

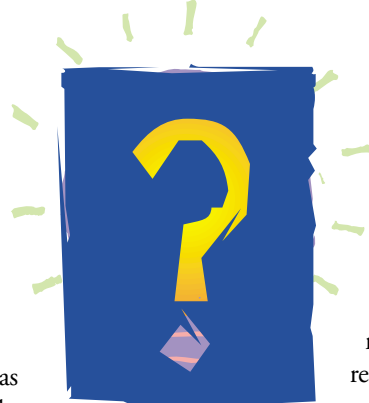
What's a Parent to Ask?

A BASIC GUIDE TO SERVICES FOR ADVANCED LEARNERS

by Sally M. Reis

Rosie reads at a fourth-grade level and often finishes a fifty-page book in the hour she reads to herself before she falls asleep each night. The next day in school she is bored and sleepy; on several occasions she has begged her parents to let her stay home and read. It's only September, and she is becoming distracted in school and rarely finishes her assignments. On two separate occasions, Rosie's teacher has called her parents to discuss her apathy in school. The problem with Rosie is that she is six years old and in first grade. Only one other student in her classroom reads and her teacher does not know what to do to challenge Rosie. While her peers learn beginning sounds, Rosie works alone, finishing her assigned work in a fraction of the time it takes other students to finish and daydreaming to pass the time.

A gifted program is available in Rosie's school, but it does not provide services for students until fourth grade. No mandate exists to provide services to gifted students in the state in which Rosie lives and no training or certification is required for teachers who work in gifted programs. The teacher in the program spends only a day and a half at Rosie's school, one of three schools that she travels to each week, and has had little formal training or coursework except for a few staff development sessions and a conference on gifted students. Rosie's parents watch as their child, who was excited about learning and motivated to begin first grade, gradually comes to dislike school and cries each morning as she gets ready to leave home. As Rosie finishes



first grade, she seems to have become bored by school and disinterested in learning.

Rosie's problems in school are not uncommon for advanced learners who are often ahead of their chronological peers in mastering basic skills and the ability to learn new skills. Yet, many classroom teachers are not prepared to adjust curriculum or modify instruction for high-achieving students. Recent research indicates that 64% of third and fourth-grade public classroom teachers who responded to a large national survey have no training in meeting the needs of gifted students, and few teachers believe they are effectively meeting the needs of this population. This research suggests that parents must become more aware of the types of services their children need and realize that many classroom teachers do not know how to accommodate the needs of their brightest students. By asking the right questions and making teachers aware of strategies that they can use to modify both instruction and content for advanced students, parents can serve an important professional development role that will benefit not only their own child but other students with advanced abilities.

LEARNING ABOUT SERVICES FOR THE GIFTED AND TALENTED

The first question that parents of academically advanced students must ask is about the availability of services for gifted and talented students in the school and/or district. The

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issue is simple: without a gifted program and a range of services for gifted students in place, many gifted students are simply assigned *more* of the same work instead of *different* types and kinds of work. Instead of more of the same, gifted students need *differentiated* curriculum and instruction, curriculum being the content children study and instruction, the way the content is delivered. Advanced students need different types of content and instruction for the learning process to be challenging and enjoyable. Parents of academically advanced students need to find schools that offer a continuum of services that address what is happening in both the gifted program and the regular classroom at various grade levels from elementary through high school. In order to be able to ask about services and understand the school's programs, parents must become familiar with some of the terminology surrounding the programs. The information that follows is a basic guide to this terminology. Parents should use this guide as a springboard for researching programs and opportunities for their children.

Types of Programs

In order to know which services to request for their talented children, parents need to know about the types of programs currently in schools. In a *full-time classroom model*, for example, identified gifted students are grouped with other identified students for the majority of the day. In a *resource room program*, students usually leave the regular classroom and spend a certain amount of time doing independent studies or advanced research guided by a teacher or specialist, often in collaboration with other identified gifted students. In some districts, *independent study projects* provide talented students with opportunities to engage in pursuing individual interests and advanced content with a mentor. Many districts have created innovative *mentorship programs* pairing a bright student with a high school student, adult, or a local professional who has an interest in the same area.

Grouping

Parents should also ask schools about the instructional grouping patterns that they use. Some schools use different grouping patterns to try to increase the challenge level for all students. *Flexible skills grouping* enables classroom teachers (usually in a heterogeneous classroom, one in which students of all abilities are placed together based on their ages rather than skill level) to group different students together based on instructional or achievement levels. Teachers then provide appropriate instructional challenge to these flexible groups. The groups are flexible or change because not all students have strengths or have had opportunities to gain advanced skills in every content area. In another grouping strategy, *cluster grouping*, advanced students are grouped in one classroom with other students who are talented in the same area. Therefore, a fifth-grade teacher may have a cluster group of six students who are advanced in mathematics in her

or his classroom instead of having these six students evenly distributed among three or four heterogeneously grouped fifth-grade classrooms.

Curriculum and Instruction

Many classroom teachers use a strategy called *curriculum compacting* to eliminate work that advanced learners already know and substitute more appropriate challenging replacement materials. Curriculum compacting involves (1) defining the goals and outcomes of a particular unit or segment of instruction, (2) determining and documenting which students have already mastered most or all of a specified set of learning outcomes, and (3) providing replacement strategies for material already mastered through the use of instructional options that enable a more challenging, interesting, and productive use of students' time. In addition, Carol Ann Tomlinson, a prominent researcher and President-elect of NAGC, advocates a series of essential strategies including *tiered instruction*. Tiered instruction offers different types of content and instruction for different instructional/ability levels. For example, in a middle school heterogeneous class, students of vastly different reading levels all receive books at appropriate levels of instruction. Three levels of reading books might be used: one for advanced readers, one for those at grade level, and one for those reading well below grade level.

