

# Too Few ELL Students Land in Gifted Classes

By and

Linnea Van Eman, the gifted education coordinator for the Tulsa school district, sees too many gifted students who simply don't have the language skills to show what they can do.

The 36,000-student Oklahoma district has been pushing hard to bring more students from traditionally underrepresented groups—and English-language learners in particular—into its gifted program. Using a combination of more-diverse testing, greater parent outreach, and closer observation, Van Eman and her teachers are working to fill equity gaps in the district's advanced programs.

"Any child who can translate for their parents and is decoding in two languages all the time, that's huge," Van Eman said. "We need to push back against this perception that giftedness has to look a certain way."

Beginning next school year, the [Every Student Succeeds Act](#), the main federal education law, requires states and districts to report the number of their students performing at the advanced academic level, not just those who are academically proficient and below, and to include advanced-achievement data for specific student groups, including English-language learners.

Oklahoma is one of the most expansive states in the country when it comes to gifted education, with 14 percent of its K-12 students participating in advanced academic programs. Yet federal data suggest that it, like most states, is still behind the curve when it comes to identifying and nurturing diverse students at the highest academic levels, and English-learners are among the groups most frequently overlooked.

An analysis by the Education Week Research Center found that while nearly 1 in 10 U.S. students is learning English as a second language, this group represents less than 3 percent of the students in gifted and talented education nationwide. That's only 101,000 of the more than 3.4 million students in gifted programs.

"A lot of the programs we test for [in gifted education] are language-based," said Dina Brulles, a gifted education coordinator at Paradise Valley, a well-off district outside Phoenix, and a consultant with the National Association for Gifted Children. "We can see they make good connections, have insights, ... but the school is often still looking at them as being not linguistically up to par, and they want to treat them through a deficit model rather than looking at these kids' strengths."

## **By the Numbers**

Gifted education generally includes the 3 percent to 5 percent highest-scoring students on academic tests, as well as those who show significant leadership, creativity, or strengths in particular subjects. But programs vary significantly from state to state. According to a study by the Education Commission of the States conducted last November, 37 states define giftedness, and only 32 require districts to identify and serve gifted students.

*Education Week* found that 7 percent of K-12 students participate in gifted programs, according to the U.S.

Department of Education's most recent federal civil rights data, which were collected in 2014. But individual states differ considerably in how and how many students are identified as intellectually advanced: Kentucky and Maryland lead with 16 percent of their students in gifted programs, while states

### **Behind the Data on Gifted/ELL Students**

Nearly 1 in 10 students in U.S. schools is an English-learner, and they make up a slightly higher percentage of students in schools that offer gifted education programs. But in a new analysis, *Education Week* found fewer than 3 percent of students in gifted programs nationwide is still learning English. Here's how we approached the analysis.

### **What is gifted education?**

According to the U.S. Department of Education's office for civil rights, gifted programs are special educational

such as Rhode Island and Vermont reported less than 1 percent. A few states, including Connecticut and Maine, cap the percentage of students who can take part in gifted programs.

Some studies suggest that children who grow up bilingual have greater cognitive flexibility and problem-solving skills than monolingual children, but English-learners in the United States often don't get a chance to show their skills.

Nationwide in 2014, within schools that have gifted programs, English-learners were underrepresented by more than 5 percent, with gaps between the share of students who are English-learners and the percentage of ELLs in gifted education that were as large as 19 percent in California and 18 percent in Nevada.

ELLs are underrepresented in gifted programs in 49 states and the District of Columbia. While they are not technically underrepresented in West Virginia, only 1 in 100 students in the state had limited English skills, and less than 1 in 100 of those English-learners actually attended a school that offered gifted education in the first place, the *Education Week* analysis found.

opportunities that take place during regular school hours for students “endowed with a high degree of mental ability or who demonstrate unusual physical coordination, creativity, interest, or talent.” They include enriched curriculum or an accelerated pace through individual classes or grades; while they can be at any K-12 grade, they are focused on K-8, and OCR also collects separate data on participation in advanced high school coursework, such as Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate classes, which is not counted as part of gifted programs.

### **Where do the data on English-learners and giftedness come from?**

The Education Week Research Center used 2013-14 data from the Education Department’s Civil Rights Data Collection. We focused our analysis on data related to overall school characteristics, language-acquisition status, and enrollment.

### **What is the Civil Rights Data Collection?**

Every two years since 1968, the Education Department has collected information on demographics and educational opportunities for students of different genders, races, English-proficiency levels, and disabilities. Every public school in the country is required to respond to the survey. These data are used both for enforcement of federal civil rights laws and for research to improve education for these students. The data we analyzed are from the 2013-14 school years; the Education Department is collecting 2015-16 data now. You can find more information on the Civil Rights Data Collection on our Frequently Asked Questions page online.

### **How did you analyze gaps in schools’ gifted education programs?**

We focused our research on the majority of schools nationwide where students are

In a University of Connecticut study of gifted identification in three states, researchers found that a student's high achievement on state tests didn't always guarantee them a slot in gifted education.

