

Better Support for Gifted Education is Critical to Our Future

By Tom Coyne

The United States continues to face the challenge of reducing the high levels of private and public sector debt we have accumulated in recent years. We have a limited number of options: we can attempt to inflate away the debt, default on our obligations to repay it, impose extended austerity to reduce it, or grow our way out of it. Clearly, the latter is most people's first choice. But how can we increase the rate at which our national and state economies grow?

In the short term, many initiatives have been proposed to accomplish this, such as improving public infrastructure, reducing regulatory burdens, and increasing support for research and entrepreneurs. In the medium-term, however, the potential growth impact of just one initiative dwarfs all others: improving the performance of our public schools (see, for example, *The High Cost of Low Educational Performance*, published by the OECD).

To varying degrees, many well-known recommendations are already being implemented to improve the educational outcomes achieved by the average student, including better teacher preparation, selection, evaluation, and compensation; more rigorous standards and better curriculum; and better use of technology for instruction, feedback, and parental involvement. All of these initiatives merit our continued support. However there is another area where our public schools also need to improve that is just as critical, not just for faster GDP growth, but also for the future success of our individual businesses: the way the Colorado educates our most cognitively gifted students.

Business success, improved productivity and higher GDP growth all require more than just basic proficiency – they also depend on the insights and innovations that are produced by our most talented employees. As Ernest O'Boyle and Herman Aguinis recently showed, these employees make a disproportionate contribution to the performance of many organizations (see their paper, *"The Best and The Rest: Revisiting the Norm of Normality of Individual Performance"*). Tomorrow's most talented employees are today's gifted students. The way we educate them is critical to our economic future.

There are some who object to special treatment for cognitively gifted children, believing that "they will do just fine on their own", or that gifted education programs should be avoided because they are elitist. This could not be further from the truth. Judging from our behavior, Americans clearly do not believe that our most gifted young athletes and artists will do just fine on their own, or that providing special support for their development should be rejected on the grounds that it is elitist. Why is this not also true for our most cognitively gifted children, upon whom our future economic growth and company success disproportionately depend? Athletically, artistically, and cognitively gifted children *all* need extra support to fully develop their exceptional potential. And in many cases, the support these differently talented children require actually has a lot in common. For example, whether they are athletically, artistically, or cognitively gifted, they all need to learn to cope with the emotional pressure of high

expectations, to be resilient and persistent in the face of failure, and to play well on mixed ability teams. But let us all agree – exceptional gifts do not turn into exceptional talent without exceptional coaching and support.

So what should we as parents, citizens, and business leaders demand when it comes to the development of Colorado’s cognitively gifted children, to help realize their potential and make our state more attractive to their families and eventual employers? The minimum list includes (1) comprehensive identification of gifted students, regardless of their social background; (2) provision of challenging academic courses, including acceleration and co-enrollment at our universities, and improved access to these courses for rural students; (3) supportive emotional and social coaching; (4) sufficient teachers with training in gifted education; and (5) inclusion of gifted programs in school and district improvement plans. In my experience, the cost of these initiatives is surprisingly small relative to most school district budgets, and absolutely miniscule in comparison to the potential benefits of improved gifted education programs to the growth of our businesses and economy.

The good news is that many Colorado education leaders are aware of the need for these initiatives, and at both the state and district level some of them are already underway. The bad news is the slow and inconsistent manner (by private sector standards) in which they are often implemented. For example, on the 2010/2011 CSAPs, only 34% of Colorado’s gifted students tested at the “advanced” level in reading, and only 67% in math. Clearly, there is a lot of room for improvement. For this reason, it is imperative that we stress to our elected and appointed officials the critical importance we attach to gifted education, and demand more urgency in addressing this issue. If we hope to grow our way out of the serious debt problems we face today, we neglect the education of our most cognitively gifted students at our peril.

Tom Coyne is a former CEO and CFO who moved with his family from Calgary to Golden in 2010. His children attend public schools, and he serves on the Colorado State Advisory Committee for Gifted Education