

# Treating students as gifted yields impressive academic results, study finds

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(PhysOrg.com) -- Schools that seek to help students who are underrepresented in advanced programs should treat them as gifted young scholars, an approach that can result in many of them actually performing at a gifted level within a few years, according to a U.S. Dept. of Education study of a North Carolina program.

Developed by researchers at Duke University with state educators, the five-year study of 10,000 kindergarteners and first- and second-graders suggests that raising expectations could be a key to enhancing the [academic performance](#) of at-risk students nationwide.

“All students should get a gifted education, even if they are not subsequently identified as gifted,” said William “Sandy” Darity, chair of African and African American studies and a professor at the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke University. “It’s not about who is in the class, but the quality of instruction.”

Darity’s research showing black and Latino students to be underrepresented in advanced and gifted classes helped lead the State of North Carolina to establish Project Bright Idea, the program analyzed in the Department of Education study. Co-designed more than 10 years ago by Margaret Gayle, director of the American Association for Gifted Children at Duke, the program trains teachers to treat all students as if they are gifted. Darity and Gayle say the project works because it nurtures students regardless of their race, socioeconomic status, gender or learning ability.

The new independent evaluation supports their claim. Its primary author calculates “on the safe side” that 15-20 percent of students taught with techniques usually reserved for gifted classrooms are identified within three years by their districts as being academically and intellectually gifted. Only 10 percent of a control group of similar students taught in regular classrooms met their district’s “gifted” criteria during the same period.

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### **Project Bright Idea, By the Numbers**

Among the 10,000 students studied, those who took part in Project Bright Idea were identified as academically and intellectually gifted in significantly greater numbers in the third grade. This occurred in all three study cohorts. Small methodological differences across the cohorts make it difficult to average them, and the independent evaluator recommended the project err “on the safe side” in using 15-20 percent as an overall result. Although more cautious than the actual study data, however, even this figure substantially exceeds the results for students in the control groups.

	Bright Idea	Non-Bright Idea
Cohort-1	24%	10%
Cohort-2	46%	10%
Cohort-3	15%	10%

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By comparison, in 2004 19 percent of all third-grade students were identified as gifted in the three North Carolina counties (Cabarrus, Watagua and Wake) with the highest numbers. Not a single third-grade

student in 2004 from the Title 1 schools involved in the study had previously been identified as gifted.

The pilot ran from 2004 to 2009 and included K-2 classrooms in Title 1 schools in 11 school districts with cohorts of more than 5,000 students in Bright Idea and 5,000 students in the control groups. As each cohort completed the research, the project was expanded to other classes and schools in the districts, including middle and high schools.

The project now continues as Project Bright Tomorrow at Northeast Elementary in Kinston and Town Creek Elementary in Winnabow, both in North Carolina. The two schools opened in 2009 and were modeled on Bright Idea.

“We are giving teachers concepts based on the latest and best research in the classroom. Then we provide support and mentorship to help them work through obstacles,” Gayle said.

The project requires teachers to undergo regular and intensive training, energizing their profession and their classrooms by weaving together teaching strategies based on the work of national education experts, including Art Costa and Bena Kallick’s work on “habits of mind,” Mary Frasier’s on “traits, attributes and behaviors” and Howard Gardner’s on “multiple intelligences.”

“We are literally changing the knowledge, skills and dispositions of teachers so they believe children can learn. It is a lot about teacher expectation and belief,” said Mary N. Watson, the director of the exceptional children division of the N.C. Department of Public Instruction, who helped develop the project.

In workshops and week-long summer institutes, teachers in the project are taught by national and state-level experts on how to develop students’

thinking and skills such as controlling impulsivity, posing questions and taking responsible risks.

“We are teaching students how to think, not what to think,” Gayle said.

Bright Idea teacher Dawn Miller of Thomasville Elementary School in Thomasville, N.C., agrees.

“In college we learned about the multiple intelligences theory; it’s nothing new. But Bright Idea had the research that provided a model to incorporate all the things we know that are right for kids,” Miller said.

After training, Bright Idea teachers are asked to design curriculum customized for their classrooms.

Incorporating the project’s concepts does not extend the work day, week or school year, nor does it require extensive tutoring for students to achieve success. But it does require support from principals and administrators, Darity said.

Edward McFarland, principal of Fuquay-Varina High School in Fuquay-Varina, N.C., was first introduced to Project Bright Idea as an elementary school principal. Since 2006 he has applied components of the project at the high school level, allowing teachers extra time each week to design curricula.

“Staff development is the key, but it takes time to retrain,” McFarland said. “Many times we’re looking for easy fixes but hard work is what gets you the results. You can throw in a new program. You may be committed for a year or so, take a few workshops and hand out a few lessons. But we really want to focus on planning lessons that go deeper than that.”

By using some components of Bright Idea, McFarland watched the achievement gap at Fuquay Varina decrease by 4-6 percent from 2006 to 2010. Testing and graduation rates surpassed the county average within the same time period.

Project Bright Idea works best when it is applied comprehensively, changing the entire school atmosphere, said Ron Tzur, faculty chair at the School of Education at the University of Colorado, Denver, who evaluated the research for the Department of Education.

“It’s very difficult to argue with the outcome,” said Tzur, who said more research is needed, particularly on math and science scores. “Most projects have two teachers in one school. With Bright Idea, we are talking about hundreds of teachers and thousands of [students](#). Most projects run out of steam when the funding runs out. But with high expectations, there is a change in teacher practices and more willingness and interest on their part. Teachers are saying they want more.”

**More information:** [www.ncpublicschools.org/ec/idea](http://www.ncpublicschools.org/ec/idea)

Provided by Duke University

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