"As students' achievement increases, their chance of being identified as gifted increases, but much slower if you are an English-language learner, poor or from a underrepresented minority than if you are non-ELL and white or Asian," said D. Betsy McCoach, a co-author of the study and a professor of education measurement and evaluation. "Districts make policies [on gifted education], but those policies don't necessarily translate to equal opportunities across schools in those districts."

In Oklahoma, ELLs made up 7 percent of the population at schools that offered gifted programs in 2014 but only 2 percent of gifted enrollment. Tulsa had double the percentage of English-learners but only 2 percent in gifted programs.

Five years ago, Tulsa, like most districts, relied on teacher or parent referrals, confirmed by an IQ test, to identify academically gifted students. In the city's mostly Hispanic Mitchell Elementary School, Principal Lyda Wilbur said that meant only 4 students were identified as gifted that year—none of them English-learners.

"Intuitively, it feels like having teachers and other stakeholders provide

enrolled in gifted and talented programs. This analysis did not include juvenile justice facilities, but did include schools serving all grade levels. We also compared enrollment of English-learners in schools that reported providing gifted education to their enrollment at schools that do not have gifted programs.

**There's newer or different information on gifted education available from my state, district, or school. Why not use that?**

We used 2013-14 data because it's the most recent data that allow us to conduct a comparative examination of gifted education across the nation as a whole.

The Civil Rights Data Collection does not include information on state laws related to gifted education in schools, and state definitions of gifted education may differ from that used by the federal government. For data that seemed questionable, *Education Week* also asked state education department officials to review the data and supply any corrections or changes that could be supported by additional evidence. Additionally, the CRDC rounds some student counts to protect individuals from being identified, which may also may affect the results.

nominations is a way of broadening the pool, but that's not what it does at all; it narrows the pool tremendously," said Matthew McBee, a gifted education researcher and an assistant professor of experimental psychology at East Tennessee State University.

In 2016, McBee and Michael Matthews, the program director for the academically and intellectually gifted graduate program at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, co-authored a study that found school systems that relied on teachers and parents to nominate students to be tested for giftedness missed more than 60 percent of gifted students, compared with systems that screened all students at least once.

"We know we have gifted students in our building—it's a matter of finding them," Wilbur said.

That frustration drove the district to overhaul its gifted education from top to bottom. Tulsa now requires every 2nd grader to take the CogAT, a four-part test of verbal and nonverbal ability; and in schools like Mitchell, gifted and ELL teachers have partnered to translate the test for students who do not speak English well enough to read it. The district also added other tests, including the Naglieri Nonverbal Ability Test, which was developed specifically to identify potentially talented children with lower-level English-language skills.

Starting next year, Tulsa will also target English-learners who show faster-than-average growth on the state English-language-proficiency test. According to Matthews, that's a strategy that shows strong potential as a way of identifying gifted students, as they often learn languages more quickly than other students.

The district still asks teachers and parents to recommend students with potential, but they have become more systematic. For example, twice a year Mitchell asks all parents to fill out behavioral checklists in English or Spanish on their child, which are used to scout potentially talented students who

hadn't shown up on the screening tests.

"We triangulate all our tests and data and say, 'Who is not being recommended? Why is this child not on our radar?' " Wilbur said.

## **Seeing Past Language**

At McClure Elementary, where today 1 in 4 students is an English-learner, and at Marshall Elementary, where the English-learner ratio is 1-to-5, gifted facilitator Patrice O'Dea has been working with ELL teachers to start identifying gifted English-learners even earlier than 2nd grade. First graders who show promise but do not necessarily have perfect grades join an "explorers club" that works on science- and technology-related group projects in school for a few hours a week during the year, while O'Dea observes.

"In math and science, they catch on to the concepts really fast," she said. "I might explain something four or six times for a regular kid. For gifted, I explain once, and they get it."

That's common, according to Rachael Mun, a gifted-education researcher at the University of North Texas. "If you look at individual domains [to identify gifted students], you would capture a lot more [English-learner] students, particularly if you could bypass some of the language barriers we put up," Mun said. "If you have students who are gifted in math or science, ... you should really be working to serve them in that area, while still working on the areas where they aren't as advanced."

O'Dea recalled one 1st grade English-learner from a high-poverty, Hispanic and Native American background.

"She was one I did not identify right away; she just was quiet, very reserved, so she didn't stand out," O'Dea recalled. After two years in the explorers club, the girl regularly led her classmates in projects and eventually tested into the gifted program.

"Her ability to articulate thoughts and ideas to others her age, is just going gangbusters," O'Dea said.

The increased outreach has infused more life into the district's gifted program overall. After Tulsa's gifted enrollment fell from more than 5,400 in 2014 to 4,100 in 2016, in keeping with falling overall enrollment, it had risen again to 4,500 by this spring. For the first time this year, every elementary and middle school had at least a part-time gifted education instructor, Van Eman said.

In Mitchell, the program has grown from fewer than 20 students in 2014 to more than 50 today, with a majority of them English-learners.

The future of gifted education in general is uncertain, though. Most states are still in the early stages of reaching for equity in gifted education. President Donald Trump rolled back Obama administration regulations fleshing out how states should implement the federal education law's accountability changes, and his fiscal 2018 budget proposal would eliminate \$12 million in federal gifted education grants.

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