



# Mitigating Bias in Gifted & Talented Programs

# District Leadership Forum

**Caleb Hausman**

*Research Associate*

**Olivia Rios**

*Research Manager*

**Daniel Gordon**

*Senior Research Manager*

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# 1) Executive Overview

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## Key Observations

**District leadership at all profiled districts adapted student selection and evaluation processes for gifted and talented programs to combat process biases.** Administrators recognized inequities in initial evaluations for gifted and talented programs, with significant underrepresentation in these programs among certain student groups (e.g., English language learners, African-American students). To combat the detrimental effects of teacher referral bias, administrators at **District A** and **District D** implemented universal screening for all second graders in the district. Administrators at **District B** eliminated formal testing for gifted and talented programs altogether—relying on more informal referrals for gifted and talented program access. **District C** operates a hybrid between these two models, where administrators screen students for gifted and talented programs based upon students’ standardized test scores.

**Administrators in District A, District B, and District C track data related to gifted and talented program representation to monitor program equity.** Administrators at **District A** and **District C** use student demographic data to measure how representative gifted and talented programs are relative to the overall student population. Administrators at **District B** are developing a qualitative survey to measure student comfort in gifted and talented programs instead of tracking student demographic data. Administrators at District B hope that this survey can provide more nuanced insights than demographic information.

**Offer gifted and talented program opportunities to all district students to eliminate geographic discrimination.** Contacts at **District C** emphasize that all students throughout the district have access to sophisticated gifted and talented programs, regardless of where they attend school. Even though gifted and talented programs differ from school to school, which is also the case at **District A**, administrators do not limit students’ access to key programs due to where students live within the district. Similarly, administrators at **District B** ensure that students can access some form of enrichment opportunities no matter where they attend school, even if the reach of some programs is limited by resource availability. Administrators at **District D** offer all gifted and talented program teachers uniform resources to increase program cohesion across the district.

**School administrators in profiled districts provide students with access to opportunities for enrichment, even if they do not have access to formal gifted and talented programs.** In profiled districts, enrichment options vary from school to school, but **District B** designates 13 schools as dedicated to gifted and talented programs (known as members of the School Enrichment Model [SEM]). Students attending non-SEM schools across the district do not have access to this particular gifted and talented program. However, these students can still access less formal enrichment opportunities, such as Junior Great Books and Advanced Placement courses. Students in **District A** who do not meet the entry requirements for formal gifted and talented programs can still access enrichment opportunities such as supplemental online coursework and dual enrollment programs with higher education institutions.

## 2) Gifted and Talented Program Selection

### Screening Process

#### Bias in Gifted and Talented Programs Stems from Inequitable Screening Methods

While implicit bias impacts student outcomes across the education system, students can feel this discrimination acutely when seeking to access gifted and talented programs. According to recent research,<sup>1</sup> while IQ tests are a common assessment tool for gifted and talented programs, these exams' language-heavy focus puts students from low socioeconomic backgrounds and English language learners at a disadvantage. In addition, cultural misunderstandings between teachers and students might make teachers less likely to identify students for gifted screening because they do not exhibit the "traditional" definition of giftedness. These biases result in major demographic discrepancies in gifted and talented program representation.

With this in mind, it is critical for administrators to consider the impact that biases such as these have on the equity of their gifted and talented programs and develop solutions to mitigate these biases effectively.

#### Access to Gifted and Talented Programs Varies Widely Across Demographic Groups

White students are 66 percent more likely than African-American students and 47 percent more likely than Latino students to obtain gifted and talented program eligibility.<sup>2</sup>

#### Screen All Students for Gifted and Talented Programs to Reduce Bias of Teacher Referral Processes

As contacts at **District D** describe, two students can exhibit identical behaviors, but due to differing student backgrounds, a teacher could label one student gifted and the other student disruptive. While **District C** have explored professional development opportunities to counteract teacher bias, **District A** and District D use universal gifted and talented program screening for all district students. Universal screening ensures that all students access screening and mitigates the effect of subjective teacher referral decisions.

#### Remain Cognizant of Barriers to External Evaluations

Even though districts provide gifted and talented evaluations to students, parents at some profiled districts can still seek evaluation from private clinicians if they wish. However, the districts typically do not provide financial support for families seeking these alternative opinions.

This lack of financial support creates an opportunity gap, where wealthier families can obtain alternative opinions on students' giftedness and potentially change assessment outcomes, while less wealthy families cannot. This exacerbates underrepresentation of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds in gifted and talented programs.

