

Dear Parents of Bright Children,

My name is MaryGrace Stewart. I am a gifted education specialist and the parent liaison for MAGE (Massachusetts Association for Gifted Education.) If you are reading this letter thank you for coming to our web site. You are to be commended. You know your child. You understand that they need something more in their education and you are trying to find ways to get them what they need.

A lot of parents write to me about having their child tested to find out if they are gifted. Let me say though that most world renowned specialists in gifted education would say that giftedness is a multifaceted and complex construct that a single test or even a single set of tests may not reveal. Giftedness is generally understood to be an intersection of things that include an above average ability in some area, some creative spirit, and some persistence when working on something of interest. That being said, an IQ score that is around 120 or more may get some people's attention. This is not to say that testing is useless, just that it's not always an adequate measure of a person's ability and it is often not a good measure for populations other than middle or higher SES white people so you might want to think about why you want your child to be tested.

If after thinking it over you still want to have your child tested, here are some people that we have had positive reports about from parents of bright children that can probably help you. You may have to go a bit of a distance so I suggest you chat with each of them to see which one you feel most comfortable with. A few are:

- Dr. Catherine Monaco www.counselingcenter.com Nashua, NH
- Dr. Elizabeth Smith <http://www.mind-works.org/DrSmith.html> Natick, MA
- Michael Fitch mike_f761@netzero.com, 413-885-1921, Springfield, MA

For more try...

- The Sage School lists additional testing locations at <http://www.sageschool.org/admission/testing-locations/>

Please note though that the above psychologists are in private practice and therefore cost money. Some insurance may cover some of the cost. You could ask your healthcare provider if they do and if so, under what circumstances. You may also be able to get the child tested by your school district for free, especially if there is any hint of a learning or behavioral difficulty. In order to do that you would probably want to contact the Pupil Services department of your school district even if you are in a private school. You pay taxes in your school district so they should do this for you. I believe a child's pediatrician can also refer them for testing by the school district. The only difficulty with the district evaluations is that the people doing the evaluation don't usually know much about giftedness or have training in gifted education. About all that they usually understand about giftedness is IQ. If you are only looking for an IQ score then that may be a way to get it done economically.

If you are looking for the school district to do something for your child once the testing is done and you have some results, I would kindly caution you that schools in MA have no requirement

by the state or municipalities to evaluate or provide any services for gifted students. We have 407 school districts in MA but only about a dozen of them have programs for the gifted and there aren't any standards or quality assurance for those. So you need to know what you are looking for the school to do before you approach them. This will require some research and learning on your part. But you are obviously a caring parent so here are some resources that will help.

The good news is that with the information in the resources listed below and the types of strategies we will share here, you will probably be better able to navigate the school system and to advocate for your child.

You see much like households and businesses, most districts put their energies and resources where they think they can do the most for the largest number of people. In this case, that is the about 70% of children who fall in the middle of the bell curve. In addition to educating the bulk of students in the middle of the bell curve, federal laws require that they address the needs of those that are in some way learning or otherwise disabled. This group is about 15% of the bell curve. That means that they are focused on about 85% of students. That's a good margin if you're in business. Children's minds though, aren't a business.

General educators are also pushed by the state to get their percentages of students scoring proficient on state tests up, with threats to teachers, administrators, and districts. With a focus on 85% of students, funds are rarely allocated to meeting the 15%'s needs. Unfortunately gifted children are left in a minority with no voice and no resources and they are in the hands of people who often have good intentions, but they don't know what to do to educate them because they haven't had any training in gifted education. This lack of education also means that general educators tend to believe common unscientific prevalent myths about giftedness because that is all that they have ever heard.

So what is a Massachusetts parent of a gifted child to do?
Whether you choose to do testing or not there are some things you can do.

1. Empower yourself with knowledge.

- **Go to www.nagc.org and learn all that you can. I suggest you start with anything that pertains to parents and then go to the section about myths.**
 - **Even if you do nothing else, look at this one.**
- Read up on acceleration in the books A Nation Empowered. It is downloadable for free from the Acceleration Institute at http://www.accelerationinstitute.org/nation_empowered
- In order to better understand the social and emotional needs of gifted children you may find SENG helpful at www.sengifted.org . There are also many books available on this topic.
- Hoagies' Gifted Education Page is a kind of clearing house for all things about gifted. It is at <http://www.hoagiesgifted.org/parents.htm>

- If your child is very highly gifted, The Davidson Institute is devoted to children who are "profoundly gifted." They also have a lot of other helpful information about giftedness and how it is, or isn't, supported by all of the various states. It's address is <http://www.davidsongifted.org>
- Another site you may find informative is the Neag Center for Creativity, Gifted Education, and Talent Development at <http://gifted.uconn.edu>.
- In addition, if it turns out that your child also has a learning difference, then the child would be considered "Twice Exceptional" which means both gifted and having a learning "disability." Often the giftedness can mask the learning issue making it even harder for the student to get the support they need. One of the best resources online for this is the 2e Newsletter at <http://www.2enewsletter.com>

2. When working with the school...

Check your school district's mission statement, goals, and strategic plan. It very likely says something about helping every child achieve their potential. This is what you want from them. When dealing with general educators it is sometimes helpful to use the analogy of buying shoes. It's not that you want anything that other children don't get. You just want an education that is a good fit for what your child's mind is ready for. *What you are looking for is a year's worth of **progress** for a year's worth of time.* If the child is bright they should certainly be able to do this, unless what they are being given they already know; a common phenomenon with gifted children.

