

Who worries about the bright kids?

By Gerald Rising

Yes, who does worry about the bright kids?

Unfortunately for the welfare not only of these students but of this country, very few of us do. While serious attention is devoted nationwide to the important goals of raising the standards for average and below average students, no one is addressing the concerns of highly intelligent scholars.

But then why should we? If they're bright, they should be able to take care of themselves. And anyway, most schools offer their best students special programs designed to challenge them.

Those two widely held attitudes -- attitudes that are maintained as often by educators as by the general public -- do a terrible disservice to an important segment of our population.

My own background is as a math teacher and I will focus on that important subject, but my colleagues in other fields, especially the sciences, report similar or even worse problems.

Consider with me the progress of two bright students as they advance through school. Dick and Betty (we'll give them names) arrive at the schoolhouse door rarin' to go only to find that their classmates are not nearly as capable of absorbing knowledge. The work comes easy to these two and their teachers respond favorably to their achievement, but the pace for them is painfully slow. Unless they find out-of-school avenues to which to direct their creative energies, they both dumb themselves down. Able to get by with no effort, they become lazy. Why work hard when little or no struggle is required?

Ah, many parents and teachers will say, but our schools have special programs for gifted students. Maybe you should check more closely. I am reminded here of the time I asked a group of so-called gifted/talented middle school teachers what math they taught in their special classes. No response -- until finally one teacher offered, "I do the water jug problem." (This is a problem involving several jugs to be used to measure out a quantity of water. A tricky but reasonable question, it is worth about two minutes of thought by even average students.)

Clearly Dick and Betty get little math beyond the norm in elementary school but what about in secondary school? There the students are usually -- but not always -- tracked and now Richard and Elizabeth (if her teachers and counselors have not already consigned her to second rate status) are assigned to the fast track.

Go to any high school administrator and ask about the education of bright kids in that school and you'll be reassured: "We have an AP -- advanced placement -- program." But just what does that mean? In almost every school across this country it means for math: the content of grades seven and eight is combined in seventh grade and the high school courses are each taught a year early. That leaves the senior year open to take a "college level" calculus course -- most often a semester of calc spread over a full year.

Is anything wrong with this program? Of course there is. Simply attending the same course a year earlier represents no challenge to Richard and Elizabeth. And it is a rare program that beefs up those courses for the bright students. The school environment works against that. Teachers are usually assigned five classes each day, three with

students of average ability, one with weak students and one with bright students. The bright students represent the easy part of the day. Too often they are taught with the same lesson plan as the average students.

But then there is that "college" course: its content is taught to average high school students in other countries. And not only that: it is a semester of content spread over a full year. Some challenge. (Still worse: most of these students will repeat it the following year in college as a gut course.)

Is that any kind of program to offer our brightest students, the very students who have the highest potential of contributing to our nation's welfare? I claim not.

That takes us back to that other belief. It is more often expressed as a snide comment: "If you're so smart, why don't you...." You can fill in that ellipsis with any number of predicates but let's consider here simply "study on your own."

Come on. We're talking about kids here, smart kids, yes, but still kids. And given the proportion of adults who study on their own, that is quite a bit to ask.

Okay, let's suppose Richard and Elizabeth (or their parents) want to address a challenging curriculum. What can they do? Texts that go deeply into content are rare as hen's teeth and the few that have been developed are unavailable in most school districts. So the answer is usually more temporizing. Some parents -- and more than a few counselors -- encourage students to skip grades, leaving holes (no geometry, for example) in their background. Others respond by doing more of the same. One widely-known national program for gifted students has the youngsters go through an old algebra text (written as it happens by a former office-mate at the University of Minnesota) doing every one of the thousands of duplicative exercises. That some bright kids maintain their incentive through this punishment attests only to their tolerance.

What is missed in all of this is a basic responsibility that should be required of all schools. Every student should be provided a program that is challenging to that student at his or her level of ability. Of course, we should do everything possible to deliver a good and appropriate program to our weakest students, but so too should we deliver a good and appropriate program to our strongest students.

Interestingly, we have a model for the kind of attention we need to give bright students in every school across this country. It takes place out on our playing fields where the best athletes are singled out and highly trained to achieve at the top of their abilities.

Oh that we could do the same for our gifted kids!

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