

Expanding Gifted & Talented

Immediate Action
Towards An Ideal Future

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Executive Summary

In January 2021, New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio and his school chancellor announced that the Department of Education (DOE) would reimagine the NYC Gifted & Talented (G&T) program by September 2021 and promised to engage stakeholders and the broader community in defining the revised program. That engagement never happened. Instead, on October 8th, the Mayor announced the end of G&T to be replaced by the “Brilliant NYC” plan. It has become clear that the DOE had already decided to move forward with the recommendation made in 2019 by the Mayor’s School Diversity Advisory Group (SDAG), which was to replace G&T with a Schoolwide Enrichment Model (SEM). This model, developed by educational psychologists Dr. Joseph Renzulli and Dr. Sally Reis, focuses on methods of educational enrichment as opposed to accelerated content.



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Brilliant NYC will not adequately meet the needs of accelerated learners. PLACE NYC is deeply concerned that the DOE is moving to a full system-wide rollout without piloting this program and showing evidence of its efficacy. As Mayor de Blasio failed to include parents and other gifted education researchers prior to developing its plan, PLACE NYC decided to undertake this important outreach ourselves. We contacted a number of the country's top experts in gifted education and conducted a survey of current and prospective G&T families to provide research and community-backed recommendations to improve access and inclusion within G&T without dismantling these successful programs.

Additionally, we will have a new Mayor on January 1, 2022. The decision around the future of G&T should be left with Mayor-elect Eric Adams' administration. We recommend that the DOE halt the implementation of Brilliant NYC to provide adequate time to pilot the Brilliant NYC model and work with parents and key constituents to improve upon, not eliminate the existing G&T program.

We have organized our recommendations into 1) **immediate action steps** that Mayor-elect Eric Adams and his education team implement quickly for the 2022-23 school year to ensure that highly successful gifted programs continue to fully function and are replicated; and 2) our **long-term, best practice solutions** for how accelerated learning can be reimaged within NYC.

“...the future of G&T should be left with Mayor-elect Eric Adams' administration.”

Immediate Action Steps (over next six months)

- **Immediate halt to Brilliant NYC** until a pilot program can be successfully implemented that shows evidence of its efficacy.
- **In Spring 2022, universally screen** all students at DOE -run and -funded NYC schools from PreK to 2nd grade for academic giftedness using a national standardized measure (with the right to opt-out) to ensure continued enrollment under existing G&T district and citywide programs.
- **Screening should include use of local norms** so economic and other disadvantages do not preclude academically gifted students from being identified.
- **Create “G&T Access & Identification” task force** that re-evaluates prior G&T test format, and provides recommendations for following Fall 2023 admissions that includes solutions to reduce cultural bias and expand identification criteria.
- **Significantly increase the number of G&T seats** (classrooms) using current empty classrooms and physical locations across all districts particularly in underserved communities like the Bronx, parts of Brooklyn and Staten Island.
- **Guarantee that any student who qualifies** for services for academically gifted learners but is not matched with a G&T program for 2022-23 will receive a seat in 2023-24. With a better knowledge of the number of qualified kids and 1 ½ years to prepare, the DOE should have no problem providing services to all qualified children by 2023-24.

Best Practice Solutions for 2023-24 and Beyond

- **Identify multiple optimal grades** for continued universal screening (with an option for opt-in screening at other times) within all DOE -run or DOE -funded schools. Universal screening should begin at regular intervals from Kindergarten or earlier to ensure accelerated services are given as early as it is beneficial.
- **Incorporate local norming best practices** to ensure academically gifted kids from disadvantaged, ELL and Special Needs backgrounds are fully identified. Create a multimeasure identification process so screening is one, but not the only part of identifying accelerated learners.
- **Create a “continuum of services”** that would range from subject-specific grouping within General Education (GenEd) classrooms to standalone district and boroughwide G&T classrooms.
- **Greatly expand G&T capacity** so all students who qualify are guaranteed access to a program within their neighborhood or yellow bus ride of ideally 30 minutes or less.
- **Develop a robust outreach program** in underrepresented communities to educate parents on G&T.
- **Create DOE G&T curriculum standards** and/or guidelines that ensure that all programs prioritize acceleration, not just enrichment.
- **Ensure all teachers in an accelerated learning service are trained and credentialed appropriately.**
- **If the BrilliantNYC pilot program proves to be effective**, it should still be rolled out to all classrooms as a way to improve learning outcomes for all NYC students. Brilliant NYC can exist alongside G&T, but it is not a substitute for services designed to meet the unique educational needs of accelerated learners.