In contrast to this universal screening method, administrators at **District B** responded to assessment bias and formerly unrepresentative gifted and talented programs by eliminating gifted and talented program access assessments entirely.

<sup>1</sup> Casey Quinlan, "How Gifted And Talented Programs Reinforce Class and Race Inequities," ThinkProgress, March 28, 2016. <https://thinkprogress.org/how-gifted-and-talented-programs-reinforce-class-and-race-inequities-40d72e16355d/>.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

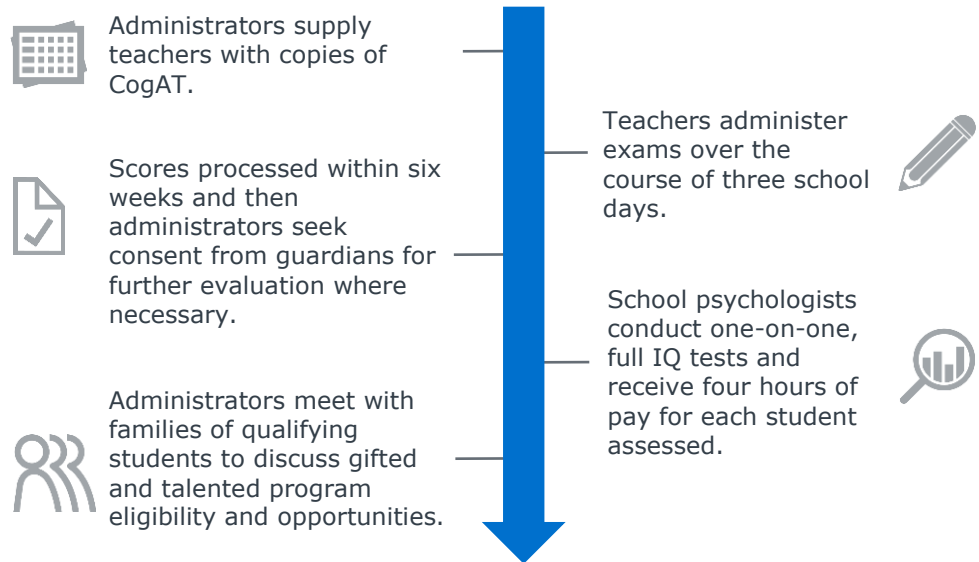
Instead, students can access gifted and talented programming at their school based solely on teacher referrals.

### Gifted and Talented Screening Methods and Age at Profiled School Districts

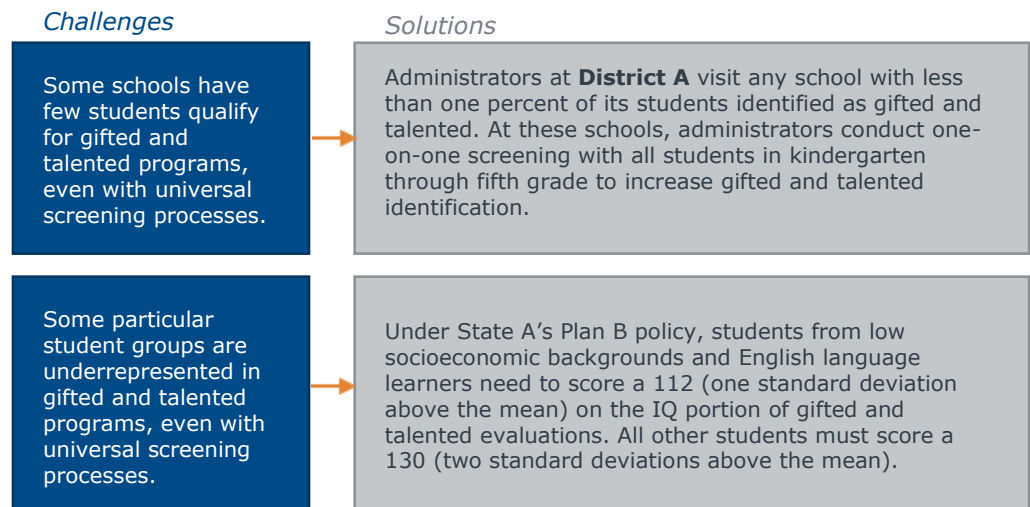
District	Gifted and Talented Program Assessment Process
<b>District A</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Administrators screen all district second graders, but other students can access screening process via teacher referral.</li> <li>Administrators screen students using the Cognitive Abilities Test (CogAT), excluding the verbal section, due to language barrier bias.</li> <li>Administrators use IQ testing to determine program eligibility for students who score above the 81<sup>st</sup> percentile on the CogAT.</li> </ul>
<b>District B</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Administrators do not use a formal screening for gifted and talented programs to eliminate screening bias.</li> <li>Students access programs based upon informal teacher or parent requests or recommendations.</li> <li>Students have open access to enrichment programs that differ based upon faculty expertise at each school.</li> </ul>
<b>District C</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Administrators screen all students at each grade level who score above the 89<sup>th</sup> percentile on annual standardized tests.</li> <li>Administrators use a variety of exams to fit individual student needs, and school psychologists select the evaluation tools that best fit unique student needs, such as exams that mitigate language barriers.</li> <li>Students can access the screening process outside of the annual schedule via teacher referral or guardian request.</li> </ul>
<b>District D</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Administrators screen all district second graders.</li> <li>Administrators screen students using the Naglieri nonverbal assessment to limit verbal skill biases.</li> <li>Administrators provide teachers with practice tests to familiarize students with exam process.</li> </ul>

