



August 24, 2016

ISSN 1094-5296

Finn, Jr., C., & Wright, B. (2015) *Failing our brightest kids: The global challenge of educating high-ability students*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.

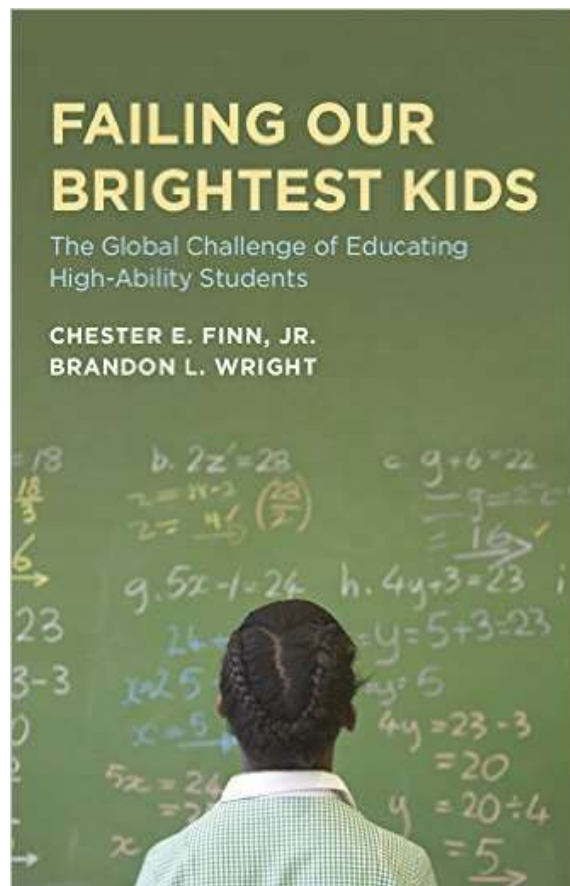
Pp. 299

ISBN: 978-1-61250-841-2

**Reviewed by Christopher Sewell
General Assembly
United States**

In *Failing Our Brightest Kids: The Global Challenge of Educating High-Ability Students*, Finn and Wright push us to begin to think about how the United States can learn from the other countries' treatment of and policies around gifted learners. The authors of the volume, Charles E. Finn, Jr. and Brandon L. Wright, undertook this project as a shared work between Stanford's Hoover Institution and the Thomas B. Fordham Institute. They take us around the world to think about gifted policies at the elementary and secondary level within 11 countries and the ways in which these countries engage gifted learners of differing socio-economic status and/or various ethnic groups.

My interest in this book comes from personal experience. Growing up in Brooklyn, I had the opportunity and privilege to attend gifted programming as early as Pre-K. I sat in classes with diverse peers from PK-5, tested into a sheltered program (a small, full-time gifted program that is housed in a traditional



school) at one of our community district's middle schools, and finished my secondary experience at one of the specialized high schools here in New York. Currently, my high school reflects some of the tensions that Finn and Wright note through their text: African-American attendance dwindled from ~33% in the late 1990s to roughly 8% now and Asian American enrollment has grown from ~33% to over 50% in the same time period. All the while, debates rage about the amount of funding given to the school due to its high level of students from low-income backgrounds and what it means to truly teach gifted students at this level. The notion of gifted education and the ways in which it helps to perpetuate inequity within the country and thwart the ability to maximize a country's human capital are well and alive here in my hometown of New York City.

Finn and Wright begin their work by noting the tensions that exist in the American vision of excellence and education. While *Sputnik* and *A Nation at Risk* pushed the notion that America should be great and utilize its resources to push forth long-term competitiveness, security, and innovation, the authors assert that we are failing to groom homegrown talent due to the lack of support of gifted populations. The authors explore the current data trends by studying international assessments and the NAEP for American students. They posit an even greater enemy in this data is the “excellence gap”, which they define as economically disadvantaged, English Language Learners, and historically underprivileged minorities representing continually smaller numbers of students scoring at the highest levels of achievement on these national and international assessments. The authors contend this only aids in creating a continued gap when looking at college admissions where less than 40% of students who take the ACT are college ready (and similar patterns exist for AP exams). The issue for the authors is twofold, getting students to the top while making sure that there is not a

