

Dedication

This book is dedicated to the thousands of parents of gifted I have worked with over the past twenty years. I thank you for always keeping me on my toes and teaching me what it means to engage with you. I could not have written this book without you.

Engaging Parents of Gifted Children

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- To me it is very important that parents advocate for their gifted child because gifted children can be introverted and would keep everything "bottled up" for fear of being seen as annoying. I remember when Abby was in 4th grade I had a disagreement with her teacher, because Abby didn't understand something that happened in class and she got dismissed when she tried to ask. She was really confused and upset. I reached out to the teacher to explain but she did not like it and said that Abby could advocate for herself. My response to her was that Abby might be gifted, but she was still a 9 year-old child.

parent Rama Sow

Introduction – Why parents of gifted are such advocates for their child

There is a joke in gifted education that goes like this:

The good news about parents of gifted is they are really involved.

And the bad news about parents of gifted is they are really involved.

There are parents who are involved in their child's life no matter what their ability might be.

However, the parents of gifted children are a different breed. They tend to be more involved as a whole than the average bear. If they believe their child is not being challenged, they might call. If their child is not having his social/emotional needs met, they might call. If they feel their child is missing out on an opportunity, they might call. Why are they so involved? There are a few reasons for this:

- 1) Parents of gifted students have to hear the complaints from their child how he is bored and not challenged. How many alarm bells are tripped when your child says they want to be challenged or given more difficult work but are not? It is sort of like when your child acts sick during the school year. In the back of your mind you might suspect your child is simply trying to get out of going to school. But if they complain about feeling unwell in the summer, you know it is something serious. Similarly, children complain about how much work school can be, how hard it is, or learning about certain topics can be boring. You always take these with a grain of salt. When your child is complaining about the converse, such as school is too easy, they cover

material your child already knows, or the class is moving so slow it is almost painful for your child, then it is serious because your child is essentially telling you he wants to learn more at school but are not being provided with the opportunity.

- 2) Their involvement in their child's life might be part of the reason their child is gifted. The outside learning experiences of children who become identified as gifted are usually more robust than an average child. If the parent reads to the child every night, takes her on trips to the art museum, or visits historic places for vacations, all of these experiences are going to give the child an advantage over others. In fact, these outside learning experiences are many times the reason why these children stand out from your average student. There also might be high expectations at home that provide the drive for this student to push herself. Because the parent is so involved, this has a positive effect on the achievement of the child because she realizes someone at home cares about what she is doing academically. While this is not true for all gifted children, it is true for many of them.
- 3) Gifted students typically do not get a lot of attention from school districts. There are two things that will draw the attention of the teacher more than anything else. One is behavior. If a child throws a fit or acts out, the teacher is certainly going to pay attention to this and quell the situation. Or if the child is struggling academically, the teacher is going to provide more of her attention to make sure the student is moving along with the rest of the class. The gifted child on the other hand is often times the compliant child. He is not misbehaving nor is he having trouble with his schoolwork. Because he is able to keep up on his own, the teacher sort of leaves him to himself and deals with the more pertinent issues of behavior or intervention. School districts as a whole do this as well. There are federal laws that require districts to provide services for students considered to be learning disabled. Thus, every one of these children have an individualized education plan (IEP) which by law must be followed. Gifted however has no such federal laws. Each state decides for itself how or if it is going to provide services for gifted children. Because of the law, districts pay a lot of attention to these lower ability students and devote many dollars to their education,

but may overlook the special needs of the high ability students. Some districts may not even provide any services for high ability students. In some cases, the only way gifted students are going to get any sort of attention or funding is because the parents have voiced their displeasure with the way these students are being treated. In education, many times the squeaky wheel gets the grease so if enough parents complain or call for action, it might compel the district to do something about it.

- 4) These parents more than likely are gifted themselves and know what school can be like for those who do not receive services. For some reason, parents project their own experiences in school onto their children. Even though there have been major advances in technology and learning strategies, these parents still wonder why we are not teaching cursive anymore or why their child does not bring home a textbook. Usually if a child is gifted, one or both of the parents are as well. Because of this, they bring their own experiences of what school was like for them being gifted. They might remember being bored in class themselves or not being given opportunities to show how academically gifted they were. This frustration carries over to their own child who they may see at home doing amazing and creative activities, and yet when he goes to school he is taking a major step back, having to learn the basics of things he has shown mastery of for years. This is not only their child's frustration but their own as well which fuels their wanting to make sure their own child's school experience is different. In addition, a trait that runs prevalent amongst gifted is a strong sense of fairness. If a parent who is gifted feels their gifted child is being treated unfairly, this will really bother them.
- 5) Who would not want what is best for their child? As parents, we spend our entire adult lives trying to provide what is best for our children. The measure of our worth of a parent can often times be tied to the accomplishments of our children, not our own. Because of this we want to ensure our children get every opportunity that is afforded to them. For the gifted parent this includes school. They want to ensure that their child is getting the best education possible. If this is not happening, they

will do everything they can to make sure it does. After all, if you cannot be an advocate for your own child, who can you be an advocate for?

Although at times it does not seem like it, you as the teacher and they as the parent both want what is best for their child. This means you are on the same team fighting the same fight. And yet there are many times when teacher and parent find themselves at odds with one another.

It is very important as the teacher that you realize no matter how unreasonable a parent seems, no matter how demanding, or how much extra work this parent's requests seem to be making for you, they are doing so for the benefit of their child, not to the detriment of you. The best way to approach this is to assure the parent that you too have their child's best interest in mind. How do you do this? By engaging the parents in the process.

The next logical question would be *how* do you engage the parents in the process. That is what this book is designed to do. Chapter 1 is about the P's of communication; what you want to do and what you do not want to do when communicating with parents. There are many myths surrounding gifted including the children, the parents, and the teachers. Chapter 2 will address many of these myths. Chapter 3 is about making a great first impression. This can be a large event, this could be a small gesture. Either way, you want to make sure the first experience a parent has with you is a positive one, hopefully leading to many more positive interactions. In addition to educating their child, it is important to educate the parent as well, especially when it comes to working with a gifted child. This is covered in chapter 4. Chapter 5 gives tips on how to involve parents in the class other than being a room parent or copy person. It is about making them a partner in the education of their child. Part of this is involving the students in this engagement as well. Sometimes you can even engage a parent to the point where their particular skillset or expertise would be valuable to all the children in your class, not just theirs. Chapter 6

includes ways for parents to become organized and how to use this organization for the benefit of gifted students. It is easy to engage the willing parent, but how do you involve the reluctant one? Chapter 7 will give you tips on how to do that. Sometimes no matter how much you engage the parent or how proactive you are, situations can still happen with a parent. Chapter 8 is looking at four case studies of situations and how you can handle them. The final chapter is parting words on why you want this parent advocate in your corner and the benefits to doing so.

In the over 20 years of working in gifted education, I have held a number of positions. Everything from a cluster teacher to a gifted pullout to team leader of a full-fledged magnet program to my most recent stint as gifted coordinator of a major, suburban school district. In these experiences, if there is anything I have learned it is not only important for parents to be advocates for their children, I have learned to try and make them advocates for gifted children in general. After all, I am only a single voice. My message becomes amplified if I have many people joining the chorus of those in support of gifted students. If that chorus is loud enough to resound in the ears of your superintendent, the board of education, and the public in general, you can do wonderful things for gifted children. After all, is that not why we are in this business in the first place? To be the champions of gifted children who otherwise might have been ignored because no matter how hard a district tries to hide the light, those students are going to find a way to shine. Just imagine what they can accomplish though if their light remains unencumbered.

I have made many mistakes in my career. Conversations I wish I could do over again, relationships I wish I would have handled differently, parents I regret not reaching out to. Amongst these though I have also had some successes. The stories I will share in this book actually happened to me or someone I know. They are not hypotheticals. By learning from these

mistakes and successes, you will hopefully be able to create advocates of your own gifted parents by engaging them in their child's education and find ways to use their voices to benefit their child and your classroom.

- At the very beginning of the year I got the worse news any parent could get; I found out I have breast cancer. My first concern and fear was how I'm going to deal with that and I have three children that need me! So after a month and half of testing, lab works, MRIs, the doctors figured out what to do. Then the surgery and the recovery after that plus those tons of appointments. It took me till March to feel myself. Through this hard period, I needed help and my first concern is my kids' schooling so the only habit I kept doing is communicating with his teachers every single day about school work. I emailed with them so many times a week to handle things and we talked about how we get my son on the right track. We never lost track of him because the teachers had been communicating to me for most of his work, projects, reading, math, and science. Believe me it paid off

parent Mari Barhoum

Chapter 1 – The P's of Communication

Do's

When it comes to communicating with any parents, no matter if their child is gifted or not, there are certain do's and don'ts that are important to understand. These all revolve around the letter P.

The do's are:

- Proactive
- Positive
- Practical
- Partnership
- Priority

Proactive means to reach out to parents before they reach out to you. In today's day and age of instant technology, this can be a challenge. The days of entering your grades in a physical ledger that are for your eyes only went out with the blackboard. Now everything is online which

typically gives parents instant access to the grade progression of their child in your class. The second you enter a grade into your online grade book, your phone or email may blowup with parents wanting to know why their child got the grade he did, what they can do to help, or other concerns or questions.

This is why it is best to try to get out in front of that. If you graded a particular assignment where several students did not do as expected, sending a proactive email to parents before the grade is posted might be wise. It shows parents a few things. It shows that you are aware of their individual child's progress, that they are not just a nameless, faceless, student but a living, breathing, thriving child who might be struggling. It also shows you care about their child. This is mostly what parents want from their teachers. That their child is in the hands of someone they trust and know has the best interests in mind. When parents drop their child off to the teacher, they want to know their child is going to be taken care of. They want that peace of mind that they do not even need to worry about their child while at school. If they do not possess this trust, if they worry about how their child is going to be treated, that can make for a contemptuous relationship.

Many times, being proactive can actually prevent those calls and emails from happening in the first place. I remember when I started using project-based learning in the classroom. It was very different than the traditional education parents were used to. What I had not taken into consideration is that most parents want to know how to best help their child. When you do something in the classroom they are not familiar with then they do not know how to help their child and thus that is when the questions come. Low and behold, less than a week into the project I got lots of phone calls and emails asking that very thing. It was not that these parents were

being annoying or prying into the workings of my teaching. They were just seeking to understand.

The next year, lesson learned, I reached out to parents before we began projects through email and explained to them how they worked. Here is the email I sent:

Dear parent(s):

In my classroom students are going to be involved in project-based learning. What this means is that students will be working on long-term assignments rather than switching to new activities day to day. This also means they will be working many times in groups. Because of this, the class is designed for students to do their work in class because they have access to their groupmates there. That means students will not be bringing home a lot of homework for my class. If students do have homework for my class, it is probably an indication that they are not using their class time as well as they could and they need to catch up at home.

Because of the in-class work, you probably will not be helping your child as much as you are used to. What I would encourage you to do is to ask your child about the project and how they think things are going. You can also check the calendar and rubric I have attached that show where your student's progress should be throughout the project and how it is going to be evaluated.

If you have any questions about the projects, I encourage you to contact me at this email or call me. You are more than welcome to come visit the classroom and see how the project work looks first-hand.

And do you know what the amazing this was? That by encouraging parents to contact me, they did not. I had headed them off at the pass by being proactive and allaying any concerns that might have cropped up by meeting it head on. My main goal was not to avoid getting calls and

emails from parents. My main goal was to inform them and keep them involved in the education of their child.

The following year I took it even a step further. When the parents came in for the meet the teacher night at the beginning of the school year, I actually went over a project with them so they could see what their child was going to be doing and what their role in this might look like. We did an abbreviated version of a project, running them through all of the steps so that parents understood how they worked.

You should send as many positive messages to parents as ones about discipline or poor grades. Typically, when the teacher communicates with parents it is because something bad has happened. It is either a discipline problem, a poor grade, or a bad day. What if, for every email you sent concerning one of these issues, you also sent a positive email? These positive emails could be about many things; a good grade on an assignment, an act of responsibility, a moment of kindness. Not only do parents love to hear great things about their children, they will be shocked that you contacted them about something positive. It could be the smallest gesture such as this:

Dear Mr. and Mrs. Abrahms,

Just sending you a note about something I saw Lincoln do today. Another student had come in from the hallway and dropped all of his stuff while trying to get to his desk. Lincoln stopped and took the time to help this student pick his things up. It was a nice thing for Lincoln to do.

Before the internet (yes I have been teaching that long) I used to apply the same to the parent phone calls I would make. It was always interesting to hear the reactions of parents. When I announced who I was, at first they would be very cautious and guarded, wondering just what sort of mess their child has gotten into. Then when I instead inform them of the positive thing

their child did, they were usually taken aback. I had several parents who would tell me, “this is first time I have ever gotten a positive phone call about my child in all the years she has been in school.” Even in today’s world where it is so much easier to shoot off an email, making a positive phone call might do a better job of making their day.

Parent communication should not be just about when students have done something wrong. There should be positive communication as well. Not only does this build good relationships between the parents and yourself, it will remind you that there are a lot of positive things going on at school rather than just focusing on the negative.

Practical means that your communication with parents should be easy to access. My daughters have had teachers where they would say “if you go to this website I will post assignments” or “if you enter this code it will take me to my online classroom”. Although it is great teachers are making the effort to inform parents, they are not making it very practical. I as the parent have to go onto the site and access the information. And if my daughter has multiple teachers, each one might have a different page on a different site. It makes it very cumbersome to find out what I need to know.

There are some parents who religiously check these websites and are kept up with the communication. There are other parents who are simply very busy people and never have that moment to sit down and figure out how to access the information. Parents should not have to find your information. It should be provided for them.

I got into the habit of sending an email to all of my parents at the end of every week, summarizing what we had been working on. Rather than having to go into a site and access this, they just clicked on the email that appeared in their mailbox. This made it very practical to access and they did not have to remember to check it themselves. This also gave an opportunity

for parents to contact me concerning this information. If they had a question, a concern, or a comment, they could respond to me.

The communication should be framed in a partnership. You and the parents are a team when it comes to the education of their child. You handle the education of the child when he is at school, the parents help with it when the child is home. How each of these looks should be communicated between the two of you. For instance, if a parent informs you that as a family they like to go to a lot of historical sites around the state, you know this child has more background information in Social Studies than your typical child. Similarly, if you teach a math concept a certain way in class, it would be beneficial for the parent to understand the method as well so they can help their child with schoolwork.

You should not expect a parent just to hand them off to you without any input in regard to the education of their child. Remember, they were the primary teachers of their child the first five years of his life. They know plenty about educating their child, including what works and what does not. As teachers, we sometimes get caught up in our profession, especially at the higher grade levels. We believe ourselves to be the experts and the parent should just listen to what we have to say. It is not a dialogue but rather a “this is how I do it” attitude. The problems with this are many. First off, you are shutting out a valuable resource. A parent might be able to provide you insight into how to best reach their child because they had to trial and error with him for years before figuring what does and does not work as well as knowing their past school history better than their cumulative file because they lived it every day. Secondly, this is a very fixed mindset. To think that you as the teacher are the only one that can provide the child’s education is rather limited. There are things for you as the teacher to learn, even if you have been teaching for thirty years. Be wary of the teacher who says they have learned everything there is

to know about teaching. How can that teacher possibly teach others when she is not willing to learn herself? Teachers and students alike need to have the growth mindset that there are always new things to learn, new tricks to pick up. Thirdly, why would you not want to have a good relationship with this person whose child you will be working with for the better part of a year? It will make the rest of your year go that much easier if you have established this partnership with the parents. Not only that, by establishing this partnership, you can make this parent an advocate on your behalf. There is no such thing in education as too many allies. On the flip side, you make one enemy, if they are the right enemy, they can cause a whole lot of problems for you. One thing I have learned in education is even the most seemingly unreasonable parents can find an audience in an administrator, school board member, or even the superintendent. It is best to have this person on your side. The way to do this is by establishing a good partnership with them.

You should make a parent feel as though you are making their child a priority. You should never tell a parent, “I have 25 other students I have to worry about. I can’t take the time to individually work with your child.” The parent does not care about the other students in your class. They care about the one student that lives with them. Or the high school excuse of “I have to grade over 150 students’ papers. How can I possibly address the needs of one student?” Parents want to see that you are prioritizing their child. When you are communicating with them, their child should be the one you are focusing on. Not the other children.

The day and age of the teacher teaching to the middle and students who are higher level having to slow down and students who are lower level having to keep up are long gone. There has been an evolution in education where we recognize that each student is an individual and his needs are specific to him. Because of this, we must differentiate as much as possible, making

sure the lesson is not just at one level but at several. Does this make things a little more challenging for teachers? Of course. It is what is best for kids? You bet. What this means is that every student is our priority. Make sure the parent understands this and that you are specifically trying to figure out how best to work with their child, not with the class in general.

How do you show you are making their child a priority? By avoiding comparing him to other students in the class or making excuses for why you cannot meet his specific needs. Parents should feel you are doing everything within your power as a teacher to help educate their child.

Don'ts

Along with these do's are the don'ts. These are things you should try to avoid when communicating with parents.

- Picky
- Polarizing
- Public
- Personal
- Parenting

These are pretty self-explanatory but even the most veteran of teachers should be reminded of them from time to time.

When communicating with a parent whether through email or in talking with them, you don't want to be petty. There will be times when a parent and you will see things very different. You must tell yourself it is more important to figure out how best to teach their child than it is to be right. If you try to make it about you being right, by being petty, the relationship with the parent will just devolve into a place where it will be difficult to engage with them.

Your goal should not be to correct a parent, your goal is to clearly communicate with them and put everyone on the same page. Sometimes this means addressing the important aspects of the communication and ignoring any snide comments or accusations. The important aspects should be anything that moves the student along in her education. So if a parent complains about how long it took you to grade something, you should address how well the child did on the assignment and what could be done to improve her understanding. You might even say, "I'm sorry you feel that way." This way you are empathizing with the parent and their feelings without admitting to any wrongdoing. If you try and rationalize why it took so long to grade the assignment, you will just come off as defensive. Just stick to the child.

You should definitely steer away from any communication that could be polarizing. What this means is you are making parents choose to be with you or against you. Some may pick your side, but others may not. This is not a good way to engage parents. There are obvious polarizing topics that should be avoided when talking with parents ranging from the big ones such as religion and politics to smaller ones such as making gender assumptions and generalizing student ability. I once made the huge mistake of saying at a parent meeting when discussing how the bussing would work for the gifted program that they would not have to worry about the short bus coming to pick their child up. It was an attempt at humor and one that drew many laughs, but I learned later that I offended some parents because I was making judgements about the students that use those sorts of busses. One parent even brought it up three years later meaning I had offended her enough to hold on to this for so long.

You also have to be careful about your digital footprint. What I mean by this is any social media you use, even if it is for private use, might end up being seen by a parent. You can actually count on it. There are often news stories about a teacher who has said something racist

or inappropriate about a student on a social media outlet and even though they did it on their personal time with their personal account, the school district fired them. Just in September of 2017, a second grade teacher from Mississippi posted:

If blacks in this country are so offended, no one is forcing them to stay here. Why don't they pack up and move back to Africa ... I am sure our government will pay for it! We pay for everything else.

Lots of polarizing topics in this post. Of course, even though she did not send this to parents, they found the post, capturing screenshots of it and brought it to the attention of school officials. She was rightfully let go within the week.

And you never know what is going to offend someone. A teacher in Wooster, Ohio who is a vegan and animal rights advocate, posted a picture of the small boxes baby cows are put in after being separated from their mother at birth. His post read:

As someone who grew up feeling parental love and support, and now as a parent who gives love and support, I reject the claim that separating babies from loving mothers to raise them isolated in boxes can ever be considered humane.

A seemingly innocuous statement and one many would support, but Wooster is a large farming community and enough people complained to the superintendent that the teacher was non-renewed at the end of the year.

You too should be careful not to say anything polarizing on Facebook or Twitter. If you are passionate about certain issues such as gay marriage, gun control, abortion, or other such polarizing topics, save those for conversations you have with like-minded people. Do not, I repeat do not post these opinions on social media. You just never know who you are going to offend.

Along this same line, you should not make an issue with a parent public. You should think of conversations you have with parents in the same manner doctors do with their patients, extending a confidentiality with what they are told. Because of FERPA you are not supposed to share any information about students with anyone else. You should most certainly keep your conversations private with parents as well. Sure, you might share them with a colleague such as another teacher or an administrator because you are seeking guidance, or you might be part of a teaching team and the team discusses the issue because all share the student. You should not however talk about it with another teacher in a gossipy way. If you have issue with a parent about something, you should definitely not make this a public battle. One time we were having a team meeting after school and I was complaining about a parent who I felt was making my life difficult. My fellow teachers supported me and joined in my complaints about the parent. Then the Spanish teacher came over and said,

“The parent you are complaining about. Her daughter is next door taking a make-up test. And we can hear everything.”

Needless to say, I learned a valuable lesson with egg on my face. Do not gossip about parents with other teachers.

You should certainly not take this battle to social media. You will come out the loser. Every time. A parent might even start an argument with you on social media or mention you on their post and it gets back to you. Do not engage with them. If they want to make the battle public that is their decision. You must remain the consummate professional which sometimes means biting your tongue and letting somethings go.

Sometimes a parent will send an email to a teacher where the teacher feels he is being attacked and thus is defensive in his response. You should try your best to not take it personal

and focus on being the professional you are. This can be a challenge, especially if someone has made it personal. A parent once said to a teacher on our gifted team,

“You have no heart.”

This was extremely difficult not to take personal and understandably, the teacher was very upset. I had to counsel this teacher not to take it personal and reassure her as her supervisor I knew this accusation to be false. When someone has taken it this far you have to consider the source. There are nightmare parents out there, parents who have the superintendent on speed dial and for some reason have his ear.

Most parents are very rational people and with a simple explanation can be calmed down and even brought to your side of things. Every once in a while, usually only every few years if you are lucky, there will be a parent who cannot be rationalized with and you just have to ride it out. I once had a very irrational parent who would call my gifted coordinator and cuss me out on his voicemail. Any teacher who had dealt with her before talked about how many problems she caused them. The principals and district office staff were all familiar with her, and I had this parent's child for four years. That meant I was not getting out after just a single year like in most cases. I had to endure 1460 days with this parent telling me I was a bad teacher and that she was going to have me fired. The other part about personal is that with a parent like this, you should not take this out on the child. The girl of this parent was very sweet and a strong student. I actually loved having her in class for four years. I had to be sure not to let anything her mother said to me carry over into our relationship or to let on how I felt about her mother. I am sure her mom was not doing the same, but again, I was the one who needed to be the professional here. They are allowed to take it personal and it is important to keep in mind that because this is their kid you are discussing, it is extremely personal to them. Because of this they might lash out at

you because they are trying to defend their child. Sometimes they will just lash out because they are an unpleasant person. It is important not to get defensive, even when you are being accused of something you feel is not accurate. Talk about it with your principal, make sure they understand your side of the story, but do not enter into a personal battle with them.

It may be difficult to hear this advice and it might seem that I am suggesting you let a parent do what they want and you just have to take it. Remember, no matter how nasty they are to you, they are not going to be fired as the parent to that child. Their child is not going to be removed from school because the parent is acting irrational. You, however, can be fired from your job as a teacher or removed from a position. In education, we are in the service industry. We serve parents by educating their children. In any industry, the saying goes the customer is always right. We know this not to be true but if you do not let them think they are right, they will make your life more difficult than is worth dealing with. Always keep it professional, never personal.

One major landmine to avoid is not to ever give parents parenting advice. You should never tell a parent how they should be raising their child or how they could do a better job. If a parent asks you, what can I be doing to help my child, then yes, you can give them some suggestions for how they can do this, but offering parental advice unsolicited is a big mistake.

An example of this would be a child who comes to school tired all the time because he says he stays up late every night. You would not talk to that parent and tell them, “you need to get Adam to bed earlier.” You could mention that Adam comes to school looking tired and that sometimes he falls asleep or loses focus because of this tiredness, but let the parent make the parenting decision on their own. This can be especially hard if the parent is doing something that goes against your own parenting philosophy. For instance, if you are an anti-gun person and a

parent is letting their ten-year old go hunting, it is not your place to correct this parent or tell him he should not be doing this.

The exception to this would be if a parent is doing something that is illegal. If that is the case and you suspect something, you would not go to the parent anyway, you should notify your principal who will follow the chain of command in bringing this to the attention of the proper people such as children's services or the police.

Gifted Ps

In addition to the do's and don'ts, there are five P's of communication that you would want to focus on while communicating with the parents of gifted students:

- Person
- Potential
- Present
- Programming
- Psychology

First and foremost, you should treat their child as a person, not as a number or as a mythical creature due to her gifted ability. This is a child. Just because she is gifted does not make her more than a child. She should not be put on any pedestal nor should she be held to a higher expectation. The expectation might be different but not higher. When talking with the parents you should address the needs of the child, not the giftedness. This can be difficult for both parties. Sometimes the parent wants to focus on the gifted aspect while neglecting the child part of the equation. A teacher too can focus too much on the gifts of the child rather than the child herself. Every child has needs in school, both academically and social/emotional. Even though they talk like an adult and act like an adult sometimes, lest not forget that these are kids.

An example would be an email like this:

Mr. and Mrs. James

I'm writing because I am concerned about Alex's grade in my science class. He currently has a B- and I figured with his ability he should be getting nothing short of an A.

A seemingly simple communication where a teacher expresses concern over a student's grade. But this email has not talked about why she thinks Alex is getting a B-. She is talking about how a gifted child should be getting an A every time. The person has been taken out of the equation and now we are holding his giftedness against him. I got news for you, gifted kids get B-'s from time to time. To expect gifted students to get A's all the time is holding them to a dangerous expectation because perfectionism can be an issue with many gifted students. Plus, it does not give the child any room to make mistakes and that is what being a child is all about, making mistakes and then learning from them. To those who did not think there was anything wrong with this email, imagine reading this one about a child who is in special education:

Mr. and Mrs. James

I'm writing because I am concerned about Alex's grade in my science class. He currently has a B- and I figured with his ability he should be getting a D or F.

You would not hold this child's identification for special education against him. Why would you do the same for a child who is gifted? You should be talking about the child when communicating with parents and using what you know about him individually rather than expecting all gifted children to be a certain way.

Mr. and Mrs. James

I'm writing because I am concerned about Alex's grade in my science class. He currently has a B-. I notice when we are discussing concepts in class he seems to

show a good understanding of them, and yet when I go to assess them on a test, there is little written detail to show this understanding. Alex seems to be a much stronger speaker than a writer so I am considering letting him create a Flipgrid response where he creates a short video of him explaining the answer. Let me know if you are OK with me trying this alternative assessment with Alex.

In this communication, the teacher is using her knowledge about what she has observed of Alex in class to make an individual diagnosis about why he might not be working to his potential. It is not a blanket statement made based on a label the child has received. This teacher is treating the child as a person.

Along with this treating a gifted child as a person because of their ability, you also need to look at the potential of that individual child as related to his giftedness. This does not mean holding the child to high expectations, it means holding the child to expectations he is capable of. These should be different for every gifted child you have in your classroom rather than a single bar that everyone is expected to jump over. Just as you have a variety of abilities in a regular education classroom, you have a similar range in a gifted one. Let us say for instance that the qualifying cognitive score to get into the program was a 126. Some are going to squeak in with the 126 but others might have a 138, 146, or 152. That is a 26 point difference in SAI (Student Ability Index). Let us take that 130 student and put her in a classroom with a child with a 104 SAI. You would expect very different things from those two just as you should the 130 as compared to the 152.

Potential also can be measured differently by different skills. For instance, you might have a student who is very adept at science but his language arts skills are not as strong. You would not have the same expectations for that child in both subject areas. You would expect a lot in science but have tempered expectations in ELA. Even within a subject area there may be

strengths students excel at while there are others that slow them down. An example would be a student who is really skilled at multiplication and can solve complex problems involving this skill. However, fractions trip him up and so the teacher would not expect as strong as work.

The reason why it is important to frame your communication with a parent about an individual student's potential is you do not want to get into the game of comparing students to one another. You would not want to get into a parent/teacher conference and have this discussion:

Teacher: I'm worried about Samantha in Social Studies class.

Parent: Is she struggling in her work?

Teacher: No, but she is getting a C while most of the other students are getting a B.

Parent: Is she slacking off in her work?

Teacher: No, she is working really hard. I would just like to see the quality of her work be at the level of these other students.

Maybe Samantha is just a C student. There are students out there, even gifted ones, who work really hard but cannot seem to grasp as particular subject. I was always an A student in Language Arts and Social Studies, but did not fair so well in my math classes, usually having a C average. That was the range of my abilities though. I have always been able to read and write better than learning mathematical concepts. Does this C in math class make me any worse a student in Language Arts? It does not.

A better conversation might go like this:

Teacher: Samantha is getting a C in Social Studies right now.

Parent: That's concerning to me. She should be getting an A.

Teacher: I think Samantha works really hard to get her C. There is a lot of rote memorization in Social Studies class and this is not one of Samantha's strengths.

Parent: But she's got an A in Science class.

Teacher: That involves more problem solving which Samantha seems to be very good at.

Parent: How can we get her to an A in Social Studies?

Teacher: I would focus more on her improving her study skills rather than focusing on getting an A.

