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Resources & ideas for parents & educators of gifted children

Talent

Center for
Talent
DEVELOPMENT®
School of Education
& Social Policy

DIRECTOR'S MESSAGE

Finding the Right Path for Your Gifted Child

You've got a child who's bright and you're not sure what is the best educational program for him or her nor where or how to get it. This is a situation faced by many parents of academically talented students. Can you work with your local public school to craft a plan that fits your child's particular needs? Should you investigate a private school, consider supplemental programs or opt to homeschool? Maybe a



combination of all of the above is appropriate? In the winter issue of *Talent* we focused on various programmatic options for bright students from three educators' points of

view. For this Spring issue, we look at this problem from the perspectives of parents.

We asked three parents of gifted kids to tell us very specifically how they went about choosing a path that worked for their particular child. Among them, they have seven gifted children – each of whom has a unique profile of talents and special needs. These students required very different approaches to developing their talents. Here, these three parents share not only the journey and the outcomes but also the lessons they learned along the way – in the hopes that, perhaps, they can save you a step or two or help you avoid some undesirable detours.

Paula Abeguski-Kubilus

WHO SAID THIS?

“All who have meditated on the art of governing mankind have been convinced that the fate of empires depends on the education of youth.”

Answer at <http://www.ctd.northwestern.edu/resources/newslettersolutions>

A Long, Winding Road

Parents Describe the Journey toward Appropriate Academic Settings for Gifted Kids

Ask parents how they found the right educational setting for their gifted children, and you will likely hear heavy sighs, long stories and wisdom acquired through sacrifice and dedication.

The road toward the right academic setting for a gifted child can be long, winding and sometimes discouraging, but it is critical to traverse. “If a child is placed in an incorrect academic setting, he or she will tend to hide, socially or emotionally. It's very hard for them to be themselves and to develop naturally,” says Paula Brennan, parent of three gifted children and former Michigan Alliance for Gifted Education board member. “They can also mislearn material by adding imaginary complexity to simple concepts or information presented too slowly.”

According to the National Association for Gifted Children's most recent *State of the Nation in Gifted Education* summary, the lack of accountability in states without gifted education mandates and funding disparity across districts – with or without state mandates – can make it more difficult for some parents than others to find a sufficiently challenging school environment. Yet without an appropriate level of rigor, a gifted student may not only fall short of his/her potential, but may drop out of school entirely. The report claims that an insufficient national commitment to gifted and talented children, “if left unchecked, will ultimately leave our nation ill-prepared to field the next generation of innovators and to compete in the global economy.”

The stakes are high, and parents of gifted children know it. That is why many of them spend so much time and energy

researching gifted education options that, in the end, they are experts themselves. Center for Talent Development (CTD) talked with three such parents – mothers who have quit their jobs to research schools or homeschool their children, served as leaders within gifted education organizations and spent countless hours as gifted education advocates. Among them, they have seven gifted children whose learning routes have included time in public school, private school and homeschool.

Travel Tips

As with any journey, these parents have learned many lessons along the way. Here are a few of their most valuable tips for choosing a school.

- “Look at your child individually and find out what his or her academic learning needs are,” says Brennan. “In my experience (and the literature seems to bear this out), if you meet children's academic needs and allow them to be with academic peers, their social and emotional needs will also be met.”



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● “Remember that schools are financial institutions,” adds Jeanne Doyle, mother to a gifted 14-year-old who will start a pre-med curriculum in bioengineering this summer, while still enrolled in a private high school. “Initially, I think I turned administrators off to helping me because I was so frustrated,” she says. “I walked in and said, ‘Look at these scores. What do I do?’ Eventually, I took a step back and realized I had to learn how to talk to administrators, who, understandably, think that their school meets the needs of its students. If spending money on your child isn’t in the best interest of the school, though, they’re not going to do it. As soon as I understood that, my questions became, ‘What do you have in place already? Do you have other kids like my child? What accommodations are you willing to make?’ Adopting this different attitude and approach led to more fruitful conversations and outcomes.”

● “Try, try and try again,” says Lynn Pomerleau, mom to two gifted children. “Sometimes the answer for our kids is a combination of many types of learning – school, home-school, community college and online courses. Be informed, find out what works for others and keep in touch with your kids. Listen to them. They will tell you what does and doesn’t work. You are their parent and advocate, and you know them best. Early college challenges my son, for example, but isn’t necessarily right for my daughter. She is more encouraged when we can change assignments into some sort of creative project.”

● “Don’t forget that gifted kids are children, too,” adds Pomerleau. “They will act out and have trouble solving their own problems. In spite of their gifted attributes, they also have challenges aligned with their age group or they may have academic deficiencies. In those areas where they are not excelling, guide and assist them. Often, gifted kids feel they don’t fit anywhere. Help them to celebrate their accomplishments and improve their self worth.”

