

**The Quandary in the Question:  
“What's the Best School for the Gifted?”**

by

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The telephone is ringing again. It's another parent who wants advice from an “expert” on which school (of all of them in the area: public & private, urban and suburban, magnet and neighborhood...) is the **best** school for the gifted. The parents ask: Who is doing the **best** job; who really cares about gifted children; who can they be **sure** will provide the **best** for their child?

They think we know; they think we can tell them; they think there is “one right answer” to this question and that we have it. They think we're being evasive (or, at the very least, are simply being “politically correct”) when we don't give them specific information—tell them things that will alleviate their concerns and virtually **guarantee** a successful school experience for their gifted child.

The somewhat painful reality is that even those of us who are looked on as “experts” don't have the “one right answer” to this question. There are several reasons for this:

- 1) We don't know their child.
- 2) We don't know what they value in an education. (And, even if we ask them, this is actually a complex mosaic of contrasting values ranging from concerns about a rigorous curriculum that stresses academic excellence to a burning desire for a warm, supportive climate that will assure that their children “feel good about themselves” at all times...or, at least, **most** of the time.)

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3) We don't know everything about every school or school system in the area.

Even when we have become familiar with some of the educational settings where high priority has been placed on providing the most appropriate education for gifted children, things change. Also, variations between schools within even an excellent school system and within each of the individual schools themselves, makes it extremely difficult to predict the quality of each educational situation.

*So, what's to be done?*

My best advice to parents is to take the following steps:

- 1) Ask yourself as many questions as you can about your child and the kind of educational situation you think would be to his/her advantage. For instance:
  - a) What is my child really like? (Think about things like personality factors, learning style, degree of giftedness, etc.)
  - b) What are my child's interests? What passions do I already see developing that s/he needs opportunities to pursue? What do I really want my child to be able to learn in school?
  - c) What kind of learning environment seems to work best for my child? How does s/he deal with challenges? How important is support from adults versus freedom to pursue learning independently?
- 2) Do your homework. Learn about gifted children, about gifted education, and about what the "experts" think are important factors to consider.
- 3) Go back to #1; do it again.
- 4) Start formulating questions that you want to ask about the schools or school systems you are considering for your child. Write them down, along with a list of the places you want to investigate. For instance, you might want to ask:

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- a) What can you tell me about your school/school system? Do you have a gifted program? What is it like? How are gifted students identified? What do you usually do to respond to their needs? How do you feel about grouping gifted students together?
  - b) Would you describe your program as being more geared toward academic achievement or to some other goal (such as helping students become responsible citizens, developing critical/creative thinking abilities, or enhancing self-esteem)?
- 5) Find out who is in charge—who is responsible for seeing that gifted students are provided with an appropriate education. (This would, most likely, be the program coordinator for gifted, but might also be the principal, the superintendent, the director of curriculum and/or instruction or some other designated administrator.) Make an appointment with that person so that you can start to get answers to your questions.
- 6) Always consider yourself as an advocate for your child. You have valuable information that can help the schools be more effective in creating the best learning environment for your child. Without that information, they may be fumbling in the dark.

Finally, once a school has been selected, parents need to get involved. Be there and be aware...of what is going on and ways that you can be a productive partner in your child's education. Yes, the “experts” can help you, but only by being a guide on your journey to finding the best school for your child.

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