



15 Tips for Improving the Identification of Gifted ELs

by [Del Siegle](#)

There is clear and mounting evidence that gifted education must address the serious challenges associated with the underidentification and underservicing of diverse populations of gifted students (Peters, 2022; Siegle et al., 2016). For example, English learners (ELs) are the fastest growing population of learners in the US, yet they are among the most underrepresented groups in gifted education (Gubbins et al., 2020; Hodges et al., 2018; Mun et al., 2020). Each year, tens of thousands of talented young people are overlooked for gifted services simply because they learned a language other than English as a child. Their teachers focus on their English skills and fail to recognize the brilliant mind they possess.

In a recent [National Center for Research on Gifted Education](#) (NCRGE) study of all elementary school students in three states, ELs were between a quarter and half as likely to be identified as gifted compared to students who were not ELs. Underrepresentation also persists for twice-exceptional students: students from poverty and Black, Latinx, and American Indian populations. ELs as well as other underserved groups are clearly not having their gifts and talents recognized, and subsequently appropriately developed.

In 2016 and 2017, the NCRGE visited 16 schools in nine districts across three states that had a record of successfully identifying ELs for their gifted programs (Gubbins et al., 2020). NCRGE recorded how these schools successfully identified ELs for gifted services. What we learned can be used to better identify ELs for gifted programs.

Finding Promise in Every Student

We found that identifying ELs, as well as students from other underserved populations, for gifted services required a paradigm shift where stakeholders focused on students' strengths, rather than focusing on their weaknesses. Under this paradigm, every stakeholder, from school psychologists to EL service providers to classroom teachers to parents/guardians/caretakers, formed a web of communication and served as talent scouts looking for points of promise in *every* student. In other words, instead of serving as deficit detectives finding reasons not to provide gifted services to ELs, which often occurs, they recognized and appreciated the diverse ways ELs could demonstrate their talents.

These schools used professional development to improve school personnel’s awareness of EL issues related to identification. The increased awareness resulted in changes in identification practices, the evolution of a web of communication among all stakeholders, and modifications in program services.

Changing Identification Practices

Changes in identification practices included

- providing preidentification opportunities to encourage emergence of talents,
- having flexible cut-off scores,
- using universal screening to avoid overlooking talented students,
- setting alternative pathways to identification to increase opportunities for talents to be recognized,
- frequently screening students to identify students whose talents manifest later or after their English skills are further developed, and
- using culturally appropriate assessments, such as testing in students’ native languages.

Frequently screening students was particularly important given that ELs’ opportunities to be identified increased with their English acquisition (Hamilton et al., 2020). Each of these practices has the potential to increase the number of ELs identified for gifted services.

Stakeholder Communication

The evolution of a web of communication promoted awareness of EL talent among all stakeholders (e.g., administrators, district gifted coordinators, gifted specialists, parents/guardians/caretakers, EL specialists, classroom teachers, school psychologists, and counselors). This encouraged the practice of stakeholders serving as talent scouts.

It also increased the trustworthiness of communications among the stakeholders about opportunities for talent development. Teachers were less worried about nominating ELs whose English might not be fully developed. Parents/guardians/caretakers were willing to approach the school and share information about their children’s talents. EL specialists felt comfortable talking with gifted specialists about the students they served.

Modifying Program Services

The improved awareness of EL identification issues also resulted in modifications to program services. The schools developed culturally responsive curricula and added support services to ensure ELs were successful in the gifted and talented program. These program modifications increased trustworthiness in communication among stakeholders and improved acceptance rates and placement of ELs in the gifted and talented program. Parents/guardians/caretakers knew their children would be supported in the gifted program.

15 Tips for Improving the Identification of ELs for Gifted Services*

Adopt Universal Screening Procedures

1. Adopt a policy of universal screening of all students in one or more grade levels for the identification process.
2. Select assessment instruments that are culturally sensitive and account for language differences.
3. Assess the speed of English language acquisition and monitor the rate of mastering reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills in English.
4. Consider including reliable and valid nonverbal ability assessments as part of the overall identification process.
5. Use other identification tools to supplement results of universal screening.

Create Alternative Pathways to Identification

6. Use native language ability and achievement assessments as indicators of potential giftedness, when available.
7. Maintain a list of multilingual school psychologists who are qualified to administer assessments in students' native languages.
8. Establish a preparation program prior to formal identification procedures that provides students with learning opportunities to enhance knowledge and academic skills necessary for a student to be recognized.
9. Create a talent pool list of students who exhibit high potential but are not yet enrolled in gifted and talented programs. Observations, daily interactions between teachers and students, informal assessments, and formal assessments provide multiple opportunities to gauge students' learning progress. Make identification of giftedness an ongoing process rather than a single event.

Establish a Web of Communication

10. Establish an identification committee that includes representatives who have key responsibilities in various roles and departments.
11. Develop and implement intentional outreach to the school community, particularly parents/guardians/caretakers. This process should utilize multiple pathways in languages appropriate to the population.
12. Emphasize collaboration within and across specializations/departments (e.g., general education, English as a second language [ESL], special education, gifted education) so people view themselves as talent scouts.

View Professional Development as a Lever for Change

13. Provide professional development opportunities for school personnel about effective policies and practices to support equitable representation of ELs in gifted and talented programs.

14. Develop a systematic approach to analyzing district and school demographics and the status of students identified/not identified for gifted and talented programs.
15. Promote efforts to diversify the teaching corps so that the adult community of a school reflects the student population.

Conclusion

The historic patterns of underrepresentation in gifted and talented programs can be disrupted through recognizing the barriers of current and historic identification practices and pursuing new culturally sustaining approaches. This begins with evaluating and changing current practices that function as barriers to recognizing and serving the advanced learning needs of students in underrepresented groups. Schools must recognize that students' cultural and linguistic identities are inseparable from their academic identities and provide a welcoming and inclusive school climate for all students and their families.

**The 15 tips for improving the identification of ELs for gifted services were first published on the National Center for Research on Gifted Education website at ncrge.uconn.edu/el-tips-2.*

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