All Means All: Classrooms that Work for Advanced Learners
Susan Rakow

Meeting the needs of all learners means all, including those who learn rapidly or are inherently curious about the world, eating up everything we offer — books, history, geometry proofs, science experiments. Some of these students make themselves known immediately. Others, especially during their middle school years, prefer to hide their talents, their academic interest and enthusiasm, and their abilities.

Regardless of whether they are students who need us to draw them out or students whose abilities are immediately apparent, we have a responsibility to help them reach their full potential.

Sometimes we are so overwhelmed by the needs of struggling learners that we believe we don't have time for the gifted, talented, high achieving, and high potential students. But they are just as desperate as any other students for good teachers to help them progress. Middle school is a turning point for them, too.

Schools can be structured in many ways to meet the needs of these top students. Part of a continuum of services might include honors or accelerated classes, co-enrollment with the high school, pre-IB (International Baccalaureate) or pre-AP (Advanced Placement) programs that coordinate with high school offerings, multi-age classes, grade acceleration, magnet schools, or honors clusters or teams.

But teachers in most middle schools meet these students in heterogeneous classes where there's a wide range of abilities, interests, learning styles, and special education needs. Cluster grouping is one approach that helps narrow the range. Effective cluster grouping places four to eight high achieving and gifted students in a heterogeneous class that does not include special needs students who require significant attention from the classroom teacher. This number of students ensures that students feel more comfortable doing advanced work and the teacher is more willing to provide it, since there isn't just one student who needs it.

Providing Challenge and Choice
Whether in a clustered classroom or a fully heterogeneous one, all teachers can use strategies to help differentiate instruction for gifted, high achieving, and high potential learners. When applied consistently, these strategies help all students make progress throughout the school year.

The three components of curriculum that should be adjusted are content, process, and product. Content is the actual material being learned. The process is the way the students are engaging with the material, such as whole class instruction, small group work, online instruction, and independent projects. The product is how the students demonstrate what they have learned. Each approach that follows incorporates one or more

(Continued on page 12)
FROM THE PRESIDENT

Dr. Ellen Fiedler

Whatever the season, whatever the weather, it’s always the right season to support gifted children. Even this year, when “Old Man Winter” seemed to be particularly enthusiastic about reminding us what season it was, all of us who care about the gifted have continued to hunker down and do whatever we can.

Everything … I repeat, EVERYTHING, that you do for gifted kids does makes a difference!

The Fall Conferences offered by the Michigan Alliance for Gifted Education featured Carolyn Coil, and everyone who participated at any of our three conference sites walked away with so many practical ideas … as well as being inspired by gatherings like these – not only by great speakers, but as a result of being with like-minded people. Sometimes nothing feels so lonely as being someone who cares about gifted kids – whether that be as a parent, a teacher, a gifted program coordinator, a school board member, a concerned administrator, or anyone else who “gets it” about these kids and how “one size fits all” doesn’t fit for them. That’s why we need our organization, and why we need to encourage others to attend events and to join!

Especially for educators … one more way to avoid feeling that you’re a “one-and-only” without even leaving home is to go online and participate in our Michigan Gifted Contacts Forum. Now’s a perfect time to go there for the first time, or to go back! Go to www.migiftedchild.org and click on the link on the left that says, “Michigan Gifted Contacts Forum.” You can connect with others and tune in to discussions of interest even in your “jammies” or whenever (a great thing to do on a snow day). Just click on the word “register” on the line that says “Welcome, Guest.” Once you’ve registered, you’ll just log in whenever you go back. The Forum hasn’t been very active lately, but all it takes is for more of us to go there and respond to anything that’s already been posted or add a new topic.

Speaking of our website … if you haven’t been there lately, browse around and check it out. There’s something there for everyone! Lots of new information has been added and is being added regularly, thanks to our “webminder,” Dr. Kelly Schultz.

Think spring! Think GIFTED!

Gifted Learners and the Middle School

In 1995, Carol Ann Tomlinson wrote in “Gifted Learners and the Middle School: Problem or Promise?” about a number of issues concerning both gifted education advocates and middle level educators. The two parties frequently voice divergent views on the education of those aged 9 – 13, but Tomlinson found promise in an emerging dialogue between them, and the hope for a more collaborative future.

Dr. Tomlinson, William Clay Parrish, Jr. Professor in Education and Chair of Educational Leadership, Foundations, and Policy at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville, explored the following areas:

- Excellence vs. Equity
- Emphasis on Heterogeneity
- Use of Labels
- Ambiguity About Appropriate Middle School Curricula
- Use of Cooperative Learning as an Instructional Strategy
- Affective Needs of Early Adolescents
- General Tension

For each of these issues, the areas of disagreement are discussed, as are the promising directions the various factions are working toward in an attempt to address the concerns of both groups.

Although it has been several years since the original publication of “Gifted Learners,” many of these areas of disagreement still exist. We invite you to read the article in its entirety (ERIC # ED386832) on the website of the Education Resources Information Center, www.eric.ed.gov, to learn more about where the promise has been fulfilled, and where there is still work to be done.

BE A PART OF THE ACTION!

There are many ways for you to get involved with the work of the Michigan Alliance for Gifted Education. First, a number of open positions remain on the Board of Directors. If you see a position that you have an interest in filling, or know someone you feel might be a good fit, please call Sue Belaski at 616-365-8230 or e-mail the Alliance at sbelaski@comcast.net.

