

STANFORD UNIVERSITY MEDICAL CENTER

DEPARTMENT OF GENETICS

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Gov. Hunt &  
Merton  
Science  
High School's  
Special Education

October 7, 1977

James B. Hunt, Jr.  
Governor  
State of North Carolina  
Raleigh, North Carolina 27611

Dear Governor Hunt:

Your letter of September 27th opens up some bold new ideas for science education. My own background includes a great debt to Stuyvesant High School in New York City -- perhaps even more from the association with (and competition (sic) of my peer students) than from the faculty. This statement perhaps underestimates their role in setting very high standards for our personal initiatives in self-instruction.

The most problematical point is doubtless the residential aspect of the proposal. The British public schools have of course managed it; but I would be reluctant to insist that 9th and 10th graders be removed from their homes unless this represents a real advantage in enhanced environment and responds to the family's own aspirations.

May I suggest a gradual approach. Start with an experimental high school, with say 25-50 students in each grade, attached to one or more existing university campuses. (There are useful precedents at Columbia University - Teachers College, the University of Chicago, University of Wisconsin - Madison).

A small number of these students might be residential, but with careful attention to a level of supervision appropriate to students likely to be of uneven maturity of judgment vs. intellect. So I would be cautious about housing such students in a college dormitory. I do not think it will be difficult to staff such schools with modest increments to the university budgets for the purpose. While the schools remain small and experimental, they should attract a lot of enthusiasm from the regular faculty. Conversely, the students will have exceptional access to courses in the regular curriculum, to jobs as research assistants, and so forth. There are many special didactic needs for these students; but school laboratory work -- in my opinion -- tends to be a pale shadow of reality outside the university research laboratory, especially for the needs of gifted students.

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successful.

James B. Hunt, Jr.

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From these modest experiments, one could get a much better perspective for the evaluation of your plan. But I am sure such a school should be situated near established centers -- Research Triangle being the obvious option for your state.

Having said all this, I have to remind you that I have been a student in, not a designer of, such programs. Julian C. Stanley is the director, at Johns Hopkins University in the Department of Psychology, of a well-known Study of Mathematically Precocious Youth, and has edited several volumes on mathematical and intellectual talent.

Finally, I would urge a careful distinction between two problems. Gifted children need emotional encouragement and support, high expectations, the competition and competitiveness of comparable fellows and tolerance for their own devices for self-instruction. By the time they reach high school, such students will learn most from guided self-study, least from formal instruction. A larger group of children will profit from carefully directed inspiration, and need help to develop a self-confidence in sciences and mathematics that existing systems tend to quench.

Yours sincerely,

Joshua Lederberg  
Professor of Genetics

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