

THE HIGHLY GIFTED

Discrimination against Excellence

The U. S. Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI) recently issued the first national report on the education of gifted children since 1972. The report is wide-ranging, with a focus on anti-intellectualism in American society, the needs of underserved gifted children, and a status report on gifted education in the 1990s.

Less than a week after the report was released, *The New York Times* interviewed the young mother of Jonathan Estrada, a highly gifted bilingual four-year-old boy above 160 IQ. He is reading at the fifth-grade level, and is a geography whiz. The local public school recently made drastic cuts in its gifted program. Jonathan's working-class parents own a deli, and can't afford private school tuition. The boy's mother says, "I want to know what do we do with this boy? He's dying to learn... I'm not looking for handouts, I'm looking for some place to send my child" (Winerip, 1993, p. B19).

The new federal report has little good news for the Jonathans of this world. Indeed, some of its findings, such as the sheer depth of anti-intellectualism in American schools, are deeply troubling. Taunts of gifted students, such as "nerd" and "dweeb," are common (p. 13). Some gifted African-American students who choose to achieve academically are accused of "acting white" (p. 13).

For years, educators of gifted children have been encouraged to cooperate with general education. However, in the rhetoric of school reform, little has been written about the responsibilities of general education to its most gifted students. They, too, are required by

compulsory attendance laws to attend school. Even the most profoundly gifted child is part of the community of "all children," mentioned so often in the literature of school reform.

Each time a taunt based on a child's exceptionality (such as "nerd" or "dweeb") is permitted in the classroom or on the playground, each time a highly gifted child is deliberately held back academically, each time a school policy prohibits academic acceleration or continuous progress, we need to ask, "What messages are we giving all children about developing talents, about the value of academic achievement, and about intellectual diversity?" The school climate needs to support all students—including the most gifted. We would never allow racial or ethnic slurs to go on unchecked in today's schools, nor would we deliberately thwart the intellectual growth of a child with a disability. Yet, profoundly gifted children (and their families) routinely must deal with these issues, based not on disability but on extreme developmental asynchrony. General education has a fundamental responsibility to these children.

Education's Responsibility to the Highly Gifted

◆ *In Hippocrates's words, "First, do no harm." School personnel must read the literature on extreme giftedness, and take the time to understand the individual child. Real damage has been done to these children by well-meaning professionals who insisted on maintaining institutional policies and philosophies at the expense of a child's development (Gross, 1993).*

◆ *The school climate must be free from taunts and jeers based on race, sex, age, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, disability, or ability. Every child not only has a right to be in school, but is required to be there by law. It is the responsibility of*

the school to maintain a school climate that will not be hostile to any child.

◆ *Intellectual diversity must be respected.*

◆ *Strategies that have proven effective for extremely gifted children—acceleration, continuous progress, intensive enrichment, and access to academic opportunities without discrimination on the basis of chronological age—must be regularly available. For profoundly gifted children, access to such strategies is essential in order for them to learn, much as other strategies are essential for children with disabilities.*

◆ *Extremely gifted children must neither be ignored nor exploited in school. Certain popular educational strategies, such as cooperative learning, can exploit these children, especially if they are permitted no time with intellectual peers and no regular, daily access to curriculum at an appropriate level of difficulty.*

School is a place for learning. The message we give to all children about learning is linked in part to how we treat our most rapid learners. If they are ignored, exploited, damaged, held back in their progress, or teased, the message we give to all children is that academic learning doesn't pay for anyone.

REFERENCES

- Gross, M. U. M. (1993). The early development of three profoundly gifted children of IQ 200. In P.S. Klein & A. J. Tannenbaum, *To be young and gifted* (pp. 94-138). Norwood, NJ: Ablex.
- Office of Educational Research and Improvement. (1993). *National excellence: A case for developing America's talent*. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.
- Winerip, M. (1993, November 10). In school: Wondering where to turn when a 4-year-old son is a certified genius—and a celebrity. *The New York Times*, p. B19.

Kathi Kearney is founder of the Hollingworth Center for Highly Gifted Children in South Casco, Maine, a doctoral candidate at Teachers College, Columbia University, and Editor of *Highly Gifted Children*.