



## Director's Message

Usually in these director's letters, I discuss the articles in the issue. Even though I'm not taking that approach this time, I encourage you to read

them. Tracy Cross does a masterful job discussing some of the issues that can trouble gifted students. And our student profile this month "Why Take Above-Grade-Level Tests?" portrays a truly extraordinary youngster who has benefited both from participating in the Midwest Academic Talent Search (MATS) testing program and signing up for courses from each of Center for Talent Development's three academic programs - Summer, Saturday and Gifted LearningLinks (GLL). Although Julie Xie liked her online course, she had some ideas for improving the format. And, we discovered when we surveyed the other GLL students, Xie wasn't the only one who wanted to see some changes. So we made some. You can read more about CTD's new and improved online programs by visiting our Web site [www.ctd.northwestern.edu](http://www.ctd.northwestern.edu). But I do want to mention the highlights: First, students will participate in a week-long orientation session so when classes start, they can spend their time learning course material rather than technology. Second, students in grades 3 - 8 who sign up for our enrichment courses will have much more interaction with other students (if they choose) through additional group discussions via text and video. And we've dramatically increased the number of "start dates" for students choosing to take our Advanced Placement or Honors classes; they can begin a course on the 15th of any month - from September 2008 through August 2009. So enjoy this edition of *Talent*, and check out the new Gifted LearningLinks program.

*Paula Okazaki-Kubilus*

## Helping Adolescents Cope with the Issues of the Day

**Center for Talent Development (CTD):** In your research you have identified a number of contemporary issues that gifted adolescents face. Please describe a few of these issues.

*Tracy Cross:* Unfortunately, the list is very long and seems to get longer almost by the day!

Certainly, one issue would be the recognition of AIDS, of HIV in general. A second would be growing up in a time of an unpopular war and a third is going through middle and high school during a period of US history in which there has been - and continues to be - a discussion of torture. A fourth would be the state of international politics. There's a sort of undercurrent of an international threat to the US now. More recent issues include a phenomenon that's closer to home - financial burdens. Simple things - from eating to heating a house - seem to be threatened.

Cyber-bullying is another recent issue; it seems to be even more pernicious. The bully has become anonymous. He or she can tarnish a person's reputation for quite some time before the person even knows it's happening. What makes matters even worse is that technology is attractive to children - they are immersed in this world and they really can't not use it without being called a Luddite. And despite what we adults try to do to protect them, when it comes to technology and setting parental controls, most adolescents can largely undo anything that we adults can implement.

**CTD: How do these issues relate directly to gifted students?**

*Cross:* We haven't completely figured that out. The majority of these issues are not

ones that most adults had to deal with when they were growing up; that's one reason we haven't thought of all of the implications that issues such as these are having - and will have - on gifted students.

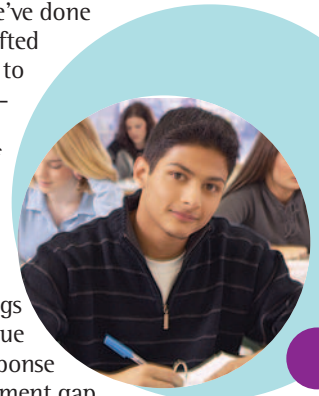
The situation is even further complicated for gifted students because the lion's share of gifted students are not living in communities where giftedness is even valued. In fact, resources these days are being targeted to the lowest-performing kids. So gifted students are going to schools in what's basically an anti-intellectual environment. So the kids are getting mixed messages when it comes to academics. We've done studies and gifted students tend to describe themselves as average instead of advantaged.

Not being gifted is often a good thing.

Which brings up another issue - society's response to the achievement gap. Right now the emphasis is on bringing up the performance of the lowest performing students; there's no advantage being given to the above average. The lower performing kids are being defined as having special education needs. Don't gifted students also have special educational needs?

**CTD: How do gifted students internalize these issues? How do these issues impact them?**

*Cross:* There's evidence that a reasonable proportion of gifted kids - I don't know  
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## WHO SAID THIS?