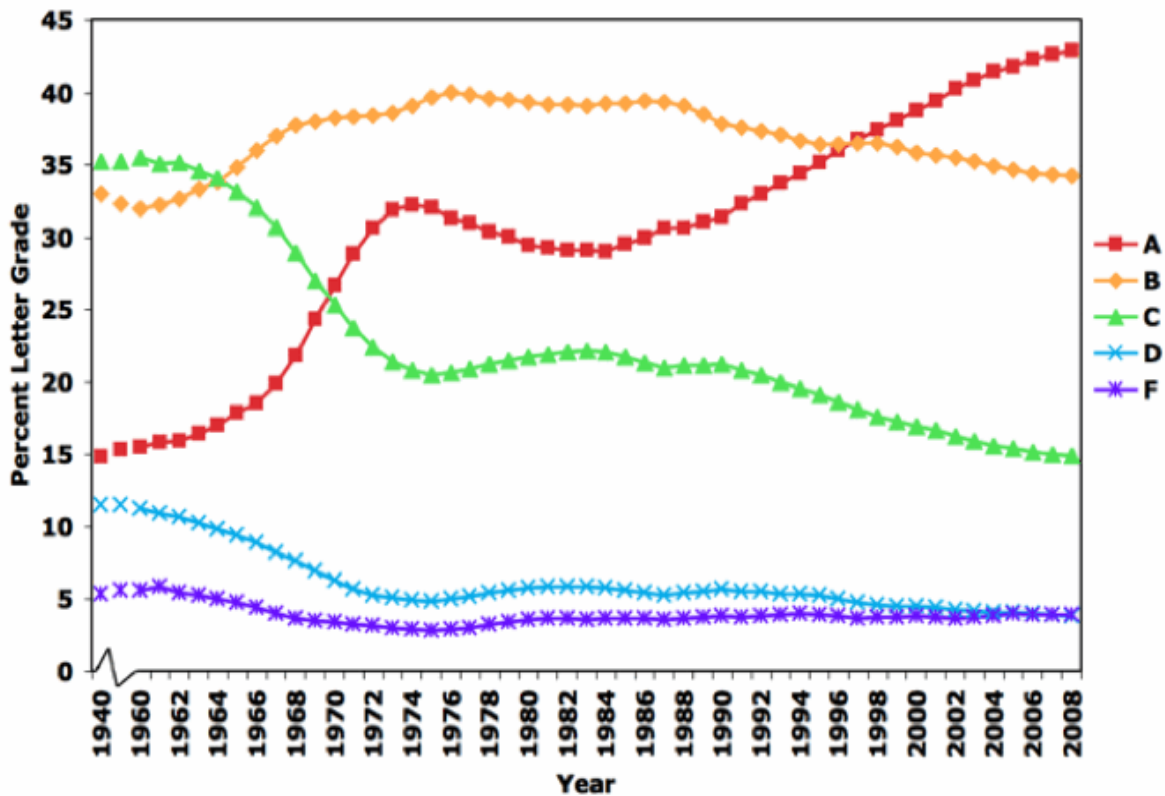
A conversation like this can be difficult to have. There are some parents who expect that their child will get all A's. However, it is important in your communication that you stress that not getting an A does not mean their child is not a great student.

You will want to remain in the present when talking to a parent about their gifted child. What I mean by this is often times we compare the past or look ahead at the future without addressing the present needs. This can be especially tempting with a gifted student. For instance, when talking with a parent they might lay this one on you:

I think Mikey is really struggling this year. Up until now, he has always gotten straight A's.

Cannot tell you how many times I heard this in a parent/teacher conference, especially for students just entering the gifted program. This is typical when a student has entered into gifted programming for the first time. There are parents that become concerned because their child is no longer getting the great grades he once did. You need to stress that there is a reason they call it a challenge program; because students should be challenged. That means not everybody is going to get A's. There has been an alarming amount of grade inflation over the past decades:

Grade Distribution Over Time, Nationwide



You can see in 1940 that around 15 percent of students earned A's in class. By 2008, nearly half of students were receiving A's. B's, D's, and F's have stayed fairly constant but C's have gone down from 35% to the 15% A's once were. The question is, have children become that much smarter or are the expectations for such a grade just that much lower. I would side with the latter. It seems like now, if students do everything they are supposed to, they receive an A. That does not mean the quality of their work is necessarily excellent. It just means they jumped through whatever hoops the teacher has laid out for them. The A reflects more of an effort than ability. An A should stand for excellence. What this would look like in a gifted classroom is that students are taking the learning to another level even higher than you set out.

On the converse side, you cannot worry so much about a student's future that it stifles his present. There are those parents who might have high expectations for their bright child down the road. Could be an Ivy League school or a coveted position such as a doctor or lawyer. The thing is, if you have a 5th grade student getting a C in your class, this is not going to prevent them from getting into Yale. Especially if the child is not taking courses for high school for credit. There are some parents that become concerned that their child is not bringing home straight A's. Learning is all about making mistakes. We have to let children make these short-term mistakes so that they learn long-term lessons. Middle school and junior high are the perfect places to make these mistakes. This does not mean once a child gets to high school, he should go back to trying to avoid any mistakes. It is just that the GPA clock starts ticking once you take courses for high school credit. Should a 7th grader taking a high school Algebra class have their graduating GPA affected by something that happened six years ago?

Here is the thing about GPA. Some students and parents freak out because they believe you need a high GPA to get into the best schools. Again, just as the Yale admission office is not going to ask about that C in the 5th grade, no employer is going to be asking you where you went to college. They just want to see that you have a degree that qualifies you for the position. There is a saying in pharmacy that goes like this; do you know what they call the person who finished last in his pharmacy class? They call him a pharmacist. If colleges are not so concerned about your GPA once you enter school. Why should high schools?

When communicating with parents of a gifted child, help them to see the present and to not be so concerned with what has happened in the past nor what might occur in the future. Where their child is right now is most important and figuring out how to best reach his potential.

When talking with a parent, you should be knowledgeable about what your school district has to offer in the way of gifted programming. Different schools across the United States have different ways to provide gifted services to students who qualify. Sometimes this comes in the form of a magnet program where students are brought from all over, putting the children with the highest ability together in one place. There are pull out programs where the child gets pulled for an hour a day or perhaps an entire day during the week in order to have her needs met. There are cluster groups where instead of having an entire class full of gifted students, you group a few of them together and then differentiate their lessons to challenge them more. Some schools offer service in the form of after school programs and others do not provide any formal gifted programming. It is important for you to be familiar with what your school has to offer in the way of programming.

Not only should you be familiar with what programming is available, you should be familiar with how a student qualifies for that programming. Again, different states have different policies. In some states the qualification for gifted is a criterion set by the state and students must qualify by taking one of the approved assessments. Other states allow individual districts to create criteria based on local norms. An example would be since gifted students usually fall into the top five percent on the bell curve, the district deems the top five percent of their student population to be gifted. You should know how exactly your district identifies children so that you can properly inform parents.

Being knowledgeable about programming allows you to make sure no child falls through the cracks. You do not want a gifted child to not be receiving services should he qualify for it. You might be teaching in the gifted program and thus are very familiar with how it operates. If you are, you should also be aware of the continuum of services. What can the parents look

forward to in the form of services in the coming years? If you do not teach in the gifted program, you should contact your gifted coordinator and ask about the district's identification process and available services. This way you can point parents in the correct direction to make sure their child's needs are going to be met. Nothing is worse than giving a parent false hope only to find that their child does not qualify for services. Regardless of programming, it is your responsibility as the teacher of this child to provide services that allow him to be challenged whether they are formal or not. That means growing that student to where he is capable of going.

Psychology involves the social/emotional needs of gifted students. Children who are gifted tend to have what Polish psychologist Kazimierz Dabrowski called over-excitabilities:

Psychomotor – lots on energy, constantly on the move

Sensual – heightened awareness of the five senses

Intellectual – thinking all the time and want difficult questions answered

Imaginational – intensity of their imagination

Emotional – can seem to be sensitive

While some of these are academic in nature such as intellectual and imaginational, others such as sensual and emotional over-excitabilities fall under the umbrella of social/emotional needs. As a teacher of a gifted child, you should be focusing just as much if not more on the social/emotional needs of the child as compared to his academic needs.

That means in your communication with parents you need to make them aware of these needs just as you would let them know of grades and achievement. You need to communicate with them things such as:

- Struggles working in groups
- Is sensitive when another student is not feeling well
- Blurts out answers

- Offers to clean up the room
- Worries about world problems
- Has a strong sense of fairness
- Cries often
- Does not like to take risks
- Gets angry easily
- I enjoy having conversations with him

Keeping parents apprised of how their child is doing socially/emotionally does a few things. It shows you care about their child and have gotten to know her well enough to recognize some of these behaviors. It verifies for the parent behaviors they probably see at home. They might even be able to offer some pointers on how best to handle a situation the child has become over-excitable about. Another thing is the focus is just not on grades but social skills that will be invaluable when this child goes to high school, college, and the workforce. If a child can learn to work well with others, this 21st century skill will translate into further success. Finally, it gives the student a well-rounded education. You are addressing the social well-being of this child as well as the academic. Our job as teachers is not to turn out excellent students, but to turn out excellent human beings.

Engage in this...

If you consider these do's of being proactive, positive, practical, forging a partnership, and making their child a priority, as well as avoiding the don'ts of being picky, polarizing, public, personal, or trying to tell them how to be a better parent, you will find much greater success in engaging with parents. Keeping in mind that while working with parents of a gifted child that you treat their child like a person, look at her potential, focus on the present, becoming

familiar with the programming the district offers, as well as considering the psychology of the child's social/emotional needs, you will be able to forge relationships with the parents of these special children.

Unfortunately, it does not guarantee that every relationship you forge with parents is going to be golden. There are those parents who for whatever reason, there is a personality conflict or you get started off on the wrong foot and cannot seem to ever recover. The golden rule in parent communication is always remember to maintain your professionalism, and treat their child like you would want your child to be treated by her teacher. If you adhere to these two edicts, engagement should be much easier to achieve.

- Not all parents of gifted students put excessive pressure on their child to excel and get all A's. I don't treat my gifted daughter any differently than my other daughter. I want them to both enjoy being kids and not feel undue pressure to 'never fail'.

parent Derek Crossman

Chapter 2 – Myths About Gifted

The world of gifted at times seems like one of those secret societies such as the Illuminati. Not many people know about what goes on in this world and because they do not understand, they make stuff up. Because of this, there are a number of myths associated with gifted that some accept as fact when it actually is quite the contrary. These myths involve not just the children themselves, but extends to those who teach them and their parents. It is important to understand these for what they are; myths, and to seek to understand a more realistic view.

Myths of Gifted Children

There are many myths about gifted children but here are ten of the more common ones:

1. Gifted children will succeed in life no matter what
2. Gifted children love school and get high grades
3. Gifted children are good at everything they do
4. Gifted children have trouble socially at school fitting in
5. Gifted children tend to be more mature than other kids their age
6. Gifted children are always well-behaved and compliant
7. Gifted children's innate curiosity causes them to be self-directed
8. All children are gifted
9. All gifted children are quirky
10. Special education children cannot be gifted

The problem with these myths is that they become accepted as the truth when in fact the truth can be quite the opposite.

Gifted children will succeed in life no matter what

This one can be problematic because if one believes this, as many do, the thinking becomes that gifted children do not need any specialized education aimed at their abilities. What then happens is the gifted child becomes bored because he is not being challenged and becomes turned off by school. When this happens, underachievement begins to settle in and this student who had so much potential is now either barely getting by or worse, is failing at the very thing he used to be so good at. Speculation is that anywhere from 10 to 50% of gifted students suffer from underachievement (Hoffman, Wasson, and Christianson, 1985; Richart, 1991). The varying of statistics also depends on the gender of the student. In a study done by Weiss, 25% of females could be considered underachieving while 50% of males are (Weiss, 1972). More alarming is that between 18-25% of students who drop out of high school have been identified as gifted (Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement, 2008). Does not sound as though those students are getting by just fine.

Gifted children love school and get high grades

What it should read is gifted children love to learn. The problem is that sometimes, what children want to learn and what school is offering can be two very different things. If a child is not willing to play the game of school, the grades might not reflect his ability. In fact, some gifted children have become very adept at figuring out what is the bare minimum they have to do

in order to pass a class. If children are not placed into gifted programming that is challenging, they might find other avenues to feed their love of learning despite school.

Gifted children are good at everything they do

This false assumption can set a gifted child up for failure actually. When she first starts out in school, the gifted child is usually good at most academics. Whenever the teacher or a classmate is seeking an answer this is the child they turn to. Teachers might even put this expectation on this child, commenting that because she is gifted she should know how to do it. What will eventually happen though is the difficulty of the academics will eventually catch up with what the child knows and all of a sudden, she no longer has all the answers. Because of this, she is not willing to take risks for fear that the reputation that has been built over time will be tarnished.

There are also some children who are very good at some subject areas but not so hot at others. The child who has written his first novel at the age of eleven might not be very good at science class. The math whiz who always seems ahead of everyone else does poorly in social studies because he does not like to read. We cannot assume that just because a child has the label of gifted that they excel at all subject areas.

Gifted children have trouble socially at school fitting in

The myth prevails that all gifted children are nerdy and as a result, are socially awkward and have trouble making friends. Just like all kids, gifted children come in all shapes and sizes. There are plenty of gifted children who have no problem making friends. It can be a bit more of a challenge for them, the difference being age-mates versus peer-mates. In the United States, we

group children together based not on their abilities but by their age. Most children enter kindergarten when they are around six years of age and progress up the ladder with other children their same age. The problem with this is that those who have higher ability might have difficulty finding peers amongst the children their age. Like-minded kids they could have conversations with may be a few years older than them.

This problem is solved in most cases however if you group gifted children together either in a magnet program or a cluster group. I have been fortunate to have been involved in two different magnet programs for middle schoolers and was always amazed at how tight knit a group they were. Students who might have had trouble fitting in found kids just like themselves and plenty of people to become friends with. Regardless, even without programs such as these children usually are able to find someone to fit in with.

Gifted children tend to be more mature than other kids their age

Going back to the peer-mates versus age-mates discussion from the previous myth, intellectually yes, many gifted children are more mature than other kids their age. That does not mean though they are ready to have mature conversations that children a few years older than them are having. A besides, just because children are ready to have that conversation does not mean you want them to do so. Not only that, emotionally they are still the age on their birth certificate. They might be able to talk about quantum physics but still throw a fit when things do not go their way. No matter how smart they appear to be, it is important not to forget they are children.

Gifted children are always well-behaved and compliant

On the contrary, some gifted children can come across as trouble makers because they are questioning things. This might be something the teacher said, some policy at the school, or some comment a fellow student has made. Their minds are designed to question things and sometimes these powers can be used to drive a teacher crazy. In addition, if a gifted child becomes bored, he might misbehave because he does not have anything else to do.

Gifted children’s innate curiosity causes them to be self-directed

There are skills that are natural to students and there are others which have to be learned. If you assume that gifted children are self-directed and you turn them loose on a project, you might be surprised. This sometimes can mask itself because a child might be motivated about something in particular so she works tirelessly on it. Motivated and self-directed are not necessarily the same. Some gifted students will be motivated because of their curiosity and will do the work because it is exciting or fun. However, there will come a time when this curiosity wains, especially as the gifted child learns more and more and things are not so new, and getting her to do classroom tasks can be a challenge. Being self-directed means doing things you are not motivated by but you know needs done. This is a learned skill. The reason why this is learned is because of what happens when that child is not curious about something? Does she ignore the work or get behind in it? This is where the skill of self-directedness can be taught. One of the simplest ways to teach self-directedness is through the use of a calendar with soft deadlines:

DAY ONE	DAY TWO	DAY THREE	DAY FOUR	DAY FIVE
Example of humans and its internal/ external structures that help it to survive	Students will begin to research a plant or animal they are interested in learning more about. (By the end chose a plant/ animal)	Taking notes on research on plant/animal	Research on plant/animal (should have five websites where research has been found)	Research on plant/animal (get caught up over the weekend should you be behind)

DAY SIX Research on plant/animal (should have 8-10 websites) Gather notes and make summations to answer the essential questions	DAY SEVEN Prepare presentation (choose the format)	DAY EIGHT Prepare presentation (make sure everyone knows his/her part)	DAY NINE Practice presentations (should not be another longer than 7 minutes, any shorter than 5)	DAY TEN Student presentation (make sure to bring what is needed for the presentation)
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What the student should be doing comes first. These are the tasks at hand in order to complete the project. The parenthesis represent a checkpoint. How these can be introduced is the teacher provides them at first, and then scaffolds up to the student determining for herself what these look like.

All children are gifted

This is a statement based on the educational philosophy of equity. This philosophy espouses that every child should be treated equally. The problem with this theory is that it makes a huge assumption that children are homogeneous; that they all have the same needs and wants. Spend any time in a classroom and you know that students are more heterogeneous. Some have these needs while others have different needs. To try and meet these needs the same would be a disaster. By being equal you would actually be unfair to those students and their needs by making everyone try to conform to the same needs. What this looks like in the classroom is teaching to the middle. This is equal because everyone is treated the same and has the same expectations. It is unfair because some students might not be able to keep up at that pace while others might be able to move at a much quicker one.

There are some who are opponents to giftedness because what it means to them is by saying these children are gifted, is that other children are not gifted. It is making a child feel as

though he is not special and we do not want anyone to feel that way in our land of equity. Let us not forget that being identified as gifted is not for the purposes of social status, it is not a pat on the shoulder, it is not a reward. The purpose for the identification of gifted children is it allows school districts to determine what services would be best for those children, just as if a child were to be identified as learning disabled, the district would do the same.

All gifted children are quirky

Those who have taught gifted children for any amount of time recognize that some of their students have certain quirks. This could be such things as a lack of social awareness, a tendency toward perfectionism, becoming stressed about seemingly small things, worrying about problems half-way across the globe, or the over-excitabilities talked about in chapter 1. If you are going to teach gifted children, it just becomes standard practice that you learn to accept these quirks as a part of doing business. These quirks can sometimes make a child stand out from the rest of the class, especially if she is in a regular education classroom. These quirks become more the norm in a program with all gifted children because more children have them so it does not stand out so much. James Delisle discusses these quirks in his book Parenting Gifted Kids. While some label these as abnormal, he suggests the term atypical as being a better fit because no child should be made to feel not normal. That being said, it would be wrong to assume that all gifted children have these quirks. There are many, typical children who are identified as gifted.

Special education children cannot be gifted

Special education and gifted seem to be on opposite ends of the spectrum, and yet there are those children known as twice exceptional or 2E. This is a child who has been identified as gifted but also has been diagnosed with a learning disability such as ADHD, dyslexia, emotional disturbance, or autism. Servicing this child can be very challenging because you have to feed both ends of the spectrum. There has to be enough challenge to satiate this child's desire to learn while giving them enough support to help him to succeed. It is a tricky balancing act and one that is not always done well. Support needs to come in the form of a special education teacher who understands gifted or a teacher of gifted who understands special education, but there are not that many out there. There needs to be better training for those who work with 2E children.

Understanding that these are myths can go a long way in helping teachers to have a better understanding of who they are working with and how to best challenge them. Like most myths, there are glimpses or flashes of truth to some of these, but to make a blanket statement that all gifted children are like this is to suggest that all gifted children are the same. That would not be true of any group of students.

Myths of the parents of gifted children

There are nearly as many myths about parents of gifted as there are about gifted children themselves. It is important to understand these myths if you are going to engage and work with these parents to best help their child. If you assume certain things about the parents of gifted children, well you know how the saying goes about assuming.

Gifted parents think their child is better than others

This comes down to the elitism that many gifted programs have been labeled with. Sometimes schools feed into this by saying we are putting our best and brightest together. By claiming these are the best kids, that does say to a parent we think these students are better than yours. Instead, gifted programming should be careful to label itself as a service that fills a very specific type of child's needs. It is important for the school to take the lead in absolving this elitism.

Parents can feed into this elitism as well. Keep in mind though, this act is not reserved for just parents of gifted. There are parents that proudly display their child is an honor roll student on a bumper sticker, or the parent of a top athlete, or a child who has a band solo over others or who is elected class president. There is a fine line between being proud of your child and thinking she is better than another child. The important thing is not to compare the child to others but only to herself and what she is capable of.

They are overly involved (helicopter parents)

To some the perception is the parents of gifted children are overly involved, when in actuality it just shows they care. There are many gifted children whose parents are not involved in their education at all and this lack of support can lead to underachievement. Students with parents who are involved in their school tend to have fewer behavioral problems and better academic performance, and are more likely to complete high school than students whose parents are not involved in their school (Henderson, 1994). The good news is that you can take this and turn it into a positive. Parental involvement in school, especially when you engage the parent in two-way communication, has been found to positively affect the self-perception of a teacher as

well as job satisfaction (Tschannen-Moran, 2007). We must remember that parents just want what is best for their child. Who can begrudge a person for that?

They are demanding of teachers

Some teachers do not have the best track record of challenging gifted students. If they have a mixed ability classroom, there is such a wide spectrum of abilities. The gifted children are not struggling so the attention of the teacher many times goes to those who are. The gifted children “will be fine”. An abundance of research has shown that this is not the case and that in order to reach their potential they need to be challenged by their teachers. Unfortunately, there is little training provided to teachers both in the teacher training programs through college nor the professional development of staff. Even if a teacher wanted to challenge her students, she may not have the know-how to do so.

Because gifted students often times are not challenged in the regular classroom, the parents become dissatisfied and ask that the teacher get their child to reach his potential. After all, is that not why we send our children to school? For them to have the best education possible, not just an adequate one? This is where the misconception of being demanding parents comes in. To the parent they are just asking the teacher to do her job. To the teacher it seems like the parent is telling them how to teach her class. The reality is that the parent just wants the teacher to teach their child. When the parents do not get the answer from the teacher that indicates this is going to happen, they move on to the next in the chain of command meaning the principal. If that does not work, they just keep moving up, sometimes all the way to the superintendent and the board of education. This is not a demanding parent. It is just a parent who wants to be heard about the needs of their child to be challenged to her potential.

Having a gifted child is a blessing

Other parents who do not have a child who is gifted often assume that raising a gifted child is easier. Just like teachers of gifted know, gifted children come with their own set of challenges. As Dena Kouremetis notes in her article *Giftedness: a Blessing or a Curse*, she states some of the pitfalls of having a gifted child.

Because their brains fire differently than those of their peers, many of these kids fail to grasp the meaning in life's compromises at school or at home. Apple founder Steve Jobs was bright – even considered gifted – but he was a troublemaker, making his parents wring their hands in despair from time to time (Kouremetis, 2017).

Sure, it is probably great to be Steve Jobs' parents when he is a filthy rich, successful adult, but imagine trying to raise such a challenging child.

Along with the over-excitabilities can be other difficult-to-parent attributes such as perfectionism and a lack of organization. Perfectionism is when a child puts unrealistic expectations upon herself. It can be especially prevalent in gifted children. Wendy Roedell says “Perfectionism is a developmental vulnerability of gifted individuals.” and “An inner drive to accomplish tasks coupled with unrealistic expectations of ability and results in completed projects being assaulted by the inherent well-developed critical thinking skills of gifted individuals” (Roedall, 1984). Many gifted children also have a difficult time being organized. It seems like everyone under the age of 16 suffers from this, but it is more rampant in gifted children. This is because their quick-paced brains are thinking about several things at one time so they do not take the time to do that one thing with detail. This might manifest itself in a messy

locker or a binder that is stuffed to the brim with papers that are no longer needed. It can reflect at home in a cluttered desk or a bedroom where there is no floor visible.

That they are gifted too

Just because a child is gifted does not automatically mean both or even one of his parents are gifted as well. I have had a lot of parents who come in for parent/teacher conferences and they display the same quirks as their child or who understand why their child thinks the way he does because they think very similarly. I have also had several parents who claim “don’t know where he gets his giftedness from cause it sure as heck ain’t either one of us”. Sometimes this is just modesty. Sometimes it is reflective of the truth.

By assuming the parents are gifted too we are also assuming they know how to work with the child because they know what works for them personally. As parents, we have an inherent advantage over our children because they are born knowing nothing and we have lived a lifetime of experiences. When children begin school, parents who are involved help their child with his homework using this basis of knowledge we have accumulated. There comes a time in your child’s education when you no longer are as effective with your help. This might be because the math becomes too complex and you do not recall your grasp of fractions. It could be that the lessons on complex phrases and clauses has faded with time. I know I was unable to continue helping my daughter with her math homework when she entered 5th grade and I have been a teacher for over twenty years. With gifted children, this convergence might happen a lot sooner because he understands things more deeply than your average bear. Finding ways to challenge your gifted child can well, be a challenge.

There are those parents who are gifted and depending on the situation they faced in their own education, might have a particularly sharp axe to grind with school systems, the reason being if they feel they had untapped potential that was not met by their own schooling, they want to be sure this same thing does not happen to their child. Or it is a parent who was gifted who attended a good gifted program and so knows what is available for their child.

They push their child to excel

There is always a fine line in wanting to push a child to reach the fullest of his potential. In the film “Whiplash” there is a teacher who is abusive and crosses the line on several occasions, but he gets results. Through his methods he is producing some of the top musicians from one of the top music schools in America. I am in no way shape or form suggesting anyone be abusive to a child in order to get results. What I am saying is as a parent and a teacher sometimes we have to ride that line to ensure that a child reaches his fullest potential, especially with a child who is gifted. If this child were not pushed, he might not achieve at the level for which he is capable.

How many children were not pushed and as a result fell into a comfortable routine where they do the bare minimum? There is nothing more frustrating as a teacher of gifted than a child you know can do better but is not. The ceiling is so high on these children that to not have high expectations of their abilities and push them a little would be doing them a disservice.

Many parents of gifted understand this and so they nudge them to work to get the most out of their ability and potential. Some nudge a little harder than others and thus the myth persists. Are there some parents who are too intense and need to back off a little? Absolutely, but I would argue these parents exist in just about every arena connected to children such as sports,

music, theatre, chess, even Irish dancing. There is a reason children are labeled “gifted”. They possess this gift and parents just want their child to use it to provide as many opportunities as possible. Is that not what parenting is all about, helping to provide opportunities for our children?

Their child was just born gifted

To some, they believe a fairy godmother waved her magic wand and poof, this child was inundated with intelligence despite whatever opportunities her parents provided for her. There has always been that argument between whether children are born smart or they develop their intelligence. Like most arguments, there is a little truth to both of them. It makes sense that intelligence would be hereditary. We get our parents’ eye color, their height, even their hairline. Why would we not get our smarts from them? But recent research on the development of the human brain has revealed that experiences early in life can cause a child’s brain to grow and expand in certain areas. And those families who are in a position to provide their child with learning opportunities, experiences, and support can expect to give their child a head start over others who did not have these.

Parents understandably want to be given some of the credit for their child’s ability more than just providing DNA, especially if they have provided opportunities and worked and nurtured them. To simply dismiss the hard work parents have done with their child and attribute a gifted child’s abilities to good genes is demeaning to the efforts of these parents. Their child may have been born gifted but without some sort of nurturing, it is difficult for a child to succeed as he has. Acknowledging these efforts by the parents goes a long way in creating a good working relationship with them.

They want their child in gifted programming

This is one I struggled with when I first became a gifted services coordinator. It did not make any sense to me when I offered services to a family and they decided to pass on them. I mean didn't this family realize how rare it is for their child to be invited to such a program when many who wanted in were denied. Or how rare it was for a district to have gifted programming in the first place considering many in the area had nothing. Did they understand the long-term opportunity for their child they were passing up, a sentence of not being challenged and having their child's needs met?

I once had a parent accept placement in a magnet gifted program and when I emailed him back to give him the summer reading book, he withdrew because he said his son read enough during the school year. The summer should be his own. As a teacher, this made no sense to me. Why were they letting one book keep their child out of four years of programming? After a few years, I came to realize that families have to make decisions that are best for them. Again, you have to differ to the fact that these families know their child better than anyone and maybe it is not a good fit. This could be because of other commitments this child has and would not be able to handle the increased workload of such a program. It could be a set of two children where one is accepted to the program and the other one is not and the parent wants to keep them both at the same school. It could be the child suffers from a lot of anxiety and moving away from his friends might be too difficult for him. The school's role is to provide opportunities. If a family chooses not to use these opportunities, that is their choice.

They are all from the upper socio/economic range

There is no doubt that children from more affluent families tend to get picked up by the gifted radar more often than those from lower socio/economic backgrounds. Students whose families are in the top income quartile are five times more likely to be in a gifted program than students whose parents are in the bottom quartile (Borland, 2004). This is a combination of more outside learning experiences as well as tests which tend to trend toward the affluent because that is the audience they are written for. Some districts have tried to counter this by using less biased testing such as the Naglieri which does not use vocabulary, or the use of local norming.

Even with these efforts, children from lower socio/economic status are under-identified in gifted. Callahan's study showed that only 9% of children in gifted programming were from the bottom quartile of family income (Callahan, 2005). That does not mean these children are not gifted. It means school districts need to do a better job of identifying these children. First and foremost, gifted programming should be representative of the student population. That means ideally that if a school system is mostly economically disadvantaged, this will be reflected in the gifted program. It would be very wrong to assume that gifted children only come from the upper SES.

They are all educated how to best work and understand their gifted child

There is a difference between knowing your child well and understanding how to best work with a gifted child. Depending on the state, those teachers who are assigned as Gifted Intervention Specialists (GIS) have gone through specialized training that helps them to specifically work with this group of students. A teacher with this training working together with the parent to best figure out how to work with their child is the ideal situation.

