How Missouri Can Serve Its Low-Income Gifted Students

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The Department of Elementary and Secondary Education states that “Missouri school districts are expected to provide programs of instruction suitable for the full range of student ability...” This statement presumably would encompass providing advanced work for students who are ahead of the curve. Yet 14 percent of our gifted students [defined by the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) as students who “exhibit precocious development of mental capacity and learning potential as determined by competent professional evaluation”] were not a part of a gifted program in 2019.

A bill currently circulating in the Missouri Legislature seeks to remedy this. The bill would require districts and charter schools that have three percent or more of their students identified as gifted to establish a state-approved gifted program. Currently, creating a gifted program is entirely voluntary, and there is vague language about a “sufficient number” of gifted students as the threshold for establishing a gifted program. But shouldn't all gifted students receive an education that challenges them?

Education Savings Accounts (ESAs) are another tool that could help gifted students, particularly low-income students. ESAs could provide these students with options they previously couldn't
afford. An ESA is a flexible account with funds that families can use to purchase books, tutoring, online services or other academic programming for their students. With an ESA, students don’t have to rely on their district to meet the three percent threshold outlined in the legislation before they can get support.

In 2019, there were a total of 37,474 gifted students in the state. Of them, just under 1,000 students qualified for the Free and Reduced-Price Lunch (FRPL) program, used as a proxy for low-income status. Using an ESA program to award $1,000 to each low-income gifted student would cost around $1 million, a small portion of the $6.2 billion DESE budget in 2019.

Kids learn at different paces. Shouldn’t our education system reflect that? Isn’t it time for Missouri to provide all gifted students with access to supplemental material so they can receive an education that matches their ability?

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Abigail Burrola graduated from Azusa Pacific University with a bachelor’s degree in political science in 2018.

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