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Rethinking What Gifted Education Means, and Whom It Should Serve

By Dana Goldstein

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SILVER SPRING, Md. — It was a searing summer day before the start of the school year, but Julianni and Giselle Wyche, 10-year-old twins, were in a classroom, engineering mini rockets, writing in journals and learning words like “fluctuate” and “cognizant.”

The sisters were among 1,000 children chosen for an enrichment course intended in part to prepare them for accelerated and gifted programs in Montgomery County, Md. All of the students were from schools that serve large numbers of low-income families.

“It’s one of my favorite parts of summer,” Julianni said.

The program is one element in a suite of sweeping changes meant to address a decades-old problem in these Washington suburbs, and one that is troubling educators across the nation: the underrepresentation of black, Hispanic and low-income children in selective academic settings.

[*Quiz: Try your hand at some test questions used to screen students for gifted programs.*]

Amid deepening debate over the issue, sometimes referred to as “the excellence gap,” school officials across the country and at all educational levels are wrestling with possible remedies. Montgomery County is one of several districts that is successfully diversifying its gifted programs, in part by overhauling the admissions process and rethinking the fundamental mission of such programs. This 160,000-student school system, one of the nation’s highest performing and most diverse, has provided a potential model — but not without creating anxiety and skepticism among some parents who feel their children have been hurt by the changes.

By far the biggest shift is in how children are admitted to the 13 elementary magnet schools perceived as the most intellectually elite in the county. In the past, parents had to apply for their children to attend, limiting spots to those in the know. This year, for the first time, every third grader in the county — some 12,000 students — was automatically considered for admission, with 715 winning a spot.

The district now gives less weight to the Cognitive Abilities Test, a common assessment for admission to gifted programs, and more to class performance. Parents can no longer submit private evaluations attesting that their children are gifted — statements that can be secured by paying hundreds of dollars to a psychologist. Teacher recommendations, too, now play a smaller role. (Research has found educators are less likely to recommend low-income students of color, even when their performance is identical to middle-class and white peers.)

The county also changed its paradigm about whom the special schools should serve: not the students with the highest abilities across the county, but rather, those students who are outliers at their neighborhood schools, with fewer than 20 peers with similar abilities.

Jack Smith, the system’s superintendent, sees the changes as part of a broader integration strategy. “If you’re a student in poverty and you go to school with a critical mass of students who are not in poverty, you have a different experience,” he said. “It’s desirable to level out the amount of poverty in a school. It’s not always possible.”

Last year, Montgomery County rechristened its elementary magnet schools for the “highly gifted” as Centers for Enriched Studies. The idea was to label the program, not the students.

The reforms got results. More students from every demographic group were selected for the 13 special schools this year, because the number of seats increased. But the overall makeup of the pool changed.

In 2016, 23 percent of students in the county’s elementary school magnet programs for the highly gifted were black and Hispanic, in a district where half the students belong to those groups. This year, 31 percent of the students selected for the Centers for Enriched Studies were black or Hispanic. A fifth came from low-income families, nearly double the percentage who were accepted two years ago.

The white share of the accepted population increased, too, by 3 percentage points. But the Asian share of the population admitted to the special schools dropped 8 points.

The changes have left some parents, mostly Asian and white and living in the county’s more affluent areas, anxious. They worry their children will be excluded from selective programs, or that the level of instruction at the magnet schools will fall as students are accepted from lower-performing elementary schools. They argue that a more holistic admissions process, with less attention paid to test scores, is one that is, ultimately, less transparent.

Their concerns echo those of a group suing Harvard University, saying that the college’s admissions policies discriminate against Asian-American applicants. They also echo complaints from some parents in New York City who are resisting Mayor Bill de Blasio’s proposal to change admissions to the city’s most elite high schools, in order to admit more black and Hispanic students.

Unlike many other school diversity efforts, the reforms in Montgomery County are meant to address educational inequality early, for students as young as second grade. Parents here, like those in many other districts, compete in an arms race of real estate acquisition, school visits, test preparation and application-writing to gain access to the most coveted schools. But only some parents know the rules of the game, or have time to play.

Students in a summer enrichment program in Montgomery County that is meant in part to prepare them for accelerated and gifted programs. Emma Howells for The New York Times

"The goal is to try and snatch a few seats," said Lang Lin, chair of the gifted child committee of the Montgomery County P.T.A. "But over all, the problem is the number of seats is just too little."

The reforms here were driven by a consultant's report, published two years ago, that detailed a history of exclusion and low expectations for black and Hispanic children in this progressive county. Many of the district's selective academic programs were founded in the 1970s and 1980s, with the explicit goal of keeping white families in the public school system.

By the 1990s, black and Latino community groups were protesting the district, arguing that their children were being left to stagnate in general education classrooms while white students filled rooms reserved for gifted, honors and Advanced Placement programs. School buildings appeared to be racially integrated, but many classrooms remained segregated.

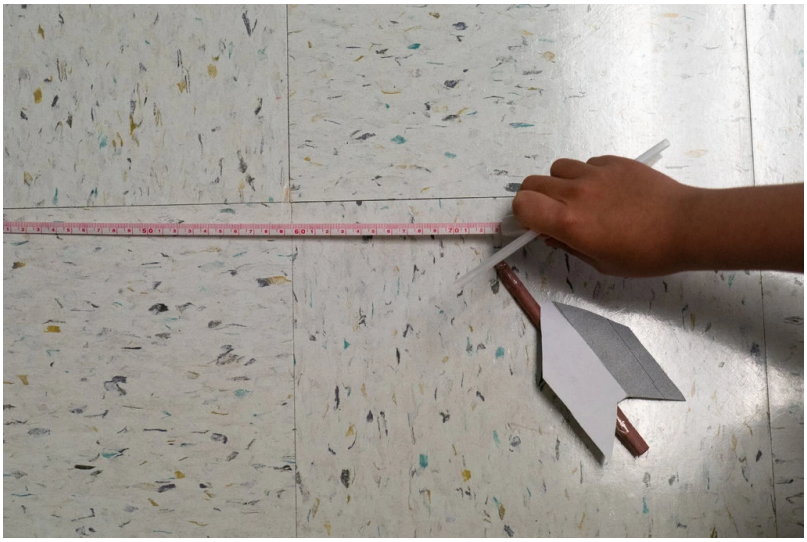
"What we wanted was for the school system to be very open and transparent about how they tracked kids," said Ana Sol Gutiérrez, a former school board member who led some of the activist efforts and is now a Maryland state legislator. "We never quite got them to own up to the fact that there was a tracking mechanism."

