Are you a regular classroom teacher, special educator, teacher/coordinator for the gifted, counselor, psychologist, or parent of a student who is a puzzlement? The Michigan Alliance for Gifted Education invites you to join us at one of three full-day conferences presented by Dr. Linda Silverman, world-renowned leader in the fields of education and psychological assessment. Explore issues that support or hinder talent development for visual-spatial learners — those students who do not conform to traditional academic settings and expectations and need recognition and support in order for their gifts and talents to be valued and developed. An engaging and dynamic presenter, Linda Silverman will enhance your understanding of visual-spatial learners and provide you with practical solutions that can be implemented in school or at home. This is an opportunity close to home that you won’t want to miss!

These conferences will be held in Grand Rapids on Monday, April 26, in Bay City on Wednesday, April 28, and in Novi on Friday, April 30, 2010. You choose which date and location work best for your calendar!

Dr. Silverman will spend the day speaking about: The Visual-Spatial Learner: Understanding and Reaching Kids Who Learn Differently. Most people think in words; however, one-third of the student body thinks in images, and this percentage is growing. School was designed for auditory-sequential, left-hemispheric students who process in words. High achievers are advanced in reading, writing, spelling, calculation, and memorization, and perform well under timed conditions. Visual-spatial learners are gifted in right-hemispheric abilities, such as imagination, visualization, intuitive knowledge, multi-dimensional perception, science and technology, holistic thinking, creativity, artistic expression (music, dance, art, drama), and emotional responsiveness. These gifts are vital to employment in the 21st century and need to be nurtured. Specific strategies for identifying and teaching visual-spatial learners will be presented, including many practical ideas from Dr. Silverman’s book, Upside Down Brilliance: The Visual-Spatial Learner.

Linda Silverman, Ph.D., is a licensed psychologist, noted author, editor, researcher, and popular speaker. She directs the Institute for the Study of Advanced Development and its subsidiary, the Gifted Development Center, in Denver, Colorado. Over 5,200 children have been assessed at the Center since 1979. Her Ph.D. is in educational psychology and special education from the University of Southern California. Linda has been studying the assessment, psychology, and education of the gifted since 1961 and has contributed over 300 articles and chapters in this field.

Early bird cost for the conference is $100 for members, $115 for non-members. 0.6 SB-CEUs are available for the full-day conference. Please use the form in the center of this newsletter to register, or look for the entire registration form online at www.migiftedchild.org.

Inside this issue:

Serving Underachieving Students
FROM THE PRESIDENT
Dr. Ellen Fiedler

For many people, the idea that gifted children might not always be successful students seems impossible. In their minds, giftedness is equated with academic achievement. In fact, for these people, a child who isn’t doing well in school “can’t possibly be gifted!”

It’s clear to me that most members of the Michigan Alliance for Gifted Children “get it” about this. In fact, for many of us, it’s a big part of the driving force behind our involvement. We really care about these kids – not just the ones who do well in school (although we don’t want to take anything away from them, either – just celebrate what all is going right for them in school).

This is part of the reason why I’m so excited about bringing Dr. Linda Silverman to Michigan in April for our Spring Conferences – three all-day sessions in three different locations: April 26 in Grand Rapids, April 28 in Bay City, and April 30 in Novi. This is an extraordinary opportunity close to home for you and others who are concerned about bright kids who have all kinds of ability but don’t necessarily do well in school – some of whom are visual-spatial learners and are typically misunderstood and left adrift in our educational system.

We are asking our members to do three things: set aside one of these dates to attend the conference; bring as many others with you as possible; and spread the word about these conferences far and wide. Linda will be presenting on the topic of “The Visual-Spatial Learner: Understanding and Reaching Kids Who Learn Differently.” Anyone who’s heard Linda present before will tell you what a fabulous speaker she is – delightfully engaging and highly knowledgeable. It’s no wonder that she’s in great demand nationally and internationally! It’s wonderful to have her coming back to Michigan to share her expertise with as many people as possible – regular, special education and gifted education instructors, counselors, administrators, and parents.

Besides giving you more details about our Spring Conferences with Dr. Linda Silverman, this issue of Images also includes other features about how gifted children are not always successful students. It’s easy to play the “blame game” when this happens – finding someone to be at fault, when the situation is usually more complicated than that. In recent years, I’ve become intrigued with the concept of the difference between non-productive gifted kids/underachievers and those whom Jim Delisle and Judy Galbraith call “selective consumers.” If you’re interested in reading more about all this, you might want to check out their book, When Gifted Kids Don’t Have All the Answers, published by Free Spirit in 2002. Elsewhere in this issue, you’ll also find my list of suggested websites related to underachievement.

Meanwhile, let’s focus on how each of us can do what we can for all of our gifted children in Michigan, including those who aren’t always successful in school. Along with you, I’ll be looking forward to our Spring Conferences and the renewal that comes not just from warmer temperatures, but from learning and joining together with others who share our concerns.
EDITOR’S NOTES
Nan Janecke

Just like children in the general population are all different and unique in their own way, so are gifted children. Some are very focused, confident, organized, diligent – and some are not. Being born with a brain with a great deal of intellectual potential does not also mean that you were born with all of the traits that make a good student, and the dichotomy can be extremely frustrating for teachers, parents, and particularly for children.

When you know that your child is capable of a certain level of intellect, but what they’re producing in school does not reflect that capability, what actions can you take? As the articles we’re sharing with you in this edition of Images reflect, there are several steps you can take, including having your child evaluated for an emotional disorder or learning disability, understanding their learning style, making sure the learning environment – including instructors, curriculum, and pace – meets the needs of your student, and understanding what motivates your student to succeed.