Contacts at District A cite the district’s universal screening program as a key reason why diversity has increased in gifted and talented programs. These administrators also cite the value of their state’s Plan B policy, which allows school districts in State A (including District A and District C) to set different eligibility requirements for traditionally underrepresented student groups (i.e., English language learners and students from low socioeconomic backgrounds).

## Gifted and Talented Screening Process at *District A*



## Supplemental Screening Processes at *District A*



## Screening Tools

### Utilize Nonverbal Assessment Tools to Avoid Language Barrier Bias

Traditional IQ exams and other similar assessment tools for gifted and talented programs rely heavily on students' language skills. Even in a seemingly unrelated subject, such as math, students must lean on language skills to interpret word problems. Thus, students without strong language backgrounds tend to struggle on

these types of assessments. This leads to disadvantages for students from low socioeconomic backgrounds and students from non-English speaking homes.

In response, profiled districts such as **District A** have moved away from traditional IQ tests and toward nonverbal exams. These assessments measure students' cognitive abilities, but without verbal assessments' biases. For example, administrators in **District D** recently implemented the Naglieri Nonverbal Ability Test for its gifted and talented screening process. Contacts at District D prefer the Naglieri assessment over other more traditional exams because it better shows student strengths that are not directly related to language skills.

To provide students with familiarity with the Naglieri exam prior to its official administration, District D officials provide all second grade teachers (all second graders are universally screened) with practice problems and online resources for students to access before the exam. Contacts note, however, that administrators lack a method to track teacher fidelity to this practice.

Similarly, contacts at District A use a full IQ test in gifted and talented screening processes, but acknowledge the shortcomings of such assessments. These contacts express that they would like to move the district away from full IQ exams and towards nonverbal assessments, but administrators need state-level approval for changes in the gifted and talented assessment process. While the official CogAT, which District A uses, includes verbal, nonverbal, and quantitative reasoning sections, administrators disregard the verbal section to reduce language-barrier bias in the assessment.

To combat bias in school psychologists who administer IQ exams as a part of gifted and talented screening at District D, program administrators have introduced a new screening tool (the SAGES exam), which may replace the mandated IQ exam. The SAGES exam mitigates psychologists' own biases and increases representation for traditionally underrepresented student groups in gifted and talented programs.

## Profiles of Highlighted Gifted and Talented Assessment Tools



### Cognitive Abilities Test (CogAT)

- Assesses students' problem-solving and critical-thinking skills
- Focuses on verbal, nonverbal, and quantitative skills
- New edition offers sections in both English and Spanish to minimize language barrier for English language learners
- Used at **District A**



### Naglieri Nonverbal Ability Test (NNAT)

- Assesses students' critical thinking skills
- Structured to be culturally neutral, limiting test bias against non-native English speakers and students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds
- \$10 per exam
- Used at **District C**



### Screening Assessment for Gifted Elementary and Middle School Students (SAGES)

- Assesses students' aptitude and academic achievement
- Focuses on reasoning, math/science, and language/social studies skills
- \$270 for 20 student exams
- Used at **District D**



