demonstrating the potential for performing at significantly higher levels of accomplishment when compared to others of similar age, experience and environment” (Kansas Department of Education (KSDE), 2010). “Kansas state statute requires Special Education services be provided through the development and implementation of individualized education plans (IEPs) for eligible students identified as gifted and needing special instructional support” (KSDE, 2010). The Kansas State Department of Education offers guidance in developing and implementing services for students identified as gifted. Kansas has also developed program standards and teaching licensure procedures, as well as state level funding

for programs; however, most details such as identification procedures and type of programming are left to the local school districts.

According to the Kansas State Department of Education (KSDE), gifted students have shown slight improvement on state reading and math assessments between 2005 and 2009. KSDE tests student for proficiency in Reading and Math are annually administered in grades 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, and 11. As shown in Appendix A, since 2005-06 the statistics on the Kansas Reading proficiency test has shown very little change. Most significant was the increase in percentage of students at the „exemplary level“ from 83.03 to 86.7 percent. When the categories of „exceeds standard“ and „exemplary“ are added together 98 percent consistently score „meets standard“ in Reading. The Kansas Math proficiency scores had similar results with students at the „exemplary level“ increasing somewhat from 76.12 percent in 2005-06 to 83.8 percent in 2008-09. As in Reading, the Math scores in the combined categories of „exceeds standard“ and „exemplary“ have held steady at 96 percent. Less than 1 percent of the gifted students assessed in Kansas function below the standards.

In spite of the appearance of test scores slightly improving, these scores do not necessarily measure individual student growth. Many gifted students know material well beyond the „meets standard“ level before they begin a grade level.

6.2 Gifted education in a midwestern suburban school district

On a more local level, I interviewed two long-term teachers of gifted students in a midwestern suburban school district. Each teacher has more than 15 years experience in the district and with the gifted program. This school serves a community of over 20,000 people and is a suburb to a city of nearly half a million people, (KSDE, 2010). The school district serves approximately 6,800 students in grades K-12, (KSDE, 2010).

The interview consisted of eight questions designed to elicit data regarding gifted education in one particular midwestern suburban school to emphasize the LEA's position concerning gifted students. This school was chosen because of the researcher's personal experience and relationship with the gifted teachers in the district. Interview questions are in Appendix B.

Interviews revealed that in 2000-2001 before NCLB this midwestern suburban school district based its gifted placement on IQ test results only. Services consisted of pullout and inclusion, compacting math and reading, and curriculum modification in small group settings with intellectual peers. At the middle school level, pullout opportunities were provided in Reading and Language Arts. Students in middle school and high school were placed in leveled math classes based on their ability. At the high school, gifted services offered consultant opportunities, and based on need, some students tested out of basic classes or worked through curriculum at an accelerated pace with gifted teachers monitoring or consulting. Enrichment opportunities were provided as extra curricular—taking place outside of the school day—including Future Problem Solvers (FPS), Odyssey of the Mind (OM), and Scholar's Bowl.

Since the passage of NCLB there have been changes. Both interviewees noted some positive changes including placement based on a matrix, which is heavily weighted on IQ test results but also now includes task commitment and creativity. They also noted that board policy has changed to allow acceleration and grade skipping. Interviewee 1 observed that technology has also played an important role in the enrichment opportunities. Technology is embedded into the enrichment opportunities: PowerPoint, Smartboard, Skyping, video streaming, etc.

When asked to address changes interviewees believed to be direct result of NCLB Policy, both interviewees pointed out the "highly qualified teachers" requirement of NCLB has created

issues at the middle and high school levels for gifted programs because secondary teachers are certified by subject area. Most school districts do not employ a gifted teacher in each subject area. In this school district designing curriculum modifications and monitoring had to be done by “highly qualified” teachers in specific fields, even though the gifted facilitators met the “highly qualified” requirements in meeting the needs of gifted students. “There has been much confusion as to whether a gifted teacher, “highly qualified” in meeting the needs of gifted students, can be allowed to work with gifted students in pull-out situations” (Interviewee 1, 2010).

Interviewee 2 believes classroom teachers are using the NCLB Act to justify their extreme focus on basics and targeting students who are functioning below proficiency. Interviewee 1 commented that in spite of countless in-services and informal discussions on differentiation in the general education classroom, the teachers in this district are tied to a curriculum map. “The curriculum map is extremely specific as to what instruction should be given on a daily basis in Reading and Math with grades based on specific activities” (Interviewee 1, 2010). Interviewee 2 expressed concerns about the elimination of compacting material, projects, creative activities, and pre-testing to show mastery so students may proceed to the next level.

