



Nebraska Department of Education

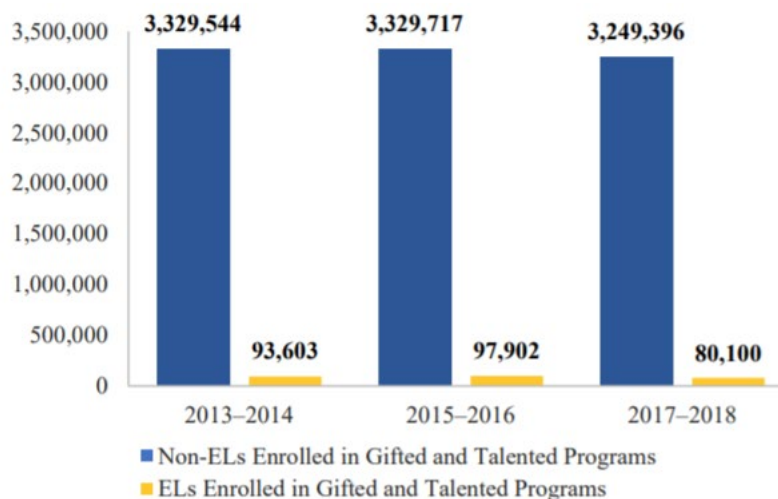
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High Ability Learning

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High Ability and English Language Learners

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(Office of English Language Acquisition, 2021)

Language is the way we learn about the world and it connects us to our family, community, and culture. Language can also be a barrier to educational opportunities--especially in the space of high ability learning. As shown in the above graph, EL students are widely underrepresented in gifted and talented programs compared to their non-EL peers. In recent data from the Office of English Language Acquisition, Office of Civil Rights, and the Department of Education, they found that EL students were only one-fifth as likely to participate in gifted programs (2021). The



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national average for ELs participating in gifted and talented programs is 1.5%. Nebraska, and .4%, comes in over one percent lower than the national average (OELA, 2021).

Additionally, English Learners are less likely to enroll in advanced academic courses, such as AP and International Baccalaureate (IB). ELs comprise 6% of 9-12 students, but only 2% are enrolled in AP courses. Less than 1 in 10 ELs enroll in offered AP courses compared to more than 1 in 5 non-EL students that are enrolled in AP (OELA, 2021). Similar numbers apply to IB. 1 in 16 ELs enroll in IB versus their non-EL peers, who enroll in IB at a rate of 1 in 8 (OELA, 2021). To further the disparity, EL students often do not have access to advanced classes. According to the OELA data (2021), ELs represent 6% of high school students, but represent 7% of students enrolled in schools that do not offer AP courses. This systemic underrepresentation continues to perpetuate lack of access and opportunity for English Learners.

While there are obvious barriers to identifying EL students for HAL programs, there are several strategies and changes we can make to our practice to create a more equitable environment. This newsletter will focus on highlighting barriers to gifted identification for EL students, techniques for improving equity in identification, and supporting ELs in the classroom to foster talent. I challenge you to examine your HAL program: What percentage of students are identified for HAL? What percentage of your school is EL? Is there appropriate representation of EL in your HAL program? (For example, if your school has 3% EL, is 3% of your HAL program EL?). Recognizing barriers is the first step to finding solutions.



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Reframing Systems: *Broader Conceptions of High Ability and Asset-Based Mindset*



Many of the above discrepancies occur when narrow ideas of giftedness and deficit-based thinking permeate our HAL identification systems. As stated in the Nebraska HAL Mission: "Appropriate and

equitable identification includes focus on areas of strength rather than absence of weakness." Many times in gifted education, our identification looks for students who are strong in all areas (academic scores, teacher recommendations, leadership abilities, etc.), counting weaknesses against them instead of counting their strengths for them. This limited conception of HAL can perpetuate underrepresentation and miss students with talent that may not fit our typical mold of "gifted." In a study done by researcher Donna Ford in 1996, she found that teachers are more likely to refer students who display advantageous behaviors in US mainstream culture, and teachers are more likely to refer students who resemble other gifted students they have interacted with. These barriers may be alleviated with a broadened conception of giftedness.

