

When Schools Fail: Is Homeschooling Right For You and Your Highly Gifted Child?

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“The ranks of homeschoolers are being swelled by conventional parents who suspect their children are being let down by public schools,” (Los Angeles Times, May 7th, 2001). No longer is homeschooling reserved for Christian educators or children with handicaps. It is reaching the secular community for the simple reason that parents recognize when their children are being intellectually starved. Homeschooling is being lauded in newspapers and magazines, ogled on talk shows, and universities, because of the students’ impressive SAT scores and life experiences, solicit home-educated students.

While most people remain skeptics, it is a far more widely accepted method of educating children than ten years ago, and most certainly more than the thirty years ago when homeschooling had its first growth spurt.

Homeschooling in the United States is growing at a fascinating speed. An estimated 1.5 to 1.9 million K-12 students were registered homeschoolers in the United States in the fall of 2000 (Lines, 1998; Ray, 1999, 2000). These statistics may be grossly underestimated as they are based only on the families registered as homeschoolers in their state. The majority of states do not yet require families to register privately schooled or homeschooled children.

Very little research in highly gifted is obtainable, with almost no data on homeschooling highly gifted children. Because this top 1%-2% of students is such a small percent of the population, the area of highly gifted is not an easily funded area of research. Not only are these students and their families logistically difficult to track down, but there is yet a vast misunderstanding and apathy toward this population. When children are home there is less information, such as test scores and other statistical data available.

Individuals who score above IQ 145 are considered highly gifted. The range of 90 or more IQ points beyond includes the exceptionally gifted IQ 160+, and the profoundly gifted 180+. Silverman (1994) found that the highly gifted are as different from their moderately gifted peers as the gifted are from average learners and encompass a range larger than their mentally handicapped counterparts. They have value structures so different from their chronological peers that they are able to make greater sense of the world and the disparity between their perception of it and that of the average learner. They seldom seek popularity or acclaim and often prefer isolation as a catalyst for much needed quiet reflection. In fact because of their modesty, researchers think that there are more than 25% of the highly gifted population who remain unidentified.

There is no single profile of a highly gifted learner. “They seem to be characterized by their uniqueness,” and are “almost impossible to know,” (Meckstroth, 1994). Most of our nation’s schools, in the way that they now function, can’t begin to address the breadth of needs of the highly gifted individual. For these children who are 3-5 standard deviations

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above the norm, a traditional school setting is almost always an uncomfortable and inappropriate place. Not only do highly gifted children see differently, but also they see the detail of the world that others don't see at all. "We all see the world through some kind of lens. Gifted people see the world through a microscope. Highly gifted individuals see the world through an electron microscope" (Tolan, 1990).

In a classroom of 25 to 30 children it is hard for even the best teachers to meet the individual needs of every child. The children with learning disabilities have daily mentors and abbreviated course work. The highly gifted children in our country are the only group of children who receive no federal mandate for a free and appropriate education. Full inclusion classes are the norm in our country rather than the exception, but the diversity and variance of abilities in a regular inclusion classroom is gaping for the child who needs rapid acceleration and engaging material. Many schools are unyielding when it comes to accelerating work within the classroom and use the What would we do next with your child next year? excuse. However even if agreeable, curriculum acceleration, early entry, or grade skipping isn't always enough for the child who may be working as much as 5-8 years beyond their classmates (Gross, 1993). "To become intellectually accessible to all students, public schools must provide access to the full range of curriculum, preschool through college," Kearney, (1996).

Miraca Gross, researcher on high and profound giftedness in Australia, explains that effective teaching must involve a sensitive assessment in the learning process and a presentation of problems that slightly exceed the level already mastered. If the work is too easy it produces boredom and lack of task commitment, which leads to underachievement. In fact, in the last 40 years, some textbook levels have dropped 3 grade levels. Gross feels it is the very process of learning that makes all the difference in taking giftedness to talent. The process can instill motivation, initiative, interest, and perseverance, lifelong skills that allow each person's individual unique potential be expressed to its fullest (1999).

Self-esteem comes from doing something you never thought you could do. When self-esteem goes up, motivation and achievement go up too. So as teachers and even as parents, we must give these children something to reach for. We must stop looking for the weaknesses we want to fix, and look for the strengths to enlarge. Doing work the student already knows doesn't enhance self-esteem.

