

Initiative to Leave No Child Behind Leaves Out Gifted

**Educators Divert Resources
From Classes for Smartest
To Focus on Basic Literacy**

By **DANIEL GOLDEN**
Staff Reporter of **THE WALL STREET JOURNAL**

SPRINGFIELD, Ill. -- To make sure even the most disadvantaged students learn the three R's, Congress two years ago passed a law known as No Child Left Behind. National test scores suggest it is indeed helping the weakest students.

There's just one problem: It may be leaving behind some of the strongest.

The 2001 law, championed by the Bush administration, calls for all public-school students to be proficient in reading and math by 2014. Schools must make steady progress toward these goals. They face penalties if they don't continually raise their proportion of proficient students, both overall and within various racial and other categories. Schools that miss milestones can be required to pay for outside tutors and let parents transfer children elsewhere. But a school faces no penalty if top students tail off as long as they remain proficient.

To abide by the law, schools are shifting resources away from programs that help their most gifted students. Because "all the incentives in No Child Left Behind are to focus on the bottom or the middle," says Stanford University education professor Michael Kirst, "reallocating resources there makes sense if you want to stay out of trouble."

Illinois eliminated its \$19 million in state funding for gifted-student programs this year, spurring Springfield and some other school districts to trim their offerings for top students. California reduced funding for such initiatives by \$10 million, or 18%, a deeper cut than the cash-strapped state imposed in most other education programs.



Devion Ross

In Connecticut, which doesn't provide state funding for gifted-student education, 22% of school districts last year reduced or abolished programs they had been funding on their own. And East Providence, R.I., where several schools fall short of goals set by the No Child Left Behind law, plans to drop a program for the most promising elementary and middle schoolers, while increasing funds for reading initiatives. Officials and advocates for the gifted in all of these places cite the No Child Left Behind law as causing or at least contributing to the cutbacks.

This shift in the delicate balance between the pursuits of excellence and of equality may create a more knowledgeable U.S. citizenry overall. That's a goal important to economic competitiveness and a flourishing democracy. But reducing programs for the best students also could make it harder to replenish -- and diversify -- the country's ranks of top intellectuals and scientists.

The effects may be felt most by gifted low-income minority pupils whose parents don't have the option of shifting them to private schools or providing outside enrichment to compensate for cutbacks. Moreover, the priority changes wrought by the law are coming just as districts had been making progress in identifying and nurturing brainy minority students, who've long been underrepresented in such programs.

Seven-year-old Devion Ross lives in a ramshackle house opposite a pawnshop in Springfield. He and an older brother recently slept several nights on bare mattresses in a front room because a raccoon had gnawed through their bedroom ceiling.

In kindergarten, Devion scored in the 99th percentile on an intelligence test, making him the only African-American at his elementary school to qualify for services for gifted children. In first grade, during weekly sessions with a specialist, he arranged cubes in intricate patterns and solved logic puzzles designed for older students.

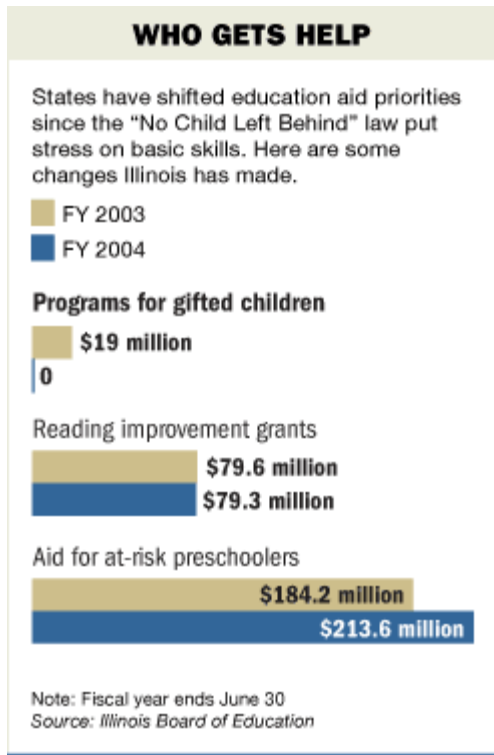
But this fall, Springfield dropped that program after state funding for it vanished. Devion now daydreams in the back of his second-grade class, rarely raising his hand. His report card brims with "unsatisfactory" grades, he often fails to hand in homework, and he has been suspended four times. His mother says he is bored and needs "that one-on-one attention."