This means educating parents on how to work with gifted children. Many times, parents of gifted children feel as though the issues they are experiencing are unique to only their child. Learning that others with gifted children experience similar problems can be reassuring that they are not in it alone. Getting the parents of gifted children together to have these conversations can go a long way and will be discussed in much more detail in later chapters.

Myths of Gifted Teaching/Teachers

That bring us down to you, the teacher of gifted students. Understanding and dispelling the myths behind the children and their parents is important, as is doing the same for those who teach gifted. Through my twenty years of being in gifted education I have experienced most of these myths myself and can tell you from personal experience they are not as true as most would like to believe.

They have the easy students

This is an argument I hear often from those who are not teaching the gifted students. It reminds me of the time we took the students to the pool for the end-of-the-year pool party. Typically, our students were separated from the regular population as were we teachers, but here we were all together, the teachers all hanging out at a cabana while the lifeguards watched the students who all played together. One of our students, Sasha, came to me.

“Mr. Stanley, someone took my inflatable killer whale.”

I looked around and saw there were about fifty of these creatures around the pool. Finding Sasha’s specific one would be a challenge.

“Sasha, I’m sure someone picked it up by mistake and it will turn up.”

Sasha seemed placated by this reasoning and went back to playing in the pool. I saw him pass by about an hour later, a giant inflatable killer whale under his arm.

“Sasha, you found your whale?” I asked.

“Yes, it was lying on the ground over there.”

“Sasha, this whale is missing one of the handles. Was yours missing a handle?”

“No,” the realization coming over him. “I must’ve taken someone else’s.”

And not only had he taken someone else’s, he had somehow gotten his hands on a Sharpie marker and had written really large on the side, “Sasha’s Whale”. That was when one of Sasha’s friends came over.

“Sasha, I found your whale.”

“Great,” Sasha said, dropping the one he had branded.

“Sasha,” I said. You need to give your whale to whomever you took that one from and keep the one you wrote on.”

“But that one is missing a handle.”

“Sasha, it would be unfair to give them a whale you wrote your name all over. You need to give them yours.”

That was when Sasha broke out crying. He was getting ready to go into seventh grade and here he was crying over a blowup whale. He continued carrying on for two hours. This was witnessed by all of the teachers who were hanging out at the cabana.

As we were filing the kids out of the pool area, Sasha was still crying and complaining. One of the teachers who had been next to me said,

“I’m sorry Todd.”

“Whatever for?”

“I always assumed you had it easy working with the gifted students. I had no idea.”

There are certain things that make teaching gifted students a little easier than your average class. There are also a set of challenges you have to deal with that you would not have in a regular classroom. These kind of balance themselves out meaning it is not any easier to teach gifted than any other group of students.

They are too touchy/feely

I was on a committee to hire a new gifted teacher with the assistant superintendent and a parent. The woman came in and told us about all her experiences working with gifted students, showing us student portfolios and projects she had kept in her garage. The assistant superintendent kept asking her about data and student growth. The candidate instead told us stories about working with children, nurturing them, and helping them to understand their gifts.

After the interview was over the three of us debriefed. I was ready to hire this woman on the spot. She seemed like the perfect person to work with our gifted elementary students and help them through their social/emotional needs which is what a good part of teaching gifted children is all about. The assistant superintendent said,

“No way. She was like a hippie on steroids,” and we moved onto another candidate.

I am positive none of my former students would describe me as being touchy/feeling, but it is a moniker often saddled on gifted teachers. The reason for this is because the social/emotional needs of our students are so important that it is necessary for us to be in touch with those. Although I was not myself touchy/feely, I was aware of these needs and addressed them as much as the academic needs. It is really important for anyone working with gifted children to be aware of these social/emotional needs and to understand them.

It's all arts and crafts

When I taught a one day a week gifted pullout enrichment class, my charge was not to teach my 3rd and 4th graders the standards, their teacher the other four days was responsible for that. My task was to enrich them and go deeper into the understanding of these standards. I decided to make the classroom project-based. I had thirty different long-term projects, each one tied to a specific standard or standards. Instead of just learning about perimeter, students got to design their own fort, build a model of it, and figure out the perimeter, or instead of just learning what an ecosystem was, students created origami animals that would co-exist in an ecosystem and describe how they would interact with one another.

I had a meeting with one of the teachers about a parent concern, and she said to me “it seems like the enrichment class is a glorified art class”. I could understand how it would look like this because students were always bringing in their projects. What this teacher did not understand was that it was the students that were bringing the artistic aspect to the projects. I provided them with a suggested product but how they created it was up to them. What I was providing for students was an artistic outlet. Sometimes in gifted we focus too much on the academics and ignore the creative abilities of these students. They need an outlet to express this creative side of themselves. I have found that project-based learning is a wonderful way to challenge gifted students because they often do not put a ceiling on the level of learning that can take place and it allows students to use their creative ability as well. It is this creativity that is allowing them to stretch the learning.

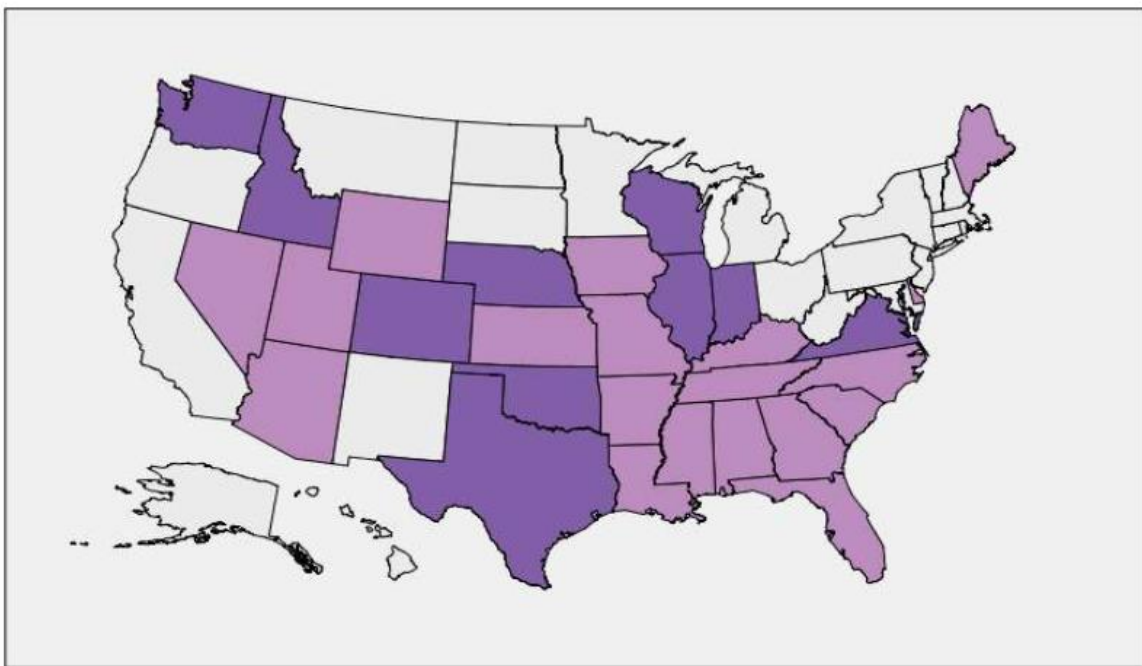
They all have specialized training

It is rare for a college student going to school to be a teacher to get any sort of specific teacher training for working with gifted students. Even if you are hired to specifically work with gifted children, not all states require that teachers be certified in gifted.

States Requiring Professionals Working in Gifted Programs to Have Certification or Endorsement

(n=29)

■ Yes ■ No □ NA



According to this map from the 2014-15 State of the States as provided by the National Association of Gifted Children, only 19 states require teachers working in gifted programs to have gifted certification. Only a single state, Nevada, requires that teachers receive training before beginning their classroom service.

The point being that some of the people teaching in a gifted classroom may have never received any training on how best to work with these students. This does not mean they are not good teachers. There are certain strategies and techniques that work well with gifted children. It

would be a boon for these teachers to at least be familiar with these so that they may choose which ones to use with their gifted students.

They employ special strategies that only work with gifted children

Sometimes when I do professional development with regular education teachers, they become disappointed because they were expecting me to tell them some magical formula for working with gifted children. There is no magical formula. Strategies that work with gifted children are typically just good strategies that would work with most students. Some of these include:

- Project-based learning
- Tiered assignments
- Inquiry-based learning
- Multilevel learning stations
- Problem-based learning
- Product choices

Most of these involve student choice and/or independent learning. It also means giving a certain level of control over to the students, something some teachers are not comfortable with. The most important aspect is there is usually no ceiling that is preventing students from going deeper into the understanding. This is something that could be done in most any classroom

The gifted students just teach themselves

Gifted children do come to school with a higher level of prior knowledge than most, and at times it seems as though they could be teaching the class themselves. I learned fairly quickly,

especially when they assigned me to teach science, that my students knew more than me. And these were 5th graders. What could I possibly teach children such as this? Luckily I have something they cannot possibly know about; experience. The experience of going through school, the experience of knowing what works and what does not from years of making mistakes, the experience of knowing what will be expected down the road, and the experience of learning. I could not teach them the content necessarily, but I could teach them life-long skills that would benefit them many years of school as well as life. In essence, I taught them how to teach themselves. This did not mean sitting back and letting them do all the work. It meant giving them a venue from which they could learn and coaching them along the way. My role went from the teacher of knowledge, to the facilitator of learning, a much more empowering position for the students.

Not only that, gifted students might seem like they know how to teach themselves but they are still children. Children with lots of ideas and ways of thinking. Figuring out a way to funnel this ability can be quite a challenge. Providing them resources and learning opportunities they might not have had access to is the goal of the gifted teacher.

Gifted students are naturally good at taking tests and notes

This is a dangerous assumption to make and one that many teachers do. Many times it is quite the contrary. A gifted child is so bright that he can be successful on a test without having to study or take notes. Eventually, this catches up to him but by the time it does, teachers are making the assumption he already has this skill. I did not learn how to take notes or study for a test until I was in my first year of college, and I found out the hard way, being on academic probation my first semester. I realized I would not be able to fake my way through the tests as I

had in high school. It was a steep learning curve and one that would have been easier if someone had shown me those skills earlier in my school career. Because of this I take quite a bit of time teaching students how to take proper notes or to learn study strategies to use when getting ready for a test.

They are gifted themselves

We often tell this joke in the gifted business:

I'm a gifted teacher

Actually, the jury's still out on that one

Is it necessary for the teachers who work with gifted students to be gifted themselves? No, but it sure helps. It helps with the perspective of these children and understanding the social/emotional needs because you too had these. I have noticed in my 20 years in education that teachers who are gifted themselves are drawn to this group of students. Does that mean everyone who has taught in gifted programming has been gifted? Absolutely not. I have known many teachers who were not identified as gifted in their school days and yet still work well with the gifted children.

I would say much more important than being gifted, a teacher of gifted needs to possess two qualities; an open mind and adaptability. An open mind in the sense that you should always be willing to try new things. Gifted students figure things out pretty quickly so having an open mind to try something else with them will keep them on their toes. Adaptability comes in that a teacher of the gifted needs to be ready to change his lesson plans as a moment's notice. You might have planned for something to take half an hour but your students fly through it in 5 minutes. What are you going to do with them the other 25 minutes? Or you have something you

thought might take 10 minutes and students are asking so many questions and throwing out so many ideas that you need to take the time to grasp onto this teachable moment, seeing where the students will take it. If a teacher possesses these two skills, they will be much more successful than someone who is gifted but does not.

Should be teaching students to fit in as much as possible

It was mentioned before that some gifted students have what we affectionately call quirks. These quirks come in many forms and include such things as being forgetful, being disorganized, being inquisitive, or being impulsive.

I had a student the first year I was teaching gifted students who asked a question about everything. No sooner had something come out of my mouth, his hand would shoot up and he would ask something about what I had just said. It was never a silly question, it was always something that was thought-provoking or inquisitive. At first this kind of threw me for a loop because it would interrupt the flow of my lesson, having to address these questions. Then I got to the point where I was just expecting the questions and thus was ready for them. I began to ask questions back to this student, challenging him to think critically.

I went to a team meeting where we met weekly to discuss issues that concerned the entire team. The English teacher was complaining about this very same student.

“He is always challenging me. He’s trying to make me look stupid.”

“I don’t think he is,” I replied. “I just think he is naturally curious.”

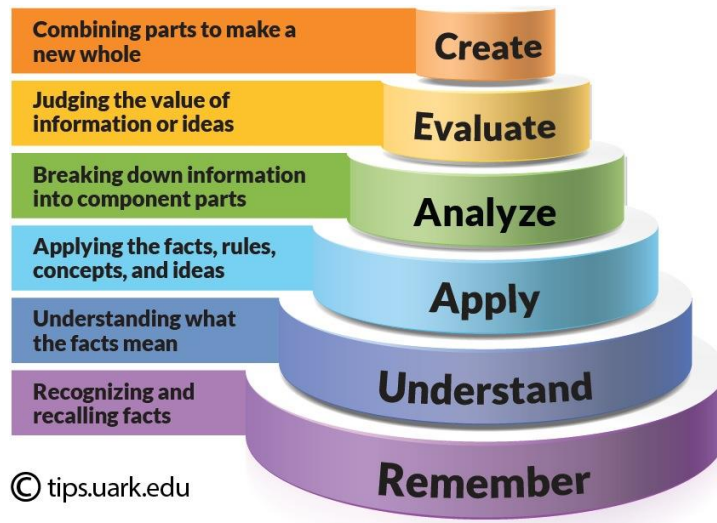
Here it was, two teachers seeing the very same student in two very different ways. While I accepted the student’s questioning of my lessons and used it to deepen discussion, she saw him as a non-compliant child.

Some teachers see the quirks of these children as something that needs to be curtailed. Students are expected to act a certain way and if these quirks get in the way, they must be stopped. By doing this you are snuffing out the uniqueness of the child. The quirks are what make her what she is. We should be embracing the uniqueness of our gifted students and empowering them to not hide it. The goal of a gifted program is not to develop every child so that they can fit in with everyone else. The goal should be to develop the individuality of each child so that they stand out from the rest.

Challenging students means making it harder for them and giving them more work

A lot of teachers think that in order to challenge gifted children, they need to raise the rigor by making their class harder. And how do you make the class harder? The easiest way is by giving students more things to do and less time to do them. This is not rigor. In fact, many students resent just being given more, especially if it is the same work. The idea of rigor is to provide different work that is going to challenge students. And where is the best place to challenge a student; with their thinking.

It all comes down to Bloom's Taxonomy. Bloom divided the types of thinking into six levels:



Many classrooms use only the apply, understand, and remember section of the taxonomy. This means that a majority of the time students are accessing the lower levels of their thinking. This does not mean what they are doing is not hard, what it does mean it is probably not rigorous.

In order to be rigorous, students need to be in the top half of Bloom's chart. They need to either be analyzing, evaluating, or creating in order to access their high levels of thinking. This does not mean every activity or lesson should be higher level thinking. The lower levels of thinking have their place in the classroom. These act as the building blocks to higher thinking. Without this basic knowledge, it would be difficult to think critically because you would not have the background knowledge needed. The problem comes in that many teachers stop at this lower level rather than pushing students higher. The ratio of high to lower level thinking students are doing in class should be about 50/50. That means half of the thinking being required of students is at the analyzing, evaluation, or creating levels.

Engage in this...

It is important as a teacher to understand the myths of gifted children, their parents, and gifted teaching. The main reason for this is that if you buy into the myths, you tend to make assumptions and assumptions can get you into a whole lot of trouble. There will be times it seems like a student or a parent is running smack dab into the middle of the myth. It is important to look a little closer and see this for the individual situation it is. The problem with one size fits all is that it does not fit anybody. If you approach a situation in the same manner you handle all situations, you will not be engaging with the student or the parent. Each gifted child and/or parent is unique in their own way and thus should be treated this way.

- A teacher makes a good impression by creating an open line of communication between parent and teacher and by having clear expectations for students. While some teachers think it's necessary to have every square inch of classrooms covered in materials related to the class, I'm personally not impressed by fancy colorful classroom displays - I want to see what students are doing rather than simply what they are seeing on the walls in their rooms.

parent Michelle Leasor

Chapter 3 – First Impressions

First impressions are very important. If you impress a parent right away, you have an ally and it will take a bit of missteps to turn that person against you. If, on the other hand, you make a bad first impression, you are in the dog house from the outset and trying to change that person's perception can be quite difficult. It can be the difference between having a successful year with a parent or not.

That first impression can be the slightest thing. Some teachers were holding a meet-the-teacher night for 4th grade parents. The idea was that the parents would get to experience what it would be like to be their child coming into the class. Expecting a large crowd, the teachers opened the wall that separated the two classrooms, but wanted to make sure parents entered a particular door so they would grab the papers and materials needed for the meeting. To facilitate this routine, they locked one of the doors to the classrooms, funneling the parents through the open one and past the information they wanted them to have. Everything seemed to go well and parents enjoyed learning about the way their child's classroom was going to be run. Flash forward two months. A parent calls for a meeting with the teachers. She has a list of complaints she begins to go over. Complaints such as grades taking more than a single day to be posted online, the fact that a job description was not clear for students, and typos in a homework

assignment. Although they were listening, all of these issues seemed sort of petty to the teachers. Then a realization came to them as she revealed;

“And when you had your meet-the-teacher night, you locked the door to one of the classrooms. This was very unwelcoming and I felt like we were being excluded.”

Both teachers were taken aback by this. That was not their intention at all. Their intention had been to welcome parents and students to the new school year. They tried explaining this to the parent but she was having nothing of it. The rest of the year continued like this, the mother emailing the principal when she had an issue or something was bothering her which was frequently. The very next year when her son had moved to 5th grade at the same building, the principal was shocked that not only was the mother not sending emails every couple of weeks as she had during her son’s 4th grade year, she had not received a single email nor a phone call. This was not a problem parent, it had been a parent with a problem. The first impression the 4th grade teachers left on her set the tone for the entire year so the parent was constantly looking for things that were wrong. This was not the case of the 5th grade teachers who apparently made enough of a good first impression to prevent the mother from finding fault with them.

With that in mind, how can you avoid offending a parent or better yet, how can you make that great first impression to grease the skids for a successful year engaging with this parent?

Orientation at the end of the year

Typically, the way it works is when students are starting a new grade or program, there is a back-to-school event either right before school begins or within the first couple of weeks, where students can see the building and meet the teachers. The problem with this, especially if it is a transition year from one building to another, is that students have to spend the entire summer

wondering how things might be different and who their teachers are or even look like. That anxiety has been building up over the three months between school years and for some it can make the beginning of the school year very stressful. Not only can this be stressful to the child, the parents also may have questions about what the program or class has to offer which will either go unanswered for the summer or be answered by someone who does not have all of the facts. If the transition is to a voluntary program, this lack of information might cause a parent or student to opt not to participate in the program.

Instead of waiting until the beginning of the school year, if you know who is going to be in what class or what students will be invited to a program, have a meeting with them before the school year ends. We do this currently for a program I coordinate involving 4th through 6th graders. We have an orientation meeting the last month of school in order for new students and parents to feel more at ease. We divide the orientation up into three parts:

- 6:00 – 6:30 – Overview of Programming
- 6:30 – 6:45 – Q&A
- 6:45 – 7:00 – Self-Guided Tour of the Building

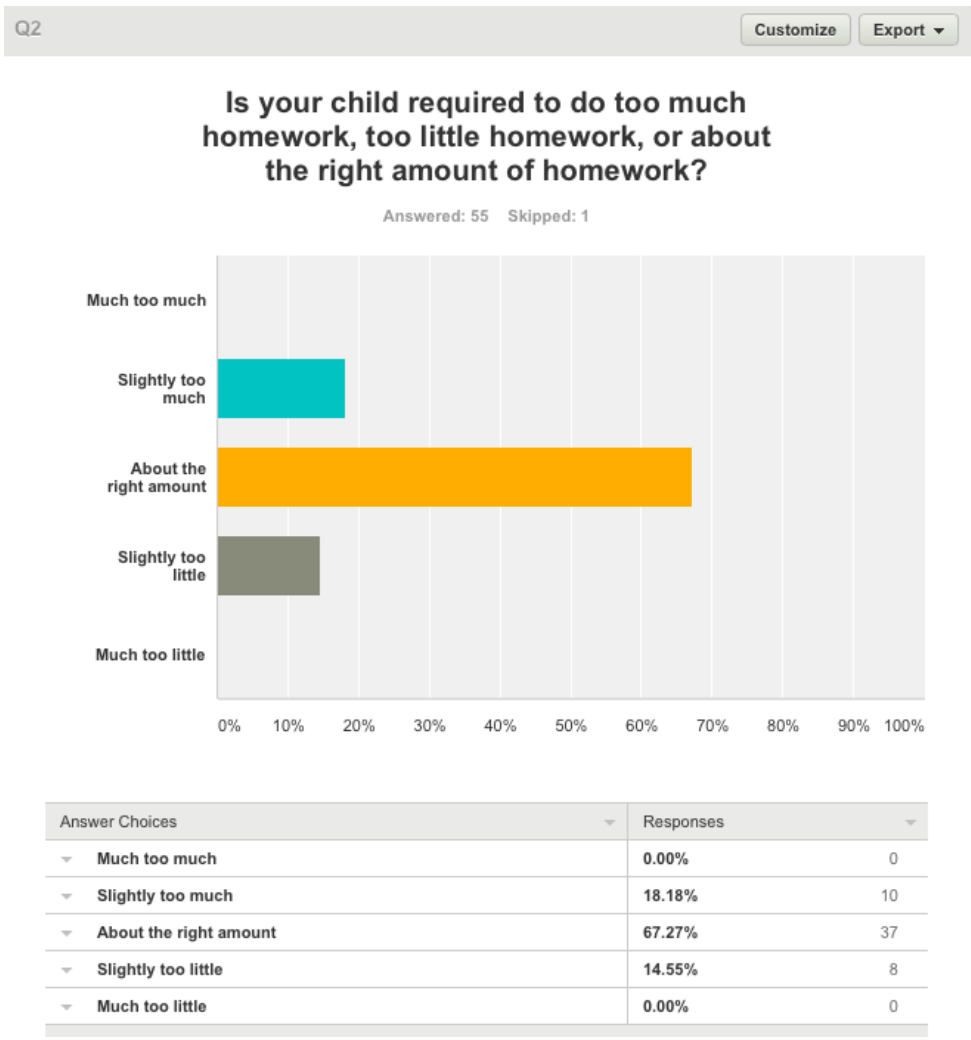
We start by explaining the philosophy and vision of the program. Having a vision for a program can be valuable in that it sets the tone for both parents and students. The vision of our program is the following:

- Gifted students will have an opportunity to express their unique abilities in a learning environment that maximizes their potential and celebrates giftedness.

We also set the expectations for the program. This is a challenge program so students are going to be challenged. That also means they might not bring home straight As. By stating this up

front, we tend to cut down on phone calls in the fall when a student gets his first B. Parents know it might happen now so it is not as big a shock.

Next is the question and answer portion of the orientation. This is probably the most important aspect because what comes out in this are all the worries and concerns parents and students might have about the program. Most times, a question someone is asking is also on the minds of several others in the audience. By answering it you are providing reassurance as well as controlling the message. Because it is coming from the horse's mouth, parents can disregard anything else as rumor. Along these lines, you sometimes want to anticipate misperception about the program or class and address it in the orientation. For instance, there was a misperception that students were given three hours of homework a night in our challenge program. It was scaring students away because they didn't want to have so much homework. We decided to gather data to combat this misconception so we surveyed parents of students currently in the program. We asked them whether we gave too much homework, just the right amount, or too little. What the data showed was this:



You can see the reality of the parents is much different than the perception of those outside of the program. Out of 55 respondents, not a single one thought there was much too much homework. Keep in mind, this was a voluntary survey. The type of person who participates in a voluntary survey is usually the one who has a bone to pick, and yet not a single response in that column. A comparative amount thought there was slightly too much or slightly too little homework, and a majority of the parents, 37 of them, thought there was just the right amount of homework. By showing these results to the gathering of new parents and students, they had cold hard data that

disproved the misconception about the program and set a lot of people at ease. It is very important to combat perception whenever you are given the chance, doing so with data. Although perception is just that, someone's perception, it can spread and become more real than reality itself. Managing the perception is important.

After the question and answer session, parents and students are invited to check out their classrooms and meet their teachers. Students are always interested to see where they will be living for the next year and parents are always glad to meet who they will be engaging with. This time is really good because the reality is that no matter what vision you have for the program and what expectations you lay out, it is the human side, the teachers, which really makes the difference. By allowing parents and students to interact with the teachers they will be engaging with the following year, it starts them out on the right foot.

Do not just have a meeting for the sake of having a meeting. Make it meaningful to parents and students. One easy way to do this is to have the teachers who will be teaching them the next school year present. The power of having parents and students meeting the teachers was apparent to me when I taught in a gifted magnet program where students entered in the 5th grade and stayed until their 8th grade year. The very first year we began the program, we worried about recruiting enough 5th graders to make up a class. We were in competition with a STEM magnet school the district was starting and we felt making a strong first impression was going to be very important for these students and parents when it came time to make their choice. Just meeting the teachers and getting to ask questions was reassuring for both students and parents to give them confidence about the decision they were making. We filled both classes, no problem. The STEM program, which did not offer an orientation with the teachers, just information about the program itself, only stole a couple of our gifted students away from us.

Years later, the magnet program was under the direction of the building principal and he decided to handle the recruiting of the students himself. He did it just as we had before, identifying students and sending them an invitation to be in the program. The difference this time was the principal did not want the teachers of the program to attend the introductory meeting, much to my protest. He assured me he wanted to try recruiting his way and that we should let him handle it. There were over sixty students and sets of parents who were invited to this meeting and when all was said and done, only twenty signed up for the program. We had to cut the 5th grade from two classes to a single one. This taught me to never underestimate the power of the teacher and how just meeting who you will be spending the next year of your life can set parents and students at ease. The unknown can be very scary. Make it known who they will be working with.

Beginning of the year mixer

A classroom or a gifted program is a community. The question becomes, how can you best shape this community? For better or worse, the teachers and students and to a certain extent, the parents, will be spending the better part of the next year together. How can you start building this community from the very beginning? One way is to have both students and parents in for a mixer. This can take many forms. In one program for high school juniors and seniors, we would do it potluck style and have families bring a dish that was traditional to their own family. The student would have a placard sitting in front of their dish explaining why this was a family tradition. Some families brought in dishes traditional to their heritage such as Polish pierogis, German potato salad, or Jewish Knishes. Others brought in dishes that were a family tradition

their own family had started such as meatloaf Wednesday, chocolate chip pancakes, or store bought Oreos that were always present during holidays and family gatherings.

The point was not the food, although that is always nice. The point was that people were brought together and not only that, they had something they could share about themselves. Not only were students getting to know one another, their parents were getting to meet and talk as well. This was the beginning of the community we would build together.

Another example would be for our 4th graders, who were all entering into the program for the first time, we decided to have a hot dog cookout the month before school began. We realized summer is a busy time for a lot of people and not everyone would be able to attend, but since we were pulling students from seven different elementary schools, we felt it was important for them to meet one another before school started and start to build relationships. This would also bring together the parents who were from various parts of town who might not have ever interacted with one another otherwise.

To simplify things, dishes were assigned alphabetically;

A - F – drinks

G - H – side dishes

J - P – desserts

R - Z – chips

I provided the hotdogs and buns and the teachers brought the plates and utensils. We were amazed at the turnout. Out of fifty some students who had been invited to the program, there were almost forty families in attendance. We had a BYOC policy of bringing chairs or blankets to sit on. Without any direction, people began to lay out blankets or set up chairs where they could be part of the community. What was most interesting was how organically conversations

happened and how connections were being made without any assistance from us. The teachers got the opportunity to mingle with families and to talk about something other than school. This kicked off the year wonderfully and we found that the transition for the 4th graders went much smoother than it had in the two years previous. We felt the cookout helped to start the year off on the right foot.

There are other activities you can have but the important aspect is to provide a venue where people can have conversations. In other words, if you decide to have a movie night to kick things off, there will not be any conversations because people are not supposed to talk during a movie. If you decide to have a pool party at a large venue, will people be too spread out to talk or interact with one another? Or if you organize a bunch of ice breakers to ensure that people are interacting, they may not have time to have natural conversations about themselves and their family. Give the people a space and then let human nature take over. We are inherently social creatures. By the way, it is always a good thing to offer food. Surprisingly, it brings people in.

Training day

A final way to get things started on the right foot would be to offer parents a training day. A lot of times what happens that causes issues is the translation factor. A child comes home from school and the parent naturally asks her what she did. The child is going to share the most interesting thing she did at school, whether it be a positive or negative thing. The parent having no other voice many times has no choice but to believe what their child is telling them. They are not there seeing what goes on in the day-to-day happenings nor the rationale behind doing it. The child is not maliciously making things up. It is merely a translation of events between what the teacher intended and what the child got from it. For example, a teacher decides to have an

economic system in the classroom where students apply for jobs, interview for them, and then work those jobs for play money which can be used to purchase rewards. A wonderful idea that teaches children responsibility as well as giving them ownership of the classroom. But the kid comes home and tells his dad when asked what he did for the day that he stapled papers for an hour. If you heard this but was not aware of the economy system the classroom has, this might upset a parent, thinking the student is being made to do menial work that the teacher should be doing. It is this lack of understanding which causes the conflict between parent and teacher.