Like most things in life, the effort to produce a high-achieving student is a delicate balancing act. Yes, you want your student to succeed. No, you don’t want them to feel that your love for them is conditional upon that success. Yes, you want them to live up to the potential that you see in them. No, you don’t want the pressure to achieve their potential to turn them into over-stressed and harried perfectionists. Sometimes the most difficult thing to do as a parent is to learn to say “good enough,” even when you know that “good enough” is less than what they’re capable of.

So love your children – gifted or not, successful or not – and learn to appreciate everything they bring to the party, even the attitudes and issues that sometimes drive you crazy. And always be asking yourself, “What is my definition of success?” If part of your definition includes the phrase, “I want my child to be happy,” you will hopefully find some measure of success – as a parent.

Steppingstone School Announces Acquisition of New Campus

The Steppingstone School for Gifted Education has acquired the site for a new campus in Farmington Hills. Near the center of downtown Farmington, the former home to Holiday Chevrolet will provide a total of six acres for new facilities including classrooms, administrative offices, laboratories, an art room, gymnasium, and 400-seat theatre. Playgrounds, a soccer field, and ample parking for special events are also in the plans.

The renovation of the premises is scheduled to begin in the spring of 2010, including a Groundbreaking Gala event. Phase one will be ready for classes to begin in September.
GIFTED UNDERACHIEVEMENT: OXYMORON OR EDUCATIONAL ENIGMA?
Barbara Hoover-Schultz

Gifted underachievement, at first glance, seems like an oxymoron. How can a gifted student also be an underachiever? By implicit definition gifted students are those who have developed high levels of intelligence and consistently perform at these high levels (Clark, 2002). Underachievement, on the other hand, is associated with a failure to do well in school. This seeming mismatch of terms is puzzling — giftedness and underachievement do not mesh. Like an oxymoron, they are at opposite ends of the educational spectrum. It is no wonder that the underachievement of gifted students is such a mystery.

Amazingly, estimates of students with high ability who do not achieve well are as high as 50% (Hoffman, Wasson, & Christianson, 1985; Rimm, 1987). This group represents a large population of talented students who are either underserved or neglected by gifted programs. If this many talented children are being ignored, it is imperative that the issue be addressed. However, a survey of the current literature demonstrates that educators disagree about the issue of gifted underachievement — not only in the definition, but the very legitimacy of gifted underachievement as a category of academic behavior. For example, Colangelo, Kerr, Christensen, and Maxey (2004) revealed that some researchers believe the majority of underachievement can simply be attributed to test error. Yet, psychologists, such as Sylvia Rimm, have spent their entire careers working to reverse underachievement.

A considerable number of articles, studies, and books have been written on the subject of gifted underachievement. Rather than clarifying a perplexing situation, the sheer amount of information and inconsistencies in definition muddies the waters. Without a clear definition, the concept of gifted underachievement remains elusive.

In an effort to understand and recognize gifted underachievement, this article will explore the definitions, characteristics, causes, and available interventions. Also, attention to underachievement in special populations will be briefly examined and discussed in an attempt to better understand this puzzling phenomenon.

Defining Underachievement in Gifted Students
Reis and McCoach (2000) pointed out that any discussion of the issue of gifted underachievement should begin with a definition. With all the assessments available to today’s educators and the mountains of existing research, this should be a simple task. However, rather than one straightforward definition, many exist throughout the literature. Even more than two decades ago, Dowdall and Colangelo (1982) were already proposing that the concept of underachieving gifted students had become nearly meaningless due to numerous categories of definitions.

At first glance, gifted underachievers seem to have more in common with low achievers than high achievers, namely, low performance in the classroom. The interesting difference that sets the gifted underachiever apart from his or her counterpart, the low achiever, is the ability to score high on standardized achievement tests, which typically assess knowledge that is needed to perform well in the classroom. This discrepancy between ability and achievement is the basic ingredient that a majority of educators use in defining gifted underachievement.

Dowdall and Colangelo (1982) described three underlying themes in the definition of gifted underachievement:

1. Underachievement as a discrepancy between potential achievement and actual achievement.
2. Underachievement as a discrepancy between predicted achievement and actual achievement.
3. Underachievement as a failure to develop or use potential.

The most common definitions of gifted underachievement fall within the first theme; however, Reis and McCoach (2000) were quick to point out problems: the criteria used to identify giftedness varies from state to state and district to district, standardized tests may not directly reflect the actual school experience, and classroom grades may be unreliable and subjective.

Similar problems exist when attempting to define gifted underachievement using the second theme. No test is 100% reliable, especially when attempting to predict achievement. Something as simple as a bad mood or ill health on test day can skew achievement scores, resulting in measurement errors in prediction.

The third theme, underachievement as a failure to use potential, is more utilitarian in that it can be applied to all levels of learners. Rimm’s (1997) definition of gifted underachievement fits this theme: “Underachievement is a discrepancy between a child’s school performance and some index of the child’s ability. If children are not working to their ability in school, they are underachieving” (p. 18). Even though Rimm was quick to point out that true underachievement problems are a matter of degree, her definition is a concise, easy-to-understand statement that explains the crux of gifted underachievement.

Once a working definition of gifted underachievement has been established, it is easier to explore its influences (or causes), as well as to describe common characteristics that set the stage for it. Like finding a definition, there is no one

(See Oxymoron, page 14)
MEETING THE NEEDS OF GIFTED UNDERACHIEVERS – INDIVIDUALLY!

Joan Franklin Smutny

As noted by the National Excellence report (Ross, 1993), there is a “quiet crisis” in the education of gifted students today – “quiet” because few people raise their voices on behalf of underachieving gifted children in our schools. It could be argued that the “quiet” response has reinforced the crisis and perpetuated a neglect of America’s talent in all sectors of society. Research has estimated that about half of all identified gifted students do not perform well academically (National Commission on Excellence in Education 1984: Richert, 1991). This estimate does not include the thousands of gifted who remain unidentified because of underachievement or because of other factors such as poverty, cultural difference (Peterson, 1999), geographic isolation, or learning disabilities.