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School!



Background

G&T is an admissions-based Kindergarten through 5th or 8th grade public school program that offers accelerated and/or enriched curriculum in district-specific classrooms within zoned elementary schools, and at the five citywide G&T-only schools. The program currently enrolls 1-2% of DOE students (approximately 16,000 students) and is highly competitive to get in. Over 28,000 families test for the program annually, resulting in 10,000 students qualifying for 2,400 seats.

For the 2020-21 admissions cycle, the G&T test was not offered, and admissions decisions were made through a recommendation and evaluation process that was little more than a lottery. In District 3 alone, for example, 94% of applicants were deemed qualified. Despite great need and strong demand for more G&T seats, the current mayor refused to expand the program. He made clear his

disapproval of G&T programs, assuming they can never be racially equitable, an abhorrent position that dismisses the enormous potential of the city's students of color and ignores school districts around the country that have created rigorous and accelerated programs that also foster substantial minority inclusion.

Accelerated learners, a portion of whom are also twice exceptional (2E), have unique needs similar to other special education students, and those learning needs are often ignored in a general education setting. According to the Davidson Institute, 2E refers to intellectually gifted children who have one or more learning disabilities and are among the most under-identified and underserved populations in schools. 2E students, whose gifts and disabilities often mask one another, are difficult to identify. Without appropri-

ate educational programming, 2E and many other accelerated learners are often unchallenged in a general education setting, leading to behavioral problems and boredom.

It is critical that we protect programs for academically gifted learners and provide a broader array of services to ensure these students' needs, across every spectrum, are appropriately met. We believe there are better ways to identify

and provide broader access to these programs without eliminating existing G&T schools and classrooms altogether. In addition, the elimination of these programs would detrimentally impact over 16,000 existing G&T families and the broader G&T community (families, teachers, administrators, school and related funding), forcing many families to abandon the NYC public school system altogether.



Photo by Jean Hahn

Best Practice Solutions for 2023-24 and Beyond

1. UNIVERSAL SCREENING AT REGULAR INTERVALS

Qualification for gifted education services should start with universal screening of all students at particular grade levels, with the option to opt-out (Johnsen, 2018; Wai & Worrell, 2020). Universal screening should be done at an early enough age to serve kids at the point they start exhibiting distinctive abilities and where the DOE can get reasonable reliability of results from the screening. Screening should be done on a sufficiently regular basis to ensure students who may not have qualified in one year have the opportunity to qualify in another. In one 2016 study, universal screening enabled Florida's Broward County district to raise the percentage of black students receiving gifted services by 80 percent and Hispanic students by 130 percent (Card & Giuliano, 2016).

For some children, screening is more appropriate at later years

than in Kindergarten. Any new identification process should ensure that students who are not identified as academically gifted at the Kindergarten level have equal opportunity to be identified AND provided appropriate services in later years (unlike the current program where the vast majority of admissions is at Kindergarten entry). Free and widely available sample tests, activities, and materials should also be offered in all neighborhoods to help familiarize students with the screening format. One vehicle for this preparation could be in 3K and PreK programs through classroom appropriate activities and instruction.

Through regular universal screening, parents who feel their children are not ready to be tested at a younger age can opt-out and have them assessed when they are older.

2. GUARANTEED ADMISSION TO A GEOGRAPHICALLY ACCESSIBLE PROGRAM FOR ALL WHO QUALIFY

Despite lawmakers, including Mayor-elect Eric Adams, and families demanding G&T programs in underserved areas, the DOE has refused to expand the program and created a dynamic where tens of thousands of families are applying for a very limited number of seats. This creates a “scarcity” mindset which leads to unnecessary resentment and misunderstanding of the value of education services for the academically gifted as such services are often perceived as “elitist” and available to only a select few. To combat this, it is critical to open classrooms in underserved areas that are within reasonable commuting distance (Gubbins, et.al., 2018; Plucker & Peters, 2016).

