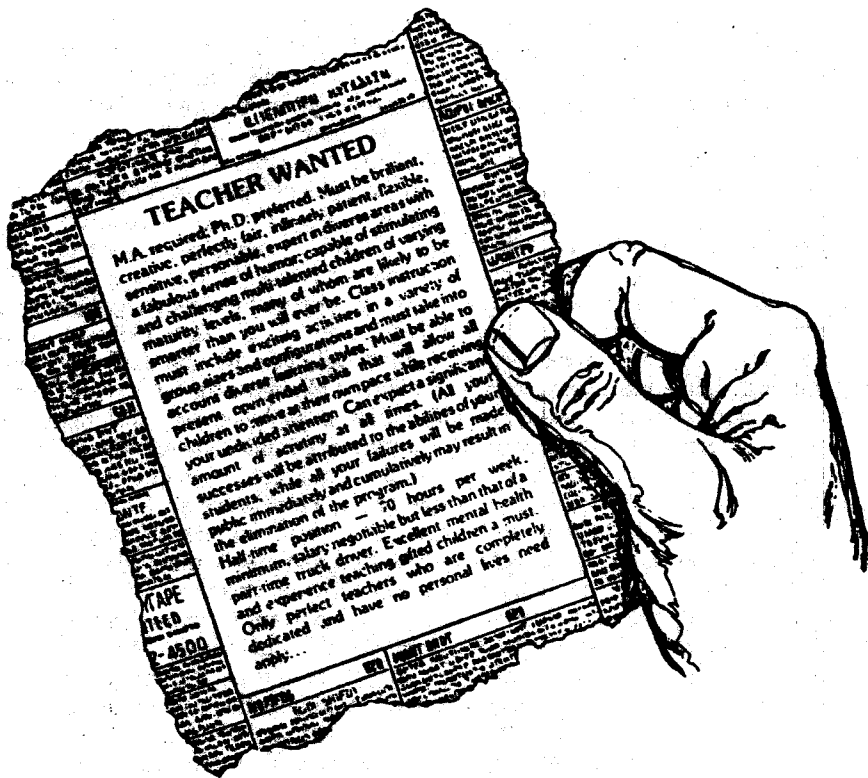


# IN SEARCH OF THE PERFECT PROGRAM

By Linda Kreger Silverman  
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*Any program for the gifted is only as good as its teachers; therefore, the perfect program depends upon finding perfect teachers. It would solve a lot of problems if someone would answer the Want Ad above. But, if our fantasy teacher did exist, why would he or she be crazy enough to take this position rather than seeking a more prestigious and lucrative career? So given the realities of budgetary constraints and human limitations, how do you find a program that will optimize your child's learning experience?*

**Y**our first task is to find out the extent of your child's abilities. If your child is mildly gifted, several options may be available that will meet his or her needs. However, if your child is highly gifted, you may have to search far and wide for a suitable program. Also, many gifted children have uneven patterns of development. They may need gifted education to develop their abilities as well as individualized instruction and therapy to remediate their weaknesses. Since all children are unique, an assessment of your child's particular strengths and weaknesses is essential to determine the most appropriate educational program. The evaluation should include an assessment of your child's intellectual abilities, learning style, self-concept, personality, achievement, interests, and relationships with peers and family. It should be conducted by someone knowledgeable about and experienced with assessing gifted children.

When your children are identified as gifted, you may experience feelings that range from joy to fear, sometimes both at once. The fear comes from your awareness that having children with high ability means greater parental responsibility to help them fulfill their potential. You want your gifted children to have happy, productive lives and you want to spare them the pain of defensive teachers, boring curriculum, and isolation from age peers. Your concerns may be magnified if your own childhood experiences were painful.

If you've always known that your children are advanced, then you've

probably already devoted years towards nurturing their talents and self-concepts. And even if the extent of their abilities has come as a surprise to you, it is nonetheless difficult to place your child into the safekeeping of a stranger's capabilities and whims. You might feel like saying, "But do you share my concerns and enthusiasms?! Will you like my children enough to guide them through all the challenges that the year with you will present?!"

Finding the right school for your children can appear to be an overwhelming task. The simplest solution is to place them in the neighborhood school. There are many advantages to this option: friendships developed in the neighborhood become the primary peer group, children can walk to school with their friends, and it is free — a factor which puts less pressure on the family financially as well as ideologically. Many families are deeply committed to public education, and want to help promote good programs for all children in their local schools. Also, the neighborhood school may be easier on your marriage: there is often parental disagreement on the importance of special programming or schools for gifted children. Since innovative programs for gifted students have been developed in several public schools through the efforts of creative teachers and supportive principals, your neighborhood school should be the first place you consider in your search.

Unfortunately, some schools are not responsive to the needs of gifted children. Many parents are told not to "push" their children when they ask about provisions to accommodate their children's special needs. There are schools where early entrance is not a possibility, acceleration is out of the question, grouping with other gifted children is dismissed as "elitist," and individual differences are perceived as problems.

Some administrators believe that gifted education is a fad that should be ignored until it goes away. Some teachers have all the children in their rooms work at the same level, regardless of differences in ability. Certain teachers and counselors resent gifted children, and make that resentment evident in working with them.

Extremely bright boys may be held back in school on the grounds of social

"immaturity" when they cannot relate to children developmentally much younger than themselves. These attitudes and practices are harmful to the development of gifted children.

With recent budget cuts and changes in philosophy accompanying the school restructuring movement, public school programs for the gifted are in greater peril than ever before. Where full-day placements for the gifted are not available in public schools, parents who are in a financial position to do so often consider private school options for their children.