What are the Common Characteristics of Gifted Underachievers?

Researchers recognize that underachievement is a diverse phenomenon with a variety of determinants. Whitmore (1989) identified three broad causes for underachievement in gifted children:

- Lack of motivation to apply themselves in school
- Environments that do not nurture their gifts and may even discourage high achievement
- Disabilities or other learning deficits that mask their giftedness.

Children in all three categories tell a similar story. All manifest a discrepancy between potential (as seen from test scores, products, or observations of parents, relatives, or neighbors) and achievement in school. Despite the uniqueness of each individual, a significant number of underachievers respond to similar challenges in more or less similar ways.

Commonly cited characteristics of underachieving gifted students include (Van Tassel-Baska, 1992; Whitmore, 1986; Rimm, 1986; Baum, Owen & Dixon, 1991):

- Low self-esteem
- Consistently negative attitude toward school and learning
- Reluctance to take risks or apply one’s self
- Discomfort with competition
- Lack of perseverance
- Lack of goal-directed behavior
- Social isolation
- Weaknesses in skill areas and organization
- Disruptiveness in class and resistance to class activities.

My experiences in school districts have shown that many educators and administrators do not understand the scope of the underachievement phenomenon among gifted students, nor are they likely to recognize it in their own schools. There are two reasons for this. First, the stereotype of giftedness – what it looks like and how it appears in the classroom – is still so strong that even the most observant educators tend to equate giftedness with achievement. A despondent, disorganized, and rebellious student who rarely performs well is typically not thought of as “gifted.” Second, even when teachers recognize the potential of a struggling student, they tend to see the underachievement as a problem within the child – rather than as a response to conditions at home or in school. They will make comments to parents such as, “If he’d just apply himself more and stop distracting the rest of the class, maybe he’d get better grades.”

What are the Most Promising Solutions to Underachievement?

Examine the Problem Individually. Underachievement covers a broad spectrum of situations from a minor school problem with a fairly obvious cause to a more entrenched long-term pattern. Since underachievement is such a varied and complex phenomenon, each case must be examined individually – with no preconceptions. As Hansford (2001, p. 316) observes: “Underachievement is very specific to the individual child; intervention and remediation of underachievement must be individually developed and implemented.”

Create a Teacher-Parent Collaboration. Teachers and parents need to work together and pool their information and experience regarding the child. Most interventions in the literature involve parent-teacher collaborations (e.g., Rimm, 1986, 2001), where they can coordinate their efforts and help the child progress more effectively. Some of the questions teachers and parents can explore together are:

- In what areas has the child shown exceptional ability?
- What are the child’s preferred learning styles?
- What insights do parents and teachers have about the child’s strengths and problem areas?
- What does the child say about self-needs, interests, and school experiences, and how is this information to be interpreted?

This kind of joint exploration yields useful insight into the nature of the child’s abilities and the root of the problem.

Stay Focused on the Child’s Gifts. When examining a child’s underachievement, always begin by focusing on strengths; a deficiency approach encourages the child to (See Meeting the Needs, page 16)
New V.P. for Advocacy Announced

The Michigan Alliance for Gifted Education is pleased to announce that Andrea Schroeder has recently been appointed V.P. for Advocacy. A native of Detroit, Andrea lived in Switzerland for part of her childhood, then moved back to Farmington. She attended Miami University and became a teacher, teaching at the PreK – 3 levels in Cincinnati, Boston, and back (again!) in the Detroit area.

Andrea left teaching after several years and started a successful sales career, working for Marriott and TrustHouse Forte hotels before joining Oakwood Worldwide, a global corporate real estate firm. After fifteen years in the corporate world she and a friend formed Strategic Five Business Solutions, a business consulting firm specializing in strategic sales and marketing planning. They celebrate seven years of success in April. Andrea also runs a condominium rental agency in Detroit, A Place Downtown, renting fully furnished condos to business executives on extended stays.

Andrea currently lives in Clarkston, where she and her wonderful husband, Mark, are raising three absolutely fabulous children (17, 14, and 7), each gifted in their own way.

Recently Images sat down with Andrea to learn more about her and her views on the role of the advocacy in gifted education.

Q: How did you become involved in gifted education?
A: Like most parents, I got involved in G/T education through my children. I recognized that my oldest child was academically gifted and started working with her teachers to find ways to accommodate her.

Q: When did your interest become directed towards advocacy?
A: Having had different experiences as a teacher in other states, I was surprised to learn how locally directed G/T is in Michigan. This motivated me to attend a session of the Senate Education Committee. I don’t remember the bill they were discussing, but my committee meeting visit was a real eye-opener! I had always assumed that our elected representatives were huddled together in the Capitol thinking Big Thoughts and making Big Plans. As I listened to the committee, I realized that many of the members did not have an understanding of what was before them or what they were voting for, and they could get away with it because most people back home were not paying attention. I decided to start paying attention, beginning by learning about the structure of education policy and funding in Michigan, as well as asking about my local district’s policies and practices.

Q: What do you think is the most important thing parents can know about advocating for their gifted children?
A: It has been my experience that most parents want to understand local and state education policy and how to best support their children, but they don’t know where to start or what to do. I like to give parents this quote:

It is the natural, fundamental right of parents and legal guardians to determine and direct the care, teaching, and education of their children.

Michigan School Code MCL Act 451 of 1976, Sec 380.10 (emphasis mine)

State law puts us parents firmly in charge of advocating the best interests of our children, but we need access to information to properly fulfill this responsibility. While it’s easy to become frustrated by the lack of support for G/T programming from the state, with the right information parents can learn how to work with teachers, administrators, and elected officials to provide support for our advanced students.

Q: Where can people find the information they need to guide their advocacy efforts?
A: Some great resources for parents are:

- Your local district website. If your policies are not online, request a written copy. Learn about your budgets and what your district’s long-term goals are.
- The Michigan Alliance for Gifted Education website. I have listed several links to information that is frequently requested.
- The National Association for Gifted Children also offers a lot of information and direction for advocacy on their site, including the State of the States report.

