

CLOSING THE
EXCELLENCE GAP

Best Practices &
State Strategies

Governors across America are working to strengthen education and help more students succeed in school—and in life. As part of this effort, it is important to focus on the nation’s low-income, high-achieving students, many of whom lack the support necessary to maximize their potential. Getting all students to proficiency is not enough.

The Jack Kent Cooke Foundation, one of the largest scholarship foundations in the country, is partnering with states to identify commonsense policies that can help close this Excellence Gap and ensure all students—regardless of income-level or circumstance—can excel. After conducting extensive research and examining countless policies through our recent *Equal Talents, Unequal Opportunities* 50-state report card, we identified three best practices that, if implemented in states and schools nationwide, can end the Excellence Gap and put more students on the path to success:

1. IDENTIFY HIGH-PERFORMING, LOW-INCOME STUDENTS

Many low-income students attend schools that do not formally identify advanced students.

Other high-achieving students are often missed when identification systems are not designed well. A quality identification system recognizes that intelligence can manifest itself in multiple ways—for example, visual-spatial, linguistic, logical-mathematical—and that children mature over time. Only 36 states require schools to identify the top students, and, as a result, high-achieving students in lower-resourced schools are being ignored.

All schools should enact comprehensive processes to identify high-ability, low-income students.

State Successes:

- **Alabama** requires all districts to have a plan for identification, and state staff members report working one-on-one with school personnel to help even the poorest schools create appropriate plans.
- **Missouri** recently released a [report](#) listing 10 recommendations to improve the identification of gifted children and help develop programs in every Missouri school.
- **Colorado** requires all schools to identify gifted students through multiple sources and multiple data points. Colorado’s strategy is particularly strong because the gifted label is “portable,” meaning it remains with the student even if he or she changes school districts. Additionally, Colorado pays special attention to seeking high achievement within under-identified student groups.

2. CREATE PATHWAYS FOR ADVANCED LEARNERS

High-ability students can be challenged in many ways, including independent study, above-grade-level courses such as advanced placement (AP), dual enrollment, or distance learning, and skipping grades. These experiences ensure that advanced students are challenged and remain engaged with learning. Few schools with large populations of low-income students offer these services, and some states do not offer any funds to support gifted education in local school districts. **All states should promote educational excellence by supporting services for gifted and talented students, such as dual enrollment and AP courses.**

State Successes:

- **Washington, D.C.**, created new gifted programs including advanced placement courses that will be available in all high schools, including those serving low-income neighborhoods.
- **Texas** ensures more students can access advanced placement courses by waiving test fee and reimbursing teacher training as part of its [Advanced Placement Incentive Program](#).
- **Minnesota, North Carolina, Ohio, and Texas** each support policies that allow children to enter kindergarten early, students to skip grades, and middle school students to take high school courses. [Research](#) consistently confirms that acceleration is one of the best, most cost-effective strategies for educating high-ability students and materially reduces the cost of public-sector education.
- **Iowa, Oklahoma, Mississippi, and Georgia** all mandate gifted programming that is [fully funded](#) by the state.

3. HOLD SCHOOLS ACCOUNTABLE FOR THE PERFORMANCE OF LOW-INCOME, HIGH-ACHIEVING STUDENTS

State K-12 accountability systems often drive the priorities in local school districts and should include measures of growth for high-ability students and other indicators of excellence. **All states should require schools and districts to collect and release data on student performance and monitor the performance of high-achieving students over time, especially those from low-income backgrounds.**

State Successes:

- **Nevada** requires schools to monitor the growth of all students, track the number of advanced diplomas, and monitor both participation and performance in AP courses. [Nevada's Growth Model](#), adapted in 2009, "measures how much a student improves in academic performance over time, rather than simply whether he or she passed a test."
- **Oregon's** state accountability system tracks the number of identified gifted students in the state along with their achievement and performance as a separate group.
- **Tennessee's** [Value-Added Assessment System](#) focuses on student growth, measuring "the impact schools and teachers have on their students' academic progress."

The Jack Kent Cooke Foundation knows our nation's governors are committed to supporting student success across the board. At stake is nothing less than the vibrancy of our economy, our nation's future prosperity, and the strength of our global competitiveness. We hope more states will work together to enact these best practices and join our fight to close the Excellence Gap.

For more information or to download state-specific reports cards, please visit www.excellencegap.org/reportcard.