Acceleration was once a standard practice in schools in our country, but today teachers and administrators deem it inappropriate for a variety of reasons and often mistakenly dismiss it. Teachers and administrators often mention concerns about the potentially negative social effects of grade skipping, yet the opposite is generally true as many studies suggest the benefits or various types of acceleration.

In order for teachers to use these strategies and provide rich, appropriate content and instruction for students of all achievement levels, they must receive professional development. As parents research programs, options, and other opportunities, they should share information with teachers and other staff at their children's schools.

Other Opportunities for Talented Students

A number of challenging options and nationally known programs are also used in local enrichment or gifted programs. Many of these provide important opportunities for talented students to apply their talents and abilities to problems in our society. One such program, **Future Problem Solving** (www.fpsp.org; 800-256-1499), conceived by Dr. E. Paul Torrance, has taught thousands of students to apply problem-solving techniques to the real problems of our society. Although not developed solely for gifted students, Future Problem Solving (FPS) is widely used in gifted programs because of the curricular freedom associated with these programs. FPS is a year-long program in which teams of four students use a six-step problem solving process to solve complex scientific and social problems of the future such as the overcrowding in prisons or the greenhouse effect. At regular intervals throughout the year, the teams mail their work to

evaluators, who review it and return it with their suggestions for improvement. As the year progresses, the teams become increasingly more proficient at problem solving. FPS takes students beyond memorization and challenges students to apply information they have learned to some of the most complex issues facing society. They are asked to *think*, make decisions, and, in some instances, carry out their solutions.

Talent Search through the Institute for the Academic Advancement of Youth at Johns Hopkins University (www.jhu.edu/gifted; 410-516-0337) actively recruits and provides testing and program opportunities for mathematically and/or verbally precocious youth. (While Talent Search was begun by Professor Julian Stanley at Johns Hopkins in the early 1970s, there are also Talent Search programs at the University of Denver (www.du.edu/education/ces/), Iowa State University (www.public.iastate.edu/~opptag_info/mainpage.htm), Duke University (www.tip.duke.edu/programs/index.html), and Northwestern University's Center for Talent Development (ctdnet.acns.nwu.edu/guides/parents.html). All of these universities offer programs for gifted children in addition to Talent Search.) In order to enter the Talent Search students must score in the 97th national percentile level on their most recent or next-most recent nationally normed standardized aptitude or achievement test. Because these tests do not always fully reveal a student's abilities, Talent Search invites seventh- and eighth-grade students to take the SAT and fifth- and sixth-grade students to take the above-grade-level PLUS Achievement test. Talent Search will then interpret the scores relative to other highly able students. If students are identified as high achieving in the Talent Search process, they are eligible for multiple options including: summer programs, grade skipping, completing two or more years of a math subject in one year, taking college courses, or other options. These options must be decided in collaboration with the school district personnel and the parents and final decisions depend upon many factors, especially what is locally available and the flexibility of program options in the district.

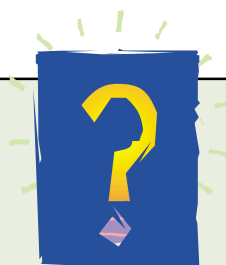
Many high-ability students have the opportunity to participate in **National History Day** (www.thehistorynet.com/NationalHistoryDay/index.html), a contest in which students work individually or in small groups on an historical event, person, or invention related to a theme that is determined each year. Using primary source data including diaries or other sources gathered in libraries, museums, and interviews, students prepare research papers, projects, media presentations or performances as entries. These entries are judged by local historians, educators, and other professionals and state finalists compete with winners from other states each June. Information about History Day can be obtained from state historical societies and by going to their web page.

Other options to challenge talented students are often offered by districts or by universities or state associations. Parents should be sure to contact local colleges, universities, specialized schools, parent groups, and state gifted education associations about programs available in their area or state. Performing searches on the World Wide Web can also lead to a wealth of resources and information.

SHARE THE KNOWLEDGE

Parents need to learn about the range of services that schools can provide in gifted programs and then advocate for appropriate professional development for teachers to help them provide these services. In addition they should research other talent development programs in order to bring as many opportunities as possible to their children. Parents should share this information with other parents, teachers, and school staff, thus helping not only one child, but perhaps a whole class or an entire school.

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GATHERING INFORMATION

Below are some resources that can help parents gather information on gifted education. Be sure to contact your state gifted association and any parent groups in your area.

NAGC (202-785-4268; www.nagc.org) Parents also might want to request the *PreK-Grade 12 Gifted Programs Standards* brochure. It presents some professional recommendations for school districts.

National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented (860-486-4676; www.gifted.uconn.edu/rcgt.html) The National Research Center offers a variety of research papers, books, brochures, and video tapes on gifted education.

ERIC Clearinghouse (www.accesseric.org) ERIC allows users to perform searches on their database of more than 950,000 abstracts of documents and journal articles on educational practice.

PUBLISHERS WITH A FOCUS ON GIFTED EDUCATION

Creative Learning Press, Inc. (888-518-8004; www.creativelearningpress.com)
Free Spirit Press (800-735-7323; www.freespirit.com)
Gifted Psychology Press (602-954-4200; www.giftedpsychologypress.com)
Prufrock Press (800-998-2208; www.prufrock.com)