Q: What do you hope to accomplish as Vice President for Advocacy and Chair of the Advocacy Committee?
A: My primary goals for this year are helping parents understand our educational policy and giving them the tools to create the best opportunities within their own district. I’m excited to help the Michigan Alliance for Gifted Education advocate for the needs of Michigan’s G/T children!

Have a question, suggestion, or concern regarding advocacy for advanced and accelerated children? Contact Andrea Schroeder at migiftedadvocate@gmail.com.
Big Words, Big Thoughts, Little Body
Marie Brucker

Thirty participants attended Marie Brucker’s presentation in Ann Arbor on Monday, March 1, 2010, entitled, “Big Words, Big Thoughts, Little Body.” The parents and child care workers were mostly from the Ann Arbor area, but some came from as far away as Birmingham and Canton to learn that being gifted cannot be easily defined as a certain list of characteristics or an IQ score. All children must be looked at as a complete human being, considering all aspects – social, emotional and intellectual.

Intellectual means looking at how they actually learn. The gifted brain has a significantly larger number of memory cells, and many more neurons connected to those memory cells and throughout the other main sensory areas of the brain. This structure allows the individual to hold much more information in the memory at one time, and to make relationships between the elements in their memory, resulting in stronger reasoning skills. Learning takes place five to eight times faster than individuals of average ability. The intensities and sensitivities we so often see in gifted individuals are related to the increased neural networking seen across the frontal lobes and midbrain areas. This also explains why no question is a “simple” one. (Notes are from How the Gifted Brain Learns, by David A. Sousa)

If one reads about Dabrowski’s theories of “Over-excitabilities,” the intensities (highs and lows) that the gifted experience are in the physical, sensual, imaginative, intellectual, and emotional areas. These students experience a strong reaction to small stimuli. Parents and teachers observe this intensity of emotional reactions and find it difficult to understand – especially when the child is strongly upset over “nothing.” One needs to remember that the emotions are the child’s alone; thus it requires considerable patience and knowledge of the child to see that this “overreaction” comes from the child’s sensitivity and the need for his or her own order of things to be preserved. (Michael Piechowski, excerpt in Handbook of Gifted Education, 1991).

Many thanks to Washtenaw County Association for Gifted Education (WCAGE) leaders for their help in making this presentation possible.

Affiliates Advocate in Tight Budget Times
Marie Brucker

Action is definitely needed when parents hear their child is either PROgressing or REgressing when it comes to learning! There is no standing still! Studies have shown that a child learns as much as 50 percent of what they will ever know by the age of 4. Gifted children are like sponges! When they enter school each fall, research says they already know 50-80 percent of the material for their grade level curriculum, and will continue to learn at a rate that is five to eight times faster than that of the average student. Unless parents become active advocates for their children, there is bound to be a mismatch of instruction and learning. Advocacy must go on even more during a budget crunch. What steps can you take? Become organized. Develop your knowledge base. Work with others to make a difference.

With the development of GT101, a PowerPoint document found free on our website (www.migiftedchild.org), the Michigan Alliance for Gifted Education has made advocacy that much easier. GT101 allows both parents and educators to learn much about gifted children and how to meet their needs. Invite an Alliance board member to present a section of GT101 to your group of parents and educators, providing extra insight into the material and answering questions. See also the Affiliate link on the website and the Affiliate Handbook for additional information and help.

Parents and educators working together will help alleviate the dilemma of losing these gifted learners and letting them fall through the cracks. According to Joan Smutny, “…many of the brightest are waiting out the years until 3rd or 4th grade when most schools formally identify children as gifted, [and] have become bored, resentful underachievers…These kids are smart. They figure out very quickly how to fit [or not fit] in…During these four very important years, children also develop feelings for school [and learning] and fix their images of themselves as students.” (Smutny, Teaching Young Gifted Children in the Regular Classroom). What will that image be?

Let’s come together so that these children will see themselves as life-long learners! Contact the Michigan Alliance Regional Representatives or board members in your area to start organizing yourselves to make a difference. Groups can be within a district or ‘regional’. Looking for others in Ann Arbor, Birmingham, Canton, South Lyon, YOUR town? Building your knowledge base and working positively and persistently with others will make the difference!

For more information on how to get started, contact Marie Brucker, Trustee, at m.brucker@comcast.net.
Let the Chips Fall Where They May: 
Grant Money Proves to be a Winner 
Angela Bayes

Like many schools, the parochial school my children attend is suffering from declining enrollment. I believe a gifted program would both improve the academic programming and attract new families. However, adding value to a curriculum with a gifted program requires the poker skills of a professional gambler. I discovered this when I anted up and approached the principal with my idea.

What I had in the kitty were the benefits I received as a gifted child enrolled in a G&T program, and a make-it-work determination. Admittedly, I lost the first hand when the principal trumped with these requirements: “You can have a program only if it doesn’t cost any money and includes everybody.” Ultimately, his concerns were over elitism and funding. I could not change his mind, even with my folio of articles, moving essay, and lovely program outline. But, the grant from the Michigan Alliance for Gifted Education was my ace in the hole.

A grant is more than money; it is a designation of importance. Gifted programs have worth. Plus, a grant is a chip in favor of using the term “gifted”, rather than whispering secret buzzwords that have no meaning. The words “made possible by a grant from the Michigan Alliance for Gifted Education” were printed on notes sent home for each meeting.

The grant I was awarded funded the Electric Think Tank, a project of the principal’s invention, designed to teach about electricity conservation. The grant money bought equipment for experiments and a bus trip to the Aquinas College Solar Facility. We have had guest speakers, as well. The students have displayed both interest and insight, which has been highly rewarding for all the grown-ups involved.