widening of the excellence gap for top students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Finn and Wright assert that four major issues serve as roadblocks to growth. First, the idea of serving those at the top is an elitist policy and one that does not aid those needing help the most. Much like my own experience in gifted education, the current demographic profile of gifted education continues to be skewed towards White and Asian middle-class students, diverting resources to specific subsets of gifted students. Compounding this issue, there is no clear way to define who is gifted. Since each state (and sometimes cities) has the ability to define who is gifted (and how to identify those traits—whether solely academic or inclusive of talent), debates ensue on how to make sure that we are accurately identifying and promoting the academic prowess of all students who should be labeled as gifted.

The authors continue by noting that until we address four major weaknesses in the current socio-political climate, we will not see major change in our system. Several factors, including program variability (from part-time pull out to fully sheltered programs), the lack of clear data collection practices about gifted students, the unclear research on the ways in which gifted education impact learners across classes and the lack of political backing, need to be considered as we think about really shaping strong outcomes for high-ability students. In my own experience as a student and educator, two aspects of this argument seem most important to our current climate. I have been in a completely sheltered model while working in schools where part-time pull out (or none at all) were the norm. While student identification matters, teacher training leads to students not getting their optimal needs met. Yes, receiving an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) is an option for gifted students, this policy is not largely put in place, which makes school resources and structures left to the whim of schools rather than cater to the true needs of the gifted learners in their school. Finn and Wright argue, without

districts gathering the right data around how gifted students performs and having a clear way of noting which populations do not receive the appropriate amounts of service, closing the “excellence gap” will not occur.

For each country’s study, the authors follow a similar model: general overview, performance on assessments, gifted education fundamentals, primary and middle grades, high school, diversity and disadvantage, and challenges, dilemmas and takeaways. While not explicitly stated in their choice of organization, the authors look to higher performing Asian countries first, followed by westernized countries on the country level and finally western countries that have a strong smaller state or provincial control of education (much like that of the United States). This macro to micro approach to country organization allows the reader to think about each level of government and their involvement (or lack thereof) in gifted education programs

Finn and Wright walk us through the Asian countries (Japan, Singapore, Taiwan, and Korea), with their generally strong performance on international assessments, and the drivers behind their ability to drive such strong scores. Overall, the approach to education here is driven by an intense competition to get into selective high schools, many of which focus on STEM subjects and the pipeline to elite colleges. This selectivity leads to extra instruction or “cram schools”, which can be cost prohibitive leading to a lack of socio-economic diversity in those who end up thriving or just simply provide undue pressures to teenagers. This environment is not much different than the United States and the test prep industry for ACT and SAT admissions or Specialized High School Admissions in New York City. While countries like Singapore shine in their universal screening of third graders for gifted and talented programs, the limited capacity for these schools leaves many in a lurch, unable to get the true support they need.

Finland stands out as a particular point to dive in. Many education reformers point to

the Finnish having strong scores on international assessments as something to be admired by the United States. Additionally, there is much discussion of the ways in which Finland prepares the best and brightest citizens to teach. While that is the true, their lack of strong accountability system leaves many students, especially those on the fringes socio-economically or geographically without the necessary supports. The decentralized education system in Finland makes it hard for there to be a clear way to collect data on and ensure that all students on the fringes who are high-ability get the education necessary to change their life trajectory.

Germany, much like many Asian countries, has a robust system for schooling (inclusive of vocational education) at the high school level for students. Through the example of Germany, Finn and Wright begin to introduce more nuances of gifted education. They pose the question – are we simply speaking of intellectual giftedness or a talent or trade that a student can excel in at the same time?

