

Submission to Human Rights Commission On behalf of Ontario Parents of Gifted

The Ontario Parents of Gifted is an organization made up of parents of these special children. We share a common goal of assisting these children to reach their full potential as students and as well-rounded members of society. To achieve this goal we serve as a source of information and support to any parent who requires it.

As you are surely aware, giftedness is one of the intellectual exceptionalities recognized by the Ministry of Education. As a result, gifted children are entitled to special education programs and services so that they can receive an education that is both suited to their current needs and which will allow them to reach their full potential as adult members of society.

The Human Rights Commission (HRC) in its consultation paper on disability issues in education did not discuss the discrimination faced by gifted students. Presumably, this is because gifted students have not traditionally been seen as “disabled”. The HRC makes the following statement regarding what is/ isn’t a disability and I quote:

There are factors which assist the Commission in determining if a condition is a disability under the code. The factors are as follows:

1. Is the condition permanent or ongoing?
2. Is the condition so serious that it restricts life's important functions, such as the ability to do a job, basic mobility, or family life?
3. The Commission may consider whether the condition is common to the broader public.

We submit that giftedness in a school-aged child fulfills all of these criteria:

It *is* permanent and ongoing; it *does* seriously impair the child's ability to function in the usual educational settings, and, for a child, school *is* their "job"; and it is *not* a condition common to the broader public, rather, it is relatively rare with a prevalence of approximately 2%, with extreme or profound giftedness occurring much less frequently than that (in the order of 0.1%).

Article 28 of the *Convention* (UN Convention on the Rights of the Child) recognizes the right of all children to education. Article 29 sets out the objectives of education, including “the development of the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential”.

This submission seeks to elaborate upon the idea that intellectually gifted children are discriminated against within Ontario's education system such that the development of the child's personality, talents and mental abilities to their fullest potential is not only *not* achieved, but is actually thwarted by some of the educational policies, procedures and practices currently in place in this province.

Some of this discrimination arises from policies and procedures that were written with less able students in mind, and yet are inflexibly applied to gifted students because they fall under the same Special Education regulations as students with below average abilities. The most obvious

example of this is the policy of keeping all exceptional students within the regular classroom in the belief that integration is the first and best option. In the case of gifted children, there is research evidence that shows conclusively that gifted students learn more rapidly and to a greater depth when grouped with others of similar ability.

In other instances of discrimination, it is ignorance of the appropriate procedures to follow with regards to identification and/or placement that is to blame, and in yet other cases, adherence to false beliefs or negative/stereotypical attitudes result in discriminatory actions against gifted students.

Appended to this report are stories and comments from several parents and one teen describing the kinds of prejudice that they have faced and how they have dealt with it. These stories serve to illustrate, in human terms, the impact of some of the prejudices that exist. The names of the parents and children have been altered to preserve privacy except in the last case (written by the author of this submission).

Let's follow the school career of a gifted child and examine where the obstacles/problems arise:

School entrance (JK and K)

The vast majority of gifted children, by the time they reach the age of 4 have already mastered most of the educational content of pre-kindergarten and kindergarten. In some cases, these children have mastered these concepts as young as 2 years of age. Yet, there is extreme reluctance on the part of school officials to allow entrance directly to Grade 1. Also, assessment of learning abilities and needs is rarely offered to parents at this stage and indeed, the majority of parents are told that children of 3 or 4 or 5 years old are too young to be tested. This, despite the fact that the WPPSI is specifically designed for assessment of this age group and is readily available to school board psychologists. There is a high level of ignorance on behalf of teachers and principals of the benefits of early identification and intervention for gifted children. The more highly gifted the child, the greater the benefit.

In spite of a stated Ministry of Education policy of early and on-going identification of all exceptionalities, the experience of our group of parents is that most JK and K teachers have not been instructed in identifying gifted students. They are not instructed in appropriate modifications for gifted children (once identified), either.

Early primary grades (1 to 3)

Once the gifted child gets to Grade 1, his/her exceptional abilities often become more obvious. The child may be a fluent reader at a time when his/her classmates are still struggling to recognize words; the child may grasp mathematical concepts such as multiplication and division, and addition and subtraction of 2 digit numbers while the average pupil is just beginning to add and subtract single digits. The child may have a wide base of general knowledge in science, geography or other interest areas and generally has a wide vocabulary compared to chronological peers. These differences are real and noticeable, but how are they addressed? Is there single subject acceleration? Are there differentiated reading or mathematics programs? Is there whole grade acceleration or even multiple grade acceleration when appropriate? No. Of all the school boards in Ontario very few offer primary gifted programs of *any* kind. The rest ignore the

existence of these gifted children until they are in Grade 4 or beyond and there remain a number of school boards with no elementary gifted programs whatsoever.

What happens to the parent that asks for tasks at the level appropriate for their child? They are either told that once their child completes the regular work he/she can have some "enrichment", or they are told that there are no gifted programs until Grade 4 (or 5 or whatever) and their child will just have to get used to being bored because that's how it is in "the real world". At times, a suggestion is made that the parents should switch their child to a French immersion program as a way of obtaining an intellectual challenge (and transferring responsibility for the child to another school or school board). However, French immersion programs are *not* a substitute for gifted programs. Researchers in gifted education describe a gifted program as a course of study in which the curriculum is modified so that the depth, breadth and pace of instruction are altered. Teaching in a different language provides a change in breadth, but not depth or pace of instruction. The vast discrepancy between the intellectual ability of the child and that of most of his/her classmates remains, even though some of the less able learners may have been filtered out (children who have difficulty learning in their first language are rarely placed in bilingual or immersion programs).