For the selection process, there was not enough funding or school support for standardized testing. Instead, teacher nominations of the most interested and intuitive science students shaped our roster.

While this was not what I had envisioned, the Electric Think Tank is established. Support of the program from students, teachers, parents, and the PTA-type association has been encouraging. I am betting on expanding the Think Tank into next year.

Angela Bayes was awarded the 2009 Adult Grant by the Michigan Alliance for Gifted Education.
Scholarship Applications Now Available

The Michigan Alliance for Gifted Education regularly offers a limited number of scholarships of $300 to students who wish to attend summer enrichment programs. Three scholarships will be available again this year.

In addition, one grant for $300 is available to an adult member who wishes to engage in one of the following activities:

1. Research in the field of gifted education
2. Implementation of a special project that will directly benefit gifted, creative, and/or talented students
3. Attendance at a class, extended workshop, or conference, which will enhance your ability to work with or for the gifted, talented, or creative

Applications for both programs are printed on a pull-out form in the center of this newsletter, and additional applications are available at www.migiftedchild.org. Simply click on Student Summer Scholarship Information and Application Brochure or Adult Grant Program Information and Application. The application deadline has been extended to Friday, April 16, 2010, so don’t miss it!

Davidson Fellows

The Davidson Fellows program awards $50,000, $25,000 and $10,000 scholarships annually to recognize outstanding students under the age of 18 who have completed significant work in science, mathematics, technology, literature, music, philosophy or outside the box. Davidson Fellows are honored for their achievement at an awards ceremony in Washington, D.C.

For an application, visit www.davidsonfellows.org.

2008-2009 Michigan Nicholas Green Award Winner: Marlee Jo Curnutt

Marlee Jo Curnutt, a 5th grade student at Plainfield Elementary School in Saginaw, Michigan, has been named the 2008-2009 Nicholas Green Distinguished Student in the state of Michigan.

Originally funded by the Nicholas Green Foundation and NAGC, this award program is designed to recognize distinguished achievement in academics, leadership, or the arts in children grades 3 through 6. One child per state can be named a Nicholas Green Distinguished Student. That winner receives a $500 U.S. savings bond and an NAGC Certificate of Excellence.

Marlee was selected for her leadership and compassion. Involved with fundraising for St. Jude’s Hospital and children struggling with multiple sclerosis since the age of 8, Marlee wanted to do more. She came up with the idea to hold a carnival, creating games, recruiting helpers, and setting up and running the carnival. With the help of family, friends, her church, and area businesses, Marlee raised over $1,000 for St. Jude’s Hospital. Now she has plans to become a pediatrician and help children and their parents with the hopes of keeping them healthy.

The Nicholas Green Foundation was established by Maggie and Reg Green to honor the memory of their seven-year-old son, Nicholas, who was killed in a drive-by shooting while visiting Italy in 1994. The Greens started the Distinguished Student Awards because they wanted to recognize young people who are working hard to make the most of their lives and develop their unique gifts and talents, and who are now about the age that Nicholas was when he died. The Nicholas Green Foundation began funding these awards during the 1998-1999 school year.

The 2009-2010 Nicholas Green Distinguished Student Award nomination form can be found on our website, www.migiftedchild.org, and can also be found in the insert in this issue of Images.
Contribute an Article 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 20, Issue 2, 2010**
Articles due: August 1, 2010
Publication date: September 15, 2010

**Volume 21, Issue 1, 2010**
Articles due: February 1, 2011
Publication date: March 15, 2011

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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**PARENT-TO-PARENT**

*Q: My child has very high IQ scores, and has previously been a very good student. Lately, however, his grades have been slipping, and he seems to be losing focus. What can I do to help him get back on track?*

*A: Share with your child the following the following “Mini-Survival Guide” to improve performance:*

**Know Thyself:**
What are your learning strengths? Whether it’s math, science, writing, or something else, think about what you’re really good at.

What conditions work best for learning? Controlled chaos, absolute quiet, loud music – everyone needs a different learning environment.

What makes you happiest? Discover your passion and let it help drive you to succeed.

**Challenge Yourself:**
Success will only feel good when you sense it was a difficult task to accomplish. Classes too easy? Negotiate with your teacher, using the language of diplomacy, to pursue a topic from the chapter material in depth, presenting it in your own style. Consider “testing out.”

**What? Me, Study?**
At some point you will need to know how to study, and you will feel as if you’ve arrived in a foreign land without knowing the language! So take lessons or read a book on “how to study.” It’s a new skill you just didn’t need to know before.

**Stress Management:**
Learn to let things go – we cannot control what others do, only how we act and react. As much as we’d like to we cannot save the entire world, but we can make a difference. Learn relaxation techniques such as yoga, tai chi, and deep breathing. Don’t forget to take time to laugh!

**Communication:**
Remember, listening is more important than speaking. When you listen carefully, you learn to understand, clarify the situation, and empathize with the speaker.

*This advice is provided by Marie Brucker, former VP of Affiliates and member of the Michigan Alliance for Gifted Education Board of Directors.*

**The Young Scholars Program**

Application materials for The Young Scholars Program are now available on The Jack Kent Cooke Foundation web site, www.jackkentcookefoundation.org. This is a wonderful opportunity for gifted and talented seventh grade students to secure educational resources and services. The Center for Talent Development collaborates with The Jack Kent Cooke Foundation to administer the application process and counsel the Young Scholars. Please share the word about this initiative with administrators, teachers, counselors, and parents!

Interested candidates should visit the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation web site (Young Scholars Program tab) or contact the foundation (telephone: 847-491-7127).

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(847) 491-3782 - www.ctd.northwestern.edu
Northwestern University’s Midwest Academic Talent Search (NUMATS) is an empowering and inspiring experience for bright students who want to challenge themselves.

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Summer Program Opportunities for Gifted Children

The following summer camps and programs are available in and around Michigan for gifted children. Check out these great opportunities for warm weather fun and adventure!

