An Urban District Solution to the Underrepresentation Issue for Cities With Predominately Minority and Low-Income Populations

Laurel E. Brandon
and
Joseph S. Renzulli

Renzulli Center for Creativity, Gifted Education, and Talent Development
University of Connecticut

One of the major issues in the field of gifted education is the underrepresentation of students from minority groups and low-income families in gifted programs. Researchers have reported that this is due both to identification practices that disproportionally exclude these students, including a lack of parent awareness of identification procedures, and a lack of gifted education programming in schools that serve many of these students (Lu & Weinberg, 2016; Mun et al, 2016; U.S. Department of Education, 2014). In urban districts that serve a high proportion of students from minority groups and low-income families, gifted programs may be populated primarily by White and Asian students from higher-income families. This disproportionality is what we mean by "the underrepresentation issue" in this article, and has been documented in many large cities, including Chicago (One Chance Illinois, 2016) and New York City (Lu & Weinberg, 2016), among others (e.g., Card & Giuliano, 2015; Galvez, 2015; Isensee, 2015; Thompson, 2015).

One strategy to promote talent development in high-potential youth from underrepresented groups in large urban districts is to provide opportunities, resources, and support to students who show readiness for a more advanced curriculum than that normally provided by their district. In this article, we describe how a 4th-8th grade public school in Hartford, CT, based on the Schoolwide Enrichment Model (SEM; Renzulli & Reis, 2014) provides the *opportunity* to participate in gifted programming to students who would likely have not been identified as gifted in nearby suburban school districts as well as *resources* and *support* to help these students rise to the challenge of a more advanced curriculum including supplementary enrichment experiences. Finally, we discuss the outcomes observed in the first several years of the program and implications for replication efforts across the country.

The Renzulli Academy in Hartford uses the entire city as the "catchment area" for its enrollees and operates on the same budget basis as all other schools in the city. Students are selected for the Academy following a two-part admission process based on the Talent Pool Identification System used in the SEM (Renzulli & Reis, 2014). The Talent Pool Identification System "casts a wide net" to identify as many students who may benefit from the school's modified curriculum as possible. First, all students scoring in the top 15% of the district on third-grade state mastery tests in reading, math, and language usage receive an invitation to apply to the academy. If there is space,

students entering grades 5–8 are also invited. Not all of these are students who scored at the highest level, which is labeled “Advanced” or “Exceeded” depending on the year of the test (Connecticut State Department of Education [SDE], 2006; 2016). In 2015, statewide, 29.7% of 3rd-grade students scored at the highest level in reading and 18.3% scored at the highest level in math. In Hartford, just 24.1% of 3rd-grade students Met *or* Exceeded the standard in reading, with only 7.2% of students overall scoring at the highest level; and just 18.6% of 3rd-grade students Met or Exceeded the standard in math, with only 4.2% of students overall scoring at the highest level. In contrast, in the suburban districts nearby, around 75% of 3rd-graders Met or Exceeded the standards in math and reading (SDE, 2015). In short, the top 15% of students in Hartford includes many students who would be average, rather than top, students in other schools.

The second part of the admission process is an application. Students who are interested in attending the academy answer a few short-answer questions about their interests and motivation to attend the school, parents write a letter of interest, and the child’s teacher completes rating scales on the students’ creativity, task commitment, and general ability. School grades and behavior are also considered in the application, though a history of difficult behavior does not necessarily exclude an applicant (https://www.hartfordschools.org/o/renzulli/). Unlike some gifted programs, where students from minority groups and low-income families are represented in a much smaller proportion than the general population of the school district (Lu & Weinberg, 2016; One Chance Illinois, 2016), the students of the Renzulli Academy reflect the population of Hartford Public Schools (HPS). In HPS, 89% of students are Black, Hispanic, Asian, or of two or more races, (84% Black or Hispanic) and 90% of Academy students are in these groups (78% Black or Hispanic). Similarly, 78% of students in HPS qualify for free or reduced lunch, and 73% of Academy students do (SDE, 2016b). For this reason, we feel this model of identification is an effective solution to the underrepresentation issue for urban districts with predominately minority and low-income populations.

The accepted students are immersed in curriculum developed for gifted learners: M^3 enriched mathematics units (Gavin et al., 2007), Schoolwide Enrichment Model-Reading (Reis, 2009), investigation-based science (e.g., Heilbronner & Renzulli, 2016) and project-based social studies (e.g., National History Day; see Sloan & Rockman, 2010). This curriculum is complemented by general enrichment: foreign language instruction, fine arts, enrichment clusters (Renzulli, Gentry, & Reis, 2014; see also Allen, Robbins, Payne, & Brown, 2016), and school-based participation in academic and creative competitions. Many of the teachers at the Renzulli Academy have a master’s degree with an emphasis in giftedness, creativity, and talent development, and teachers are supported with ongoing professional development in differentiation, gifted pedagogy, and the Schoolwide Enrichment Model. Students who need academic intervention are supported in the classroom through differentiated instruction and Response to Intervention plans. Parents are not only welcomed, they are heard at a parent council, supported with classes on characteristics of gifted learners, and expected to invest time supporting the school (Hartford Public Schools, 2016).