At these grade levels (1 to 3), the absence of teacher training in recognizing giftedness and the reluctance to test children continues to keep many gifted children from being appropriately identified. As proof of this fact we only need to look at the numbers of identified elementary students to see that they are FAR lower than what would be expected on a population basis. There is an unwritten (but not unspoken) policy in many school boards against identifying gifted students. Parents are told "We don't identify gifted students in our board" or "We haven't had a gifted child in this school in 10 years." We urge the HRC to obtain and examine the statistics of the Ministry of Education with regards to number of identified gifted students at different Grade levels to confirm that fewer than 2% of students have this designation.

Middle elementary (4 to 6)

Those students fortunate enough to have an elementary gifted program in their school district are identified and placed, but not always and not consistently even from school to school within a school board. There are still many parents who pay for a private assessment after trying unsuccessfully to have their child assessed by the school board. Parents of the gifted report waiting times for assessment of 6 months to a year. It would appear that assessments for the gifted are automatically placed at the bottom of the priority list. Comments such as "We are only testing students who are either failing their year or so disruptive as to be dangerous in the classroom" are not uncommonly heard. There is an automatic presumption that the testing of a gifted student cannot possibly be urgent because they are never going to fail their year. What is not understood is this- a gifted child who started Grade 4, for example, functioning at Grade 5 to 7 levels in all subjects (and this wouldn't be unusual at all for a gifted student) and finished Grade 4 functioning at a Grade 4 level has, in fact, failed their year. This child would have gone to school for a year and not only not learned anything new, but actually retrogressed in his/her learning. This is the danger inherent in refusing to identify gifted students, and this is happening to the thousands of gifted students that remain unidentified in this province every year.

The situation regarding placement is just as dismal. As stated earlier, not all school

boards have a gifted placement in elementary school. So for those gifted children who attend those school boards, they will never be placed with their intellectual peers. Placement with intellectual peers has undeniable advantages for gifted students. The pre-conceived notion that gifted students don't need their peers to succeed is robbing these children of the opportunity to experience those benefits. In the school boards that DO have elementary gifted placements, not all gifted students have equal access to those placements. Waiting lists are pervasive; one school board uses a lottery system, for goodness' sake! In certain school boards only students "at risk" are placed, in spite of the fact that the Education Act guarantees appropriate special education programs and services for ALL identified pupils, not just those considered "neediest" by school or board officials. If we take the small number of students who are fortunate enough to be appropriately identified and placed in a program, even these students can face undue hardships. At times, that consists of unreasonable transportation arrangements, or the impossibility of remaining in the same school as their sibling(s). Parents are sometimes placed in the very difficult situation of having to decide between either meeting the academic needs of the child or meeting the emotional needs, with no option that allows for both.

Late elementary or middle school (Grade 7 and 8)

The same issues that exist at earlier Grade levels continue here. Those children who were missed in the screening process at Grade 3 or 4 (if there even was one!) generally have no further opportunity to be identified. Teachers at this level do not receive training in identification. Identification of Grade 7 and 8 students takes place by chance, that is, either the teacher or parent notices that this may be a possibility and takes the initiative to have the child assessed or they don't. The problem of parents being forced to pay for private assessments remains. The enrichment mini-courses in Ottawa and Kingston start at this Grade level and are paid for by the parents even when their child/ren are formally identified. The Ministry of Education's policies specifically prohibit the payment by parents of a fee for a special education service and yet it happens anyway. The school boards involved simply say, "This isn't a service, it is an opportunity that you may or may not want to take advantage of." This clearly violates the intent of the prohibition of payment of fees but the Ministry of Education turns a blind eye to it.

In the case of Grade 7 and 8 students who are already identified and placed, not every board that offers an elementary gifted placement offers one at the secondary level. This places the children in the situation where, just as they have developed good working and social relationships with a group of intellectual peers, and benefited from that interaction, they are once again placed into the regular classroom, the same placement which had already failed to meet their needs 3 or 4 years prior. This is not done with the needs of the children in mind; this is done for financial and administrative reasons, pure and simple. There is no scientific basis for believing that intellectual giftedness comes and goes with age. In other words, either the child has a high intellect or he/she doesn't. The common practice of having a gifted class placement from Grade 4 to 8, not before and not after, has no rational basis. Special class placements exist in secondary school for several other exceptionalities, to deny such a possibility to gifted students simply because they are gifted is discriminatory.

High school (Grades 9 to 12)

The absence of on-going identification hinders young people at this stage of their education as well. Having instruction that is below one's level of functioning is just as frustrating at age 15 as it was at age 5. In fact, it may be even more frustrating if we are speaking of a student who was never identified and has been enduring this frustration for the past 10 years. It is extremely rare to see a new identification of a high school student. As alluded to previously, this is NOT because they have all been found already, the statistics tell us that; rather it is because of another pre-conceived notion that high school with the new curriculum is challenging enough for anyone and thus gifted programs are unnecessary. This idea overlooks the fact that gifted students learn in a quantitative and qualitatively different way, and ignores that fact that these students are exceptional.

The absence of appropriate placement options also discriminates. Placements such as "regular classroom with enrichment" or "regular classroom with enhanced learning opportunities" are not equivalent to special education class placements and are much closer in day-to-day functioning to regular classrooms than to special education classrooms. Regular classroom teachers are obliged to provide, in these cases, a special education program without the requisite formal training and experience. A presumption is made that the regular teacher's training will be sufficient for the task. The basis for this presumption is a mystery.

The Ministry of Education's policy regarding PLAR (Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition) that specifies that there are to be no PLARs for Grade 9 leads to a situation in which Grade 8 students who have been working above grade level are forced to repeat material in Grade 9 because they cannot circumvent the compulsory credits via PLAR. The PLAR process in itself is an advantageous one for gifted students.

