

## **The Patriots** *News from the citizen advocates..*

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### **The SCHIP (expansion) hits the fan**

*By John R. LaPlante*

As schools seek to comply with No Child Left Behind, are we shortchanging the most academically talented?

Schools have responded to the law by focusing on the under-achievers. But some people say that in the process, gifted and talented students are ignored.

In its cover story dated August 16, TIME magazine asked "Are We Failing Our Geniuses?" It's a question worth asking. The story opens by introducing us to Annalisee Brasil, an extremely intelligent 14-year old from Longview, Texas.

Brasil isn't the kind of student who should have trouble in school. She was doing sixth-grade work at age 7, after all.

But there was a problem. To make school meaningful for her, she should have skipped at least three grades. No school in east Texas was willing to let her skip more than two. Brasil eventually moved 1,700 miles away to Reno, Nevada, to find a school that fit.

According to John Cloud, the author of the TIME article, gifted students drop out at the same rate as students as a whole. This leads him to ask whether "we may be squandering a national resource: our best young minds."

I think he's right.

So how should we respond? Populism shapes American attitudes towards education. Nobody, in this line of thought, should be too far behind or ahead of the pace set by the great middle. As Cloud notes, "Many school administrators oppose ability grouping on the theory that it can perpetuate social inequalities."

So we put special education students in regular classrooms and call it "mainstreaming," and we let gifted students like Annalisee Brasil linger to the point of dropping out.

Unfortunately, we expect all students to fit in at government-run schools. Square peg, meet round hole. No Child Left Behind is just the latest example. American education policy isn't very good at matching student needs with opportunities.

How do we change that? At the Flint Hills Center for Public Policy, we think that children should have a diversity of schooling options available. To start with, policy makers should encourage the development of virtual school programs, especially those that allow enrollment from around the state.

Kansas should also be smarter in the way it uses public charter schools. In states as diverse as Arizona and Florida, charters innovate free of the constraints and culture of traditional public schools. Some help students with spotted academic records finish high school. Others emphasize a college-prep curriculum.

In states where foundations, universities, and state-wide public agencies are free to grant charters and oversee public charter schools, charters flourish. The variety of institutions outside the traditional school establishment gives the charter school movement an institutional bias towards innovation and expansion.

By contrast, over the last four months in the state of Georgia, only two of 17 proposed charter schools have been approved. What did those two proposals have in common? They were made by school boards—which, by the way, are the only organizations in the state that can grant a charter.

As the *Wall Street Journal* noted in an editorial, "one of the most effective weapons" that student choice opponents have "is simply restricting who can grant charters. Under Georgia's charter school law, only local school districts have this authority, and they've made it clear that these alternative public schools are not welcome."

As a result, the *Journal* concludes, charter schools are merely extensions of the existing bureaucracy rather than the forces for innovation they were meant to be.

Does this sound like Kansas? As with Georgia, school districts in Kansas have veto power over all new charter schools.

Charter schools are just one option for expanding the world for students. Utah recently enacted a program that gives a voucher to nearly every family in the state. Other states, meanwhile, offer vouchers to a limited groups of students, or offer personal and business tax credits for contributions to student scholarship organizations.

Truly independent charter schools, vouchers, and tax credits share one thing. They give all students, including gifted students, more opportunities to find suitable schools.

When gifted students are forced to fit into a one-size-fits-all system that, well, doesn't, they get left behind. When that happens, we all lose.

It's time for that to change.

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