

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**EQUAL TALENTS,  
UNEQUAL OPPORTUNITIES:**

*A Report Card on State Support for  
Academically Talented Low-Income Students*



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Year after year, in every state and community in our nation, students from low-income families are less likely than other students to reach advanced levels of academic performance, even when demonstrating the potential to do so. These income-based “excellence gaps” appear in elementary school and continue through high school. It is a story of demography predetermining destiny, with bright low-income students becoming what one research team referred to as a “persistent talent underclass.”<sup>1</sup>

Low-income students, recently estimated to be roughly half of our public school population,<sup>2</sup> are much less likely to achieve academic excellence or, when identified as high-ability, more likely to backslide as they progress through school.<sup>3</sup> Recent studies highlight the numerous educational advantages students in higher-income families receive, from hearing more vocabulary words from their parents to taking part in extracurricular activities and attending schools with more experienced teachers and smaller class sizes.<sup>4</sup> In light of these disparities, schools can play an important role in equalizing opportunities. Through educating the nation’s youth, our schools cultivate our next generation’s talent, and students who do well in school are more likely to become productive contributors to society. By setting state-wide policies encouraging excellence, states can encourage all schools to provide advanced learning opportunities for high-ability students.

This report examines the performance of America’s high-ability students, with an emphasis on those who come from low-income backgrounds. The report examines a range of state-level interventions that are intended to foster academic talent, with the goal of identifying the policies currently in use that should be implemented more widely. Working with an expert advisory panel, the project team identified a range of indicators related to state-level policy inputs and student outcomes. Ultimately, 18 indicators were included in the analyses, representing nine distinct state-level policies and nine specific student outcomes. All data were collected at the state level, as we believe that changes to state-level policies are most likely to improve the country’s education of high-ability students, especially students from low-income families. States were then graded on both their policy interventions and their student outcomes.

The initial results (see maps on page 3) are not encouraging. Few states have comprehensive policies in place to address the education of talented students, let alone the education of high-performing students from low-income families. In this state policy vacuum, support for advanced learning rests on local districts, schools, and families. The opportunities available to low-income students are decidedly restricted and limiting.

Without significant differences in state interventions to support advanced education, student performance outcomes at the advanced level appear to be normally distributed across states—as one would expect in the absence of attention to talent development. Our data suggest a correlation between state demographics and outcomes—higher poverty states tend to have lower outcomes. Not surprisingly, large excellence gaps (differences in performance between low-income and other students) exist in nearly all states.

This is both unacceptable and incompatible with America’s long-term prosperity. The vibrancy of our economy depends on intellectual talent, our quality of life is enriched by it, and the moral code of our society is based on the free exchange of creative ideas. We must ensure that talent is developed equally in all communities, starting with ensuring that all students have access to advanced educational offerings.

Yet there are reasons for optimism. Talent development is becoming a concern of policymakers, and many of the necessary policies identified by the expert panel and in the research literature are relatively low cost and easy to implement. Several states lead the nation in producing higher percentages of talented students, and many states appear to have the structures in place to begin addressing student talent development more effectively.

To help states build on this groundwork, the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation plans to conduct this survey periodically, with an increasingly broadened set of indicators and data sources, to inform the national dialogue about how best to educate our most advanced students, especially those from low-income families. As a starting point, we offer the following recommendations to states:

1 Plucker, J., Hardesty, J. & Burroughs, N. (2013) *Talent on the Sidelines: Excellence Gaps and America’s Persistent Talent Underclass*.

2 Southern Education Foundation (January 2015) Research Bulletin *A New Majority: Low Income Students Now a Majority in the Nation’s Public Schools*. <http://www.southerneducation.org/getattachment/4ac62e27-5260-47a5-9d02-14896ec3a531/A-New-Majority-2015-Update-Low-Income-Students-Now.aspx>

3 Josh Wyner, John Bridgeland and John J. DiIulio, Jr. (2008) *Achievement Trap: How America Is Failing Millions of High-Achieving Students from Lower-Income Families*. Jack Kent Cooke Foundation.

Yun Xiang, Michael Dahlin, John Cronin, Robert Theaker, and Sarah Durant (2011) *Do High Flyers Maintain Their Altitude? Performance Trends of Top Students*. Thomas B Fordham Institute and Northwest Evaluation Association.

4 Kornirich, S. and Furstenberk, F. (2011) *Investing in Children: Changes in Parental Spending on Children, 1972 to 2007*. Duncan, G. and Murnane, R. (2011) *Whither Opportunity? Rising Inequality, Schools, and Children’s Life Chances*. New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation.

**RECOMMENDATION 1:**

**Make high-performing students highly visible.**

Require local education agencies (LEAs) to identify high-ability students and their income levels and collect data on their performance over time, especially those who are low-income. When releasing state data on student outcomes, ensure that the performance of high-achieving students is highlighted.