Attitudes within high schools also disadvantage gifted pupils. The most pervasive of these is the attitude among teachers and fellow students that because these teens are intellectually advanced they will automatically be high achievers in all areas, and thus will not require any assistance to learn. Gifted pupils, in addition to their own usually high expectations of themselves, are often intensely sensitive to the expectations and criticisms of others, including teachers and peers. This may have the contradictory effect of decreasing motivation as the student feels that if he/she can't excel at something they he/she might as well not even try. It is more acceptable to some to be considered lazy and unmotivated than to be considered incapable.

The decision by the Ministry of Education to not require a transition plan for gifted students, when one is required for every other exceptional pupil is also discriminatory and without a logical basis. It is not less important to plan for the transition between secondary school and tertiary education or work for the gifted than it is for students with more limited options. In fact, the plethora of possibilities faced by gifted students renders decision-making considerably more difficult and complex. This is where professional guidance can be extremely helpful, as can the setting of long-range goals.

Post-secondary education

Since enabling students to reach their full potential is the stated goal of the Ministry of Education there should be specific efforts or programs geared towards supporting the success of gifted students in their post-secondary endeavours. A gifted student who drops out of college or university or takes an unskilled position in the work force is a precious human resource squandered. This support could be in the form of incentives for degree completion, or assistance with such matters as housing, career selection, or development of business plans.

Issues common to all age/grade levels

The Ministry of Education's regulations on Special Education create a situation in which it is difficult to impossible to obtain special education programs and services without first accepting a label (identification) or labels. There is a subtle pressure on parents to accept the label or labels which will result in the highest level of financial support to the school board, or to accept a label that will allow acceptance into an already-existing class or program, even when some other arrangement might be more beneficial to this particular child.

Gifted children are as likely as any other children to also be members of other "historically disadvantaged groups". For instance, there are gifted children of every ethnic group, gifted children with concomitant physical, psychological or mental disabilities, and gifted children from every socio-economic group. In the United States there are studies showing that Blacks, Hispanics and the poor are underrepresented within gifted programs. In Ontario, no statistics are kept regarding the racial or economic characteristics of identified students thus no conclusions can be drawn as to whether such discrimination occurs here. It is also unknown whether children already identified for some other reason are screened for giftedness at an appropriate rate. Because the Ministry of Education has no standards describing who and how children should be screened for giftedness, there is no consistency within the province as to how this is done.

Breaking down discrimination

How would it be best to break down the barriers? In some cases it is as simple as changing a rule or policy that is unfair, but in most instances it involves changing attitudes.

At the level of teacher's college, there has to be an obligatory course on the characteristics, and needs of, and teaching adaptations required for, gifted students. Once teachers are hired into the system, this knowledge needs to be regularly updated, since, with a prevalence of over 2%, every teacher is going to have a gifted student in his/her class within the first year or two of entering the workforce. These students are more likely to be unidentified than identified (at least in the current system) and thus the task of identification will fall upon the teacher. There needs to be an even more focused program stressing the importance of identification to JK, K and Grade 1 teachers and this should be done annually. Teachers and principals need to be in-serviced better on the regulation 181/98 and the parents' rights therein. Many principals are under the false impression that a parent cannot insist on the convening of an

IPRC meeting. The regulations say otherwise. Also, when the level of appeal is reached there is an attitude of hostility that develops and the parent is made to feel that he/she is unreasonable to request a program or service that isn't usually available. Note that in the case of gifted students, parents generally appeal because they WANT their child identified and placed. This differs from other exceptionalities where parents appeal more often to keep their child in the regular classroom than to place him/her in a special class.

There is a false belief among educators and administrators that segregation of students is always to be avoided and has negative social consequences for the child. In the case of gifted students the reverse is true. Gifted students learn better when they can interact with intellectual peers, whether those peers are younger, older or the same age. What is important is the intellectual match. In the social arena, gifted children need to be accepted for who they are and this is more easily achieved when they feel less isolated, in other words, when there are other gifted children around on a continuous basis. The wording of Ministry of Education policies needs to reflect that segregation is preferable for some students (most notably the gifted but also some other exceptional students) and detrimental for others. This would better respect the differences in needs of both individuals and groups of students.

The current policy in most school boards of having gifted programs begin in Grade 4 must be discarded. The special needs start at school entry, the programs must start in Grade 1 (age of mandatory school attendance). If identification is done in JK and K, this is simple to arrange.

The current policy of most gifted programs ending in Grade 8 must also be discarded. The special needs extend throughout the student's lifetime; the programs need to cover the whole academic lifetime.

Single subject and whole grade acceleration should be permitted based on the needs and abilities of the child and not some arbitrary Board policy.

PLARs need to begin in Grade 9, and the current policy of a maximum of 4 PLARs makes no logical sense. If a particular student wishes to PLAR 8 courses in his/her high school career, for instance- why prohibit that? As long as the student is enrolled in a high school and taking courses towards completion of his/her diploma, how can acquiring more knowledge independently have negative consequences? There is much discussion in educational circles about the need for adults to be lifelong learners. More opportunities for independent learning should be made available- not fewer.

AP courses should be more widely available and should extend beyond first year University courses. This would allow students who are 2, 3 or more years ahead of chronological peers to keep learning at their level.

In conclusion, it has been the experience of many parents of gifted children, and many gifted children themselves, that the Ontario education system, rather than cherishing and nurturing these exceptional abilities, tends to downplay, ignore or even actively discourage the identification of them. The Education Act already contains regulations governing the

identification and placement of gifted students but, all too often, these regulations are either unfamiliar to, or deliberately ignored by, school personnel. The Ministry of Education does not enforce its own policies on early identification, equal access to special education programs, consistent quality of special education programs, or range of placement options for all exceptional pupils. The Ministry of Education had announced that program standards would be introduced for all exceptionalities, a move that would aid in levelling the playing field for Ontario students but to date the standards have not been released.