The Importance of a GPS

All three parents talked about various resources that served as directional guides, helping them discover shortcuts and navigate around roadblocks.

Books

For Doyle, Karen Rogers’ book, *Reforming Gifted Education: Matching the Program to the Child*, helped involve her younger son in the school choice process, which she says was absolutely essential. “All I knew at first was that he didn’t like school. Before reading this book, getting him to explain specifically *what* he didn’t like was challenging,” Doyle says.

Gifted Professionals

Brennan says that Carol McCarthy, former President of the Board of Directors for the Michigan Alliance for Gifted Education, was very helpful. “She was doing a lot of studies about the Northwestern University Midwest Academic Talent Search (NUMATS),” says Brennan, “and she taught me to trust NUMATS recommendations regarding my children’s needs and the education options that would fit those needs.”

“The best thing I ever did was work with an educational services consulting organization,” says Doyle. “They assess the different social skills a child should have at a given age while simultaneously administering an IQ test and an academic test. I received a grade-level equivalent by year and by month per subject. When I had that, along with a psychologist’s recommendations on my child’s needs, then I could go look for a school.”

Fellow Parents of Gifted Children

All three parents mentioned the benefit of hearing from other parents of gifted children. “I had a friend help me get started with all this,” says Doyle. “She introduced me to CTD when my son was in grade 2.”

Pomerleau, too, says it was a class for parents of gifted children that changed the course of her children’s education. After hearing a public school’s assessment that her son had “no signs of giftedness; he just needs to learn to sit still” and a Montessori school’s recommendation that he repeat kindergarten, connecting with other parents of gifted children gave Pomerleau the con-



fidence and motivation she needed to seek out alternatives.

Finding Fit: A Five-Step Route

The following route toward an appropriate academic setting for a gifted child emerged from information gathered from the three parents interviewed.

1. Get to know your child and his/her learning needs.

- Parents often find it helpful to have their children professionally assessed, and many organizations simultaneously provide guidance on educational options. Doyle, for instance, says, “The NUMATS counselors were helpful and supportive in assisting me with course selections.”
- Another approach is to keep a binder of projects that your children do in their free time. The binder will become helpful documentation of their talents.
- Observe environments in which your child thrives. Parents typically know when a child needs a more structured or a kinetic environment. Do they need to get up and move? There’s a creative component, too. Some environments may not be very accepting of a child’s different viewpoint or contribution, while other environments might welcome it.

2. Assess your academic options.

- Research school options online. Make sure your child meets a school’s entrance requirements before you call. For public schools, look at the percentage of students exceeding state requirements and the courses offered. With private schools, look for the percentage of students participating in advanced courses and programs.
- Contact the principal, academic director or admissions director, and share your child’s profile. See “Questions Parents of Gifted Children Should Ask Schools,” in the resources section to the right to help assess the fit between the school and your child’s needs.





- Attend an open house, and talk with the teachers. Open the books on display or ask to see the classroom's books. Where do the books fall in relation to what your child is naturally doing? If there is incongruence, show the teacher your binder (see #1) and ask, "How would you handle a child who is doing this?" The interaction between students and teachers can either motivate or discourage a child to reach his/her full potential.

3. Make a decision, involving your child throughout the process.

- "This is easier to do with gifted children because their reasoning is advanced and they can make decisions that their age-level peers cannot," says Doyle. "At age 10, my younger son's thoughts were integral to our decision to homeschool. He recognized that online courses from CTD and the Education Program for Gifted Youth were more fulfilling and motivating than his public school curriculum; he wanted less repetition and more time for questions and accelerated critical thinking," she says.

4. Evaluate fit regularly.

- Hang onto your binder (see #1) with

Resources

Finding a School for Your Child

<http://nagc.org/index.aspx?id=206&terms=school+choice>
NAGC offers five tips for identifying the best school for your child.

Is Your School Using Best Practices for Instruction?

<http://www.ctd.northwestern.edu/resources/displayArticle/?id=9>

CTD Director Paula Olszewski-Kubilius, PhD, describes which practices, out of the many promoted as beneficial, have "proven" effectiveness for the advanced student.

Questions Parents of Gifted Children Should Ask Schools

<http://nagc.org/index.aspx?id=1116>

In an article from the *Parenting for High Potential* archives, Dr. James Gallagher details seven key questions and describes what to look for in a school's answers.

Choosing the Right School for Your Gifted Child

http://www.dukegiftedletter.com/articles/vol6no1_so.html
This article from the Duke Talent Identification Program also lists must-ask questions for schools and the answers to be sought, as well as tips for filling gaps when students must attend a school that doesn't fit their needs.

Competencies Needed by Teachers of Gifted & Talented Students

<http://nagc.org/index.aspx?id=385>

In a policy statement, NAGC outlines five competencies that teachers need to provide appropriate learning experiences for gifted students.

the writing, math and reading they do at home, and note any discrepancy between their performance at school and at home.

