

SELECTING AFTER-SCHOOL PROGRAMS

A GUIDE FOR PARENTS

By Dr. Stephen T. Schroth



An appropriate after-school program can create magical interactions between a child and learning. After-school programs focus on a wide variety of options, with some programs emphasizing academic pursuits, such as advanced mathematics or writing, while others stress development of talent in music, drama, dance, or the visual arts. Regardless of program concentration, students are able to focus upon areas of interest, study subjects that are not part of the school curriculum, or discover in ways

that best fit their learning profiles. Many students return to the same program year after year, with this loyalty grounded in deep satisfaction with the offerings provided and the opportunities for student growth. Such offerings have frequently been sponsored in whole or in part by public school systems that sought to provide both educational opportunities for students and a safe and controlled environment for children whose parents work.

Unfortunately, recent budgetary problems in many states have reduced funding schools receive. Federal mandates, including No Child Left Behind, have focused attention on struggling students. Increased assessment has disclosed that many struggling students lack even rudimentary literacy skills. Faced with these issues, many school districts have reduced funding for, or eliminated entirely, after-school programs that focused on enrichment activities. Parents with a gifted child facing such a situation often attempt to augment, or in some cases solely provide, their child's educational opportunities. Opportunities provided within the home, of course, significantly contribute to a child's progress. Popular offerings for outside-the-home enrichment are also an option. Such options include weekend classes, summer enrichment programs, and specialized instruction in areas of interest. Indeed, such opportunities have multiplied in recent years, offered by a variety of sources at an often-astounding cost. If you're a frantic parent, faced with this cornucopia of alternatives for your high-ability child or children, you may feel immobilized by the array of choices available. What, then, should you do? Enroll the child in the most readily available program? Find the program attached to the most prestigious institution? Take out a second mortgage to pay for it all? Do nothing?

Fortunately, if you are searching for an enriching opportunity for your child, you can greatly expedite the process if you ask a few important questions and look closely at a few key components of the options offered. You might consider each option in light of its rigor, appropriateness, and fascination for your child. Additionally, you will seek an environment that ensures your child's safety and speaks to his or her passions. Those programs with a track record of success, of course, can provide such an environ-

ment for a fee. Investigate less expensive options that exist close to home, too, especially for younger students or older children just beginning to develop a new enthusiasm. Thinking about your child's needs in relation to various programs' relative merits will help clarify your decision-making process. Since each child's needs are unique, this article provides a framework through which to examine the panoply of choices available.

Components of Successful Programs

Many factors influence the development of the whole child, including family, community, friends, and relatives. A child's external activities should thus support, or augment, the programs that he or she experiences during the school day. Programs sometimes use a "one-size-fits-all" approach when generating options for children, which overlooks each student's unique strengths and needs. Far too many programs offer a slick brochure, a prestigious setting, and little else. Look for programs that pay attention to your child's learning profile (that combination of factors that influence how students learn best, including learning styles, intelligence preferences, culture, and gender). Quality programs have in common an emphasis on:

- Program focus,
- Quality engagement, and
- Motivation for learning.

Each of these should be present in any program for the development of talent. Table 1 presents some key questions to consider for each of these areas.

Program Focus

The needs of the whole child are differently defined and can be met by various types of after-school programs. While a wide variety of offerings can be deemed after-school programs, gifted children's parents usually seek opportunities that offer academic enrichment and appeal to special interests as divergent as opera

or physics. Programs that allow children to engage in recreational activities or belong to clubs are also popular. Traditionally many after-school programs have focused on a child's academic needs, which often included providing access to foreign languages, writing courses, poetry, or other classes not offered in school. Developing a child's recreational and cultural needs has also been a popular option. The recreational category includes all activities that are social and fun, such as athletics, but also chess clubs, scouting, dramatic undertakings, and the like. Cultural events include music, art, drama, and dance but can similarly be expanded to include woodwork, fishing, and crafts. All options have something to offer.

When faced with the plethora of options available, many parents are understandably uncertain and even confused regarding how to select an effective and appropriate program for their child. It might be best for you to focus on your reason for searching for such an option in the first place—your child's need for above-grade level academic nurturance or the opportunity to explore fields not offered at school. A potential program for gifted students must thus, as part of its mission, develop students' athletic, artistic, or academic talents. Students finding the right program for their needs and talents are often very satisfied. For example, eight-year old Jason was enrolled in the gifted program at his suburban elementary school. While this meant that he met twice a week with a gifted resource specialist, Jason's parents wanted to develop his interest in music, which was not addressed at his school. Enrolling him at a music conservatory for Saturday lessons meant a 90-mile drive each way, but the joy he showed at playing the violin was well worth it. The program Jason entered clearly stressed the development of musical talent as its mission. At a minimum, prospective programs should emphasize the goals for desired student development and growth in their mission statement, their brochures, and their communications. What to look for next depends largely on the age of the child,

Table 1: Key Questions for Parents to Ask When Looking at Programs

	Questions for Parents	
Focus of Program	1) What are my child's talents and interests?	2) Do we want to build upon existing talents or offer exposure to new areas?
Quality of Engagement	1) Is my child at a beginning, intermediate, or expert state of development in his or her area of interest or talent?	2) How advanced are the available courses? What level of supervision is provided? Are there other participants of the same level?
Motivation for Learning	1) How much experience has my child had in his or her area of interest or talent?	2) How much extrinsic motivation does my child need at this time to pursue his or her interest or talent?