Also, for the June issue, Images is planning an article on how the new state graduation requirements are affecting gifted students. If you are interested in adding your input or know of a high school that would like to partner with us, please call Nan Janecke at 269-353-3757, or drop her a line at nkjanecke@sbcglobal.net.
EDITOR’S NOTES
Nan Janecke

So much to do with raising gifted children seems to be about balance, between study and play, between encouragement and pressure, between the academic and the emotional. Middle school is no different – except that you have to throw in the additional issues of peer pressure, school transitions, and hormones.

Parents often struggle with these balance issues, as do teachers. The most common complaint that I hear from the parents of gifted middle school students is that schools go overboard in their attempts to make this time of somewhat difficult social and emotional issues easier academically – as if removing the challenge of academics from the classroom will make all the other aspects of puberty easier to deal with. This unbalanced approach can be detrimental in many ways.

First, students who are not being academically challenged are often bored with school, and bored students frequently tune out or act up. In the first instance, they are certainly not using their brain to its fullest extent, and in the second, they are making it difficult for their fellow classmates to learn. Either way, they are definitely not growing or learning to their fullest potential. Second, these students are not developing the study habits or skills they will need in the future. At some point, be it in high school, college, or on the job, even gifted students will reach a point where they are forced to work harder and focus more – and many will never have been in that situation before. Isn’t it better to have reached that point earlier – when the grades don’t matter as much, when they have a support system to help them, when failure is less traumatic?

Middle school is also the time when many gifted students start to fly under the radar, for any number of reasons. Boys often want to be popular, athletic, “cool;” girls also want to be popular, and many don’t think boys will like them if they are seen as smarter than the boys. Failure to challenge students at this time makes the disappearance into an “average” student that much easier, often without any adult being the wiser.

Middle school is a time for huge growth – physically, emotionally, academically, and socially. We must try not to stunt the growth in one aspect of our children in order to achieve success in the other. Balance continues to be the key. We hope the articles in this issue of Images will help parents and educators who are seeking that balance to find books, websites, ideas, and advice that will help them, and that in the end every child has a middle school experience that is positive in every respect.

Gifted Contacts Network
Rebecca Dull

Here we are midway through the second semester of the school year. Somehow the day-to-day activities squeeze out the time needed for writing information about the Gifted Contacts Network – or posting on the network for that matter.

The thing is, though, underneath is a constant desire to find a way to help the gifted children in Michigan. When I hear someone say children should be held back so they can gain life experiences, I cringe and have to speak up. You probably all know the usual comments people make about gifted children not needing assistance. Well, when I hear these things I realize I can’t forget the needs of gifted children even though sometimes I feel like I’m banging my head against a wall in an effort to institute change in the way they are treated. That is when I realize that doing what I can to help parents, educators, and the gifted children themselves is a PASSION for me. Not just a passing phase but truly something that I cannot keep inside of myself for very long.

How about you? Are you passionate about the needs of the gifted children in our state? Let’s keep working together to help our students. Check out the Gifted Contacts Network and consider joining the Gifted Contacts Forum where we can share ideas and information.

To join the Gifted Contacts Network, send your name and contact information to me at rdull@gmail.com. To become a member of the Gifted Contacts Forum, go to the Alliance’s website, www.migiftedchild.org, and click on “Michigan Gifted Contacts Forum.”
We hope to see you at the next Michigan Alliance for Gifted Education Conference on Friday, April 24, at the Kent Intermediate School District in Grand Rapids and repeated on Monday, April 27, at the Livingston County Education Service Agency in Howell from 8:30 am to 4:15 pm.

The spring conferences feature speakers from across Michigan. First, from the east side of the state, we’ll have Kim Waters, chair of the Michigan Alliance for Gifted Education’s Social and Emotional Needs Committee and founder of Exceptional Strategies in Livonia. She is a psychologist specializing in counseling gifted and talented youngsters and their families, with many years of experience in child development, parenting and behavior management.

Ms. Waters will present “Gifted and ‘Quirky’ Children” which you can choose as your morning or afternoon selection. This workshop will discuss Sensory Processing Dysfunction and other common emotional and behavioral issues seen in gifted children, as well as strategies to meet their special emotional needs. She will also discuss common misdiagnoses and dual-diagnoses of gifted students.

Mary Molyneux and her team from the Kentwood Public Schools PEAKS Program in the Grand Rapids area will offer two separate presentations. Mary is in her thirtieth year of teaching, with 20 of those in gifted education. Joe Westra is Mary’s teaching partner for grades 5 and 6. Becky Brown teaches third grade, and Eric Closson teaches fourth grade.

In the morning Mary and her team, with over 65 years of teaching experience between them, will focus on “Gifted Education: The Basics.” This workshop is aimed at parents and teachers who have not had a lot of formal training about giftedness and will cover the basics, with lots of time for questions from the audience. The Kentwood PEAKS team will also offer strategies and techniques that they have used in the classroom and for parents at home.

In the afternoon they will share the components of their very special PEAKS Gifted Program for grades 3-8 and provide details on how to put together an all-inclusive gifted program or a pull-out.

A conference brochure including complete details and a registration form is included in this issue of Images. Special price breaks are offered for early registration, groups of three or more registering together, and for college students/student teachers.

Great Opportunity for U.P. Members

Mark your calendars now for Saturday, May 9, 2009, when the joint Michigan-Wisconsin Gifted Information Forum and Talkback Session workshop will be held in Marinette, Wisconsin. Best of all, this exciting event will be FREE for all current Michigan Alliance members!

