

Policy Brief

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Left Behind

How Wisconsin Struggles to Educate Gifted & Talented Students – And How ESAs Can Help

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Introduction

When considering the shortcomings of Wisconsin's K-12 education system, policymakers tend to focus on its failure to meet the needs of poor and minority students. This focus is important—Wisconsin is held back by struggling rural and urban public schools and has the largest African American to white achievement gap in the country. But, gifted and talented students, especially low-income ones, are underserved in many parts of the state and at risk of being left behind the rest of the country and world.

Are gifted students receiving the education they need?

At least since the passage of No Child Left Behind in 2001, there has been an increasing focus on test scores and proficiency in schools. Schools were generally rewarded for helping their students reach a minimum-level

Takeaways

1. The U.S., compared to other countries, have less students testing at advanced levels.
2. Hispanic kids are significantly less likely to be identified as gifted and talented than their peers.
3. In Wisconsin, there is no additional funding for gifted programs and no way to identify children in private schools.
4. 63% of Wisconsin school districts do not employ teachers who are assigned to teach gifted children.
5. In 13% of Wisconsin school districts, there were no AP exams taken. In 48% of school districts, AP exams were taken in 5 or fewer subjects (out of 36 subject areas).
6. Rural and small town school districts in Wisconsin struggle the most. 78% of rural school districts do not employ a teacher assigned to teach gifted children. In rural districts, only 4.4 AP exams are taken, on average, by students.
7. **CALL TO ACTION:** Wisconsin policymakers should create a Gifted and Talented Scholarship Program (GTSP) that would: 1) Provide an alternate means of identifying kids less likely to be identified by traditional standards, 2) Allow students to utilize their GTSP funds at any participating school or supplemental educational service, and 3) Give families the opportunity to access more resources and choice for their children's education.

of achievement. This, naturally, led to a heightened focus in the classroom on teaching students who are at or below minimum proficiency level (Petrilli, Griffith, Wright and Kim 2016).

But for gifted and talented students, such an intense focus on minimum levels of proficiency could result in neglect. Smart kids, capable of learning challenging or difficult material, are languishing.

One method of examining service for the gifted is through comparing the share of gifted students in the United States to other countries. The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) is administered to students around the world every three years and represents an objective, international benchmark of student performance. Petersen, Hanushek, and Woessman (2014) analyzed the results of the 2009 administration of the PISA, and **found that students in 30 of 56 countries included in the test had higher percentages of students scoring at the advanced level than the United States.** Farkes, Duffet, and Loveless (2008) found one potential cause of this low performance was teachers who were under-prepared for dealing with advanced students. **In a survey, more than 58 percent of teachers reported having received no professional development focused on instructing gifted kids.**

Fordham Institute President and K-12 education scholar Chester Finn (2014) makes the case that this sort of disservice to high achievers is a logical result of an environment where success is more often derided than cheered:

“Pressing the education system to pay more attention to high achievers (or high-ability youngsters capable of becoming high achievers) is easily depicted as elitist in a country where “top one percent” has become almost a curse and any number of civil-rights advocates and enforcers are poised to allege discrimination and ‘disparate impact’ at the drop of a hat.”

While the mediocre track record of these services for gifted students is unfortunate, what is worse is some gifted students may never even be identified.

Under-identification: A Common Problem for Minorities

Certain groups of disadvantaged students are less likely to be identified as gifted nationwide. **African American students represent approximately 16.7% of students in the U.S., but only 9.8% of students in gifted programs. Hispanics represent about 22.3% of students throughout the country, but only 15.4% of students are receiving gifted services (Grissom and Redding 2016).** Beyond differences in performance, which are perhaps legitimate reasons for differences in representation in these programs, research has determined that differences in access according to race are meaningful. Race is still an important predictor of access to gifted and talented programs when previous performance

is taken into account (Nicholson-Crotty et. al. 2011). Support for the idea that this results from educator discretion is found in studies that have examined identification by minority teachers. Students are more likely to be identified as gifted by an educator of the same race (Ford et. al. 2008).

The State of Gifted and Talented Education in Wisconsin

So what’s the story in the Badger State? First of all, it is hard to tell because **DPI does not regularly track data on the number of gifted students**, making it impossible to update the numbers for 2017. The reasons for this lack of data collection are unclear. But the lack of data collection in this area calls into question the extent to which DPI is monitoring and guaranteeing the provision of enrichment services to students who need them.

We do know that 52,058 students in the state were identified as gifted and talented, representing 5.9% of overall statewide *public* school enrollment, according to the [National Digest of Education Statistics](#).¹ Currently, there is no funding from the state for gifted services (National Association for Gifted Children 2015). And no way of identifying children in private schools as gifted.

