

Policy Brief: HB127, Gifted Education as College Preparation

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Since its introduction into the public lexicon in 1958, scholars have hotly debated the American conception of meritocracy: are our outcomes in life truly determined by our merit (Liu, 2011)? If so, how do we define such a consequential term? In the United States, education is widely viewed as the key to social and economic mobility; how are our educational experiences determined by our “merit,” and how do these experiences contribute to our “merit” later in life (Ford et al., 2018)? In Virginia, this legislative session, the debate around House Bill 127 has brought these questions to the forefront of public discussion. On the surface, House Bill 127 appears to address basic questions of admissions criteria to Virginia’s most esteemed public high schools, the governor’s schools. In order to truly understand this bill, however, we must examine the context in which it was proposed. In this brief, I will outline this context through a brief overview of the history of gifted education. Then, using this context, I will provide a critical summary of the current and proposed admissions policies of the governor’s schools with a particular focus on equity. Finally, I will conclude with specific recommendations and implications related to House Bill 127 and gifted education, broadly.

“Defining, identifying, and serving the gifted and talented have important, lifelong implications. Those who score highest on cognitive tests reap the benefits of society: they have access to the best colleges, most prestigious careers, and highest salaries” (Mansfield, 2015, p. 2). This question of admissions criteria (or, perhaps more broadly, defining giftedness) is, then, clearly consequential not only for educational outcomes in K-12 but also in higher education admissions and outcomes and lifelong career outcomes. Determining who is “gifted” and therefore worthy of the education provided at these institutions is no small responsibility. Unfortunately, gifted education has, since its inception, been criticized as an elitist and racist institution.

The history of gifted education begins in earnest in the first half of the 20th century with the research and writing of Lewis Terman and Leta Stetter Hollingworth. Terman was one of the creators of the Stanford-Binet Intelligence Scales and designed and conducted an influential longitudinal study of “gifted” children. Hollingworth, too, conducted a longitudinal study of “gifted” children, though with an explicit focus on the educational and environmental factors that influenced “giftedness” (Sternberg et al., 2021). Modern scholars take issue with many aspects of these studies; the biggest controversy with the “father” and “mother” of gifted education, however, is that both were outspoken eugenicists. Terman and Hollingworth both believed that non-White people and people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds were intellectually inferior and used their privileged positions “to forward their pseudoscience” (Mansfield, 2015 p. 7). “The political ramifications of the coupling of eugenics and gifted education resulted in the denial of resources to people deemed ‘less than’ and clearly favored those falsely labeled as superior”; this influence is still felt today through IQ testing and tracking as standard sorting mechanisms in our public schools (Mansfield, 2015 p. 10).

Heavily influenced by this initial research, formal gifted education programs emerged at the state level in the United States beginning in 1958. The creation of these programs was both a direct response to the National Defense Education Act of 1958 that sought to foster a generation of talent to compete with the Soviet Union during the Cold War and the ruling of *Brown v. Board* in 1954 and subsequent efforts to integrate schools (Martschenko, 2021). Under the political guise of global educational competition, gifted education programs “could serve to reposition and safeguard whiteness while enabling the use of ability grouping to resist desegregation” (Martschenko, 2021, p. 5). The legacy of this historical conflation of Whiteness with giftedness and worth is still seen in our gifted programs today; when under-identification is

considered, scholars estimate that between 39% and 52% of students are missing from gifted identification (Gentry et al., 2019).

Given the racist and classist underpinnings of gifted education and the exclusionary state of gifted education today at the national level, it is not surprising that Virginia's gifted education programs are unrepresentative of the broader student population. While no federal provisions regarding gifted education exist, Virginia is one of the 37 states that requires school divisions to identify gifted students. However, Virginia is also among the states with the most inequitable underrepresentation of Black students in our gifted education programs at only 11.5% (Ford et al., 2018). The governor's schools addressed in House Bill 127 are a small but consequential subset of gifted education in the state.