The Forum will be held at the University of Wisconsin-Marinette campus (just over the little bridge from Menominee, Michigan), 750 W. Bay Shore, Marinette, WI 54143. Michigan SB-CEUS will be available and parking is free. Participants choose one of two sessions, based on their interests and needs.

Gifted 101 will feature identification of gifted students, including those from diverse backgrounds, twice exceptional, levels of intervention, and basic programming options such as acceleration, clustering, and differentiation. These workshops support the Response To Intervention (RTI) model and will include an emphasis on basic, practical differentiation strategies.

Gifted 201 will feature an in-depth exploration of programming options, including acceleration, clustering, mentoring, differentiation, etc. Participants will learn and practice basic differentiation strategies such as compacting, flexible grouping, interest and learning centers, independent contracts, tiered assignments, and questioning. Assessment practices will be examined and discussed. Bring along one of your favorite lessons to "play with.” Come to learn, laugh, and share.

Watch for further information at www.migiftedchild.org and in Images, and encourage your friends and colleagues to join the Michigan Alliance so they can attend this special educational event, a collaboration between the Wisconsin Association for Talented & Gifted and the Michigan Alliance for Gifted Education.
ATYP Program Provides Challenge to Middle Schoolers
Kelly Schultz

Gifted students need to be challenged in a way that meets their needs at all ages – not just when they reach high school. As a result, ATYP, the Academically Talented Youth Program, is designed for academically talented middle and high school students. ATYP was started in 1981 in the Kalamazoo area as a collaborative K-12/higher education regional model and has been replicated in several parts of Michigan.

Recognizing that gifted students need to be challenged in a multitude of ways, the ATYP model currently focuses on the student who is highly gifted in either math or language arts. These students are thirsty for more advanced topics in their area, at a much faster pace than the traditional system can accommodate. The ATYP model begins identification of appropriate students during their 6th grade year. Most students begin the program during their 7th – 8th grade years and continue through 9th or 10th grade. Thus, ATYP provides a way for these students to receive high school curriculum at a depth and pace that meets their unique talents.

ATYP allows school districts to give their most advanced students in these subject areas, typically only a handful per school district, the curriculum they need when they are ready for it and at the level and pace they crave. The ATYP model also has a piece that is very important for the diversity of the program – the school districts are asked to pay the fee for the course and release the student from the course time at their school.

The Language Arts program at ATYP consists of two basic courses covering all four years of high school English. This is followed in the third year of the program with AP English, which culminates in the students completing both the Advanced Placement Language and Literature exams. The AP exams usually allow the student to receive college credit for each exam passed.

The Mathematics program at ATYP covers all the traditional high school algebra topics in the first year, followed by geometry and precalculus topics in the second year. When finished with the mathematics sequence, the student is ready for AP Calculus.

In the fall of each year, middle school counselors are asked to identify students in their schools that might qualify for more challenging learning opportunities. Typically, any student who scores at the 97th percentile level on a grade level national assessment is invited to learn about Northwestern University’s Midwest Academic Talent Search. This is a national model that identifies students needing additional challenge by giving them above-grade-level testing. To qualify, students need to score a minimum of 520 on the critical reading, writing, or mathematics portions of the high school SAT (or equivalent scores on the ACT).

The ATYP program at Western Michigan University is available for students in the southwest Michigan area. More information about this ATYP program at the Lee Honors College at WMU or the Kendall Center in Battle Creek can be found at www.wmich.edu/honors/atyp. ATYP-type programs have been started in other areas of the state (see box below). They may have slightly different programs but are also designed to meet the needs of gifted middle/high school students.

For help in starting a program similar to ATYP in other regions of the state, you may contact Kelly Schultz at kelly.schultz@wmich.edu.

### Michigan Sites Replicating ATYP Model

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<td>PATH</td>
<td>Math</td>
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<td>OTD Program</td>
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<td>Kay Hemerline 989-774-4387; <a href="mailto:hemer1kl@cmich.edu">hemer1kl@cmich.edu</a></td>
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<td>ATYP</td>
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Gifted Education in Michigan: Programs that Work
Nan Janecke

The amount and quality of G/T programming in Michigan middle schools varies widely. Two school districts, Saginaw Township Community Schools and Holland Public Schools, provide appropriately challenging educational opportunities for their middle school students in a variety of ways, all designed to help sixth - eighth grade students succeed. Greg Hayes, Talent Development Coordinator with Saginaw Township Community Schools, and Gary Vosburg, middle school teacher/coordinator for the Holland Public Schools’ Gifted and Talented Program, spoke to Images about what their districts are doing to accommodate gifted learners in the middle school.

For instance, at White Pine Middle School in Saginaw Township, advanced and honors courses are offered in mathematics, science, and English language arts in all three grades. Additionally, after taking a course that explores world languages, students in the Talent Development program are encouraged to focus on a world language. Students also have opportunities to take part in mentorship programs, leadership, and community service learning.

Meanwhile, at the Holland Public Schools, middle school students who are identified as G/T attend a daily scheduled class period which provides a cross-curricular, project-based curriculum with a strong self-discovery component. Technology is also fully integrated. Holland uses rigorous academic competitions, such as the Statistics Poster Competition and National History Day, as channels for students to challenge themselves and to get outside feedback. Some of these middle school G/T students also participate in PATH, a program of accelerated classes in English, Math, and/or science offered through Hope College.

Both of these districts use a blended approach to identify participants for their programs. Test scores on the Cognitive Abilities Test are used in Saginaw, and this is a system that Holland is moving to as well. MEAP scores are also a component. In addition, staff and parent recommendations are considered.