Table 2: Developing Levels of Expertise

	Early Exposure	Middle Learning	Perfection of Skills
Time	Initiation to 2 years	2 to 6 years	6 or more years
Focus	Introduction to field	Progression to proficiency	Expertise at a high level of mastery
Location	Near Home (1 to 20 miles of interest or talent)	Regional (20 to 100 miles)	National (anywhere in the country)
Cost	Inexpensive	Moderate	Expensive
Motivation	Extrinsic; positive reinforcement	Self-interest; increased commitment	Intrinsic; self-motivated

as needs change as the student passes from early exposure to middle learning, and finally, to perfection of skills (see Table 2).

Quality Engagement

Any program must have quality adult supervision and leadership to be effective. At an early age, or early in the development of a particular talent, the key role of the mentor, teacher, counselor, or troop leader is to make learning fascinating and worthwhile for the child. The programs that are most useful to children in the early stages of development are often easily accessible, in that such programs are plentiful, inexpensive, and easy to find. Early-stage programs are often provided by local schools, museums, or sporting facilities. These programs make learning enjoyable and provide a great deal of positive reinforcement. After several years of progress, the students, their parents, family friends, an expert, or the initial teacher, may suggest that even greater progress might be made with a more specialized program.

This new program is seldom located in the child’s neighborhood. The new program frequently is some distance away, has a reputation for developing talent in the field, charges a great deal for lessons, and is selective about the students selected for tutelage. These new programs often have a significant reputation in their field, and are affiliated with orchestras, sporting facilities, or universities. Students are frequently referred by friends or colleagues met during the early stage of development. Marisol, for example, had participated in ice skating at a local center since the age of four. When she was nine, her parents were told about a more advanced summer program by her initial coach. The summer program led to her meeting the coach who helped her prepare to compete in the Olympics. While not all students will demonstrate this level of devotion or enjoy this type of success, those who do progress to the final stages of talent development seek a master teacher or coach, usually one recognized as being among the ten best in the country. These master teachers and coaches have repu-

tations for developing great talent in their chosen fields. Students expend much effort and expense in obtaining an interview or audition with the master teacher. The cost of lessons is even more expensive. When finished with the master teacher, the students themselves are recognized practioners in the chosen field.

Motivation for Learning

Recognition from others, rewards, and acknowledgment from a larger group of people often are essential during the early stages of talent development. Motivation of this type often assists learners in the early stages to persevere and continue with learning. Status as being a “special student” or “fast learner,” actual or perceived, also assists early talent development. As learners move to a more mature stage, increasing commitment to the chosen field is a symbol of this transition. Teachers assist students in setting short- and long-term goals, and initiate the student into the meaning and purpose of the field of study. Students also begin to see how they could become a part of the talent field. As more and more of the students’ friends come from the field of interest, students begin to see themselves as “athletes” (i.e., sprinter or swimmer), “artists” (i.e., painter or sculptor), or “academics” (i.e., historian or writer).

Motivation shifts from external to intrinsic. Finally, those pursuing talent at the highest levels become responsible for their own motivation. The students participate in public forums, for objective prizes, such as recitals, publication, or rewards. The students, as much as the master teacher, evaluate their own performance and ways of improving preparation and effort. For example, César, a precocious math whiz, went to math camp at age eight mainly because he liked socializing with the other campers and enjoyed the trophy he received for participating. After several summers of this, César began to identify with the counselors and instructors at the camp, many of whom were former campers. César ultimately pursued college-level calculus while still

in middle school based upon his love for the subject. Intrinsic motivation thus typically evolves over time and follows a period in which the child is encouraged to participate. César's evolution to an intrinsically motivated mathematician thus came after a period when extrinsic rewards drove his interest.

Program Options

This article focuses on those searching for outlets to develop their children's talent at the early level, which can be expressed as any point from early elementary school through the beginning of high school. The reason for this emphasis is simple; those with children further along in the process have, by virtue of their exposure to the programs, more contact to the "next steps" necessary. But where to begin? The focus needs to be on programs that focus on the academic, artistic, or athletic development of the student. Additionally, and especially with academic programs, there should be an emphasis on higher-order thinking skills, such as application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. An emphasis should be placed upon both process and content, so that students develop creative thinking and problem-solving skills while also becoming familiar with subject matter through the projects and activities by which the processes are developed. Places where such development is available include Saturday Programs, Summer Programs, Academic Competitions, and other local resources.