Universal screening will greatly increase the number of identified children, particularly Black and Hispanic students. However, greater identification will not improve access if the number of seats in G&T continues to be limited, nor will it improve access if programs are geographically inconvenient for children to attend. Every child who meets the criteria for particular gifted

education services should be guaranteed those services and those services should be available at a school within yellow bus distance of every child’s home (currently less than five miles and in the same borough, but less than 30 minutes on the bus is a better standard). No longer should any parent have to decline the appropriate services for their child because they do not have the means to arrange for transport to a school that provides services for accelerated learners, or are reluctant to have their Kindergartner commute an hour or more each way.

Furthermore, educational services for academically gifted learners should be delivered in the least restrictive environment possible. For many, the least restrictive environment is a stand-alone classroom of other accelerated learners.

“Every child who meets the criteria for particular gifted education services should be guaranteed those services...”

For these students, learning in a GenEd classroom restricts many accelerated learners from fully expressing their abilities and from learning at a pace that is appropriate for them (Hershey, 2010). As such, NYC must **vastly** expand the number of stand-alone G&T classrooms across all boroughs and neigh-

borhoods whether those classrooms are part of G&T schools (e.g. citywide programs), embedded in schools (e.g. district programs) or follow a new model like borough-wide programs or a separate district (similar to D75) that specifically serves the needs of accelerated learners.

3. FOCUS ON ACCELERATION, NOT JUST ENRICHMENT

Curriculum acceleration is by far the gifted service that is best supported by research. NYC G&T programs **must focus on curriculum acceleration** across core subjects, as acceleration best meets the needs of the broadest range of advanced learners. According to the Templeton National Report on Acceleration, "*A Nation Deceived: How Schools Hold Back America's Brightest Students*," current nationwide education policies do not implement accelerated curricula that best meet the needs of academically gifted learners, and for exceptionally and profoundly academically gifted students, interventions limited to enrichment and moderate degrees of acceleration, tend to be unsuccessful. According to the report, there are numerous

studies spanning more than the past half century that point to the benefits of accelerated curriculum.

While teachers may be able to offer limited differentiation (e.g., extra worksheets for an advanced math learner), large classroom sizes, wide gaps in students' grade level proficiencies, limited resources and time often make it difficult for teachers to customize curriculum for a broad range of learners. Acceleration should include enrichment activities and project-based work to deepen understanding of concepts. However, the purpose of a G&T curriculum is to meet the needs of accelerated learners and afford them the opportunity to tackle material at a faster pace. The DOE should develop pro-

programming standards similar to those that are offered by the National Association for Gifted Children (“NAGC”) to ensure a standardized approach to offering gifted education services that are accelerated. This will also help ensure teachers who teach accelerated learners are adequately trained and supported to meet the needs of these students (Colangelo, Assouline, & Gross, 2004).

4. GREATLY EXPAND THE G&T DELIVERY MODEL

To appropriately serve a larger population and wider range of academically gifted learners who will be identified under our proposed methods, the DOE should offer a “continuum of services” delivery model which would provide multiple ways to deliver services to academically gifted learners depending on the needs exhibited by those learners. Not only should this continuum include a greatly expanded number of stand-alone G&T schools and stand-alone classrooms within other schools for kids exhibiting multiple gifted potentialities, it should include flexible ability grouping and pullout programs, particularly in mathematics (which is often difficult to differentiate), within every neighborhood and a majority of GenEd schools in the city. The latter would allow teachers to group students who exhibit high ability in particular subjects to be offered appropriate accelerated instruction while maintaining flexibility to move children in and out based on their evolving developmental needs.