A common measure of the success of a school is its students' performance and/or growth on standardized assessments (VanTassel-Baska & Feng, 2004, p.136). When the Renzulli Academy opened in 2009, the State of Connecticut defined five performance levels: below basic, basic, proficient, goal, and advanced. A proficient student was considered to be making adequate progress and ready to learn the skills of the next grade, whereas a student at goal or advanced was able to complete more challenging work at the grade level (SDE, 2006). In Connecticut, a school is rated with School Performance Index scores (SPIs) from 0–100 based on student performance on standardized tests. The target SPI prior to 2013 was 88. In the 2010–2011 school year (the first year for which scores are available), the Renzulli Academy had a math SPI of 91, a reading SPI of 91.5, and a writing SPI of 92.2. By 2013, the SPIs for reading and writing had increased to 95.8 and 94.8, respectively, while the SPI for math had fallen to 85.1 (SDE, 2013).

In 2014, the state changed its assessments to measure performance on the new Connecticut Core Standards, and the target SPI was changed to 75. In 2015, the Renzulli Academy's English language arts SPI was 69.7, and rose to 72.7 in 2016. For math, the 2015 SPI was 62.4, and it rose to 67.3 in 2016. These scores are higher than the state's overall performance indicators (2016 ELA: 67.7; 2016 math: 61.4; SDE, 2017) and nearly as high as the scores in neighboring West Hartford, a school district where only 21% of students are eligible for free or reduced-price meals and 25% of students are Black or Hispanic (2016 ELA: 75.2; 2016 math: 68.3; SDE, 2016b). Some might say that this school would produce these higher test scores simply because the students were drawn from a pool of the highest-scorers in the district, undoubtedly including students who were already scoring above goal on standardized tests. Perhaps these impressive scores are merely an artifact of selection. They might rightly ask for additional evidence with which to judge the effectiveness of the school's *educational model*, which brings together creative, task-committed students with above-average (but not necessarily superior) ability and then teaches them using an enriched curriculum designed for gifted learners.

Another way to assess a school is to consider how its students perform on performance tasks, including whether students place in academic and creative competitions and the quality of the products, performances, and services its students develop. Because gifted programs often emphasize outcomes on processes that are difficult to measure with standardized tests, such as higher-level thinking and creativity, portfolio assessment is recommended when evaluating their effectiveness (VanTassel-Baska & Feng, 2004, p.134–135). Since the school's opening in 2009, Renzulli Academy students have excelled in creative and knowledge-based competitions across the disciplines:

- Students placed at the State Invention Convention in 2010, 2014, 2015, and 2016; one student advanced to the National Invention Convention
- Students placed in the Columbus State University's math contests and earned a Silver Award at the State MathCounts competition

- Student artwork was selected for display and publication in various competitions in 2012, 2013 and 2014
- Students qualified for the State Geography Bee in 2012, 2015, 2016, and 2017
- Over 50 students advanced from regional finals to the National History Day State Competition, and 10 advanced to the National Competition over the years 2013, 2014, and 2015
- Students placed 1st, 2nd, and 3rd in the City of Hartford Creative Youth Essay Contest two years in a row.
- A total of 19 students placed at the Citywide Science Fair in 2013, 2014, and 2015, including 9 first-place winners
- Since the school began its band program in 2014, 8 students have been selected for the University of Hartford's Hartt School of Music ensemble, and the Renzulli Academy band ranked 15th out of 35 in the Fantastic Festivals Adjudication Competition
- In 2017, an Academy student received a full scholarship to the prestigious Loomis-Chaffee college preparatory boarding school. (F. DeJesus, personal communication, March 20, 2017).

Based on high test scores, creative competition-winning products and performances, and positive feedback from families, we feel that the Hartford Renzulli Academy program is an effective way to select and serve high-potential youth from minority groups and low-income families in urban districts. Although the students served by the Renzulli Academy may not be eligible for gifted services in higher-performing districts, the opportunities, resources, and support provided by the Academy has enabled students to show that they can perform at high levels. As one parent commented, "A rose might grow from a crack in the concrete, but planted in a garden with nourishment is where it will thrive" (https://www.greatschools.org).

Visitations to the school have resulted in replications in other cities. You are invited to contact us if you would like to arrange for a visit.