"I believe we could do away with affirmative action [in college admissions] if the needs of these young, bright minority children are met at an early age," says Susan Rhodes, gifted-education coordinator in Springfield. "But No Child Left Behind leaves them behind, because it doesn't let us spend money on children already meeting the standards."

Test scores seem to reflect the shift in priorities. In the National Assessment of Educational Progress, low-achieving public-school fourth and eighth graders have posted larger gains since 2000 than top students. In fourth-grade reading, for example, the bottom 10% of students jumped 10 points on a 500-point scale. The top 10% of students showed only a two-point gain. In eighth-grade math, the bottom 10% of students rose seven points, compared with just one point for the top 10%.

Eugene Hickok, acting U.S. deputy secretary of education, says top students made smaller gains because "it's easier to bring a student up from an F to a C

than it is from a B-plus to an A." The Bush administration's highest education priority is to narrow the achievement gap between minority and white students, the official says.



Mr. Hickok says No Child Left Behind may unearth some diamonds in the rough: gifted students scoring below proficiency level. School districts shouldn't use the law as an excuse for shortchanging the brightest of any race, he says: "It's a false dichotomy. If they get rid of the achievement gap, the entire school should improve."

One reason gifted-child education is vulnerable to cutbacks is that the U.S. government doesn't mandate programs for the three million or so students considered to be in the category. The federal contribution is limited to \$11.2 million a year for research and state grants. More than half of states require districts to offer gifted-student programs, but few provide enough state aid to cover the cost. Even so, many school districts set up such programs over the years, including "magnet" schools, regular sessions of independent study and museum tours.

Now, they're making hard choices. The Plymouth, Mass., district last year began dismantling a program for gifted students. It reassigned the program's three teachers to regular classrooms. One Plymouth school principal, Lyman Goding, says resources needed to be shifted because some schools barely meet No Child Left Behind targets in math. Plymouth also is paying teachers \$100 a day to tutor struggling students during summers and school vacations.

Before Plymouth's program for the gifted was discontinued, eighth-grader Marina Ramsay says she studied everything from robotics to the stock market. She won first prize in the state science fair for a project on the effects of magnetic fields on plants. Now her classes rarely excite her. In science this year, Marina says, she was assigned to "memorize the order of the planets in the solar system. I learned that in kindergarten." Her parents are considering teaching her at home next year.

Meanwhile, Fairview Elementary in High Point, N.C. -- 85% black or Hispanic and 95% from low-income families -- has raised its proficiency rate sharply by intensively tutoring low achievers. Only one segment has lagged. "The group here that did the worst was our academically gifted children," says Carol Forsyth, a third-grade teacher.

Illinois, in addition to eliminating last year's grants for gifted-child education, stopped requiring districts to identify top students and develop programs for them. Brenda Holmes, an education aide to Gov. Rod Blagojevich, says he figured that identifying preschoolers at risk of failure was especially important, and \$29 million more went to that task. Gail Lieberman, federal liaison for the state board of education, says these spending shifts also reflected the impact of No Child Left Behind.

The Jefferson Middle School in Springfield landed on a watch list for showing insufficient progress under the law. It responded by targeting 60 low-scoring students for improvement and putting them in classes of just 20. The move increased high achievers' class sizes to 30 or more.

English teacher Barbara Boosinger, a former Jefferson "teacher of the year," says that though she prefers teaching high achievers, she switched to the lower track because of the smaller classes. "No Child Left Behind is a real joke, because children are going to be left behind," she says. "It may be the ones in the higher track, because they didn't get the individual attention they needed."

In Springfield, as in much of the country, white children have long been overrepresented in gifted-student programs. Donna Ford, an Ohio State professor who has studied the issue, cites several reasons. She mentions a lack of referrals of promising minority students by some white teachers, possible cultural bias in tests, and a reluctance by some black and Hispanic students to participate because "they don't think it's cool."

A federal survey in 2000 found that blacks made up 17% of public-school students but only 8.2% of those in programs for the gifted. For Hispanics, the figures were 16% of all students and 9.6% of those in programs for the gifted.