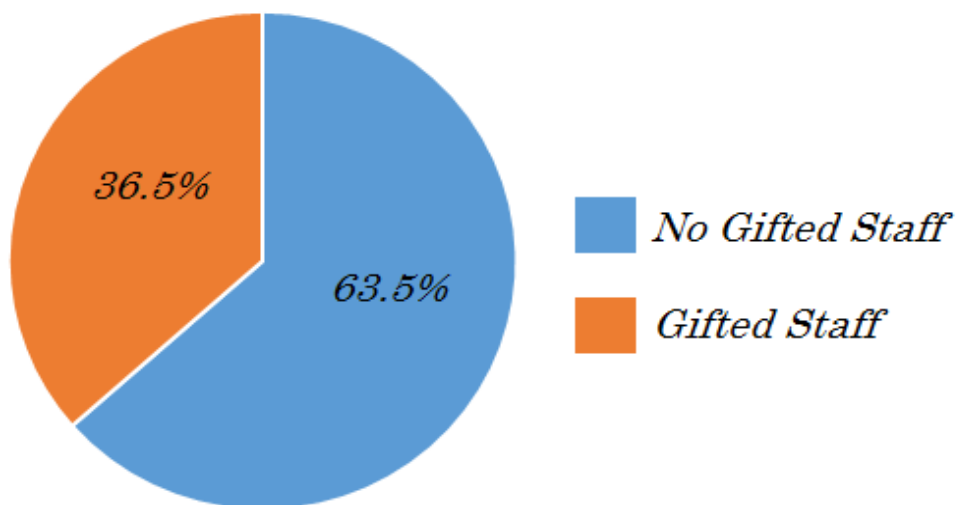
Although we lack data on gifted programs in the state, an alternative

Share of Wisconsin School Districts with Dedicated Gifted Teachers/Program Coordinators, 2016

method is to look at the number of staff assigned to work with gifted and talented students.²

According to the most recent 2016 data, there were 495 gifted and talented teachers or coordinators in Wisconsin. A number of these are duplicate staff serving multiple schools.

However, this staff was employed in just 154 (36.5%) of Wisconsin’s 422 school districts.



There are significant differences the share of districts that have gifted staff based on urbanicity. Table 1 below depicts the share of districts with at least one gifted staff person

¹ This is from 2012 which is the most recent data on the number of gifted and talented students in Wisconsin.

² DPI provides [a data file](#) for all staff in the state that includes their assignment area. Among the categories is a “gifted and talented” assignment area. All of the staff assigned to “gifted and talented” have the position code for “teacher” or “program coordinator.”

using DPI’s classification of schools as urban, suburban, small town, or rural.³

Table 1. Share of Districts with Gifted Staff by Urbanicity.

Urbanicity	Share of Districts with Gifted Staff
Urban	82.3%
Suburban	63.2%
Small Town	46.5%
Rural	22.4%

The vast majority of urban school districts have at least one dedicated gifted staff person, as do the majority of suburban school districts. **However, less than half of small town districts have such a staff member, and only 22.4% of rural districts do.** It is important to note that we do not make the claim there are no gifted services offered in these districts, but do think a lack of dedicated staff may call into question the level of services in these districts.

Enriching the learning of Wisconsin’s gifted students should not be limited to one specific gifted program, however. One of the more common ways gifted students are challenged is through advanced placement classes (AP), which present higher level material and give the student an opportunity to obtain college credits. Research has found that AP courses may be one of the only legitimate options for gifted students in high schools (Gubbins 2000).

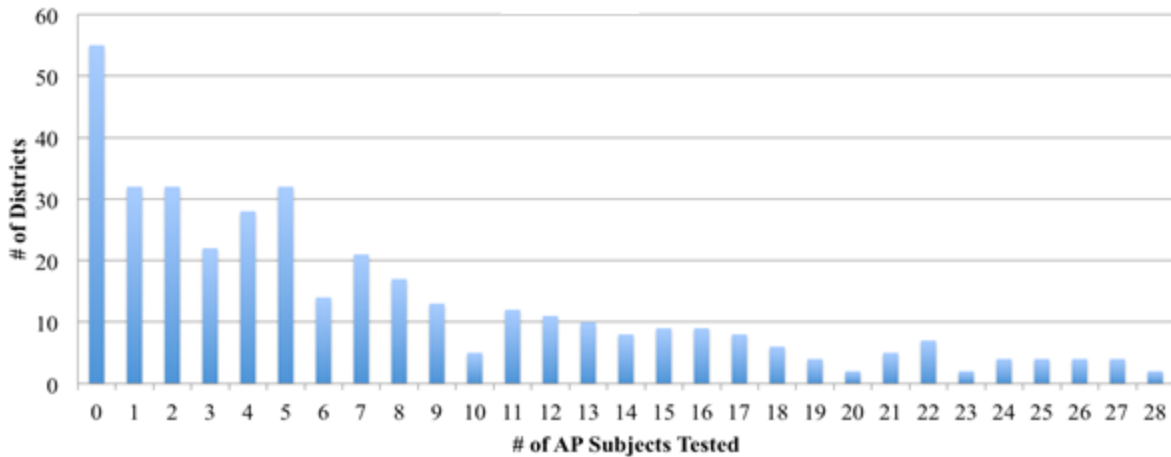
But access to AP courses is far from universal, particularly in struggling school districts. The Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction records the number of students in each district taking Advanced Placement exams. The data is recorded by the subject of the AP Exam. From this data, one can garner a rough estimate of the number of Advanced Placement courses offered by each school district. While it is possible students may have taken the AP exams without taking the class or the school may have offered other AP courses that no students took the exam for, it represents the best possible approximation of course offerings given the available data.

