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## Brightest Stall, Low Achievers Gain

*Some Say Top Students Need Attention Given to Weaker Performers, as Smart Kids' Scores Barely Move*

By **STEPHANIE BANCHERO**

A national focus on the lowest-achieving students has helped boost their academic performance, but it has left the country's brightest young minds behind, prompting calls to rethink how schools teach top kids.

Recent data, including results released last week from national math and reading exams, show high achievers are stagnating and falling behind their international counterparts.

### Teaching the Gifted at Da Vinci Academy



Erik S. Lesser for The Wall Street Journal

A scene in the halls of Hall County Schools' Da Vinci Academy for gifted students in Gainesville, Ga.D



Some students are growing more skeptical of the investment return of an undergraduate college education, discouraged as they see recent graduates struggle to find jobs and increasingly default on their loans. Melissa Korn has details on Lunch Break.

A report by the National Association for Gifted Children released this week said public schools deny top-performing children the resources, properly trained teachers and coherent policies they need to excel. It called for policy changes that don't require additional spending, such as holding schools accountable for the scores of the top-fliers.

"There is this myth that gifted and talented children will be fine on their own," said Jane Clarenbach, director of the National Association for Gifted Children, a nonprofit advocacy group. "But I think history is showing us that this is not true, and we now have a crisis in this nation where our top achievers are being ignored."

Proponents of gifted education say a preoccupation with the lowest performers has relegated the most promising students to unchallenging classrooms. They point to the 1990s effort to "mainstream" gifted students who previously had been taught in separate classes, and to the 2002 No Child Left Behind law, which put intense focus on the lowest achievers.

A Wall Street Journal analysis of national elementary and high school reading, writing, math and social studies exams shows dramatic progress—sometimes double-digit increases—for the lowest achievers over the last two decades, especially after No Child Left Behind. But the scores of the brightest students have, for the most part, inched up marginally or stalled.

In fourth-grade reading, for example, the average score of

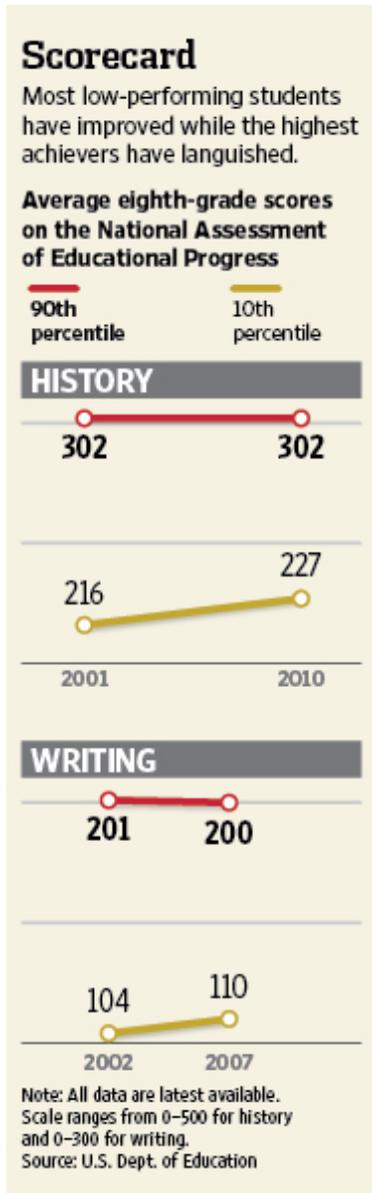


Peter Thiel, founder of Clarium Capital and The Thiel Foundation, explains why young Americans need to be encouraged to take on more risk to spur innovation and why the cost of a U.S. education is hindering that.

students in the lowest 10% was 174 out of 500 in 2011, up 15 points from 2000. The score of students in the top 10% was 264, statistically unchanged since 2000 at 262.

In fact, of the 17 subject exams given in elementary and high school over the last decade, top-scoring kids showed progress on only four: fourth and eighth grade math, and minimal gains in 8th and 12th grade reading. Meantime, the lowest achievers improved on 11 exams.

Among all U.S. students, the average national scores on most exams have ticked up slightly, except for elementary school math, where students have made double-digit gains.



Only 10% of U.S. students scored in the top tier on the math and science portions of the 2009 Program for International Student Assessment, an international exam, behind many other developed countries, including South Korea, Finland and Canada.

Ulrich Boser, a senior fellow at the Center for American Progress, a liberal think tank, said top achievers shouldn't be ignored but that the lowest achievers are "historically underserved" and get less than their share of resources and the time highly effective teachers. "We need to focus our attention and make the most gains with these students," he said.

The gifted association's report found that only 31 states require schools to identify gifted and talented children. Twenty-six states mandate targeted services for top achievers and 23 set aside funding for such students.

And even though the majority of the nation's estimated three million gifted and talented students are taught in general-education classrooms, only six states require that those teachers receive training to work with top-performing children.

By contrast, schools spend more than \$12 billion on special-education students and state and federal laws require schools to provide intensive services for them. The report recommends ways to improve the situation without significantly raising costs for strapped districts.

One is to make it easier for top-performing children to skip grades. Only eight states have policies that let smart kids skip grades, while the remaining leave it up to local school districts to decide, the report said.

Hall County Schools in Gainesville, Ga., about 55 miles north of Atlanta, has embraced many of the strategies called for in the report. Officials prodded more middle school students to take high school-level classes and more high school students to take college-level classes. They opened a school for high-achieving students and found ways to motivate junior high students interested in the arts, sciences and technology. And they pushed about 300 of the district's 1,700 general-education teachers to take courses in how to teach advanced students.

The district, which is racially diverse and 60% low income, has seen an increase in students scoring in the top tier on state



Parents are growing increasingly concerned as college tuition fees continue to rise. Watch the Journal Editorial Report. Video courtesy of Fox News.

exams.

Chris Turpin, who taught social studies at West Hall Middle School before moving over to the high school this year, said that as a beginning teacher he tried to challenge his brightest students with extra work, but they finished quickly, got bored and, sometimes, misbehaved. He earned an endorsement in gifted education two years ago and has since altered his teaching to allow students to control the learning process by devising their own projects and group lessons. And he has learned to let students move at their own pace, while keeping up with them. "Now, my class is organized chaos, but everyone

is engaged and reaching full potential," he said.

Connor Lofton, a gifted eighth grader in Hall County, said that he often got bored in elementary school classes and read n

on-fiction books as his teachers tried to bring other students up to his level. Then he enrolled at the new Da Vinci Academy for high-achieving and motivated students and "found my place."

"It's been challenging and fun at the same time," he said.

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