There are hiring requirements to be a firefighter. Candidates for the job must be able to lift and carry 100 lbs., even though the requirement may bias the hiring in favor of men. When a hiring, housing, or other practices creates disparate results between certain demographic groups there must be a ‘legitimate’ reason for the practice. The 100 lbs. lifting requirement makes sense, given the nature of a firefighter’s job. So, the bias is tolerated.

Central Academy in Des Moines Public Schools is largely designed to serve the needs of students who demonstrate early readiness for advanced work. Like it or not, standardized tests have predictive validity for student success in accelerated and compacted curricula (Worrell, 2014). After examining student achievement data for students at Academy, it is clear that Academy curricula and instructional approaches are the best options for some students. When properly placed in accelerated courses, students routinely show 2 – 3 years of growth in a single academic year. However, for improperly placed students, accelerating too soon causes regression in skill, not advancement.

In many gifted programs in our nation, standardized test scores are used like the 100 lbs. lifting requirement for firefighters. Herein lies the rub; to write off the disparate representation in gifted programs of students of color, or students who live in poverty, because of their ‘ability’ ascribes to biological difference between groups that which is actually cultural. There are undeniable general biological differences between men and women that result in disparate ability to lift 100 lbs. But gifted students are members of all cultural groups whether those groups are based on income or race/ethnicity (Stambaugh & Ford, 2015). The deep-seated belief in the
egalitarianism of meritocracy in schools has created one of the most egregious examples of disparate impact in our educational system.

With Pollyanna optimism, a common theme in the gifted education literature is that disparate impact is not a concern if we create a meritocracy in our identification procedures (Gagné, 2011; Persson, 2011). Gagné (2011), a thought leader in gifted education, developed a talent development model, the Differentiated Model of Giftedness and Talent (DMGT), that he asserts, if used correctly, would cause “the equity issue [to] lose its relevance” (p. 3). Gagné’s DMGT tool does address some of the inherent biases in traditional identification processes; however, Gagné misses one important point. Low-expectancy students are treated differently than high-expectancy students in subtle but detectable ways (Babad, Bernieri, & Rosenthal, 1991).

Microaggressions are the subtle verbal and nonverbal signals sent to low-expectancy students. “Students who are gifted and culturally different or poor are at even greater risk for encountering microaggressions and the consequences associated with these microaggressions compared with their White or affluent counterparts,” (Stambaugh & Ford, 2015). The more minority groups that a student identifies with—for example, gifted, African American, poor—the more difficult it is for the student to engage in talent development, especially if stereotype threat is at play (Henfield, Washington, & Owens, 2010). Stambaugh and Ford (2015) listed typical microaggressions leveled at gifted students who are also members of underrepresented groups. “Students [from culturally different or poverty backgrounds] hear contradictory views of intelligence, such as ‘Be smart, but don’t act White’; ‘Debate that point, but don’t be bossy and arrogant’; or ‘Be all you can be, but don’t leave your family, home, or community.’ Gifted students find it difficult to determine their place in the academic setting if they have to navigate
their finances; their culture; their personal beliefs; their family and community beliefs; and their own passions, abilities, and capacity to achieve,” (p.195).

Simply placing students from underrepresented groups in accelerated classes without attending to their pre-cursor skills and emotional needs while simultaneously denying opportunities for acceleration for students from overrepresented groups because there are not enough seats, harms everyone and the program. The gifted students from underrepresented groups without the proper talent development and emotional support encounter more microaggressions, depression, and feelings of inadequacy (Stambaugh & Ford, 2015). The gifted students from overrepresented groups who had more opportunities for talent development are stifled (Rogers, 1991). And the Gifted program becomes ineffective (Robinson, 2003). Robinson “urges that we not abandon rigorous efforts to serve academically advanced children, whatever their backgrounds,” (2003, p. 251). To become a model for gifted programs in an urban school district, Academy must address both the opportunity gaps that some students experience and recognize emotional aspects of attending Academy for underrepresented students (i.e.: sense of belonging, stereotype threat, and cultural identities).

Academy’s primary solution to disparate impact has been the development of the Prep Academy for 7th grade students who are also members of underrepresented groups in the gifted program. Students who receive free and reduced priced meals and those from ethnic or racial minorities who demonstrate gifted behaviors in academic areas are brought together for a year of accelerated and compacted English and mathematics curricula. Using Gagné’s talent development model, the goal is to advance the skills of these gifted students so that they are ready to participate in the Gifted Core Pathway starting in 8th grade. Since implementing the Prep Academy, the population served by the Gifted Core Pathway in grades 8 – 12 has changed
from approximately 90% white students in 2003 to 60% white students now—even as more students than ever are being served by the Academy program.

That sounds impressive. However, the rate of changing demographics did not keep pace with the district overall. The percentage of white students served in DMPS changed from approximately 73% in 2003 to 43% white students today. African American students, who make up 19% of 7-12 grade students in DMPS, continue to be the most disproportional in enrollment in Academy courses at 9% of all students in the program. Prep Academy has increased the accessibility of the Gifted Core Pathway to underrepresented groups, but it has not resolved disproportionality.

‘Disparate impact’ is defined as the unintentional discriminatory impact of practice that may seem neutral on the surface but is discriminatory in application (HUD.gov, 2017). Disparate impact is different from ‘disparate treatment’, which is purposefully discriminatory of protected groups. Like most school programs, Central Academy is vigilant about stopping disparate treatment. Nevertheless, resolving the systemic inequity that results in disparate impact
remains our solemn moral duty. Eliminating disproportionality in Academy enrollment requires a nuanced and dual approach that addresses both talent development and emotional support.

In the summer of 2015, the United States Supreme Court passed a ruling that housing discrimination need not be intentional in order to be illegal (HUD.gov, 2017). It is a ruling that reverberates with the Academy staff. As we have studied cultural proficiency as part of our professional development training, the leadership team has allocated an additional seven building directed professional development days to additional cultural proficiency training, which has been the most highly attended and well received PD in my tenure here.

Social justice is the heart of our program improvement plan. Unlike the comprehensive schools, attendance, behavior, and, yes, even academic achievement data, are not as critical to our program’s success as is our ability to address enrollment disproportionality. Our goals for the remainder of this year are: to reduce bias and barriers to the program for middle school students next fall, increase enrollment in our specialty AP courses especially for students from East and North, ensure that all students are encouraged to take AP exams this spring, and improve our utilization of SRG—both in modifying topics and scales, and in regularly communicating with parents about student progress.

It is important that we get this right. Not just for our students’ benefit, but for our whole community. The next great idea will likely come from a perspective we had never considered before. That is the power of diversity. All of us are diminished, if some of us are suppressed. So, we at Academy will continue to confront ourselves to reduce the disparate impact of our practices by addressing both the academic and the emotional needs of our students.
REFERENCES


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