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We mustn't neglect gifted students

Boost in federal funding would benefit nation

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Tennessee has long been a center of innovation and discovery.

From world-renowned researchers and physicians at St. Jude Children's Research Hospital curing devastating childhood disease to scientists at the Oak Ridge National Laboratory developing next-generation technologies, the state is focused on the future.

While the gifts and talents of America's doctors, researchers and other innovators are often lauded and their breakthroughs celebrated, our nation has largely underperformed in identifying early and subsequently serving our high-potential and high-ability learners.

Half a century ago, threatened by the specter of Soviet dominance, the United States recognized that a robust and systematic approach to identifying and developing our academic talent was essential to our future. This commitment paid off and resulted in decades of U.S. leadership as the world's innovator. But it did not last.

About 30 years ago, the U.S. was beginning to slip in its commitment to talent development. Today, our once-vaunted system lies in tatters and the nation has no national policy to systematically identify and support our top learners, in stark contrast to other nations that have made their most talented students priorities.

For example, the sole federal program focused on gifted education, a research initiative that focused primarily on developing strategies to support high-ability students in disadvantaged settings, was defunded two years ago.

Only a handful of states require that gifted education services be delivered and provide funding to fully support these services. About half the states are like Tennessee, where education services for the gifted are mandated but only partially funded; the rest do not require services or do not provide any state funds, resulting in an inequitable system that is dependent on local resources.

The impact of this disregard is profound. U.S. students are regularly outperformed by global counterparts on international benchmarks. Fewer U.S. students are pursuing studies in demanding fields. And few students from culturally and linguistically diverse or low-income backgrounds reach advanced levels on state and national tests. This "excellence gap" exemplifies the potential we are squandering. For example, in 2011, while 6 percent of white Tennessee fourth-graders reached advanced levels in reading, only 2 percent of Hispanic and 1 percent of black students achieved similarly.

The time has come to fix this problem.

Soon, Congress is expected to take up the long-overdue revision of the nation's core elementary and secondary education laws. Sen. Lamar Alexander will play a leading role, and he must use this opportunity to stop the neglect of our nation's high-potential and high-ability students.

A bipartisan blueprint known as the TALENT Act was introduced recently to focus attention on high-ability students in the same way increased attention on low-performing students has helped boost the performance of this population over the past decade.

The act requires states and local school districts to report publicly on the achievement gains of their highest-performing students. Such public reporting will bring with it increased attention and, ultimately, lead to greater public accountability.

The bill recognizes that properly trained teachers are essential to identifying and supporting high-ability learners and permits federal teacher training dollars to be used for such purposes, and it supports applied research to develop and spread to the classroom best practices in identifying high-ability students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

We urge Sen. Alexander to use his leadership position and his long history as an education innovator to ensure these provisions are included in any major education legislation that passes the Senate this Congress.

Our nation has a clear choice. We can continue with the policies of the present, falling further behind international nations and placing our future prosperity at even greater risk. Or we can resolve that the time has come to reverse the neglect of our high-ability students and to prioritize talent development.

What choice will our lawmakers make?

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