

# High-Achieving Countries Leave America Behind

*It's time to stop ignoring smart kids*

## Failing Our Brightest Kids: The Global Challenge of Educating High-Ability Students

by Chester E. Finn, Jr. and Brandon L. Wright

Harvard Education Press, 2015, \$64; 288 pages.

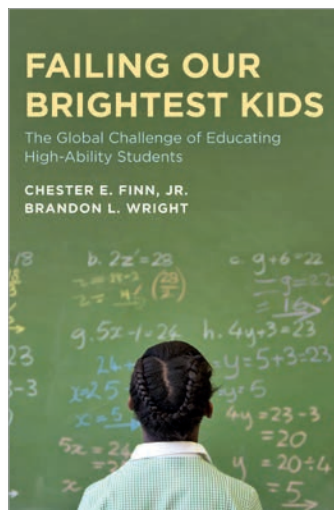
As reviewed by Mark Bauerlein

Imagine what would happen if a school district instituted the following policy.

All 3rd graders have the opportunity to take an exam that tests math and reading skills plus general aptitude. If, as expected, around two-thirds of the students opt in, the district will select the top 8 percent of scorers for another round of tests two months later. From that group, the top 10 to 15 percent will be admitted to a gifted program made up of schools-within-schools across the district, with their own teachers and curriculum, smaller classes, and special resources. In effect, around 1 percent of the primary school population receives gifted instruction.

That's not all. At the end of grade 6, the gifted students will be tested again to determine their fitness for gifted education at the secondary level. Those who make the cut will enter college-oriented programs with special benefits (custom-trained teachers, outside mentoring, international exchanges) and a subsidy from the district to cover any school fees.

How would such a program be received in the United States? With cries of elitism and inequality and the "1 percent." Everybody would complain except the parents of the chosen few. In



America, all the energy seems to center on low performers, not high ones. As Chester Finn and Brandon Wright note in this study of high-ability education, No Child Left Behind "focused entirely on low-achieving students," and former U.S. secretary of education Arne Duncan repeatedly spotlighted schools in "the lowest-performing 5 percent." The academic establishment, too, disdains gifted programs, one professor at a top university telling the authors that "his school's placement office wouldn't think of sending graduates anywhere but into the most troubled and disadvantaged settings." Why should we devote money and labor to kids who are already doing fine when so many others struggle with poverty, racism, second-language and cultural-relevance barriers, not to mention low literacy and numeracy?

It's a settled attitude in America today, a value-laden commitment to social justice that leaves the brightest kids unattended. To change that view is a daunting task, Finn and Wright

acknowledge. It means persuading people that a student who is so smart that ordinary instruction leaves him bored and unchallenged is just as much a calamity as a student whose ability and preparation make the same instruction so far above him as to be worthless.

The argument begins with a comparison. On international tests, as everyone knows, students in the United States perform, on average, well below those of Singapore, Finland, South Korea, and other developed countries. When we tabulate only the high-performing kids, things look worse. Finn and Wright calculate how many students in the United States reach high achievement on the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development's Program on International Student Assessment (PISA) exams and come up with only 9 percent in math, 7 percent in science, and 8 percent in reading. On this measure, in the pool of 34 nations participating in PISA, the U.S. ranks 28th, 21st, and 19th, respectively. Taiwan, for instance, quadruples our math rate (37 percent), while Australia doubles the science rate (14 percent).

In one aspect, the gap in high-performer rates is more important than the gap in average scores. High performers drive innovation. "At the forefront of creation, invention, and discovery are—nearly always—the society's cleverest, ablest, and best-educated men and women," the authors say. In developed countries in the 21st century, which increasingly prize cognitive skills, what happens in school among the top 10 percent likely has greater socioeconomic

## Singapore's poorest kids far outperform the highest-income quartile in the U.S.!

impact than what happens among the other 90 percent.

All of us need these talented individuals, and to cultivate them we should examine how other countries do it. The bulk of *Failing Our Brightest Kids* does precisely that. Finn toured the world in 2012–13, doing advance reconnaissance work before making site visits in 11 countries in Europe and Asia. Each country gets a chapter that details policies for primary and secondary levels, efforts to ensure access to gifted programs for less-advantaged students, and direct reports on what he actually saw and heard in classrooms.

The scenario laid out above is, in fact, how Singapore runs its gifted program. And high achievement extends well beyond the students deemed gifted. Singapore ranks at the top of international tests—fully 40 percent of its students reach PISA's upper levels. Even more impressively, 21 percent of Singapore students in the lowest socioeconomic quartile reach the two highest tiers on the PISA math test. That means Singapore's poorest kids far outperform the highest-income quartile in the U.S.! It puts Singapore at the forefront of educational equity.

Other nations that do better than the United States offer other ideas—and warnings, too. In Taiwan, whose Ministry of Education declares, “The gifted brain is the country's most precious resource and core power of social progress,” gifted education is part of the larger special-education program that addresses students on both sides of the talent bell curve. Korea has several high schools for the gifted but can't come close to meeting demand. The school Finn visited had 2,250 applications for 93 slots. Indeed, the competition has produced a national “education fever” that prompts some school leaders to consider withdrawing from gifted instruction entirely. In Switzerland, policies

vary from one locality to the next, and admissions tend to be more personalized through teacher recommendations than through standardized tests. Only two cantons use IQ measures. Finland is able to meet the needs of high-ability students, to some extent at least, by employing “exceptionally well-prepared teachers whose skills include the capacity to differentiate their instruction according to the needs, capacities, and prior achievement of their pupils.” In Hungary, people can earmark 1 percent of their annual tax payment to gifted instruction.

The profiles are informative, and they offer school officials examples to follow and the rhetoric to justify them. Finn and Wright end with 10 recommendations of their own (“Moves America Should Make”), which include

- tracking high-performer data more thoroughly
- universal screening through

achievement tests and teacher recommendations to identify the top 10 percent

- afterschool programs of independent study
- more acceleration and early graduation
- more training of teachers in gifted education.

These are sound ideas, but one wonders whether the United States suffers a resistance that the other nations do not. What if the gifted 10 percent proves racially disproportionate—Asians vastly overrepresented, whites somewhat, and blacks and Hispanics far underrepresented? Finn and Wright hint at the problem several times, but shift the focus to efforts to overcome socioeconomic disadvantage. We need a fuller accounting of race if we want school leaders to sign on. In their world, racial disparities are frightening. Given the persistent gap on every test of cognitive skills, there is no way to make the disproportions disappear entirely.

This brings us back to the old challenge of out-of-school conditions. How do we produce more gifted students when so many American kids, especially poor and minority youths, inhabit worlds utterly contrary to giftedness—homes with too much TV and no books, anti-intellectual peer pressure, and absent or derelict parents? To Finn and Wright's on-campus recommendations we must add outreach programs—say, volunteers recruited from high schools to read to toddlers an hour a day. If gifted programs, which look all too white and Asian, can be joined to gifted-development programs that will lean black and Hispanic, then we may have a political breakthrough that benefits everyone.

*Mark Bauerlein is professor of English at Emory University.*



“Try to think of each sentence as a tweet sent by a celebrity named William Shakespeare.”