What's your style? Defining the approach you will use to educate your child may be the most daunting part of getting started and may be a large reason why many parents are reticent in believing they are qualified to teach their child. "I'm not a teacher. I wouldn't have any idea how to teach my child and he would never listen to me." The approach to teaching and learning will necessarily be determined by your child's motivation to learn, personality traits you both share that mesh or conflict, values you hold as a family, and your enthusiasm for seeking out new adventures. Too, the qualities you would look for in an outstanding classroom teacher for highly gifted students are qualities you will want to embrace in your home. Whatever style or strategy, or combination thereof you choose, home education requires innovation, patience and commitment from everyone

involved. It requires consistency and energy, but it's the ultimate IEP (Individualized Educational Plan) that we begged for in school but is reserved for students at the other end of the Bell curve. Home education promotes interaction between parent and child and encourages learning as a process rather than a series of required tasks to be checked off. Homeschooling is a series of moments seized and promotes mastery of topics with depth and acceleration.

Many families embark on the homeschooling experience before even trying school. Don't put the cart before the horse if you're not confident that homeschooling is right for your family. You may not want to fix what isn't broken...yet. Perhaps making sure school doesn't work before you give up on it feels safer. If there is some question about whether or not homeschooling is right for your family you may want to investigate other options before embarking on the home school journey.

Public schools can offer numerous options for gifted students. You may be surprised to find that your district is already utilizing one or more of these interventions or may be willing to implement something. Sometimes programs vary even within the same district. Some gifted teachers may be more or less innovative. Consider exploring other public schools, magnet or charter schools, and private schools in the area that may accommodate your child. Perhaps your child's school would be open to exploring some new possibilities. However, be astute in your investigation, asking very pointed questions as to exactly what the intervention will look like, how often it will be in place, and who is responsible for the follow-through. Interventions described below such as, early accelerated placement, access to mentors and counselors, flexible pacing and valuable enrichment experiences are only possible solutions that are few and far between in finding a good fit for these deserving bright lights. The intellect of highly gifted children develops anywhere from one and a half to two times the rate of their chronological peers (Hollingworth, 1942). With this knowledge, how can we expect them to not suffocate in a chronologically matched group without serious intervention? Following are options most commonly seen where districts have a program in place.

- **Enrichment** - Subjects that are not usually studied may be explored in depth and breadth during a time of day your gifted child can afford to miss in the regular classroom. This may be an independent study, time with a mentor, or with other students with similar interest and ability, perhaps at varying grade levels. Interest grouping can occur with core academics as well as with enrichment study. A group of fifth graders may be keenly interested in reading together, Uncle Tom's Cabin, or investigating the southern perspective of a united America and could work to present their findings to the class.
- **Early entrance** - Consider early entrance to kindergarten. However, most public schools will not yield on the birthday entry level to kindergarten unless the child has had a comparable kindergarten experience in a private school.
- **Acceleration** - The child works at a higher-grade level and/or a faster pace than chronological peers and is ready to move ahead in a single subject area or by grade level. With highly gifted children, a single grade level is seldom sufficient.

- **Clustering** - Gifted children at the same grade level are grouped together in one classroom with a teacher that has interest and ability in providing differentiated instruction. Their curriculum is compacted in the areas where little rehearsal is needed; reducing the amount of time required to spend on topics or subjects already mastered so they can work more in depth on areas of interest and ability.
- **Self-contained** - With a fine teacher and program in place, this is the most effective option for gifted and some highly gifted (in a highly gifted self-contained) children. The teacher has certification and extensive experience in gifted education and understands fully the exceptional and divergent needs of this population.
- **Mentors and Tutors** - Can meet with your child before, during or after school. I had a fifth grade student especially advanced in computer technology who would walk across the street to the Middle School to work with the eighth grade technology teacher during his prep period. This was very generous of the teacher to give his time, and the two developed a wonderful working relationship. They worked on advanced language programming and designing. Talk to other teachers, gifted friends and people within your community to track down someone to nurture your child's interest or at least to guide you in that direction. You may even be allowed to have a private tutor come into the class to broaden your child's scope of interest and ability. This will threaten some teachers. Others will be thrilled to be relieved of the responsibility.

Be creative. Your school may be open to suggestions that haven't been explored. They may allow you to hire a consultant who works with the classroom teacher to differentiate the curriculum for your child. The teacher may allow your child to bring in special interest topics from home to work on after proving with the five most difficult problems that she already knows long division. The teacher may appreciate you coming in to work with a small group of high-end children on a regular basis to teach Shakespeare while she teaches Haiku and limericks. Perhaps your child is very independent and could benefit from computerized instruction allowing her to progress at her own pace. While some schools are very rigid others just haven't been presented with the wherewithal to serve this population.