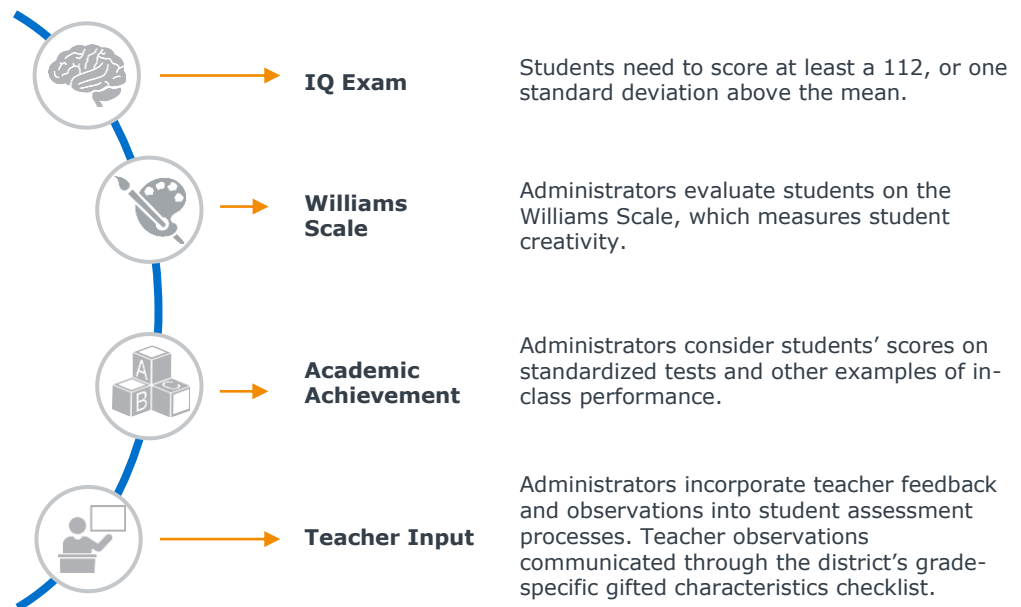
School district administrators should also consider the languages of gifted and talented programs' evaluations and materials. **District C** provides students with opportunities to take gifted and talented evaluations in either English or Spanish to accommodate the large proportion of Spanish-speaking students in the district. Administrators at District A also accommodate local communities' linguistic needs when crafting gifted and talented program materials. For example, to maximize guardian buy-in for gifted and talented programs, district administrators distribute key program paperwork in the five most common home languages for district students: English, Spanish, Haitian, Creole, and Portuguese.

## Incorporate Several Criteria into the Gifted and Talented Assessment Process

Another common challenge administrators face relates to the breadth of evaluation methods used in the student assessment processes. While using fewer assessment opportunities makes the process more efficient, incorporation of more assessment criteria helps administrators evaluate a wider array of student skills and abilities. This large assessment umbrella helps identify students with nontraditional versions of giftedness. By expanding assessment criteria, gifted and talented program administrators can expand the pool of eligible students and mitigate biases of individual assessment methods.

Administrators at **District C** use an especially large number of factors in evaluating students for eligibility in gifted and talented programs, including four factors uniquely used for students covered under State A's Plan B policy. Administrators evaluate non-Plan B eligible students based on IQ scores, a demonstrated need for gifted and talented programs, and meeting a majority of characteristics on the district's gifted behaviors checklist. In addition, psychologists at District C can choose the assessment method that best fits individual student needs.

### Plan B Assessment Criteria at *District C*



## Excerpt of *District C's* Gifted Characteristics Checklist

### Gifted Characteristics Checklist – Kindergarten

Teachers rate students on a 0-4 scale based upon frequency of behaviors such as the ones listed below. Gifted students should have a majority of traits fall into the highest two categories.

#### Verbal Abilities

- ✓ Has an enriched vocabulary
- ✓ Uses unique and clever responses
- ✓ Is uninhibited in expressions of opinion

#### Learning Characteristics

- ✓ Has a questioning attitude
- ✓ Understands the concept of time
- ✓ Has a long attention span in specific areas

#### Motivational Characteristics

- ✓ Requires little direction
- ✓ Has a high energy level
- ✓ Is persistent

#### Social Abilities

- ✓ Possesses leadership ability
- ✓ Is sensitive to the feelings of others or to situations
- ✓ Has a highly developed sense of humor

## 3) Gifted and Talented Program Design

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### Program Reach

#### Offer Gifted and Talented Programs in All District Schools to Increase Accessibility

Students in any district cannot realize the benefits of gifted and talented programs if these programs are not made available to them in their local schools. Even though resource limitations might dictate the specific programs offered at each school, profiled districts nonetheless offer enrichment opportunities to all students.