How you can engage this problem is by showing parents how your system works. You could have the parents come in and see the economic system in play. You could also make them part of the process. They could be in on the interviews for the various positions. Or they could coach students how to conduct themselves in an interview. The idea here is if you are making a major change to the classroom or have a system you want parents to be aware of, invite them to come in and give them a training concerning the system.

I was teaching a one day-a-week gifted pullout, meaning I would only see the students a single day. Because I did not want the enrichment to be for only a single day, I chose to make the classroom a project-based learning one. Students would come in, choose a long-term project they wanted to work on from a choice board on the wall, and then plot out how they were going to work on it the entire week. Most of the work would actually be done at home with the time spent in my classroom making sure they were on the right path or to offer guidance to push it to the next level. I asked that they work on their project at least fifteen minutes a day, although some students excited about the project worked longer. I decided to have an evening meeting for parents to attend so I could educate them how the process would work. I invited them into the classroom, let them peruse the projects and resources, and then I took them step by step through

the process their child would be taking while working on the project. Every child would get a calendar and plot out the course of the project. Because this was not the traditional way of teaching, I wanted to make sure parents were aware of a few things:

- 1) Students would not be bringing home worksheets – instead students would have a task that they laid out on their calendar. It might be doing research, maybe it was constructing something, it could be conducting an experiment. Students were going to be creating their work depending on what they needed to do to complete their project. I was once in an orientation meeting for my daughter who was attending a Montessori school. They told us not to be alarmed that our child would not be bringing home worksheets every night. I thought this was odd and asked about it after the meeting. “Do parents really complain that their child is not bringing home a worksheet?” I asked the teacher. The answer the teacher gave me was “parents only know what they experienced in school. And since they grew up in a time where students often brought home worksheets, they expect the same thing and sometimes even get mad and demand worksheets”. If you are not running a traditional classroom, you might need to educate parents on what it will look like instead.
- 2) There would not be much direct instruction – other than focusing on a different 21st century skill each week (i.e. taking notes, conducting research, or writing an essay), I would not be standing in front of the class speaking at students. When you came into my class what you were going to see was 15 students working on 15 different projects. Not only would they be doing different tasks, all their deadlines were different so one student might be finishing up a project while another was right in the middle or just getting started. And where would I be? I purposely made sure my classroom would have a teacher chair with wheels because what I would be doing was moving from student to student and having conversations with individuals about their projects and time management of them. But me standing in front of the

class going over a math lesson or teaching them about rocks and minerals was not going to happen.

- 3) They could best help their child by providing resources – as stated before, gifted parents like to be involved in their child’s education. How best to do that for this unique program? I provided some guidance by explaining how time management was one of the most important skills students would be getting from the projects. Prioritizing, meeting deadlines, and avoiding procrastination was something the students would learn if allowed to do the work. What that meant was parents should not be helping create the projects or even giving students the ideas. Their main role would be providing whatever resources the child would need to complete their project. This might mean purchasing modeling clay if doing a replica of King Tut’s tomb, getting a younger sibling off of the computer so that the student could conduct research, or driving them to meet a veterinarian for an interview. If you do not give parents an idea of how to help, they will find ways themselves that might not be as helpful. Providing this guidance gave their help a purpose.
- 4) If they wanted to check in with their child the best way to do so was the calendar – again, time management was a major skill from this project-based learning. Rather than asking them if they had any homework or wanting to look over their answers, the best way to check in with their child would be to ask to see their calendar and ask if their child is staying on schedule. This could evolve into a conversation about how they might get back on track, encouragement for staying on task, or even suggestions for how to make the project even better. By using the calendar, the parent would also see the big picture of the project rather than the day-to-day tasks that might not make sense by themselves, but like a puzzle, fit together to complete the whole project.

- 5) If they wanted to be engaged in the project, they could do an evaluation of the final product using the rubric the student created – in an effort to engage parents in the project, I required students to get a second evaluation that they had to turn in with their product of the project. I did this for a couple of reasons. The parents would then get to see exactly what their child had been working on. The second thing it did was give the students the opportunity to do a dress rehearsal so-to-speak and see any problems there might be with the product before turning it in to me for a final grade. It provided me some feedback on how someone else saw the evaluation of the project. I would always read the comments the parents had made and used them to help with decisions of my own that I was not completely sure of.

Keep in mind, by having this parent meeting, I was not trying to prescribe for parents how they should and should not work with their child. What I was trying to do was offer some guidance for territory they might not have encountered themselves in school. Project-based learning was very different than the traditional classroom so helping parents to understand the differences was going to make a smoother process for parent, teacher, and most importantly, the child.

Anytime you are doing something in the classroom that is different than the traditional classroom, it is a good idea to explain to your parents the rationale for the change and what they should expect from their child. This is especially important with the advent of technology and the increased use of it in the classroom. Parents did not have such technology when they were in school so helping them to understand it with a link to an on-line tutorial or an email with an explanation of how to use it will prevent confusion and questions later on. Being proactive in the education of parents will solve so many problems that you will actually never see because you informed them.

We made the mistake in our gifted program when we radically changed the way our classrooms looked mostly due to a one-to-one initiative where every student had a computer to use. We moved from direct instruction to station rotations where students learned from on-line videos, applied what they learned, and then met with the teacher to check for understanding. In a traditional classroom, it is the exact opposite. The teacher gives direct instruction, the student applies what they have learned, and maybe they watch a video afterwards. The mistake was not that we were moving to the station rotations. After all, this made students more responsible for their education, improved their time management skills, and made them self-sufficient. Our mistake was not educating the parents of the change. We got a lot of backlash because kids were going home and telling mom and dad that the computers were now teaching them and the teacher was not doing anything. This of course was not the case but that was how the message was being translated. We received lots of parent phone calls and emails concerned with the method we were using to teach. I assured parents this was what was best for kids, but parents still struggled for understanding. We then decided to have the parents come in and experience what it was like to go through the station rotations. We even had current students run the various stations and explain to parents how they worked. This training session went a long way in helping parents to understand the process and the value in it. There were some parents who still did not like the method and I feel if we had shown them at the very beginning of the school year what this was going to look like, they would have been less upset. We erred in waiting too long to educate our parents on what instructional strategy we were going to use.

Engage in this...

It is important to get out in front of the message that you want parents to hear. The major reason for this is because without a message designed by the teacher, parents will fill it in with other sources you may not want them to such as their child, other disgruntled parents, or the worst, message boards such as Facebook. The best way to do this is by educating parents whenever you get the opportunity. Sometimes you need to purposefully create these opportunities through some of the aforementioned events. There are other methods that can be used to inform and educate parents which will be discussed throughout the book.

- When Zach was just four years old he saw the sign that said “Lee A. Gray: Mayor” and he asked me what “a grey mayor” was. That was when I knew he looked at things differently than other kids. We really do see differences in our children not just that he can read it at age 4, but the different way he looked at that sign.

parent Renee Ayers

Chapter 4 – Education

I will never forget the time I brought in a guest speaker to talk to the parents from our gifted program. I had about 30 parents in attendance and the speaker, whose book I greatly admired and I was hoping she would discuss, got up and told parents the most obvious things about gifted children. These were things that to anyone who had spent any amount of time in gifted education, would be very familiar with. My frustration turned to pleasure as I noticed so many parents nodding their heads in agreement as though this speaker had given them the secret for understanding their gifted child.

What became apparent to me is that just a little bit of knowledge can go a long way with parents. They are not looking to become experts of working with gifted children, they just want to have a better understanding of their own child. Educating them can go a long way in helping them to achieve this. This engagement could be a conversation, it could be a question and answer, it could be providing them ways to spend enrichment time with their child. Whichever you choose to do, make sure to be a partner in this education. You should be learning as much from them as they are from you.

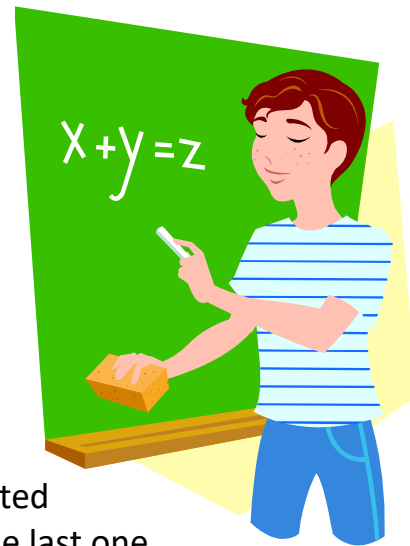
I started this process very slowly at first, deciding to run workshops that would help parents with their gifted children. These were done every three months and allowed me to engage with parents and them with me. I learned very quickly to leave some time for questions as just like their children, these parents have a lot of them. Depending on the nature of the workshop, I

might bring in someone else to help with these questions such as a coordinator, a principal, or an expert in the field.

This is an example of a flyer I sent home to parents:

Gifted Parents Workshop

I would like to have a workshop for parents of gifted students to develop strategies for improving student achievement and helping parents to support their gifted child. There would be a series of three workshops, the last one being a discussion with gifted education author Carol Strip, whose book Helping Gifted Children Soar is an excellent source for a better understanding of gifted children. The first workshop would be on February 1 and be held at the middle school in room 205. The topic of the first workshop will be gifted-friendly parenting strategies. The workshop would be at 6:00 and run for an hour and a half, giving you a unique opportunity to talk with other parents of gifted students. The agenda will break down as follows:



5 minutes: Introduction

25 minutes: Tips for Parents

25 minutes: Text-based discussion over needs of gifted children

25 minutes: Round-table concerning strategies for parents

10 minutes: Closing remarks, questions, wrap-up

Any parent of a gifted student is invited to come. In addition to having a gifted-certified teacher as a resource, there will also be an administrator present to discuss issues as well.

What I found at these meetings was that parents are an excellent resource. They have a lot of good ideas about the direction of gifted in the district. An extra added advantage is that they can become a voice for you. Many times these parents are not afraid to get involved and solicit the superintendent and school board if they find a cause they can get behind. This is how gifted gets consideration in a school system where a lot of other voices are crying out for support and help as well. I found it was also important to engage the parents, allowing them space to be heard and to bring issues they might be concerned about. Listening is half the battle. By listening to parents you might find there has been a misperception that can be cleared up easily or you might hear a legitimate concern that you had not considered. Providing a forum where parent voice can be heard is important in these education events.

When I became a coordinator, I had a much bigger parent group than just the ones in my class. These parent groups all have different needs and areas of interest. I decided to hold monthly meetings to address that. I would change the type of parent meeting every month for three months and then repeat the cycle. My schedule for the year looks something like this:

October – Parent Advisory (gifted programming the district offers and what you would like to see)

November – Book chat, Introduction and chapter 1 and 2 of *When Gifted Kids Don't Have All the Answers*

December – Parent Education (engaging parents of gifted students)

January – Parent Advisory (progression of gifted students through graduation and beyond)

February – Book chat, chapters 3-5

March – Parent Education – Myths of gifted children and their parents

April – Parent Advisory (what has worked this year and what can we do for next year)

May – Book chat, chapters 6-8

Notice it is a mixture of parent engagement. The parent education nights focus on working with their child. The parent advisory is about programming specific to the district and giving parents a voice to share their thoughts. The book chat always involves a book on parenting gifted children or dealing with their social/emotional needs.

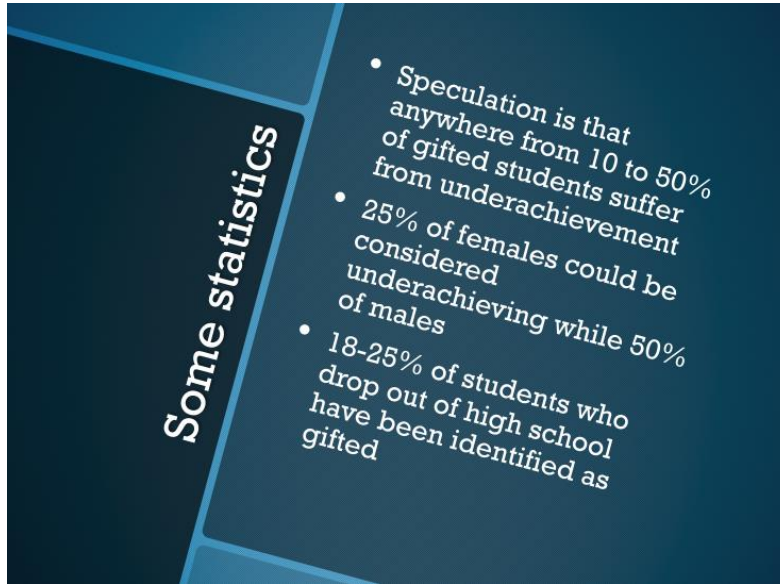
When I run programs such as this, I get a variety of groups. The book chats are usually small because parents have to commit to all three sessions and have to read the chapters. The parent advisory nights are usually more attended and have different groups depending upon the topic of the advisory. The parent education is somewhere in the middle. It is a little something for everyone. I always invite teachers and administrators to these parent gatherings as well.

Parent education nights

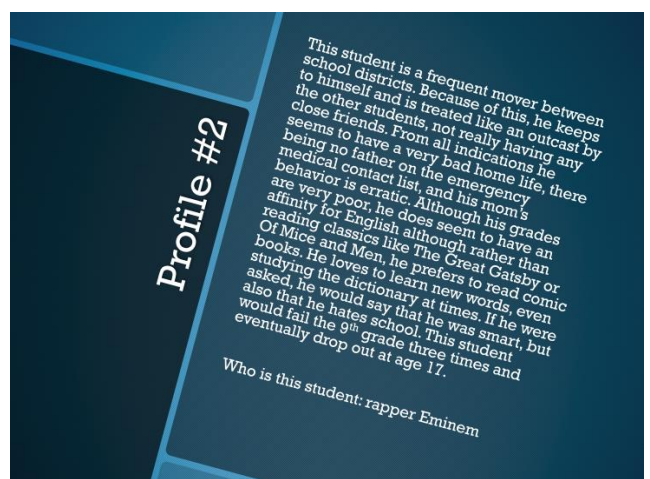
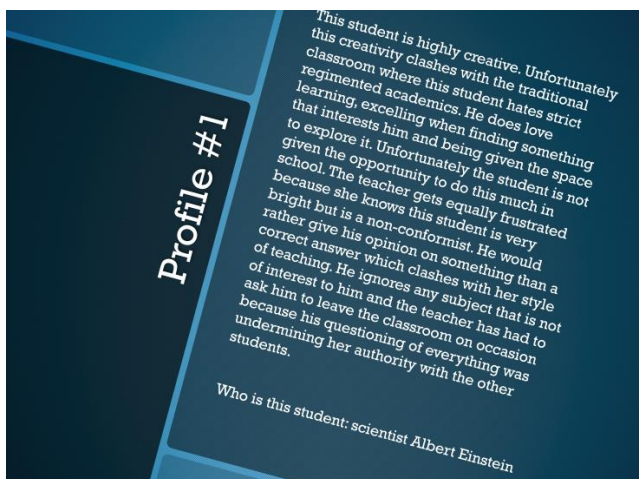
Parent education nights are just that, an evening when parents can choose to come in and learn something about working with their child. The topics can be broad-based concerning gifted or it can be very specific to the program and school. Every year our junior high and high school counselors put on a College and Career Ready Night. I speak at this event about the options of classes our gifted population have available to them and suggest pathways that children coming out of the gifted programming in the middle school and junior high might fall into.

Sometimes the topic of parent education is something that I notice in a lot of our students and want to make sure I address with parents. For instance, I noticed we had a smattering of underachieving gifted students, those who were not working up to their potential. I put together a parent education night covering what underachievement might look like and how they as parents could help to reverse this.

First I provided some statistics to show how underachievement can be a problem amongst gifted students:



Then we looked at the profiles of three famous people and how they were underachievers in early life before going on to bigger success. We also discussed the causes of their underachievement:



Profile #3

This student has been home schooled for her childhood education. She does enjoy fantasy play and creating characters. She also is an excellent reader. She enjoys problem solving skills, but has difficulty with spelling, math, foreign language, and the mechanics of writing. She often has to recite her answers and someone else writes them down for her because her handwriting is so poor. In math she often forgets numbers which makes it difficult for her to do even the most rudimentary arithmetic problem. She is eventually diagnosed with a learning disability called dysgraphia as well as dyslexia, which cause one to write backwards and to have great difficulty with math and writing.

Who is this student: author Agatha Christie

Causes of the underachievement

- Profile #1
- Non-conformist
- Profile #2
- Peers/Home life
- Profile #3
- Learning disability

Next we looked at some signs that could indicate underachievement that they might see at home:

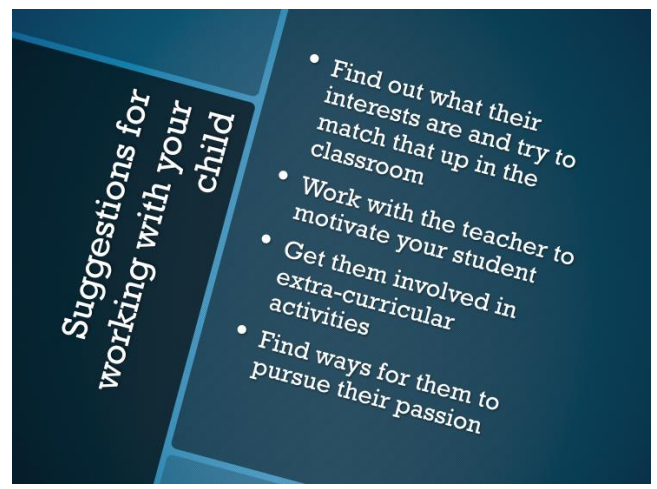
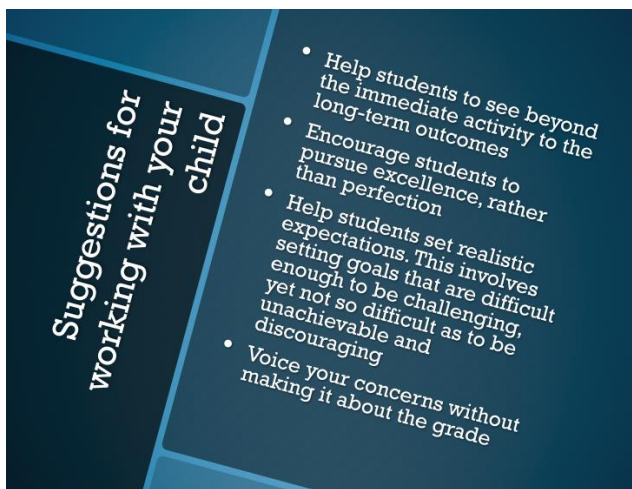
Signs of underachievement?

- take "easier" classes to avoid work that would require much effort
- avoid competitive academic activities, such as the debate team or math contests, to evade potentially envious or angry reactions from peers
- refuse to try anything that might lead to failure or rejection, such as auditioning for the lead in the school play.
- procrastinate until the last minute to see how quickly they can write a paper before the deadline.
- take pride in only reading Spark Notes and still getting A's in their AP English class.
- avoid opportunities to challenge themselves when given the chance by teachers or assignments
- gives minimal responses to assignments, enough to answer the question but not enough to probe it at a deeper level

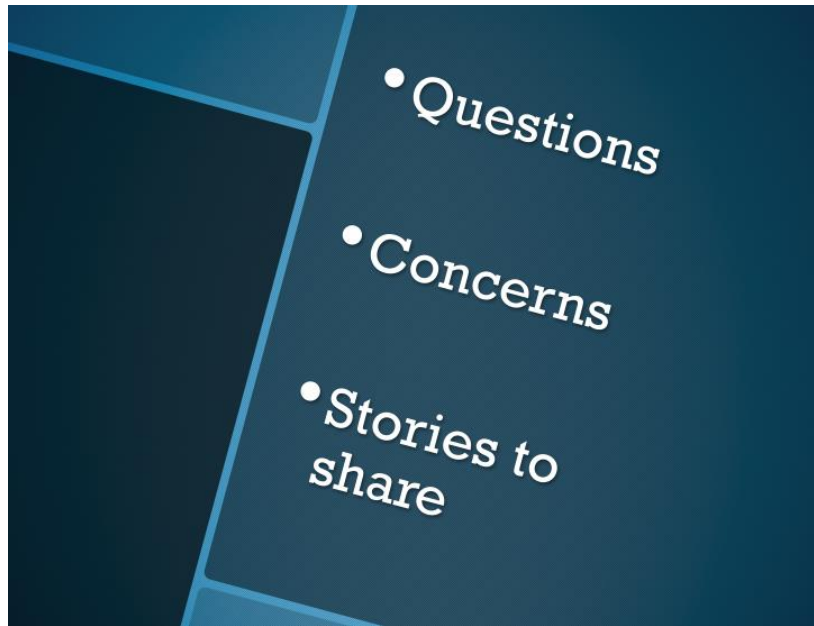
Although there are many reasons for underachievement, I focused on the five that parents are most likely to see at home or have some control over. They are:

1. Social/Emotional Needs
2. Depression/Lack of Motivation
3. Home Life
4. Twice Exceptional
5. Too Smart for their Own Good

After going over each of these and what these might look like at home, we discussed ways they could work with their gifted child to prevent underachievement:



After all of this, it is important to leave time for parents to ask questions and more importantly, to connect with one another:



A venue such as this does two things; it educates the parents and provides them with answers they might have been wondering about, and it allows for dialogue. Dialogue between the teacher and the parents. Dialogue between the parents and the school. Dialogue between parents. It is in this dialogue that we find engagement.

Sometimes I choose the topics based on what I have seen of the students in the programs, other times the topic comes up in another meeting or a parent suggests one. I discovered in one of my meetings that I had more twice exceptional children in programming than I was aware of. This led to inquiry by others and thus the topic for the next parent education night was discovered; students that are 2E and strategies for helping them.

What is equally as important as the parent education, is the education I myself receive from these evenings. I find out things that I can take back to the classroom that I had not considered. I hear issues come up that I address with other teachers to get their take on and what can be done. I discover the needs that some families have and can take this to my administration to see what the school system can do to help with these.

Book chats

I am a reader by nature. I enjoy reading for both pleasure and to further educate myself. Reading can sometimes be a very lonely hobby however. What makes it more interesting is to have someone to talk about the book with and perhaps get a different perspective. Ask anyone who is in a book club and they will tell you it makes their reading of the material more dimensional because they are seeing it from many different points of view. I often have book chats with colleagues, reading about some new practice we might try in the classroom. I have book discussions with students even though I am not the Language Arts teacher, mostly to get me caught up on what they are reading. Book chats with parents is a good way to have some conversation. Adding to the discussion for me is the fact that I have a gifted daughter myself so I am there not just under the guise of the school presence, but as a parent who might be going through many of the same things.

I usually put an invitation for the book chat out at the beginning of the school year through email:

The book chat will be just that; dividing a book into various sections and talking about different chapters each time. The book for this year's book chat will be "A Parent's Guide to Gifted Children" by James Webb. This book is somewhat long so we will be looking just at specific chapters each time we meet. It is available from Amazon in paperback for \$16.62.

Please feel free to join us at any of these parent nights. I will send reminder emails a few days before each event.

Any questions please let me know. I am always posting events for gifted students and photos of gifted students in action on my Twitter account, @the_gifted_guy.

Putting it out at the beginning of the year allows parent enough time to get the book as well as to read the required chapters. It takes a big commitment on the part of the parent. They not only have to devote three nights out of a busy schedule, but also the time spent reading the chapters.

That is why no matter how many people say they are coming, I would never consider canceling. I had a book chat with only one other parent, but enjoyed the conversation immensely.

Finding the right book can be a little bit of a challenge. Here are some books I have used with parents in the past that allowed for great engagement about gifted children:

- When Gifted Kids Don't Have All the Answers – Judy Galbraith and Jim Delisle
- The Survival Guide for Parents of Gifted Kids: How to Understand, Live With, and Stick Up for Your Gifted Child Paperback – by Sally Yahnke Walker Ph.D.
- Helping Gifted Children Soar – Carol Strip Whitney
- Parenting Gifted Kids – James Delisle
- Guiding the Gifted Child: a Practical Source for Parents and Teachers – James T. Webb
- The Overachievers: the Secret Lives of Driven Kids – Alexandra Robbins
- Creating Innovators: The Making of Young People Who Will Change the World – Tony Wagner
- Raising a Gifted Child – Carol Fertig
- A Parent's Guide to Gifted Children – James T. Webb

Notice many of these books have to do with the social/emotional needs of gifted children. This is the area parents can help the most with their child and the place you can most help them with their child. They see the late nights working on homework, the frustration when something is not perfect, or the tantrums when others are not getting them. Although you as the teacher can help students with the social/emotional aspect at school, it is more behind the scenes imbedded into the school day that mostly focuses on academics.

It is best to prepare for your book chats. I always tell my students, it is never a good idea to wing it. This usually results in a lesser quality product. This is also why as teachers we have lesson plans. The same goes with the book chats. In this case however, rather than laying out a comprehensive lesson for what it to be discussed, I generally create discussion questions that are designed to lead to rich dialogue. These broader, big questions without an easy answer are always more interesting to discuss and debate than just covering the content of the book.

Here are some examples of discussion questions I used concerning the book Parenting Gifted Kids by James Delisle:

Discussion questions

- What is full potential?
- Does giftedness doesn't always show itself with high achievement
- Should teacher recommendations be considered when identifying gifted students
- What is the difference between normal and typical?
- Is there a distinction between better at and better than?
- What is the difference between agemates and peers?
- Which of the overexcitabilities (OE) do you see in your own child?
 - 1) psychomotor – instead of punishing we should find ways to channel
 - 2) sensual – provide sensual outlets for dealing with situation
 - 3) intellectual – always asking why, best thing to do it listen
 - 4) imaginational – overly imaginative and creative children who create their own worlds, must let this spark and not worry about returning to Earth
 - 5) emotional – intense positive and negative feelings, strong sense of right and fairness
- Can you cannot train someone to be gifted or are they born that way?
- What did you think about his comments on A Nation Deceived, the report that showed the state of affairs of American education system (available for free online)
- Should there be a gifted parent association in our school?

- Should students be well-rounded or find something they're good at and do it well
- Does potential exist in the eye of the beholder
- Which is worth more, the lazy A or the hard worked C

The idea of these questions is not to find an answer. It is to come to an individual realization in the process of discussing the issue with others. This realization might be something they experience at home, something they have seen in their other children, or something they might want to avoid with their child. Sharing this realization is where the engagement takes place.

With busy schedules, it is difficult for some parents to attend evening sessions. This is why I always take notes from the discussion and send this to all the gifted parents in my contacts.

Here is an example of notes taken from a session on Carol Fertig's Raising a Gifted Child:

Notes from Book Discussion concerning chapters 3-4

Chapter 3

- what do we expect bright kids to do just because they are intelligent? Can some of these expectations be unfair?
- we must help the child see the possibilities in life
- importance of organization skills, students must see the benefit of it
- emotional intelligence (EQ) can be almost as important as their IQ, must be a balance between the two
- struggle can be good for kids
- students need to understand the relationship between effort and success
 - o effort can be controlled, intelligence cannot
- parents need to expect their children to work hard, to fail at times, and to learn from their mistakes

Chapter 4

- parents of gifted students have a responsibility to learn as much as they can about gifted education, allows them to act as an advocate for their child
- most of the gifted services are being offered by the district but there could be improvement and more intentional services in the affective support, social/emotional needs being met
- outside learning experience very valuable for students, makes them more well-rounded
- Hoagies gifted website an excellent resource for gifted parents
- is it too early for college planning
- how responsible is the parent for the learning of their child

Book chats are also a good way to expose parents to ideas that if they came from you, might not as readily accepted. Having them read these ideas and coming to conclusions on their own is much more empowering. Just as we want to empower students to learn on their own without us having to tell them what they should know, we should extend the same courtesy to their parents.

Outside learning opportunities

There are two types of education; the kind you get in school, and the kind you get outside of school through experiences. These outside learning experiences can be just as educational if not more so. These experiences occur when a parent takes their child to the zoo, goes to see a play the local theatre group is putting on, signing them up for an art class, or sending them to a summer camp. These experiences are what give children a view of the world in context rather than the sterile laboratory we call school.

These experiences need not cost anything. There are plenty of free enrichment activities put on by the library, the city, the school, or an organization such as the Boy Scouts of America or the YMCA. The problem is sometimes an outside learning opportunity comes along and even though the sponsors of the event tried to get the word out, it did not reach the parents. That is why I send out enrichment newsletters every month to make parents aware of outside learning opportunities that are available to them. Some of these come to me from the people hosting the event, some are suggested by parents or students, some I just run across, and some I actively search for.

Experiences such as this might not engage the parent with you the teacher (unless you are attending the event as well), but it allows them to engage with their child. They have a shared experience they can talk about as a family.

For every month, I provide three learning opportunities, one community based, one free, and one that costs. Here is an example:

Picktown Art Works Studio is independently owned art studio offering classes and projects in most genres of visual art. It is privately owned by Donato & Desirae DeBellis, residents of Pickerington, OH.

