OP-ED

Resources Run Short For Gifted Students

DEL SIEGLE

Being a gifted young learner should not mean you lose your right to a quality education.

Unfortunately, the current system of accountability in education epitomized by the federal No Child Left Behind Act creates an environment in which the individual right to a quality education has been all but revoked for bright students, particularly those from underserved and disadvantaged backgrounds.

The increased focus on accountability carries some positives, namely a much-needed change in educator behavior that has led to significant academic progress for our lowest achieving students. But while our political and education leadership should be proud of these gains, a just-released national study says that NCLB's narrow focus on low-achieving students causes educators to ignore high-performers.

If this trend continues, nothing less than our nation's future is at risk.

According to an in-depth analysis of eight years of National Assessment of Educational Programs data by the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, an education think tank, low-performing students in the bottom 10 percent have made encouraging gains in math and reading, while the scores of students in the top 10 percent have remained stagnant.



JOHN OVERMYER

Perhaps even more alarming, a companion national survey by the institute found that a majority of our teachers do not feel adequately prepared to meet the special learning needs of gifted students, nor do they feel encouraged to spend time working with high-achieving students to maximize their potential.

While no one disputes that the nation has an obligation to support struggling learners, doing so at the expense of high-performing students — especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds — perpetuates the cycle of inequality and results in continued underperformance.

Instead of raising the bar high by demanding that every student excel, we have instead lowered it to basic proficiency — focusing outsized amounts of resources and attention on those at the lowest ends, leaving behind an entire population of students whose needs continue to go unmet.

Some in education policy circles adhere to an outdated and misguided philosophy of "gifted children will do just fine on their own." Research and experience, however, have proved that if high-ability students fail to receive appropriate instruction and attention, they lose interest in school, underachieve, and even drop out.

If this trend continues, nothing less than our nation's future is at risk.

The most vulnerable students are those high-achieving learners from underserved and disadvantaged backgrounds whose families lack the resources and ability to compensate for the national underinvestment in gifted education.

Cultural, language and budgetary challenges, among others, have long resulted in underidentification of gifted learners from disadvantaged backgrounds. Continuing to neglect the needs of gifted learners will only guarantee that those who are identified will see few or no resources.

For gifted students, the first challenge most often begins when they walk into the classroom. According to the Fordham survey, 64 percent of teachers received little to no training in gifted education in college, and nearly 60 percent have received no professional development focused on gifted students. Until we commit to ensuring every child is taught by a well-qualified teacher, little else will make much difference.

In addition to teacher training, it's time for Congress and the administration to enact legislation that ensures all students will have equal access to gifted education resources and services. By setting this standard, policymakers will tell educators that they are not only encouraged but expected to focus on excellence rather than proficiency alone.

Ultimately, the Fordham report sends a clear message that if we continue the current course of action, we will inflict irreparable harm on our nation's strongest learners, with negative repercussions we can only imagine.

Del Siegle is president of the National Association for Gifted Children and is an associate professor of education at the University of Connecticut.

Oil Speculators Not To Blame For Prices

SEBASTIAN MALLABY

A few years back, when "subprime" generally referred to beef, economists used to congratulate themselves on their progress since the 1970s. Central banks had learned to tame inflation. Politicians had learned to appreciate the folly of price controls. Thanks to the economics profession, policy-makers had grown wiser.

Well, inflation has returned. And politicians are out to control prices again, this time in futures markets. You see this most clearly with oil prices. Last Thursday a measure demanding a clampdown on oil trading passed the House 402 to 19.

So it's time for a quick refresher: Richard Nixon's early-1970s price controls were a disaster. Administering the controls on energy alone took an estimated 5 million man-hours per year and punished motorists with gas lines. Repeating this experiment by clamping down on oil trading is like burning your hand on a gas stove and then sitting on a barbecue.

Would-be Nixons argue that hedge funds and their ilk are piling into oil futures, driving prices above "reasonable" levels. They note that in 2000, speculators owned just over a third of the "paper oil" traded on the New York Mercantile Exchange but now own more than two-thirds. This buying pressure on paper oil is said to be pushing physical oil up. Stop the speculation, they say, and prices would revert to normal.

