Underrepresented Students in G/T Programs

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Underrepresentation of low income and minority students is unquestionably the biggest challenge facing our field today and has already resulted is some schools and school districts to eliminating their programs because they can't address this challenge.

Ian Warwick, my dear friend and colleague from England has developed an excellent list of suggestions below for including more underrepresented students in programs for the gifted and talented. *Please* share the following with colleagues and all people on your mailing lists, and *especially* with school administrators, state department of educational officials, and any other persons responsible for gifted education in your state or country. Thank you for taking part in this very important political action facing our field.

Fifteen Strategies to Drive "Greater Expectations"
Ian Warwick

At the time of writing, the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and the subsequent cost of living crisis have unleashed a series of profound shocks on already vulnerable communities, disrupting carefully constructed but fragile ecosystems of survival. This is in addition to the UK having experienced an extended decade long crisis in social mobility, with a major attainment gap between students from the most and the least advantaged backgrounds stubbornly persisting. The Education Endowment Foundation (2018) has found that disadvantaged learners are already over four months behind their more advantaged peers by the time they start at primary school. The gap then continues to widen as students' progress through education, and has increased to over 19 months by the end of secondary school.[1] Those from privileged backgrounds are significantly over-represented in the country's top professions and the most prestigious universities. Many of these disparities, which have life-long consequences, emerge in school.[2] Examining how well highly able students from disadvantaged backgrounds perform academically is vital when trying to understand the inequalities in outcomes for these students further down the line, including their under-representation at leading universities, and in the top professions.[3] Schools or colleges can provide essential defenses to prevent students' wellbeing and aspirations being swept away. To do so, inclusive school procedures need to be honed, secured, and shared to more effectively support learners that face difficulty on a day-to-day basis. But what can schools do on a practical level? The Sutton Trust came to a depressing conclusion. "Very little is

[1] Education Endowment Foundation. (2018) The Attainment Gap.
[2] Sir Peter Lampl, Fulfilling the promise of highly able students in secondary schools report 2018.
[3] Cullinane, C., & Montacute, R. (2017). Fairer fees: Reforming student finance to increase fairness and widen access. The Sutton Trust. Kirby, P. (2016) Leading people - The educational backgrounds of the UK professional elite. The Sutton Trust.

currently known as to how to best support and stretch the highly able, especially those who are from lower socioeconomic backgrounds."[4]

Fortunately, we disagree. We work with many educational institutions who have developed outstanding strategies, and their success is clear, but unfortunately these are far too rarely shared or celebrated across the educational community. So in this chapter we have pulled together a shortlist of strategies that the LAE has developed and found to be effective in meeting the needs of our most able and disadvantaged students.

1. **De-stigmatise Disadvantage**

   A student's eligibility for free school meals (FSM) during their secondary education is a crude substitute for a scrupulous accounting of household means. Unlike, the Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index (IDACI), which is a continuous, community level variable, FSM eligibility is a binary measure related, in most cases, to receipt of social security benefits. Among those who qualify for FSM are young people whose families "dip" into hardship and those who suffer endemic, even inter-generational poverty; among those who do not—in educational parlance, "Other" students—can be counted young people from some of the poorest communities in the country, but whose parents' immigration status excludes them from the benefits system, and also those students whose families enjoy six figure incomes. Perhaps the best that can be said for FSM eligibility is that it is a consistent, if imperfect, measure of disadvantage that all schools have sufficient resources to track. This is not a small benefit. Notably, this degree of consensus around a single measure is wholly absent from the higher education sector in the UK. The LAE has, for many years, proactively encouraged students and their families to register their eligibility for free school meals—and to de-stigmatise that status in and around school. The school leadership is very clear in its mission and communicates proactively with applicants and their families that the LAE will prioritise applications from those students in the greatest need. Students' first assembly in Year 12 often begins by pointing out that group in attendance who have been eligible for free school meals includes the current Headteacher, at least one Governor and several members of the teaching faculty. LAE also surveys students at the beginning of Year 12 to understand how long they have been eligible for free school meals. In such an environment, there is certainly less shame about poverty or difficulties, a clearer understanding of what others in your cohort are dealing with, less embarrassment about claiming for entitlements and support. This is also the clear advantage that students who know they are part of a majority will recognize the success of their peers as something they can emulate.