- **Academically Talented Youth Program at Western Michigan University Summer Programs**
  www.wmich.edu/honors/atyp

- **Calvin College Academic Camps for Excellence**
  http://www.calvin.edu/admin/pre-college/camps/ace/

- **Center for Talent Development at Northwestern University Summer Program**
  http://www.ctd.northwestern.edu/summer/

- **Gifted Education Resource Institute at Purdue University**
  http://www.geri.soe.purdue.edu/youth_programs/index.html

- **Institute for Educational Advancement's (IEA)**
  http://www.educationaladvancement.org/pages/programspages/yunasa.html

- **Michigan Supreme Court Learning Center’s Exploring Careers in the Law**

- **Michigan State University Office of Gifted and Talented Education**
  http://gifted.msu.edu/

- **Steppingstone School**
  http://steppingstoneschool.org/summercamp/summercamp.php

- **Summer Institute for the Gifted/University of Michigan Campus**
  http://www.giftedstudy.org/residential/michigan/admissions.asp

- **Summer Youth Programs at Michigan Technological University**
  http://youthprograms.mtu.edu/students-prospective-syp.php

Books

Looking for more information on how to help your child achieve their full potential? Look for these books in your local library, bookstore, or online.


*Bright Minds, Poor Grades: Understanding and Motivating your Underachieving Child,* by Michael D. Whitley, Perigee Trade (2001)


Ellen Fiedler, President of the Michigan Alliance for Gifted Education, suggests the following Selected Website Resources for Understanding/Helping Gifted Underachievers:

- **AEGUS (Association for Gifted Underachieving Students)** ([http://aegus1.org](http://aegus1.org)) - This organization has been in existence for more than 19 years as an advocate for gifted underachievers and provides a forum for ideas and interventions.

- **Free Spirit Publishing** ([http://freespirit.com/](http://freespirit.com/)) - Free Spirit is the leading publisher of learning tools that support young people’s social and emotional health and has many publications that are useful for working with gifted underachievers.

- **Gifted Development Center** ([http://gifteddevelopment.com](http://gifteddevelopment.com)) - Dr. Linda Silverman's excellent website, with information and articles about gifted students with learning disabilities. Also includes links to many other useful sites related to gifted children and adults.

- **GT-Cybersource** ([http://www.gt-cybersource.org](http://www.gt-cybersource.org)) - This is a section of the Davidson Institute Website and includes an amazing collection of articles online. This site is a valuable resource for finding excellent information about providing for gifted children, including underachievers.

- **Hoagies** ([http://hoagiesgifted.org](http://hoagiesgifted.org)) - Especially for parents, but worthwhile for teachers, too. Includes information about underachieving gifted students and good links to other sites.

- **KidSource Online** ([http://www.kidsource.com/kidsource/content2/social_development_gifted.html](http://www.kidsource.com/kidsource/content2/social_development_gifted.html)) - This site is an easy way to look at social/emotional characteristics of gifted children with possible strengths and problems associated with each – a good quick reference. The site also has specific information about underachieving gifted students.

- **Metagifted** ([http://www.metagifted.org/topics/gifted/underachievement/](http://www.metagifted.org/topics/gifted/underachievement/)) - This page on the Metagifted site has a good overview of the issue of underachieving gifted students, including a list of possible reasons for underachievement.

- **National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC)** ([http://www.nagc.org](http://www.nagc.org)) - The website for NAGC, the major U.S. organization for those concerned with gifted children and their education. Provides information on all subjects related to gifted children, including underachievement.

- **National Research Center on the Gifted & Talented (NRC/GT)** ([http://www.gifted.uconn.edu/nrcgt.html](http://www.gifted.uconn.edu/nrcgt.html)) - NRC/GT was funded under a federal Javits Grant to focus on research and wide-ranging information about the gifted. This site includes a wealth of resources. Underachievers, special education, cultural diversity, etc. are just some of the topics to be found.

- **Prufrock Press** ([http://www.prufrock.com/client/client_pages/guiding_gifted.cfm](http://www.prufrock.com/client/client_pages/guiding_gifted.cfm)) - This page on the Prufrock site has practical advice for addressing social/emotional needs of gifted students, and a search of the site using the keyword “underachievement” led to many worthwhile articles.


- **The Visual-Spatial Resource** ([http://www.visualspatial.org](http://www.visualspatial.org)) - Dr. Linda Silverman's “other” website, with excellent information and descriptions of visual-spatial learners, including a quiz to help determine whether you or your child is a visual-spatial learner.

**Note:** This information was current as of February 2010. If you would like to receive this document as an attachment via email so that you will have “click-able links,” email your request to Dr. Ellen Fiedler at: ellenfiedler@comcast.net.
single event or factor that contributes to underachievement in gifted students. The causes of underachievement are complex (Fehrenbach, 1993), and a pattern that develops in elementary school often continues into the upper grades. There are a number of contributing factors to this pattern cited in the literature.

Gallagher (1991), Rimm (1997), and others have suggested that the causes of underachievement can be separated into environmental (school) factors and personal/family factors. Environmental factors appear to stem from two problem areas: the school and the student’s peer group. An anti-intellectual school atmosphere that focuses on athletics and social status and an antigifted atmosphere can contribute to underachievement (Rimm, 1995). Inflexible requirements for graduation that require students to follow a specific path from entry to graduation may also contribute to low achievement in older gifted students. Underachieving students often report peer influence as the single most important force blocking their achievement (Reis & McCoach, 2000). A study that measured students’ grades and behavior in the fall and spring found that students seemed to more closely resemble their friends at the end of the school year than at the beginning (Berndt, 1999), with their grades tending to decrease in the spring if their friends had lower grades in the fall. Is it any surprise that antiacademic peer groups could exert enough pressure on gifted students to cause them to hide their talents?