In the state overall, students took AP exams in a total of 36 subjects. **There is no school district where all 36 AP exams were taken.** Even the district with the highest recorded number of AP exam subjects taken, Madison Metropolitan, only had 28 subjects. Clearly, there is room for students to benefit from taking additional courses at other schools.

In 55 school districts out of 422, there were no AP exams taken. In fact, the most common number of AP exams taken in a school district is zero. In 206 school districts, AP exams were taken in 5 or fewer subjects.

³ The average of each school’s urbanicity in a particular district is taken to create an overall districtwide urbanicity. Districts that are evenly divided between different urbanicities are not included in this analysis.

Figure 2. Count of Districts with each number of AP Subject Tests



The differences between AP participation are also significant along lines of urbanicity. The most AP Exams are taken in urban and suburban areas; perhaps reflective of the varied interests of a larger population of students. But far fewer exams are taken in small towns, and even fewer in rural school districts—only an average of 4 per district.

Table 2. Number of AP Exams taken by Urbanicity

Urbanicity	Average Number of AP Exams
Urban	19.94
Suburban	14.37
Small Town	9.12
Rural	4.24

Left out of this entire discussion are the thousands of low-income students enrolled in Wisconsin’s parental choice programs that have limited access to AP classes. Most gifted and talented students in the private voucher program currently don’t have access to these types of courses that could allow them to graduate from college sooner, or gain experience with a college-level curriculum.

Identification of gifted and talented kids in Wisconsin is open to the sort of subjective identification criteria that appears to lead to discrimination against certain groups of students. Wis. S. 118.35.1 lays out the legal definition of what a gifted student is:

“In this section, "gifted and talented pupils" means pupils enrolled in public schools who give evidence of high performance capability in intellectual, creative, artistic, leadership, or specific academic areas and who need services or activities not ordinarily provided in a regular school program in order to fully develop such capabilities.”

It is unclear what “gives evidence” means in this context. Administrative rules designed by DPI to enforce this statute suggest it should be based on multiple measures including standardized test scores, but no specific benchmarks are provided. Using the 2012 NCES data, it does appear some minority students, particularly Hispanic students, are underrepresented. In 2012, **Hispanic students represented 9.8% of the student population in the state, but only 6.5% of students identified as gifted.** Representation of African American students appeared to be far closer to their share of the population.⁴

How Choice Has Helped Expand GAT Program Access in Wisconsin

Currently Wisconsin has both the Course Options Program and the Youth Options Program, both of which offer expanded educational opportunities for students in public schools. However, they currently do not apply to students attending private schools through the choice program. They also may impart costs on students, making it difficult for low-income families to benefit from the programs.

Wisconsin’s Course Options Program “allows a pupil enrolled in a public school district to take up to two courses at any time from an educational institution”.⁵ Students can take courses at other public schools, including charter schools, technical colleges, and both public and private universities. However, according to DPI’s Course Options Cost Table, students and families may have to pay fees for any classes that offer college credit for completion.

Similarly, Wisconsin’s Youth Options Program allows public high school juniors and seniors who meet certain requirements to take postsecondary courses at a UW institution, a Wisconsin technical college, one of the state’s participating private nonprofit institutions of higher education, or tribally-controlled colleges”.⁶ However, the student must receive approval from the school board in order to have the cost of the course covered by their school. This still does not resolve the issue of the cost of materials, textbooks, or transportation, again disproportionately hurting students of low-income families.

A great option to highlight is Waukesha’s eAchieve school, which offers AP courses online. The school, chartered by the Waukesha School District, provides tuition-free education for all Wisconsin students through open enrollment, both full-time and part-time. Full-time students receive free laptops and can be reimbursed for internet expenses. However, part-time students still face the cost of materials, internet, and a computer. This creates a barrier to the program for low-income families. While students of any districts can take up to two classes their school does not offer, they face costs for materials – for AP

⁴ African American students represented 9.1% of students identified as gifted and 9.8% of the student population.