2. **Guide, rather than pitch, when recruiting students**

   The LAE routinely receives more than 5,000 initial applications for what are currently just 250 available places in Year 12. Successful applicants can take

[4] Sutton Trust, POTENTIAL FOR SUCCESS, Fulfilling the promise of highly able students in secondary schools report 2018.

comfort in knowing that they have been successful in an application process as competitive as almost any in the university sector. It would be easy to regard this tsunami of applications merely as a logistical hurdle to be overcome. But this would be a mistake. Any popular and successful school or college has an opportunity to use its recruitment process to provide high quality information and guidance to applicants and their families. The LAE's process includes clear signposting of career pathways to which students might aspire, along with healthy reassurance that most students will not yet know which career is right for them. Teachers who lead the school's pathways into medicine, law, engineering, and finance run online guidance sessions—as do those responsible for Oxford and Cambridge applications and applications to international universities. The sessions increasingly feature the active involvement of LAE alumni working in the fields under discussion. Holding the sessions online makes scheduling more flexible, reduces staff workload and allows applicants to attend as many or as few sessions as they choose. The sessions are held **before** provisional offers are made, so that as many students as possible can access guidance. All students require guidance and support to choose the right A-Level courses that will ensure a successful transition onto the most competitive university courses or other meaningful destinations. The purpose of this guidance is not to stream students early on, but to combat widely and firmly held misunderstandings about the relationship between A level choice, degree and university selection, and eventual career goals. In an environment where a substantial minority of applicants will lack any direct exposure to the careers to which they aspire, there is an opportunity to make a profound contribution to the lives of many more students than will ever actually attend the school.

3. Get to know students as well as possible, as soon as possible

Sixth form schools or colleges often find issues around family-specific disadvantage harder to identify than the schools that their students have come from. They don't have the many years of accumulated experience with that child or the family and community that secondary schools typically do. Without investing the time with previous schools, there is a real danger that all that accumulated knowledge will be lost or delayed irretrievably. Sixth forms need to hit the ground running as they have less than two years to make their impact. The more information that is shared at the start of the transition period may well ensure a far better starting point for more disadvantaged students. This can be supplemented with a one-to-one interview or survey of new students. A suitably well-crafted interview or survey will throw up all types of issues. We must not expect our more disadvantaged students to come forward with details of what is happening at home. Perhaps issues to do with refugee status, unemployment, or imprisonment. Other issues can range from sudden family death, to not having suitable shoes for interviews, or the fare to get there. Sharing bedrooms, electricity turned off, meals bypassed, and younger siblings to be cared for are also regular barriers to home studies. As is the spectre of homelessness and destitution. These can all too easily become the quietly assimilated shame of poverty. Many students from the poorest backgrounds do not necessarily see schools or colleges as a natural sanctuary to go to, particularly to address their family issues around finance. So interviews, conducted with

sensitivity, will reveal far more of these issues than any more generic survey of student need. As a further practical step towards that identification of need, LAE has developed its own Index of Vulnerability, supported by a wide range of evidence collected both before and after students are enrolled. Targeted support, specific funding, and adapted practices at the school can then more easily follow.