5. DIFFERENT PATHWAYS TO RECEIVE GIFTED EDUCATION SERVICES

To ensure that all kids needing services for academically gifted learners are appropriately identified regardless of race, ethnicity, disability, English Language Learner status or socio-economic factors, the DOE should offer **multiple pathways for identifying children with accelerated learning needs**. Those

pathways should include standardized testing as well as other appropriate criteria (Peters, Carter & Plucker, 2020; Wai & Lakin, 2020). The previous process where students competed with each other not just to qualify, but to have the highest qualification score to secure one of a very limited number of seats created artificial scarcity due to the DOE's refusal to expand the number of seats to meet the needs of all who qualified, even if physical space was available. This refusal to expand was despite the fact that G&T programs use the same Fair Student Funding formula as every other school and cost the same and often less (on a per student basis) than programming at GenEd schools.

While standardized measures such as tests are important for ensuring unbiased screening of children for gifted academic programs, students should be screened for academic gifted-

ness in each of the major potentialities, Verbal, Mathematical and non-Verbal. Allowing qualification via a single potentiality helps identify gifted ELL students as well as the many academically gifted students who exhibit asynchronous development across these potentialities.

Furthermore, students should be evaluated both on national as well as local norms as defined as single school or zip code norms, with perhaps even a separate norm for students in temporary housing (Peters, Rambo-Hernandez, Makel, 2019). Specific norms should also be used for identification of 2E children who are often underidentified. Offering gifted academic services within the continuum of services based on local norms helps better identify underrepresented children and those who may be negatively impacted by their socioeconomic circumstances.

6. LEVERAGE DOE 3K AND PREK PROGRAMS TO SUPPORT GIFTED IDENTIFICATION

The use of DOE 3K and PreK programs to help facilitate G&T screening/evaluations and ed-

ucate parents on how G&T services can better meet the academic needs of accelerated

learners will greatly increase the identification of academically gifted students across all communities. The DOE leveraged PreK programs this past year to administer the G&T evaluation process. The Fall 2021 admissions to gifted programs saw offers to students from lower income neighborhoods increase by 42% and fully enrolled programs in low-income communities that generally go unused. While we question if that evaluation method was the best approach it proved the value of having children evaluated within the existing DOE programs. Leveraging PreK programs will

also identify high-risk candidates who would benefit from gifted education services at an earlier age and offer necessary support to families to help familiarize them with the gifted screening process, the value of gifted education services, and to provide outreach and general information on how children are identified. (Dixon, et. al., 2020). These evaluations can have other benefits by finding children who can be helped on other needs and should be part of a comprehensive set of screeners for accelerated and other special needs (e.g., ADHD, dyslexia, 2E).

7. IMPROVE COMMUNITY OUTREACH AND AWARENESS

NYC public school admissions for any program is an overwhelming process for parents, particularly for those with limited resources, language ability or access to a computer or enrollment center. Under the previous G&T, parents needed to be highly engaged to find out about G&T and understand the complex process of application, testing and program selection. With our recommendations, that process will become much simpler. No specif-

ic action will be required on the part of parents for their children to be screened and identified for gifted education services. Most who are identified will receive services through their local school or be assigned to a specialized classroom in close proximity to their home. Some of those identified may be asked to rank program preferences, but that ranking will be similar to the ranking that parents already do for either elementary or middle school choice. That

said, the DOE needs to better market and communicate the needs of students identified for gifted education services and the benefits these services provide. There is a need for much greater marketing effort and information particularly in Black and Hispanic and other

underrepresented communities where many parents opt for charter schools. By expanding gifted education services into all neighborhoods, families will have more community ties and familiarity with the benefits of these programs (Davis, 2010).

8. GIFTED LEARNERS AS SPECIAL EDUCATION

We believe that the need to accommodate academically gifted learners should be designated a Special Education need with the appropriate services, and placed in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) to ensure they can access the support they need. LRE is a term used in Special Education and implies that students needing support will receive it in an inclusive environment; the GenEd classroom. However, in the case of academically gifted students a regular classroom is the opposite and may constitute a restrictive environment from a social-emotional perspective. Academically gifted students often work at ‘keeping behind’ to not appear too different from age-peers (Hershey, 2010) facing social incentives not to appear “too smart”.

