

How Teachers Can Help

An effective teacher can help a gifted child in several key ways. First, recognize the child as academically advanced. Next, point that child to new challenges and make sure school remains a positive experience. Finally, make sure a child is accurately evaluated for readiness to be accelerated.

While popular wisdom may say gifted children can teach themselves and learn by do-it-yourself trips to the library, experts say the truth is that academically talented students need qualified, informed teachers.

“Classroom teachers are important for gifted kids, too,” says Dr. Camilla Benbow, Dean of Vanderbilt University’s College of Education and an authority on the gifted.

“Excellent teachers open doors to other opportunities,” Dr. Benbow explains.

What Teachers Need to Know

The teacher is critical in the life of every gifted child, even when the child has informed, supportive parents.

“Parents are the primary advocates for their children, but they must work with their child’s teachers and administrators to implement change,” explains Dr. Susan Assouline, Associate Director of the Belin-Blank Center at The University of Iowa.

The reality for gifted children is that their needs have not been a priority for teachers. These needs have faded into the background as teachers are confronted with increasingly greater demands on their time.

Currently, the national focus is on the legislation known as *No Child Left Behind*. The emphasis is on all children meeting minimum skills. Maximizing the talents of those who are well above proficiency is not the priority. But recognizing the needs of gifted students



What Teachers Can Do

- Recognize gifted children
- Provide new challenges
- Inform child’s parents about acceleration
- Minimize teaching students what they already know
- Make school a positive experience for all students . . . including your brightest

does not mean short-changing any other students.

Teachers need to be aware of the research on acceleration and of the 18 types of acceleration. They need to know that there are strategies like the *Iowa Acceleration Scale* to determine whether a child is ready to be accelerated.

Interestingly, something simple but stubborn—attitude—may be the biggest problem for experienced teachers. After years of absorbing negative perceptions about acceleration, many teachers may need to reconsider their ideas. It’s all about continued professional development.

All classroom teachers need to know that the overwhelming majority of accelerated students are happy with their educational experience and are well-adjusted socially. Classroom teachers can make use of the materials provided by Volumes I and II of *A Nation Deceived* to help the next highly capable student they teach.

A child’s education is too important to squander because of a lack of familiarity with the truth about acceleration.



Colleges of Education: The Silent Problem

A topic few educators like to discuss is where current attitudes toward acceleration originated.

No one knows for sure, but one thing we do know is that America's teachers and administrators have one thing in common—an education degree. Colleges of Education are partners with schools in the education process. The problem is—where bright children are involved—they are silent partners.

“It's a cultural problem,” explains Dr. Camilla Benbow, Dean, College of Education, Vanderbilt University. “Colleges of Education have worried a lot about social justice and equity.”

“Faculty members are deeply concerned about equity in education. This theme is important, of course, but we have lost something crucial—the thrust toward excellence. For me, social justice without excellence is empty.”

A cursory look at course catalogues in Colleges of Education indicates very few courses (required or elective) offered in gifted education. It appears that most course offerings are in-service, and these options are available only after a teacher or administrator has received a degree. Courses that help teachers to identify and assist the gifted students in their classrooms are very rarely a part of the degree requirement.

Gifted students are simply not part of the required curriculum, so many teachers graduate from college unprepared to make appropriate decisions about highly capable students.

While teachers and administrators are often required to take a course focusing on students with special learning needs, inclusion of gifted students in these special-needs courses is either absent or an afterthought.

The lack of focus on gifted education and excellence issues is one reason why Colleges of Education are so silent on the topic of acceleration. Given that the extensive research on acceleration has been available for many years, it is curious that such a fundamental curricular intervention is not taught as part of the preparation of educators.

“A hallmark of Colleges of Education must be that they critically evaluate and then disseminate research on various aspects of education,” says The University of Iowa College of Education Dean, Sandra Damico. “Education faculties have a professional obligation to provide our future educators with the information and skills to interpret and implement best practices on behalf of all students.”

“The fact that the research on acceleration is not readily part of the training of teachers and administrators,” asserts Dean Damico, “is a strike against the mission of Colleges of Education.”

Teachers Don't Deserve Blame

Some educational leaders are concerned that classroom teachers will be blamed for all of the problems in gifted education, just as they have been blamed for other problems.

It's not fair to blame teachers for not knowing the specifics about the characteristics and needs of gifted students or the particulars about acceleration. Universities and colleges are accountable for the preparation of teachers and principals. Society counts on these institutions to provide the most relevant information and practices. Why, then, is there such a disconnect between information and practice?

The research basis for educational practices emanates from Colleges of Education. This research should influence attitudes and practices. It is our experience that College of Education professors preach the importance of research as the basis for educational practice. When it comes to research on acceleration, however, they do not practice what they preach. They do not promote the research on acceleration as the basis for the practice of acceleration.

"What we need is not just information but appropriate professional development," says Dr. Camilla Benbow, Dean of Vanderbilt University's College of Education. "To change behaviors is very, very hard. We need to support the teachers as they change their attitudes and practices."

It will be hard to educate the nation's teachers about the extensive, positive record of acceleration, but Benbow believes it must be done.

"It's not easy. People would like to think you can change these teachers' ideas in a weekend or a week-long professional development seminar," she says. "I don't think it's that easy. Yet, just because it isn't easy does not mean we should not do it."

"Education is full of one-day workshops," Benbow says. "This is not a one-day solution."

Where Teachers Can Get Help

"That's why centers that aim to educate and train educators about academically advanced students are so critical to the nation's future," says Dr. Sandra Damico, Dean of The University of Iowa's College of Education.

"Centers like the National Research Center on Gifted and Talented at the University of Connecticut and The Belin-Blank Center at The University of Iowa are models for professional development as well as a clearinghouse for the latest research on academically advanced children, and they support teachers who want to learn how to provide appropriate challenges for these students."

"As more teachers become informed about the special challenges of teaching highly capable students, and of the various kinds of acceleration that may help these students, such centers on gifted and talented students will be there to help teachers make the right decisions," Dean Damico says.

Deans Damico and Benbow are clear on one other point. Even with the best-equipped centers for the gifted in the world, very few children will be helped without the commitment of individual teachers. Identifying a gifted child and suggesting appropriate educational choices are almost always the challenges of a single classroom teacher.

In the life of any child, a teacher is crucial. But for a gifted child, one teacher can open the door to an entirely new educational pathway by making sure that child is set on an appropriately challenging course.