The Ontario Parents of Gifted sincerely hopes that the Human Rights Commission will bring to the Ministry of Education's attention the flagrant violations of gifted students' rights that continue to take place every year.

Respectfully submitted,

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Association for Bright Children, Cornwall chapter Vice-president

Personal stories and anecdotes

The following stories were written by parents who have/had gifted children within the Ontario school system, with the exception of one, which was written by an American teenager. The names have been changed but the stories are unedited. Although each story involves different people and times, certain themes are common to all: ignorance of the characteristics of giftedness and the multiple ways in which it can present, an attitude that the needs of gifted students are less important or less real than the needs of other exceptional students, behaviour that is condescending, patronizing or simply rude directed towards parents who attempt to obtain assessment, placement or services for their child(ren) and a lack of understanding of the regulatory requirement to test and program for intellectually gifted.

Isadora

This human rights issue applies to my family in a very important way. I've been trying to figure out a way to get the message out to the local school board, but one person alone is usually ignored. You see, my brother took his life last October at the age of 30. He was the bassist in a popular Ottawa rock band. He was frustrated over the last few years at his lack of college or university education, but he could not abide the thought of putting himself back into the educational system. He had always been exceptionally creative and could convince anyone to do as he wanted-he loved a good argument. The extent of his vocabulary was astounding considering his education. He was never identified as gifted because he quickly became an underachiever due to the negative attitude of school staff towards anyone who didn't "fit the mold". He had no patience for fools and argued with the staff members who were fools, on a very regular basis.

So, he barely passed his grade 12 and tried to make a living with his music, paying bills through his painting business. The inability to implement all the ideas that were constantly running through his head was an increasing frustration. My father and I agreed shortly after his death that due to the lack of help and counselling from the schools, my brother's mental state suffered. If not for his extensive network of friends, his death would have occurred much sooner than it did.

Sorry for such a gloomy story, but I've already had to deal with a bout of depression in my 6 year old ds, and for society to destroy any more of these special children through neglect would be a great crime.

Ginette

My biggest obstacles:

1. I was told that a parent cannot call an IPRC and I had to wait almost two full months JUST to get a written response to my written request (I sent three of them) for an IPRC.

2. I was told that my son would not ever be given a full psychoeducational assessment by the school. Now that I have proof that he is gifted (which I had to pay for privately) they will do a full testing with him, but only because of the possibility of a learning disability.

3. Even though the private assessment I was forced to undertake stated that J should be in a congregated class of intellectual peers, we have to go through a 3 month assessment period of a placement in the school. There is no official plan for the In-School Enhanced Learning Program.

4. No information is freely given about the policies and standards that regulate the "gifted" classes or programs.

And after all of this, there is no set guideline of what a gifted placement is!!! They could tell us that beating the chalk board erasers (using someone else's example here) is enrichment. There is nothing for the parents to hold the school accountable for.

Isobel

I'm a 34 year old SAHM who used to be an armed forces musician. My DH is a military officer. I have two children, my DS who is 6 and my DD who just turned 4. My own battles with school occurred soon after starting kindergarten in Ottawa in 1974. My proficiency with languages made me rather unpopular with classmates, because I was drafted as a teacher's helper in french. The following year the brightest students were placed into the new Immersion program that the federal government started a couple of years before. I performed well in class but felt horribly out of place at school. According to report card notes over the next few years, I changed from a confident, talkative child to a very quiet, withdrawn child. By grade four my marks deteriorated from straight A's in grades one to three(I was punished by teachers if I received any mark lower than 75% on a test-sent to a desk in the hallway for a couple of days) to C's and D'S midway through grade four. By this time, my reading ability was at the point where I found the collier's encyclopedias and my mother's RN training textbooks more worthwhile to spend my time on than the homework assigned. I also had read through just about every book in the kids' section of the public library by the end of grade five. Occasionally a special teacher would come along and I would shine for that year in his or her class but until grade 11 I mostly looked out the window during class and added another chapter to one of the stories running in my head. Once I moved to high school in grade 11 I met alot more young people just like me so socially things picked up. Academically, my work habits were poor, so I had a hard time if something wasn't fully grasped from the start. So

every year I was just a hair shy of an A average, so no special services or honours privileges (the view was gifted kids get straight A's). I thought I was just mediocre by this time, and the low self esteem reflected in my marks, and prevented me from entering university in the field of my choice.

It seems that history is repeating itself in my kids and I'm not thrilled with that. My son has had a trying time during his first three years of school. He's a December birthdate and has very intense emotions, so the teacher in JK wanted him to repeat, despite her admitting that he came into JK knowing most of the SK curriculum. So we changed schools. SK was better, because the teacher recognised his abilities and tried to help him with his concentration problems. He was still very reluctant to print, but due to her flexibility, he was able to progress with his reading at his own pace. But when I brought up the subject of testing, the principal stated that they only tested if they were very sure that the child was profoundly gifted and could qualify for the congregated classes, otherwise they didn't test until grade three. "Too expensive, you see. Yes, L will probably show himself to be gifted then." The next year the teacher ignored the extent of L's reading abilities, and his quick grasp of math, expecting him to sit quietly and complete all the work assigned, before she would even think of giving him some enrichment work. He had some all out shouting arguments with her while I was present, then he stopped working altogether. I am now debating on homeschooling. The new school here in the Hastings board is allowing my DD to bypass JK, but the teachers here have no idea of how fast she can learn things. They think that just a grade skip will do the trick, without any enrichment. She's reading at a grade 2+ level, and is learning grade one math at home right now. If she's not happy there, I guess homeschool is my only option.