**RECOMMENDATION 2:**

**Remove barriers that prevent high-ability students from moving through coursework at a pace that matches their achievement level.**

Require LEAs to allow and encourage a range of academic acceleration options, such as early entrance to kindergarten, acceleration between grades, dual enrollment in middle school and high school (with middle school students able to earn high school credit), and early graduation from high school.

**RECOMMENDATION 3:**

**Ensure that all high-ability students have access to advanced educational services.**

States can and should take the lead in promoting educational excellence. Require services for gifted and talented students, require all educators to have exposure to the needs of advanced students in teacher and administrator preparation coursework, and monitor and audit LEA gifted and talented programs for quality. Increase opportunities for dual enrollment and AP courses.

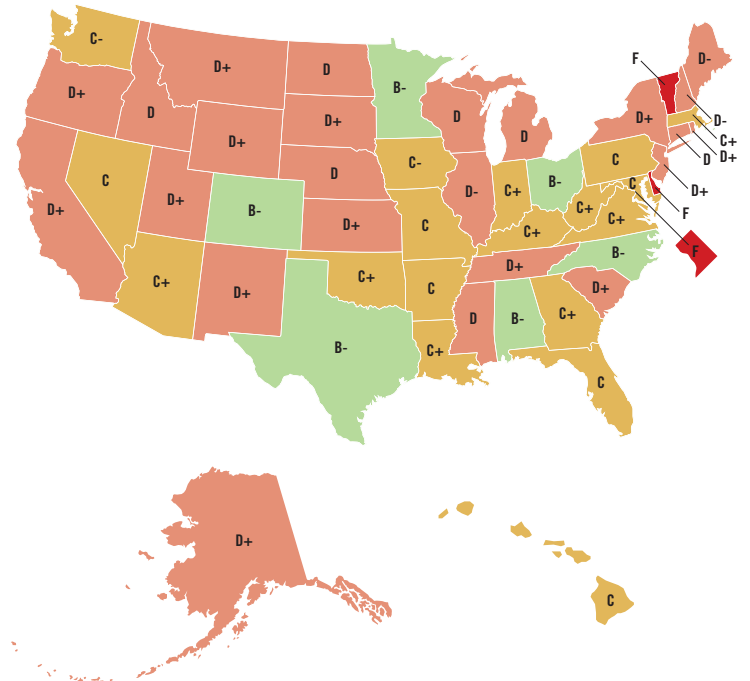
**RECOMMENDATION 4:**

**Hold LEAs accountable for the performance of high-ability students from all economic backgrounds.**

State K-12 accountability systems often drive the discussion of priorities in local school districts, and those systems should include measures of growth for high-ability students and other indicators of excellence, including distinct indicators for high-ability, low-income students.

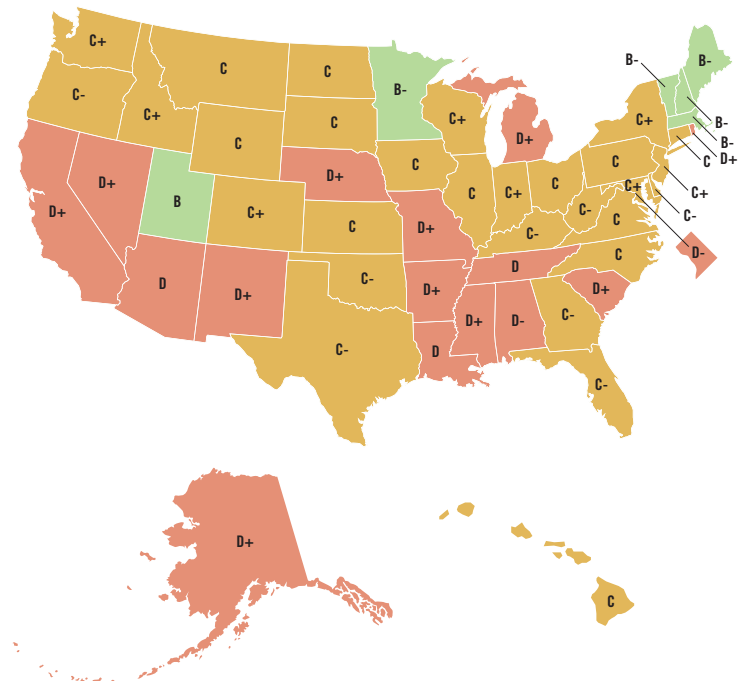
**INPUT GRADES:**

**State Policy Support for Advanced Learning**



**OUTCOME GRADES:**

**Advanced Student Performance and Excellence Gaps**



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