Underachievement related to personal matters often starts with unfavorable coping skills or learning styles. Research has attributed some difficulties encountered in these two areas to a form of neurological dysfunction or imbalance (Gallagher, 1991). However, the overwhelming factor appears to be in the area of personal/psychological underachievement due to dynamics within the family. Subsequent interactions at school add a layer of complication to an already perplexing situation. Interestingly, several characteristics of gifted underachievers were described decades ago by Lewis Terman in his famous longitudinal study of 1,500 students. The underachieving group was set apart by the following characteristics (Gallagher):

- low levels of self-confidence,
- an inability to persevere,
- a lack of goals, and
- feelings of inferiority.

Contemporary researchers (Rimm, 1995; Whitmore, 1987) have confirmed Terman’s findings that underachieving gifted students are different from achieving gifted students in personal and family relationships, as well as in self-image and motivation. Family is frequently identified as an unhealthy place for many gifted underachievers. Rimm and Lowe (1988) cited poor family relationships and inconsistent standards as being characteristic of the family dynamics of gifted underachievers: “commitment to career and respect for school were remarkably . . . absent” (p. 358). However, it may be that parents of underachieving students simply do not have the skills to support their children’s unusual academic talents.

Culturally Diverse Underachievers
Gifted underachievement crosses all cultural boundaries and, interestingly, differs across the cultures. Pointing out that little research has focused specifically on culturally diverse underachievers, Reis and McCoach (2000) suggested that these students face unique barriers to achievement. For example, minority students are frequently underrepresented in gifted and talented programs, and different subcultures’ definitions of achievement may differ from that of the dominant culture.

Language typically adversely affects gifted Latino students’ achievement. Being proficient in English generally means greater success in school for Spanish-speaking students. However, it is not the only condition necessary for success. A different value system that exists within the Hispanic American community may be of greater impact, particularly for female students (Reis, 1998).

Identification practices may adversely affect gifted African American students. Baldwin (1987) suggested that the practices normally used to determine eligibility for gifted programs may not be valid or reliable for students from culturally diverse backgrounds; in particular, using intelligence scores as the sole criterion can create a bias toward African American students. Mickelson (1990) reported an attitude-achievement paradox: a positive attitude toward education coupled with low academic achievement that makes it difficult to reverse African American underachievement.

Gender differences also affect underachievement. According to a study done by Weiss (1972), approximately 25% of above-average females may be considered underachievers, as compared with approximately 50% of above-average males. Even though it appears that academically underachieving gifted girls are far outnumbered by underachieving gifted boys (Colangelo et al., 2004), increased attention has been aimed toward female underachievers. Deliberate underachievement seems to be prevalent among bright adolescent females as a response to perceived sex-role expectations (Fox, 1981).

The issue of cultural diversity within the gifted population is beginning to receive more attention, particularly in the area of “hidden underachievers,” students who underachieve because the educational system is not designed to recognize their talents. Because cultures vary in what is valued, should we impose one culture’s ideas of achievement upon another’s? Is this imposition helping children or, perhaps,
Interventions

Much has been written about the complex causes and characteristics of gifted underachievers, and the major points have been outlined above. However, understanding the causes and identification of gifted underachievers is only the first step. While appropriate interventions are necessary if educators are to correct this problem, it is understandable that proposed interventions have taken on several different directions. As with creating a definition and looking at causes of gifted underachievement, no single intervention has been found to be the answer. In fact, according to Reis and McCoach (2000), effective interventions designed to reverse underachievement in gifted students have been “inconsistent and inconclusive” (p. 202).

Butler-Por (1987), Dowdall and Colangelo (1982), and others have described two categories of interventions aimed at reversing gifted underachievement: counseling and instructional interventions. Counseling interventions attempt to change any personal or family dynamics affecting gifted students’ underachievement. Rather than attempting to force gifted students to be more successful, counseling interventions help them decide goals and help reverse any habits that are blocking the road to success. While some researchers believe the debate is still out on whether counseling interventions are truly successful, Rimm (1995) described a Trifocal Model used by schools with some success in reversing underachievement in gifted students. The six-step Trifocal Model begins with assessment and focuses on communication, changing expectations, identification, correction of deficiencies, and modifications at home and school.

The second category of instructional interventions focuses on special classrooms designed to create a more favorable environment for gifted underachievers. These classrooms have a small teacher-student ratio and use less conventional approaches to teaching. Students typically have more freedom and control of their own learning. Unfortunately, this strategy has not encountered much success in reversing gifted underachievement. Reasons for the lack of success range from educational politics, to difficulty in getting school districts to implement them due to limited time, physical space, and resources (Fehrenbach, 1993).

Why some programs work and others do not is almost as mysterious as the concept of gifted underachievement itself. However, Fine and Pitts (1980) devised some useful guidelines for planning and implementing successful intervention programs:

1. Initially develop a structure to support the child.
2. Issues, expectations, and intervention plans need to be solidly outlined.
3. Appoint one person to be in charge of the intervention plan.
4. Involve the family in a close, working relationship with the school.
5. Parents and teachers should establish a strong parental posture to learning.
6. Group meetings should parallel family interactions.
7. Use follow-up conferences with the same people to maintain accountability.
8. Expect and confront sabotages (pp. 53–54).

Successful intervention programs do not let the child be in charge. After all, underachieving children have shown their inability to work in their own best interest. However, through successful intervention over time, the child can be invited to be more active as problems and behavior issues are resolved.

Conclusions

As researchers (Dowdall & Colangelo, 1982; Fine & Pitts, 1980; Gallagher, 1991) have pointed out, gifted underachievers are more than smart children bored with school. There are far-reaching personal and political implications when gifted children — or any children, for that matter — do not work to their potential. The loss to society can be tragic.