Hungary’s decentralization is aligned closely to the US, but they too have programs that follow the model of the SEED school (college-preparatory, public boarding schools in urban areas) or A Better Chance. These programs allow students to live in at or near schools in other parts of the country to get the level of education they need. While costly, Hungary engages with its larger philanthropic community to gain some of the necessary funding and support. While the US has large corporations and foundations working towards supporting education, it would be interesting to think about a specific investment in large scale gifted schooling across the United States (more organizations like Jack Cooke Kent Foundation which provide scholarships for low-income high-potential students at the high school and college levels, for example). Switzerland provides a rather uneven approach to gifted education - very little education for teachers, varying supports and programs across the country and

decentralization leading to very few programs for those on the fringes to capitalize upon helps to highlight what happens when a lackadaisical approach to gifted education drives policy. Gifted learners are then subject to area specific policies which, due to a lack of a national agenda and policies regarding their education, leaves them without advocates or a strong path towards getting the education that they deserve.

Eerily, like the United States, England is at the whim of the government and changing political tides, gifted and talented programming has all but been stalled since the early 2010s. Much like the US, school choice, while aiding in providing options have not necessarily led to increased growth on international assessments and is coupled with strict accountability measures (akin to NCLB) has focused on moving bubble students and those at the lower end of the spectrum. As a result of this, gifted students and their educational attainment are not actively at the center of socio-political and educational policy discussions.

Ontario, the city at play, helps us gain insight into a realm where giftedness is treated on the special education spectrum as an exceptionality. While Western Australia holds exclusive power to push gifted education, the area is working to push forth gifted education at the higher levels of education and level the playing field between indigenous students and native born Australians.

Finn and Wright rightfully assert that taking on other cultural identities will not simply push scores ahead, actions must also have clear agendas at the federal and local levels which will help shape the political landscape thus grounding gifted education. The authors advocate the US must start these programs when children are young; it is going to be imperative to think about early intervention to push kids ahead as soon as possible. It is clear that having strong data systems is important and ways to track and hold programs accountable for the growth of

students even at the very top. With passage of Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), the re-envisioning of No Child Left Behind, there is still room to grow on this front and schools and families need to advocate for all of their students.


From a curricular standpoint, universal screening done by schools, could ensure all students have access to these programs. An opt-in model would allow for parents who are not even aware or knowledgeable of the opportunities for their child. These options, which should include acceleration, college access programming, other programming, will push forth a holistic approach when dealing with gifted learners.

This book makes a strong contribution to gifted education literature by looking at the ways in which other countries have made an impact on international assessments and how integrating aspects of their programming might aid in closing the excellence gap and the number of students receiving the gifted services they deserve. I appreciated their qualitative and quantitative approach at looking at diversity and the policy behind choices in the 11 countries discussed while looking at the ways in which American policy has room to grow and meet the needs of all American students. One interesting addition might have been to see how these countries' educational policies were in conversation with one another more directly. For example, do certain countries value certain policies more than others and how do they go about aligning or using policy from other countries as they shape their current human capital development policy and asserting their intellectual prowess globally. Finn and Wright, while helping to provide these solutions, will need to figure out how these solutions will reach local communities as the government moves away from a centralized education model.

About the Reviewer

Christopher J.P. Sewell, Ed.D serves as an instructional coach at General Assembly in New York City. His research interests include gifted education, urban education policy, and character education.



 *Education Review/Reseñas Educativas/Resenhas Educativas* is supported by the edXchange initiative's Scholarly Communications Group at the Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College, Arizona State University. Copyright is retained by the first or sole author, who grants right of first publication to the *Education Review*. Readers are free to copy, display, and distribute this article, as long as the work is attributed to the author(s) and ***Education Review***, it is distributed for non-commercial purposes only, and no alteration or transformation is made in the work. More details of this Creative Commons license are available at <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/3.0/>. All other uses must be approved by the author(s) or ***Education Review***. ***Education Review*** is published by the Scholarly Communications Group of the Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College, Arizona State University.

Please contribute reviews at <http://www.edrev.info/contribute.html>.

Connect with *Education Review* on Facebook (<https://www.facebook.com/pages/Education-Review/178358222192644>) and on Twitter @EducReview