



Dr Patricia Edgar

# Give gifted and talented students a push

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“No one has written your destiny for you. Your destiny is in your hands.” There are “no excuses” for underachieving, said President Barack Obama in an address to the NAACP (The National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People) in July this year.

In exhorting all kids to apply themselves and try harder he also called on parents to play their part. “...we can’t tell our kids to do well in school and then fail to support them when they get home. You can’t just contract out parenting... It means pushing our children to set their sights a little bit higher.”

In a debate challenging educational thinkers around the world to improve the education of children generally, there are different points of view about how best to help children succeed. Is it the child’s natural in-born talent that makes the difference (as we have long believed), is it the school they go to, or is it the teacher or the parent who pushes their child to excel?

Barack Obama credits his mother with pushing him, caring about his education, taking no lip, teaching him right from wrong and insisting he use his abilities.

In the same month as President Obama gave his rallying call for education, Alan Milburn,

MP and chairman of the UK Government’s panel on social mobility, delivered his report Unleashing Aspiration. He too spoke of the key role parents can play claiming “Parental interest in a child’s education has four times more influence on attainment by age 16 than does socio-economic background”.

‘Pushy parents’ make a difference in education for all children, but those with high incomes have additional advantage, they can buy extra tuition or move near a good school to guarantee a place.

Parents should push but the school their children go to makes a difference. “A good



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school”, Mr Milburn says, “opens the door to a good career. Generations of low and middle income young people will miss out unless we do more to close the educational attainment gap in schools”. He is an advocate for paying schools according to the progress their pupils make, providing an incentive to drive up standards and improve pupil’s outcomes.

The argument in support of special programs for gifted and talented students begins with a different premise but arrives at the same overall goal of improving schools.

In the UK Young, Gifted and Talented is a national program providing extra educational support for those who excel in one or more academic subjects, like language and mathematics, learn faster than others in their year group or may have high potential but are underachieving. Or they are talented, with practical skills in areas like sport, music, design or creative and performing arts. Skills like leadership, decision-making, and organisation are also taken into account when identifying and providing for gifted and talented children.

The national champion of gifted and talented learners in the UK, John Stannard, sees benefits to schools as a whole from a systematic focus on providing successfully for able, gifted and talented learners: lifting standards and expectations for all; more optimistic and challenging learning and teaching; increased opportunity through curriculum enrichment; positive and creative impact on school climate; increasing parental commitment.

What able children can do, he says, is a good guide to what should be an entitlement for everyone. A curriculum pitched only at the average, he says, is unlikely to serve anyone’s interests well.

Surely the aim should be to devise schools that both challenge the ablest and push the less able to achieve their best. Whether the goal is to develop unfulfilled talent or skills to compete in the modern labour marketplace, good schools for all – staffed with skilled teachers who work in partnership with parents – are needed to educate young people successfully.

If we get the system right we still need to monitor the motivation of the individual child. It is the teacher in the classroom who is best placed to identify talent and motivate unengaged minds in partnership with a pushy parent. But the child is central in this partnership.

My eight-year-old grandson’s parent teacher interview – a process usually undertaken without the child present – underwent a transformation recently with the school encouraging the child to opt-in and express their views. It proved to be a powerful experience for all involved. The teacher learned things about the child she wasn’t aware of. The boy heard his teacher and parents suggest a course of action which gave the agreement more weight in his eyes. He was happy to be included and turned over a new leaf the next day. It demonstrated how powerful a partnership between a teacher and parents with a child could be. ■

*Dr Patricia Edgar is an author, television producer, educator and founding director of the Australian Children’s Television Foundation. Her latest book is **The New Child: In search of smarter grown-ups.***

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