Look for a teacher who can readily define characteristics of a gifted child and recognizes the vast differences in the various gifted populations. This teacher is adept at assessing individual strengths, weaknesses and styles of learning for all of her students. She understands that differentiation is not cooperative grouping and can accommodate the varying levels of ability in her classroom. She assists students in planning their own learning and helping them assess the effectiveness of their own learning activities. She understands that giftedness goes beyond academic talent and can address their affective needs as well as their scholastic demands.

Think of how vastly different our world of today is from even one hundred years ago. Someone traveling through time would hardly recognize the country, as we know it today. Yet, if that same time-traveler were to walk into today's classroom, it would be far more familiar. Instruction is teacher-directed, lecture-oriented and textbook driven and

spelling tests are still given on Fridays. Drill and practice is the focus of reinforcing concepts. Basal readers pound the shelves and desks with linear comprehension skills and phonics. Are we really training our students to be problem-solvers and independent thinkers who can step into a role of entrepreneurship and have the world available to them or are we grooming them for complacency, limiting them to a single, unpredictable life-long career. Those who step out of the box and demonstrate their versatility will contribute to and reap the rewards of a growing nation. With our society and culture changing at lightening speed, only those who have learned how to learn, how to think for themselves will be able to keep up. Are we giving our children the best that is known in the world? Are they helping to solve the mysteries of the universe in ways that they are ready to explore? Are they informed? Are we helping them learn to develop their own goals and values? By nature humans gravitate toward things that are intrinsically satisfying. For learning to be life-long and meaningful it must be valuable and engaging. Galileo's words of yesterday remain eloquently fitting today; "You cannot teach a person anything, you can only help him find it within himself."

This is not to discount the need for children to have a phonemic awareness of the language, but writing letters to protect the now extinct Carrier Pigeon might have had a more lasting effect than practicing spelling words in cursive on a worksheet.

We scream for schools to provide an individualized program that is free and appropriate, with depth and acceleration, with flexible grouping and based on real-life problem-solving experiences. Our political and social system is based on democratic principles. The school as an extension of those principles must provide an equal educational opportunity for all children to develop to their fullest potential. But, equal opportunity doesn't mean that everyone gets the same instruction. This means allowing gifted children the opportunity to learn at their level of development. For truly equal opportunity, a variety of learning experiences must be available at many levels, even within a gifted program, so that all students can develop those skills and abilities they choose and for what they are ready. Each person has the right to learn and to be provided challenges for learning at the most appropriate level where growth proceeds most effectively. There is indeed a most remarkable program available now to every highly gifted child—home education!

Highly gifted children of IQ 140+ enter kindergarten knowing about half of what will be taught that year, while children of IQ 170+ will have previously learned all that will be taught in kindergarten (Hollingworth 1942). Because of the limited resources and experts available to assist highly gifted children in schools, many families are turning to homeschooling as a means of better meeting the diverse needs of their highly gifted children.

Often it is clear from the get go that the public school will not be an option for your child, particularly if the child is exceptionally or profoundly gifted. Homeschooling offers the one-to-one tutoring that, in many ways, is the most effective teaching strategy available for most purposes according to teachers, researchers and historians. It comes as no surprise that with individual tutoring students are found to have greater retention and

understanding of the material and improved performance and attitude toward subject matter (Cohen, Kulik, and Kulik, 1982; Fager, 1996). Homeschooling is an option that can provide the highly gifted child with an accelerated curriculum, flexible pacing, meaningful enrichment, substance and depth in areas of strength and interest.

Homeschooling teaching styles vary as much as do the families that are homeschooling. Listed below, in alphabetical order, are several of the most common teaching strategies or pedagogical approaches that homeschoolers have reported using successfully (e.g., The Teaching Home, 2000). Parents regularly mix elements of multiple approaches.