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
31	1	2	3	4	5	6
7	8	9 4:30 pm - 6:00 pm Dakota Smith ● DRAWINGWT	10	11 4:30 pm - 6:00 pm Dakota Smith ● DRAWINGWT	12 6:00 pm - 8:30 pm Desirae DeBellis CUSTOM CULTURE DESIGN YOUR OWN VANS	13
14 2:00 pm - 4:00 pm Alyson Toone ● JEWELRY MAKING	15	16 4:30 pm - 6:00 pm Dakota Smith ● DRAWINGWT	17	18 4:30 pm - 6:00 pm Dakota Smith ● DRAWINGWT	19 6:00 pm - 8:30 pm Amy Smith CUSTOM CULTURE DESIGN YOUR OWN VANS	20 9:00 am - 11:30 am Carrie Boerio INTRO TO OIL PAINTING
21	22	23 4:30 pm - 5:45 pm Dakota Smith ● DRAWINGWT 6:00 pm - 9:00 pm Cris Letourneau SIMPLY ZENTANGLE	24 6:30 pm - 9:00 pm Amy Smith ● STAINED GLASS	25 4:30 pm - 6:00 pm Dakota Smith ● DRAWINGWT	26	27
28	29	30 4:30 pm - 6:00 pm Dakota Smith ● DRAWINGWT	31 6:30 pm - 9:00 pm Amy Smith ● STAINED GLASS	1 4:30 pm - 6:00 pm Dakota Smith ● DRAWINGWT	2	3

You can access their calendar of classes at:
<https://picktownartworks.com/timetable/>

Pickerington Public Library
Dog Tales

December 14 @ 6:30 pm - 7:30 pm

The Pickerington Public Library has partnered with The Connection to bring you this Dog Tales program. We will now be scheduling readers to participate in one-on-one reading with a canine buddy. You will register for a 20-minute session of reading.

For children ages 5 – 10.

Registration is required. Contact the library Youth Services Desk to register.

Ohio Chinese Lantern Festival

November 17 – January 7

A celebration of Chinese culture will return to the Ohio Expo Center with more lantern displays, more culture programs and more fun! Get ready to experience Columbus in a whole new light with exquisite lanterns, amazing nightly performances, and various handicrafts demonstrations!

Price: Online: Onsite Box Office Hours nightly from 4:30 pm – 9:30 pm starting November 17; performances are included in festival admission. Tickets are available online or at the door, no advance purchase is necessary.

- Adults – \$15
- Youth (17 and under) – \$10
- Kids (2 and under) – Free

Time: 5:30 pm -10 pm nightly; performance times: Sunday-Thursday, 6:30 pm and 8 pm; Friday and Saturday, 6:30 pm, 8 pm and 9 pm

Location: Natural Resources Park

Website: ohiolanternfestival.com/

These are emailed to parents of gifted children in a monthly newsletter. I ask that if they attend the event with their child if they would not mind sending me some pictures to post on my Twitter account so that parents in the community can become engaged as well.

Engage in this...

Part of the engagement of parents is educating them about strategies for working with their gifted child and to provide them with opportunities to grow as people. Almost as important is the education you receive yourself through the conversations and interactions with parents. It gives you much more perspective of the children you have in your classroom. It also cements that partnership aspect of the relationship, meaning by learning how the other operates, many times it can put you on the same page. Having the same message to provide to children both at

school and home goes a long way in having an effect on kids. If the messages are contrary to one another, this is where problems can be.

- Parents need to get involved because sometimes they are the only ones who really "get" their children.

parent Sarah Starkey

Chapter 5 – Imbedded Parent Involvement

It is good to engage with parents outside of the classroom, but it is even better to imbed that parent involvement right into the classroom. This does not mean finding a room parent who will make copies for you or cut out laminated shapes. This means engaging the parent into the classroom by finding ways to use them as a resource to help your gifted students to learn.

This can come in many forms. This chapter will discuss nine ways to provide opportunity for the parents of your gifted students to engage in the classroom. They are:

- Learning centers
- Running literary circles
- Chaperones for fieldtrips
- Evaluating student work
- Panel
- Expertise
- Mentoring
- Action research
- Invite them to exhibitions

You need to find the strategy that provides the level of engagement you are comfortable with while at the same time giving parents a meaningful experience with their gifted child's education.

The less you make your classroom a secretive place and instead are transparent about what is going on, the more comfortable parents are going to be. This is especially true if they can see it for themselves and be a part of it.

Learning centers

A strategy of teaching that has grown a lot of traction lately is that of station rotation. The idea behind this is that instead of all the students learning the same lesson at the same pace at the same level, students can rotate through stations that are spread around the room. Some of these stations involve hands-on manipulatives, some involve going onto a computer, watching a video lesson, and answering questions, some involve students playing games that help them to learn a concept. These stations all run independently, with directions and materials already at the stations. When students arrive at the station they read what it is they are supposed to do and then accomplish the task. Sometimes the task is differentiated according to the ability of the student, but students work at the station until they are finished and then move on to another one. There is typically a station in this scenario that is run by the teacher. Students come to the kidney-shaped table and may receive a teacher-led lesson, it could be a one-on-one discussion, or it could be a handful of students are not getting a concept and the teacher wants to go over to make sure they are.

What if you also had a parent-run station? When students go into the rotation, they go to a table where the parent is seated and she gets to run the lesson at the station. Having something available such as this does many things for you:

1. It gives you another set of eyes and ears to make sure students are on-task. Station rotations are great, especially for self-directed gifted children, but for those who are not so self-directed, another person guiding them along would be nice.
2. It gives you flexibility with the station lesson. By having a parent man the station, it opens up more options for how it can be run. Instead of a set of directions, the parent can engage the students in the lesson. To be truly

meaningful the parent should not just be verbalizing what could simply be read on a set of directions. It should be something where the parent is playing an important role in the station.

3. The students get the perspective of another adult who might have a level of expertise or experiences that can help the student to understand it better.
4. And most importantly, it allows the parent to engage in the classroom. She gets to see for herself how the class is run and sees the hard work you put in as a teacher. She is not hearing it secondhand from her child but rather is seeing it with her own eyes. This can help make the parent more empathetic to you.

Depending how many parents would like to come into the classroom, you could have a few parent-led stations going on in the classroom. It is a win-win situation for you. You get an extra set of hands to assist with the students as well as increasing the level of engagement the parent has in your classroom.

Running literary circles

The way it works in a traditional classroom, the teacher chooses a book the entire class is going to read and together they plod through the book lock and step, talking about what is going on, followed up by watching the movie version of the book.

We now understand that choice is a powerful tool to give a child. It is powerful because it empowers her to participate in her education by getting some say in the direction it takes. If the unit is on coming of age, rather than give students one choice such as *Catcher in the Rye*, which is essentially no choice, you provide them with several choices:

The Perks of Being a Wallflower – Stephen Chbosky

Looking for Alaska – John Green

The Outsiders – S.E. Hinton

The Secret Life of Bees – Sue Monk Kidd

Little Women – Louisa May Alcott

Notice there is something for everyone, from the 19th century Little Women to the more recent Looking for Alaska by John Green. There are books that focus on boys, and others that focus on girls.

The difficulty of doing this is that you the teacher would need to read five books and then try to have discussions with the five different groups that read various books. Not something that can be managed easily. One way around this is to get parents to run literary circles. Literary circles are discussion groups where those who have read the book discuss the themes and content. They are smaller than a whole class discussion, more intimate, sort of like a book club. Because they are smaller, more people have a voice in the discussion. These can be done with students leading the literary circles, but a way to engage parents is to ask them to lead them. You contact parents and ask if they have read the books or would be willing to. Then you have a lit discussion day where you invite these parents in to participate. You can either provide them with discussion questions or ask them to come up with some on their own. Because these are gifted students, you do not have to have the parent direct the entire discussion. They just need to be able to provide the spark that gets that students' innate curiosity and thinking flowing and then the students will take over much of the discussion. The parent would simply be there to bring them back to focus should the discussion veer wildly off track.

You might even come across a parent who has another book suggestion for your theme that she feels passionate about. This could become an additional choice for students or it could

replace one of the others. You want to capture that passion however because that is what will lead to thoughtful and meaningful discussion.

Chaperones for fieldtrips

Typically when schools are looking for chaperones for field trips, the parent is simply there as another adult of record to keep an eye on children. What if instead you made them part of the learning process?

Our school takes 5th graders to what is called JA BizTown. BizTown is a program where students work at businesses in order to learn hands on, and experience the concept of making and spending money. A student might be assigned to the hospital, the grocery store, or the bank. They are given specific tasks to accomplish and some of the students are the CEO of the company and thus are in charge of the business. JA BizTown asks for parent volunteers but instead of just having them supervise the students, they are part of the learning process. A volunteer is assigned to each business with the task of answering student questions as well as asking thought-provoking questions. Since the volunteers have life experience, they can provide a perspective for the children that their young age might cause them to lack. It is good use of chaperones that allows the volunteers and the students to engage in the learning process together.

When I would run fieldtrips, I would try to find ways for the parent to be more than just a monitor. How could I create a situation where the parent gets to talk with the students and figure out things together? Here is an example of a fieldtrip I took to the zoo annually with my 3rd and 4th grade students:

On Wednesday, May 17 the Ivy Program is taking its final fieldtrip for the year. We are leaving from Slate Ridge around 9:30 to go to the Columbus Zoo in conjunction with the Ohio Science standards dealing with animals and their life cycle as well

as a research paper the students have been working on. Arriving after 10:00, students will check in and then we will take a brief group tour until 11:00. We will eat from 11:00 to 11:30 and then students will spend the rest of the time studying their particular animal, collecting information for their research paper. We will meet at the front of the zoo by 1:00 and leave at 1:15.

There will be about twenty students. We are doing things a little differently when it comes to chaperones. Because every student is studying a different animal, each student needs to have a mentor attend the trip with them (admission for adults is \$2.00). This way the student can engage in discussion with his/her mentor in regard to the research questions posed. Please include the mentor's name and number on the bottom of this form.

Occasionally I would have a child who could not find a mentor but I would always find someone for them.

It was always so rewarding walking around the zoo and watching students talking with their mentor, challenging each other with questions, and engaging in the learning process as a pair. This also allowed the parent to get a better understanding of what their child was working on in class and to understand the process the child went through to complete the research paper.

If you do go on fieldtrips, try to find ways to have the parents engage in the learning rather than just being a chaperone. Choose venues that allow them to participate or set up the assignment where discussion with their child is part of the project. It becomes a win-win because you get parents to help you supervise the children when going somewhere outside of the school environment, and they get to engage in their child's learning. This is especially important with gifted students because the discussion allows them to gain a deeper understanding

Evaluating student work

Other than signing off on a log or looking at the student data binder, the parent often times is never made a part of the evaluation process for their child. What if you provided opportunities for parents to evaluate their child's work?

I am not suggesting you send their child's test home with them for the parent to grade, I am talking about engaging in the evaluation, providing their perspective to the learning process. I did this when I taught project-based learning in my science class. Students had to produce some sort of performance assessment to show me what they learned. This might be a presentation, an exhibition or display, an essay, or a model of something. Parents then evaluated the product and the student turned this in to me as part of their grade. This gave students another opportunity to practice their performance assessment before they turned it into me for a grade, and it allowed parents to see firsthand what their child was working on in my class.

Parents need not be a trained teacher to evaluate the work. A well written rubric can lead just about anyone through the evaluation process. Take for example this project I did with my 8th graders:

Criteria for Portfolio

Location - Where are you going to live (city and state) and why did you choose this location?

Job/Income – Job title, starting salary (annual ÷ 12) , benefits

Housing – No Roommates!

- a. Apartment:
(studio, 1 or 2 bedroom)
- b. Rent
- c. Security deposit
- d. Utilities – (heat, electric, water, garbage pick up)

College Loans – See **Scenario Worksheet** for the deduction you must take based on your selection of occupation.

Essentials – These are things that are a must. You have to have some money set aside for them, but the actual amount may vary per person.

n. **Food** – groceries, everyday household products/cleaning supplies and dining out.

- Are you bringing lunch to work or eating out?
- How about coffee and a bagel in the morning?
- Fast food once a week? What about weekends?

o. **Medical Insurance** – See **Scenario Worksheet** to help determine your insurance

- Health Insurance cost
- Physician co-pay (\$15 per visit)
- Rx's – co-pays generally \$5 per prescription each time it is filled.

p. **Dental**

- Insurance cost

- e. Renter's insurance
(You must have!)

- Dental cost (insurance covers all cleanings and x-rays; you still need to pay a % for fillings, root canals, crowns, orthodontia, etc.)

Transportation – You must purchase or lease a vehicle, new or used (no more than 3-4 years old) and purchased from a dealer.

- f. Make, model and year
- g. Purchase price
- h. Terms of loan:
years and interest rate
- i. Monthly payments
- j. Auto insurance
(company and cost)
- k. Deduct \$30/m for car repairs
- l. Gas - figuring 1,000 miles a month, calculate your gas consumption based on the MPG for your vehicle.
(Calculation must appear on slide.)
- m. If you live in a large city (NYC, Boston, or Washington DC) and choose public transportation, deduct \$65/m for unlimited access pass.

q. **Clothing** – a professional occupation needs appropriate clothing.

- Does your job require a uniform? You usually have to pay some of the cost.
- Shoes/sneakers/coats/swimsuits/underwear etc.

r. **Health and Beauty** (just the basics)

s. **Household/Cleaning supplies**

t. **Laundry/Dry Cleaning**

u. **Union dues** - if you are a member of a union, budget for a deduction of \$56 a month for dues.

Non-Essentials – These are optional, your choice:

- v. Cell phone
- w. Gifts – Birthdays, Christmas
- x. Hair Cuts – hair cuts, coloring, perms, straightening etc.
Remember to consider how often you need to go to determine monthly amount
- y. Other beauty – tanning, manicures, pedicures, etc.
- z. Pets – food, litter, snacks, toys, vet
- aa. Subscriptions – magazines, newspapers.
- bb. Memberships – health club, AAA ???
- cc. Entertainment – What do you do during your free time and on weekends? Vacations? Movies, video and game rentals?
- dd. Internet
- ee. Cable/Satellite
- ff. Donations – religious, humanitarian ???

AUTOMATIC DEDUCTIONS

-25% of your gross income for taxes and Social Security
-5% of your net income for savings and investments

The idea of the project was after students wrote a research paper on what career they would like to pursue after high school, they had to research the average annual salary for someone starting out in this career. Then students had to budget for a place to live, food, transportation, etc using this salary. They would collect all of their information in a portfolio, including all of the research they did on the costs of these items they wanted to purchase. A student would go on-line and find an apartment in Chicago if that was where he chose to live. Or he might bring in an advertisement to determine how much groceries would cost him.

I then contacted parents and asked if they would be willing to evaluate the portfolio. I figured what a great chance for a parent and their child to have a real discussion about how one budgets in the adult world. The student could show their parents what they researched and learned about, and the parents could share their real-world experiences of when they were starting out. Out of the 60 parents I contacted, every one agreed to evaluate their student's project. I sent a rubric home with the child for the parent to use that looked like this:

Economic Portfolio Rubric

Student _____ Parent _____

Overall	Content	Organization	Rationale	Requirements
Excellent (A)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Covers topic in-depth with details and examples. Subject knowledge is excellent. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Content is well organized using headings and appropriately used bulleted lists to group related material. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> All decisions are fully explained and justified. Impact of choices has been explicitly addressed. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> All requirements are met and exceeded.
Good (B)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Includes essential knowledge about the topic. Subject knowledge appears to be good, but there are 1-2 factual errors. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Uses headings and bulleted lists to organize, but the overall organization of topics appears flawed. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Explained and justified most decisions. Some impact has been considered. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> All requirements are met.
Average (C)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Includes essential information about the topic but there are 3-4 factual errors. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Content is logically organized for the most part. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Explained and justified some decisions. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> One or two requirements were not completely met.
Needs Improvement (D-F)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Content is minimal OR there are 5 or more factual errors. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> There was no clear or logical organizational structure, just lots of facts. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Very few if any decisions were explained and/or justified. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Three or more requirements were not completely met

Please circle the grade you feel your student deserves for each of the 4 categories along with a brief description as to why. Then circle the overall grade you feel they deserve for the portfolio. Thanks for your help in this.

The students brought the completed rubric in and this is what I counted as their grade for the portfolio.

Panel

Often times I wanted students to have an authentic audience in the presentation of their work. I would bring in experts to serve on a panel that would evaluate the student work. Sometimes these were people from the community who were experts in the field of what we were studying. If students were building a bridge, I might have a couple of engineers come in and have the students present their final product to them. Or a unit where students ran a

presidential campaign and had to put forth candidates who gave speeches about their party's platform on certain issues. I had the mayor of our town, the superintendent of schools, and a school board member, all who know about public service and what it takes to do so, serve on the panel to determine who would be president of the class.

Parents can be a part of this authentic experience. Reaching out and seeing if parents have any know-how with a certain topic and if they would be willing to serve on a panel that would be evaluating students. By having parents on the panel, they are not taking a passive role but rather an active one where they are not only listening to the students but asking questions and getting to interact with them as well.

An example of this would be the Shark Tank project students did in my Social Studies class as a cross-curricular unit. The idea was just like on the show, students would create and market a product they could sell to others. They had to shoot a commercial advertising the item and present to a panel who would evaluate how persuasive and professional their pitch was.

I sent out an email to parents, asking if we had any small business owners, people in the advertising industry, or any economics majors. I always had a few parents who had experience in the business world and were willing to serve on the panel. In addition, I added a couple of small business owners from around town to get the community involved as well.

Along with myself, this panel would evaluate the performance of the students, recording their observations on the rubric:

Shark Tank Presentation

Students: _____ Product _____

Overall	Commercial	Presentation	Product
Excellent (A)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It is clear the audience the commercial is intended for using methods to attract this consumer. • The commercial is persuasive in its message, showing several instances why someone should use the product. • Commercial looks professional, something you might even see on television. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Group presents itself in a professional manner, showing maturity throughout. • Group consistently speaks with confidence in their presentation of the business plan. • Group is able to answer questions with confidence, providing additional detail for the investors. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Product looks professional, like something that would be on display shelf of a store. • Product clearly captures what it is used for and how others will use it. • Product is easy for people to view, showing many details about the use of the product.
Good (B-C)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The audience the commercial is intended for using methods to attract this consumer seems somewhat obvious but not as clear as it could be. • The commercial is persuasive in its message, giving one or two instances why someone should use the product. • Commercial looks somewhat professional, something a good quality class project would look like. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Group most the time presents itself in a professional manner, but does not maintain this through the entire presentation. • Group speaks with confidence in their presentation most of the time, but are not consistent throughout. • Group is able to answer most questions with confidence, but does not necessarily provide additional detail for the investors. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Product looks somewhat professional, like a good quality school project. • Product captures mostly how it will be used but some aspects unclear. • Product can be viewed by many but some details are difficult to see.
Needs Improvement (D-F)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It is not clear the audience the commercial is intended for using because there are no obvious methods to attract this consumer. • The commercial is not persuasive in its message, failing to show why someone should use the product. • Commercial does look professional, something that seems thrown together at the last minute. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Group does not present itself in a professional manner, showing lack of maturity throughout the presentation. • Group does not speak with confidence in their presentation, looking unsure of themselves. • Group is not able to answer questions with confidence, lacking any additional detail for the investor. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Product does not look professional, like something an elementary student would make. • Product does not capture how the product will be used. • Product is not easy for people to view, leaving out many details.

Because these are gifted students and many times can carry on an adult conversation no matter what age, the panel was also encouraged to ask questions of the students.

Before we started this process though we anchor graded. This would involve asking a group to do a dress rehearsal of their presentation. The panel would watch this, ask questions, and evaluate. Then the panel would talk about what they saw and how they evaluated the students in the different areas. If one member of the panel gave the aspect an A while another a D, we would talk about what each of them saw and how they determined this grade. I would also encourage them to leave written feedback so that students realized what they did well or did not.

The idea behind this anchoring was to put everyone on the same page. Because your panel is not necessarily made up of educators, just how one evaluates is an important topic of conversation. A well-written rubric will eliminate a lot of these issues, but even then, there might

be some details that need to be compared and discussed. I then used all of the graded rubrics to determine the grade for the performance, averaging them.

Expertise

Your parents have a wealth of expertise that they might be able to share with your students. At the beginning of the year I would send out an email to my gifted parents. I would list all of the topics I was going to be covering and then ask parents if they had something they felt they could give a lesson on.

Here is a communication a math teacher of gifted sent out to her parents:

Dear parent(s):

In math class this year we are going to be covering five basic units. The units are:

- measurement
- ratios
- equations
- functions
- statistics and probability

If you work in a position where you are using one or many of these skills, would you be willing to come in and talk to students about how you use math in your everyday job. This will allow students to see math in the real world and to be able to get the connection to what we do in class to a practical application.

If you would be willing to do this, please contact me and we will arrange a time for you to come in and speak.

I did not think she would get much response back but low and behold, she found a few parents willing to share their experiences with math in the workplace. She had a parent who worked for Victoria Secret who talked with students about how she incorporated decimals into her day-to-day work. She had another parent who happened to be a chemist who discussed how he used

graphing in his line of work. Another parent worked at an Amazon fulfillment center and showed the class how coding was used to program the robotic equipment that filled the orders.

You should not expect to get a ton of parents for something like this, but if you have 50 sets of parents and you cast a wide enough net, you are bound to get a couple who would be willing to come in. We have even been fortunate enough to have parents who were published authors who would come in and talk about their process of writing to an ELA class, or a Social Studies class who had a parent who was a Civil War enthusiast and collected memorabilia from that era he shared to bring history to life.

By doing something like this, you might have two benefits in addition to engaging parents. The first is that students can understand how what they are learning manifests itself in the real world. Often times students learn about something in a laboratory setting. The topic is introduced and students must figure out how to do the skill. What is not often shown to them is why they are learning this skill and how they will use it in their lives, maybe not today, but somewhere down the road. By having a parent share how they use what they have learned in their jobs, students see the application of the skill and it is of value to learn. A second benefit is the power of the guest speaker. Because you are speaking at your students 180 days a year, your voice sometimes takes on a decibel that students are unable to hear, like that teacher voice in the Charlie Brown television specials. By having an outside speaker, she might be talking to students about the exact same information you would have shared with them, but because it is coming from this outside voice, students put more belief in it. They remember it better. Having different voices in your classroom is always a good idea. If the voice belongs to a parent of one of your gifted students, all the more better.

Mentoring

Carrying on this idea of the outside voice, another way to utilize this is in using parents to act as mentors to students or groups of students. Someone to offer advice, listen to ideas, and give another perspective in addition to yours. Mentors do not need to be experts. Mentors, especially adults, just have life experience that students do not and can help them to try and understand something. They also do not need to come into the school physically in order to mentor. They can FaceTime, Skype, or Google Hangout in order to communicate with students.

For example, let us say students are working on a project for science class where they are learning about the advance of technology. The lesson requires students to answer the following question:

Choose three advances of technology you feel are the most important in the past fifty years. Explain where these advances came from and why they are so important to society.

You have broken the students into groups and tasked them with creating a tri-fold to display their arguments on. The problem with a lesson such as this is that students often times can only see what has occurred in their lifetime. If they could talk to someone who actually remembers when there was no internet, they might get a completely different perspective on the matter.

This does not require any expertise on the part of the parent mentor. It just requires that they lived through much of that past fifty years and can share with students the advances that happened to them. You could assign each group a parent who volunteered to mentor and students would have the opportunity to get advice from the mentor and run their own ideas past him. An exchange might go something like this:

Students: We were thinking of using iPhones, laptops, and the Tesla as the three advances of technology.

Parent mentor: Those all have happened in the past decade or so. Have you thought about anything that came before that?

Students: Like what?

Parent mentor: I can remember when I used to have to get up to turn my television on or off, or even to change the channel.

Students: Really?

Parent mentor: When my dad bought our first television that had a remote control, my life was changed forever. Before I had to get up every time I wanted to watch a different channel.

Student #1: I would have to get up a billion times I change channels so much.

Student #2: I wouldn't because I watch everything on my iPad.

Parent mentor: That's another thing to consider. There used to just be three stations to watch. And most houses had a single television.

Student #3: What?! You just blew my mind.

Having an adult mentor can just provide the perspective than many children at a young age lack because of their limited experiences.

Involve parents in action research

According to the Institute for the Study of Inquiry, action research is...

...a disciplined process of inquiry conducted *by* and *for* those taking the action.

The primary reason for engaging in action research is to assist the "actor" in improving and/or refining his or her actions (Sagor, 2000).

In short, action research is research in action. It is actually going and experiencing the research rather than reading about it on-line or in a book. Because this is usually an outside learning

experience it can be difficult to procure permission and bussing to take the students on a school fieldtrip. A way around this is to invite parents to take their students to places that aligns with the curriculum you are teaching. If you are studying about electricity parents might want to take their child to the science center that has an exhibit pertaining to it. Or in ELA students are reading Shakespeare so the teacher informs parents of days and times the play is being performed locally and invites them to go. In math, the class is learning about averages and the use of statistics so an invitation is sent out suggesting parents take their child to a baseball game and see how the batting average and other statistics are determined using math.

For example, in my Social Studies gifted classroom, we were studying the Moundbuilders of ancient America. We are from Ohio where there are a lot of mounds scattered throughout the state, some more prominent than others such as the Serpent and the Alligator Mound, to some that simply looked like a small hill at a golf course. I had a project where students were to identify a mound, researching about it, and then traveling to it to see what more they can learn as well as seeing it firsthand. These were 5th graders so they idea was that parents would be the ones taking them to the mounds and it would turn into a family trip. Some students chose mounds within the direct vicinity, others got more audacious and went to the very ends of our state to view more interesting mounds.

I had the unique situation of experiencing this from both perspectives. I was the teacher, so I got to see the school side of things. This meant I was seeing the end result which including photos, PowerPoint presentations, clay models, and other products that showed what they learned. And it just so happens that my daughter was in my class so I got it from the parent side as well. My daughter chose a mound called the Conus Mound which was a two-hour drive away on the southeast border. We drove to Marietta, seemingly the only town for many miles around,

with a population of 14,000 people. In the middle of the town was this very cool cemetery, and smack dab in the middle of the cemetery was the Conus Mound. My daughter and I spent an hour walking around this mound of earth, talking about what we saw and comparing it to the research she did. The conversation continued on the drive home.

My daughter now is several years older and I am sure if I asked her, she could not even tell me the name of her mound. But she and I remember that trip. We remember the conversations we had. We remember the experience of what was learned. This was a level of engagement created by her brilliant teacher that allowed me to be directly involved and part of the learning process.

Invite them to exhibitions

Inviting parents to a student exhibition is a win-win situation. Parents love to see what their children are doing. Students benefit from having an authentic audience. It causes them to step up their game a little bit in regard to the quality of their work because it would be adults who are used to seeing professional exhibitions and thus have high expectations. A simple example of this would be a science fair. You have students work on their science fair projects, recording what they learned on a tri-fold, and then you have an evening where students display their projects and parents are invited to walk around and look at them. The problem with this of course is that parents do not really get to engage in the process. Sure, they might ask a couple of questions, but mostly they are just walking around and passively observing the student work. You need to find a way to make parent more involved in the experience.

How you make parents engaged rather than just passive audience members is you give them a forum to leave feedback on the various exhibitions. This could be something like having

an art show and next to each piece is a log where they can make comments about what they liked. It might look something like this:

Thank you for coming to see my project this evening. If you wouldn't mind, I would love some feedback on what you thought. Don't feel a need to fill out every question, just the ones that speak to you personally:

- What did you like?
- What did you not like?
- How did the piece make you feel?
- What improvements could I have made?

Or since it is the 21st century, parents could scan a QR code and leave feedback using their phone. Then the student would be able to go through these comments and see what others thought about their exhibition.

If you are going to invite parents to come in to be part of an authentic audience, make sure to find ways to engage them in the process. The more engaged you allow them to be the better the connection they are going to make.

At least engage in this...

Having room mothers who provide snacks or WatchDOGS Dads who monitor the hallways, are ways to involve parents in school, but it is not engaging them in the learning process. Parents of gifted students especially like to engage in the process because many times they are doing this at home. Allowing them to be involved in the learning going on does a few things:

1. Makes them understand how you are running your classroom and the efforts you put into challenging their gifted child. Can help them to sympathize with the challenge of teaching gifted children.
2. Connects them with the thought-process of children this age. Sometimes adults only see it through an adult's perspective. Understanding why a student might struggle or seeing their own child in the context of a whole class might help them to gain a better understanding of what their child is going through.
3. Gives students another person to confer with. Because gifted children are operating on many different levels from one another, having more people for them to engage with rather than just the one teacher provides more resources.
4. Makes the connection between home and school all the more stronger.

Engaging your parents in the learning of their gifted child builds that relationship and allows both you the teacher, and the parents, to figure out how best to challenge your students.

- For me, the top three benefits of having a parent group are; 1) Advocacy – gives a voice to the gifted learners 2) Support – it's always helpful to hear from parents of gifted kids how they have navigated school (and life) for them 3) Resource – the parent group has been an invaluable source of information for me.

parent Melissa Larcher

Chapter 6 – Forming Parent Groups

Does the world really need another parent organization? I mean, there is the PTO, the PTA, the band boosters, the athletic boosters, the principal's advisory, and just about every other grouping you can imagine. Why do we need a group of parents whose only commonality is that they have a gifted child? I would argue that out of all of those groups, a parent organization supporting gifted education is the one needed most. I'm not just saying this because I am involved in gifted education and would love the help. There are two reasons we need parents in support of gifted education.