Students who are bilingual have many benefits such as stronger thinking skills, higher levels of abstract thought, and more flexible approaches to thinking through problems. Because traditional views of HAL are rooted in assessment data and high achievement, EL students are at a disadvantage because of language output or cultural orientation. One way we can tackle this issue to shift mindsets to more inclusive frameworks. Yaafouri (2019) poses three components:

- A comprehensive definition of exceptional ability that encompasses a spectrum of cognitive, social/emotional, linguistic, and logical-reasoning capabilities. This serves ELs which are generally good problem-solvers and have strong language acquisition.
- Multiple criteria and entry points to HAL programs, such as interviews, performance-based evaluations, non-verbal instruments, native language testing, etc.
- Mindfulness about the unique gifts of EL students

Once we have shifted our minds to be asset-based, we can start to make systemic change to create more equitable access to gifted and talented programs. It is vitally important to remember that EL classification DOES NOT impact eligibility for HAL programs.

Events

National Association for Gifted Children Annual Conference

Virtual or In-Person

Denver, CO
November 11-14th

COMING SOON

Fall Webinar Series

Check NDE HAL Website
for sessions and
registration

Invite me to your district or ESU!

I will be out and about
traveling around
Nebraska. Schedule a
half or whole day PL
workshop, observation
and feedback, or
strategic planning day!

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Identifying EL Students for HAL: *Tips and Best Practices*

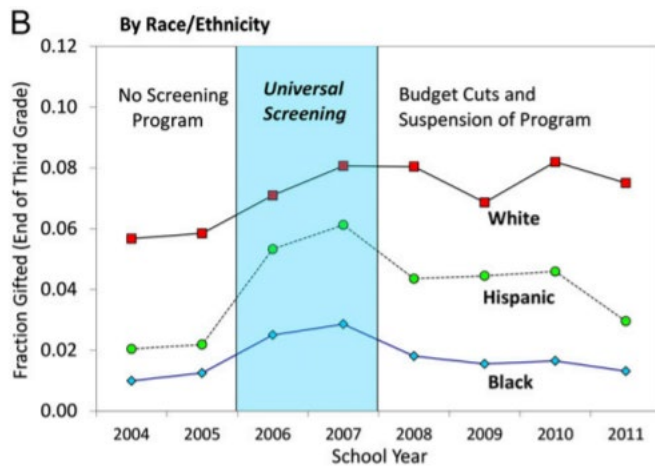
Identification for HAL programs is complex, and adding additional layers to improve equity can feel like a big task. This section contains a list of recommendations and best practices from the research that can be applied in all districts.

Universal Screening

Adopting universal screening is far and away the best way to give the most students access to the candidate pool. Universal screening refers to the process of administering a cognitive abilities test to all of the students in a chosen grade level.



In a seminal study conducted by Card & Guiliano (2015), they implemented a universal screener in a large urban school district and saw a 180% increase in the identification of Hispanic students.



(Card & Guiliano, 2015)

While most schools use universal screeners in one grade, it is advantageous to screen in multiple grades due to the development on English acquisition as well as reasoning ability. A student may not score well in 2nd grade, but they may score much higher in 3rd grade after a year of English language supports.

As always, there is the question of which screener to use. It is a popular assumption that using a non-verbal test (Raven's Matrices, Naglieri Non-Verbal Ability Test [NNAT], Cognitive Abilities Test Non-Verbal [CogAT], etc.) will benefit EL students. Taking language out of the equation can be helpful in some cases, but it is important to remember that not all EL students are strong in non-verbal skills. According to a study by Lohman et. al (2008), the NNAT does not identify equal proportions of high-scoring students from differing ethnic or language groups. Non-verbal tests do help identify students who speak languages other than English, but only in the realms of



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spatial ability and non-verbal reasoning. This may predict success for students who will be good in math, engineering, and related subjects, but students who may excel in writing or humanities generally score better on verbal or quantitative tests (Lohman et al., 2008).

Non-verbal screeners are a good option, but it is important to look at other factors than a score produced on one assessment.

Understanding Observable Characteristics of Potentially Gifted EL Students

Most often, teacher referrals are the main pathway into HAL programs. While EL students with high potential may not exhibit "traditional" characteristics of giftedness, they do possess unique strengths to look for:

- Acquiring English at faster than a typical rate
- Code switching; eager to translate at a high level
- Navigates between cultures
- Strong aptitude for leadership; non-conforming approach to problems
- Work above grade level in native language
- Exhibit notable "street smarts"
- Creative problem-solving

(Yaafouri, 2019)

Ensuring all teachers know and understand these characteristics can increase referral of EL students for HAL programs.