An examination of the literature identifies general characteristics of gifted underachievers and suggests some causes for this peculiar phenomenon. The unique situation of culturally diverse gifted underachievers also requires attention. No panacea exists for resolving the issue of gifted underachievement, and unfortunately, it seems more questions arise than answers.

What can we do about the situation of gifted underachievement? Focusing on what we know, or at least what we think we know, as well as what we don’t know, is a good place to start. We know that there are gifted students who are not performing to their potential and that there are a variety of causes and influences. However, educators do not have reliable information about how many gifted students are underachieving.

Intervention strategies exist with differing measures of success. Effective strategies are thought to reverse the problem of underachievement; unfortunately, such strategies, which include private programs, tend to be expensive and labor intensive. Is there a more efficient way to affect change?

Some researchers believe links between certain learning disabilities and gifted underachievement may suggest mi-
focus on weaknesses even more than before. At each point
the investigation needs to find the most effective ways to
involve the child in the pursuit and exploration of personal
talents and interests. This builds the confidence and strength
the child needs to manage problem areas. A gifted under-
achiever once wrote Sylvia Rimm a letter that expresses per-
f ectly the importance of focusing on the gift:

*I remember you told me to continue and explore my creativ-
ity through writing and acting because that is how I would truly
find my strengths. I remember how you taught me to
manage my life strategically because this would help my
confusing and random, inconsistent behavior. I finally re-
member that you told me to never be afraid to express my-
self no matter what others thought.* (2001, p. 350)

Create an Individual Plan for the Child. The plan de-
dsigned for the child has to emerge from the nature of indi-
vidual gifts and the root causes of the underachievement. An
underachieving Native American child, for example, who
suffers from low skill development due to poverty, inade-
quate schooling, and low self-esteem needs an individual-
ized program that will provide mentoring in the develop-
ment of personal gifts, open-ended projects that allow free
exploration and divergent thinking, and also special inter-
vention to strengthen skills. (Scruggs & Cohn, 1983). Re-
search on culturally different and disadvantaged gifted stu-
dents has produced a number of effective models (Smunty,
2001a) that educators can use to help reverse underachieve-
ment. These models show how factors such as cultural dif-
f erence and impoverishment lead to underachievement and
the kinds of interventions children need to overcome the
barriers that have isolated them from their own talents.

In a number of cases, a difference in learning style has hin-
dered the progress of a gifted child. Peterson (2001) points
out that creative children have a tendency to underachieve
because their thinking style diverges so drastically from the
convergent style rewarded by schools. Janos and Robinson
state that schools “tend to reward the less original students
and may, indeed, exacerbate the problems of some creative
children” (Peterson 2001, p. 326). Avoiding competition
(Rimm, 1986) and acceleration, these underachievers often
improve once they find themselves in classes where they can
use their talents in creative thinking, learning, and expres-

Creative students need solutions that give them both the
freedom to create and the support in skill and organization
areas where they are weak. Baum, Renzulli, and Hebert
(1995) used Renzulli’s Type III enrichment to design an in-
tervention model that addresses the creative needs of gifted
underachievers and that also helps them complete projects in
a systematic way. In this model, teachers can address indi-
vidual needs — whether they be limited skills, poor goal-
making, or trouble with sequential tasks — without making

Rimm’s Trifocal Model (1986, 2001) is one of the most
comprehensive approaches to underachievement. The model
operates on the philosophy that underachievement is
learned, and therefore achievement can also be learned.
Rimm examines the three major influences on a child’s life
— home, school, and peer culture — and seeks to under-
stand how these areas contribute to the child’s underachieve-
ment. Rimm’s analysis of the defense mechanisms an under-
achiever uses to establish “dependent or dominant rituals”
(2001, p. 353) provides keen insight into the subtle dynam-
ics between a child and the adults in his life that reinforce
a pattern of nonproductive behaviors.

A Final Note – The importance of Advocacy

Each underachieving gifted child has special characteristics,
gifts, and challenges that require a unique response. Some
form of advocacy has to take place for any solution to work
(Smunty, 2001b). Because of their low self-esteem, gifted
underachievers need, as Rimm (1986; 2001) points out,
mentors or role models with whom the children can identify
and in whom they can confide when they face obstacles.
Children who do not feel good about themselves have a par-
ticularly difficult time sustaining interests or persevering
when they have problems. For gifted children, this problem
is greatly exaggerated by the heightened sensitivity and in-
sight that accompany giftedness.

This is where advocacy comes in. In many respects the ab-
sence or presence of advocacy can determine whether or not
a child overcomes underachievement. The children I have
seen emerge from difficult school experiences were those
who had a special person in their lives who was committed
to their success when they were not themselves committed,
who cared for them when they felt alone or inadequate, who
supported them through all their doubts and fears. The gifted
child who wrote to Rimm credited her with the support, af-
f ection, encouragement, and wisdom that true advocates
bring to their role, and it changed the course of this child’s
life. This is the quality we all must bring to the gifted under-
achievers in our schools and homes.

Author and teacher Joan Franklin Smunty is founder and director
of the Center for Gifted at National-Louis University. Among her
books are Stand up for Your Gifted Child and Underserved Gifted
Populations.

References

disabled. Mansfield Center, CT: Creative Learning Press.

(See Meeting the Needs, page 17)
nor neurological problems. Is there something happening in our environment that produces this anomaly, or is it a genetic anomaly?

Out of questions answers may grow. Until that time, the process of defining underachievement, identifying underachieving gifted students, explaining underachievement, and suggesting interventions remains an educational enigma.

Barbara Hoover-Schultz is the Gifted/Talented Coordinator for the Omaha Public Schools in Nebraska. She has a Masters in Education with an endorsement in gifted education.

References


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One Size Does Not Fit All
Meet the Needs of the Gifted Child

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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.

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**Birmingham ASSET
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Plymouth-Canton group starting.

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Images
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City ___________________________________________ State _____________ Zip Code _______________

County _________________________________ School __________________________________________

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