One reason is there are very few people advocating for this particular group of students. States vary quite a bit but there are some where districts are required to have a coordinator licensed in gifted education who oversees the programming and advocacy of gifted students. In other states, there are no such provisions and the fate of the gifted students are in the hands of an administrator with about thirty other things, which he has prioritized as being higher, on his plate. Some districts do not have anyone overseeing the gifted and thus they offer no services. Parents may not even be aware their child is gifted because there has never been any whole grade testing.

The other end of the spectrum, special education, has lots of people advocating for them. Because special education falls under the American Disabilities Act, federal law protects their

rights. There are many people in the district who are charged with overseeing the needs of these children, from the school psychologist, the intervention specialist, paraprofessionals, to school counselors and special education coordinators. If a district did not offer services for these children, they would find themselves in court facing a lawsuit. If a school district does not offer gifted services, the only wrath they might be facing are that of angry parents whose gifted children are the ones being neglected. Some parents want to be advocates for their child, but do not know how to go about doing so or are not familiar with the types of gifted programming available their child might receive. A parents of gifted children organization can unite these voices. If you think a single gifted parent wields a lot of influence with their demands of their child being challenged, imagine how powerful an entire group full of these parents working together and focusing their efforts on a single issue might be. They could move mountains. The National Association for Gifted Children puts out a guide called Starting and Sustaining a Parent Group to Support Gifted Children. In it they espouse:

When parent groups are involved in advocacy and support for their gifted children, change happens – maybe not all at once, maybe not as comprehensively as we might like in this tough economic climate – but parents make a difference (Starting, 7)

The important thing is you want them to be moving mountains for you, not on top of you. You want to get in front of the parent support group, playing the role as liaison to the school, rather than parents not including you and going around you. It is important for parents to get the perspective of the school, to understand the constraints, and be knowledgeable of the topic. Nothing is worse than misguided intentions. You want to steer this group so they are creating productive programming that is in the best interest of students and is reasonable enough that the

superintendent and board of education will listen to it. It is a careful balancing act, but by working together, you can accomplish much more than if you were working autonomous of one another.

The second reason to form a parent group is to put people together who can share experiences and find a sympathetic ear for what it is like to raise a gifted child. I cannot tell you how many times when I have gotten a group of parents in a room together, I have heard the statement, “No kidding. I thought that was just my child who did that.” By putting parents of gifted together, they have people with like-experiences that can be shared, laughed about, cried over, or celebrated. Having a venue such as this is important for the social/emotional needs of the parents as well as the children.

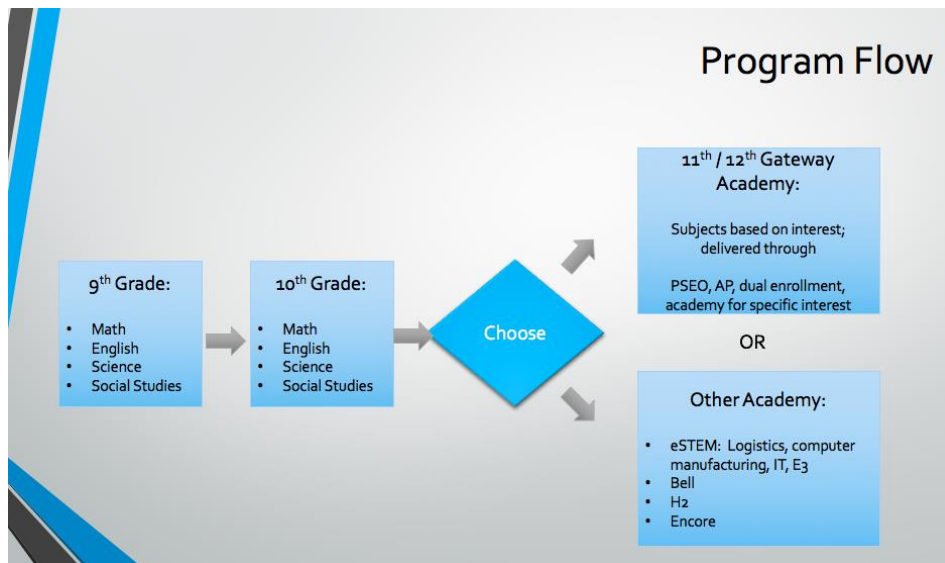
Figuring out the focus of the group

The first thing that needs to happen is determining the focus of the group. The question is, who determines this? As the school liaison to gifted, you might have to be the driving force behind getting the parent group going. You are the spark so to speak, but if you have done things correctly, the group will take on a life of its own and determine its own course. While it is important that you are there to help shape the direction of the group, what you do not want to be doing is making decisions for the group.

What this might look like on your end is getting parents together to see if there is any interest in a parents of gifted group. It does not take more than a handful of parents to start such a group and in the first few years, there might be lean membership until they are able to build up

awareness of the group and what it can bring to gifted students in the district. An important aspect of such a group is sustaining it. I have talked with many districts who had parents of gifted support groups but they eventually faded away as the children of the people running the group grew up and the parents moved on to other ways to support their child.

It is also important that you are not the driving force behind the group because then they are doing your will rather than what is in the best interests of their child. At the same time, you cannot let a single, determine parent steer the group off a cliff. There was this time when I was working with a gifted advisory group. The task before the half dozen parents and myself was to figure out how we would best serve our gifted students at the high school level. We looked at several models, had much discussion and debate, and got input from district office personnel to see what our constraints and parameters were. Our goal was to put together a proposal and then the district office person would present it to the superintendent for his consideration, making sure to indicate the ideas came from parents. As a group, we settled on having a gifted academy at the high school where students would be encouraged to have all of their high school coursework out of the way by the end of their sophomore year and then take post-secondary education options or PSEOs (now known as College Credit Plus in many states). The idea was that these high ability students who could move through curriculum much quicker than the typical child would be able to work at their own pace and have the opportunity to earn two years worth of college credit. It looked like this:



It seemed like a win-win situation. Gifted students got their needs met at the high school, something that had not happened in the past few years, parents got two years of college paid for by the district, and the district got to develop National Merit Scholars.

As we formulated the requirements for such a program, we arrived at students who were cognitively gifted. We had a decent pool of those students, forming a class number we felt we could handle in the academy with the resources we had at our disposal. One of the parents figured out really quickly that her son would not be able to participate in the academy because he was not superior cognitive. As a result, she worried that having a gifted academy would pull all of the gifted students away from her son who would be left behind to have his academic needs met in one of the other four academies the high school had. She basically said she did not want her son attending class with those “other” types of students.

What this parent managed to do was derail the idea that most of the other parents did like for their children. She would rather no one have the benefits of such a program since her child would be unable to have it. My misstep as the person acting as the school liaison with this group was to enable her to do so. I let a single dissenting voice change the direction of the entire group

and in effect killed the idea we had spent months developing. I'm not saying I should have kicked her out of the group. She had a right to be there sharing her opinion which I did not begrudge. After all, if you cannot advocate for your own child who can you advocate for. My mistake was I should have taken the idea to the district office person and informed them that there was a parent who was against the idea but a majority of parents did want such a program. As a result of my lack of action, the idea died in committee and nothing was presented to the superintendent, effectively wasting the time of the parents involved. More disappointing for me however was the fact that the opportunity students might have had to receive specialized services for their unique abilities was gone. It has been years since that happened and I have moved on to another district but there is still nothing gifted specific in place at that high school. One of the single greatest disappointments in my career in education.

When searching for the focus of the group, one place to start is where is the greatest need. In other words, is the pressing need there be specific programming or extra-curriculars for gifted students, or might it be that there has been a lot of drama in already existing programming and the need is to address the social/emotional needs. There are several needs that parent groups can address:

1. Parent groups can celebrate giftedness

Who better to celebrate giftedness than the very people who have lived with it for so many years. And it is good to celebrate the positives because sometimes the negatives can be overwhelming. It is good to have a sense of humor about a child's giftedness and a group such as this can help facilitate that.

2. Parent groups can teach parents, educators, and the public about what giftedness means and how it is best served

As discussed before, there are a lot of misconceptions and myths in regard to the area of giftedness. A parent group can find ways to make those people who are making decisions about the education of these children aware of their unique needs. This includes other parents, teachers, administrators, district office staff, the superintendent, and the board of education.

3. Parent groups can provide social and cultural interaction

Not all learning and development needs to take place within the confines of the school day. There are many extra-curricular activities gifted children can be involved in that can bolster their talents. The difficulty often comes in finding the person who would supervise and facilitate these activities. A parent group would be able to work with the school in order to offer some of these activities.

4. Parent groups develop effective advocates (Starting, 9)

It can start small, such as petitioning a principal for additional classes or sending an email to the district office and asking for the hiring of more gifted intervention specialists. As parents in the group become more knowledgeable about state laws concerning gifted, they can testify in front of school boards and legislators in order to be a proponent for gifted children and their rights. What moves school boards and legislators to action is seeing that within their constituency there is a need to be met.

These needs translate into four types of parent groups:

1. Advisory
2. Provide extra-curricular activities
3. Support organization
4. Social/Emotional

The main difference in these groups is the level of involvement of you, the teacher. At one end of the spectrum are advisory groups which require a lot of organization on your part, while the other end has a social/emotional group that might not need your presence at all. Often times, these purposes will overlap with one another. An advisory group might also address social/emotional concerns, while a support organization could possibly provide extra-curricular activities for gifted students. The group does not need to stay in just one lane, but its focus should be reflected in its constitution or bylaws to ensure that everyone is on the same page.

What exactly is a constitution or by laws? It is the backbone of the parent organization. Here is an example of a constitution from the New Zealand Association for Gifted Children:

NZAGC will champion the cause of gifted children at home, in their schooling and beyond. NZAGC will foster the educational and social development of gifted children through the achievement of a climate in which giftedness is recognized, understood and accepted as a valuable human attribute and in which the special needs of gifted children are met fully, effectively and with generosity (NZAGC).

Here are the bylaws for a parent organization known as SWEPP out of Worthington, Ohio:

SWEPP (Supporting Worthington's Enriched Placement Program) is a parent/community organization established in 1981 to support academically-talented students and quality education in the Worthington School District. Our activities include ongoing support of the gifted program, support of Enriched course works at the Middle School level, support of Honors and Advanced Placement course work at the High School level, advocating for academically-talented students and creating a network of support for their parents.

Part of their bylaws also establish the different officer positions, the role of the executive board, and the power to be able to form committees if need be.

As the organization grows in size or turns over membership, the focus might need to be altered or modified to reflect the influence or the change in leadership of the group. Again, I encourage you as the gifted expert to be there during these changes. If you are not, it might be changed to something that would actually be more harmful to the school's gifted programming.

Forming an advisory committee

An easy way to get a parents of gifted group going is to form an advisory group. Usually how this works is as an educator working with gifted students, you are seeking help in the shaping of that work. What would parents like to see? What would be valuable for their children to learn? What can be done to improve services?

When I get my gifted advisory group together at the beginning of the year, the first thing I do is inform them of what services we as a district provide. A lot of parents have no idea exactly what services are offered, only what their child is experiencing. It is a good idea to provide this big picture so parents can see how it all fits together as one puzzle as well as seeing what pieces might be missing. I also try to make them aware of the constraints and parameters we are dealing with. If we are going to make changes to the gifted programming, they need to be realistic and backed with research and data. Everyone is asking the school board and superintendent for more. As a group, you need to make a compelling argument for what makes what you want more appealing than the others by showing how it will help students and the district.

The drawback to an advisory group is that you, the gifted liaison, are planning and running a lot of the meeting. You try and provide space for people to share suggestions, but you are the one who has created this framework. This type of group is usually more informal, without

officers. Because of this there can often be inconsistent attendance. The main point of an advisory group is you allow parents a place where their voice can be heard. Then you take the information gleaned from these meetings and use it to inform your decisions in the classroom or in the district concerning the programming.

The goals of an advisory group should be:

- To educate
- To advocate
- To bring awareness
- To shape curriculum/programming

Think of an advisory group as a bicycle with training wheels. You are trying to train parents to be advocates for themselves, to be a voice that has influence in the district. They cannot do that without a little knowledge which an advisory group can provide. Hopefully, they will be able to take this and grow into a full-fledged support organization.

Forming an extra-curricular organization

There is enrichment which takes place in the classroom where a teacher such as yourself is stimulating students with open-ended projects or design challenges. These are done within the confines of the classroom during the school day. These allow gifted students to grow and tap into the potential they have shown to possess. These are typically categorized as gifted services and is what districts use to meet the needs of their gifted population.

There is another form of enrichment. This takes place outside of the classroom not during the school day. This takes the form of before or after school clubs and activities, academic competitions, and fieldtrips to experiences that expand the thinking of these students. Sometimes

these are organized and run by teachers who either volunteer or are provided a stipend. Often though, such activities have difficulty finding a teacher willing to shoulder the responsibility. It takes a commitment of time and sometimes training that extends a teacher's already burgeoning workload. Often times these activities need an advocate and teachers only have so much time in the day. If you cannot find a teacher who is passionate about it, the activity might not be available.

This of course is a shame because although these enrichment activities might not be connected to the curriculum or tied to course credits, they greatly expand the experiences of these gifted children. There is something to be said for authentic learning and often times these academic extra-curricular activities engage students in ways that regular academics are unable to. This is where a parent organization can provide services the school might not offer themselves.

For example, Destination Imagination is an organization that has children creating a skit that solves a problem. They must come up with a solution that falls under the parameters of the challenge with the more creative they are, the better they score. This is an International Organization but each state runs regional tournament to determine who will compete at the state finals, and then the winner from that goes on to Globals. At the regional level, many of the team managers as well as members of the governing board are parents who, just like coaching a soccer team, help children develop their skills in order to solve their problem. There are some districts where teachers act as the team managers and the registration of the teams is handled by a gifted coordinator. There are other districts where it is completely parent run. The practices where a solution is developed occur after school or on weekends at a house, a parent is acting as the team manager, and other family members act as the required appraiser at the tournament. Without the

parents being involved, this academic extra-curricular does not happen. It only works because they are involved.

While this is not a program specifically for gifted children, there typically are a lot of gifted children who are attracted to such a competition. It allows them to think as well as be creative. A parent group could be the ones organizing things for a district, holding an informational meeting to make other parents aware of it, helping to put together teams, getting team managers trained, registering the teams and their appraisers, and helping out the day of the regional tournament. This would provide enrichment for as many children sign up to participate.

There are other academic extra-curricular activities a parent group can help to organize that enriches gifted students. Chess clubs, First Lego Leagues, STEM design challenges, family game night, and solo/ensemble contests just to name a few. The parent group could choose to focus on a single academic extra-curricular activity or could choose to support a variety of them. Once it gets started, hopefully the program will continue to grow and involve more parents.

Your role in such activities might be to provide space at the schools, coordinate all the various groups, or helping to recruit students and families, but it is the parents who are doing much of the work and volunteering their time to provide these enrichment activities to gifted children.

Forming a gifted parent support organization

Eventually what you hope occurs is these small, informal group of adults who have been meeting sporadically, become a more organized, well-oiled machine that has the focus of influencing the lives of gifted children for the better. This would be what a gifted parent support group would look like.

How does a group of parents become an organization? First and foremost, it is finding leadership. This usually comes in the form of a president, vice-president, treasurer, and secretary.

Having leadership such as this does a few things:

- Creates clear, distinctive roles
- Provides a go-to person for those outside the organization
- Establishes stability to who is running the meetings
- Gives focus to the purpose of the group

These officers would be responsible for setting the agenda, getting out the meeting dates, and working with you, the school liaison, to arrange for meeting places and speakers. They would also be the ones heading up any fundraisers or extra-curricular activities.

To add legitimacy the group might want to consider a few things:

- Insurance
- Tax exemption number
- Bank account
- Under the umbrella of a larger organization (state/national)

By doing these things it allows the organization to operate autonomously from the school while at the same time having options. Partnering with a larger organization provides the benefits of extending tax exempt status, discussions with the organization's parent group advisory council, grants for advocacy seed money, advocacy updates, access to speakers from the state organization, and one big intangible – the relationship with a larger group to establish legitimacy. All of these can boost the credibility of the group with the powers that be if they see you an organization with a focus.

Another way to establish legitimacy is to be organized. According to the NAGC guide, *Starting and Sustaining a Parent Group to Support Gifted Children*, successful parent support organizations:

- Elect officers
- Have a role for past presidents
- Assign member representatives to the local school district
- Commit to a written statement of the goals
- Adhere to procedure during meetings
- Have meetings with both consent and action agendas
- Have written descriptions of the roles of officers
- Support leadership development
- Make a special effort to make new members feel welcome
- Formally recognize the contributions of members
- Keep a broad focus rather than a single purpose
- Solicit input from all members on a regular basis
- Provide services to the members as well as the wider community
- Commit to work with the officials with decision making positions
- Have a designated spokesperson for the group (Starting)

In order to sustain a group such as this there are a few things to consider:

- Be organized – No one wants to give up their time for something only to find it to be a colossal waste of time. Make sure there is an agenda prior to a meeting and that you are respectful of starting and ending times.
- Not having too many meetings – these people are already giving their valuable time. To ask them to do so too often risks a person reaching the point of deciding not to come to any meetings. Meetings should be at least quarterly, but not much more. You occasionally might have to have a meeting if an event sponsored by the group is coming up.
- Have a succession plan in place – children grow up, it is a fact of life. Often times when the child moves on the parent does as well. It is important to have someone in line to take over a position.
- Actively recruit – Rather than arranging a time and hoping people come, reach out and personally invite people to attend. It is much more difficult for someone to turn you down face to face or even over the phone rather than simply deleting a mass email.
- Try not to make the meeting feel too meetingish – anyone who has ever been to a board of education meeting knows how appropriate the “bored” moniker is. The reason usually is because people sit in chairs points toward the front and listen passively as the board does its business. These meetings should be more interactive and engaging. All voices, not just the officers, should have a place to be heard.
- Avoid being cliquey – often times school groups such as this end up consisting of all stay-at-home mothers. Figure out ways to involve more underrepresented groups such as minorities, EL students, and men. A group like this should be representative of the children in the student population.

Your role in a group such as this is to act as the liaison between the organization and the school. This could involve helping to find guest speakers, making them aware of upcoming events they could be involved in, or just being there to answer questions they might have. Just your mere presence will most likely steer the crowd away from teacher or district bashing and keep it from devolving into a gossipy clique. The one thing you definitely do not want to happen is this group operates in spite of you. Make yourself useful to the group or they might not see the benefit in inviting you.

Forming a social and emotional support group

The final sort of group has a very different purpose than the other three. The other three tend to focus on how to improve enrichment and programming that directly affects their children. They are there for the kids. A social and emotional support group can be for both the children and the parents. It can be challenging raising a gifted child. There are a lot of issues a gifted student has socially and emotionally due to their asynchronous development. This is when the social, emotional, physical, intellectual, and creative skills develop atypically compared to others their age, so they develop at an uneven rate. What this looks like in gifted children is:

- **Increased Asynchrony.** As levels of giftedness increase, asynchrony may be more pronounced and social relationships may become more problematic.
- **Progressive Development.** The discrepancy between mental age and chronological age is progressive. A 6-year-old with a 9-year-old mind will become a 12-year-old with an 18-year-old mind.
- **Anxiety.** When a child realizes he is out of sync from his age mates, he may experience fear, anxiety, or depression.

- **Peers.** It's essential that gifted children spend time with like-minded age peers as well as like-minded "idea peers." Varied groups of friends are essential to meet children's needs at different levels of growth.
- **Perfectionism.** Children may experience intense frustration when their hands and feet cannot keep up with the visions of their more advanced minds.
- **Twice-Exceptionalities.** The most asynchronous gifted learners are often those with learning disabilities, commonly referred to as twice- exceptional or 2E learners. This combination requires additional support at home and at school.
- **Age-Appropriate Expectations.** Adults must continually remind themselves that gifted children are still children. It's important to have age-appropriate expectations (Parent, 2016).

It helps to have a place to go to talk about these imbalances and listen to others who are experiencing similar problems. That is where a parent social and emotional support group can come into play.

How you set up the group is up to those involved, but you will probably want someone who is familiar with the many ins and outs of gifted children and their quirks to lead the group. Or the group could read research articles or a book about social and emotional needs and have a discussion about how this applies to their own child.

SENG is a group that was established in 1981 after the suicide of a gifted student. When the parents reached out to try and find some place that would help them to understand, there were not any groups specific to gifted. Supporting Emotional Needs of the Gifted was formed under the mission to empower families and communities to guide gifted and talented individuals to

reach their goals: intellectually, physically, emotionally, socially, and spiritually. One of their programs is known as Seng Model Parent Groups (SMPG). According to SENG:

SMPG – SENG Model Parent Groups. 8-10 week guided discussion groups which provide a safe and supportive environment to freely discuss your child’s development and parenting challenges, to connect with other parents, to increase your awareness of your child’s unique needs, to learn strategies for successful parenting, and to expand your resources (SENG).

The only barriers to forming your parent group as a SMPG, is that the sessions have to be run by two trained facilitators who help with the flow of the discussion between parents. Because of this, there is a cost for parents to participate. The cost is determined by each individual facilitator taking into account if they have to rent a space or print materials. Of course the benefit of having a facilitator running things is that they have the proper training to be able to help parents.

If you decide to do it on your own, there are books that can guide you. Some of these include:

- When Gifted Kids Don’t Have All the Answers: How to Meet Their Social and Emotional Needs – Judy Galbraith and James Delisle
- Emotional Intensity in Gifted Students: Helping Kids Cope with Explosive Feelings – Christine Fonseca
- On the Social Emotional Lives of Gifted Children – Tracy Cross
- Living With Intensity: Understanding the Sensitivity, Excitability, and the Emotional Development of Gifted Children – Susan Daniels

Engage in this...

One way to definitely engage parents is to help them to organize themselves. It is like taking thirty voices all singing a different note and harmonizing them so that they are singing a

single, clear note. This single, clear note is going to be much more powerful when sung to the powers-that-be because it can be heard better than a hundred separate voices. The way to get this harmonious note is to ensure the group has a clear focus. When everyone's eyes are on the same prize, it is so much easier to attain that prize.

- Even the most reluctant, busy, distracted or alienated parents appreciate a positive message about their student. The key to getting families involved who traditionally are not active in their child's gifted education is to approach them with specific positives first. This can be followed up by asking questions to gain information on how to better support the student and the family and by listening to what the parent has to say. Sometimes, these families may not be able to give their time or resources, but they are willing to share their insight and thoughts. Other times, by opening up the lines of communication and showing that the input of these families are valued, they become invested in the conversation and the gifted programming which leads to increased involvement.

parent and teacher Leanne Ross

Chapter 7 – The reluctant engager

So far in this book, I have spoken mostly about how to engage the willing gifted parent. Because parents of these children are typically involved in their child's school life, engaging them can simply be a matter of reaching out. Since you get so many who are willing to participate, you think you are engaging your entire gifted community, but this can be misleading because you have other parents less eager to engage. What about the parent who does not latch on to your first offer? What of the parent who for whatever reason, does not seem like they want to be involved or be part of the gifted community? How do you engage them? That is what this chapter will be about; how to engage the reluctant engager.

Underrepresented engagers

Over the years, gifted education has been accused of many things.

Elitist

Why should high ability students be given any more special programming than other kids.

False, unless providing education for students with special needs is considered elitist as well.

Not worldly

Because these smart students are put in classes with other smart students, they don't know what it's like to work in the real world where there are a variety of intelligences.

False, there are just as many levels of intelligence in a gifted classroom as might be in a regular one. Being with like-minded peers actually advances their learning to deal with the real world where they will more than likely end up in careers with other like-minded individuals.

A refuge

Gifted programs have been holding places for the good kids so that they don't have to take classes with those "other" students.

False, gifted students come with all sorts of challenges, just like the regular classroom. Some of these challenges are the same while others are unique such as their impulsiveness, their questioning of everything, and their difficulty in accepting what others have to say while working in groups.

Biased

Gifted programming has mostly upper class, white students in them.

Fal...

As much as I would love to indicate false for this as well, in many cases this is the truth. A good indication of whether your gifted program is balanced is if its population models the culture of the school. In other words, if you have 30% Hispanic students in your school, around 30% of the students in the gifted program should be Hispanic. There are some school districts whose population has a majority of white students from a middle to upper class household, so having a nearly all-white gifted program would be legitimate. However, in many schools the gifted programming unfortunately is lily-white but this does not represent a cross-section of the student population.

Gifted programming has for years been trying to fight this accusation but it is difficult. Much of the problem stems from the nationally normed tests that educators use to identify children. These tests in themselves can be biased. They are written with certain vocabulary and expectations that might be typical in a middle class, white family, but are foreign in households where there are different cultures of learning. This vocabulary has nothing to do with the intelligence of the student and his ability to think at a higher level, and yet it is being held against him because those who have that vocabulary have an advantage over these students.

There have been proposed ways to combat this test bias. One was is local norms. This is where a school district decides for itself what the qualifications for gifted students are going to be. This way, instead of being compared to all of the children who took the test nationally, these students are compared to others in their school who share similar characteristics. The argument is that “individual schools...rarely replicate the nation in their distribution of ability or achievement” (Lohman, 2006). By comparing students to those similar to them, you are going to be able to identify more minority and low socio-economic students, especially in low performing schools.

The problem with using local norms is that some states simply do not allow for it. They have an approved list of testing that can be used to identify gifted students. In addition, even if a state does allow for local norming, if this student were to leave the district their identification would not follow them. They would have to be retested using the local norms of the school district they ended up at.

Another cause of underrepresentation are barriers that are placed in the way of low-income, high-ability students. One of these barriers are misconceptions of teachers and parents. There are some states that whole grade testing is required by the district. There are others where

the only way students get the opportunity to be tested is through parent or teacher referrals. The people making these decisions may not have any training in gifted education and may not know how to properly identify a gifted child. For instance, many times teachers associate good grades and behavior with gifted students. If a student is getting As and does what the teacher asks him to, they would be way more willing to recommend this student as gifted than a child who is a behavior problem and does not get the best grades. The issue is that the child who has good grades and is well behaved represents more of a high achieving child. This does not necessarily mean he is gifted. At the same time, a child who seems to be a behavior problem and does not get the best of grades, could in fact be a gifted child. The problem is since the teacher does not know what she should be looking for, this child ends up not getting selected for testing.

These misconceptions can affect black students as well. A study in the Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory shows that black students are 54% less likely than their white peers to be identified for gifted services. Yet, these students stand a three times better chance of being recommended for gifted when they have a teacher of color in the classroom. A lot of this has to do with cultural differences and perception. Black teachers tend to have a more positive view of black students than white teachers do.

Parents of low income children are also sometimes uninformed. They want what is best for their child but do not necessarily know how to get that or even how to ask for it. They are not at fault in this, they just never experienced this themselves or had friends and family who experienced it. As we have seen in past chapters, even upper income, highly involved parents can be misinformed, but they at least do not have any problem asking for what they believe is best for their child. Some parents are much too busy to be able to get involved or do not feel they have the stage to speak their wants. Because of this they do not know the procedures for

requesting testing and cannot be the advocate their child needs. Many times instead of being proactive they are reactive because that is all they have time for.

Another group of underrepresented gifted children come in those who are English Learners or EL. Even if the student is very bright, he gets tripped up by the language barrier and an unfamiliarity with the American school system which can cause him not to be able to show his true ability on gifted testing. How do we test a student such as this?

There are non-verbal assessments that can be given to EL students that asks students to recognize patterns rather than translating vocabulary. One of these is the Naglieri test and does give students who struggle with the vocabulary a better chance of showing their cognitive abilities. It is not completely bias-free as there are cultural context the testing does not account for.

Your district should be aware of this underrepresentation and do what they can to educate teachers and parents about spotting a gifted student through the biases that might prevent this from happening. It is important that teachers and parents recognize that gifted students are not just “the good kids”. Rather, these are the children who think differently than the norm. If people are properly trained to look for the characteristics of the gifted, many times the gifted child can be spotted without even using a test. Extra vigilance when it comes to minority, economically disadvantaged, and EL students will result in a greater screening number and as a result probably higher identification.

Understanding the home life

Regardless of why a parent is a reluctant engager, there are strategies that can be used to help them feel like there is worth in engaging. One of those strategies is trying to better

understand the home life. For instance, from the perspective of the teacher, it may seem as though the parent never comes to parent/teacher conferences or any of the gifted parent group opportunities you put out there. This teacher might label this parent an uninvolved parent who does not seem to care about their child's education. The reality is something different. This is a parent who works the late shift and is unavailable in the afternoons and evenings. She is just trying to best provide for her child and regrets the missed opportunities but cannot attend them. If only there were morning conferences or parent meetings on the weekend, this mom would have a better chance at attending.

Or it could be the parent did not have a good experience with school when she was younger and as a result, she does not look fondly upon the institution. Even walking into the building itself causes moments of panic and anxiety so she stays away. There is also the parent that believes the only time a parent should go to the school is when the child is in trouble. Thus they stay away from the school because they believe everything is alright and they are not needed.

In order to engage these reluctant gifted parents, you first have to know their story and why they might be reluctant. Then you can figure out the best way to engage them. What is the best way to find out these stories? Here are a few ways:

1. Rather than waiting for parents to sign up for a conference, invite them to come in for one. Lots of times we as teachers assume parents know how to engage and that is not always the case. Sometimes an invitation can go a long way in bridging the gap of communication.
2. Talk to teachers from previous years. They have experience with this family. They might be able to provide some insight as to the best way to approach the family about engagement.