By contrast, whites made up 62% of public-school students and 74% of gifted-education pupils. Asians, while just 4.1% of all students, made up 7.1% of those in programs for the gifted. Gaps in Illinois are similar.

Kendra Lockhart was among low-income minority students to benefit from the full array of services Springfield once offered for gifted children. Kendra was reared by her grandparents because her mother couldn't afford to support her. In small groups in their neighborhood schools, she and other talented students met in weekly sessions with Ms. Rhodes, Springfield's gifted-education coordinator. Ms. Rhodes nurtured Kendra's interest in science by taking her to meet doctors and observe laboratory research at Southern Illinois School of Medicine.

In 1999-2000, Kendra transferred to a magnet school Springfield had set up for gifted children. She was one of three blacks in a sixth-grade class of 28.

At first, Kendra says, she floundered academically there. She was so lonely she argued with others in hopes of being sent back to her neighborhood school. But when her family told her she had to stay in the magnet school, known as Iles Elementary, "I figured I might as well start getting along," she says. Persistence paid off, and she scored 197 out of 200 in the state eighth-grade math test. Now she's a Springfield High sophomore, and the only black in her German class. She hopes to become a psychologist.

Recently, Springfield has made strides toward diversity in gifted-student education. All kindergarteners now take the Naglieri Nonverbal Ability Test, which requires them to detect patterns of geometric shapes and aims to eliminate the influence of parental education and socioeconomic status. "It levels the playing field," says the test's developer, Jack Naglieri of George Mason University in Fairfax, Va. Top scorers on the test, along with high-achievers nominated by teachers, are eligible for Springfield's gifted-student services.

Devion Ross scored 141 out of a possible 150 on the test as a kindergartener in January 2002. At home, he often reads or does word puzzles while his friends play outside. He is writing a book of several chapters on the family's 10-year-old computer, which was bought second-hand for \$100 and has a broken mouse. "I like to read books all day long," he says. "I'm the only one I know that writes stories. It's a special secret I keep."

His first chapter, called "The Three Boys," displays a flair for math. "One day, three boys named B.J., Maurice and Stanley wanted to go to the bowling alley. But they had \$98 and it cost \$202 to get in the bowling alley," the story reads in part. "So they went to their mom and their mom gave them \$202 and they had \$300 and they got in the bowling alley."

Devion's high Naglieri score brought him an invitation to attend the magnet school last year. His parents didn't follow up on it. His mother, Lasand, says she missed the appointment, exhausted from working an overnight shift as a caretaker. His father, Steven, was recently laid off from a bookbinding job. The five-member family has a \$12,000 annual income, say the parents, both of whom have high-school equivalency diplomas.

Devion would have continued having weekly sessions with a specialist in gifted-child education. That was before Illinois -- its priorities under pressure from the No Child Left Behind law -- ended its grant for gifted education. Springfield had used its share of the grant to fund the weekly sessions. Deprived of the money, it ended them.

The discontinued program had served as many as 550 talented students a year. That's more than twice as many as in the Iles magnet school, which wasn't funded by the state gifted-education grant and therefore was largely unaffected.

Devion attends class in a middle-class white neighborhood, under a desegregation plan. His second-grade teacher there, Paula Gruebel, says she is unaware of his Naglieri score. She says she doesn't look at intelligence-test results for fear of prejudging students.

Specialists in gifted children say some exhibit behavior problems and inattention when their intellectual needs aren't met, and Devion seems to fit that mold. He has been barred from two field trips because of misbehavior. Mrs. Gruebel says he is "extremely bright, but he's not doing the work he can do" and often doesn't follow directions.

She recently told the class to write to Mickey Mouse, congratulating the cartoon character on his 75th birthday and on being a good role model. "Second-graders have to learn how to write a friendly letter," she said.

Devion began the heading, but Mrs. Gruebel corrected him for putting the date on the top-left side of the page instead of the top-right. He changed it, but then lost interest. Afterward, Devion said the assignment bored him because he prefers Pokemon to Mickey Mouse: "I could write 100 pages about Pokemon. A whole book."

Devion may soon get more instruction that's geared to his abilities. Although the Iles magnet school is so crowded it rarely accepts transfers, after The Wall Street Journal began looking at Devion's situation, he was invited to transfer in. He is expected to start there Jan. 5.

Write to Daniel Golden at dan.golden@wsj.com

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