

Where Shall I Send My Gifted Child to School?

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Empowering Gifted Minds: Educational Advocacy That Works

The choice of educational setting for a gifted student is a critical one and cause for concern in parents. If the child has previously been held back by a curriculum, spent considerable time drilling and practicing concepts already mastered, or had difficulty finding true peers in school, the decision must provide a better option. Ideally, all children should be challenged by their school work, learn something new each day, and “fit in” with enough children at the school that they feel accepted and supported.

Parents often ask what the best placement is. Is it a school for the gifted? Will a good private school be best? Or, is the local public school parents trusted as children adequate? Opinions abound and school officials disagree, with the best of intentions. If giftedness is viewed as *advanced development*, with the child pacing faster than others, then the school has to accommodate the child who masters concepts quickly, with little or no drill and practice, and needs options to accelerate the curriculum. Likewise, placement needs to address the social aspect of giftedness: the gifted child’s greater comfort with older children or other gifted students. When placed accordingly, the gifted student flourishes and maintains the natural curiosity and love of learning parents cherish.

The self-contained gifted classroom or school for the gifted is usually the best choice, if the option exists. The curriculum is designed for the typical gifted child, so pace and material have already been adjusted. Abstract reasoning is encouraged at an age when typical children are believed to *not* have this capacity. Because the work is sufficiently challenging, gifted students develop a strong work ethic and the organizational skills to handle their work (a problem if work is too easy). Gifted children find others with similar interests, who laugh at their jokes and appreciate their complex play. This does not mean that every gifted child will be a perfect fit. The profoundly gifted child in a gifted school will still need an individual education plan. And, all gifted children show varied achievement patterns. Some excel in math, others in literature, so any gifted school needs to provide levels of instruction in each subject area. The advantage of the full-time gifted program is that less accommodation is needed from the gifted framework already established and school personnel understand the importance of a good fit.

Curiously, some parents have been advised that placement in a gifted school will cause gifted children to “just shut down socially” or embrace elitism. Clearly, the social concerns have come from adults unfamiliar with gifted schools. Gifted children seem the most comfortable socially with other gifted children. They are not singled out or bullied for being different—speaking like an adult or having unusual interests. One girl described her move to a gifted classroom by saying, “they are just like family.” Regarding elitism, gifted children in typical schools often get the highest grades with little effort. The move to a gifted school is their first taste of learning to respect others of similar ability and to handle truly difficult challenges that do not come easily.

Private and public schools present a variety of issues for the gifted. If the school is highly individualized and accustomed to placing children at different grade levels in different subjects, the gifted child may fare well. Though rare, there are some excellent schools of this type, which usually boast flexible administrators and teachers with knowledge of gifted education. However, if the school teaches all children together, the needs of gifted children are more difficult to meet. Public schools may have a strong ethic of egalitarianism which can under-challenge the gifted. Top-notch private schools can have similarly undifferentiated programs, based on the school's philosophy of what all students should learn to prepare for higher education and professional careers.

Private schools pose interesting issues regarding gifted students because all parents are paying tuition and have high expectations. Some private schools place emphasis on test scores to bolster their reputations within the community. There can be considerable classroom practice on all concepts to ensure that every student will score well and heavy homework requirements (more than is warranted for a gifted student). The gifted child would be better challenged if allowed to move on to more difficult material. Likewise, if the school believes that an accommodation for one child will anger other parents or cause many parents to demand changes, it will not be offered. If the school has an educational tradition of some type, families may be told, "If you attend this school, you are accepting our program."

All schools claim to support the gifted; however, results vary dramatically. Most offer *individualization* within the classroom: the teacher will make consistent modifications for the gifted student, as needed. Because many private schools offer smaller classes, there is the hope that adequate individualization for each student within the classroom is possible due to classroom size. The question to ask is: What happens if my child is more advanced in [subject] than the teacher can accommodate? What is the school willing to do? Savvy parent advocates know that classroom individualization *can* be adequate, but usually only when a master teacher appreciates the needs of a gifted student and has lots of materials and ideas to utilize. When individualization occurs only rarely (when the teacher has time), or the teacher believes the regular, lower-level work (already mastered) is essential to ensure foundational skills, frustration sets in for the child. Some teachers have even insisted that learning to do things one doesn't like is essential for development, an argument that would never be accepted for an average child benefiting from the innate challenge of a typical curriculum. When the teacher allows *some* advanced work, but next year's teacher fails to recognize it, what happens? This is why most parents advocating for gifted students come to prefer forms of acceleration. If the child attends a higher grade level class for math or completes a full-grade skip, the pace of instruction will always be a bit slow but the material *will* be more advanced. The student will never be asked to do the lower-level work again and will receive credit for having mastered it.

Keeping all of these things in mind, parents need to look for flexible school personnel and a willingness to teach the child at the level where he or she actually is. The school that truly respects and honors the needs of the gifted child will have the greatest chance of helping the child reach his or her full potential.