“It is important that students bring a certain ragamuffin, barefoot irreverence to their studies; they are not here to worship what is known, but to question it.”

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

# Helping Adolescents

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the exact percentage – have “existential angst” or moral concerns – about many of the issues that I have mentioned such as torture, for example. Because most gifted children seem to have a capacity to empathize with and appreciate the implications and ramifications of these issues more than the general population, these issues tend to affect gifted children more than they affect others. This often results in high levels of anxiety in a gifted child.

To complicate the issue even more, we don't teach sociologists and psychologists how to deal effectively with gifted students. That means that we're twice unable to help.

## **CTD: Are there signs that parents and educators should look for that might help them determine if a child might be employing negative coping strategies?**

*Cross:* It can be very difficult for parents to identify negative behaviors; often it's difficult for people with training. When a child is really young – say between the ages of four and eight – you can see displays of their frustration but you can't always tell if they're a reaction to the moment or if it's something more serious. You have the same question with older kids, too. It's really only about the time a child reaches adolescence that parents can distinguish negative coping behaviors from other less destructive behaviors.

One specific sign is withdrawal – pulling back from the environment. Oftentimes gifted students are asked to do things that aren't meaningful or valuable. Sometimes they feel unappreciated and unaccepted. Many gifted children deal with situations like this by pulling away from the situations – they sit quietly and don't participate. Adults use alcohol and drugs to pull away, to numb themselves. There's no reason to think that gifted kids

don't employ similar coping behaviors.

Another sign of negative coping behaviors is really the reverse of withdrawing – thrill seeking.

A third is cutting. It's been around for a while but the number of incidents seems to be growing. People who cut do it to alleviate stress, to give themselves the feeling of regaining control.

We are living in a country that does not embrace giftedness. So negative coping strategies are very prevalent.

## **CTD: Are there other external factors that impact gifted children?**

*Cross:* Families with more than one gifted child face another unusual situation – dealing with different forms of coping behaviors. What was perhaps “normal” for one child may be negative for another. How does a parent know the difference?

The context in which a gifted student is raised can also have a profound impact on the child. Whether a gifted child happens to be in rural Indiana or downtown Chicago can make a really big difference. So all these factors – families, location and schools – help create different kinds of coping behaviors in gifted students. For, example, in a school setting where sports are touted and academics are not, then it is common to see gifted students try to blend in with the general population. This can be accomplished by dressing and acting in the same manner as the general

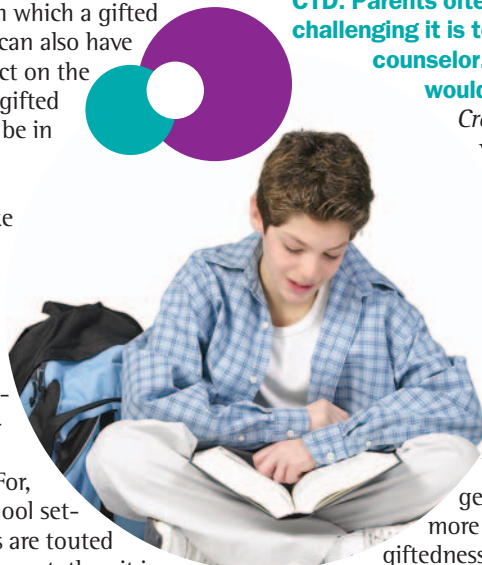
population of students. A more subtle, and pernicious form of coping is trying to disidentify from being thought of as gifted. This is done by spending time with others who engage in behaviors resulting in students learning less and not pursuing their passions.

## **CTD: If a student seems to be struggling with his/her sense of self, what steps should parents take?**

*Cross:* They should always seek help. I recommend proactive counseling – and early and often! Parents should not wait until things get really bad. Now, finding the right counselor can be difficult but it's essential. Parents should certainly be part of the treatment but they should not be the person who initiates the intervention. They just don't have the training.