By 2016, the district had new leadership and "more of a sense of urgency" to address disparities, said Michael Durso, president of the Montgomery County Board of Education and a former principal in the district.

Still, "some people behind the scenes wondered, 'Well, why would one open this can of worms?'" Mr. Durso remembered. "It was promising to be contentious."

The district started with a pilot program in the southeastern section of the county, yielding especially controversial results at the middle school level. Few magnet seats were added for middle-school students, while the candidate pool, because of the new policy of screening all students for admission, expanded nearly tenfold to 8,000 children.

Mr. Lin, an engineering manager who immigrated from China two decades ago, said his 11-year-old daughter had earned good grades in an elementary school for enriched studies, but was effectively de-selected this spring. She was not invited to continue in the magnet program into middle school.



About 1,000 children were chosen for the enrichment program. All of the students were from schools that serve large numbers of low-income families. Emma Howells for The New York Times

“If the admission criteria hadn’t changed, she would have been in a magnet for sure,” Mr. Lin said.

District officials do not deny that some students who would have been chosen for the elite middle schools in the past were not selected this year. It has been “the hardest change,” said Lori-Christina Webb, an executive in the district’s central office who is a driving force behind the reforms.

Asian-American students were hit especially hard. At two middle-school magnet programs in the pilot region, the number of black, Hispanic and white students admitted grew modestly, but there were 18 fewer seats for Asian students.

According to the district, evaluators do not see children’s names, race or language status as they determine admission. They do, however, see information about the family’s socioeconomic status and the child’s gender. The changes for Asian students were “expected,” according to a district spokesman, because universal screening brought the demographics of admitted students closer in line to the overall demographics of the county.

Among Asian-Americans, the changes “are really very stressful within the community,” Mr. Lin said.

The middle-school reforms will roll out countywide this year. Ms. Webb said the district would meet the needs of children like Mr. Lin’s daughter at local middle schools, in new accelerated classes reserved for high-performing students. “There is an element of prestige associated with going to a magnet program, but that can’t be a driver for the district,” she said.

But Mr. Lin worries the new courses at neighborhood middle schools won’t be as challenging as classes at the magnets. That concern is shared by Michelle Gluck, president of the Gifted and Talented Association of Montgomery County, and a lawyer for a local university. She has two children who have attended the county’s magnet schools and other accelerated programs.

“Gifted education does have a bad racial history in this country,” Ms. Gluck said. She said she supports changes meant to address that history, especially the universal screening process.

Still, she is concerned that the curriculum at the magnet schools will be “pitched lower,” she said, as the admissions standards change.

“For those of us who live with and raise and deal with these highly gifted students, we also want these classrooms to be offering what they need,” she said. If challenging instruction is not available, she added, she and other parents might enroll their children in private school.

The parents of Giselle, left, and her twin Julianni Wyche were thrilled with their daughters' inclusion in the enrichment program. Emma Howells for The New York Times

Kimberly Petrola, a fourth-grade teacher at Fox Chapel Elementary School in Germantown, one of the Centers for Enriched Studies, acknowledged that instruction had changed since the school became part of the pilot program last year, ahead of the rest of the county.

With a more diverse student body, not every child performed above grade level, Ms. Petrola said. She said she and other teachers used ability grouping to teach at different levels. For example, for a unit in which students read an author's autobiography and fiction side by side, to look for consistent themes, some groups were assigned authors who wrote at a more challenging reading level.

Ms. Petrola said that while some teachers were apprehensive about the changes, she supported them.

"The process identified a lot more of the underachieving gifted," she said. "It's good for the community to see that the gifted students are not just the typical students that you think of when you think of gifted and talented. Anybody from any diverse background can be gifted."

Some experts say diversifying selective academic programs is not enough to address inequality in education. In fact, they argue that such programs should not exist at all. They point to research showing that low-performing students learn more when they attend classes alongside higher-performing peers, while the test scores of high performers do not suffer.

"Race is a very scary thing, and when people are liberal, they try to figure out how to have diversity in a way that still feels safe and still feels protective of their own children's privilege," said Jeannie Oakes, an emeritus professor of education at the University of California, Los Angeles. "It's this sense of, 'Well, if we can find the good ones, it would be good to have diversity in these programs.'"

For those children not selected, she added, "low expectations really put a ceiling on what we can achieve."

In Montgomery County, some were quick to defend selective academic programs and the districts' reforms. The parents of the twins in the summer enrichment program, Catherine and Rashawn Wyche, who are Hispanic and black, moved to the area six years ago, in part because of the bilingual and accelerated programs in the schools.

Ms. Wyche works in information technology and Mr. Wyche is an engineer. They were thrilled with their daughters' inclusion in the enrichment program. They want their children in gifted programs during the regular school year, too, they said — but not as demographic tokens.

"We want them to be proud of their heritage, and be where they feel comfortable," Ms. Wyche said. She hoped her daughters would realize that other smart kids "look like me. We can excel together."