

Tips for parents on preparing schools for your child

by Karen B. Rogers, Ph.D.

In a 2003 online seminar for parents in the Davidson Young Scholar program, many good points were made about how to "prepare the school" for the prodigiously gifted child. Some of the suggestions and actions of parents meant having to take things to an extreme, such as moving to another state or having an annual "battle" to have a child's differences recognized and individualized for, or having to remain "polite" when confronted with school policy. It is clear that getting the school to think of the prodigiously gifted child as out of the ordinary is the first step. The second step, once that recognition is in place, is persuading the school that the options you have selected that best address your child's needs will not harm your child, but, in fact, enhance his or her progress. The third step is ensuring that the options, or interventions continue and are built upon over the course of the school year, not just carried out one time. Here are some tips for each of these steps for preparing the school for your gifted child:

STEP ONE: Getting the school to recognize your child's differences.

1.) Collect a portfolio of unique and unusual independent work your child has done starting with age 2. Label

the date of each project or exhibit as well as how long the child worked on it, etc. Make sure the projects or work included are very indicative of conceptions produced considerably earlier than normal developmental patterns. Quality is more important here than quantity.

2.) Follow the data collection ideas suggested in *Re-forming Gifted Education: Matching the Program to the Child*. A list of the books your child has read each year, a list of experiences and activities engaged in outside of school, and a list of your child's interests and passions from year to year are a critical part of this data collection.

3.) Test scores matter, so any testing you have had to determine intellectual level and achievement levels, particularly when individual tests have been administered, is important information. In compiling this within the portfolio, however, put these objective data last, so that the school will look at what your child is doing rather than see your child as a score.

4.) Contact school officials to whom you wish to show this portfolio well before the school year begins. If this is your first foray into the school, you will want the GT resource teacher, the principal, and a potential classroom teacher for your child present when you meet. If your child is moving to the next grade (or even higher) in a school he or she has already attended, then make contact with his or her assigned teacher for the next year before the school year begins so that your child's "interventions" will begin on Day 1 of the school year.

STEP TWO: Suggesting concrete and feasible options for the school to provide for your child.

1.) Use *Re-Forming Gifted Education* to identify grouping, accelerative, curriculum modification, and instructional techniques that would best address the personal characteristics and developmental needs of your child. There are a series of charts that suggest what kind of learner would best benefit from a grade skip or moving to a higher class for math. Use these charts to determine the best 3-4 options that should be put into play for your child in the next academic year. List these in order of priority on a separate request sheet that accompanies your portfolio.

2.) If at all possible, bring your child's classroom teacher or the school library a copy of *Re-forming Gifted Education* so that they will have the same access to the research data supporting the practices you have asked for. If you present the book at your meeting with the school, you may have a better chance of starting out on a good, but firm, footing with them.

3.) The first thing to ask for--each year--is that your child be pre-assessed on the core academic areas. In other words, you, your child, and the teacher need to know at the beginning how much of the year's curriculum your child has already mastered. In this age of standards and assessment, there will be a plethora of old tests the teacher or GT resource teacher can use to determine your child's levels of mastery in reading, writing, science, math, and social studies. Often this step alone makes it evident to the classroom teacher that he or she cannot expect to have this child sit there and repeat what is already

known. It makes it clear how much of that child's time would be wasted not learning anything new. (As you know, more than half of each year is thus spent by gifted children when they are not pre-assessed.)

4.) Because the school is unlikely to implement all three or four of your requests, ask for one option for the beginning of the year with a built in "grace period" to determine whether or not it is working and how your child is responding to it. Ask the group (or teacher) you are meeting with to schedule a follow-up meeting with you for one month after school has begun to see how things are going.

5.) In identifying the critical options for your child, realize that different options will need to be in place each and every year. You do not need do to everything each year. In general when coming up with the 3-4 you will ask for in a year, however, be sure to include some form of grouping, some form of acceleration, some kind of curriculum change, and always focus on ways that the teacher can incorporate faster pacing, independent work, and complexity within regular curriculum areas when your child is so engaged.

STEP THREE: Ensuring that agreed upon options and interventions continue across the entire school year.

1.) Ask that the first option you and the school have agreed upon begin on Day 1 of the school year. Too often a mindset occurs among teachers that the first month is just to socialize students to a classroom routine. This will not be enough to keep your child challenged.

2.) Ask that the options to be phased in across the year end on the last day of school. Too often a mindset occurs among teachers that the last month of school is to tidy things up and spend the majority of the time on

non-academic things as well as field trips. This will not be enough to keep your child challenged.

3.) Bring your appointment calendar to the school with your first meeting and set firm dates to re-assess the agreed upon plan for your child throughout the year. Allow about one month for an option to have been implemented before checking on its progress. At that month-after meeting, bring along your own and your child's perceptions of how it has gone, to add to what the school will have to say about it. Also be prepared to bring up the next option you want to see put in place for your child at that meeting. This is often a propitious time to do this, because the school will be "flushed with success" on the first option and realize that doing something different is not so risky and certainly has not harmed the child they were so worried about.

4.) Do not EVER feel as if you are a nagging parent, even should the school seem to communicate this to you. If you do not continuously hold the school accountable for what your child is or is not learning, no one else will. You have probably noticed how many "policies" have been put into place to ensure that no exceptions will be made for individual children. These are important for the mainstream population that attends the school, but it is unlikely that the school has had even one other child like yours. Policies were developed to ease the work load and cut down on precedents being established when differences in need are moderate. They also nurture a sense of security for teachers who feel harassed and overwhelmed many times by all that is expected of them. But with the careful data collection you have done in compiling the portfolio and the careful selection of options you have considered in your prioritized requests, you should have been able to establish just how different from the mainstream the needs of your child are. You have every bit as much right to advocate for an individualized intervention for your child as does the parent of a child with special education needs. Go for it!

(This article was found on the Davidson Institute for Talent Development website in 2003: www.ditd.org and is reprinted with permission. Karen Rogers, Ph.D., is Professor of Gifted Studies in the Department of Special Education and Gifted Education in the College of Applied Professional Studies at the University of St. Thomas in Minneapolis, and author of the award-winning book, Re-Forming Gifted Education: How Parents and Teachers Can Match the Program to the Child, published in 2002 by Great Potential Press. The article was reprinted in the November/December, 2003, issue of Outlook, a publication of the MN Council for the Gifted and Talented [MCGT].)