## **CTD: Parents often tell us how challenging it is to find a good counselor. What resources would you recommend?**

*Cross:* Well, I had some very negative things to say about the Internet when I was discussing cyber-bullying earlier. But one of the positives is that all of us interested in giftedness have an opportunity to network like never before. And the field is getting larger; more and more people are interested in giftedness and this is a good thing. Most states have gifted organizations and listservs. Parents can post questions and hear from others who are struggling with the same issues. Of course there are organizations such as the



Dr. Tracy L. Cross, the George and Frances Ball Distinguished Professor of Gifted Studies, is the Associate Dean for Graduate Studies, Research, and Assessment for Teachers College at Ball State University (BSU). For nine years he served BSU as the Executive Director of the Indiana Academy for Science, Mathematics and Humanities, a

public residential school for academically gifted adolescents. He received his graduate degrees in Educational Psychology from the University of Tennessee. Dr. Cross has published 100+ articles, columns, and book chapters, a co-authored textbook “Being Gifted in School: An Introduction to Development, Guidance and Teaching,” and a supplemental book entitled “On the Social and Emotional Lives of Gifted Children.” He is

the editor of the *Journal for the Education of the Gifted* and editor emeritus of the *Roeper Review*, *Gifted Child Quarterly*, *Journal of Secondary Gifted Education*, *Research Briefs* and others. He served as president of The Association for the Gifted of the Council for Exceptional Children and the Executive Committee and the Board of National Association for Gifted Children.

## Student Profile



National Association of Gifted Children and the Davidson Institute, too.

### CTD: How about books that parents could use as resources?

*Cross:* That's more difficult to answer. Much of the information that's available on giftedness is researched-based and not written specifically for parents. I wrote a little book, which is a compilation of columns I'd written for the *Gifted Child Today*, but they're just short pieces on different aspects of gifted education. They don't really fill the need that you are describing. Your question is a good one. We have bits and pieces but nothing that's really comprehensive, that provides what parents need. That's actually one reason that I present interest sessions. Keynote addresses tend to be too broad to satisfy the needs of parents. They want very specific information.

### CTD: What steps would you suggest that parents take that will help gifted children be more self confident, to develop positive coping skills?

*Cross:* Parents need to make sure that their children – gifted or not – know that they are valuable to themselves and to their families because of who they are. Period. A lot of parents seem to want to change their children, make their introverted kids more extroverted. One, that makes the kid feel as though s/he is not acceptable as s/he is. And two, it's like turning a left-handed person into a right-handed one. It just goes against the basic nature of the person.

I also hope parents can encourage their gifted children to take risks with the understanding that their occasional failure can certainly be tolerated – by the family and the student.

And lastly, I think it's critical for gifted children to have the opportunity to be around other gifted children. When they're in middle school in particular, I think it's really important for a gifted student to go to some kind of residential summer program. When gifted students go away, not only are they among other kids like themselves, but it allows them to try on different hats in a safe environment, to become their own person. When they are surrounded with other gifted kids, they are fully accepted. That can have a very powerful impact on a gifted student. ●

Julia's Xie's Mom didn't tell her she had signed up her daughter for the EXPLORE test until just a few days before her child was scheduled to take this above-grade-level test through the Midwest Academic Talent Search (MATS) at Northwestern University's Center for Talent Development (CTD). "I think my Mom didn't want me to be scared," says Julia. "She just said there would be some things on the test that I didn't know and that I shouldn't worry about it. She said that I should do as well as I could, that they wanted to know how much I knew about things."

Julia wasn't scared when she got to the testing site – even though she was one of the youngest in the room. "The other kids weren't that much older," she comments. "I just didn't want to do bad on the test." She could do most of the math problems, she explains, though on some of the other parts of the test she admits she said to herself, "Wow! How do you do this?"