4. Establish hard work as a basic expectation

Students aspiring to the most rewarding professions need to understand that they will be stretched—not in a way that jeopardises their wellbeing, but in a way that raises their potential. Sixth form schooling should prepare them for those demands. In addition, students who come from disadvantaged backgrounds often have more ground to cover in the final years of their secondary education than students who have enjoyed greater opportunities earlier on. Finally, the sixth form experience is short, lasting barely more than five school terms. For all of these reasons, it is vital that the highest expectations are established right from the outset. It needs to be stressed that all students are full-time students on an A-level programme of study, and in addition they must also have timetabled lessons for study skills, lectures, careers guidance and interventions. Prior to these new students applying, they need to be aware that the school or college day runs from 8 am to 6 pm, so the school or college needs to specify that students need to be on site between these hours. This is one of the more challenging issues to be faced as many state school students tend to assume the school day ends at 3:30 pm. Some will assume that when they attend sixth form, their workload lightens (with free periods etc.) and they can go home during this “free time,” whereas the expectation should be that these free periods are for working/co-curricular/sports/outreach/community engagement. The LAE school week includes five hours of lessons in each A-level subject, an hour of study skills, and an EPQ, lectures and other forms of academic enrichment, three hours of sports and other co-curricular activities and community outreach, and two hours of careers and university preparation. All students should be expected to undertake significant home learning to supplement their classroom studies. An extended curriculum means that students’ study programmes should far exceed (by at least a third) government expectations for 16-to-19 study programmes which are typically delivered in 600 hours. Online courses should be a key area for students to both catch up (subject specific academic literacy) or be more fully stretched (subject specific challenging enrichment and extension).

5. Teach the subject, not the specification

All schools and colleges encourage their students to achieve excellent academic results and to make positive progress throughout their time, but there is a level beyond this; a deliberate process of preparing students for what those A-Level subjects will be like when studied at university. A-Level exam specifications are the product of careful deliberation and intense work by skilled professionals. Inevitably, however, they involve subjective decisions about what to include and what to omit, compromise regarding scope and level of challenge, and idiosyncratic assessment

features that can sometimes seem far removed from the subject proper. No school can ignore the specification or trust to the belief that able, productive students will do well with or without clear guidance regarding assessment protocols. But schools whose mission includes sending students to the most prestigious universities in the UK and elsewhere must address the fact that those universities expect applicants to have explored their chosen subjects far beyond the scope and demands of any exam. Schools concerned with the development of scholarship and a genuine love of learning should also be actively teaching young people that learning is valuable even where it is not formally assessed. Teachers should be encouraged to construct curricula around the explicit teaching of the threshold concepts that give coherence and integrity to the subject proper; regularly to go beyond the specification in terms of taught content; and to incorporate undergraduate materials in teaching at least for the most able in Year 13, but arguably also for all students. A carefully designed series of additional academic enrichment courses should be created that incorporate what we know to be good practice. It is a way to direct resources at those who will benefit most as well as giving teaching staff a clear idea of which students might benefit from further challenge in the classroom.

6. Normalise university-style learning

Attending lectures is a required part of university life—much though some students might think otherwise. Sixth formers need to grow comfortable with attending lectures and the style of learning that requires. A valuable contribution to students' development that is also a relatively easy win, consists in establishing a programme of high-challenge lectures that should run weekly throughout the Autumn and Spring Terms students. These can be live, remote, or recorded. Schools should tailor lecture programmes to their students' needs and aspirations. As a minimum, lectures should cover academic, pastoral, university, and careers topics, including a focus on financial management and expectations. At the LAE, the lecture programme acts as a supplement rather than as a substitute to the classroom experience. Lecture topics are specifically chosen to enhance students' understanding of their subjects rather than to consolidate or reinforce topics that have been covered in lessons. Where possible, lecturers are encouraged to draw connections across subjects and to emphasise the real world relevance of academic topics. Lectures are often delivered by members of the teaching faculty, an experience that most teachers enjoy, which enhances their sense of their own scholarship and which encourages students to see their teachers in a new light. Lectures can also, of course, be drawn from outside of school. LAE lectures are routinely delivered by working academics, independent scholars, and professionals whose expertise lies in fields to which its students aspire, such as the law, medicine, or engineering.