CHAPTER 7

RECOMMENDATIONS

With all the research and data gathered, the question to be answered is how can schools and individual teachers best serve gifted students and still meet the requirements of NCLB? Overall, the recommendations seem to focus primarily on encouraging, facilitating, and monitoring individual growth to ensure the advancement of all students to their highest ability. The key words are „individual“ and „growth“. This concept brings to mind the old one-room schoolhouse; one teacher facilitating the instruction of several students of different ages, abilities, and levels of functioning. I have chosen research-based strategies from the literature which seem viable in correcting, to some extent, inequities brought on by NCLB.

Susan Johnsen (2007) has suggestions for changes to NCLB including lifting the ceiling on assessments, using multiple assessments, and requiring teachers to meet national standards. By lifting the ceiling on assessments, teachers would obtain a better measurement of a student's upper abilities. Educators could have a more rounded view of a student's potential in areas such as social and emotional. Requiring teachers to meet national standards would be a step to ensuring a more consistent level of teacher performance.

Measuring the growth of individual students in a given year, rather than testing to see that a minimum is reached, allows high performing students to show what they know (Johnsen, 2007; Ruf, 2005). Individualized tracking of students' progress will ensure *all* students are learning. With computer accessed testing, tests have evolved to instant assessment and gauging an individual student's level of functioning. As a student answers the questions at a basal level correctly the questions continue begin to increase in difficulty, lifting the ceiling. When the

student begins answering incorrectly the computer bank levels down again, and results with an accurate reading of a student's abilities.

One positive outcome of NCLB has been its highlighting discrepancies in achievement between ethnic and low-income sub-groups and the general population. It has brought to light the differences between these groups in the gifted population, as well. By actively seeking out and developing high-ability students from ethnic minorities and low-income backgrounds, schools could improve their excellence gaps (Plucker, Burroughs, & Song, 2010). They also suggest we should be concerned about bias in testing and cultural differences. As a society, we could be overlooking a significant talent pool.

Colangelo, Assouline, and Gross (2004) have completed extensive research in the area of acceleration concluding that it is an effective, low-cost educational intervention for high-ability students. They have identified 18 types of acceleration including self-paced instruction, early entrance to school, grade skipping, curriculum compacting, and early college entrance. Other suggestions for meeting the needs of gifted students include ability grouping, dual credit programs, Advanced Placement (AP), and International Baccalaureate (IB).

Acceleration is also addressed by the U. S. Department of Education report on the reform of ESEA in 2010 entitled *A Blueprint for Reform of ESEA*. It proposed competitive grants to SEAs, LEAs and nonprofit partners to increase access to accelerated learning at the high school level. These would include AP and IB programs, as well as, dual credit through state institutions. Priority for these grants would be given to high school with low graduation rates (USDE, 2010).

Colangelo (2004) and colleagues report gifted students are often better matched with their cognitive peers, rather than with their age peers, using above grade level testing to identify candidates. They also suggest early kindergarten entry, skipping grades, and curriculum

compacting to allow students to proceed at a pace more appropriate to the student's abilities. Even though compelling evidence in favor of acceleration exists many administrators, educators, and counselors remain negative about it. Acceleration should be considered on an individual basis and may not be appropriate for all students. The student's Individualized Education Plan (IEP) team should carefully consider all options in reference to meeting the needs of the student.

Bleske-Rechek, Lubinski, and Benbow (2004) researched the role of Advanced Placement (AP) in educating intellectually gifted students. Analyzing longitudinal data collected over 30 years from nearly 4,000 participants, they found most gifted students had taken AP courses and often chose them as their favorite course. When compared with their intellectual peers who had opted not to join AP courses, these students appeared more satisfied with the intellectual challenge, and therefore, achieved more. This research shows that gifted students who take AP courses place a higher value on the academic and intellectual activities than on the social and extracurricular aspects of high school than their age peers (Bleske-Rechek, Lubinski, & Benbow, 2004). Surveyed talent-search participants assigned degrees of „like and dislike“ to the responses. The survey revealed participants „like“: intellectual engagement, associating with highly intelligent peers, math and language courses, and academic success. The survey also revealed „dislikes“ including: lack of intellectual engagement, slow paced instruction, unenthusiastic or controlling teachers, lack of intelligent and motivated peers.