You will probably want to appeal to teachers and/or administrators, for an educational fit and pace that is a better match for your child and be willing to work together with them to make that happen. However, don't try to educate them unless they ask! Telling them their job just makes them angry. Also, try addressing it item by item as needed. The big picture of gifted education is overwhelming to general education teachers and administrators. You know in your mind what your child needs. You go to them to discuss what parts of that they are willing or able to do. Be respectful. They are professionals but remember you are actually in charge of your child.

The trouble is that most general education teachers and administrators are not prepared to meet the needs of gifted children. Most are not taught about giftedness or gifted education in their teacher or administrator preparation programs at most colleges and universities. If they don't have the appropriate gifted education training then they aren't any more prepared to teach gifted children than general practice doctors are to perform heart surgery.

Parents of gifted children often feel that teachers should know how to teach all children and perhaps they should, but it is unrealistic to expect this of regular educators who don't have special training. Gifted children are just as different from average children as special needs children are. In the case of special needs children though, there are laws that say they must be educated appropriately by the public schools. Therefore, the public schools recognize that as a specialty and hire specialists in that field. This is not the case for gifted children.

This isn't to say that some of what general education provides isn't useful. Some of it can be but this is where a lack of training and experience come into play. It is possible to do this for

all students, all of the time, but it requires special training and for the district to treat its curriculum differently. It is no small task to get a district to change the way it functions.

It is also notable that private school educators aren't gifted education specialists either. They are no more prepared to meet a gifted student's needs than public school educators. A private school may be more rigorous or have smaller class sizes, but that's not all that a gifted child needs.

In order to achieve what gifted children need we begin with a process of matching the curricular content to a child's readiness and interests through a system called "differentiation." If you find yourself in a conversation about this with general education professionals you will need to indicate that your child needs differentiation *as per the work of Carol Ann Tomlinson*. Differentiation is not the same as having two or three reading groups. It is much more than that. However, before you talk to anyone else about this you will need to know it somewhat for yourself. She has many YouTube videos, books, and professional development packages available to anyone who is interested. Her books and other tangible materials are published by ASCD (Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development) and can be purchased online for a reasonable cost especially if you are willing to purchase a used one.

Getting a gifted child's educational needs met is often more about pre-assessing concept by concept in every subject area and then placing the student in the curriculum that is the next thing they are ready for. This is called, "acceleration." It includes grade skipping, which the research overwhelmingly shows does not harm gifted children socially, emotionally, or psychologically. Acceleration also includes 19 other forms which you will read about in [A Nation Empowered](#). You can imagine if all students had this how well their education would fit. The problem is, teachers have too many students to do that much individualization *and they often seem to believe that it's not fair to do it for some if they can't do it for all*. With the proper training though, they can do it for all students. I've seen it in action in many classrooms.

3. Follow their bliss!

We suggest that you help your child engage in whatever it is that they are interested in; do what you can to support that. Their interests will change over time and they may seem to be interested in everything, but *involve them in the choice* of activities they pursue. This may not be what you think they should be interested in. *What we adults think about our children's interests really doesn't matter. What does matter is that we facilitate for them*. For example, as was my case, I thought my daughter would like dance lessons. She wanted Russian lessons.

Luckily, there are many summer, weekend, vacation, and after school programs that can help you do this. Usually the town library or parks and rec. department aren't it though. They may advertise "enrichment" programs but they are still aiming to the middle and below. Those services might work if you can arrange your child's way into a higher level of program that fits their readiness though. If you can, that could be a very economical approach. Providing these kinds of experiences can be somewhat costly but it's less expensive than private school.

4. Always remember that you are your child's legal guardian.

Regardless of what principals, teachers, or even school psychologists, may try to tell you, they do not have the right to inappropriately treat your child in any way. That includes neglecting their education or as one administrator put it to a parent, "Well if she already knows the content then she will learn to wait." Waiting is not education! Remember, what is the district's "no" does not need to be your "no." Theirs is rooted in their lack of knowledge and understanding.

Yours will come from a fountain of knowledge and understanding. If the school will not accommodate your child's educational needs in any way, it is possible in many cases to only have a child in school for those parts of the day that are useful to them. The balance of extra-curricular and education switches. The student may be in "school" for things like P.E. Art, Music, and for socialization, but they are really learning from other sources.

There are partial homeschooling options, and full homeschooling, which isn't like it used to be. It is highly organized in MA and involves large groups of students. The schooling is coordinated by parents but it often isn't actually taught by parents to their own children. Some private schools will also allow part-time enrollment. There are also some good online programs and once in upper grades there is partial enrollment in college. One of the difficulties for many parents with these kinds of options is transportation. Don't let that get in your way either. There are carpools and other driving options. There are also fully accredited online programs and other web-based programs that can be used in full or in part.

5. Getting connected

Last but not least, because this is about a 15 year journey you are entering into with your child, I suggest you get connected with others in your situation. One way you can do this is by joining MAGE and getting connected to their parent network. MAGE is very inexpensive. It gets you their newsletter, discounts at their events, and entitles you to free webinars from NAGC. Another suggestion is to join NAGC and get their Parenting for High Potential magazine. It's a good resource.

It may help to think of this like making a quilt. One piece of it comes from the school but the rest of the pieces will come from you. It is a lot of extra work but it can build a relationship with your child that those who hand it all over to the schools will never have.

I hope you find this information helpful. You can always email me at stew492@usc.edu if you have any other or specific questions or concerns.

With best wishes for you and your child,

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