

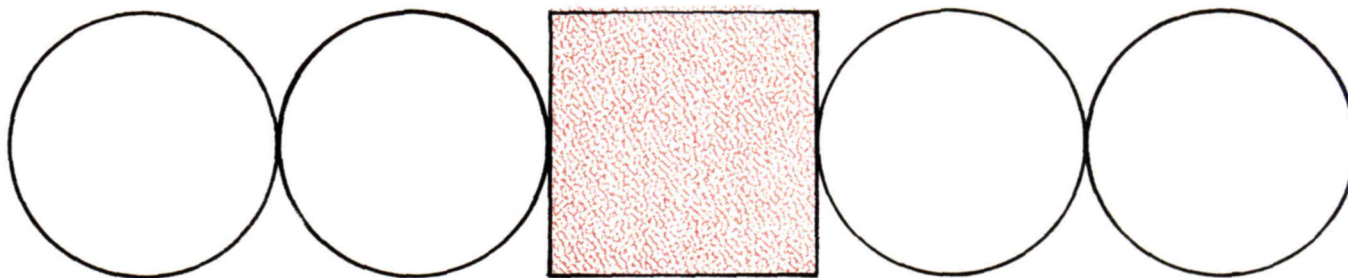
Many people view mentally gifted children as having an unfair advantage over other children. After all, these children learn quickly and easily the lessons with which others struggle. What they don't see is the pain of being a misfit.

In our educational system, the child is forced to fit the curriculum taught instead of the curriculum fitting the child. Somewhere along the line, equal education has come to mean the same education for all instead of equal opportunity to develop talents. The more highly gifted a child is, the more that child's needs differ from other students'. No one expects a severely retarded child to fit into a regular class, yet a severely gifted child is expected to conform. Public schools profess to be supportive of academic excellence, but usually this is a political statement designed to placate parents and impress the public.

I'd like to tell you about our experiences in order to emphasize the

ON BEING A MISFIT

by Jeanette D. Lindblad



complete lack of cooperation we have had in the education of our son. Please keep in mind that Pennsylvania has had a law that guarantees him an appropriate education for all the 13 years he has been in school. The intentions of the lawmakers may have been worthwhile, but those who have the responsibility of carrying it out have done everything possible to ignore it. The best students are prisoners in classrooms where their needs are ignored.

During Eric's 13 years in the Gateway School District, we have provided and paid for most of his math education. In elementary school, we searched for programs and tutors and later provided tuition and transportation to college courses. This is very costly, both

emotionally and financially. We received no help from the professional "educators" who we felt should have been anxious to help such a child. The district's gifted program deals with enrichment only, as if the child is not gifted in basic education classes. We feel the intent of the district is to fulfill a minimum state requirement rather than consider the needs or talents of children.

Public Law 94 indicates that gifted children must have an "appropriate education." But apparently, "appropriate" does not mean what is best for the child but what administrators can convince the state is adequate. An Individual Educational Program (IEP) is written for each child identified as gifted. The student,

parents, and teacher are supposed to author this document. In reality, it is already written before the parents arrive and the wording is so vague no one could tell what learning may or may not take place. If the parents object to the IEP, they have the right to a Due Process Hearing. A Hearing Officer appointed by the State Department of Education listens to both sides and renders a decision. Most parents feel they cannot afford to do this and fear their child will suffer reprisals if they cause trouble. It takes a lot of expensive evidence and legal help to prove the child's needs are not being satisfied. Educators are not above misrepresenting the truth and developing faulty memories to win their case.

We have had three Due Process

Hearings. When Eric was 8, he had scored a 12th grade math level on diagnostic tests administered by the district. During the hearing, an elementary teacher testified that this particular test didn't ask him to identify numbers in the millions and that 5th grade math teaches that; therefore, 5th grade math was appropriate. The Hearing Officer, a psychologist (and coincidentally the mentor and personal friend of the district's psychologist) placed Eric in 5th grade math. No one cared that Eric could identify numbers in the millions by age 5 or that he scored 520 on the SAT-M at age 8 (the average college-bound senior scores 490). Instead of realizing this child's potential and helping to develop it, the district was determined to squelch his learning. Eric spent most of his time in 3rd grade sitting on the floor in the back of the 5th grade classroom working on independent study cards. The teacher tested him every 8 cards but never corrected any of them because, as he told Eric, he didn't have the answer key.