Chubb (2009) points to the fact that the financial incentives in NCLB fixed at the proficiency levels and recommends that financial rewards should be considered for helping students achieve at the highest levels. Chubb also suggests the use of “adaptive tests” to track students' progress. Adaptive tests are administered on computers; questions are chosen from a bank of questions and are designed to measure each student's maximum level of performance.

Interviewee 1, a midwestern suburban teacher, suggested using the standards as a “springboard into appropriate curriculum options for gifted students.” The teacher explained further, the standards could be used to help students prove mastery at specific levels; and tiered curriculum maps could include pre-testing and specific options for students showing mastery of each specific skill keeping the students moving at an appropriate pace.

A few recommendations for individual teachers include learning more about the educational need of gifted students, taking a course on gifted education, collaborating with other teachers and parents to challenge students, and learning about differentiating the curriculum to keep the high-ability students engaged in learning (Colangelo et al., 2004; Gentry, 2006; Davidson & Davidson, 2004; Van Tassel-Baska, 2007). Regular classroom teachers could and should learn how to better serve their gifted students. This could be accomplished through in-services or classes on the characteristics and learning styles of gifted students (Gallagher, 2004; Mendoza, 2006; Van Tassel-Baska, 2007).

In my experience, many classroom teachers seem skeptical about gifted students having a different learning style or special needs; and many are reluctant to collaborate with a gifted specialist. Some teachers seem to shrink back from the concept of curriculum differentiation, but with training they would discover their classroom could become a place of challenge and learning on many levels. Regular classroom teachers should embrace gifted specialists as partners rather than competitors; actively seeking professional advice, assistance, collaboration, and ideas (Van Tassel-Baska, 2007). Teamwork is imperative, and should involve students, parents, support staff, teachers, and administrators. Gifted teachers and parents must advocate for their students.

No Child Left Behind needs to consider gifted education.... One of the most cherished principles of American education is equality of opportunity. No Child Left Behind cannot, at its core, be interpreted to mean that the brightest should wait on the slowest. *All* students should have the right to exercise their talents to the fullest potential. Accepting the educational philosophy of excellence for all does not equate to identical education for all. There are no identical students. Why, then, should there exist identical programming? In the realm of education, cookie-cutter models offer no solution. (Glass, 2004, p. 25)

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

OVERALL KANSAS STATE ASSESSMENT RESULTS
FOR GIFTED STUDENTS

READING PROFICIENCY

Performance Level for grades 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, & 11, combined		FY05-06	FY06-07	FY07-08	FY08-09
Academic Warning	Count	14	<10	<10	10
	Percentage	0.15	0.1	0.1	0.1
Approaches Standard	Count	16	22	<10	16
	Percentage	0.18	0.24	0.1	0.1
Meets Standard	Count	167	130	121	148
	Percentage	1.85	1.44	1.3	1.4
Exceeds Standard	Count	1339	1145	1034	1286
	Percentage	14.8	12.71	11.2	11.7
Exemplary	Count	7513	7706	8030	9486
	Percentage	83.03	85.51	87.3	86.7
Totals	Count	9049	9012	9200	10946
	Percentage	100	100	100	100

MATH PROFICIENCY

Academic Warning	Count	11	<10	13	12
	Percentage	0.12	0.07	0.1	0.1
Approaches Standard	Count	48	34	24	30
	Percentage	0.52	0.38	0.3	0.3
Meets Standard	Count	408	330	269	237
	Percentage	4.41	3.66	2.9	2.5
Exceeds Standard	Count	1741	1387	1318	1236
	Percentage	18.83	15.36	14.3	13.2
Exemplary	Count	7040	7271	7600	7857
	Percentage	76.12	80.54	82.4	83.8
Totals	Count	9248	9028	9224	9372
	Percentage	100	100	100	100

*2010 Demographic Data Index-Kansas State Department of Education

APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. How many years were you involved with gifted education and in what capacity?
2. Briefly describe the services offered gifted students in your school district during the 2000-01 school year?
3. Briefly describe the services offered gifted students in your school district during the 2007-2010 school years?
4. Do you believe any changes are the direct result of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Policy?
5. From your point of view, do “regular” classroom teachers in your district differentiate instruction to adequately meet the needs of gifted students? What is your evidence?
6. Do you believe NCLB Policy focuses on „all“ children?
7. How do you envision the future of gifted education under NCLB Policy?
8. Do you have recommendations how schools and individual teachers can best serve the gifted population while meeting the requirements of NCLB?