

Gift giving

Bills should focus on teachers, not students



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Are you a gifted student? By gifted I don't mean you could give John Holmes a run for his money. I'm asking if you are an above-average student?

Everyone remembers taking the CAT and PSAT tests back in junior high school. What happened to you after taking these exams? One of three things probably happened to you:

1. You were labeled a "gifted" student and went through high school taking advanced placement (AP) courses.
2. Your test scores were in the middle range and nothing happened to you.
3. Your test scores could have been duplicated by a monkey and you spent five of seven school periods in classes like "Advanced Small Engines."

An hour of your life had set you on track for excellence, mediocrity or Jiffy Lube. Does one hour of your life really measure all of who you are as a student? Our state legislators are willing to bet on it.

Before the Legislature adjourns in April two bills, LB1228 and LB1229, will be voted on. The bills are called the "Quality Education Accountability Act" and the gifted bill, respectively. Their purpose is to help gifted students and schools with above-average test scores.

LB1228 would provide additional funds to schools who meet certain criteria. If a school has above-average college-admissions test scores, academic standards, a gifted program and alternative education for expelled students then they qualify for the additional funding.

LB1229 would require all schools to provide programs for gifted students. The bill would appropriate \$6 million to help start and operate these programs. Gifted student programs are purely optional at the present time.

How many of you students out there had the advantage of participating in one of these gifted programs? Did you feel challenged, separated, advantaged and better prepared for college?

I have been fortunate enough to sample academic life from all ends of the spectrum. When I was in grade school, I was in the "special" reading group. Let me tell you something, there was nothing special about it. I was separated from the class, along with a few other children, and we followed a different lesson plan than the rest of the class. We were behind in school and probably went at a slower pace. I felt like an idiot. I couldn't understand why I wasn't able to learn like the other children.

After a couple years of this I was diagnosed with a vision problem that was hindering my learning. I had to do these horrible eye exercises to correct the problem but after a year I was able to work things out. By the fifth grade I was back in the normal class. This didn't last long.

In sixth grade I was identified as gifted. At sixth grade I think what classifies students as gifted is that they know where babies come from and that they've

stopped threatening the other children with scissors. I was suddenly among a group of students who I considered very intelligent. I was with these same students until I graduated high school.

I benefited a great deal from the educational opportunities that came with being a gifted student. I also suffered a lot of psychological stress from being in the "special" group. All of this gifted/special labeling happens to us when we are in grade school. At that point in time, are we being tested on what we know or our genetic composition?

Nebraska has a reputation of being a good place to raise a family and it ranks high among other states in level of academic achievement. Are the test scores high in Nebraska because of superior teaching or because Nebraskans are intelligent and produce intelligent little huskers? Either way, gifted programs only serve to harm the 90 percent of students who aren't gifted.

The instructors who teach gifted students are usually the educators with the highest education and the most effective teaching methods. The teachers for the other classes left something to be desired. My senior year English teacher had a doctorate and was absolutely amazing. The other senior English teacher also taught drivers education and was the football coach. I believe his final exam consisted of one essay question: "Emerson was a good writer but could he play football?"

Gifted student programs separate students and try to give certain students a huge academic advantage. Are students who possess a desire to learn

but who aren't highly intelligent unworthy of the best education that our state can offer? Who can weigh a person's potential with a series of tests? Apparently our state legislators can.

I would like the university to do a breakdown of its students. I would like to see the relation of college GPAs to high school GPAs and to standardized tests. I know a lot of university students who barely managed to get through high school who now carry GPAs of 3.6 or better. In high school they were made to feel inferior to other students. Despite this message they managed to get into college and excel.

The problem may stem from the fact that all teachers are not paid what they are worth. We as a society rely on a person's desire to teach to overcome the low level of pay. A school can only afford so many educators of superior education, so why not let them mold the minds of the gifted children?

These superior teachers are most beneficial in a setting where learning is hindered. Anyone can take a group of gifted children and allow them to continue learning, but only a gifted teacher can take average students and teach them to enjoy learning.

Our state legislators need to take the money they are planning on dumping into gifted student programs and invest in a gifted teacher program.



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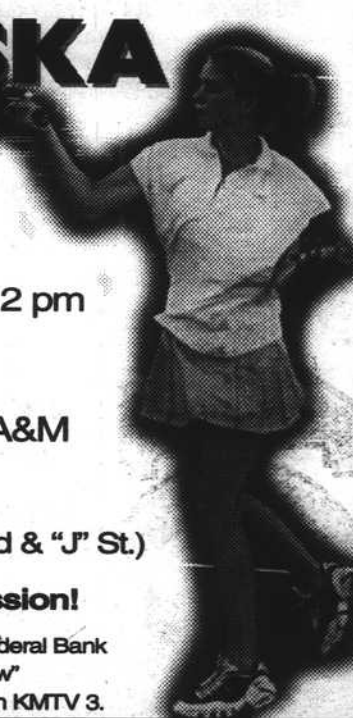
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