- Know that gifted students may want/need supplemental courses even if they are in a good school setting. Doyle, for example, found an all-inclusive school for her son, but "even that isn't enough," she says. "The more I give him, the more he wants. At nine years old, for example, he wanted to take a pottery course. By the time he was 11, he could throw pottery on a wheel, sculpt and use all of the facilities in an adult pottery center. Now he takes a pottery class that allows him to do whatever he wants to do."

5. Continue to be a gifted education advocate.

- Consider joining or starting a local support organization for parents of gifted children and/or your state gifted education association. Your participation can make the journey toward an appropriate school setting easier for other parents and can make your own experience more meaningful.

The Road Ahead

While it is important to check in with kids regularly even after finding a good fit with a particular school, parents at the beginning of this journey can take heart that their hard work will pay off. "Now, I do nothing at all," says Doyle. "What a transition from spending every second of my day researching and reading and trying to help! Not only is everything in place for this year, we have a long-term plan, as well. We know the level my son is at currently and what that means two and five years down the road. Some schools – even gifted ones – were not prepared to plan ahead this way."

For some parents, such as

Brennan, the process of finding the right school sparks a passion for gifted education that continues even after children are grown. "I have a dream," says Brennan. "I think our school systems are tied too closely to age. It's a box that we need to make into

a rectangle. We need to set up schools so that it's not such a cultural oddity for a student in grade 8 to learn with students in grade 9 or 10."

Brennan recommends revisiting the idea of whole-grade acceleration. "When grade-skipping was done in the '60s," she says, "we tended to choose students who sat in the front row and always had their hand up – students

already performing at their maximum ability. We were not choosing the students sitting in the middle or back of the classroom doodling, not turning in homework but performing well on tests. We were not asking the right questions, and we declared whole grade acceleration as a failure."

Brennan adds, "Now that we have a tool like the Iowa Acceleration Scale (<http://www.accelerationinstitute.org/Resources/IAS.aspx>), which has been shown to be reliable and valid in predicting the ability of select students to benefit from whole-grade acceleration, I wish we would use it.

Through a multidisciplinary approach that includes parents, school educators and psychologists, the Iowa Acceleration Scale helps assess academic, social and emotional readiness for grade skipping. Using it would allow us to loosen the age-based academic systems we currently have. Let's keep grades by age but make the walls less rigid."

Whether planning ahead for their own or other gifted students, parents of gifted kids rarely rest after their own school decision journey is through. All the parents interviewed now share the lessons they've learned with others. The collective voice of these parents and others like them can increase gifted program options and the efficacy of existing options, making the road toward the "right" school just a little shorter and easier to travel. ●



NEWS, DATES & OTHER IMPORTANT CTD INFORMATION

Have fun this summer! And learn a lot, too. Three-week **Summer Program** Session 1 starts on June 26, 2011. Session 2 begins on July 17, 2011. *New This Year!* Afternoon Leapfrog courses and expanded all-day offerings in Chicago, Naperville and Palatine; and a pre-session, four-day “week” of favorites at the Skokie site. Specifics including course descriptions, dates for all Summer Programs, and online registration are available on the CTD web site.

Civic Leadership Institute’s three-week summer service-learning program for high school students is held on top college campuses in Chicago, Baltimore and San Francisco. Through academics, hands-on service, and dynamic speakers, students develop the knowledge and leadership skills to make a positive impact on the world.

Gifted LearningLinks offers online courses for students in grades K through 12. Family Program (K through grade 2) begins on June 15 with Backyard Explorers. Nine-week enrichment courses start June 15 (grades 3 through 8). One- and two-semester honors courses (grades 6 through 12) begin on the 15th of every month as do AP® courses (grades 9 through 12). The Accelerated

Summer Option offers students the opportunity to complete a year’s worth of honors or AP coursework in 9 weeks.

Saturday Enrichment Program Fall session starts on October 1 in Evanston, Naperville, Palatine, and Chicago, Illinois.

Accelerated Weekend Experience programs for students in grades 5 through 8 are taking place in several locations in and out of Illinois this spring and summer.

Northwestern University’s Midwest Academic Talent Search (NUMATS), is a great way to “jump start” the academic talent development of gifted students in grades 3 through 9 by enabling them to take EXPLORE, ACT and SAT years ahead of most other students. Learn more about NUMATS by listening to recorded webinars and viewing one of the narrated PowerPoints. ●

*For more information on any of these programs or offerings, go to the CTD web site, www.ctd.northwestern.edu, write us an e-mail at ctd@northwestern.edu or call us at 847/491-3782. Find us on Facebook: www.facebook.com/ctdatnu. Read our blog, *Talent Talk*, at ctdblog.northwestern.edu*