



Advocacy for Gifted and Talented in New York

Gifted Kids Get Motivation from Peers, Programs

By: Pauline M. Millard

George McDougall High School principal Don Thomas, hands over a cheque to student Amanda Burbridge, 14, after a school assembly in Airdrie, Alberta. High schools throughout the country are offering rewards cash, vehicles, exam exemptions for students with perfect school attendance. Principals say it's a bit unorthodox, but they get a big bang for their buck. (CP PHOTO/Dave Olecko)
NEW YORK --

Like many of his peers, Dwight Bussman went away to summer camp for three weeks when he was 13. But instead of learning how to tie-dye or sail, he took a course on theoretical foundations of computer science. He loved every minute of it. Bussman, now 18 and a freshman at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, was considered a gifted child growing up.

According to The Gifted Development Center in Denver, children usually demonstrate giftedness by showing good verbal and problem-solving skills, abstract reasoning and intense curiosity at an early age. Like other gifted children, Bussman needed to be with other students who shared his intellect and interests in order to stay motivated and do well in school.

In their book, "Guiding the Gifted Child" (Gifted Psychology Press), psychologists James T. Webb, Elizabeth A. Meckstroth and Stephanie S. Tolan cite underachievement in school as the most common motivational problem parents of gifted children observe, although it is not the only one. They name boredom and disruptiveness as other potential problems.

"Many times it can be difficult for that upper three percent of children called gifted to stay motivated in an educational system that is oriented primarily toward the other 97 percent," they write. "Too often the child's enthusiasm and motivation are stifled by persons more interested in seeing that he conforms to accepted patterns."

Guadalupe L. Rangel is a regent emerita for Texas A&M University and has worked with many gifted children in her career as an educator. Currently an adviser for Parents magazine, she has written extensively about the importance of special classes for gifted students.

Rangel says that when she taught high school she arranged writing classes for gifted students after school and would scrounge for material for her students who surpassed the regular curriculum.

"Those who were capable were always hungry for more," Rangel says. "They were delighted just to be noticed." And Rangel says she has seen firsthand what a lack of stimulation can do to a gifted student.

"Some students become depressed and disinterested when they reach the ceiling of their learning. They get bored and can become troublemakers."

The Johns Hopkins University Center for Talented Youth (CTY) in Baltimore is ground zero for gifted programs. Besides offering information about giftedness and resources for parents, it has a network of summer programs specifically designed to stimulate and challenge gifted students -- like the one Bussman attended.

These programs are important because they give gifted children a chance to meet and interact with each other, an experience they may not get during the regular school year. While some students may balk at going to school in the summertime, more than 90,000 students take placement tests through the CTY talent search to get a spot in one of the coveted summer programs.

Most of the students who end up at the CTY test in the 97th percentile or higher in standardized tests given at their schools, such as the Iowa test of Basic Skills or the Connecticut Test of Basic Skills. They also take an "out-of-level" test, an exam given ahead of a student's grade level, and do well on it.

"The point of taking further tests is for assessment," says Chuck Beckman, a spokesman for the Johns Hopkins program. "It helps us determine if this a student at the top of their grade level or if it's someone who could handle college-level classes."

Bussman agrees. "The learning at CTY was second to none," he says. "It was as engaging as college and a great prep for it."

Programs for the gifted also can be found across the country and are often affiliated with universities, including Duke University, Northwestern, the University of Denver and the University of Delaware. Once in these programs, gifted students often realize that there are other students with their talents and begin to have more confidence in themselves when dealing with their peers.

"The best thing about the CTY programs was that I learned to accept myself and others," Bussman explains. "At CTY I was surrounded by real people who appreciated me for what I could bring intellectually to a conversation. It was a fantastic environment."

Eser Chamoglu, 17, is another student who attended the CTY summer program. Eser, a senior at Horace-Mann School in Riverdale, N.Y., recently was accepted by Stanford University and plans to major in computer science and electrical engineering.

Eser's primary interest is in robotics. His version of an after-school job is working at a robotics firm that is involved in the development of the rock abrasion tool, a device designed to drill through and collect rock samples. NASA plans to send it on the mission to Mars slated for 2003, Eser says.

Eser realized when he was younger that if he wanted to understand the manuals and magazines about robotics, he was going to have to teach the material to himself.

At CTY, he took algebra and geometry courses which he says helped him tremendously. "I had to teach myself the math which helped me teach myself the robotics as well."

For some gifted children, it is enough to simply know that they have been singled out to encourage them to excel.

Sam Morrissey, 23, was put in a gifted program in the first grade and spent his entire school career in accelerated classes. Growing up in Missouri and Connecticut, Morrissey says he developed quirky interests in Mayan and Indian cultures, and building and construction. His parents always encouraged these passions and they treated him like an adult -- even when he was a small child.

"I liked the treatment I got from being called 'gifted,'" says Morrissey, a civil engineer in San Diego. "I think it helped me get a good education and pursue things I really liked."

Although parents and individual teachers can make a difference, Rangel says it is time the federal government started funding gifted programs the way it does programs for the learning disabled. She notes that Washington sets aside three times as many funds a year for slow-learning students as it does accelerated learners. Those funds are then divided up between public and private schools as well as for gifted research.

"Most of the programs we currently have in our schools are geared toward bringing the bottom students up," Rangel says. "The government thinks gifted kids don't need the funds, but they do. I think it's a terrible waste not to invest in these kids on a national level."

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