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editorial

Gifted, talented and diverse, too

By The Denver Post

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It's an obvious truth, but it deserves saying: Smart kids come from all demographics.

The move by Denver Public Schools to look at ways of pulling a more diverse group of bright children into highly gifted and talented programs is a wise one that deserves support.

The problem is that traditional ways of screening gifted students undercounts children of modest means and those who aren't native English speakers.

Gifted programs really didn't begin in earnest in this country until the 1970s, so it's understandable if identification methods still are evolving. But DPS has found that its proportion of minority students classified "highly gifted and talented" was significantly out of whack with its demographics.

The district is 76 percent Latino and black, but only 25 percent of students in the highly gifted program are ethnic minorities.

The answer DPS has come up with is to add some flexibility into considering gifted test results and applications. For example, students who speak English as a second language or get free or reduced-price lunches will get a second look for acceptance in the program — even if their test scores might not have been quite high enough to previously qualify for the program.

The art of making the selection process work is to effectively get around the cultural biases inherent in many standardized tests and find those gifted children from diverse backgrounds.

We won't know if the DPS strategy is effective until we can measure the achievement of those admitted under more flexible guidelines.

Are they progressing on par with the other students? Are they moving on to and succeeding in accelerated programs in middle and high school?

While it might take more than a couple of semesters to get an adequate read on their performance, it's important to keep track of them. Those observations can help finetune the gifted and talented admissions policies and perhaps point out ways of identifying and supporting these children.

For those who worry that accepting more students means fewer resources for others, DPS is structured to support the additional load. In short, the more gifted students a school has, the more funding it gets for gifted education.

It is true, however, that some popular magnet programs, such as the Polaris program at Ebert Elementary, already are tough to get into.

The DPS board has committed to opening another highly gifted and talented school, but so far it has not. With this tweaking of standards, now is a good time to make good on that promise.

We're glad to see DPS has taken on the issue of parity in gifted and talented education.

Bright kids of every background deserve an education that challenges them to excel.

Rocky Mountain News

Wednesday, March 5, 2008

'Pharming' a growing fear

Some school districts are seeing 'a scary' increase in the dangerous trend of abusing prescription and over-the-counter pills.

April M. Washington

Seventeen-year-old Rachel Justice struggled to remain calm as she watched a friend go on a binge.

They were at a party last fall, and in a few short hours he downed shots of rum, smoked pot and snorted Adderall, a controlled stimulant used to treat narcolepsy, attention deficit disorder and hyperactivity.

"It was like . . . Oh my god! He was crashing," said Justice, a senior at Rangeview High School. "I left the party, and my three friends called me in a panic. They had no clue what to do. When I came back, he was throwing up and acting strange. I had to call an ambulance. It was scary."

Justice's friend survived his drug and alcohol free-fall. But what he did to himself sheds light on a disturbing and growing trend: abuse of prescription and over-the-counter drugs, particularly by young people.

"We hear stories at our school about kids who will go to parties and dump prescription pills into a container and pick them out at will," said Chris Tabela, an assistant principal at ThunderRidge High School in Highlands Ranch.

"They call it Chex Mix. We continue to hear scary stories of how they're not only taking prescription drugs, but they'll drink alcohol with it."

Widespread problem

The trading and selling of drugs such as Vicodin and OxyContin and over-the-counter medications is called "pharming." The practice is increasing,

creating another danger for students and another concern for school officials everywhere.

"This is a widespread problem," said Larry Borland, director of security for Douglas County Public Schools. "Pharming keeps coming up as a major topic when you talk to security from other school districts."

And it has made headlines locally in recent weeks:

* In February, 11 Castle View High School students were suspected of taking the prescription painkiller oxycodone, a painkiller. The students were hospitalized after showing symptoms of nausea and constricted pupils. The case is under review by the Douglas County district attorney.

* Later last month, a seventh- grader at Castle Rock Middle School allegedly gave three pills believed to be Vicodin, a narcotic painkiller, to another student at the nearby high school, officials said. That case, too, is under review by the DA.

* And just last week, two girls and a boy from Carmody Middle School in Lakewood were charged after police and school officials found four tablets of Dilaudid, prosecutors in Jefferson County said.

The federal government reports that overall youth drug use is down. But prescription drug abuse is a "huge and growing problem," said Jane Maxwell, a researcher with the School of Social Work at the University of Texas and an expert on substance abuse trends.

National media push

The problem is so serious the White House recently launched a national media campaign to educate parents. In his weekly radio address Saturday, President Bush called for tighter controls on Internet sales of controlled substances.

Nationwide, nearly one in five teens, or 4.5 million, report abusing prescription medications that were not prescribed to them, according to 2005 survey cited by the Office of National Drug Control Policy. More than three in five respondents say prescription pain relievers are easy to get from their parents' medicine cabinets.

Alex Sanchez, a spokesman for Denver Public Schools, acknowledges that pharming likely takes place, although the extent is unknown. He said police are notified when a student is caught with drugs.

Aurora Public Schools is not witnessing abuse of prescription drugs inside its schools, spokeswoman Georgia Duran said.

But, she added, "because we have heard a few student anecdotes about weekend activities (involving prescription drugs), we'll begin a discussion about the issue, including if and how we should address it."

Slight upswing seen

Jeffco Public Schools officials said there is a slight upswing of students abusing prescription drugs.

"It's growing in popularity in the teen culture," said spokeswoman Melissa Reeves. "It's easy to do because they simply have to go to their parents' and grandparents' medicine cabinets to get it."

Teens and young adults are experimenting with painkillers and the like because they believe they are safer and not as addictive as street drugs, experts say. Yet, as they point out, the sudden death of Oscar-nominated actor Heath Ledger demonstrates the dangers of prescription drugs.

"They go to these parties and trade off multiple medications, not knowing what they are taking," said Brian Hemstreet, of the University of Colorado at Denver School of Pharmacy. "The danger of that is it can be lethal if they're mixing these drugs with alcohol. They could pass out or overdose on it."

Law enforcement officials and educators say parents and grandparents need to pay close attention to the trend and keep prescription medication locked away from their children.

"These drugs are very powerful," said Scott Storey, district attorney for Jefferson and Gilpin counties. "Young teens are very naive about prescription drugs and have no understanding about the danger they present."

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Parental tips, guidelines

Here are some tips for parents to keep prescription drugs out of the hands of kids.

- * Educate yourself and your children about the risk of misusing prescription medication.
- * Keep prescription drugs locked in a secure place away from children.
- * Keep close track of the quantities of pills and regularly monitor the contents of medicine cabinets.
- * Discard expired and unused pills by burying them deep in the trash.