- **Classical** - Teach the tools of learning (i.e., grammar--mastery of a language, dialectic--logic, and rhetoric--the expressive and creative use of language) so they may be used in the study of any subject.
- **Lifestyle of learning** - Teaching and learning are treated as a seamless and organic part of living within a family, geographical community, local faith community, and nation--that is, the "real, everyday world."
- **Schooling at home** - Parents generally teach as they were taught in schools. There is a high degree of structure. It often involves active teaching with the teacher having a clear-cut and outstanding role. There is no significant integration of subject areas.
- **Structured/mastery learning** - Content to be learned is clearly presented in (usually) consumable booklets (or via computers) in a sequential, step-by-step manner while immediate feedback to the learner is emphasized. Often the parent is viewed more as a moderator or administrator than as an active teacher.
- **Unit studies** - These emphasize the concept that all knowledge is interrelated and learned more easily and remembered longer if it is presented and studied in a related way. Subject areas (e.g., math, history) are blended together as the teaching is centered on a common theme or project.
- **Unschooling** - This approach emphasizes giving children as much freedom to explore and learn about the world as parents can comfortably bear; it does not mean allowing them to misbehave (Holt Associates, 2000).
- **Worldview** - This approach emphasizes that all education is value- and belief-driven and no form of education or schooling can be otherwise. It purposely and explicitly integrates a particular worldview in curriculum materials, activities, and ways of thinking. An example is "The Principle Approach," which focuses on researching a religious writing to identify basic principles or truths, reasoning from these truths through an academic subject (e.g., history, politics), relating the principles to the student's own character and self-government, and recording in writing the application of the principles and ideas to life and living (The Teaching Home, 1998, 2000).

When embarking on the homeschool journey, parents should consider their personal philosophy of education, join a homeschool group, read up on web sites and magazines. Extend research from publications for homeschooling to educational periodicals and materials directed at teachers and parents of gifted. Internet searches

can be done on topics related to homeschooling the highly gifted populations. Almost every state has an annual gifted conference with helpful presentations and my favorite, exhibit halls where the dollars chink at fire-rapid rates into the hands of publishers.

The highly gifted child is more likely to choose solitary play over chronological peer interaction because of the nature of their peers' play. Because of this they may be labeled as immature, unsociable or a loner, but it is rather their social maturity that causes them to remove themselves from an activity that offers no intellectual fuel. Parents want their children to be happy and meet well with society. So if they don't "fit" how do we help them become socially acceptable?

The question homeschool parents are confronted with the most is unquestioningly, What about socialization? The use of the word "socialization" vs. "social development" is noteworthy. What we're really after is that we want for our children to be able to effectively interact with a variety of individuals. As Americans we want our individuality, yet we're constantly trying to make everyone a round peg. Stephanie Tolan says it beautifully, "If we can't all be round pegs, then at least shave off the corners enough to fit the square pegs into the round holes," (1990). Really, isn't it just that we want for children to be happy and productive contributors to society and to look beyond themselves to the largess of the world?

One of the most valuable benefits of homeschooling a highly gifted child is the opportunity to find intellectual peers who are also chronological peers. There is little more empowering than finding that you are not the only eight year old who daydreams about quantum physics or molecular biology and that you no longer have to pretend to like GI Joe in order to have a companion. Too, multi-age homeschooling groups even when not geared toward gifted, are much more tolerant of children with differences and activities tend to focus more on interests and ability rather than on ages.

School plays a very important role in our society and there will always be a need and benefit to some degree of group instruction. But it can't be all things to all people. America was founded to celebrate the individual, to encourage independent thinking and expression of talent and ability. We all know the stories of Edison, Einstein and Lincoln, bound for failure within the school system, labeled as inept and deficient of meaningful intelligence. Yet hundreds upon thousands of our world's leaders, contributors, thinkers and inventors were unsuccessful playing the school game, yet in the comfort of a nurturing homeschool environment were able to reach for the stars and become tremendous contributors to society. Winston Churchill once said, "I am always ready to learn, but I do not always like being taught." And of course Mark Twain, "Never let school interfere with 'his' education."

Webster defines education as "the act or process of imparting or acquiring general knowledge, developing the powers of reasoning and judgment, and generally of preparing oneself or others intellectually for mature life." Comparing education and culture, Webster continues, "Education and culture are often used interchangeably to mean the result of schooling. Education, however, suggests chiefly information

acquired. Culture is a mode of thought and feeling encouraged by education. It suggests an aspiration toward, and appreciation of high esthetic ideals. The level of culture in a country depends on the education of its people.” Isn’t what we’re after a culture of well-informed citizens who have developed power of reasoning and judgment? If children don’t fit well into the system that has been arbitrarily constructed to educate the masses then school can actually mitigate against their learning. We can assault our students with so much schooling that the result is a society with much less of a culture.

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