7. Provide extensive co-curricular opportunities

A-Level study can be intense and the mountain of attainment that some students must climb to achieve a place at a good university is often daunting. Some school leaders have understandably responded by narrowing the focus of post-16

education to what they regard as “core” activity, typically taken to mean lessons in three chosen subjects. The relative under-funding of post-16 education has only exacerbated this trend. But the LAE was founded on the conviction that this preference for narrowness was mistaken and that active involvement in co-curricular activity would support, rather than detract from, student achievement. Moreover, the provision of high quality co-curricular activities are an essential way in which schools can help address the gap in experience and education between those students whose parents can afford to pay for music lessons, language tuition, sports, and other many other things besides. At the LAE, all students take part in sport or other physical activity, in clubs and societies, and devote time to community service. Every staff member is expected to contribute something to the co-curricular programme, whether it’s yoga classes, football coaching, or circus skills. And the school of course benefits from its links with partner independent schools who have centuries’ worth of combined experience of offering rich, life enhancing co-curricular programmes.

8. Track performance forensically

Almost all schools these days are data rich, but not all schools are data enriched. Some school leaders have mapped the output of national data sets too directly onto individual students’ performance as a blunt way of securing teacher accountability. By contrast, some teachers remain skeptical of the relevance of *any* objective data set to the education of specific students. Neither position is constructive. The risks of both data misuse and data dismissiveness are particularly acute when addressing educational disadvantage. While it is true, to paraphrase Tolstoy, that each disadvantaged family is disadvantaged in its own way, this is more a question of idiosyncrasy than of novelty. Educational disadvantage results from a series of causes, most of them arising from or exacerbated by poverty, and often felt over several generations. These causes can and should be identified as potential sources of vulnerability, but must not be mistaken for predictors of underachievement. Schools committed to the constructive use of data to enhance achievement will track many, if not all the dimensions captured in the LAE Index of Vulnerability and will compare this analysis to large data sets where these are available. The LAE uses ALPS Connect to measure how its students do relative to their peers with similar characteristics in other high performing schools. Responsible school leaders will treat group comparison as the first stage of a meaningful analysis of student achievement and as a guide to any outcomes that seem anomalous. (Statisticians will rightly rail against assumed correlations between national data sets composed of several thousand students and groups measured in the tens or dozens.) They will also suspend judgement about the causes and character of those anomalies until after several more stages of analysis have been performed to achieve a rounded understanding of what is driving individual students’ results. And they will do so routinely throughout a students’ journey through the school.

9. “Keep up” beats catch up

Schools can take too much comfort from the observation that, nationally, students who are disadvantaged tend to make progress later in their A-Level studies than other students. This is true, but can lead to the second half of Year 13 becoming something of a loaded bet on effective revision and last-minute intervention. It also risks conflating the gap in attainment between groups for a difference in each group’s proximity to a specific point on the assessment curve. A-Level grades, like any system of standardised assessment, have a limit factor. Some students—for example, those applying for the top universities and medical schools—will comfortably exceed that limit factor while others may “just” tip into it (while in no way meaning to undervalue these students’ achievement). This is why information about destinations should be tracked alongside grades to ensure that the socioeconomic gradient is genuinely being flattened. Having established the systems and processes necessary regularly to analyse student achievement, schools should proactively target the highest levels of achievement for students from all backgrounds as early as possible in their sixth form education—albeit in a way that is compatible with their wellbeing. By no means all this activity need take the form of “extra” intervention. The Education Endowment Foundation Framework, which emphasises in-class provision over out-of-class provision, is instructive here. At the LAE, the Disadvantage FIRST agenda (which is detailed in an earlier chapter) is a way of signposting the needs to make specific, informed provision for students whose home circumstances pose barriers to their academic achievement.