3. Provide hours that you are available that are not the norm. Most times, parent/teacher conferences and meetings take place right after school. If the parent is working or the family is busy this might exclude them. Have some of your meetings in the morning or during the school day. Maybe even try a Saturday meeting.
4. The meeting place does not always have to be the school. If the parent has a negative perception of school, the last thing they want to do is come to one. Find a neutral site such as the library, the local coffee shop, or if a good number of your students come from the same apartment complex, finding a meeting space there.
5. Home visits to see it for yourself. Many kindergarten teachers will conduct home visits to get a real sense of what the home life is like. Why does it have to stop there? Home visits for junior high students might be just as informative to understanding the home life of that student. Plus you are on their turf, making them more at ease than sitting in a classroom feeling like they are being judged.
6. Send home a parent survey. At the beginning of the year, send home a parent survey, both a digital and a physical copy in case the parent does not check email regularly or the paper gets lost. Ask questions that might be useful for you in figuring out the best way to engage this parent. An example parent survey would look something like this:

Tell Me A Little Bit About You and Your Family

1. *What are you looking forward to for your child in school this year?*
2. *How would you like to be involved with your child's education?*
3. *What is your preferred method of communication (email, phone call, meeting, text...)*

4. *Does your family have any celebrations or traditions you would like to share with the class?*
5. *What subject/area did you dislike when you went to school? Why?*
6. *What subject/area did you love when you went to school? Why?*
7. *What are your goals for your child this school year? For yourself?*
8. *What would a typical afternoon after school look like at your household?*
9. *Who else lives at your house (siblings, pets etc.?)*
10. *Anything else you would like to share that will help make this a successful year?*

These methods do probably seem like a lot of work, but then if it were easy, they would not be your reluctant engagers. Rather than try them all and exhaust yourself, pick a couple that works best for your schedule and give them a try.

Men need to start representing

If you walk into a PTO or parent advisory group, you would be hard pressed to find a male in the bunch. Most of these groups are run and attended by women. Even though we have stepped away from the tradition of the male being the breadwinner and the mom staying at home, women still seem to be far more involved in their child's schooling than the male.

The importance of having a father in the house who is involved in their education should not be ignored. "...There is a growing body of research that has shown that children benefit from higher academic achievement and social and emotional well-being if their fathers are involved in

their education” (Morgan et al, 2009:167). Since social and emotional well-being is half the battle with gifted children, engaging the dad in his child’s education is tantamount.

What is the best way to get dad’s or other supportive males involved, by asking them? Research by the National Center for Fathering has shown that fathers respond more quickly to the word “dad” than to the word “parent.” According to PTO Today, here are some ways to engage fathers:

- Dads may not feel welcome at parent group events unless you personally invite them, and they will be more likely to attend if other dads will be there.
- Dads typically don’t like meetings for meetings’ sake. PTO meetings sometimes turn into a social hour, but dads would rather get down to business.
- Men tend to be project-oriented and want tasks with clear beginning and end points. They’re more likely to get involved if you have specific jobs to hand out.
- Dads like fun, physical activities, such as derby car races and father-daughter dances.

You begin with father-only invites to events. Something like a father’s breakfast where you invite dads and other father figures to come in and share some pancakes, eggs, or coffee together. Does not cost a whole lot and you get them more comfortable with coming into the school. That might seem too intimidating to come to an event by themselves so involve their child. A daddy-daughter dance or a father and son sports event is a way to provide more comfort because they have their child to rely on. You could invite them to come in and speak to the class about their job for a career fair. Not that women should not be invited to an event such as this, but the likelihood you get a dad to come in to talk about their work is better.

Once you have gotten them more comfortable with the idea of coming into school, you recruit them for your parent organizations. If you notice you have a good majority of women

coming to meetings, actively recruit more men. Specifically reach out to individual men rather than sending a blanket email or communication. Appeal to the fact that while the women tend to lean toward the social/emotional aspects of the gifted, the men would tend to focus on the academics and challenging the kids, giving the group a good balance

Involvement beyond the nuclear family

In the United States we are a nuclear family society. What that means is that typically, a household consists of mom, dad, and their children. Other cultures have an extended family, meaning that grandparents, aunts, cousins, and a whole allotment of family all might live in a household together. Since 1965, the number of foreign-born people living in the United States has quadrupled to 43 million according to the Center for American Progress. As we are getting more multicultural, this influx of people from various countries is changing the idea of what we assume is family. And the US version of the family is beginning to shift too. As divorce rates continue to rise, a child might actually have two households because they are splitting time with mom and dad, or they might be raised by a grandparent because neither parent is available. Single parent households are also at an all time high. During the 1960-2016 period, the percentage of children living with only their mother nearly tripled from 8 to 23 percent (Census, 2016).

The point is you should not assume that the point of contact is mom and/or dad. Check the student's records and see who the emergency priority person is. This might give an indication on who is the best person to communicate with. I have seen parents list neighbors as their point of contact. Just because they are not family does not mean they are not involved in the child's life.

You need to find who the best point of contact is going to be. This is the person you will establish trust with, the cornerstone of a good school to family relationship. Gaining trust, especially with the reluctant engager, is really important in the relationship. If families are to trust teachers and other school staff members, they must believe that school personnel are qualified, fair, and dependable, and have their child's best interests at heart (Adams & Christenson, 2000; Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Young, 1998). You have to find the best way to establish these.

If you are going to establish this trust with families, you must establish your own trustworthiness. There are five aspect that build this:

1. Benevolence: The degree to which you take the other party's best interests to heart and act to protect them
2. Reliability: The extent to which they can depend upon you to come through for them, to act consistently, and to follow through
3. Competence: Belief in your ability to perform the tasks required by your position
4. Honesty: The degree to which you demonstrate integrity, represent situations fairly, and speak truthfully to others
5. Openness: The extent to which you welcome communication and share information with the people it affects (Building)

Hopefully you have picked up a lot of strategies from this book to be able to establish these.

Once you have gained this person's trust, they can be your advocate with the rest of the family. One way to find who this person is could be asking the student herself. Have a private conversation with her to find out where you might have the most success. She may be able to tell you exactly who you should go to in order to engage the family.

Ways to engage an EL family

Understanding the culture the family is coming from can be somewhat important in figuring out how to engage. For instance, I have had some foreign-born families come in for conferences where the father was the one doing all the talking. The mother was very passive and wasn't saying anything. Not only that, the father was only talking to me even though I had two other female teachers on the team with me. Afterwards, we reflected on this situation and how it made us feel. Although at times we all felt uncomfortable, myself included, we clearly understood there was a cultural difference that had to be respected. From then on I became the main contact person with that family and I always called dad first. It might seem sexist when looked at through the lens of our own culture, but for their family culture it was the way things were.

Here are some questions you might want answered in order for you to better engage with EL parents:

- What countries your families come from?
- How many of your ELs were born in the U.S.?
- What languages do they speak (which may be at least two or three)?
- Whether families who speak the same language, such as Spanish, come from different countries or different regions within the same country
- The educational background of families and the school system of their countries
- If any of your EL families are migrants, refugees, or students with interrupted formal education
- If your families have experienced war or another traumatic event such as a natural disaster.

A teacher who successfully engages families from diverse background typically do so by doing three things:

1. They focus on building trusting, collaborative relationships among teachers and families
2. They embrace a philosophy of partnership where power and responsibility are shared
3. They recognize, respect, and address families' needs, as well as cultural differences (Mapp, 2002 p. 7).

Hopefully the first two sound familiar because they have been talked about in earlier chapters as being cornerstones for strong relationships with any family no matter their cultural background. The one that might be unique is the last one where cultural differences must be recognized and respected.

Some specific strategies you might want to consider to include families from different cultures:

- When you have an event, make it a family one, not just for the parents – in some cultures families are large so just the parents getting out to something is not realistic or there might be issues finding childcare. You do not want to make this a barrier for families.
- If it is something just for the parent, provide child care or activities for other children in the family to participate in – this might make parents more willing to come because they do not have to find someone to watch their children.
- Don't call from a school number – many times when a school is calling it is for something negative, so EL parents might be reluctant to answer a call from this authority. If they do not recognize the number, it might be easier to get them to answer.
- Texting can sometimes be better – this is for a couple of reasons. Depending on their grasp of the English language, they might need to employ Google translate in order to understand the message. Texting allows them to do this. Even if they do understand the language, they might not be able to process it when it is

coming quickly from a native speaker. This allows them time to figure out what the message is saying.

- Have them come in and share their culture – many times, people are proud of their culture and would jump at the opportunity to showcase it. You could have a multicultural fair where people from different cultures bring in their food and share their traditions. It could be storytelling in the native language. There are lots of activities that could be organized to allow a family to take pride in their culture in a school setting. This would go a long way to establishing that trust.
- Work with the EL teacher – you can talk to the EL teacher that may interact with your gifted student. They might have some insight as what is the best way to reach the family and what strategies you might take.

Remember first and foremost that people from another culture make lack a fundamental understanding of what their relationship with the school can be. Just like anyone who does not understand something, a little education goes a long way. Helping to develop opportunities that would be attractive to these families would bridge that gap and allow them to trust you and the school.

Make them feel welcome

This seems like an obvious one but I have seen many parent, and teacher groups for that matter, form cliques. Because there are a lot of one type of parent with similar backgrounds, they naturally gravitate toward one another and speak a language that seems like their own. By doing this, those who are not part of this particular group or do not speak this language feel excluded and as a result, unwelcome. Many times, it is not done deliberately by the dominate group, but nonetheless they have created a barrier that others do not feel comfortable overcoming and thus they simply stay away.

It is important to establish a culture where everyone feels their voice is being listened to and that they are included on conversations and decisions. One way to do this is through the use of group norms. Norms are not rules necessarily, but just the expectations of the group. By establishing norms, everyone knows what the expectations are and know the proper way to behave in the group setting. You do not just want to hand the norms down or decree them. The norms should be built by the participants of the group.

How you do this is at your very first meeting, you ask participants what they need in order to feel successful as a member of this group. You hand out a bunch of sticky notes and have them write one need per note. Eventually folks will have five to eight sticky notes in front of them. Then you ask them to go to an empty board or wall and cluster similar ideas together. For instance, if a lot of people feel what would allow them to be successful is that everyone feel listened to, those would all be clustered together. What will happen is you will have these large clusters of needs which become the group norms. There will also be some outlier sticky notes or one or two clustered together. You do want to make sure you acknowledge these but point out that since not many people suggested this idea, it does not need to be a group norm. Some of the norms you might have are:

- Start and end time respected
- Agenda/minutes out in a timely manner
- Limit side conversations
- Should be a safe place to ask questions
- Spirit of collaboration
- Stay positive about teachers
- Student-focused

There might be other ones that are important to people such as there being snacks at meetings or every meeting should be attended by a representative of the school. These norms will do a few things. One thing, and probably most important, right away people feel as though they have a voice and are being listened to. This is certainly essential if they are going to feel like part of the group. A second thing is it will establish how to act at meetings and also, how not to act. If you post the norms, there does not have to be any one individual who is the norm police. Instead, the group will remind one another of the expectations that have been established.

The norms should not be written in stone, rather they should be malleable. As new members join the group, the norms should be revisited and revised to reflect the entire membership of the group. You might find that as time goes on, some of the norms become outdated and are no longer needed. The group should have the ability to strike this norm from the bunch or to add one if a problem persists. The point is that the norms belong to the community of parents and should reflect an inclusion of all.

Create something they want to be a part of

When creating your community that you hope engages reluctant people, make sure it is something parents can be proud of and because of this, want to partake in it. Part of this is acknowledging there is no shame in admitting their child is gifted. A lot of times we speak about gifted students in hushed terms, hoping no one overhears us and accuses us of being elitist or of being exclusive. Parents should embrace and be proud of the fact their child is gifted. After all, aren't parents proud when their child is good at a particular sport or finishes a song at their piano recital. We put these on Facebook and brag about them because our child is achieving something. And yet, we do not always do this for our gifted children. I am by no means

suggesting you post every time your child comes home with an A paper or is awarded that gold star. What I am saying is parents should not be ashamed or secretive about the fact that their child is gifted. After all, there are parents that display bumper stickers that say “my child is an honor student at Breckman Elementary”, or displaying their good work on the refrigerator. Why should not gifted parents be proud of their child’s ability. This also lets the child know, it is OK to be gifted. In fact, if he uses it correctly, it can be a gift. Why do you think they call it gifted?

How do you create this pride without coming off as pompous? First off, just know this. No matter what you do, there are going to be people who find gifted elitist and believe it is full of privileged children and parents. This is based on preconceived notions, a strong sense that all things need to be equal, or maybe bitterness that their child did not make it into the gifted program. Whatever their reason, there is nothing you are going to do that will please these people. With that in mind, you certainly do not want to come off as better than others, otherwise the haters will be correct in their assumptions. Instead, parents should be proud of what their child does, not who they are.

You can start this in your own classroom by giving this sense of pride to your students. I helped to create a magnet program for cognitive children grades 5-8 who were pulled from three different middle schools. We were sequestered in the back wing of an old junior high building, sort of the district’s dirty little secret. We wanted to make sure students felt good about their ability and achievements. We started by branding the program. We had a STEM design challenge class and our first project was for students to create a logo for the team. The winning logo, judged by a panel of parents, administrators, and teachers, would be used in all of our letterhead and announcements that came from the gifted team. The logo has to exemplify what

the students felt was important for people to know about them being in the program. This is the logo that won:



We chose it because it exemplified the fact that students would spend four years in the program discovering who they were. We felt this was very powerful. Then there was the analogy of the maze coupled with the fact that gifted students like brain teasers such as these.

Just as we promised, with every letter we sent home, with every email, with every program we printed concerning a team event, we used this logo. We even had students construct a model of the logo which we proudly displayed at the entrance hallway to our wing. Students took pride in this logo and the fact they belonged to something.

This carried over into the parents. One of our parents was a seamstress and offered to make Gateway logo clothing. This included shirts, polos, and other clothing students could proudly display the team logo on. We set up a table at parent/teacher conferences and parents purchased some too. Pretty soon, many of the students and parents were wearing the apparel, taking pride in our students.

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We even held our own graduation at the end of their 8th grade year and every student got a novelty t-shirt with the Gateway logo on it and the names of their classmates:



It was inspiring the number of parents who showed up to this event wearing their Gateway apparel.

The point is we created a group that people wanted to be a part of, students and parents alike. You do not have to go to this extreme, but you do want to have a group of parents who are proud to be parents of gifted.

Engage in this...

The key to engaging a reluctant parent is finding out their story. It might be they have a bad perception of school, might have to work during regularly scheduled school activities, or do

not feel comfortable culturally in participating. By finding out their story, it helps you to best figure out how to approach them and make them feel welcome in the gifted community.

- Gifted children are unique and their academic and social-emotional needs have to be addressed in a specific, specialized manner. With that in mind, sometimes the same applies to their parents.

parent and principal, Kara Jackson

Chapter 8 – Case studies for challenging situations

In this chapter, we are going to look at some real-life situations I have dealt with in my career in gifted education that you might find yourself dealing with. These are case studies for what to do and what not to do in certain situations involving parents. What you will see is the situation, warts and all, and then we will use my mistakes and successes to learn how to properly handle the situation.

Case study #1 – When you cannot see eye to eye with a parent

As much as I would like to believe that everyone is a good person, I realize there are some jerks out there. This is the person who even though you bend over backwards to accommodate them, does not show appreciation, but rather on the contrary, they complain about your helping them. It is going to be next to impossible to please this parent, but here is the difficult part; you have to keep trying.

Why is it you have to swallow your pride and be the bigger person? Because you are the professional in this situation. They are the parent, meaning they do not have to act professionally. In fact, they can be the exact opposite and yet if you stoop to their level, you will find it only makes it worse. Not only that, district office might not be too happy you have engaged in this behavior.

There was one white whale of a jerk who was very skilled at baiting me into acting in an unprofessional manner. It all began innocently enough. His son was in my fifth grade class and

had ADHD. The program was a gifted magnet that pulled from all over the district, based on students who had been identified as cognitively gifted. I remember one of my first interactions with the student. I had been teaching a unit on timelines and he lingered after class once the bell had rang and everyone else had scrambled for their next class.

He said to me, “Mr. Stanley, I saw the movie Dolphin Tale and really liked it. Have you seen it?”

“Can’t say that I have.”

“I really think we should do a unit on Dolphin Tale.”

I paused, not knowing how to proceed. I wasn’t seeing where this suggestion fit in.

“I’m not sure Social Studies class is the right fit for something like that. Maybe it would be better off in Science class.”

“I really think it would be an interesting unit for our class to do.”

“Well, as you may or may not know, I am required to teach the state standards on Social Studies. Unfortunately, Dolphin Tale just doesn’t fit anywhere in the curriculum.”

Fortunately for me, this seemed to have confused him just enough to grab his things and head off to his next class. Normally I would not be so curt with a student who was suggesting something, but I was taken aback by the entitlement this request had been delivered with. As though we should just do whatever this particular child was interested in. This was the start of a long three years.

Our next situation happened when I reached out to the families in our gifted program and asked them to fill out a survey. Our program was new and I was trying to make sure we were meeting the needs of our students and parents. I sent the survey out in an email, asking parents to partake in the survey and get it back to me in the next two weeks. I was going to compile the data

and show it to our gifted coordinator and the team to see what was working and what needed improvement. I spent hours putting the data together, creating charts and graphs, and preparing a presentation I could share with the others. I had just put the finishing touches on the presentation with in walks this student. He hands me a piece of paper,

“Here is the survey, my dad filled it out.”

I had three choices here. Tell me which one would be the best of these:

- A) I take the survey the student has given me and redo the graphs and data I had put together to include this new information.
- B) I take the survey from the student and after he has left, do not add its results to the data I have already tabulated.
- C) Tell the student the surveys were due a week ago and hand it back to him.

Even if you cannot decide on which was the best of these, surely you can figure out which is the worst. Choice C clearly is a bad decision. The other two decisions are a little bit of a toss up, but both have the same effect. The student was able to accomplish his task and the parent would feel as though their opinion had been listened to. Unfortunately for me, I decided to take choice C.

About a week later, my supervisor came into my room. This was a bit surprising because we rarely ever saw him because in addition to being the gifted coordinator, he was running his own credit recovery school for students who were on the verge of dropping out.

“Did you give a survey back to a student who tried to turn it in?”

“Yes,” I said, “The survey was due the week before the student turned it in and I had already gathered all the data.”

“Well, the dad is calling me and indicating that you don’t care what he has to say about the program.”

“No, what I was saying was turn the survey in when you are supposed to.”

“That is definitely not the message he got.”

There was a few ways I could have handled it:

- A) Call the parent and apologize for not taking his survey
- B) Call the parent and explain to him better why I did not take his survey
- C) Ignore the situation and hope the parent goes away

In hindsight, choice A seems like the most logical of these. Even if I’m not sorry, I should suck it up and be the bigger person here. But because I chose C, I actually got the opposite result. This parent most definitely did not go away.

After a couple of months in the program, it became obvious to the team this student was not seeming like a good fit. Not only was he not performing at a high level, he seemed to be really struggling. We were concerned that if he continued to fall behind, it would be very difficult for him to catch up. We wanted the student to experience success, we just did not feel as though that was going to happen on this gifted team where expectations were very high. Not only that, apparently I was not the only person having issues with dad, as other teachers were receiving rude emails and seemingly unrealistic demands, although this had nothing to do with our suggesting the student be removed from the team.

We brought this to the attention of our coordinator. This was nothing out of the ordinary. Occasionally we had a student who was not working out in the program and suggested they move off the team to better meet their educational needs. A couple of days later, our coordinator informed the team we would be having a meeting with the family. In the five years our coordinator had been overseeing the team, he had always been supportive of our decisions and we always felt as though he had our back. That was why I was so surprised in the meeting. Rather than talking to the family about our concerns, he talked to us in front of the family how

we needed to do a better job meeting the needs of this special student. We felt as though we were being chastised for our work with the student as he handed us a packet that contained strategies for working with students who had ADHD. The parents left with a victorious look on the faces.

At this point, I could have taken a few routes:

- A) I could take the packet we had been given and use it to figure out better ways to work with the student.
- B) I could talk with the student and parents about what he felt would work best with his needs and do my best to meet these.
- C) I could resent the fact that we were being made to change the program to suit the needs of this one demanding family.

It does not take a gifted person to figure out I kept making the wrong choice. And why was I digging my heels in and being so stubborn? Because I did not want this jerk telling me what I should be doing. I had lost sight of the really important thing; the student.

I will not go into all of the details, but there were several more run-ins with the family:

- The student was put on an IEP and the parents demanded we hire an intervention specialist specifically for the team even though he was the only student out of 150 on an IEP. The district capitulated even though another intervention specialist had offered to work with him.
- The dad was on the road a lot so requested that we meet on Sundays to discuss school business.
- After they complained he was spending three hours a night working on homework, we asked the family to chart his activities during these three hours to determine what was causing him to have this issue. The next time we met with the family they said they did not have time to do this.

- I was eventually made gifted coordinator and was called into my supervisor's office and said the dad had complained about me, so I was coached on what I was doing wrong with this particular family.

I felt as though this dad must have pictures of district leaders in compromising positions because everyone seemed to jump when this parent demanded it. I did come to find out a couple of things. First, he was on the board of education for my former coordinator's credit recovery school. In other words, he was my boss's boss. He was also best friends with the superintendent and had his ear. Everyone admitted that he was a very demanding parent and yet everyone seemed to be bending over backwards to accommodate him. My largest issue here was my pride. I was not going to let this parent beat me. I was determined not to kowtow to his demands.

In retrospect, I handled the situation completely wrong (which you probably already deduced). If I had a time machine and could do it all over again, I would certainly change a few things. Most importantly, I would have communicated more with the family. I took a very reactive approach rather than a proactive one. I waited for things to come to me and then reacted to them, rather than recognizing an issue and proactively reaching out to try and solve it.

I also learned that just because a parent is a jerk does not mean he is not correct. It might have come in a jerky fashion, but he was just advocating for his child and his specific needs. We were not meeting the needs of this twice exceptional student. Not only that, I came to the conclusion the student should not have to adapt to the program, but rather the other way around. Just because the student does not meet the criteria of how we think a gifted student should be does not mean he does not have needs that we need to address. If any good came from it, it was my awareness of twice exceptional students and what we needed to change in order to address these children.

If I had to summarize this experience into a fortune cookie's worth of advice, it would be:

Engaging in a jerk's battle just turns you into the jerk.

Case study #2 – Managing expectations and tempering enthusiasm

This next case does not pertain to a specific parent but rather a specific type of parent. Upon hearing their child has been identified as gifted, imagine how exciting this would be to a family. This is validation that their child is special. That they have raised someone who has so much potential. It can sometimes be a challenge to manage the expectations of these parents as to what is going to happen now that their child is identified gifted. What happens in a majority of these cases is unfortunately nothing. Most states do not mandate that services be provided for gifted students. Unlike special education which has federal law insisting that this student's special needs be met, there is no such law for gifted. Not only that, the resources provided by a district are limited, so in many cases only the exceptionally gifted are going to receive services. In my district, 1 out of every 3 students is identified gifted in one area or another. However, we serve about 1 out of every 10 students, meaning a majority of those identified as gifted do not receive services.

This can be a difficult thing to explain to parents. Congratulations your child is gifted, oh by the way, we are not going to be able to do anything about this. This is why forming parent groups where they can advocate for additional services becomes so valuable. District personnel are much more likely to listen to parents than they are their own people. When communicating with a parent, it is sometimes difficult to explain to them the identification of their child as gifted is only the first step, and it is the easiest step. There are many more things that have to be considered.

From these experiences, I have learned a few things about managing expectations and tempering enthusiasm. The first thing was to be as transparent as possible with parents when reporting the scores from gifted testing. Depending on the testing your district uses, there might be a report that is generated by the testing company that can be sent home. However, these reports can be quite confusing, especially if you do not know what you are looking for or do not know what the numbers mean. I have seen some districts just send this home with the students and leave the parents to fend for themselves what it all means. When I send results home with a student, I attach a letter to it such as this:

Dear Parent(s):

In October, all 5th grade students were administered testing to determine achievement and ability levels. Your child's scores should be included with this letter and their report card.

There are six pertinent scores included in the report. For the first five look for the column that reads National PR (National Percentile Rank). The five scores you are looking are: Total Reading, Total Mathematics, Language, Science, and Social Science. You want the score before the dash. In other words, if the score reads 79-4, you are just looking at the 79. **If a student scores a 95 or higher, they are identified as gifted in that area.**

The sixth score is the Otis-Lennon School Ability Test (OLSAT). Look under the SAI (School Ability Index) column for the Total. This is a school intelligence test that measures a student's cognitive ability. **In order to be identified gifted or superior cognitive, a student must score a 126 or higher.**

If your child has been identified as gifted in more than one area, he/she may be eligible for services beginning next school year. **However, no new services are available for the current school year.** The two gifted services for 6th graders are the Gateway and Math Plus Programs.

Gateway is a magnet program located at Toll Gate Middle School. They receive gifted services in reading, math, social studies, and science. In addition they are with like-minded peers as well as teachers trained to help with social/emotional needs. To qualify for this program a student must be superior cognitive as well as being gifted in both math AND reading. That means your child would need to have a 126 or higher SAI and have a 95 NPR in both reading and math.

Math Plus is an accelerated and compacted class specifically geared for gifted math students. This is done at the home school of your child. The student is placed on the team that has the Math Plus teacher and attends math class with them. In order to qualify for this program, a student needs to be identified as gifted in math and have a 122 or higher SAI.

If your child was close to qualifying or you feel these results are not an identification of their true ability, you can request retesting during the spring testing window. Those forms can be found on the school district website under departments. Click on the gifted tab and open the screening form. Fill out, scan, and send it to the email provided at the bottom of this letter.

I have done a few things with this letter. First, I have educated parents on how to read the report. I tried to be as clear as possible so that parents can make sense of the numbers. There is a lot of data used in education and teaching parents what this looks like helps them to better understand and figure out what it means for their child. It puts you on the same playing level as them so it is not a matter of I know this and you don't. These scores should not be something we are keeping from parents. We need to make them knowledgeable in order to function as a team.

The second thing I do is to make sure parents know this information will not result in anything this year. We purposefully wrote into policy that students cannot enter into gifted programming once the school year starts unless they are a move in. Why we did this is for two reasons. Some of our classes are accelerated and if students entered into them mid-year, they will have skipped some content that might be vital to the foundation of their understanding the subject area. Second, we usually have a few people that qualify for services and would not have the room to add this influx of students to the already existing classes. I state this to temper enthusiasm of their child receiving these services immediately.

The last thing I do in the letter is make parents aware of what services we have to offer. I want to inform them what is available. I clearly lay out the qualifications of each service and give them opportunities to have their child retested. I do not want to get their hopes up, but at the

same time, want to provide an opportunity for them to advocate for their child. Because we have clear guidelines, there is no subjectivity to acceptance of a child into the gifted program such as grades or teacher recommendations. Some feel these aspects give you a more well-rounded view of the student's gifts, but this is only if the person giving the recommendation is aware of the traits of gifted students. Many teachers believe the myths about gifted students and improperly identify high achievers as gifted when they may not be. This also puts the brunt on the qualification on the performance of the student. As much as I want parents to advocate for their child, I do not want their child to receive special consideration because she had a parent who spoke up while those children of parents who did not are left out. I want parents to advocate for all gifted children.

After the testing letters come out, I always get a dozen or so calls or emails from parents whose child had been identified as gifted, but does not meet the multiple qualifications for service. I do my best to lay out the clear criteria we have that qualifies a student for service and the rationalization for having it. I often times set up meetings with these parents in order to answer all of their questions as well as informing them of what options might lay in their future, continuing the spirit of transparency.

Case study #3 – The almost gifted parent

In my many years in working in gifted education I have had to have this conversation with a parent numerous times:

“Hello Mrs. Smith, what can I do for you?”

“Well Mr. Stanley. I wanted to talk to you about Billy's test scores.

“What about them?”

“It says here he scored a 125 on his superior cognitive test.”

“That is correct.”

“Does that make him gifted?”

“Unfortunately Mrs. Smith, Billy would have needed to score a 126 in order to qualify as gifted.”

“So he missed the qualification by a single point.”

“That is correct.”

“Is he going to receive any gifted services?”

“He would not qualify for the gifted programming we provide.”

“But he is one point away. He is obviously intelligent enough to get that close.”

“Obviously. Unfortunately we have to draw the line somewhere and 126 is where the district has decided to draw it.”

“What is the district going to do for my intelligent but not quite gifted child then?”

“Mrs. Smith. I can assure you that Billy is going to be challenged in the regular classroom. I will make sure his teachers know how intelligent Billy is although they probably have a pretty good idea about that, and develop strategies that will enable him to tap into his intelligence and potential.”

“I would appreciate that, Mr. Stanley.”

“My pleasure.”

Sometimes it goes this pleasant and sometimes it is less pleasant, but no matter which, after hanging up I always asked myself “what if this were my child?” Would I not want her to receive the best education possible if she displayed a certain level of intelligence? Would I feel comfortable with her in a regular education classroom, even if the coordinator did pass the

information along, where the range of students can vary wildly and where often times the teacher ends up teaching to the middle instead of a gifted classroom where every child in the class is at a similar range of ability and where the teacher has been trained to work with this type of student? Would I not be upset that she had gotten so close to qualifying only to miss it by such a small margin?