In 4th grade we hired a tutor while Eric suffered through 6th grade math placement at school. The 6th grade teacher added to his academic loss by making comments such as, "Well, the 4th grader in here got a '-0' on his test. What's the matter with you 6th graders?" This did not endear him to the 6th graders nor make him feel welcome in the class. The tutor, who has a master's degree in mathematics, began working with Eric by giving him a diagnostic test for algebra I. Eric tested out of algebra I. He began working in the Elements of Mathematics, a program designed for gifted secondary students and at age 10 earned an "A" in a college logic course. Of course, this was done outside of school and at our expense. Since Eric is a competitive swimmer and was taking piano lessons, and our other two children did both also, this schedule was difficult to juggle. During the summer, he attended Carnegie Mellon University (CMU) with gifted 7th graders and earned 3 credits in computer science and problem solving.

Prior to and early in his 5th grade year, the 2nd Due Process Hearing took place. The district was ordered by the Department of Education to tutor Eric 2½ hours a week and he was placed in 9th grade Algebra II. Instead of tutoring him in math as ordered, the

district decided he would be taught computer science by the teacher of the gifted. She had had 6 Saturday classes in beginning computer training (taught by Eric's tutor). He was ordered to sign in at 12:10 every day in the gifted classroom. He sat there alone, not permitted to use the computer or do anything else, until the teacher returned from lunch at 12:50. She then spent 10 minutes "teaching" him and he signed out at 1:00. In the meantime, he was very unhappy in the 9th grade class due to the constant comments of the students. The teacher, who meant well but had no experience with gifted students, insisted that Eric write out all the steps to pages of problems that he could do in his head. We complained to the state's regional reviewer about the computer "lessons" and she said the district had the written evidence that he spent 50 minutes a day there. We refused to allow him to be punished further so he had no math at all the remaining 6 months of school.

In the meantime, he grew by leaps and bounds with his tutor. It was a wonderful experience except he was denied the exchange of ideas with his intellectual peers that is such an important part of learning math. The tutor would tell us that every time he thought he knew where Eric was mathematically, his grasp of concepts would make another giant leap. It was a thrilling experience for the tutor and satisfying to us all.

Since Eric had scored 650 on the SAT-M as a 10 year old, he qualified for a fast-paced mathematics program for gifted secondary students being held at the Community College of Allegheny County—South Campus. During the summers of 1981 and 1982 he completed Algebra II, III, and Trigonometry in 13 class days. A gifted student does not need an entire school year to learn these subjects well. By making these students crawl when they yearn to fly, we assure our country its last place position in international mathematics comparisons. We also turn off students who have tremendous ability and potential. It is a waste America can ill afford.

Eric loved learning at CCAC. For the first time, he was with a whole class of gifted students learning at an exciting and challenging pace. No one questioned why he was there or asked insulting questions or was even

surprised when he led the class in performance. Math was fun again! The professor who runs this program is a highly gifted teacher and his enthusiasm for learning math is contagious. He loves to teach math to these gifted kids who are so eager to learn.

In 6th grade, the head of the math department at Gateway High School volunteered to tutor Eric two periods a week. We transported him to and from high school prior to elementary school in the mornings. He completed honors geometry with a 99% and scored a 720 on the SAT-M.

In 7th grade Eric scored 800 on the SAT-M, the only perfect score in the 16,000 gifted students tested by Johns Hopkins University. In 8th grade, he received a 5 (top score) on the Advanced Placement Calculus Exam, a test high school seniors take in order to skip Beginning Calculus in college. During these junior high years, he completed the state's math requirement by taking one semester of Functions and 1 year of Calculus at the high school. Privately, he completed a second college logic course, Algebra in Operational Systems, and Introduction to Fields.

In the fall of 1984, Eric entered high school. Now we had a new problem. The district offered no more math courses and the state required two for graduation. While Gateway allowed Eric and other gifted students to accelerate, they were unwilling to provide an appropriate math course for him, even though by law he was entitled to one. Furthermore, he, and others who accelerated, lost the honors math credits their classmates received. This lowered Eric's class rank. In other words, a student who completes algebra in 5th grade will be ranked lower in a class than the student who completes it in 9th grade. This wouldn't matter except in the way it affects college admission and most particularly, scholarship awards.

I spent the next 4 years providing transportation and tuition to Carnegie Mellon. Eric earned 8 A's in 8 college math courses. I would pick him up at Gateway in mid-morning and return with him 2 hours later; he missed two class periods and lunch.

When we attempted to discuss the needed high school math credits with administrators, we were told that, yes

indeed, something would have to be worked out and that if we would just be patient, it would be resolved. They would consider whether credit should be given for his CMU courses. We should have known not to expect ethical behavior.