⁵ Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, “Student Course Options.” <https://dpi.wi.gov/courseoptions>

⁶ Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, “Wisconsin’s Youth Options Program”. <https://dpi.wi.gov/youthoptions>

classes often including expensive textbooks – and must have access to internet and a computer.

All of Wisconsin’s current programs for gifted and talented students fail to properly address the cost concerns associated with them. An Education Savings Account Program could solve the issue of cost, benefiting low-income families the most.

How the Gifted and Talented Education Savings Account Would Work

In the [ESA bill proposed by State Senator Darling](#), up to 2,000 parents of gifted children in public, charter, or choice program schools would be provided with an ESA of \$1,000 which could be used to purchase additional services for their child. The funds in the ESA could be spent at any participating school, a licensed or accredited tutor, or other providers that have been approved by DPI. There are number of specific expenses listed in the legislation on which the ESA can be spent. These are included in Table 3 below.

Table 3. Eligible Expenses in Darling ESA bill

Tuition and fees
Textbooks required by the provider
Payment to licensed or accredited tutor
Payment to purchase a curriculum
Tuition or fees for a private online learning program
Fees for AP Exams or similar courses
Private music or art lessons
Other expenses approved by DPI

To increase the likelihood of participation by students from traditionally underrepresented backgrounds, the identification of gifted students would no longer be based on educator assessments alone. In addition, students who scored in the top 5 percent of all students in that grade level on the Forward Exam’s Mathematics, English/Language Arts, Social Studies, or Science sections would be eligible for the ESA⁷. The ESA would be available to families eligible for free or reduced price lunch; which is includes incomes up to 185% of the federal poverty line.

The bill would also expand the means of identifying gifted students to include the top 5% on state tests, potentially opening up access to ESAs to students enrolled in Wisconsin’s school choice programs, who cannot be identified as gifted and talented under current state law. This provision also has the potential to increase identification of students who are traditionally underrepresented in gifted education, such as economically disadvantaged and minority kids.

⁷ The Technical language in the bill is that students who score in the top five percent on Exams required under Wis. Statutes 118.30 would be eligible. If the Forward Exam is changed to another exam at a later date, this exam would be used for identification.

Are there enough students meeting these criteria to fill the 2,000 spots? We attempt to estimate the answer to this question using the numbers available from DPI on Forward Exam Performance. More than 38.7% of students in the state come from families earning less than 185% of the federal poverty line. Of those students 2.6%—3,797 total—scored in the ‘advanced’ category of the Forward Exam in math. And 3.7% of those students—5,391 total—scored in the ‘advanced’ category in English/language arts. These numbers do not include the number of students who achieve this category in Wisconsin’s parental choice programs. While these category cutoffs are not a perfect match for the language in the legislation on eligibility, it does indicate the potential for a sufficient number of students.

This legislation would have no impact on the manner or amount of funding a student receives for their regular school day education. If they are enrolled in a public school or charter school, they will continue to be enrolled at the same per pupil rate. If they are in one of Wisconsin’s school choice programs, they will continue to receive the full voucher.

The Benefits of the ESA Bill

- *More opportunity for educational programs for all children regardless of sector.*

Whether a public, private, or charter school is best for their child, families with gifted children will be able to take advantage of the supplemental services offered through the ESA.

- *Expanded access to services for poor and minority students.*

Poor and minority students tend to be under-identified as gifted, even when controlling for their level of achievement in the classroom. The Darling ESA bill provides an objective measure on which students can be identified as gifted: the Forward Exam. Card and Giuliano (2015) examined the effect on the representation of poor and minority students in gifted programs when a universal screening procedure was implemented in a large urban school district. They found that the implementation of this program led to large increases in access for these students. Similar results may be found in Wisconsin if a system devoid of educator biases is implemented in the state.

- *Access to gifted services for students in the choice programs.*

Under the current Course Options law in Wisconsin, students in public schools are able to take advantage of classes offered at participating private schools, but private school students do not enjoy the same privilege. This ESA proposal would level the playing field for families of students in choice schools, who want to tailor the best possible education for their student, which might mean a mix of public and private classes.

- *Services tailored to the specific needs of the student.*

The legal requirements for gifted education in Wisconsin are not well defined and quite

ambiguous. State law, Wis. Stat. 118.35.3a, mandates that all students identified as gifted in a school district be provided with access to “a program,” but provides no guidance on what that program should entail. Additional funding through the ESA would provide parents with an opportunity to identify and take advantage of specific programs they judge to benefit their child. For instance, a student with a gift for music could enroll in private piano lessons, or a student with an affinity for language could have a Spanish tutor.

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