Julia concedes that taking the ACT, which she did a year later in 2007, was a bit more daunting. "Everybody was really tall. They were all high schoolers and completely different." She also says that the ACT was a lot harder – which well it should have been since Julia was only in the sixth grade at that time and the test is designed for high school students. But that, of course, is one of the primary reasons students take a MATS test – by taking a test that's above grade level, students and their families get a better read on the child's true potential. This information is very useful in planning academic paths, providing data when lobbying schools for advanced courses and, equally important, the student gets practice on the test, making it a more familiar experience for when s/he takes the tests and the scores actually count. But that also means that the student won't know all the answers – a point that parents and educators should emphasize with students as did Julia's parents.

To give her experience in all the different college entrance exams, Julia's parents signed her up to take the SAT in January, 2008, which Julia said she thought was easier than the ACT. Part of the reason was that Julia prepared for this test by practicing on the questions in a SAT preparation book that her mother bought.

But Julia hasn't just taken above-grade-level testing programs with Center for Talent Development. Her scores have qualified her for a variety of programs

targeting academically talented students. For example, she has participated in CTD's online distance-learning program, Gifted LearningLinks, the Saturday Enrichment classes (Julia lives close to Evanston, Illinois, CTD's home base) and the Summer Program. She particularly likes the Summer Program; her favorite class to date was Creative Writing – which she took last summer. "I wrote a memoir about the time we were on vacation in Atlanta and my Mom got her purse stolen." Julia attends the Summer Program with a friend. They both like it, Julia says, "because it's not all studying. It's also fun. And we get to stay in the dorms."

But Julia has also found the English Vocabulary classes she has taken with Michael Clay Thompson through CTD's distance learning program to be very helpful in her test-taking endeavors. "I'm not all that good at vocabulary," Julia says, "and those classes make you know a lot more words. I just look at them and break them down to the stems and figure out what they mean." But Julia says that if all else is equal, she'd rather take a class in person than sitting at a computer, though she says Michael is "very funny."

Overall, Julia is pleased with her Center for Talent Development experiences. "My school doesn't have a gifted program," says Julia, "and I find the work to be pretty easy. So the CTD testing and the classes have probably made me even more confident in what I can do. ●

## FUN & GAMES

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

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## NEWS, DATES & OTHER IMPORTANT CTD INFORMATION

### NUMATS DVD Available!

Need a visual aid for a parent meeting? Just want to know more about Northwestern University's Midwest Academic Talent Search (NUMATS)? CTD has a DVD that explains the entire NUMATS process and its benefits. All your questions will be answered in 15 minutes via interviews with parents, students, gifted coordinators and program administrators. Want a copy? Send your contact information to [ctd@northwestern.edu](mailto:ctd@northwestern.edu), write NUMATS DVD in the subject line and we'll put one in the mail to you — free of charge.

### Great Programs at CTD

Sign up for Northwestern University's Midwest Academic Talent Search (NUMATS), a program that offers above-level tests, EXPLORE, ACT or SAT, to students in grades 3 to 9 several years ahead of schedule. Online registration begins in September.

Gifted LearningLinks Enrichment classes for students in grades PreK to 8 start on September 15th. AP® and Honors classes start on the 15th of every month begin-

ning in September. New format fosters even more interaction among participants in each class.

**Saturday Enrichment Program** Fall session starts on October 4, 2008

### Opportunities for Teachers

If you're a teacher of students in grades 2 through 8, sign up for our **fall conference** designed specifically for you. More details on the CTD Web site.

Create a challenging learning environment for a wide range of student abilities by completing a **Gifted Master's Degree OR Advanced Teaching Certificate** program at Northwestern University's School of Education & Social Policy. Check out [www.sesp.northwestern.edu/msed](http://www.sesp.northwestern.edu/msed) for more information or call 847/467-1458.

**Gifted Institute** is July 28 to August 5.

*For more information on any of these programs or offerings, go to the CTD Web site, [www.ctd.northwestern.edu](http://www.ctd.northwestern.edu), write us an e-mail at [ctd@northwestern.edu](mailto:ctd@northwestern.edu) or call us at 847/491-3782. ●*