References

Allen, J. K., Robbins, M. A., Payne, Y. D., & Backes Brown, K. (2016). Using enrichment clusters to address the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse learners. *Gifted Child Today, 39*(2), 84–97. https://doi.org/10.1177/1076217516628568

Card, D., & Giuliano, L. (2015). *Can universal screening increase the representation of low income and minority students in gifted education?* (NBER Working Paper No. 21519). National Bureau of Economic Research. https://doi.org/10.3386/w21519

Connecticut State Department of Education (2006). *Fourth generation Connecticut mastery test: Performance level descriptors for mathematics, reading, and writing.* Retrieved from http://www.sde.ct.gov/

Connecticut State Department of Education (2013). *Renzulli Academy 2012-2013 performance report.*

Connecticut State Department of Education (2015a). *Setting the baseline* [Excel spreadsheet]. Retrieved from http://www.sde.ct.gov/

Connecticut State Department of Education (2016a). *Connecticut's achievement standard descriptions for the Smarter Balanced assessment.* https://portal.ct.gov/-/media/sde/student-assessment/smarter-results-resources/present_policy_alds_final-7-2-2019.pdf?rev=65e3ba0dfe844c60b6234bdd20434803&hash=7D27470B79B6326252B7D009D6A9BC99

Connecticut State Department of Education (2016b). *School profile and performance report for school year 2015-2016: Renzulli Academy*. Retrieved from http://edsight.ct.gov/

Connecticut State Department of Education (2017). *Connecticut's Next Generation accountability system: 2015-2016 results* [Statewide Report]. https://edsight.ct.gov/relatedreports/next_generation_accountability_system_march_2017_presentation.pdf

Galvez, A. (2015, May 21). Gifted and talented education update. *Los Angeles Unified School District.* Retrieved from https://boe.lausd.net/

Gavin, M. K., Casa, T. M., Adelson, J. L., Carroll, S. R., & Sheffield, L. J., & Spinelli, A. M. (2007). Project M^3: Mentoring mathematical minds–A research-based curriculum for talented elementary students. *Journal of Advanced Academics, 18*(4), 566–585. https://doi.org/10.4219/jaa-2007-552

Hartford Public Schools (2016). *Phase IV school design specifications: Renzulli Academy*. Retrieved from https://www.hartfordschools.org/files/RenzulliAcademyDesignSpecsRevisedFeb16.pdf

Heilbronner, N., & Renzulli, J. S. (2016). *The Schoolwide Enrichment Model in science: A hands-on approach for engaging young scientists.* Waco, TX: Prufrock Press.

Isensee, L. (2015, September 30). In Houston's gifted program, critics say Blacks and Latinos are overlooked. *National Public Radio.* https://www.npr.org/sections/ed/2015/09/30/441409122/in-houstons-gifted-program-blacks-and-latinos-are-underrepresented

Lu, Y., & Weinberg, S. L. (2016). Public pre-k and test taking for the NYC gifted-and-talented programs: Forging a path to equity. *Educational Researcher, 45*(1), 36–47. https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X16633441

Mun, R. U., Langley, S. D., Ware, S., Gubbins, E. J., Siegle, D., Callahan, C. M., McCoach, D. B., & Hamilton, R. (2016). *Effective practices for identifying and serving English learners in gifted education: A systematic review of the literature.* Storrs: University of Connecticut, National Center for Research on Gifted Education. https://ncrge.uconn.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/982/2016/01/NCRGE_EL_Lit-Review.pdf

One Chance Illinois (2016). *Untapped potential.* Retrieved from One Chance Illinois website: http://onechanceillinois.org/oci-wp/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/OCI_Report_UP_Mar2016.pdf

Reis, S. M. (2009). *Joyful reading: Differentiation and enrichment for successful literacy learning, grades K-8.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Renzulli, J. S., Gentry, M., & Reis, S. M. (2014). *Enrichment clusters: A practical plan for real-world, student-driven learning* (2nd ed.). Waco, TX: Prufrock Press.

Renzulli, J. S., & Reis, S. M. (2014). *The Schoolwide Enrichment Model: A how-to guide for educational excellence* (3rd ed.). Waco, TX: Prufrock Press.

Sloan, K., & Rockman, S. (2010). *National History Day works: Findings from the national program evaluation.* Retrieved from National History Day website: http://www.nhd.org

Thompson, R. (2015, September 26). Closing the gap: How Duval is getting more minorities into gifted programs. *The Florida Times-Union.* https://www.jacksonville.com/story/news/education/2015/09/27/closing-gap-how-duval-getting-more-minorities-gifted-programs/15681679007/

U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights. (2014). *Civil rights data collection data snapshot on college and career readiness in the 2011-2012 school year.* Retrieved from Office of Civil Rights website: http://ocrdata.ed.gov/Downloads/CRDC-College-and-Career-Readiness-Snapshot.pdf

VanTassel-Baska, J., & Feng, A. X. (2004). *Designing and utilizing evaluation for gifted program improvement*. Waco, TX: Prufrock Press.