



Perspective on the Achieve Report: Creating a World-Class Educational System in Ohio?

The Ohio Association for Gifted Children (OAGC) supports the goals of the Achieve report "Creating a World-Class Educational System in Ohio." However, the OAGC governing board has a number of concerns and questions regarding the report recommendations. This position paper lays out these concerns and questions for policymakers and others interested in education in Ohio.

Can Ohio Achieve World-Class Status if the Needs of Gifted and High Ability/High Achieving Students Are Ignored?

The Ohio Achieve Report was developed with the goal of creating a world-class educational system for Ohio students by examining the state's strengths and weaknesses when compared to international standards. The report aspires to the "moral purpose of raising the bar for *all* students in Ohio." (p.1) Eliminating the social and economic barriers and providing equal access to high quality education is an admirable goal. However, if Ohio aims to "raise the bar for all students," Ohio should attend to the needs of its brightest students as part of the process.

The failure to mention high ability/high achieving learners and the absence of any recommendations to ensure their continued achievement is a major flaw in the Report. "Achievement gap" appears on six pages; "disadvantaged" on fourteen pages; "proficient" on eight; and "NCLB" on sixteen. On the other hand, "accelerated learners", "advanced learners", "high potential learners", "high performing students", and "high ability" do not appear at all. The fact is that gifted students exist in all ethnic, social, and economic categories. Significant gaps do exist between gifted students provided opportunities and those who are not. The reluctance to acknowledge this gap will result in the continuation of state educational policy that condemns gifted students in some districts to levels of opportunity and achievement that are well below their ability.

The Achieve Report's Recommendation to Replace the Ohio Graduation Test with End of Course Examinations is a Positive Development but the Policy Recommendation is Incomplete.

The Achieve Report refers to the Ohio Graduation Test (OGT) and recognizes it as "setting a floor of performance that all students must clear in order to graduate." (p.27) The Report goes on to state that, " While it ensures a base level of competence among Ohio graduates, the OGT does not serve other important purposes inherent in a robust high school assessment system. First, it does not test advanced knowledge and skills that students will need to make a successful transition to college or 21st Century careers...When viewed through an international lens, the OGT assesses math skills that students in most other countries learn in the 7th or 8th grades." One of the Report recommendations is to "reconsider the continued use of the OGT" and encourages Ohio policymakers "to phase out the OGT." Further, the Report recommends

that students be able to take End-of-Course (EOC) exams to demonstrate student mastery of subject. OAGC strongly supports the move to EOC exams, but does not believe that the Achieve Report goes far enough in the recommendations in this area. Two major shortcomings of the recommendation are as follows:

1) The End-of-Course Exams should be developed on standards that stretch beyond those currently in place for Ohio. Strong consideration should be given to the End-of-Course exams currently under development by ACT. The SAT subject and Advanced Placement exams should also be considered in the mix as this policy moves forward. It does little good to talk about competing worldwide when our students are not held even to the norms of a nationally based examination. In general, OAGC does not support the continued use of assessment instruments that are only applicable in Ohio.

2) The Achieve Report includes no discussion on a provision for high ability students to take the EOC exams *before* taking the course in order to demonstrate mastery and move to the next instructional level. Ohio needs to encourage the removal of artificial barriers so that students with competency entering classes can continue to learn and not be forced to repeat material they already know. Ohio is behind other states in the area of credit by examination to show content mastery. While policymakers have discussed the limitations of the seat-time requirements of the Carnegie unit credit system, there has been no attempt to actually remove this artificial barrier to achievement.

The Achieve Report's Recommendation to Remove Norm-Referenced Testing for Gifted Identification is Not Supported by Best Practice or Research.

The recommendation for a rigorous high school measurement does not align with the recommendation that "Ohio repeal legislation requiring districts to use norm-referenced testing to identify gifted students..." and "...work with districts to come up with other valid and reliable approaches to identifying students for gifted and talented programs." The tests currently approved by the State for identifying students are nationally norm-referenced tests that are designed to rank student skill or ability when compared to students of similar grade across the United States. The current Ohio Achievement Test is a criterion-referenced test (CRB) based on Ohio grade-level standards and relies on cut scores to report student skills. The difference between the two is like the weekly spelling list (which one expects all students to know and be able to spell) and the national spelling bee (where the student spellers are eliminated as words become increasingly difficult and one person can spell the last word.) If Ohio wants to ensure that its students can compete nationally and globally, it must look to tests that rank students with others outside Ohio.

Past attempts to identify Ohio's gifted students with criterion-referenced tests failed. Best practice and research prevented this from occurring. One of the biggest concerns with the use of CRB exams in the identification of gifted students is the potential for increasing the under-identification of hard to identify student populations. In fact, members of the current ODE Gifted Identification Assessment Review Committee do not believe that this recommendation from the Achieve report is appropriate. If we do not want to compare students in Ohio with those in other states, how can we possibly compare our students with those in other countries?