10. Embrace and celebrate academic excellence

Highly academic schools should unashamedly celebrate and should provide visible rewards for academic achievement. Contrary to the prevailing narrative in maintained schools, this sentiment is not in any way incompatible with celebrating other forms of achievement, nor should it lead inevitably to the emergence of an academic hierarchy. At the LAE, scholarships are offered both for absolute and for contextual achievement. Absolute grades matter, of course—particularly when scholarships are linked to achievement in specific subjects, such as mathematics or one of the modern foreign languages the school offers. But progress from a students’ given baseline also matters and is celebrated in the form of whole school scholarships. The majority of LAE scholarships go to students who are disadvantaged and are based on the trajectory of their achievement while in the sixth form. These scholarships are celebrated in assemblies, through school periodicals, in the form of letters home and in a variety of other conventional ways. Scholars enjoy high visibility in the school community through specific badges and other identifiers. In the past, the LAE has experimented with the sorts of quasi pecuniary rewards that have become common in state schools. More recently, the school leadership has concluded that these rewards are incompatible with the culture of scholarship the school seeks to foster. These days, scholarships entitle students to attend a residential trip devoted to the development of higher-level academic achievement and to broadening career aspirations.

11…. And excellence of all kinds

Academic scholarships should be balanced by the conscious development of a culture that celebrates active engagement across a range of other fronts. At the LAE this takes the form of an LAE Diploma, that can be awarded for achievement in competitions, participation in outreach, leadership, and service. These could include non-cognitive and employability skills and clubs and societies, web design, volunteering for local social activities, work discovery, Duke of Edinburgh and support for academic literacy or mentoring within school or college. Independent work could include an extended piece of writing based on wider ("super-curricular") reading, a detailed report about relevant work experience, submitting an essay to a relevant external essay competition, listening to and reporting back on subject-related podcasts, undertaking a MOOC, writing reviews of films in the language you want to study, or subscribing to a topical journal or magazine. Together these activities can contribute to an internally recognised diploma. Working towards this should help to cultivate an ethos of independent thinking, self-discipline, communication, confidence, and teamwork. Some schools or colleges have an awards ceremony akin to the Oscars. All students attend in black tie/ball gowns etc. and for the big awards, students are required to prepare mini acceptance speeches (similar to a one to three-minute valedictorian speech).

12. Invest in university preparation

Create a course, starting as early as possible in the Autumn Term of Year 12, that supports students to make well-informed choices regarding university courses and destinations that match their achievement and interests. Clarify the immediate timeline, how the process works, actions to take now to start building a personal profile for university, and employment and careers guidance. Introduce what A-Level subjects will be like studied at university and tools for deepening their understanding for A-Level and beyond. Set up encouragement to aspire to top universities, high tariff courses and the best degree apprenticeships. The pathway should lead them through the application process, and ensure they have the subject knowledge and academic language that they will need to access the university courses with confidence. Within the course should be tuition on the study habits, self-management skills, prioritising, independent study, time management that they will need to thrive once they are at university. This pathway should be more than a preparation for university, however; it will need to be designed to create a broad and deep intellectual experience that values high aspirations. Students should increasingly experience learning to be an independent and interdependent experience through academic integrity and scholarship, intellectual curiosity and criticality, struggle, risk-taking and autonomy, self-regulation and self-awareness, and depth and mastery.

13. Establish dedicated routes into Oxbridge, medical schools and international universities

We don't have to accept any simple hierarchy of universities, with their almost unavoidable overtones of snobbery, to acknowledge that some universities have

quite distinct entry requirements and processes. Schools with substantial numbers of students who sincerely aspire to attend those universities need to prepare those students appropriately. In a typical year, the LAE sends between 10 and 15 percent of its students to Oxbridge and roughly the same percentage to medical schools. While there are third party organisations and websites that can be useful sources of information, university access on this scale requires dedicated in-school resourcing. And there is, unfortunately, something to the argument that those best placed to facilitate access to specific universities, or types of university, are likely to be graduates of those universities. The LAE has an Oxford and Cambridge Coordinator who runs a year-long programme: first, to encourage students of all backgrounds with the right academic profile to apply to one or another of those universities; then to guide those students carefully through the choice of course and college that is right for them; and finally to work with the wider team of tutors and House leaders to manage students' mental wellbeing throughout the process of application. The school's MDV Coordinator runs a "Pathways to Medicine" programme of lectures, interview preparation and application workshops aimed at providing the same level of support. The school's International Universities Coordinator performs a similar role in supporting students applying to universities in the United States and in the European Union, though fewer students opt for this route. In the specific case of applications to Ivy League universities in the US, working closely with the Sutton Trust has proven to be essential. Departments are responsible for providing admissions testing preparation, interview practice, and personal statement advice.