There are some additional costs for these programs. Saginaw has a dedicated district-level administrator who guides programming, assessment, communication, professional development, and trained support for students, while Holland has a middle school teacher/coordinator for their Gifted Program, teaching six classes per day in two different buildings. There are also evaluation, technology, and materials costs.

One of the most vital aspects of this type of program is its link to the social and emotional well-being of its students. Both districts cluster or group their students in some fashion, providing a network of like-minded children. They then provide counseling or group discussions to cover specific needs and issues. In particular, Holland makes a point to address the organizational needs of its students, which can be a key to helping G/T students gain confidence. Success in this area removes significant stressors in school and at home.

Students who move from these programs into high school are prepared for AP/IB courses, are confronting fewer social and emotional issues as they get older, and are more confident of themselves and their abilities. High school principals and teachers are impressed with the students they are receiving, proving that the programs are beneficial for both the students and their school districts.

Both Saginaw Township Community Schools and Holland Public Schools are to be commended for their dedication to serving students of all academic abilities and all ages. The success of these programs is proof that the middle grades can be a time of emotional and physical growth and academic rigor, and they provide models for other school districts across the state.

Saginaw Township Community Schools is a suburban district that has a student population of approximately 5,273 students in a K-12 program. Greg Hayes may be contacted at gahayes@stcs.org. Holland Public Schools is a small urban district that has a student population of approximately 4,532 students in a pre-K-12 program. Gary Vosburg may be contacted at gvosburg@hollandpublicschools.org.
BOOK REVIEW
Ellen D. Fiedler, Ph.D.


For middle school teachers who are just getting started with differentiation, this book and its accompanying CD are an excellent resource. It has good, solid, basic information about differentiation explained in a clear, accessible way. Furthermore, tools and strategies for differentiating instruction are well summarized, without any excess verbiage. In addition, specific examples of lessons for middle-school students of all ability levels are provided for language arts, math, science, and social studies. A concluding chapter on assessment, although brief, includes some practical pointers for teachers who can be very overwhelmed with the ideas of assessing students’ performance when the entire class is not involved in identical learning experiences.

The CD is a highly useful adjunct to this book. All tiered assignments, R.A.F.T.s, (an acronym for Role, Audience, Format, and Topic), Think-Tac-Toes, and Complex Instruction activities in the book are found on the CD. The files are in Microsoft Word and can be customized and saved on your computer or storage device. You cannot save them on the CD, which is a good thing, since you won’t accidentally overwrite the files on there.

In terms of providing appropriate instruction for gifted middle school students, the tiered activities in each of the “big four” subject areas provide clear and very effective guidance for teaching those at “Tier 3,” the highest level. This is a major strength of this book and CD and would be immediately useful to teachers. One “red flag” that jumps out to anyone looking it over from the perspective of concern for gifted middle schoolers is in the section on “Complex Instruction,” which the authors describe as “an effective and sensible answer to the question of how to group students in mixed-readiness groups while ensuring a meaningful learning experience for all involved” (Eidson, Iseminger, & Taibbi, 2007, p. 25). A long-standing problem with the much-touted middle school philosophy has been an overemphasis on heterogeneous grouping. Any even subtly-implied endorsement of this practice needs to be viewed with caution.

This is definitely a book for middle-school teachers and could be very valuable for those who have gifted students in their classrooms, whether formally identified or not. However, principals and curriculum directors may also find it useful to review the contents of this book, as well as parents who are interested in seeing how differentiated instruction can be implemented at the middle school level.

NAGC Offers Middle Grades Network

If you are interested in the issues and concerns facing gifted middle school students, you may want to consider joining the National Association for Gifted Children’s Middle Grades Network. According to their mission statement:

The Middle Grades Network recognizes the unique needs of gifted middle grades learners and educators. Middle school is the level at which gifted students face great challenges to full development of their potential and is a time when a large number of gifted students, particularly girls and minority students, begin to underachieve in response to perceived societal and peer pressures. The Network recognizes the need to develop appropriate strategies for working with these students. To address these concerns, the Network works in the areas of curriculum, instruction, research, and communication and dissemination, to assist students, teachers, and administrators as they endeavor to make the middle school years a positive and challenging experience for gifted students.

You must be a member of NAGC to take part. Visit their website at www.nagc.org to learn more!

Improving Schools:
One Person is a Fruitcake or Collaboration Counts!

If you think that you alone cannot do much to improve your school, you are probably right. You’re more likely to get what you want for your child if you work with other parents.

If you are in a school that is not parent-friendly, this is how you might be perceived.

1 person = A fruitcake
2 people = A fruitcake and a friend
3 people = Troublemakers
5 people = “Let’s have a meeting”
10 people = “We’d better listen”
25 people = “Our dear friends”
50 people = “A powerful organization”

If you collaborate with other parents and organizations, you can make a difference. There is strength and power in numbers.

Reprinted with permission by KSA-Plus Communications, publisher of “12 Things Parents (and Teachers) Need to Know About and Expect from your Schools — and Yourself.” www.ksaplus.com/parents.html
While parents and educators shoulder the bulk of the responsibility for providing appropriate educational experiences for all children, middle school students should be prepared to take some responsibility for navigating their way through the world. The following tips are great for anyone, but are particularly geared for those entering middle school and beginning to make independent decisions.

KNOW THYSELF. There is so much to know about you: “how” you take in information and the best conditions for you for learning (learning styles); your sensitivities (ways you may respond intensely to stimuli); and what your strengths are (Howard Gardner calls them “intelligences”). The more we know about ourselves, the easier it is to help others understand us.