In contemplating full-day placement, whether in public or private school, many parents share popular misgivings that moving the child from the regular classroom will result in elitism, isolation, inability to get along with the mainstream, or rejection of democratic values. Others fear that placement in a segregated class for the gifted will develop their children's intellectual abilities at the expense of their social, emotional, artistic, or athletic talents. These fears usually disappear after families have taken the opportunity to visit and observe self-contained gifted programs. There is no evidence whatsoever that lends support to these concerns. On the contrary, 60 years of research indicates that full-day programs for the gifted enhance social development, humanitarian values, ability to get along with others who are not gifted, leadership and emotional development, along with academic progress.

The further your children are from the norm, the more they will benefit from full-day placement. The regular classroom is well-equipped to accommodate children who are one standard deviation from the norm in either direction (85-115 IQ). In certain communities, where the norm of the classroom is an IQ of 115, children in the 115-130 range will do well in the regular classroom. Reputable private and parochial schools generally provide excellent educational opportunities for children in the mildly gifted range (115 to 130 IQ), especially if they have selective entrance procedures. However, moderately gifted children (130 - 145 IQ) usually progress better academically and socially in a full-time program for the gifted than in the regular classroom. Highly gifted

children (those whose IQ scores are in excess of 145) often require full-day programming in order to develop social relations and to remain motivated to learn. Schools for gifted children may be helpful to children who are mildly or moderately gifted, but they are lifesavers for the highly gifted.

Different types of full-day programs for the gifted exist in different cities, ranging from self-contained classes in the neighborhood school to state supported high schools in mathematics and science. If you live in a city with several options, we strongly recommend that you visit as many full-day programs as possible before making your decision. Although reputation is certainly an important factor, nothing can substitute for your own observation and intuitive judgment. Just as it is unlikely that you would allow someone else to pick out your home for you, it is not wise to trust someone else's judgment about the right program for your child. No one knows your child as well as you do. You will be surprised at how much information you can pick up about the atmosphere of a program by observing it.

Figure 1 includes guidelines you might use when choosing among full-time programs for educating the gifted. Obviously, if you are looking for a preschool, you will be seeking some different elements than if you are trying to find a high school. Naturally, no program contains all of these provisions. Look for as many of them as possible. Decide which factors in this list are most important to you and whether they will meet the specific needs of your child.

It is important to remember that this checklist represents the writers' concept of the perfect program. It is used most effectively if condensed and customized to your own particular situation. It may be helpful to visit schools with another parent, rate the schools independently, compare notes and then give weight to the factors that are most important to you and your child.

Good luck on your search for the perfect school environment for your gifted child! We hope this checklist assists you. If you think of additional criteria to include, please let us know.

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## Full-Time Gifted Programs

YES NO

- B. Grouping is varied to include a mixture of individualized, small, and whole group activities.
- C. Student input sought in goal-setting
- D. Students encouraged to understand reasons for learning
- E. Emphasis on concept formation rather than drill and rote memorization
- F. Minimal amount of review and repetition
- G. Creative approach to basic skills; skills reinforced through application and experiential learning
- H. Frequent use of open-ended or divergent questions
- I. Guidance provided to help students develop organizational skills
- J. Intuition, creativity, feelings and imagination valued as highly as logic, facts and accuracy
- K. Speed of performance de-emphasized in favor of higher level thinking and creativity
- L. Varied projects serve a wide range of interests and capabilities.
- M. Creative exploration, independence and risk-taking encouraged
- N. Development of interpersonal skills and self-confidence
- O. Access to higher level libraries
- P. Carefully designed field trips
- Q. Student evaluation skills developed

### VI. Curriculum

- A. Responsive to individual and group interests
- B. Accelerated to maintain interest and challenge
- C. Deals with central themes and relationships rather than isolated facts
- D. Interdisciplinary to allow students to apply skills in a variety of ways
- E. Stresses creativity
- F. Involves critical thinking, higher level analysis and synthesis
- G. Scope and sequence of learning apparent
- H. Relevant — deals with real issues in students' lives
- I. Global — provides a context to enable students to gain a world perspective
- J. Emphasizes problem-finding and pattern-finding
- K. Provides an historical context
- L. Deals with philosophical issues, existential questions, and the learning of philosophy

YES NO

- M. Incorporates emotional and social development

## VII. Practical Considerations for Private Schools

- A. Reputation**
1. The school enjoys an excellent overall reputation.
2. The school has been recommended by parents of other gifted children.
- B. Selection**
1. Admissions are selective.
2. Preference given to qualified siblings
- C. Costs**
1. Affordability
2. Availability of scholarships
3. Discounts for siblings
- D. Proximity**
1. Practical distance for child and parent
2. Workable, given placement of siblings
3. Bussing or carpools available
- E. Schedule**
1. Hours and schedule fit family's needs
2. Part-time placements available for preschoolers and homeschoolers, if needed
- F. Day care**
1. Availability of before-school quality care, if needed
2. Availability of after-school quality care, if needed
- G. Stability**
1. Program has been in existence for several years.
2. Low teacher turn over
3. High student return rate
4. School has an Advisory Board
5. Good management apparent
6. Annual audit
- H. Physical Education**
1. Challenging and safe equipment
2. Exercise of both large and small motor skills
3. Cooperative as well as competitive games
- I. Aesthetics**
1. Design of building is efficient and attractive.
2. Adequate maintenance of facilities and appealing classroom atmosphere
3. Inviting playground equipment

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