While all profiled districts offer a wide array of programs to gifted and talented students, both **District B** and **District C** offer different enrichment opportunities in different schools. Gifted and talented programs differ from school to school at District C, but contacts report that teachers integrate gifted and talented programs into the curriculum of every district school. This setup ensures that all eligible students can access gifted and talented programs. Similarly, District B offers students myriad gifted and talented programs, such as Junior Great Books and the Schoolwide Enrichment Model (SEM). The exact makeup of enrichment opportunities at each school depends on the availability and expertise of teachers at each school.

#### Schoolwide Enrichment Model (SEM) at *District B*



SEM is offered at 13 schools across the district, which students can access via neighborhood zoning or district-wide lottery. In the SEM program, students receive enrichment opportunities based upon their stated areas of interest. For example, students interested in marine life can access enrichment programs in biology and chemistry. SEM classes operate with much smaller groups than traditional classes, with capacities of about 15 students. Students in SEM programs complete their learning through personalized, project-based curricula and independent study.

#### Provide Students who do not Qualify for Formal Gifted and Talented Programs with Alternative Enrichment Opportunities

Profiled districts offer enrichment opportunities to advanced students who do not qualify for formal gifted and talented programs. **District A** and **District B** both provide students with enrichment opportunities that do not require students to meet gifted and talented program eligibility criteria. At District A, non-restricted enrichment opportunities include accelerated online coursework and dual enrollment options with local higher education institutions.

While district geography limits SEM-program access, administrators at District B mitigate these disadvantages through alternative programming. Even if students cannot access a SEM school, they can nonetheless access other enrichment opportunities, such as Advanced Placement classes, Junior Great Books, and Advanced Readers Extensions. Thus, even if district resources limit the reach of certain enrichment opportunities, it is important to offer students at all schools access to some type of enrichment opportunity.

## Overview of Enrichment Opportunities Offered at *District B*



### Advanced Placement (AP)

AP courses allow students to take college-level courses and earn college credit. The district covers students' AP exam costs.



### Advanced Readers Extensions

Advanced Readers Extensions offers elementary school students the opportunity to engage with reading material above their grade level.



### Junior Great Books

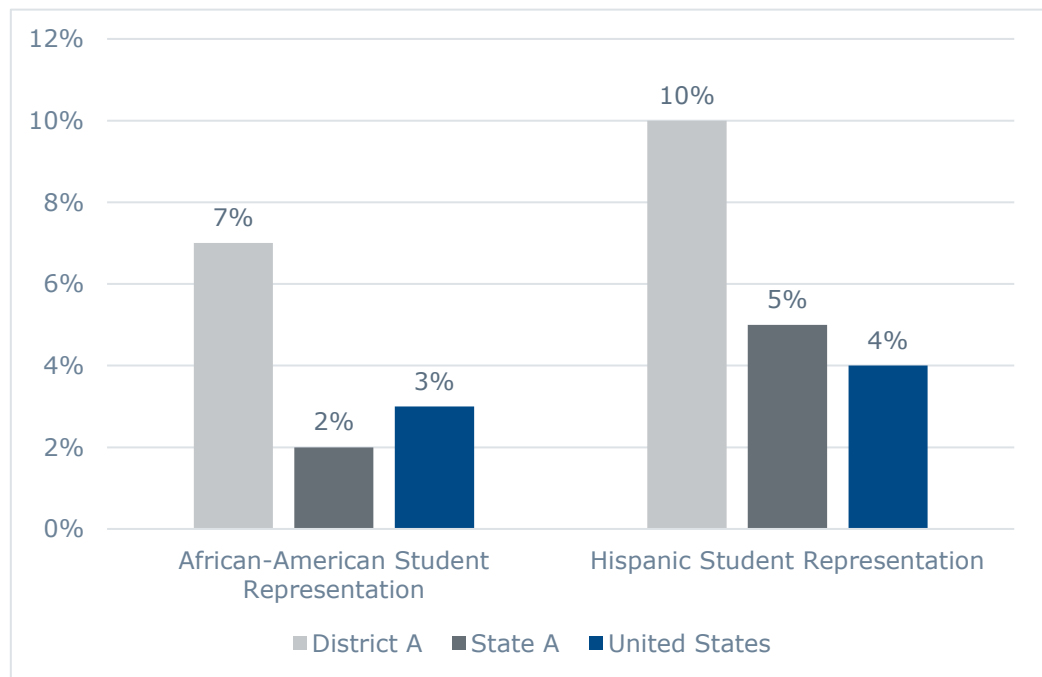
Junior Great Books develops students' language skills through assignments around material from renowned authors.