The most basic problem with this claim is that a speculator can buy paper oil only if someone else sells to him. For every trader who bets on a price rise, there must be another who bets the opposite.

Richard Nixon's early-1970s price controls were a disaster.

Sometimes the bulls are more eager than the bears, and prices spiral upward. If the bulls have the upper hand, it's generally because supply and demand favor higher prices. The fundamentals of physical oil drive the psychology around paper oil more than vice versa.

Why do I think that? Financial behavior often influences the real economy. In the recent mortgage bubble, for example, financiers made mortgages available to people who had been ineligible: They changed the fundamentals of demand for housing. But oil speculation is not like that. Investors who buy paper oil do not alter the demand for physical oil. Every paper claim they buy is a paper claim they will later sell, because they have no intention of converting their paper into real oil stocks.

The uncertain connection between speculation and price trends is clear in recent history. During the first seven months of 2007, speculators as a group tripled the amount of paper oil they owned, buying it from commercial players. But since last August, speculators as a group have not added to their positions — yet this was when oil prices went skyward.

It would be too much to claim that futures prices don't influence players in the physical market. But to the limited extent that speculators' influence is real, this is probably a good thing. If speculators see that oil suppliers are headed for trouble and that oil demand is trending up, they express their expectation of a higher price via the futures market. This can deliver a valuable message: Governments and consumers had better adjust before shortages get even nastier.

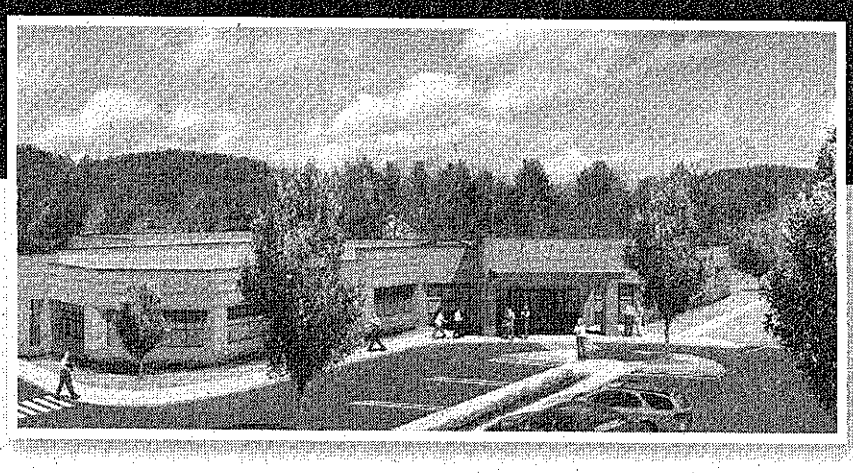
Just as in Nixon's day, government's response to runaway prices would have unintended consequences. The most popular proposals would limit how many contracts a speculator can buy or sell on a futures exchange, and prevent trading with mostly borrowed money. But the more you restrict trading on U.S. exchanges, the more you drive trading into the shadowy world of the unregulated swaps market or onto offshore rivals.

Most fundamentally, Nixon's heirs forget that the "speculators" they attack are often trying to reduce risk, not embrace it. Pension funds have piled into oil because they are trying to protect themselves from inflation. Small investors who load up on retail oil funds are mostly doing the same. I know my family will consume several thousand dollars' worth of oil this year, so I logged on to Fidelity's website and locked in my price. Does Congress think I'm irresponsible?

Sebastian Mallaby is a fellow for International Economics with the Council on Foreign Relations. This first appeared in The Washington Post.

Court Preserves Gun Rights

Announcing the newest member of the
Helen & Harry Gray Cancer Center family



THE HELEN & HARRY GRAY CANCER CENTER—AVON

FISHER DRIVE, AVON

Opening July 2008

Thanks to the generosity of one of Connecticut's most