The reality in education is that even if your district does offer services for gifted children, not all gifted students are being directly served. A majority of those students are going to be taught by regular education teachers in a regular educational setting. Many of them are going to get a great education, but there will be those who become bored at the slow pace of the class and the discussions by students not at a depth engaging to them and shut down. Or because the bar is not raised, they will simply jump over the one that is being held at a low level. And of course, there are those really intelligent students who do not quite qualify but would certainly benefit from some sort of enrichment and/or challenge. What is going to happen to these students?

In some cases what will happen is what happens sometimes to gifted students in the regular education classroom. The teacher knows this student is going to do well academically and a lot of times are not going to be a discipline problem in the classroom. Because of this, the teacher can focus his attention on those students who he feels need it the most; this is either the disciplinary problems that suck a majority of the teacher's attention, or the focus will be on those students who are struggling because they need the most help. While Billy is off in the corner diligently working on his schoolwork, the teacher is giving the attention to other students. And if Billy does not have someone to challenge him or push him to tap into his intelligence, his intelligence might go to waste.

And even if Billy had missed the cut by ten points rather than one, he would still be in the top ten percent of his class, meaning that he is a pretty intelligent kid. What happens to the Billy's of the world? Do they not deserve to be challenged to the fullest of their ability just like a student who struggles should be challenged as his level?

It is important as the gifted teacher to not forget about these almost gifted students. As much as I try to encourage the parents of gifted to advocate for their children with the level of challenge their child is receiving in class, I encourage this amongst the almost gifted parents as well. Often times parents will contact me and tell me of the dilemma that their child is bored in school and not being challenged. I often listen to this parent and ask who the teacher in question is. I then contact the teacher and have a conversation about ways they could challenge their children who have shown a propensity for being able to handle this. Sometimes the conversation goes like this:

“Mr. Stanley, I know Sally is really smart. She always finishes her work before everyone else and then I don't know what to do with her.”

“Have you considered giving her more challenging work?”

“Oh, I give her more work. She just finishes that as well.”

“No, not more work. Different work.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean when you give some students a group of problems to work on, do you give her a different set of problems that are more complex or that require her to think more?”

“But I need to make sure she can do the same work that everyone else is doing?”

“Hasn't she proven time and time again that she is capable of doing that work?”

“I suppose she has. But that means more work for me.”

“And you don’t like having to do more work?”

“Certainly not.”

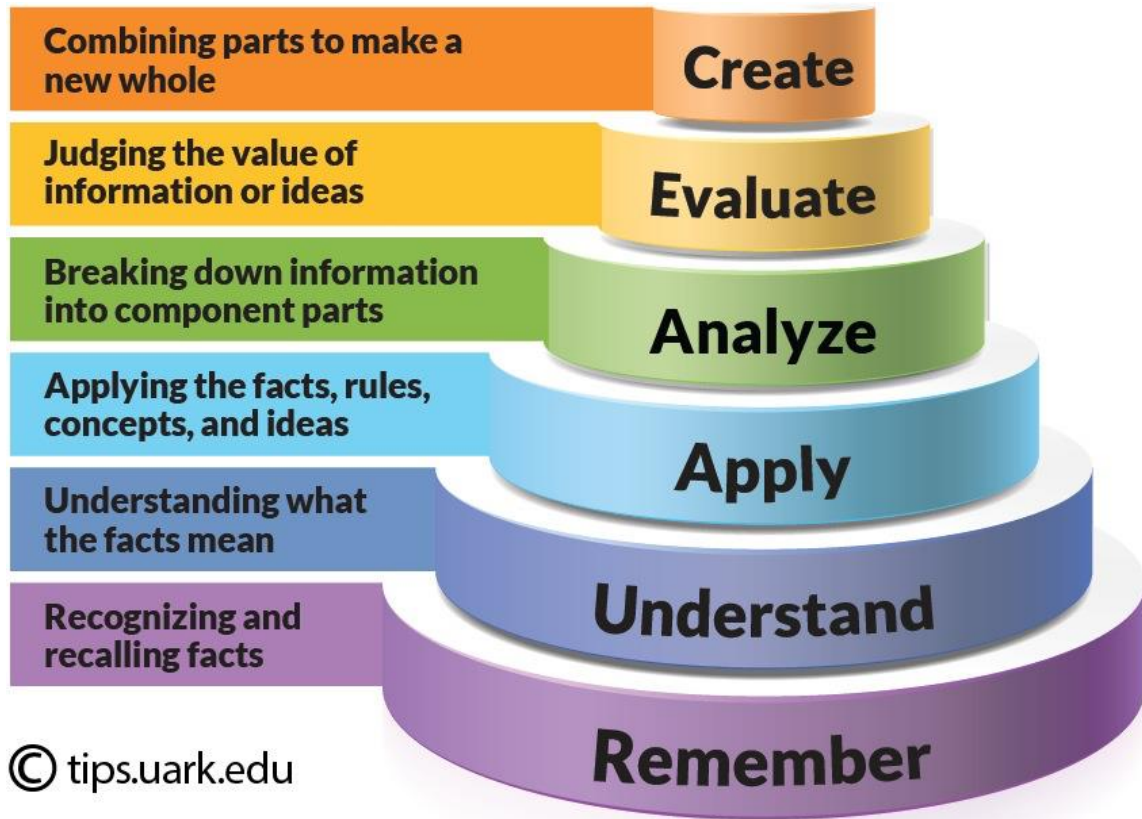
“Well neither does Sally.”

Teachers receive a lot of education or professional development on how to work with students that are struggling. But how much education are they provided on how to challenge students? What if this were your child? Would you not want her to receive the best education possible if she displayed a certain level of intelligence? Would you feel confident telling a parent that because this child misses the gifted programming requirements, that you are not going to be do your best to make sure she is going to get an education that allows her to reach his potential. I realize this is a lot to ask of a teacher. With all sorts of legislation, testing, and standards it has become increasingly more difficult to be a teacher. Of course the reality of this is that regardless of how difficult it might be, you owe it to your students to do your best and find the best way to challenge them. Would you not want to make sure you are challenging all of your students no matter what their ability level?

When I do have these conversations with teachers, I usually try to provide them with various strategies that might enable them to challenge their students. Here are five such strategies I talk to them about:

Higher Level Thinking

- Use the levels of Bloom’s to guide you



- By having the questions or product be something in which students either analyze, evaluate, or create.
- Do your assessments, classroom discussion, and/or conversations require students to think at a higher level
- Do your products require students to think at this level and challenge them to go deeper.
- It is not the difficulty of the question/product that causes students to grow, it is the level of thinking you are asking them to do.

Flexible grouping

- This is the idea of putting students in groups based on ability for the specific skill you are teaching
 - Could be performance-based
 - Could be ability grouping

- Some buildings have already been cluster grouping
- Could use pre-assessment to determine the level of their understanding (K-W-L chart)
- Need to stress the flexible part, these should not be assigned for the entire year

Questions to Consider

- When does grouping benefit students?
- When does grouping facilitate instruction?
- Which activities lend themselves to group work?
- How do you determine group membership?

Differentiated Centers

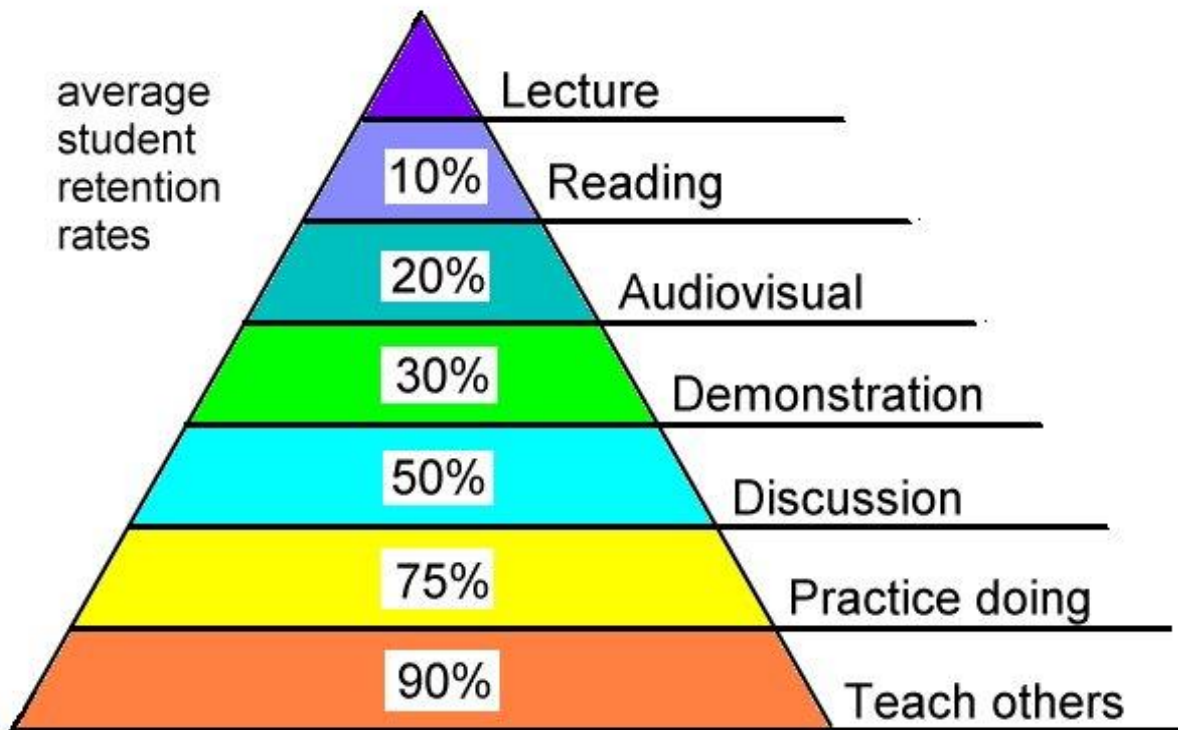
- Teachers base differentiated stations on student assessment data, whereas a traditional station is based on whole-group instruction.
- In a differentiated station, students work within multilevel resources, whereas traditional station resources are not differentiated.
- An **open-ended activity** is where all students in the group tackle the same assignment, but the end product will differ for beginner, intermediate, and advanced clusters.
- A **tiered activity** is when students are doing the same activity, but it's tiered according to their difficulty level.
- **Learning menus**, or choice boards, are varied activities that give students options on how they want to learn a concept. They often mimic a tic-tac-toe board where your classroom would pick three activities to complete (one from each row) to form a line. Differentiated instruction menus benefit all students because you can tailor each board to students' readiness, learning style, or interest, and kids think they are a lot of fun.

- Differentiated stations have tiered assignments, which include varied student responses, whereas a traditional learning station only has one level of response for all.

Teach interactively

- Allow the students to teach
- Allow them to choose the method of teaching
- Organize resources in order to free yourself to work with individual students
- As an ancillary effect students have a greater appreciation of how difficult it is to teach

Learning Pyramid



Source: National Training Laboratories, Bethel, Maine

Advantages to cooperative learning

- It has the potential to produce a level of engagement that other forms of learning cannot
- Students may explain things better to another student than a teacher to a class. Students learn how to teach one another and explain material in their own words
- Interpersonal and collaboration skills can be learned in a cooperative learning activity
- Cooperative learning has the potential to meet more learning style needs more of the time than individualized direct instruction
- Sends the symbolic message that the class is egalitarian
- Higher ability students are in a position to be experts, leaders, models and teachers

High expectations

- Students have a funny way of jumping over wherever you set the bar
- When a student receives an A, what does that mean
 - Should not mean effort
 - Should not be that the assignment requirements were met, that is an B, maybe even a C
 - By pure definition of A = exceed, the student should be exceeding what is expected from the assignment
- Examples of high expectations techniques
 - No opt out - a method of eliminating the possibility of muttering, "I don't know," in response to a question
 - Right Is Right - is about the difference between partially right and all-the-way right. Should expect 100% correct
 - Stretch It - the sequence of learning does not end with a right answer; reward right answers with follow-up questions that extend knowledge and test for reliability

- Format Matters - prepare your students to succeed by requiring complete sentences and proficient grammar every chance you get
- Without Apology - sometimes the way we talk about expectations inadvertently lowers them. If we're not on guard, we can unwittingly apologize for teaching worthy content and even for the students themselves (Lemov, 2010)

Notice there is nothing specific about gifted students in these teaching strategies. They do work with gifted students because they are designed to get students thinking at a higher level, but these can just as easily be used with almost gifted students to make sure they are reaching their potential as well.

When working with a parent of an almost gifted child, it is equally important to engage the teacher the child has to develop strategies that enable this child to be challenged even if he was not formally accepted to the gifted program.

Case study #4 – The Irrational Parent

In scenario #1, I pointed out that even though the parent was being a jerk, he had valid points he was bringing to our attention and his demands were legitimate for the needs of his child. Every once in a blue moon, you run across a parent who is not being rationale, even after emotions have run their course. We had been warned about this parent prior to the coming school year. Some of her daughter's elementary teachers had told us how demanding she was, how she expected teacher to bend over backwards and yet was unwilling to be flexible herself, and how she would verbally attack them. It was no different for us as our gifted team ran into this parent several times.

Ultimately what it boiled down to is that this parent was a grade grubber. She wanted her daughter to only have As, and when her daughter did not achieve these, she blamed the teachers, the curriculum, the program, and anything else she could set her sights on. Keep in mind, this student was in 6th grade. None of the grades she was getting were going to matter in the grand scheme of things. It was not like she would be applying to Harvard and they would pull out her middle school transcripts and say,

“I see you got a B in 6th grade math. Well, that grade that you got six years ago is going to prevent you from entering our hallowed grounds.”

We try to explain to parents at the beginning of the year, this is a challenge program. By its purest definition it should be challenging students so what that means is your child may not come home with all As. That is not the end of the world. A B means your child still did pretty darn good. And it was not like this child was trying her very hardest and still getting Bs. She was getting zeroes on quizzes, not turning in all of her assignments, and then lying about some of the things she did. And yet, the mom wanted her the opportunity to retake the quizzes, to be able to turn the assignments in late, and blamed the teacher for her daughter lying. Here was an email she sent to us:

My daughter stated, they just recently received the packets from what I gathered. I question how she was able to take the test/quizzes home. Generally, most teachers collect the assessments from students. I'm not excusing my daughter's actions because she has never done anything like this before but I would hope we would treat this situation as a learning experience for her and that she is given the opportunity to retake the quizzes/test?? Whom should I talk to about her retaking this test?

Basically her daughter took a quiz home she was not supposed to, being able to look at all of the questions, and now her mom wanted her to be able to retake this quiz. What was interesting is she would say she wanted a weekly meeting to keep track of her daughter's progress. Then we would not hear from her for a month. Then all of the sudden, she would communicate with us,

always when her daughter's grade fell below the A threshold. In one of our meetings, as she was complaining the curriculum was going too fast and the method of teaching was not working, the principal asked her point blank,

“Would it help if I changed her grade to an A?”

The mother sputtered like a motor boat before composing herself enough to say,

“Yes, that would be very helpful.”

This showed us it did not have anything to do with curriculum or teaching methods, it was only about the grade.

She was also the type of parent who would keep going up the ladder until she got the answer she was looking for. She went to the teacher first, asking her to change the grade but she would not. Then she went to the program director and asked that he do the same. After conferring with the teacher he told her he could not do that. She went to the principal next who had several face-to-face meetings with the mom, but in the end, she supported the teacher's decision not to change the grade. We next heard from the superintendent's office.

There were certainly some mistakes I made during this encounter. When things got a little contentious, this was an email I sent her:

I think the problem from our perspective is the way you go about asking for help. You are not asking. You are demanding in many cases. Example from your email before "She needs to retake the math workshop number six and seven." There are some instances where you are going from a professional situation to making it personal. That is not acceptable.

I would be more than happy to send you a map of the math curriculum. As for hiring another teacher to help, in my two years here you are the only person that has expressed a concern that the math is too challenging. It is supposed to be challenging. That is why this is a challenge program. If students and parents were saying it was too easy, that would be a concern. If a student gets into the program and finds it is moving too fast maybe this is not the correct placement for them. Maybe they would be better suited in a regular classroom moving at a pace that is more comfortable for them. I do not feel the need to hire an additional teacher to help in the math program. I can tell you that last year every single one of this teacher's students scored an advanced on the state AIR test, an amazing accomplishment. I am very confident she has a handle on the curriculum and is doing what is best for students. Her classroom has become a model for other teachers in the district and out-of-district visitors to come and observe.

I can assure you here that no one wants to see your daughter fail. Some of the responsibility of that falls on her. Is she putting forth her best effort? She needs to be able to figure some of this out herself with the help and support of the teachers and yourself. We want to prepare these students for the junior high where a large brunt of the responsibility is placed on their shoulders.

You can see in this email there are places I let my emotions get the best of me. Phrases such as “this is not acceptable”, and when I say that students who find the curriculum too fast might be better off in a regular classroom, really have no place in the email. I forgot to maintain my professionalism.

I was coached to stop sending her emails because what she would do was copy and paste parts of the email, taking the context out of it, and use that against us. Instead it was suggested if I was going to communicate with the parent, it should be face-to-face.

The behavior of this parent was baffling at times. This was an email the principal sent to the district office apprising them of the situation:

I have 36 email message correspondence from this parent/teacher/myself since Thursday. The latest concern is over 3 points and this is reflected in the 36 messages to me, the teacher, and Todd. Her daughter received a 2/5 and a 3/5. The teacher allowed her to redo these assignments, so now the grade book reflects a 5/5 and 5/5 for these two assignments. The other concern that she has brought up in the 36 messages is that her daughter was sick for 2 days and she wanted to make sure that we got her caught up. Her daughter is telling the teachers that she is ready to take the assessments and the teachers are reviewing the content with her and she is showing understanding. If her daughter gets an A then all is good. However, if her daughter does not receive an A then she has a problem with the program, the grading, and then she starts to personally attack the teacher, me and Todd.

She has requested to come in and observe the classroom (two weeks ago). I have provided her with the schedule now for the last two weeks. She has not been in to observe.

This was the email we received back from district office:

There needs to be another face-to-face meeting with this parent to show her the compacted curriculum, expectations, pacing, and the rationale behind it.

Under this directive, the principal sent this email to the parent:

I think that it would be a good idea to sit down and meet so we could go through the curriculum to address each one of your concerns? When would be a good time to do this?

Also, I know that you would like to visit the classroom. I have provided you with the schedule. What day were you planning on coming in? I am requesting that you provide me with 24 hour notice of when you would like to come in.

This was the response we got from the mom:

What does this concern??

This was a woman who sent us 36 emails in a two week period, complaining about this and that. Then when we wanted to sit down and talk with her about the concerns, she did not seem to be aware there was a concern. I had to tell myself over and over, I was a rationale person trying to make sense of an irrational person. This was an impossible task. You cannot rationalize with an irrational person.

These were the takeaways I learned from our dealing with this irrational parent:

- Rather than email, either have a face-to-face or a phone conversation with the parent. Emails can be tone deaf, and it sometimes is difficult to control how the message is coming across. The very same email can be read differently by different people.
- If you are going to respond in an email, write the email, completely delete it, and then write it again. You may have to do this a few times depending on how worked up you are. You should never send your first draft of a response because more than likely it contains many of the don'ts talked about in chapter one.
- It never hurts to have someone else read an email before you send it. A fresh set of eyes might see the defensiveness that snuck into your response.
- Make sure there is another teacher/administrator in the room when you talk with this parent. This way it is not her word against only yours. There is someone that can corroborate what happened.

- First and foremost, remind yourself that you are the professional and thus you need to act in a professional manner. Do not let your emotions get the better of you and cloud your judgement.

I will say, we were able to get our happy ending. A few months into the next school year, the teacher who would not change the grade got the following email:

Good morning –

I hope your year is going well. I just wanted to say thank you for preparing my daughter for junior high. Although I did not agree with how the grading was done. I deeply apologize for how I approached the situation. I wish the best for you this school year.

Again, you cannot rationalize with an irrational person.

Engage in this...

You will find yourself in situations where you want to defend yourself because someone is attacking the thing you love so much; teaching. What you always want to remind yourself of is that this parent is defending the thing they love most in the world; their child. Like a mama bear defending her cub, sometimes there is no thought, there is only raw emotion. That is where you need to be different. You need to check your emotion at the door when communicating with this parent and always do your best to bring it back to being professional.

It is important to put the emotion of the parent aside and really boil down the problem to its truest form. Even though you might not like how they are saying it, they may have a point. The best teachers are reflective teachers that are constantly learning from mistakes and trying to improve their craft.

No matter what the differences between you and the parents, you both want the same thing; you want this child to succeed. If both parties have a fundamental understanding of this, there is not any problem that cannot be resolved.

- By providing opportunity to engage parents with each other at informal events. My daughter found a great group of friends through Destination Imagination in middle school and junior high that she frequently studies and collaborates with inside and outside of school. Getting to know parents while participating in these events allows us as parents to support and grow these connections.

parent Stacy Morton

Conclusion – Creating the gifted community

Ultimately, the best way to engage a person is to show them the value of doing so. How you do this is by creating a community rather than a group. I can sense some of you rolling your eyes right now. What's the difference between those two? I would argue there is a large difference, but rather than taking my word for it, let me try and demonstrate it. I once worked for a program called Mosaic. It recruited juniors and seniors from around the county to take part in a humanities program that employed project-based learning. There were some things this organization did well, and other things that could have been better, but I would say its greatest strength was its ability to create a community of students, much better than a traditional school is able to do. Typical schools create community through loyalty and support of the school and its sports teams. Mosaic had no sports teams and students actually graduated from their own districts. How was it able to create community then? By following the four factors that create a sense of community.

McMillan and Chavis formed a theory of community calling it a sense of community.

The four factors that create a sense of community are:

1. Membership
2. Influence
3. Fulfillment of needs
4. Shared emotional connection (McMillan, 1986)

Mosaic created membership by recruiting students to the program. We indicated the sort of student the program worked best with:

- Independent, original thinkers
- Intellectually curious, creative, or unique
- Motivated by “real life” learning experiences
- Interested in the arts and creative expression
- Committed to having a voice and making a difference

We purposely began to try and find underachieving gifted students, students with an obvious love of learning but who had been turned off of school. Not all of our students were gifted, but we had noticed the program had organically drawn a lot of these types of students and they were the ones the program seemed to work best for.

Students needed to decide if they fit this bill and then had to go through the process of membership meaning they filled out an application, got two letters of recommendation, wrote an essay as to why they wanted to be a member of this group, and had to come to an introductory night where they met other people who were applying. Many times in a typical school, the only membership is that you live in the boundaries of the district. People are not left to think they are members of the school but rather people who happen to attend it.

They also needed to feel as though they had some influence on the program. In many traditional schools, school is something that happens to students. They do not have much control or say so in the goings on of school. Mosaic tried to change that with its philosophy:

- We focus on projects, first-hand experience and papers rather than textbooks, lectures and tests.
- We are a relationship-based, small learning community focused on individual solutions rather than one-size-fits-all rules.
- We believe students learn best in a diverse setting so we promote effective collaboration between students across racial, religious and socio-economic backgrounds.

- We value learning for learning sake rather than to “get the grade”.
- We believe that students deserve to be treated like adults and are capable of being accountable for that responsibility.
- We believe learning is a way of life and therefore provide students a vast range of learning opportunities in class and beyond.

Notice in there such things as “relationship-based”, “effective collaboration between students”, “learning for learning sake”, “treated like adults”, and “learning is a way of life”. What all this means is that students have influence in the program, especially in their choices. Instead of everyone reading the same book, students were given ten to choose from. We asked for three outside learning opportunities a quarter and then provided dozens of them, allowing students to choose ones outside of that as well but encouraging them to go to the ones we provided because then they could do it with other students, promoting that sense of togetherness and community.

Next was the fulfillment of needs. It used to be the way they recruited for Mosaic was they called the counselors who tended to send us whomever they felt could benefit from such a program. Some schools sent us their artsy folks, others their druggies, and others students who were looking for an easy weighted grade. What would happen is the artsy students would come and all hang out with other artsy folks, the druggies would gravitate toward one another, and the students looking for the easy A just tried to stay out of the way. With all these cliques, there was not the strong sense of community we were looking for. Then we got purposeful about the students we thought would most benefit from our program and created the tenets you have seen earlier in the chapter. We started to get students that were a better fit for what we had to offer which was an alternative to your typical high school. These were students who for whatever reason had fallen out of their love of learning at school but still loved to learn. What we provided was fulfillment for this love of learning. The projects we did were experiential, authentic

learning. We had students interning at businesses, working for campaigns, creating their own community service initiatives, and participating in grassroots change.

I cannot tell you how many students, and parents for that matter, that came through the program and talked about how they enjoyed school again. Why did they enjoy school again? Because we provided them fulfillment for their love of learning. Suddenly, no matter what the clique of the student, they all had something in common; their love of learning. From here it was easier to create community because students and teachers alike were in it for the same reason. We shared a common purpose. It was the fulfillment of this purpose that made the community as strong as it was.

Finally, there is the shared emotional connection. All healthy communities have one thing in common; a story. The story of Mosaic was a renewed love of learning. Here these students had pretty much given up that school had anything to offer them except as a gateway to college and other things. It was just another hoop to jump through. Instead, Mosaic showed them how school and the love of learning could work together. This came in the many experiences we provided for students. Instead of meeting in a classroom every day that had desks, a desk at the front, and a teacher standing talking to them, none of these things existed at Mosaic. Although we had a central meeting place, most times students met us at wherever experience was helping to teach the current project we were working on. This might mean meeting at a topiary garden, listening to foreign-born speakers give their perspective, visiting art exhibits, taking a tour of different kinds of religious centers, researching at the public library, or any other way for students to see how learning occurs in the real-world rather than the confines of a sterilized classroom. The city was our classroom. Our goal was for students not just to experience learning, but to do so within the context of their community. We purposely placed the program in the

downtown area within walking distance of the art museum, three universities, the main public library, and easy access to other venues that would offer experiences.

It was these shared experiences that formed a long lasting, emotional connection. Although students participated in their district school's graduation, we would have a Mosaic graduation. Although there were no diplomas handed out, no valedictorian speeches, no caps or gowns, what we were doing was celebrating our creation of a community. I have been to typical high school graduations. Although you might get your occasional student who becomes emotional, it is mostly the parents who are emotional because it is a symbol of their child growing up and a culmination of twelve years of hard work. At Mosaic graduation, all of the students got emotional as did the teachers. I received more hugs that day than at a family reunion. Students were genuinely sad to see the school year end because it meant they were going to have to leave the community they had spent so much of their time contributing to. Of course the community did not end with their graduation. Every year we had a Mosaic reunion and lots of students returned to share what new things they had learned and experienced since leaving us. I have been in education for over twenty years, with my time at Mosaic constituting three of those years, and yet I have had more lunches with former Mosaic students, more students who are Facebook friends from those three years at Mosaic than all of the other years that students have friended me. I've even been invited to concerts and weddings with these former students. Although I have not taught there for over a decade, I still am part of that community.

So how do you create this community amongst your gifted parents? By having all four of these factors available to parents.

Membership: a child being gifted gets parents membership to a very exclusive club. There aren't that many kids out there with this identification. Not just

anyone can join. Only the parents of gifted children. By offering to engage these parents as you are planning to do, you have given them access to a membership that has always been there but they weren't even aware existed.

Influence: by following the advice in this book and engaging parents of gifted children in ways that allow them to be involved, they will feel as though they have some influence in the education of their child. As stated from before, schools and home do not need to be exclusive from one another. Instead, each should help to inform the other as to the best approach to challenging these high potential students and meeting their needs. It gives parents a sense they have some influence on the schooling of their child. In addition, if they are involved with a parents of gifted group, this influence might extend to the district and the programming and services it offers to all gifted students. Parents are having an influence on not just their own child's education, but the education of all gifted children in the district.

Fulfillment of needs: parents of gifted are getting a few needs fulfilled. First and foremost is the need for their child to receive services that match their unique abilities. Every parent wants their child to be happy and fulfilled and find themselves fulfilled as a result. Secondly, by having other parents of gifted to talk and confer with, they are having their social and emotional needs meet or confirmed. Just knowing there are other people other than themselves going through what they are can be a huge relief. This is why organizations such as Alcoholics Anonymous can be so reassuring to its members. People sharing their stories and receiving empathy for what they are going through. Third, having their basic needs as a human to improve their community met can happen in a group such as this. By making them advocates not just for their child but for the entire gifted community, they are improving their overall community which can be very fulfilling.

Shared emotional connection: finally, this shared sense of purpose creates an emotional connection amongst members. They have a common story and that story is my child has these special gifts and I want to do something about making sure they are met. By working together and with you as well as the school, they will hopefully get these needs met and the experience will have made them that much more connected. This elevates the level of community even higher because now it is not just the fact that all their children are gifted that gives them something in common, it is the fact that they are doing something about it. This shared experience is what creates the community of gifted parents.

Phew, that is a tall order indeed and a lot to put on your plate, a plate that is already full of other things that come from being a teacher. However, as anyone with a full plate knows, just moving around things or trying to put them on top of one another is just going to make for a messy plate with the possibility of some of those things falling off. If you are able to engage with your gifted parents and help them to create this sense of community, you will find them taking things off of your plate and putting them onto their own. It will take a lot of work at the beginning, but if you stick with it and do it right, you will all be doing the heavy lifting together.

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