During these 6 years of junior- and senior-high school, Eric represented Gateway at many math contests. He won trophies, plaques, and other awards for which the district publicly took credit. From the way the newspaper articles were written, a reader would assume Eric received his math instruction at Gateway. Many of these contests were on weekends and we transported him and the rest of the math team; sometimes other parents drove also. We were the only team present at these contests not accompanied by a faculty member from the district. After a few contests, some of the teachers from other districts assumed I was Gateway's coach and, as we usually won the first place team trophy, I guess they thought I did a good job! I would have much preferred a caring attitude from Gateway.

Eric was the top scorer at Gateway on the American High School Math Exam for the 4 years he was in high school. As a result of this, he attended the United States Mathematical Olympiad Training Program as one of the top 24 math students in the United States. The only reaction from his school to this honor was to mark him absent. Eric also qualified for the Pennsylvania Governor's School for the Sciences and the Research Science Institute, which picks the top 35 science students in the United States. He was a National Merit Finalist. He was named the top math student in Pennsylvania for 1988 by the Western Pennsylvania Mathematics Council and the Pennsylvania Council of Teachers of Mathematics. He had a 97% overall average on his high school transcript (without math). He received only a small merit scholarship and when I inquired about this, a college financial aid officer told me Eric's class rank wasn't all that impressive and that the National Merit Scholarship Corporation weighs that heavily.

Hearing Number 3 was held during Eric's senior year. The district was ordered to put the two CMU math courses for this year on Eric's IEP, on his high school transcript to fulfill the

state requirement, and to add them to his class rank. The district appealed the third part of the decision and the appeal was granted. Now they refuse to obey the rest of the order and have filed for Common Pleas Court. An hour before graduation, we were told that Eric should attend even though he would receive an illegal diploma. Eric feels cheated and used. He has worked hard and performed exceptionally well. Some of his teachers have been very supportive and are as aware of the shabby and unnecessary way he has been treated as he is. One praised him by saying that he never knew Eric to brag in any way about any of his accomplishments even though he had more reason to brag than most students. Another said he was ashamed of an educational system that puts a lid on excellence.

The parents of highly gifted students who might read this, sadly will be able to identify with many of our experiences. Gateway is not the only district geared to a "minimum education with mediocrity for all." There are good teachers who can do nothing because they are stuck with an inadequate curriculum. Our son hasn't been destroyed by this because we haven't allowed it; but what of other talented students whose parents can't provide what we did or who don't know what to do or where to turn? The system *must* change; hardly a week goes by that we don't see in magazines or newspapers new evidence of our nation's disastrous performance in mathematics. The parents are blamed; the teachers are blamed; the curriculum is blamed. I believe all deserve some of the blame, but the greatest degree of blame lies in a system that puts bureaucracy before the child, where the political power of the administration or the teacher's union weighs more heavily than why these people have jobs in the first place.

As for Eric, he has been named a Princeton Scholar by Princeton University because of his "unusual academic achievement and extraordinary academic promise." To add a bit of bitter irony, Princeton is donating \$250 in Eric's honor to the Gateway High School Library because of Gateway's commitment to academic excellence.

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The Gifted Child Today solicited responses from Julian Stanley of the

Study of Mathematically Precocious Youth (SMPY) as well as from the Gateway School System. As director of SMPY, Stanley observed Eric's academic progress first-hand and his response follows. Gateway was unable to prepare a response before our deadline, but their reaction will appear in the March/April issue of The Gifted Child Today.

Most Fare Better

by Julian Stanley

Eric is, indeed, exceedingly able, as I know from following his progress since 1979 and giving his mother many suggestions about how to provide the special, supplemental educational opportunities a youth of his great intellectual ability sorely needs. Her experiences with educators seem rather atypical, however. Many of the parents of mathematically highly precocious youths with whom we work closely have successfully negotiated a reasonably smooth passage between the proverbial rock and the hard place. They have managed to obtain for their quite talented offspring appropriate curricular flexibility and good articulation of out-of-school experiences with in-school ones without becoming chronically hostile to the school system and embittered toward it. I wish there were some formula we could give parents for dealing successfully with teachers and administrators, but obviously there isn't. Many aspects of personality and local circumstances are involved.

By contrast with Mrs. Lindblad's experiences, readers may want to reread the story of Terry Tao, the Australian boy of Chinese parentage who recently won a gold medal in the International Mathematical Olympiad competition just before his 13th birthday, having already won a silver medal at age 11 and a bronze medal at age 10. Even the usually inflexible Australian school system has adjusted nicely to Terry's educational needs, as carefully and diplomatically set forth by his father, like Eric's pediatrician. (See *G/C/T* July/Aug. 1986, p. 2; Nov./Dec. 1986, p. 25; and Mar./Apr. 1988, p. 39.) The educational experiences of many other SMPY protégés are more like Terry's than Eric's. ■