There are currently three different types of "governor's schools" offered in Virginia: summer regional governor's schools, summer residential governor's schools, and academic-year governor's schools. House Bill 127 addresses admissions practices only at the 19 academic-year governor's schools. Of those 19 schools, six serve students in all four years of high school, and of those six schools, two have historically been the most prominent in discussions of equity and admissions: Maggie L. Walker Governor's School for Government and International Studies (MLWGS) in Richmond, and Thomas Jefferson High School for Science and Technology (TJ) in Fairfax (*Educational Opportunities*, 2013). House Bill 127 was specifically contentious among the MLWGS and TJ communities. Keeping the historical context of gifted education in mind, I will now provide a brief case study of the current and proposed admissions policies of our local Governor's School, MLWGS, with a particular focus on equity.

In 2021, MLWGS was ranked #5 out of 19,314 public schools in the nation by Niche (*School Profile*). The school is located in the city of Richmond, a largely African American city, but students come from 14 neighboring localities. Each year, each locality is allocated a certain

number of “slots” for prospective students as determined by the Director and the Planning Committee. The localities must then pay “tuition” for each “slot”; essentially, each participating locality purchases “slots” for its students each year (*Policy No. 1029*, 2020). In their eighth-grade year, interested and qualified students from these counties submit applications to MLWGS for consideration. In order to qualify for admission, students must be enrolled in Algebra I (or higher) and have a B average in their seventh-grade year. The application consists of personal data, two recommendations, their transcript, and results from the MLWGS assessment administered on-site on a “test day”. Applications are evaluated by the Planning Committee (composed of one representative from each school district) and a composite score is calculated using the following weight: ability assessment - 25%, writing samples - 25%, GPA - 30%, rigor - 5%, and recommendations - 15%. Each participating locality is then provided with a list of students who completed the application process sorted by the composite score; the locality then determines which students will fill their “slots” (*Policy No. 1030-R1*, 2021).

Most participating localities simply allocate their slots to the students with the highest composite scores as determined by the Planning Committee. In 2020, however, recognizing significant equity issues in the admissions process (historically, Black students have been accepted to MLWGS at a rate 4 times lower than White students) one participating locality revamped its selection process. The new process at the county level allocates slots to the top-performing students at each middle school and distributes the rest according to the county-wide list (Hunter, 2021). MLWGS has also had equity at the forefront of public discussion since 2020, and other localities have also considered changes to their selection criteria, as well.

In the 2022 legislative session, however, HB127 sought to seriously limit possibilities for increasing diversity in the admissions process. The bill sought to ban the collection of demographic information in the admissions process which would, essentially, make the analysis

of underrepresentation in the process impossible. The bill would additionally obstruct the ability of stakeholders to prioritize outreach efforts and prevent them “from achieving diversity and preventing racial isolation - compelling state interests affirmed by the US Supreme Court in 2007” (Deverakonda and Kahwajy, 2022).

A thorough analysis of the context surrounding House Bill 127 illuminates the problematic nature of this policy; the theoretical underpinnings of gifted education were formed by eugenicists and the beliefs of these founding figures combined with the wide belief in an American meritocracy are clearly still influencing gifted education policy today. MLWGS prides itself on its “rigorous academic program [that] prepares students for admission to first-choice colleges and universities” and its student outcome statistics back up this claim. The MLWGS class of 2021 had an average GPA of 4.27, an average SAT score of 1422, and scholarship offers totaling over \$4.5 million (*School Profile*). It is clear that in the governor’s schools’ admissions processes the question is not simply “who should we admit to this school” but “who deserves a free exceptional education that will provide extraordinary opportunities through higher education and into adult life?” These policies are highly consequential and all too often based on the resources that prospective students have had access to in grades K-8, which excludes a large portion of deserving children. We must recognize the necessity of change in our educational systems and not only oppose policies that limit equity efforts but create and support policies that extend these efforts.

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