WHAT MAKES YOU HAPPIEST? Some activities we do give us great pleasure and bring a smile to our face (or a good feeling inside). That is a love or passion you want to keep with you throughout your life. Keep trying different classes and activities until you find an activity like this. Maybe it’s art, writing, music, engine repair, computers, or something else that’s different and new. Whatever it is, keep it a part of your life. Continue to pursue that passion and expand your knowledge of it.

CHALLENGE YOURSELF. Success will only feel good when you sense it was a difficult task to accomplish. Have you even been applauded for doing something that took no effort on your part? Did it produce an empty feeling inside you? That’s why it is so important to challenge yourself in a job or activity. Even if no one says “Wow!” you will have a sense of pride in a job well done.

What should you do if a class you are in presents no challenge to you? Negotiate with your teacher to pursue a topic or issue in depth – perhaps in a way connected to the passion discussed above. If you already know the material being covered in a class, is there a pre-test or post-test you could take? If you pass this test, perhaps your project could re-place the time spent re-learning things you already know.

COMMUNICATION. There are two parts to communication – listening and speaking. The “listening” part is the most important. People want to be heard and understood. If you don’t let them know you are hearing and understanding what they say (where they’re coming from), they are not going to be compassionate to your side of the story or your needs. This is a process called “active listening.”

When speaking, a good way to make yourself understood is to use “I” statements: “I feel…,” “I think…,” “I believe….” This way you are taking responsibility for your concerns, and don’t sound like you are placing blame or passing judgment on someone else.

STRESS RELIEF. There are things that occur in our lives that cause us stress, and we all have different ways of reacting to them. A big cause of stress for gifted students is unrealistic expectations. These may express themselves in thoughts such as “I’m supposed to be perfect – therefore asking for help is a failure” or “I always get good grades – there must be something wrong with me if I have to actually study.” This kind of self-talk creates roadblocks for success and happiness.

If you find yourself thinking thoughts such as these or reacting negatively to events in your life, talk to your parents or a trusted adult about finding a way to reduce stress that works for you. You may want to try controlled breathing, meditation, exercise, or listening to a comedy routine and having a good laugh.

SET GOALS. Start out with short term goals – things that need to be done this week or next week. Put them down on paper – it feels great to be able to cross things off the list! Gradually think further down the road. What needs to be done or thought through in order to ensure future happiness? What skills will you need, and what are the steps to build those skills? As experience tells us, not everything turns out perfectly. We need to be flexible and renegotiate our plans. Determination or positive motivation and a clear evaluation of a situation or problem will get you much closer to a goal than worrying about what “could” go wrong.

KEEP A JOURNAL. Some of the greatest ideas are the result of writing things down and allowing “incubation” to take place. Writing helps to clear your mind and gives you a chance to evaluate your thoughts, ideas, and feelings. It’s how you do “active listening” with yourself. You can also look back and see if you are using self-talk that is positive or negative.

DREAM LONG TERM. Catch on to a dream. Yes, you will have to be flexible. There will certainly be obstacles along the way, but when you combine a dream with feet based in reality, fueled by excitement and motivation, you can accomplish great things. You will find inner happiness, and that inner happiness will help you to weather the storms of life.
Contribute to *Images*!

Parents, students, teachers, administrators, counselors, researchers:
Share your experience educating, parenting, advocating for, or studying gifted children — or even being a gifted student yourself.
Write an article for a future issue of *Images*!

**Volume 19, Issue 2, 2009**
Articles due: April 15, 2009
Publication date: June 1, 2009

**Volume 19, Issue 3, 2009**
Articles due: July 15, 2009
Publication date: September 1, 2009

**Volume 19, Issue 4, 2009**
Articles due: October 15, 2009
Publication date: December 1, 2009

Would you like your events and activities publicized in this newsletter or would you like to submit an article? Contact Nan Janecke, editor of *Images*:
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nkjanecke@sbcglobal.net
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Grand Rapids, MI 49525
616-365-8230
Website: www.migiftedchild.org

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**Notes From The Webminder**
Kelly Schultz

We have been busy adding new resources to the website in the past few months. There are sections for both books and websites — you can get your information the way you find most comfortable.

In our website section, we have categorized the websites as: “Websites on Differentiation,” “Websites on Underachievement,” “Websites on Twice-Exceptional,” and “Websites for Teens and Kids.” The “Websites for Teens and Kids” section lists websites that allow a teen or elementary-age child to find their passion. There are also resources for teens who like to write or enjoy science.

In our book category, we have categorized books and articles for general reading, for parents, and on differentiation. The parenting section has books with titles like *Survival Guide for Parents of Gifted Kids* and *Raising Your Spirited Child* - books that could help any parent survive the middle school era. There are also books listed there for teachers – *Teacher’s Guide to Parents of the Gifted* and *A Guide to Creativity for Parents and Teachers* are both great books for helping middle school teachers. The website listing for differentiation includes articles and books that can help any teacher differentiate in the classroom. One title, *Designing Effective Middle School Units: Version 1.0*, stands out as being perfect for middle school teachers.

Also on the resources page are the “Parent Roadmap – My Child is Gifted, Now What Do I Do?” and the “Michigan Alliance Speaker Resource List.” Great places to go if you are just starting on this journey with a gifted child. If you feel that there are many people in your community like you and there should be an interest group started, check out the Affiliates page. You can find out if a group already exists and there is a handbook that will help you start or reactivate an affiliate group.