Jolene

When my ds started JK 3 years ago, we approached the school board with testing results and a letter from his psychologist highly recommending a grade skip. The principal refused to discuss the idea, solely based on his age. Despite recommendations from doctors, psychologists, social workers and his obvious frustration with the "status quo", she still refused any accommodation (again based on his age). She even went so far as to put in his permanent record that we requested he "not be IPRC'd as gifted", which slowed the process down when we finally switched schools.

Interestingly, the first day of grade 1, we switched my son to a new school. When my son showed the new principal our file, she immediately put him in second grade.

Margot

Why we feel gifted students deserve protection under the by the Human Rights Commission?

So parents can not be manipulated by educators who don't want to take time, and money to deal with a child who is 'different'.

Amongst other things, I was told by our principal that my daughter (SK) was probably gifted, and any thing that we requested would be taking away resources from one of the many special needs children who had physical disabilities in the school, and that they needed the resources more than my daughter. 'You wouldn't want that to happen would you?'

I was also told that expecting a teacher to try and meet the needs of a single child was expecting too much, every parents wants there children to get special attention, and this can not be done.

For these, and many other reasons, we switched schools. Her new school knew in advance that our daughter was probably gifted (I brought in her work and asked the pricipal if they could accomdate this, He happily said, 'Yes, no problem', what a difference).

Some times I think these conferences with teachers and principals should be taped. There is no consitancy. There are no diffinitive guidelines, attitude by the prinipal is everything, regardless of school board rules, and laws.

I felt dealing with the old principal was like dealing with a crooked automechanic, knowing it, not being able to prove it, and having no where to go to make him do the right thing.

Problem is....our daughter is the car.

Yvette

Stereotypical and attitudinal barriers are in evidence in the classroom when a gifted child is required to dumb down his reponses, or when he or she is required to repeat work over and over again when it has been mastered after one teaching or even before it is formally taught. These barriers are further developed when gifted students who must remain in the mainstream class are subject to judgement by their classmates as they have "privledges" that have been established in an IEP. Tolerance of gifted students is not something that is adresseded/taught by mainstream classroom teachers as giftedness is viewed as the elitist/effortless position requiring no understanding by others.

Testing, that is finally provided after much determination on the parents part, is inadequate for primary students (CCAT) who have never been tested before and who are perfectionist by nature. Parents are forced to obtain private testing that meets the standards of the board that the school would not use its funds to order. Parents are told that the needs of other children must come first and are made to feel that requesting appropriate testing is a shameful thing as other more needy children may be left out if your child is tested using those funds. Therefore the parents who can beg and borrow and squeeze funds together may get the indepth testing required.

Patty

Well, as most of you know, I felt the discrimination was detrimental enough to my kids to pull them out of the educational system altogether. I'll give you my take on it. If it can help improve the educational system so that in the future children will get the educational environment they need and people will not have to resort to leaving the system, I'd love to help.

For us, I think the biggest problem was the lack of knowledge and understanding about giftedness and ALL it encompasses. I'd like to think that if teachers, principals etc. knew enough about giftedness to at least understand how to potentially identify it in kids and how it affects their whole being (from emotional responses, to boredom etc.), not just their paperwork (and how it can often adversely affect their paperwork!), then we could get these kids directed into a specialized environment where they could blossom. That's my dream anyway.

However, through my journey, I spent a number of years trying to educate my kids' teachers ... in areas even I didn't know at the time related to their giftedness. I spoke at length to them about how I handle the "spiritedness", the "ADHD", the "anxiety". I brought in articles, donated related books to the school library (in case they ran into other parents searching for info), and even gave a presentation at a school staff meeting on "spirited kids" and some tips on how to "handle them" in a classroom environment. When the response I got was "the teachers really enjoyed the presentation but they don't have the time to implement the suggestions", which to me just seemed like mostly common sense, I realized lack of knowledge alone is not the key.

I know there are gifted kids who can survive a "less-than-ideal" school environment (though the whole point is not to survive, but thrive), but

mine can't. My eldest son had developed such a hatred for school that he had to be coaxed / coerced every day to submit to their unending sea of worksheets etc. (As an aside, he's been out of school for four months now and yesterday when we were talking about what they were interested in learning about, he said the thing he hated most about school was that they would teach him something one day, then try to teach it to him again and again!). My daughter was the "teacher's pet" but was starting to get negative feedback (grade 2) from her peers about her joy of learning – and again, no notice from the teachers on her area of difficulty – since she wasn't "bad enough". And my youngest son (JK) was hiding out behind furniture to avoid the drudgery of just a couple hours of school.

And not once during that time did any of these "experts" put 2 and 2 together. Once I finally put it all together a few months ago, I also realized that I could not just turn on the principal's / teacher's "light bulb" through education so my that kids could get the educational environment they NEEDED. Not an environment that would be nice for them to have if there's enough money left over, but one I believe they need because I could see my kids deteriorating before my eyes. I also knew that even if I fought and got all the required "labels": "gifted", "LD", "at risk" etc., I was still not likely to find an appropriate environment at the end of it all.

Sadly, it seems they will need to be forced to do it ... and then when that's done, they'll need to be forced to do it well. I realized that my kids did not have that kind of time ... they need an appropriate educational environment NOW, so that's why they are at home. I'll say this though, I'm very glad we have the choice and that homeschooling is not another big battle I must wage (just some small ones, but that's another story).

Helen (gifted American teen)

I feel guilty so much of the time in school. When I get grades back and they're higher than my friends or people who I know study harder than me. When people realise how many courses I'm doing and comment on it. When someone asks which university I got into. When I wait for exam results and don't get the worried feeling. When someone asks what I did for my summer.