Alternative Pathways to Identification



Gifted identification often resembles this photo of a highway: flat, narrow, and has one entry point. If you do not get on at the beginning using the main entry, you often do not get on the highway at all. Using only test scores creates a static picture of a student and often only lets those who display high achievement at that time on the road. Much like this image, using only scores or strict cut scores creates a narrow path to access HAL services. Additionally, restrictive criteria and lack of flexibility in identification often creates one access point. When students must show evidence of high achievement right now, they may miss the on ramp and not be considered as we get down the road.



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This image displays what our identification systems should look like, especially when identifying EL students. Flexible, dynamic systems with multiple points of entry will catch a larger amount of HAL candidates, including CLED students.



There are several strategies we can use to bring this picture to life. The most important element is willingness to step outside of the “traditional” and look at alternative paths. Using ability and achievement tests in a student's native language can be a good indicator of their ability regardless of the language barrier. This includes using multilingual school psychologists or native speakers of their first language to administer assessments (NCRGE).

Researchers push to make identification and ongoing process instead of a one-time event, especially for EL students. Observations, rating scales, and use of a portfolio - collect artifacts of student work, use comparison with other ELs of similar language, age, background, etc. gives more information and a better picture of the student as a whole. Along this same vein, having multiple criteria for identification is not enough—it depends on the weight of each criteria. If academic measures are weighted heavier than other measures, ELs may show potential but not qualify (Escamilla et al., 2018).

Another element to consider is rate of English acquisition. Looking at ELPA 21 scores or observing rapid progress in English language acquisition can be an indicator that a student is gifted. Acquiring language faster than their same-aged peers is often a sign that the student is capable of functioning on a higher level than they are displaying due to language barriers. Similar measures can be used when looking at growth scores on MAP or NSCAS. A potentially high ability EL student may score low on the Fall administration but make significant growth from Fall to Winter or Spring as they adjust and acquire more English. While looking at rate of acquisition and growth can be a strong indicator, it is important to remember to continue to look at multiple measures. Using growth and language acquisition allow multiple pathways for EL students to enter the HAL program versus using stringent achievement measures.

Professional Learning for Systemic Change

As with all topics, professional learning and teacher awareness is the first step toward equity. Teachers are the source of most nominations (McBee, 2006). As stated by Escamilla et al. (2018), “Implicit beliefs related to intelligence, giftedness, SES, and language ability may influence how teachers view the abilities and potential of ELs in their classrooms. Cultural bias may also be embedded in teacher rating scales. Items such as being assertive, initiating activities, asking questions, and contributing in class represent behaviors valued in Anglo-American culture, but are not necessarily culturally appropriate for some children who may be raised in a Hispanic family that values a collectivist culture” (pg. 3)



Providing professional development opportunities regarding characteristics and best practices for supporting CLED students will raise awareness to some of the unique manifestations of giftedness outside of the more traditional view.

Additionally, developing a systemic approach to analyze school demographics and make a concerted effort to create policies for equitable identification of underrepresented groups is crucial. Examining the inequities and examining the systemic barriers causing underrepresentation is how we truly begin to combat inequities in HAL programs.

Communication and Engagement Inside and Outside School

Establishing what NCRGE calls a “Web of Communication” is crucial to identifying and supporting EL students.

Engaging parents is vital to the process. In one study, researchers found that parents were glad to be part of the process, but they noted wishing communications and opportunities were offered in their native language (Plucker et al., 2009). Some families may be hesitant to reach out to the school or be involved, but intentional communication and building relationships with families can form trust between school and parent, and valuable information can be collected about the student. Communication such as newsletters, clear program information, and community nights held in conjunction with local entities are all ways to improve communication with EL parents and guardians (Gubbins et al., 2020).

Collaboration amongst staff in the building is equally as important. Everyone is a talent scout. Students perform differently in different environments, so communication between the EL teacher, general education teacher(s), and the gifted specialist is crucial to spotting and unlocking potential.



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