As always, we want the website to contain information that helps you! If you have any suggestions, comments, or (heaven-forbid) corrections, please don't hesitate to send me an email at kelly@dyksterhouse.org.

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**Links, Links, Links…**

For more information on the subject of gifted education in middle school, we recommend the following websites/pages:

- [www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG139](http://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG139), “Focus on the Wonder Years: Challenges Facing the American Middle School.” According to the website, “This monograph is a comprehensive assessment of the American middle school.” Authors Jaana Juvonen, Vi-Nhuan Le, Tessa Kangasoff, Catherine H. Augustine, and Louay Constant ask whether “middle schools, as currently designed and operated, are performing that function well. Or, as some have alleged, do they unintentionally encourage poor behavior, alienation, disengagement, and low achievement?” They not only pose the question, they present possible solutions to a variety of the problems encountered in today’s middle school. A free, downloadable PDF version is available.


- [www.paulgraham.com/nerds.html](http://www.paulgraham.com/nerds.html), “Why Nerds are Unpopular,” by Paul Graham. A sometimes funny, sometimes serious, and always brutally honest (and long) essay that is an up close and personal look at being a “nerd” at school and why, for a lot of kids, that’s just fine. An eye-opener for students, and a reminder to parents of what it was like to be 13 and not fit in.
Q: I have several students in my middle school classroom that I feel are gifted, but who refuse to acknowledge their giftedness. They do not want to be placed in the school’s gifted program, and resist efforts to attempt more challenging or in-depth work. How can I help them to embrace their skills and talents and view them as a gift, instead of allowing them to constantly hide their true abilities?

A: This is a tough age to be “different.” The pressure from peers to fit in and be like everyone else can be overwhelming. Read on for an excellent article with great tips for understanding and aiding the gifted students in your classroom.

Helping Adolescents Adjust to Giftedness

Thomas M. Buescher and Sharon Higham

Young gifted people between the ages of 11 and 15 frequently report a range of problems as a result of their abundant gifts: perfectionism, competitiveness, unrealistic appraisal of their gifts, rejection from peers, confusion due to mixed messages about their talents, and parental and social pressures to achieve, as well as problems with unchallenging school programs or increased expectations. Some encounter difficulties in finding and choosing friends, a course of study, and, eventually, a career. The developmental issues that all adolescents encounter exist also for gifted students, yet they are further complicated by the special needs and characteristics of being gifted. Once counselors and parents are aware of these obstacles, they seem better able to understand and support gifted adolescents. Caring adults can assist these young people to “own” and develop their talents by understanding and responding to adjustment challenges and coping strategies.

Challenges To Adjustment

Several dynamics of giftedness continually interfere with adjustment gains during adolescence. Buescher (1986) has found that, during the early years of adolescence, gifted young people encounter several potent obstacles, singly or in combination.

Ownership: Talented adolescents simultaneously “own” and yet question the validity and reality of the abilities they possess. Some researchers (Olszewski, Kulieke, & Willis, 1987) have identified patterns of disbelief, doubt, and lack of self-esteem among older students and adults: the so-called “impostor syndrome” described by many talented individuals. While talents have been recognized in many cases at an early age, doubts about the accuracy of identification and the objectivity of parents or favorite teachers linger (Delisle & Galbraith, 1987; Galbraith, 1983). The power of peer pressure toward conformity, coupled with any adolescent’s wavering sense of being predictable or intact, can lead to the denial of even the most outstanding ability. The conflict that ensues, whether mild or acute, needs to be resolved by gaining a more mature “ownership” and responsibility for the identified talent.

A second basic pressure often experienced by gifted students is that, since they have been given gifts in abundance, they feel they must give of themselves in abundance. Often it is subtly implied that their abilities belong to parents, teachers, and society.

Dissonance: By their own admission, talented adolescents often feel like perfectionists. They have learned to set their standards high, to expect to do more and be more than their abilities might allow. Childhood desires to do demanding tasks PERFECTLY become compounded during adolescence. It is not uncommon for talented adolescents to experience real dissonance between what is actually done and how well they expected it to be accomplished. Often the dissonance perceived by young people is far greater than most parents or teachers realize.

Taking Risks: While risk taking has been used to characterize younger gifted and talented children, it ironically decreases with age, so that the bright adolescent is much less likely to take chances than others. Why the shift in risk-taking behaviors? Gifted adolescents appear to be more aware of the repercussions of certain activities, whether these are positive or negative. They have learned to measure the decided advantages and disadvantages of numerous opportunities and to weigh alternatives. Yet their feigned agility at this too often leads them to reject even those acceptable activities that carry some risk (e.g., advanced placement courses, stiff competitions, public presentations), for which high success is less predictable and lower standards of performance less acceptable in their eyes. One other possible cause for less risk taking could be the need to maintain control — to remain in spheres of influence where challenging relationships, demanding coursework and teachers, or intense competition cannot enter without absolute personal control.

Competing Expectations: Adolescents are vulnerable to criticism, suggestions, and emotional appeals from others. Parents, friends, siblings, and teachers are all eager to add their own expectations and observations to even the brightest students’ intentions and goals. Often, others’ expectations for talented young people compete with their own dreams and plans. Delisle (1985), in particular, has pointed out that the “pull” of an adolescent’s own expectations must swim against the strong current posed by the “push” of others’ desires and demands.

The dilemma is complicated by the numerous options within the reach of a highly talented student: The greater the talent, the greater the expectations and outside interference.