Except not all of that is guilt. I feel guilt when I feel that my presence is making other people feel bad or stupid. And I'm not sure what does that... I suppose answering questions in class (don't do much or mumble), talking about grades (hide them!), number and type of courses (never bring it up), universities (avoid conversation... actually this is fairly OK), extracurricular activities (oh just science geek stuff you know...). But however hard I try it doesn't seem to work. Sometimes people still round

on me and accuse me of being arrogant or a know-it-all. Especially in class work where I seem to have an unofficial job teaching other class members. Once they had a go at me because I understood this practical setting up and they didn't. And that annoyed me because it really isn't something I can help. Also if I'm doing something else and don't help them that instace I'm a moody broody arrogant cow. Sigh. Actually that class was pretty miserable, from all the petty seat arguments and exclusion tactics (one girl in particular) you'd have thought you were back in grade 3 or so. Sigh.

I think the rest comes from me. I am uncomfortable with myself... or rather what they will think if they know more about me. I worry about what they will think if I tell them what I like doing, my hobbies, interests and future plans. There is still a general belief that I only watch the news and a popular science program. Hello? I know I'm not normal in some respects but some bits are! So I don't mention it. The fact is in highschool I will not fit in undiluted and not packed into a little box of what I should be. Hate highschool social atmosphere.

I suppose its better for me though in someways because the problem is me, and I can try and change myself to prevent the problem or at least make it better. Except it doesn't work.

I tried to hide it though from through most of ages 12 to 16. I still do really. And although I did succeed in that unless you saw my tests or written work I was a silent nobody, it did involve not speaking much, not socialising, and getting very depressed. And they knew anyway. So now I just go with it. I am a total freak, everyone knows that. So just go with it. Call yourself a freak. Its easier.

Tamara

I think one of my main beefs is people that are supposed to know the differance when they profess they are knowledgable about gifted issues such as our experiance but yet know absolutely nothing. I have seen this too many times to speak of so getting a few qualified experianced school staff that have training and experiance in gifted would be a good start. In each and every school not just from the board. Of course if it were a small school 2 would probably do. [thinking of cost]. A larger school of course one or two extra.

Many of us know the percentage of gifted is much, much more than we anticipated if you were to include all of the variations which of course is ld. Many of our kids fall under this category and could easily be underachievement looking like ld. It is indeed as severe as a very ld child. Especially now that I know this presents itself very, very young in some of

our kids. So we should beg and plead or whatever it takes for qualified gifted staff.

Identifying these children in primary grades would be my second thing to look at. And enforcing the unwritten rule that the parents of these special ed children gifted/ld be taken seriously about their childrens' needs and listened to and not be made afraid or ashamed to speak up. I was able to speak up and put some sort of a halt to what was going on. Many parents don't or can't. The teachers know so little and the parents know so much if all children and parents were treated as individuals cases. I mean this not words on paper and lip service but actually doing what they are proposing to be doing ,anyway.

How about a principal making a medical diagnosis in writing?
How about children being ieped and placed without parents knowing let alone asking for a signature. Yep in writing.
Medicate your child says teacher to a parent. Then I will teach him . The parent [not me] has this in writing from a teacher.

My hands are tied says another teacher. I can't give your child advanced French to keep him from being bored. I absolutely must teach to the curriculum.

If I put your child back in reg class [no IPRC , mind you to place him to begin with] you child HAS to keep up with the curriculum or back he goes into a class he was never identified or placed to begin with.

Yvette

I would like to stress that in our case lack of knowledge on the part of the school administration served as a basis for the discrimination against my son. We were specifically discourgaed from pursuing efforts to test for giftedness within the system.

This attitude was presented in a way that stipulated that giftedness did not create a need that was of the same value as other learning challenges. This was accompanied by the idea that gifted children should meet some ideal standard of self knowledge and self directed learning without requiring any addtional assistance. The pressure was to perform to a higher standard with no basis in the gifted reality. The position was given that social needs would be best met within the regular classroom without any acknowledgement that social needs for gifted children are most often fundamentally different than those of the mainstream students. Once identified privately the identification was certainly accepted quickly and rightly so, but then in the same breath the placement offered by the IPRC was not consistant with other placements offered within the same board. There has been no consistancy with regards to placements within

the board, from region to region. To offer placements to equally "qualified" children on a fluctuating basis due to economics or to meet the needs of administrative programming difficulties seems to be discriminating to me. Finally to place a child into an undefined enhanced learning program when an existing program is already in place says to me that there is no equal rights policy for children based on the standards of the board of ed. towards gifted children. If a student has met the "requirements that the board has in place for giftedness and has a gifted program, as mandated by the ministry, should they not also be mandated to offer all gifted children the same options?

Dorothy

Inappropriate placement decisions

P never quite fit in with his peers in daycare, playgroups, or at school. An advanced reader in JK, his teacher let him read by himself during circle time when he refused to participate. The real problems started in SK when P was expected to participate in circle time; he started acting up in class and in daycare. We had a meeting with daycare staff, a representative from The Crèche, and the vice principal from the school to talk about implementing a new program offered by The Crèche: a psychoeducational consultant visited the classroom to identify the barriers preventing P from properly integrating into the classroom routines. The Crèche then paid for an educational assistant to assist P and to help the teacher implement strategies to overcome problem areas. The VP was lukewarm to the idea, despite the fact that it was a free service provided by The Crèche. He wished to place P in the kindergarten intervention program (KIP), a program intended for children with conduct disorders and/or ODD. The representative from The Crèche felt that P's behaviour issues were not serious enough to warrant such a placement and that KIP could worsen the situation by failing to respond to P's advanced cognitive abilities and surrounding him with children with more severe behaviour issues.

