

***Dealing With the Needs of Underachieving Gifted Students in a Suburban School District: What Works!***

Frey, C.

When I saw *A Beautiful Mind* and then read the book on which the movie was based (Nasar, 1998), I thought back to my 26 years of working with gifted students, about 1/4 of them with the kinds of off-putting characteristics exhibited by John Nash. Following are my reflections as a former teacher and supervisor in a program that is somewhat unique for its emphasis on "saving" underachievers.

When we think of schools' goals for students, especially gifted students, most mission statements include "helping students to reach their potential." Implied in those words is the message that both grades and conformity are important and that students must play the "school game" to succeed. As a result, many districts have high achievement, as measured by grades and standardized test scores, as a basic requirement for entrance into a gifted program.

Lower Merion School District (in Ardmore, Pennsylvania), on the other hand, has targeted gifted underachievers as one important audience for participation in its gifted program; this has been true since the inception of the program in 1976. As the program description says:

*Lower Merion School District identifies gifted underachievers as a target group for participation in gifted support class. These students demonstrate a significant discrepancy between their cognitive potential and their performance in the classroom. (Lower Merion Gifted Support description, 2001)*

How do we determine who these underachievers are? After examining the literature on underachievement, we recognized that these students may demonstrate remarkable strengths or talents in some areas and disabling weaknesses in others (Baum, Dixon, & Owen, 1991). Further, research from The National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented (Díaz, Hébert, Maxfield, Ratley, & Reis, 1995) supports the idea that underachieving gifted students have difficulty actualizing their talents and gifts without differentiated instruction. Over the years, we have found underachievers to fall into a variety of categories:

- female, especially during adolescence
- member of a non-dominant cultural group
- student with other identified exceptionalities, such as a need for learning support, emotional support, and/or speech and language support
- student with a physical disability
- student with significant discrepancies between measured verbal and performance abilities, and/or with certain patterns of scatter on the WISC III intelligence test
- a lower socioeconomic background

- a non-traditional learner
- student who demonstrates at-risk behaviors

The goals for gifted underachieving students are primarily "to develop the following school survival skills and tactics" (Lower Marion Gifted Support Description, 2001). Our first task is to teach students self-regulation strategies, including taking time for reflection about their actions. This can be through discussion (either group or individual) and/or through informal journal keeping.

Further, we try to help them understand the personal issues of underachievement. We discuss what the label of "gifted" means to them and to others who interact with them. Each gifted support classroom has numerous copies of *The Gifted Kids' Survival Guide* and *Perfectionism: What's Bad About Being Too Good*. The gifted support program in Lower Merion is not graded, nor do students get credit for attending, even in middle and high school. Instead, teachers (who are designated as fulltime teachers of the gifted) try to establish a classroom atmosphere where students are willing to take risks, both academically and socially, without some external judgment like a "bad grade" or a "silly idea" to make him/her feel different.

However, the gifted support program definitely has an intellectual and academic component. Students at the elementary grades are asked to choose a long range project in their area of interest, completing it as a practitioner in the field would, and then presenting it to an audience of peers, parents, and/or other students. Elementary students are first taught the basic skills that practitioners need: research techniques, planning for short and long range goals, deciding who the audience will be and then tailoring the product to the audience, and developing a rubric and timeline with the teacher—in advance—for the development of organizational and evaluation skills by the student him/herself. In middle schools, there are several themes offered each year; students continue to individualize their interests through their choice of topic and completion of a project. In addition, in sixth and seventh grades, advanced readers (determined by standardized tests) participate in literary circles once or twice a week. Often, these groups include underachievers. In high school, students work with gifted support teachers on both intellectual and social/emotional issues. Instead of a project, however, teachers and students select topics of interest, and these are discussed during the times students are scheduled to participate in the program (traditionally once or twice a week). Teachers may select newspaper or magazine articles, short stories or essays, or a video clip from a television news magazine. Again, students are not graded for their participation.

I believe the program for underachievers is successful for several reasons. First, there is at least one fulltime teacher in each of the district's 10 schools. There are more at the middle and high schools. This gives the teacher(s) of the gifted time to work with classroom teachers as both a resource for materials and a way for classroom teachers and specialists to understand the individual students more clearly. Second, parents, students, and staff are all very comfortable with the model of the program. No one has asked for grades or curriculum extensions in the past; this allows the students free rein

to explore topics they might not ordinarily be able to pursue. Further, because of Pennsylvania law, there is at least one IEP (called GIEP) meeting each year for each identified gifted student. Gifted students are mixed in the pullout portion of the gifted program; we never have classes of "just" underachievers or high achievers. All students in the district are eligible to take all credit classes (provided they meet the criteria of the academic department). There is no "gifted track" where only identified gifted students may participate. Last, our multiple criteria allow many dually identified students to participate both in the resource room and in the gifted program.

Have all of our students "made it" in the "real world?" Except for a few, I would say almost all have. They may be in non-traditional professions, or have taken longer to finish college, but they are happy and productive individuals. After 26 years, I feel very comfortable with the Lower Merion program; it really does meet the needs of its students, including both high achievers and underachievers. John Nash was successful because those closest to him accepted him for what he was; his mother, sister, wife, peers, and colleagues understood that he might be "different" but that he had a great deal to offer the world. This is the most basic goal of Lower Merion's program: to help all gifted kids reach their potential, and to affirm their special gifts, despite individual behaviors and differences which might stand in their way.

## References

- Adderholdt-Elliott, M., & Goldberg, J. (1999). *Perfectionism: What's bad about being too good*. Minneapolis, MN: Free Spirit.
- Baum, S., Dixon, J., & Owen, S. (1991). *To be gifted and learning disabled: From identification to practical intervention strategies*. Mansfield center, CT: Creative Learning Press.
- Díaz, E., Hébert, T., Maxfield, L., Ratley, M., & Reis, S. M. (1995). *Case studies of talented students who achieve and underachieve in an urban high school* (Research Monograph 95120). Storrs, CT: The National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented, University of Connecticut.
- Galbraith, J., & Delisle, J. R. (1996). *The gifted kids survival guide: A teen handbook*. Minneapolis, MN: Free Spirit.
- Nasar, S. (1998). *A beautiful mind*. New York: Simon and Shuster.

Frey, C. (2002). *Dealing With the Needs of Underachieving Gifted Students in a Suburban School District: What Works!* The National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented. Spring 2002. Retrieved from <http://www.gifted.uconn.edu/nrcgt/newsletter/spring02/sprng023.html>.