Gifted adolescents consistently report dramatic episodes of being pushed to the point of doubt and despair by insensitive teachers, peers, and even parents. Teachers in secondary schools, in particular, have tried to disprove the talents of individual students, saying, in effect, “Prove to me you are as gifted as you think you are.” Coping with the vagaries of adolescence while also proving oneself again and again in the classroom or peer group significantly drains energy allocated for the normal tasks of adjustment and leads to frequent frustration and isolation.

Impatience: Like most other adolescents, gifted students can be impatient in many ways: eager to find solutions for difficult questions, anxious to develop satisfying friendships, and prone to selecting difficult but immediate alternatives for complex (Continued on next page)
decisions. The predisposition for impulsive decision making, coupled with exceptional talent, can make young adolescents particularly intolerant of ambiguous, unresolved situations. Their impatience with a lack of clear-cut answers, options, or decisions drives them to seek answers where none readily exist, relying on an informing, though immature, sense of wisdom. The anger and disappointment when hasty resolutions fail can be difficult to surmount, particularly when less capable peers gloat about these failures.

**Premature Identity:** It appears that the weight of competing expectations, low tolerance for ambiguity, and the pressure of multiple potentials each feed very early attempts to achieve an adult-like identity, a stage normally achieved after the age of 21. This can create a serious problem for talented adolescents. They seem to reach out prematurely for career choices that will short-cut the normal process of identity crisis and resolution.

**Coping Strategies**

How can talented adolescents cope with the myriad obstacles to developing their talents? A study of young adolescents who participated in a talent search program (Buescher & Higham, 1985) suggested various strategies. Table 1 depicts the strategies suggested by the adolescents, arranged according to their assessment of acceptability for use.

**Table 1. Coping Strategies Suggested by Adolescents (In Order by Weighted Ranking; 0 = Least Acceptable to Students; 10 = Most Acceptable):**

(0) Pretend not to know as much as you do.
(1) Act like a "brain" so peers leave you alone.
(2) Adjust language and behavior to disguise true abilities from your peers.
(3) Avoid programs designed for gifted/talented students.
(4) Be more active in community groups where age is no object.
(5) Develop/excel in talent areas outside school setting.
(6) Achieve in areas at school outside academics.
(7) Build more relationships with adults.
(8) Select programs and classes designed for gifted/talented students.
(9) Make friends with other students with exceptional talents.
(10) Accept and use abilities to help peers do better in classes.

The strategies were influenced by such factors as age, sex, and participation in programs for gifted students. For example, over the course of 4 years (ages 11 to 15), “using one's talent to help others” moved from second place to first, by way of third. “Achieving in school in areas outside academics” appeared to rise in popularity until the age of 14 but then dropped to third place. Students participating in special programs for the gifted were less likely, as they grew older, to mask their true abilities. Other studies have indicated that gifted females appear to be somewhat vulnerable to the pull of cultural expectations that drive them toward seeking peer acceptance rather than leadership and the full development of their abilities (Olszewski-Kubilius & Kulieke, 1989).

**References**


**Resources:**


Prepared by Thomas M. Buescher, child and adolescent therapist in Camden, ME, editor of *Understanding Gifted and Talented Adolescents*, and Research Scholar, Center for Talent Development, Northwestern University; Sharon Higham, formerly Associate Director of Programs, Center for Talented Youth (CTY), Johns Hopkins University, and currently a Fulbright Scholar researching programs for gifted students in Poland. The material in this digest was adapted by permission of the publisher from Buescher, T. (1989). A developmental study of adjustment among gifted adolescents. In J. VanTassel-Baska & P. Olszewski-Kubilius (Eds.), *Patterns of Influence on Gifted Learners: The Home, the Self, and the School* (pp. 102-124). New York: Teachers College Press, c1989 by Teachers College, Columbia University. All rights reserved.

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of these and helps meet the two most basic needs of these students: challenge and choice.

**Pre-Assessment: Who Knows What?**
The cornerstone of any attempt to meet the needs of diverse learners is to find out what they are interested in, how they learn best, and what they already know. This is the purpose of pre-assessment.

Administer an interest inventory or a learning styles inventory to all students at the beginning of the school year. Questions can include: What sports do you play? Do you prefer to work alone or with a group? What musical instruments do you play? What do you enjoy learning about? What do you do with your free time? If you had to put together your new desk, would you rather hear the instructions, read the instructions, or watch someone do it and then follow their model?

Identify or collect from existing data information about each student's reading and writing levels in all content areas. If the responsibility for gathering this information is divided among grade level team members, students don't end up completing four writing samples or filling out six interest inventories during the first two days of school.

Teachers should be aware of any student who has been identified as gifted in a specific academic area, in a cognitive ability, or in the visual or performing arts. Criteria for this designation vary by state and district; this is different from the consistent federal guidelines for identifying special education students.

This pre-assessment gives teachers a general overview of students' academic and personal starting points. The next step is to be more teacher- and content-specific. At least two weeks before instruction about a specific unit begins, teachers should give students a pre-assessment covering the content of that unit.

Often teachers misuse the K-W-L technique (What do you Know? What do you Want to know? What have you Learned?) for this purpose by doing it as an oral whole-class activity on the first day of a unit. While it is a great way to engage students' interest in a topic, it is not an effective pre-assessment. The students who know the most stop talking after they offer two or three answers, even if they know more (it’s socially “uncool” and teachers ask “can we hear from anyone else?”) while students who don't know anything about the topic say “he took my answer” or remain silent. Teachers get a false “read” of the class's knowledge base. In addition, doing this activity on the first day of an already-planned unit gives them no time to adjust for individual learners’ needs.

