

Remarks to the Arkansas Senate Education Committee

Jonathan Wai

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Hi, I am Jonathan Wai, Assistant Professor in the Department of Education Reform and Endowed Chair in Education Policy. Today I am discussing gifted education research and its implications for Arkansas students.

Developing excellence for all students is a worthwhile goal of education. Every student should have the opportunity to learn something new each day.

Decades of gifted education research supports the idea that even the highest performing students need academic challenge to develop themselves to be their very best whether that means learning from other highly performing peers, being a part of a gifted program, or taking mathematics above their grade level because they are ready for it.

Unfortunately, in many cases academically advanced students go unchallenged, and many from disadvantaged backgrounds are often left behind despite being quite talented. This is a loss to both the student and to society, and to their communities.

Students thus need to be adequately identified and then matched to advanced programming that they are ready to learn and to more fully develop their talents. Our research found that each year, 30% of Arkansas' highest achieving students are not identified as gifted and talented. More concerning was that high achieving students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds are 50% less likely to be identified as gifted than similarly high achieving students from more advantaged backgrounds.

Research on gifted education finds that universally testing all students, instead of just the students who are nominated by a teacher or parent, is a way to widen the net and identify a broader set of students who are ready for advanced learning. To avoid added expense, employing an existing academic measure that is already taken by all students, such as the ACT Aspire, as one objective indicator of readiness for advanced programming, would help identify talented but disadvantaged students.

Our recent research also shows that although the quality of gifted education provisions across the state likely varies widely as a result of inconsistent programming, overall, participating in the gifted program in AR is associated with improved test score growth in later grades.

This positive outcome aligns with the decades of research on gifted education around the world which supports the idea that advanced learners, just like all other students, need challenge to develop their excellence.

This work flowed from a Research Practice Partnership with Dustin Seaton of the Northwest AR Education Service Cooperative, Bich Tran, a PhD graduate student in Education Reform, and Sarah McKenzie, the Executive Director of OEP. We are continuing to do research and support improvements in gifted education through this collaboration by working with G/T coordinators to inform the research questions we ask, and hopefully help identify and challenge students in Arkansas schools.

There are many ways that gifted education might be improved in the future, such as expanding identification to include students who have advanced spatial reasoning, those who can rotate a three-dimensional figure in their mind's eye or enjoy working with their hands to build. And crucially, we need to ensure that the wide-ranging talents of all students are fully developed through advanced programming to ensure their personal flourishing and to support the talent pipeline for the future workforce in AR and beyond.

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Dr. Wai is an Assistant Professor of Education Policy and Psychology and 21st Century Endowed Chair at the University of Arkansas in the Dept. of Education Reform. He held prior positions at Case Western Reserve University and Duke University. Broadly, Wai studies education policy through the lens of psychology, with a substantive focus on improving gifted education in Arkansas, nationally, and globally. He has published over 100 journal articles, book chapters, policy reports, book reviews, and news articles and has received over ten awards for the quality of his research. He serves on five journal editorial boards, two boards of scientific societies, and three working groups focused on improving the use of research evidence in education policy in different domains. He received his Ph.D. in Psychology from Vanderbilt University in 2009.

Some recent publications include:

Tran, B., Wai, J., & McKenzie, S. C. (2021). [Gifted education in Arkansas: A longitudinal study of gifted status and academic growth](#). *Office for Education Policy, University of Arkansas, Arkansas Education Report*, 18(9), 1-46.

Tran, B., Wai, J., McKenzie, S. C., Mills, J. N., & Seaton, D. (in press). [Expanding gifted identification to capture academically advanced, low income, or other disadvantaged students: The case of Arkansas](#). *Journal for the Education of the Gifted*.

Wai, J. (2020). [How research can help find the missing Einsteins](#). *Forbes*.

Wai, J., & Worrell, F. C. (2020). [How talented low-income kids are left behind](#). *Phi Delta Kappan*, 102(4), 26-29.