14. Focus on informed, impartial careers education

All students should receive effective information, advice and guidance to support them in making choices that will enhance their life chances, guide them in choosing career paths that suit their interests and abilities and help them to sustain employability throughout their working lives. More disadvantaged students may well have far fewer role models that they can emulate and are likely to have experienced family unemployment, sometimes generational. Students should receive a rich provision of careers education, both inside the classroom, online and within professional contexts, in accordance with the eight Gatsby Benchmarks. The key elements of a successful careers programme are: i) the identification and cultivation of skills and competencies that have broad applicability across sectors and professions; and ii) regular exposure to people working in the fields to which students aspire. At the LAE, the first of these elements is rooted in the school's Professional Skills and Competencies Framework, developed in partnership with major employers representing the sectors in which LAE alumni most often work. The second element consists in an active mentoring and Pathways programme that puts students in touch with working professionals across a variety of industry sectors. This programme should include internship and work experience opportunities, as well as sessions on how to network/make a good impression when students are on them. Most disadvantaged students will not have family contacts to ensure good work experience and so schools or colleges need to establish and share links with industry. Finally, as a practical matter, many students from low-income homes need to work outside of term time during their A Level studies.

Industry partners need to be educated in the value of paid rather than unpaid internships in order to democratise access to certain types of professional learning.

15. Stay close to alumni

Perhaps this has become quite standard practice in many independent schools, but it is far rarer, yet more significant and necessary in disadvantaged schools and school or colleges. A focus on the students who were originally designated as FSM or LAC, who then made it to top universities. How did they manage it? Did they then manage that university transition well? What really helped them? How was their transition beyond those institutions? What was the support that the school or college put into place that supported them the most? Obviously sixth form schools or colleges need to acknowledge their role in this success, but they have a responsibility to also give feedback to the schools who put in so much time and effort earlier in those students' academic life too. The trickle-down of these success stories help to boost and restore communities. They also help to encourage role modelling that is so significant. Those students can also be recruited to give back to younger students in terms of interview practice and cv's/admission statements. The impact of this cannot be underestimated. Someone from that community, with those disadvantaged labels, defeating the odds, and sharing what strategies helped them to do it.

Conclusion

Throughout its first decade, the LAE has tried to support students' aspirations without sacrificing their wellbeing. No list of strategies aimed at such an ambitious goal can hope to be definitive. The strategies listed above have all played a part in the school's success. We believe they can contribute to the success of other schools and other students operating and learning in different contexts. Some of these strategies may seem daunting, depending on colleagues' context. "Normalising university style learning" will seem very far removed from the day-to-day experience of teachers and school leaders working in communities with very low rates of participation in higher education over multiple generations. Nonetheless, most of the suggestions above are practical and within the reach of most if not all schools. We have used the term "strategies" to follow the convention in schools, but a reader familiar with corporate strategy development would likely call many of the suggestions "tactics" and this might better reflect the practical nature of many of our suggestions. Scale is undoubtedly a factor. Although a small school, the LAE has a concentration of high achieving students that might otherwise be spread over several dozen secondary schools or a handful of sixth form colleges. But schools do not have to go it alone: whether through multi-academy trusts, local authority systems or looser federations and partnerships, schools may find it easier to implement many of the recommended strategies by working together. Above all, schools should de-stigmatize disadvantage and recognize the potential that is to be found in young people from all backgrounds and personal circumstances. Contrary to the Sutton Trust—an organization that we nonetheless admire greatly—we believe the sort of education that is most likely to propel students from all backgrounds to the richest, most rewarding universities and careers is readily identifiable and, with time, patience, and skill, eminently replicable.