Refusal to Provide an Assessment

It quickly became apparent to the educational assistant that P's problems were the result of boredom due to his extremely advanced intellectual abilities. Following the intervention by The Crèche, P's behaviour improved and the educational assistant was phased out and P successfully finished his kindergarten year. We then asked the VP to have P assessed for giftedness so that he could be formally identified within the school system. The VP refused our request on the grounds that the staff psychologist was already much too busy with children with 'real' problems. Apparently, my son's problems were severe enough to justify placement in a segregated classroom for children with conduct disorders, but not severe enough to justify an assessment. Once again, The Crèche stepped in and provided a psycho-educational assessment free of charge where we learned that P had a verbal IQ in the highly to exceptionally gifted range. A possible non-verbal learning disability was also identified through the assessment. On parent, teacher, and daycare behavioural evaluations, P fell within the normal range.

Refusal to schedule an IPRC

Armed with our assessment results, we requested an IPRC so that a formal IEP could be implemented to respond to P's needs. Because the request was made over the summer, we had been in direct contact with the special education coordinator. She then contacted the principal of P's school to establish the need for a formal IPRC. The principal cancelled our IPRC request on the grounds that no programs were available at the primary level to respond to our son's needs. She informed the special education coordinator that P's needs would be dealt with at the school level. The principal was not aware that the school board was implementing a new congregated gifted program at the primary level for students considered gifted and 'at risk'. When we informed her of this new program, she reinstated the request for a formal IPRC. In other words, the IPRC had been cancelled on the grounds that no programs were available to respond to my son's needs! Only gifted program is for "Gifted at risk" After many weeks we finally succeeded in getting our IPRC meeting, a formality at this point since everyone had already agreed that the congregated placement was the best option for P. The 'at risk' criteria for placement in this new program was never properly explained to us. We were given a variety of explanations from 'children who have a second exceptionality' to 'highly or profoundly children who cannot be properly accommodated in the regular classroom' to 'children with behaviour issues'. When I asked the principal at the receiving school whether the children in the class had behaviour problems, I was told "No! Absolutely not! They are all wonderful and sweet children." I later learned that in the first few months, this class of 6 children with a teacher and an educational assistant had been a complete zoo because of behaviour issues. Completely unaware of this, we sent our son off to his new school.

Inappropriate academic accommodations

The first year was a mitigated success. The academic work was at a more appropriate level, although we encountered resistance over our suggestion that P could work at a more advanced level in math. "When he learns to pay attention to the math I am teaching now, I will let him try harder math." He was later accelerated one year in math. The following year, when we asked if further acceleration or compacting was possible, we were told "He's already been accelerated one year, what more do you want?" P was taught very little new material in math that year. Conversely, by the end of grade 1 P was being taught cursive writing. P was having a lot of difficulty with handwriting issues and we had worked very hard to bring his printing to an acceptable level. We felt that P was being taught cursive writing as a matter of convenience: the primary gifted class covered grades 1-3 and it was much easier for the teacher to teach cursive writing to all the students so that she could create and photocopy only one set of worksheets. In the beginning of grade 2, P was bringing home lists of spelling words where the cursive writing was illegible so that it was impossible for him to study. His teacher refused to let him print and made a note of his resistance to cursive writing in his report card. Focus of the class is on behaviour In P's first year in the primary gifted program, he mimicked every behaviour exhibited by the children in his classroom. By grouping children with behaviour issues, the program served to normalize the very behaviours that we had been working so hard to eliminate. Over the course of the year, P's teacher had numerous stress-related migrained headaches. The atmosphere in the classroom at pick up time was a tense and unhappy one. No willingness to accommodate individual needs P attended four different summer camps and had a wonderful summer. When the next school year started, P was eager to see his friends again. His teacher marvelled at how well behaved he was and how quickly he was completing his work. Three weeks into the school year, the problems started again. P was belligerent and disruptive in school. At home, there was no indication that anything was different, he was a polite and easy-going child. When his teacher started complaining about his behaviour, we supported her and instituted a system of penalties and rewards. P's behaviour worsened at school. One day, he told us in tears that he wished he could die. He was 7 years old.

School board refuses to allow part time attendance

We stopped all penalties and began to search for ways to change the classroom environment to suit P's needs. We paid for a private consultation with a psychoeducational consultant but the recommendations were ignored by P's teacher. In December, we removed P from school for 3 weeks. We asked that P be permitted to attend school on a part time basis in January, but the school board refused. R reduced his hours at work and started volunteering in the classroom and bringing P home for lunch 3 days/week. What he saw in the classroom made him realize that the primary gifted program was never going to work for P. The classroom environment was chaotic: children were constantly throwing temper tantrums, others were belligerent, while some children quietly bullied the more sensitive children. P spent most of his time daydreaming, quickly completing his work and doodling until the next activity. He was incapable or unwilling to pay attention to the verbal instructions, made tedious by the constant repetition and disruptions. Still, with R's support, P's behaviour improved and he was seldomly sent to the office in the months following his return to school.

School board pressures parents to accept a false label in order to obtain ISA funding

Despite the improvement in P's behaviour, we attended a school support team meeting that had been scheduled when P was still experiencing difficulties. At the meeting, we were told that the school board was in a financial crunch and needed to increase its number of applications for ISA funding. They asked for our permission to allow an evaluation for behaviour issues in order to support an application for extra funding for behaviour. We balked at the proposal P had already been evaluated for behaviour issues a little over a year before and had fallen within the normal range. He was well behaved at home and in summer camps. We felt that the chaotic and tense atmosphere in the primary gifted classroom were contributing to his behaviour problems and that the school board was at fault for not having a regular congregated gifted class at the primary level.

