



Connecting for High Potential

NAGC receives similar questions from teachers and parents; however, rarely is there an opportunity to explore how the “other side” might face the issue. Interestingly, both groups benefit from the same information even though they look at it from different perspectives and have different roles to play in helping gifted children reach their potential. Our ongoing goal is for teachers and parents to develop a broader understanding of their students’ potential and thus create stimulating learning environments.

This month’s topic: “We don’t have a gifted program, so what can I do?”

Just because you don’t have a “gifted” program doesn’t mean you aren’t serving (or can’t serve) high-ability students. Read on; you’ll find ideas and resources to address the issue, but first...

A TEACHER VIEW

Standing in front of a classroom of 20 to 30 students, you face an enormous range of abilities and experiences. How many of these students will be reading far above or far below their grade level? How many students are able to quickly and easily grasp mathematical or scientific concepts the first time around? Can you see the small child near the window who is constantly sketching wickedly targeted cartoons? These high-ability students can easily be forgotten in the daily struggle to meet minimum standards.

How can you explain that struggle to parents who, while understanding the needs and growth of their own child, may not be aware of the realities of today’s classroom? How can you enlist their support of your school and, at the same time, help them nurture their child’s development?

A PARENT VIEW

Your child has just slammed through the front door for the third time this week. S/he’s furious that, once again, the class is reviewing multiplication. Or, your child gets up in the morning complaining of yet another stomachache. “Please mom, don’t make me go to school. Can’t I just stay home and read?”

As a parent, you’re torn between supporting school expectations and authority (knowing that teachers want the best for your child) and feeding your child’s obvious curiosity, excitement, and love of learning. You haven’t addressed your nagging concern about these behaviors because you’re worried about stepping on toes, or injuring the parent-teacher relationship. However, you worry about what could happen if your child doesn’t continue to see school as a stimulating learning environment.

We’ve found it’s all about building connections, proactively and positively. Before jumping into some specifics, keep these 5 steps in mind – no matter at what stage of the collaborative process.

1. Start small
2. Do your homework
3. Organize your thoughts
4. Build a team
5. Start small (yes, it’s repeated)

Developing a gifted program in your local school district is a job that could take years to accomplish. Rather than feel overwhelmed by the enormity, begin by sorting out one piece that will affect your student population.

1. START SMALL:

Although you may not have a gifted program in your school, you can still find ways to meet the needs of gifted kids in your classroom. Is there a single tactic that can make a difference for you and your students?

Where can you best put your energy and resources as a parent? Think about what single issue would make the most difference in your child's school life?

2. DO YOUR HOMEWORK

As you learn more about students, your ability to capitalize on their strengths and talents multiplies. Pre-assessments and inventories are a great start, but be sure to take time to peek into students' lives outside of school. One of the best information sources, especially with elementary students, is a conversation with parents. To locate surveys, you may want to peruse a copy of *Choosing and Charting* by Lindy Redmond.

Before asking for accommodations for your child, you'll want to know about existing constraints. Find out about existing state and local mandates with a quick web search or by contacting your state and local gifted education association. You'll also benefit from exploring options that have worked in other classrooms. Develop a useful vocabulary by reading through books such as *Re-Forming Gifted Education* by Karen Rogers.

3. ORGANIZE YOUR THOUGHTS

Once you have identified a "target population," you are ready to reflect upon their specific program and service needs. Look at what you already offer such as after-school clubs, in-class interest centers, opportunities to explore technology, and independent study. Where are the gaps that need to be filled? What additional information or training do you require? Reviewing the NAGC Pre-K-Grade 12 Gifted Program Standards is always a good place to start. (<http://www.nagc.org/new/prekto12.html>).

Since you'll be taking your ideas to the school, it's essential that you have a game plan. Be clear on what you hope to accomplish. Although your focus will be to provide challenge and enrichment for your child, many other students will benefit if you can pave the way. You'll find good suggestions for establishing a respectful relationship in "Communicating Effectively With Your Child's School" by Joan Franklin Smutny from the *Parenting for High Potential* archives: www.nagc.org/Publications/Parenting/index.html.

4. BUILD A TEAM

As you plan to meet with family members to get a new perspective on a child and contemplate the best options to support his/her learning, you may also want to consider broadening the view by asking the student to attend some or all of your meeting and/or inviting another teacher who interacts regularly with the child in a different setting (e.g. music, art, technology). HOWEVER, parents can feel intimidated by a roomful of "experts," so be sure to ask parents before offering an invitation to another teacher and try to limit the number of people present — especially at the first few meetings. See hints on connecting with families in "What I've Learned About Cultivating Parent Involvement" by Max Fischer at: www.nea.org/classmanagement/ifc021029.html

Going to school with concerns or even a new idea can be intimidating. You can also easily feel dismissed as a "squeaky wheel." One solution? If you join with 3 or 4 parents to work on a proactive and positive approach, magic can happen! For example, one small group of parents asked to meet with willing teachers and administrators. Looking through what was offered within the regular classroom and after-school clubs, they noted a lack of opportunity for students interested in math and science. After writing a small grant, this school was able to start enrichment clusters, organized by parents, supported by community, and focused on those two subject areas. For more ideas on activities parents can help establish look under "Academic Competitions" in resource topics on the Davidson site at: www.ditd.org.

5. ONCE AGAIN, A REMINDER: START SMALL!

Think about it this way:

"Winners take a big problem & divide it into smaller, manageable parts."

Robin M. Schader is NAGC's Parent Resource Specialist. She is the mother of 3 grown gifted children. Her Ph.D. is in Educational Psychology/Gifted Education with research focusing on talent development and the parental role.

Rebecca D. Eckert is NAGC's Gifted Resource Specialist. Prior to receiving her Ph.D. in Educational Psychology/Gifted Education, she was a classroom teacher in a public middle school. Her research interests include educational policy and talented readers.