

America Ignores Excellence

Is America ignoring excellence? Newspaper headlines proclaim that our nation's schools are producing weak students who lag behind age-peers in other countries. Meanwhile, there is a quieter story that's been kept in the dark—but is just as important to our country's future.

In every state, in every school, in huge cities, and in tiny farm communities, students are ready for much more challenge than the system provides.

These children perform better than any politician dares to expect. They are the top scorers, the ones who break the curve. They are the kids who read shampoo bottles at age three, and read newspaper editorials at age five. They can add up the cost of groceries faster than a cash register. They shock their parents and wow their grandparents.

But when they enter school, things change. They're often the most frustrated students in the classroom. They're bored in kindergarten, and they're bored again in first grade. Year after year, they learn little that they haven't learned already. They hope things will get better, but things rarely do. For many of them, nothing changes.

America's school system keeps bright students in line by forcing them to learn in a lock-step manner with their classmates. Teachers and principals disregard students' desires to learn more—much more—than they are being taught.

Instead of praise and encouragement, these students hear one word—no. When they ask for a challenge, they are held back. When they want to fly, they are told to stay in their seats.

Stay in your grade. Know your place.

It's a national scandal. And the price may be the slow but steady erosion of American excellence.



About the Title

The title of this report, *A Nation Deceived: How Schools Hold Back America's Brightest Students*, reflects what happens every day in our country's classrooms. When we tell ourselves that our brightest students would not benefit from acceleration, we deceive ourselves, our students, and the nation.

We know *deceived* is a very strong word. We consulted with a large number of people before deciding on this title, and we stand behind it.

This title is provocative—and accurate. This title is our honest message to America and that message is this: deceiving ourselves and deceiving our brightest students is no longer defensible.

The 20 Most Important Points from Volume II of This Report

1. Acceleration is the most effective curriculum intervention for gifted children.
2. For bright students, acceleration has long-term beneficial effects, both academically and socially.
3. Acceleration is a virtually cost-free intervention.
4. Gifted children tend to be socially and emotionally more mature than their age-mates. For many bright students, acceleration provides a better personal maturity match with classmates.
5. When bright students are presented with curriculum developed for age-peers, they can become bored and unhappy and get turned off from learning.
6. Testing, especially above-level testing (using tests developed for older students), is highly effective in identifying students who would benefit from acceleration.
7. The evidence and mechanisms are available to help schools make good decisions about acceleration so that it is a low-risk/high-success intervention for qualified students. *The Iowa Acceleration Scale* is a proven, effective instrument for helping schools make decisions about whole-grade acceleration.
8. The 18 types of acceleration available to bright students fall into two broad categories: grade-based acceleration, which shortens the number of years a student spends in the K–12 system and subject-based acceleration, which allows for advanced content earlier than customary.
9. Entering school early is an excellent option for some gifted students both academically and socially. High ability young children who enroll early generally settle in smoothly with their older classmates.
10. Gifted students entering college early experience both short-term and long-term academic success, leading to long-term occupational success and personal satisfaction.
11. Many alternatives to full-time early college entrance are available for bright high school students who prefer to stay with age-peers. These include dual enrollment in high school and college, distance education, and summer programs. Advanced Placement (AP) is the best large-scale option for bright students who want to take college-level courses in high school.
12. Very few early college entrants experience social or emotional difficulties. When these do occur they are usually short-term and part of the adjustment process.
13. Radical acceleration (acceleration by two or more years) is effective academically and socially for highly gifted students.
14. Many educators have been largely negative about the practice of acceleration, despite abundant research evidence for its success and viability.
15. To encourage a major change in America's perceptions of educational acceleration, we will need to use all the engines of change: legislation, the courts, administrative rules, and professional initiatives.
16. Effective implementation of accelerative options for gifted students with disabilities is time- and resource-intensive.
17. It is important for parents to be fully involved in the decision-making process about their child's acceleration.
18. The few problems that have been experienced with acceleration have stemmed primarily from incomplete or poor planning.
19. Educational equity does not mean educational sameness. Equity respects individual differences in readiness to learn and recognizes the value of each student.
20. The key question for educators is not *whether* to accelerate a gifted learner but rather *how*.

For more information on the research that informs these points, see Volume II of *A Nation Deceived*

America Says No

What do America's brightest students hear? Every year, across the nation, students who should be moved ahead at their natural pace of learning are told to stay put. Thousands of students are told to lower their expectations, and put their dreams on hold. Whatever they want to do, their teachers say, it can wait.

Staying put is the wise move, many school districts say. That's what is best for the child.

The problem is that it's not. Study after study tells us what so many bright but bored students already know—challenge is lacking in the regular classroom. We are deceiving ourselves when it comes to encouraging excellence. The way to promote excellence is to help it advance.

Excellence begins with one word—yes.

Yes to giving bright kids complex math problems. Yes to letting them learn another language. Yes to letting them accelerate to take classes that are ahead of their age group. Yes to letting them fly.

Instead, we say no. And by saying no, we undermine the motivation of bright students and hurt ourselves. We cling to the idea that all children are better off with children who match them in age. We don't even question it. And the cost to our country, to our communities, and to our children is enormous.

Excellence can lose its vibrancy. It can become complacency. It can become apathy. What it always becomes, if it's ignored, is less than it could be. When we say no to acceleration, we are quietly and, ironically with good intentions, lowering our national standards from excellence to baseline competence. Excellence is simply disregarded.

The Cost of Yes

What will it cost to reinvigorate excellence?

Very little. The price of moving bright students ahead is minimal. In fact, acceleration often saves money.

When a high school student takes college-level courses such as Advanced Placement (AP) classes, her parents save thousands of dollars, because that's what those courses would have cost at most universities.

Nationally, the parents of over 1 million students who, in 2004, took 1.9 million AP exams are saving millions of dollars in college costs each year. And, of course, getting young professionals into the community more quickly strengthens our neighborhoods and increases the tax base.

For more on what the word yes can mean to American students, read on. What yes means is a little different at the preschool, elementary school, high school, and college levels. But in almost every case, it is a great word. It's the first syllable in the long story of American achievement.

The word yes saves money, but it also saves bright young minds. And in many cases, it saves years of loneliness and social isolation for students who don't fit in with age-peers and who are hungry for friends who share similar interests.

Yes opens the door to achievement for students who long for challenge.