

Assessing the Impact of a Proposed Rule Change on the Identification of Gifted English Language Learners

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How would Florida's proposed change to a unitary gifted rule affect gifted learners who are also classified as limited English proficient? Data collected as part of a study now in progress at the University of South Florida in Tampa offers some sobering empirical input on the potential impact of this change on these traditionally underserved gifted learners. Because Florida is the fourth largest U.S. state in terms of K-12 population, changes implemented here may influence educational policies in other states.

Florida's current system for identification of gifted learners has two tracks. Under this current rule, which has been in effect in its present form since 2002, mainstream students must meet an IQ requirement of 130 or higher. Alternative criteria are allowed for students who are classified as limited English proficient (LEP) or who are of low socioeconomic status, as indicated by their eligibility for free or reduced-price school lunch. Note that the LEP designation is being changed to the less deficit-oriented term "English language learner", which is preferred; since LEP has been the official term used in archival records, I use both terms in this article.

The current gifted rule allows Florida school districts to design a plan for increasing the number of LEP or low-SES students, known informally as 'Plan B' after its heading in the state rule. Districts choosing to develop Plan B criteria may set their own IQ cutoff for these two groups of learners, and may include additional elements such as creativity and leadership that are not given separate consideration in the criteria used to identify mainstream gifted learners. Both plan options also require a behavioral checklist of gifted indicators and evidence of need for a special program, but in practice the IQ cutoff is often the primary criterion in identification. The text of both the current rule and the proposed revision are available online from the Florida Department of State (2006).

The state rule allows districts to develop Plan B procedures, but such plans no longer were mandated when race and ethnicity were dropped from Plan B in the 2002 revision of the gifted rule. Currently, 43 of Florida's 67 districts have developed Plan B documents. The remaining districts chose not to develop a Plan B. At least two of the Plan B documents currently in use do not require any minimum IQ score if other criteria are met, while the remainder require minimum IQ scores ranging from 110 to 118 (along with other evidence) to qualify a low income or LEP learner for gifted services.

The proposed rule revision would identify learners for gifted programs using IQ scores on a sliding scale together with scores from the Florida Comprehensive Achievement Test (FCAT), the state's NCLB achievement test. Under the revision, students with IQ scores at or above 130 would also be required to demonstrate high performance on a

standardized achievement test; this could be either a 4 or 5 on the reading or math score of the FCAT, or a reading or math score at the 85th percentile or higher on any nationally-normed test. This change represents a departure from current practice that likely will preclude the identification of underachieving gifted learners. A five on the FCAT in either reading or math would be required for students whose IQ scores fell between 120 and 130, and no IQ score below 120 would qualify for gifted services.

There are some theoretical problems with using achievement test results to determine giftedness. We know that gifted students from disadvantaged backgrounds are best identified early-on, as waiting until higher grades risks losing these learners as more-advantaged peers show greater academic growth. Furthermore, the ceiling on standardized grade-level tests may not be high enough to identify gifted learners. This is particularly a problem on state-level tests, some of which appear to be getting easier every year (see Matthews, 2006). Furthermore, the standardized testing mandated by NCLB begins at third grade, potentially leaving out students in grades K-2. The proposed gifted rule addresses this by allowing "an above-average score on a research-based reading assessment" (Florida Department of State, 2006, ¶ 3.a.2). The proportion of English language learners who would meet this criterion is unclear, but high English reading ability would likely have kept a student from being designated LEP in the first place.

For students who are learning the English language in school, perhaps a more serious problem lies in the heavy language demands that standardized achievement tests present. Florida law recognizes this by allowing the LEP committee to exempt students whose LEP classification date falls within one year of the FCAT testing. We know that whether or not a person speaks English has little bearing on their intelligence, and we also know that LEP students who are tested are unlikely to achieve the high levels of FCAT performance that the proposed gifted rule would ask of them. A quick look at the 2007 FCAT results (see <http://www.fcatresults.com/demog/GetReport.aspx>) confirms this suspicion; while 8 percent of third and fourth graders statewide scored in the highest of the five FCAT proficiency levels in reading, just one percent of English language learners obtained scores in this category. In grades 6-11, zero percent of English language learners statewide had scores in achievement level five, while between two and eleven percent of all students fell into this highest category in reading achievement. This suggests that all English language learners in grades 6 and higher could only be identified as gifted if their IQ score was in the 130+ range, and only then if they made a 4 on the FCAT assessment.

Not having access to FCAT scores at the student level, I was curious to examine the question from another perspective. What would the impact of raising the IQ score to a minimum of 120 have on the population of English language learners determined eligible for gifted services? Table 1 shows the distribution of IQ scores for a population of elementary LEP students (N = 432) who were referred for possible placement in the gifted program. Each of these students had obtained a score of at least 120 on a screening test, most commonly the K-BIT II, before being referred for an individual evaluation by the school psychologist.

Table 1. IQ score distribution for LEP students referred for possible gifted program placement

IQ Score Range	N	%
≤104	28	6.5
105-109	23	5.3
110-114	25	5.8
115-119	124	28.7
120-124	82	19.0
125-129	58	13.4
130-134	57	13.2
135+	35	8.1

Note: Population mean = 121.1

There are several interesting things here. First, a criticism sometimes expressed by teachers in Florida schools is that students identified under Plan B criteria somehow 'do not really belong' in the gifted program. As these data make clear, one in four of the students now identified under Plan B would also be eligible under the 130 IQ standard applied to mainstream gifted learners.

Second, the majority of these students' scores fall in the range of 115-119. This is probably consistent with some regression to the mean, which might be expected given the IQ 120

screening cutoff that was in use when these scores were collected. Since three quarters of those screened met the IQ 115 criterion for gifted program entry used in this district's Plan B, the screening score could probably be set a bit lower to increase the number of LEP students referred for gifted evaluation without substantially increasing the proportion tested who do not meet the 115+ placement criterion.

The same evidence suggests that implementing a statewide requirement for a minimum IQ score of 120 for all learners would substantially reduce the number of English language learners found eligible for gifted programs in Florida. More than one third (34.8%) of the English language learners currently eligible for gifted services would no longer be considered gifted under the new proposed rule. When one considers that an FCAT score of 5 would be required for the 120 minimum score to apply, and that an extremely low proportion of ELL students achieve a score in this range, it becomes apparent that we would miss many more gifted English language learners if the new criteria were adopted; a loss of half or even three quarters of the current population of these diverse gifted learners would be likely. More than 250 individuals in this one district alone might no longer qualify for gifted services, representing a loss of dozens of home languages and myriad diverse perspectives. The loss of these students would not only harm their educational achievement; it also would diminish the experiences of mainstream gifted learners, who would no longer be exposed to the perspectives these English language learners bring as peers in their gifted classes.

We all would like to be able to think that important educational decisions are made only after careful empirical study of the complex implications of these issues. However, the reality often is different; politically motivated changes often trump those based on reasoned analysis. As researchers in gifted education, we have a responsibility to publicize our work to the larger audience of legislators, district personnel, and state education agencies whose decisions affect education, and through education, our larger society. ❖

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