According to the NAGC State of States report, New York is one of 12 states that does not have a mandate to identify or serve, and/or does not provide any state funding for gifted students. We believe New York City, and more broadly New York State, should consider a mandate to ensure adequate funding, support and identification are given to NYC public school students who qualify as academically gifted learners. The DOE should also consider hiring additional math and core subject specialists to ensure an appropriate curriculum is developed that will meet the needs of accelerated learners - resources that should be applied not just for G&T students but across the entire spectrum of learners.



Criticisms of Brilliant NYC

We also want to express our skepticism of Brilliant NYC as a better solution to meet the needs of accelerated learners. The program will purportedly offer differentiation in GenEd classrooms starting initially in Kindergarten and later expanding to the higher elementary school grades. Information from the DOE suggested that their approach draws heavily from Renzulli's Student Enrichment Model and Renzulli Learning, its online learning platform. While SEM may be an appropriate model for smaller, well-resourced districts and could possibly work in tandem with existing G&T, we have concerns over how well it can be implemented specifically within NYC public schools. In addition, we received feedback from gifted education experts who expressed doubts on solely relying on this model to meet accelerated learners' needs. Our concerns are as follows:

1. Brilliant NYC was **never piloted** and there is no data to prove its efficacy in meeting accelerated learners' needs or meet its intended goal of increased access and equity to accelerated learning opportunities - a risky move that will impact 60,000 children and be highly disruptive as teachers ramp up on a brand new differentiation approach.
2. The expectation for one teacher to differentiate and offer suitable curriculum to up to possibly more than four different grade levels in a class of 30+ students seems highly unrealistic. Such an approach is better suited for small classroom sizes, a scenario which the DOE is unlikely to adopt anytime soon.
3. The expectation that the DOE will adequately train all 4,000 Kindergarten teachers and subsequent grade level teachers every year until every classroom can provide enrichment, differentiation and acceleration is also highly unrealistic.

4. The delivery model and the expected curriculum used has not been formally announced by the DOE, although there is concern that it will leverage online learning tools in limited weekly sessions, an instructional model that is not individualized or intensive enough to meet the needs of accelerated learners. As Dr. Joyce VanTassel-Baska, Smith Professor Emerita and former Executive Director of the Center for Gifted Education at The College of William and Mary, stated, *“It is not that the Renzulli program would not be a good addition as a supplement to the programs already operating...But make no mistake that it is a supplemental program, not a core one. So you are removing, in some cases, full time programs for less than an hour a day services.”*
5. The funding and feasibility of rolling out such a complex, resource intensive program across a huge, diverse school system has not been made clear. Notwithstanding, new leadership will most likely have their own opinion on how to offer accelerated learning services so this effort seems wasted, especially as it was hurriedly implemented during the waning months of the current administration.
6. There is no accommodation for siblings that we have heard of under the Brilliant NYC program causing considerable burden on existing G&T families who have siblings who cannot be tested in.
7. The likelihood that the UFT will fully support a major increase in teacher responsibility and training given the increased burden of being required to differentiate instruction across many grade levels of ability within a single classroom

Finally, as stated above, enrichment alone will not meet the needs of accelerated learners. Enrichment should still be pursued as a means to improve student learning across the entire DOE, but it cannot be used as a replacement of needed services to accelerated learners.

*“Gifted education is about providing programs and services for students significantly above the norm in academic aptitude singly or in combination. It is also about providing comprehensive articulated opportunities... with a trained instructor in a classroom. These types of opportunities have been available in NYC for close to a hundred years. Schools like Bronx Science, Stuyvesant, and Hunter have all tried to meet the demand but never could as more students have qualified than could be served. The appropriate response in NY has been to **expand services both at earlier ages but also with parallel secondary schools** to meet the increasing need for advanced learning for students who have demonstrated through testing, performance, and products their abilities and readiness for advanced coursework. The Renzulli model is one that promotes individualization online, a model that **MOST** parents have rejected during the pandemic as not effective with their children.”*

*Dr. Joyce Van Tassel-Baska, EdD.
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Appendix

Summary of G&T Survey Results

Respondents are in favor of expanding access to Gifted and Talented (G&T) programs through various means (e.g. expanding programs across districts, universal testing etc.). Respondents are also satisfied with the acceleration in the current G&T curriculum and the ability of their school's leadership to develop and implement the curriculum. Respondents are not in favor of the School Enrichment Model (SEM) recommended by the SDAG report although more information is needed to fully understand how this model would be implemented.