More lies

On researching the criteria for ISA level-2 funding, we learned that this funding is for children who pose a serious threat to their safety or the safety of others. We printed out the document for the principal at P's school and highlighted the relevant section, but she denied that this was a necessary criteria for supplementary funding and maintained that P qualified for this level of funding. Following our refusal to have P evaluated a second time, we received P's report card. This was the 5th report card that we received from this particular teacher. Where previous report cards placed P at a satisfactory rating or higher on all behaviour ratings, this latest report card was filled with negative notes about his behaviour throughout all the written comments and the behaviour ratings had all gone down. This, over a period where P's behaviour had improved! Having received a letter informing us that P's OSR would be viewed for verification purposes for ISA funding, it was apparent to us that the report card was being used to support an ISA claim for an exceptionality that we had never agreed to. The following day, we removed P from school and started homeschooling.

No follow-up for issues surrounding possible nonverbal learning disabilities No further evaluations were completed to follow-up on the possibility of nonverbal learning disabilities. Weaknesses with handwriting, gross motor skills, and working memory were never addressed. P's teacher brushed off concerns over P's tendency to clutter when speaking.

A happy ending

Homeschooling has been a success. P is much happier and more confident now. P finished his grade 2 year completing grade 4 Singapore Math. His handwriting has improved tremendously. He is learning French, typing, and playing the piano. We are thinking of sending him back to school for the regular gifted program in grade 4 but are not confident that the school board will be responsive to P's needs. We may continue homeschooling up to high school and beyond.

Michele

My family's story is a long and involved one: We are members of a visible minority (second generation immigrants from a West Indian island) and our 3 gifted children have always attended Ontario schools. Our eldest son showed signs of giftedness at a very young age (2) and entered the school system at the usual age (4). Although his advanced abilities were brought to the attention of the school, along with the report of a psychological assessment, we were told that the school board doesn't test for, or identify gifted students until Grade 3. We didn't even bother inquiring in the case of our two younger children (also gifted) because we were certain that we would hear the same answer.

When the eldest was in Grade 3, testing was done on all three. Our 4-year-old daughter and 7-year-old son were identified as gifted, the 8 year old was not. For our two younger children we were told that there is no special class, and no organized program per se, but that enrichment would be provided. We had no clue that we had a right to appeal any of this.

During that same school year, the 8 year old was screened as part of a board-wide screening process. His scores were extremely high (128 verbal and 136 performance) but since 130 (minimum) on both scales was required, he was not identified. Also, the results were kept from us and only discovered 5 years later while perusing the OSR. Once we became more aware of our rights (by joining ABC and speaking to other parents and reading Ministry regulations) we decided to appeal the non-identification of our eldest. We requested, in writing, an IPRC and the principal refused to set one up, stating that we needed to have a repeat assessment first and the psychology department was overloaded and not accepting any more cases for the remainder of the school year. Our son was in Grade 6 at the time. I was told that if he scored highly on the Grade 6 testing, he might be considered for identification.

The next fall, the Grade 6 testing results came in, there were many level 4 performance but IPRC meeting was once again refused and child was placed on a "waiting list" for assessment. Three months later he was tested using the WISC, and scores were below the threshold. No consideration at all was given to the possibility of concomitant giftedness/ learning disability, and no further assessment was done. IPRC was requested yet again, and was finally set up 3 months later (1 year after initial request)

Identification was again denied (even though the psychologist didn't even show up at the meeting to discuss the testing) but an IEP was set up.

Still, there were no gifted classes either occasional, part-time or full time and there were no other identified students within the entire school of 400 pupils (except for our other 2 children). The teachers had no formal training whatsoever in gifted education and yet were said to be modifying his curriculum.

The case went to appeal and finally Tribunal (by this time our son had graduated Grade 8) where it was ruled that our son was indeed gifted, that the school board had confused their financial obligations with their legal obligations, and that our son must be placed in a secondary gifted program.

The school board (UCDSB) changed their Special Education Plan at the time of the Tribunal hearing. They kept this important evidence (the existence of a revised plan) away from the Tribunal members and misrepresented the services that they were willing and able to provide. The new plan stated, "All gifted children will be placed in a regular classroom". The UCDSB had decided on its own that none of their gifted pupils was going to need a specialized setting in order to achieve to the level of their potential. The Ministry of Education, although fully aware of the fact that there was a gifted student that needed a special class placement within the UCDSB, nevertheless accepted this new Special Education Plan that did not include a range of placement options for gifted students, and did not include a contingency plan (describing what the UCDSB would do if it encountered a student with needs that it could not meet) The Ministry itself, in its standards for special education plans specifically requires school boards to either provide a range of placement options, or tell parents what they will do if they can't meet this requirement. The Ministry of Education and Training ignored its own rules with respect to placement options by approving this special education plan.

Faced with the prospect of yet another year in a regular classroom with no access to gifted peers for my son, I decided to file a contempt of court motion against the UCDSB. I believed that since I had gone through the proper process (IPRC, then Appeal, then Tribunal) and since the Special Education Tribunal upheld the needs of my son, that surely, the court would force the UCDSB to provide the services requested by the Tribunal. I was sadly disappointed to discover that not only did the judge refuse to insist that the UCDSB comply with the recommendations of the Special Education Tribunal, furthermore she ordered that I must pay \$15,000 in court costs of the school board for bringing this "unnecessary" motion. The fact that I begged both the Tribunal and the Ministry to do something, anything, to ensure that the school board obeyed the order of the Tribunal and was pushed aside with the advice "If you aren't happy with the placement offered by the school board, speak to your lawyer" was ignored.

I can't afford to appeal the judge's decision, and our entire family is being punished financially because we insisted on standing up for the rights of our children to receive the type of educational services essential to their future success and to the development of their extraordinary potential.

We can't help thinking that if our child's needs were the result of something other than extremely high intellect, we would not have been treated in this way. The false belief that gifted students are like everybody else and don't need or deserve anything special has resulted in our mistreatment at the hands of both the education and justice systems. Please help to prevent this from happening to other gifted children and their families.