

Introduction to Teaching Students With Gifts and Talents

Lenny is one of those students whose abilities baffle his teachers. At 10 years of age, he scored a perfect score of 800 on the math portion of the Scholastic Aptitude Test. He set a record with four perfect performances on the American High School Math Exam, and he won a gold medal at the International Math Olympics. But Lenny's abilities go beyond mathematics. He has taken honors in violin and piano competitions, played on a championship basketball team, and earned a 4.0 grade-point average in college courses he took while still a full-time high school student. When Lenny enters Harvard at the age of 16 as a sophomore, there is little doubt that his academic career will be an outstanding success.



Sarah is the best chess player in her class, in her school, and in her hometown. When she finishes the tournaments planned during her third-grade school year, she may be the best chess player in the country. Sarah is good at everything that takes place in school. Her teacher struggles to keep a step ahead of her, especially in math, but she enjoys the challenges that Sarah provides. She knows the school principal plans to offer accelerated coursework to Sarah in a few years, and she hopes Sarah's new teachers will think highly of the work she has done with Sarah.

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Nicholas had always been an excellent creative writer. Most of his teachers described him as the “most gifted writer” they have ever taught. By the age of 12, he was writing pieces that most teachers thought were characteristic of much older students. For the first quarter of his eighth-grade year, Nicholas was an excellent student. His teachers were surprised when his parents decided to enroll Nicholas in a special school. They were not surprised because the school was for gifted students but because they thought Nicholas was happy at his present school. When they asked Nicholas’s parents why he was moving, they said he was bored with school and didn’t enjoy what he did there. They said Nicholas tolerated the work he was assigned because he didn’t want his teachers to feel bad. They also described Nicholas’s real passion, a biography of Eleanor Roosevelt that he was working on every day after school. Nicholas’s teachers described an instructional approach in which students “buy back” school time they were supposed to “spend” in one way so they can spend it in another, and asked his parents to give them a chance to try it before making the school transfer. After a month’s participation in this “curriculum compacting” project, Nicholas decided to stay in his neighborhood school.

Gifted, creative, and talented are terms teachers use to describe students like Lenny, Sarah, and Nicholas. Some people use *genius* to refer to them because their strengths are far beyond even those of their peers who are perceived as smart, bright, or artistic. These are students who can solve problems in traditional and nontraditional ways and who demonstrate consistently high performance in areas requiring considerable mental ability. They also come up with novel solutions that are characterized as “creative,” “imaginative,” “outstanding,” and “brilliant” by very talented judges in their respective fields.

These students are recognized and considered exceptional because of the contributions they make and the performances

they demonstrate. Widely acknowledged figures from the past and present whose contributions are considered far beyond the ordinary include Maya Angelou, Celestino Beltram, Alexander Calder, Marie Curie, Charles Darwin, Albert Einstein, Duke Ellington, Sigmund Freud, Martha Graham, Harvey Itano, Ynez Mexia, Sir Isaac Newton, Alwin Nikolais, Pablo Picasso, Srinivasa Ramanujan, Chu Shin-Chieh, Igor Stravinsky, Andy Warhol, and Laura Ingalls Wilder. Many believe today's students who are gifted and talented will also make outstanding contributions as they progress through life.