
Meeting the Needs of Academically Advanced Students: When School Is Not Enough

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*Parents must make sure their child has
the opportunities to excel at the highest levels*

Academically advanced students have unique and challenging needs. Their unusual ability requires that they have opportunities to expand, grow, and experience that which may be difficult for a public or private school to provide. The burden of insuring that the child is being sufficiently challenged and stretched falls to the parents. But luckily there are many options for parents to explore that can provide remarkable opportunities for their children. This article will examine both the nature of gifted children and what sort of programming is available for them.

First, let us understand about whom we are talking. There are many definitions of gifted students. One of the most widely accepted comes from the U.S. Department of Education (1993):

“Children and youth with outstanding talent who perform or show the potential for performing at remarkably high levels of accomplishment when compared with others of their age, experience, or environment.”

There are a number of important things about this definition. First, it is a performance model, based on students performing at a remarkably high level of accomplishment. This means it is based on achievement, or in most cases school grades or achievement test scores.

Second, however, the definition provides for students who show the potential for performing at remarkably high levels, but have not yet achieved at that level. How would this potential be shown? Most likely it would be through ability test scores, often IQ tests. One of the difficulties of this definition is that it could be capturing overachievers who get excellent grades through hard work, but are not really unusually advanced in their intellectual ability. It also captures the classic underachiever, who has high ability but low achievement.

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Third, this definition is a comparative model; these high performance students are being compared with average students who have the same environment, experience and age. There is no independent standard; it is based on certain students doing much better than the rest of the students.

Finally, the definition speaks of accomplishment, without specifying in what area or areas that accomplishment is taking place. It can be academic, artistic, creative, social, emotional, and athletic. This is making the definition as broad as possible including all areas of endeavor. In general however, most gifted students are outstanding in one particular area. That is they have one unusual strength and passion, be it academics, arts, athletics, social-emotional, or physical. This article is primarily interested in the academic area. Students will have usually one particular academic strength and interest, such as math, writing, science, or history.

Let us take a look at another definition; this is one also from the U.S. Federal Government, but this time from the No Child Left Behind Act of 2002:

“Students, children, or youth who give evidence of high achievement capability in areas such as intellectual, creative, artistic, or leadership capacity, or in specific academic fields, and who need services and activities not ordinarily provided by the school in order to fully develop those capabilities.”

We see the continuing themes of achievement and of capacity; that is achieving at a high level or having the potential or capacity to achieve at a high level. Again we see the broad range of areas in which this achievement can take place. Yet, now we have a very important new element added in. Since No Child Left Behind is a school reform initiative, in this definition the role of the school is now brought in and the notion that the school cannot ordinarily provide the services and activities that these children need is introduced. This suggests that parents are going to have to seek supplemental services outside of the school.

Let us now turn to the issue of programming for gifted students. A good place to start is a definition from the National Association for Gifted Student (2001):

“A coordinated and comprehensive structure of informal and formal services provided on a continuing basis intended to nurture gifted learners. ”

There are a number of important elements in this definition. First is the notion that these services are both coordinated and comprehensive. Being “coordinated” means that the various components are related and connected and are not just a series of activities. For example, a child with outstanding ability and interest in mathematics might, besides what he or she is doing in school, be taking an on-line creative problem-solving course, participating in an after-school parent-led math games student group, and doing an independent study project on great unsolved math problems. These activities all involve math problem solving, an area in which this child has been identified as having great ability and interest.

“Comprehensive” means that the services are broad and complete, involving a variety of settings and formats. The example above illustrates how a supplemental program can be comprehensive. It is important also to note the idea of “structure,” that is these services are established, outlined, and clearly delineated.

Next is the idea that these services are both “informal and formal.” In the example above, there is a mix of both formal and informal programs, ranging from an informal independent study project to a formal on-line course.

Finally, is the notion that these services need to be provided on a continuing basis. Again, in the example above, those activities might last three or four months and when over, the parents will need to find additional activities and programs. One-time programs will not be enough; this is a long-term project lasting many years.

Let us look now at some of the different kinds of programs that are available for gifted students. As I have mentioned, the school often will not be sufficient, but it is important to recognize that students will have most of their educational experiences in school. Public school services for gifted students vary tremendously. There are some very good programs in some school districts and poor or no programs in others. It is important for parents who have their gifted children in public school to meet with school officials and learn about the program. Some districts have outstanding magnet school programs for gifted students, others have specialized schools that concentrate in particular academic areas.

If parents choose to send their gifted children to public school, they need to work closely with the school to insure that the needs of their children are being addressed. One way to do that is to use the special education approach of an Individual Educational Plan (IEP) for each gifted student. This approach is multi-faceted; bringing together a team of educators that includes the parents, the gifted and talented coordinator (if there is one), the classroom teacher, any specialized gifted teachers who are available to provide services, and the school counselor and/or school psychologist. It is helpful to bring the student into these meetings for part of the time. It is important that there is good and recent testing that indicates the particular strengths and weaknesses of the student.

One thing this team will need to appreciate is that most likely the school will not be able to provide everything the child needs. They will have to look outside to supplemental programs. Some districts will even pay for some of these programs, such as an advanced on-line course (usually in math), which will replace the regular math course the child would have taken and which would not have been at a high enough level for the student.

There are many different kinds of supplemental programs. I mentioned some in the example above about a student gifted in math. There are formal after-school, weekend, on-line, and summer programs offered by schools, universities, and educational organizations. There are scholarship, award, and recognition programs for gifted students. A good resource for finding out about formal programs is the new National Society for the Gifted and Talented (www.nsgt.org), a student membership organization that has terrific resources on its web page.

Then there are more informal opportunities run by libraries, community groups, and parent groups. It is important for parents of gifted students to network among themselves, share resources and information, and organize activities for their children. Some schools support such parent groups.


Some parents will choose to send their gifted children to private or independent schools. And while these schools often are better suited to meet the needs of gifted students, there are still some of the same issues that exist with public schools. Questions to ask are to what degree can the school individualize the program to meet the particular needs of

individual students? Can students be accelerated if that is the appropriate solution to a programming need? (This is usually true in math.) How many other gifted students are in the school?

Most private schools have a stronger student body than public schools, and given that, they may feel that the program is strong enough for even academically superior students. This may be true, but it is not always so. Parents should ask their private schools to use the IEP approach that I suggested above for use in the public schools.

Whether the child is in a public or private school, it is important that the parents work closely with the school. The model I suggest is the 3 Cs: Communication, Cooperation, and Collaboration. There should not be a 4th C: Confrontation.

Gifted students need to be identified, recognized, and supported. They need to be provided enriching and challenging opportunities to stretch, grow, and develop their particular strengths and passions. Their social and emotional needs are important, in particular they need to spend time with their true peers, other gifted students who share their interests, abilities, and excitements about learning. Parents need to assume the majority of responsibility for insuring that these needs are met. As I have said throughout this article, schools may not always be able to fulfill all of the needs of gifted students. Usually there will be the need for the parents to find supplemental programs for their children.

It is critical that these students get these services, for we know that if they are not sufficiently challenged and engaged in learning, they can easily become bored and turned off by school. Gifted students are at risk and can get disillusioned and not achieve at the levels that their ability would predict. They have tremendous potential, but that potential can be lost and they can fail to realize the promise their gifts suggest. Parents must make sure that their child has the opportunities to excel at the highest levels. 

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