



Shelby County Schools

Tennessee's largest public school system makes its gifted program more equitable using a universal screening tool from Illuminate Education.

OVERVIEW

District

Shelby County Schools

Location

Memphis, TN

Numbers

Number of students: 113,166

Number of educators: 8,869

Number of schools: 206

Illuminate Education Customer Since

May 2019

About Shelby County Schools

Shelby County Schools is Tennessee's largest public school district and is among the 25 largest public school districts in the United States. It serves a very diverse student population: More than half of its students come from economically disadvantaged families, about 8 percent have limited English proficiency, and 1 percent—or more than 1,000—are homeless.

Despite these challenges, the district has set very ambitious goals that 80 percent of students are college or career ready, 90 percent of seniors graduate on time, and 100 percent of graduates will enroll in a postsecondary opportunity. To reach these goals, the district focuses on five high-leverage areas in particular: early literacy; improvement of postsecondary readiness; developing strong teachers, leaders, and support staff; expanding high-quality school options; and working closely with families and community partners to support its schools.

Bringing Equity to Gifted Education

Shelby County's long-running gifted student program has been in place for more than 50 years. The program, called CLUE (which stands for "Creative Learning in a Unique Environment"), serves students from prekindergarten through high school. It aims to build the talents of every student who is achieving at a high level, and it does this through learning experiences based on characteristics, needs, abilities, and interests rather than on a predetermined curriculum.

Shelby County has a strong focus on equity of access. "When we're screening students for gifted services," says CLUE Supervisor Jennifer Chandler, "we not only look at students in general education; we also look at students who might have a disability and those who are in our English Learner program. We want to make sure that nobody falls through the cracks."

Despite this focus on equity, the district found that white and Asian students were vastly overrepresented in its gifted program in relation to their share of the overall student

population, while Black and Latinx students were underrepresented. In the 2017–18 school year, 32 elementary schools—mostly in low-income neighborhoods—had no students recommended for gifted testing.

This reflects a common national trend. A [2018 study](#) found that Black students accounted for 15 percent of the total student population nationwide but only 10 percent of the students enrolled in gifted programs. Latinx students made up 28 percent of the total student population but only 21 percent of the gifted population. Students from high-income families are seven times more likely to be in gifted programs than other students with similar reading and math scores.

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Disproportionality in gifted education programs means that some students who are deserving of this opportunity are missing out—and [research confirms there are many benefits to participating](#). For instance, students in gifted education programs are more likely to take advanced courses, have higher educational attainment, and experience social benefits as well.

“We had been relying on adults to recommend which students should be tested for inclusion in our gifted programs,” Chandler says. However, many teachers and other adults aren’t trained to recognize traits of giftedness, causing a referral-only process to yield an unreliable and incomplete candidate pool.

To make the screening process truly equitable, it was time for a different approach. District officials realized that universal screening would make the identification process more equitable; using objective data as the first step of screening removes any qualitative data that may be influenced by student behavior, appearance, or background.

The Solution: Universal Screening

The district had tried this before using NWEA's Measures of Academic Progress (MAP). However, the length of the assessment was causing testing fatigue with students, causing some to start answering questions quickly without thinking carefully about their responses. "The high-achieving students were taking much longer to finish their tests," says Chandler. "Even after an hour-long window, we had some students who had to come back to finish their test."

“ We were able to look at the top end of the data to screen for our gifted program without adding another assessment to what the children already had to take. ”

This not only caused frustration with students but also ultimately resulted in data validity issues. "It's really hard to get reliable data when the test is causing burnout," she observes. The district's Response to Instruction & Intervention (RTI²) department was already using [FastBridge](#), a universal screening and progress monitoring solution from Illuminate Education, to identify K-8 students in need of academic intervention. Chandler and her colleagues in the CLUE program discovered that they could use these same screening tools to identify students who might be gifted as well.

"We were able to look at the top end of the data to screen for our gifted program without adding another assessment to what the children already had to take," she says, "and this didn't cost us anything extra, either."

The FastBridge assessments are short, taking only about 20 minutes to complete—long enough to yield reliable data, and short enough to avoid testing fatigue with students. "This

was encouraging for our gifted students, because it took the same amount of time for them to complete as everyone else,” Chandler says. “They weren’t still taking the test while their peers were at recess.”

What’s more, the assessments are norm-referenced based on national norms for grade-level achievement. That’s important, she says, because national norms are highly predictive of a student’s IQ—which is one of the factors in the state’s definition of gifted students.

Positioning Students for Success

Using the FastBridge universal screeners to screen all students for inclusion in the gifted program has given Shelby County leaders valid data upon which to base their decisions about which students should be considered for gifted education—and this has made a tremendous difference. “In one year, we grew the program by nearly 900 students, or about 25 percent,” Chandler says.

Shelby County’s Success, by the Numbers

	Gifted students, August 2019	Gifted students, May 2020	Difference	% Increase
Asian	252	321	+69	27.4%
Black	1,458	1,917	+459	31.5%
Latinx	326	419	+93	28.5%
White	1,192	1,416	+224	18.8%
Other	171	244	+73	42.7%
Total	3,399	4,317	+918	27.0%

In addition, the district increased its number of underrepresented students (Black and Latinx) at a higher rate than the overrepresented students. “That’s very exciting,” she adds, “and it shows that we’re on the right track.”

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Now, every elementary school in the district has students receiving gifted services. “It’s not just about finding those individual kids,” Chandler says. “There’s a ripple effect. You start to see the school differently when you can say, ‘Yes, we serve gifted students in our school.’ It’s a win for more than just those kids. It’s a win for families, for schools, and for the community.”

By using FastBridge to increase the number of students identified as gifted, Shelby County is providing equitable opportunities for everyone. The district is also keeping more students engaged academically—while opening doors for their future.

“With a local enrichment program,” Chandler concludes, “we can expose children to academic vocabulary, academic knowledge, and different ways of thinking critically and creativity that are going to set them up for success.”



To learn more about FastBridge, [schedule a demo.](#)