Instead, pre-assessments should be
1. Written.
2. Individual.
3. Focused on the key information, concepts, and skills of the unit, including the embedded state and local standards.
4. Relatively short.
5. Assessed only for instructional planning and grouping (not graded).
6. Returned to students only at the end of the unit when they can assess their own growth.

Other effective pre-assessments can be specially constructed pre-tests, post-tests, journals, incomplete graphic organizers, or open-ended questions. It is often useful to add “What else can you tell me about your experiences with this topic and what you know about it?”

Once teachers have a good idea of the starting point for each student, they can select the appropriate materials, pacing, and instructional approaches. This is the foundation of middle school philosophy and differentiation of instruction: start with the student.

**Tiered Assignments**
Tiered assignments, both in class and for homework, are a great way to differentiate instruction when all students need to work on the same content or material. This might include differentiated journal prompts, comprehension questions at different levels of Bloom's Cognitive Taxonomy, or a range of sophistication in math problems.

For example, when students are reading The Gettysburg Address, teachers can develop two sets of questions. One set is for struggling readers or more concrete thinkers with little background knowledge. These questions might emphasize the first three levels of Bloom's taxonomy (remember, understand, apply) and some key vocabulary words. A second set is for advanced readers or more abstract thinkers. These questions might emphasize the higher levels of Bloom's taxonomy (analyze, evaluate, create) and include a question about the oratorical devices that made this speech memorable.

Both groups get the same number of questions. The whole-class discussion that follows can include all students so everyone benefits from shared insights and knowledge, and encourage critical thinking.

**Menus of Activities**
Another approach is to create a menu of choices for learning activities ranging from reading the basal social studies text and creating an outline of its content to analyzing primary source material. Each activity in the menu is assigned a point value and all students must complete the same number
of points. Making a basic map may be worth 5 points. Making a map of contemporary Europe and contrasting it with what that same map looked like in 1900 would be worth 20 points. The key is that point values are determined by cognitive complexity, not just quantity or amount of time needed.

Through thoughtful coaching by the teacher, all students can learn new material on the assigned topic. Struggling learners may be required to master certain skills needed for state assessments while those who already have those skills may work toward above-grade level proficiency. The emphasis is on meaningful work for all students connected to the unit's essential questions.

**Orbital and Independent Study**

While differentiation is definitely not individualized education, opportunities for independent and orbital studies may be appropriate. For example, in a language arts unit on folk tales, fairy tales, and myths, a student with a lot of background might do an orbital study on Rafe Martin's book *Birdwing* (Scholastic 2007). This novel extends Grimm's fairy tale of “The Six Swans” in which six brothers are cursed and turned into swans. Their sister bravely breaks the spell, but one brother, Ardwin, is left with a birdwing. How he faces his difference, how the author has spun his ideas from the original tale, whether the moral is consistent with Grimm’s intention — all can be part of the students’ study. Significantly advanced students can explore Joseph Campbell’s *Hero with a Thousand Faces*.

While orbital studies extend a given topic, independent study may replace a topic. If students have mastered the goals, objectives, and concepts of this unit and have no interest in the topic, they might substitute in-depth study of a topic of interest such as science or history.

**21st Century Technology**

We are lucky that today, computer and other media technologies provide unique opportunities for student learning. There are online courses at both the high school and college levels for advanced learners. There are Web quests, podcasts, and video lectures from some of the greatest thinkers and teachers of our time. These experiences extend the boundaries of our classrooms and the learning of our students.

**Some Cautions**

Differentiation is an approach to teaching and learning, not just a strategy. It has a profound impact on the classroom community. Students must understand that not everyone in the classroom does the same thing at the same time, but everyone gets what they need.

It's not OK to make the top students into junior teachers. It has the opposite effect of what is often intended; rather than build compassion and caring, it creates arrogance and resentment. In addition, often gifted students don’t know how they know what they know or how to explain their leaping insights to more structured learners.

Differentiating instruction for advanced learners takes time and resources. Teachers should reach out and ask for help from gifted coordinators, gifted intervention specialists, online resources in the gifted community or in a content area, or from teachers in higher grade levels.

**The Rewards**

When we apply these strategies in our classrooms, we are delighted to see students blossom beyond our wildest dreams. We see students reach up to accept challenges because they see others doing it. We exemplify the ideals of middle schools and ensure that all our students are learning every day.

Susan Rakow is assistant professor in curriculum and gifted education at Cleveland State University and the author of Teaching to the Top: Understanding and Meeting the Needs of Gifted Middle Schoolers, published by the National Middle School Association.

Michigan Alliance for Gifted Education Affiliates

Each of these local affiliates provide parents opportunities to share information, to work with the schools, to hear speakers on various gifted and talented issues, and to generate and promote enrichment activities for gifted children. Note that some affiliates also have their own websites. If you have further questions or would like to start a new affiliate in your area, please contact Marie Brucker at 810-227-5379 or m.brucker@comcast.net. This list is regularly updated; we apologize for any errors or any exclusions. If you have any changes, please contact Marie Brucker.

*Groups forming; not affiliated at this time. **Affiliates

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**PLUS (Partners in Learning for Unlimited Success) - covering counties from Allegan to Indiana, Lake Michigan to Coldwater
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REGION 5 - Central Lower
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**HP4K (Hartland Parents for Kids)
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*Saginaw Township Group (STAATS-Saginaw Township Advocates for Academically Talented Students)
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Images
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