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Submitted to TIME Magazine

Dear Editor:

As president of an organization that has been fighting for 60 years to increase opportunities for our high-achieving and high-potential students, we applaud Matthew Mugo Fields for his interest in this topic and would find ourselves in agreement with some of the points he puts forward in his recent Ideas piece. (Re: [Gifted and Talented Programs Dumb Down Our Students](#), February 6, 2015).

Unfortunately, however, Fields could not be more inaccurate than in his sweeping suggestions that the field of gifted and talented education is oriented around affixing a static label on naturally talented students as early in their careers as possible and keeping all others out of this “club.” These dangerous fallacies have resulted in a climate where gifted education programs are seen as easily expendable because of the mistaken view that such learners do not need supports as they will do just fine on their own.

The National Association for Gifted Children believes that every student has the right to develop his or her potential, including high-achieving and high-potential learners as well as those learners who may be struggling and in need of help to reach basic standards.

We agree with Mr. Fields that intellectual capacity is not fixed. Just as gifted athletes must engage in rigorous training to refine their skills and remain at the peak of their games, students with high academic ability require similar rigor through appropriate, consistent, student-specific content delivered by properly trained teachers. The solution is not simply piling on more work that a student has already mastered; rather it means delivering increasingly challenging and complex material to, as Fields notes, expand a student’s intellectual capacity.

But because of a combination of weak laws and limited public funding, the landscape of quality and accessible gifted education programs is a postage stamp-sized parcel surrounded by a sea of mediocre to non-existent initiatives. This is a sorry state for a nation that more than 50 years ago prided itself on its systemic approach to talent development, a commitment that has been neglected for the last three decades.

We also empathize with the personal struggle of Fields and how he was initially dismissed and exiled to a less-advanced track simply because he did not fit a stereotypical profile of a high-ability child. High-ability and high-potential students are found in every zip code in the U.S.; talent is color blind and income blind. But in order to make this more than a slogan, we need at least two critical elements: first, the belief that far more students can achieve at the highest levels, and second, we need educators in every school to be properly trained to spot signs of talent at all grade levels so that any such student, particularly those from populations traditionally underrepresented in advanced courses and programs, can be identified and subsequently served.

Rather than destroy the foundation that exists today and replace it with an undefined approach to use “technology and innovation” as a replacement, we would encourage Fields to join with NAGC and other advocates to push for ways to strengthen the system today. Priority focus areas would include:

- Reforming state laws to knock down barriers to student participation in advanced courses and gifted education programs and to provide more state funding to help districts deliver programming;
- Update federal education laws to provide for more public accountability as to the annual progress – or lack thereof – being made by high-ability students, similar to longstanding reporting in place for those at the lower end of the achievement spectrum; and
- Increase training of teachers – including before they ever enter the classroom – to ensure they are better prepared to develop talent in any student

By reforming our current system, we can ensure that future students like Mr. Fields are given the opportunities they need to maximize their potential.

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