## Program Support Structures

### Track Program Equity via Robust Data Collection Practices

Administrators can monitor the equity of gifted and talented programs through regular data collection about student participant demographics and student experiences. Administrators at **District A** take a quantitative approach to data collection, tracking gifted and talented program participants' ethnicities, socioeconomic backgrounds, neighborhood, and English language learner status. This data-tracking process enables program administrators to measure the effectiveness of policies aimed at increasing the equity of gifted and talented program access. Program administrators have seen increases in diversity in gifted and talented programs since implementing innovative practices such as universal screening.

### Student Demographic Group Representation in Gifted and Talented Programs at *District A*, *State A*, and Nationally



**District B** takes a more qualitative approach to data tracking instead of compiling student demographic data. Program administrators are working to implement a survey of gifted and talented program participants to measure how comfortable

students of different backgrounds feel in the district's gifted and talented programs. While District A's practices provide administrators with clear data with which to identify trends, District B's data practices enable administrators to obtain a more nuanced understanding of students' actual experiences in these programs.

### **Offer Professional Development to Teachers to Increase Awareness of Gifted and Talented Program Biases**

Professional development sessions give district administrators the ability to communicate important information about potential biases in gifted and talented programs, especially in terms of teachers' referral of students for gifted and talented evaluations. Funding limitations and teachers' time constraints present administrators with challenges to offer these professional development opportunities. To mitigate these challenges, administrators at **District A** provide bias-reduction trainings to gifted and talented program teachers, but not to the general population of teachers.

Both **District B** and **District C** offer teachers sessions on gifted and talented program operations, but these sessions are not necessarily required for all teachers. Notably though, all teachers in District C have the option to attend professional development sessions about mitigating bias in gifted and talented programs (led by external experts). By opening bias-reduction training to all teachers, but maintaining its optional nature, administrators can extend the reach of these resources to the general population of teachers without losing engagement by mandating participation.

## 3) Research Methodology

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**Project Challenge** Leadership at a member district approached the Forum with the following questions:

1. How do students at contact districts gain access to gifted and talented programs?
  - a. At which points in a student's educational career do contact districts offer entry into gifted and talented programs?
  - b. What performance indicators do contact districts consider when evaluating students for potential participation in gifted and talented programs?
2. What policies or tactics do contact districts use to combat subconscious bias of teachers related to referral of students to gifted and talented programs?
  - a. How do contact districts measure the effectiveness of these policies and tactics?
3. Do contact districts allow students' families to seek secondary consultations for gifted and talented assessments?
  - a. If so, do contact districts subsidize these opportunities for additional screening?
4. Do contact districts provide professional development opportunities to help teachers mitigate bias in selection of students for gifted and talented programs?
  - a. If so, how do contact districts incentivize teacher participation in these professional development programs?
5. How do contact districts collect and track data related to potential bias in the selection of gifted and talented program participants?
6. What services do contact districts provide to students who do not meet established thresholds for gifted and talented programs, but who would still benefit from enrichment opportunities?

**Project Sources** The Forum consulted the following sources for this report:

- "CogAT." Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. Accessed June 22, 2018. <https://www.hmhco.com/programs/cogat>.
- "Creativity Assessment Packet (CAP)." PRO-ED, Incorporated. Accessed June 28, 2018. <https://www.proedinc.com/Products/6565/creativity-assessment-packet-cap.aspx>.
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- "SAGES-2." PAR. Accessed June 22, 2018. <https://www.parinc.com/Products/Pkey/386>.

## Research Parameters

The Forum interviewed gifted and talented program administrators at large urban school districts across the United States.

### A Guide to Districts Profiled in this Brief

<b>Institution</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Approximate Enrollment</b>
<b>District A</b>	South	272,000
<b>District B</b>	Mid-Atlantic	49,000
<b>District C</b>	South	354,000
<b>District D</b>	Mid-Atlantic	128,000