The Achieve Report Stresses Student Self-Influence Rather than the Importance of Teacher Quality

According to the Report, there are "a growing number of schools and districts that have not been meeting Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) in recent years." (p.3) AYP may soon be defined as a year's growth in a year's time. The Report recognizes that, "Given the importance of fairly assessing whether teachers are impacting student achievement, districts should explore the quantitative measures of effective teaching, including value-added data." (p.37) Value-added research shows that teacher impact over a three-year period can be as great as fifty percentile points in achievement scores. The research also shows that the students who gain the least in a year are the students in the top quintile. (Sanders and Horn – Research Findings from the Tennessee Value-Added Assessment System, 1998) The Report contradicts the importance of teacher impact on page 46. "The people who have the greatest influence over student success are the students themselves. Especially in middle and high school years, students make real choices about the level of achievement they want to attain. The difference between success and failure often hinges on whether a student thinks he or she will gain something from doing well in school." (p 46) In the case of the high ability or gifted student, the difference between success and failure often hinges on the quality of the teacher(s) and the level of access to appropriate levels of challenging curriculum.

The Achieve Report does not Address the Barriers to and Costs of Educating High-Ability/High Achieving Learners.

The "culture of aspiration" referred to in the Report survey should recognize that there are students of high ability who can learn at a faster pace, and a deeper, more complex level than their age peers. Closing the gap must not be achieved by holding the brightest students back from their potential achievement. Services are mandated for special education students. Service should be mandated for gifted students with funding and resources available to gifted students and their teachers just as they are in the countries that are making significant academic progress. While the report recognizes that disadvantaged students may cost more to educate and proposes extra weighting of funding for those students, it does not recognize that high-ability students may also cost more to educate or that some disadvantage students are also gifted. Cost analysis should be conducted to ensure that all students have what they need to compete with intellectual peers world-wide. Two cost studies have been conducted on the cost of providing adequate gifted services. A follow-up study that takes into account the ability to harness new technology is needed. In addition, the state's accountability system should ensure that each student's growth is accounted for, even if they are currently above proficient. It appears even with the inclusion of the long-awaited value-added dimension, districts will have very little ability to determine whether they are providing growth to Ohio's high ability learners.

The Achieve Report Places Emphasis on Site-Based Management with Little Regard for Quality Control

The Report envisions school principals as educational leaders of the learning community. To build capacity for this to occur, extensive professional development must be provided. Funding must be provided for professional development, as well as for additional staff to take on management duties as the role of the principal evolves from manager to instructional leader. High-quality professional development must also be provided to school staff to address the needs of all adult and student learners. The danger in site-based management proposed by the Report is the lack of quality assurance and opportunity for inequities among schools and between districts to flourish, especially in large urban districts, where gifted services can be hit and miss as students move from one building to another.

Suggested Changes to the Encourage Achievement in Ohio's High Ability Students

The OAGC Legislative Position Paper for the 127th General Assembly <http://www.oagc.com/?q=node/231> provides detailed recommendations to increase support and accountability for Ohio's gifted children. Many of these positions are based on the "Gifted in the 21st Report" <http://www.oagc.com/?q=node/49> commissioned by State Superintendent Susan Zelman in 2002. In order to truly create a world-class system of education in Ohio, OAGC recommends the following:

- 1) Appropriately support gifted and high ability students through appropriate levels of funding based on a true analysis of the costs of gifted education.
- 2) Removing the barriers to learning that are currently in Ohio's education system that routinely hold students back from learning appropriately. Some suggestions for improvement include:
 - a. Increasing the participation of secondary students in Post Secondary Enrollment Options (PSEO) by removing ensuring more students have access and are not discriminated against by the use of unfair grading policies and entrance requirements.
 - b. Allowing the use of alternative tests for graduation such as the PSAT, ACT, SAT, SAT subject examinations or Advanced Placement examinations so that students aren't artificially held back from until they pass the OGT.
 - c. Allowing for increased flexibility in Carnegie unit requirements, so that students aren't forced to sit for 120 hours learning material that could be mastered in much less time.
 - d. Developing a Credit by Exam Policy based on national or international examinations as other states have done so that students may show mastery of material.
 - e. Removing non-relevant pre-standards language in Ohio Revised Code that bars students from accelerating appropriately.
 - f. Developing a grouping policy based on research that allows for a cost efficient and educationally effective method of education high ability students.
- 3) Utilizing innovative techniques to reach high achieving students such as creating a STEM residential high school or a virtual school that would allow students access to high level material regardless of where they lived in the state.
- 4) Developing an appropriate accountability measure for gifted students that ensures districts will provide adequate growth to these students as all others in the system. Appropriate education of Ohio's high ability students should not be optional, and finally,
- 5) Providing adequate professional development and pre-service training in gifted education to all teachers to ensure that the needs of high ability students are both understood and met.

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