The takeaways can be split into three distinct categories / potential policy proposals:

Admissions

Respondents were strongly in favor of expanding G&T programs across districts, implementing universal testing (with ability to opt out), and expanding entry points into G&T programs up to fifth grade (from K-3). Respondents believe the DOE should determine admissions criteria and retain sibling priority.

Curriculum

Respondents are generally satisfied with the acceleration in the current G&T curriculum and believe that children benefit from being grouped with peers of similar ability. Parents have stronger faith in their children's current school leadership's ability to develop a challenging and robust curriculum, versus one developed centrally at the DOE. Respondents did not appear to be familiar with SEM or did not support it.

Funding

Majority of respondents believe funding for gifted services should lie with the city or the state.

Details

441 respondents completed the survey. Majority of respondents (84%) were parents with children in the G&T programs or who planned to apply (11%).

Survey conducted between February 2021 to April 2021 via Google survey and disseminated through parent groups.

Respondents with children in D2 and D3 comprised 59% of respondents. D20, 28, and 30 constituted over 5% each. Other districts were under 5% representation.

Majority of parents (86%) were existing G&T parents and 13% identified as prospective G&T families (with 2% of those having existing G&T children).

The top reason (82% of respondents) why parents chose G&T for their children is that they felt GenEd programs would not meet the accelerated learning needs of their children. The second reason was to allow their children to be among peers of similar abilities (75%).

Questions focused on three main areas related to G&T Programs:

1. Funding
2. Admissions and access to G&T programs
3. Curriculum and program structure

Funding

Most respondents (approximately 80%) believe that either the city and/or the state should fund gifted academic services for NYC public school students, 18% respondents unsure of who should fund, likely indicating lack of awareness about school funding mechanisms.

Admissions and Access

Most respondents are in favor of expanding access to G&T programs through expanding testing and expanding criteria for admission into G&T programs. Parents overwhelmingly (88%) supported the idea of universal testing with the option to opt out. Parents also want to expand the number of G&T programs across districts and boroughs and the years in which entry is possible (K-5). Expanding G&T into all school districts will be most impactful in improving access to G&T programs for more students, followed by expanding marketing and outreach of the programs and expanding entry points to the programs.

Standardized testing as one of multiple criteria for admission (56%) was more popular than standardized test as sole criteria for admission (40%). Teacher recommendation (39%), grades (33%) and state test scores (26%) were also popular alternative criteria for admission to a G&T program although the latter two would not be helpful for kindergarten admissions.

A large number of parents (68%) were in favor of admissions criteria to G&T programs being determined centrally by the DOE and implementing that across G&T schools (current model). This may be due to parents who see a benefit in having a standardized approach to admissions versus allowing districts or schools a separate process. Giving district superintendents, or individual schools / principals oversight over admissions criteria gained approval of only 24%.

Majority of parents (68%) were in favor of sibling preference.

Curriculum and Program Structure:

A majority (86% of respondents) believe that students should be grouped with peers of similar ability to create the most appropri-

ate educational experience. When asked what type of programming G&T should focus on, parents overwhelmingly chose acceleration (54%) followed by enrichment (34%). Parents did not appear to be familiar with the SDAG report or the SEM (45% respondents did not know what SDAG is) or appeared not to support it (33%).

When presented with choices about who decides the curriculum followed at school, parents favored a decentralized curriculum determined by the individual school/principal/SLT. This indicates that current parents have a lot of faith in their school's leadership to chart the best academic path forward for its students and may be more indicative of the lack of information on what best practices are in gifted academic programming. In contrast, parents favored admissions criteria to be centralized and determined by the DOE, and not be determined at the school level.

Parents were unsure (46%) whether existing G&T programs provide good access or support to 2E students which may be due to unfamiliarity with the term, although 27% voted no.



