

Even when they include them, gifted programs aren't serving Black or low-income kids

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Credit: Illustration by Shannon Alexander

After years of criticism for their lack of diversity, programs for high

achievers may not be adequately serving their Black and low-income students, a new study shows.

"The potential benefits aren't equally distributed," said lead author and University of Florida College of Education professor Christopher Redding, Ph.D., who evaluated data from gifted programs in [elementary schools](#) nationwide. "The conversation up to this point has been about access, with less emphasis on how students perform once in gifted programs."

While academic achievement gains for students overall were modest—going from the 78th to 80th percentile in reading and rising only a third as much in math—low-income and Black gifted students, on average, saw no achievement gains. When the researchers looked at factors beyond scores, including engagement, attendance, and whether a [student](#) left or stayed in a [school](#), they found little evidence to suggest gifted participation influenced those measures for any group.

"We're not saying these programs don't have benefits," Redding said. "But as states and [school districts](#) evaluate them, we need to ask, 'How can we do this best both for all [gifted students](#) and for diverse student populations?'"

A barrier to effectively serving a diverse gifted population could be the programs' content. If the curriculum only reflects the affluent, predominantly white population that gifted has traditionally served, it might not meet the needs of its other students, Redding says. As a success story, he points to the example of Illinois' second-largest school district, which diversified its curriculum—but the impetus for that shift was a federal class-action suit.

"Unfortunately, unless there's this strong pressure from the courts, lots of districts aren't taking these steps that could be taken," Redding said.

Another culprit could be the structure of the programs. While some students receive all-day gifted instruction, others might only get an hour every other week. In "light touch" programs like those, a better option might be what education researchers call acceleration: skipping a grade or taking fifth grade math while in fourth grade, for example.

Redding doesn't want to see gifted programs go away, but he wants educators to take a hard look at how their curriculum meshes with the students they're trying to reach—and for policymakers to have a better understanding of what the programs are actually achieving.

"It's not just about access," he said.

More information: Christopher Redding et al, Do Students in Gifted Programs Perform Better? Linking Gifted Program Participation to Achievement and Nonachievement Outcomes, *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* (2021). [DOI: 10.3102/01623737211008919](https://doi.org/10.3102/01623737211008919)

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