Saturday Programs

Saturday Programs offer the attractive enticement of allowing gifted students the chance to interact and work with others away from the routines and pressures of the regular school setting. Usually taught in the form of seminars, discussion groups, or mini-classes, Saturday Programs allow in-depth coverage of one or several topics of intense interest to the student. College professors, graduate students, master teachers, or museum or symphony orchestra members or staff often teach such classes. Teachers, both those who work in the regular classroom or in school gifted programs, are often a good source of information about such programs. Music and art teachers may also know of programs related to their specialties of which others are unaware. Such programs are often advertised in local papers and at community art centers, as well as at the host institutions themselves. Parents will want to investigate the qualifications and experience of the teachers leading the sessions as well as to talk to parents whose children have participated in previous years.

Summer Programs

Summer programs usually constitute two distinct varieties, those sponsored by universities and those that are sponsored by art museums, music conservatories, and other cultural institutions. University-sponsored programs are often residential in nature, and offer the students an opportunity to explore in depth a subject of interest to them. Many prominent schools, such as Stanford, Johns Hopkins, Northwestern, Purdue, and the University of Virginia offer such programs for gifted students on an annual basis. Many art and music organizations, as

well as some universities, also sponsor music, art, and language camps to build individual skills. Examples of such programs include the Interlochen Center for the Arts, the Pueblo Opera Program, the Peabody Institute, and the Tanglewood Music Festival. While many art and music programs are not specifically geared toward the gifted, the process of self-selection often ensures a high level of bright, motivated students keenly interested in a particular area.

Although ivy-laden quadrangles or sylvan settings may bedazzle students, one special area of concern to many parents will be the level of supervision a particular program offers. In these uncertain times, many parents have legitimate concerns about the safety of their children when away from home, especially if this is the first time. It is essential that parents ascertain the level of security and supervision the program demands, not just that offered. There is a difference between the option of adult-supervised activities and the requirement that students take part. Parents should choose a program that mirrors their own philosophy of parenting; they, and their children, will be happy to have done so.

Academic Competitions

Many students enrich their school experience through involvement in an academic competition. Although school budget cut-backs and testing pressures have threatened many programs, parents can often sponsor such activities as an after-school endeavor. These activities can be team-oriented or individual in nature. Some options among the many available include the Academic Decathlon, Destination ImagiNation®, the Future Problem Solving Program, Mock Court, and Odyssey of the Mind. Academic Decathlon is a high school program that features competitions between teams from different schools. The teams are composed of two "A," "B," and "C" students in the 11th and 12th grades. Teams compete against schools of a similar size in areas such as mathematics, physical science, social studies, fine arts, essay writing, and conversation skills. Destination ImagiNation® and Odyssey of the Mind also feature competitions between teams, but focus more on building creative thinking, problem solving, self-confidence, and self-image. Divided into three age classifications, roughly mirroring elementary, middle, and high school, Odyssey of the Mind and Destination ImagiNation® teams each include seven students, only five of whom compete in formal competitions. Founded by creativity pioneer, the late E. Paul Torrance, the Future Problem Solving Program seeks to stimulate critical and creative thinking and problem-solving skills, and encourages students to develop a vision for the future. Mock Trial is designed for high school students, especially those interested in law or politics or both. Local, regional, and state competitions are held to judge students' performance in each of four roles of a given case. Such programs build students' oral advocacy, presentation, and logical reasoning skills.

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Conclusion

Parents concerned that their children are not receiving adequate challenge in school have an unprecedented array of choices available to them. If schools provide inadequate services for gifted learners, enrichment services can become a lifeline for certain students. When examining choices, parents should look for those programs that focus on the academic, athletic, or artistic talents of their child. Good programs have certain traits in common. All have a well-defined focus, quality teaching, and motivate their students to strive for peak performance. Programs with these qualities allow gifted students to investigate an area of interest and to develop lifelong love of a field. Gifted students enrolled in such programs have the opportunity to make new friends and expand their horizons in ways that can have a life-changing effect.

Recommended Resources

Bloom, B. S. (1985). Generalizations about talent development. In B. S. Bloom (Ed.), *Developing Talent in Young People* (pp. 507-549). New York: Ballantine Books.

Bronfenbrenner, U. (1986). Alienation and the four worlds of childhood. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 67, 430-436.

Davis, G. A., & Rimm, S. B. (2003). *Education of the Gifted and Talented* (5th ed.). Boston: Allyn & Bacon.

Fashola, O. S. (1998). *Review of Extended-day and After-school Programs and Their Effectiveness* (Rep. No. 24). Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University, the Center for Research on the Education of Students Placed at Risk.

Subotnik, R. F., Olszewski-Kubilius, P., & Arnold, K. D. (2003). Beyond Bloom: Revisiting environmental factors that enhance or impede talent development. In J. Borland (Ed.), *Rethinking Gifted Education*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Van Tassel-Baska, J. L. (Ed.). (2006). *Serving Gifted Learners Beyond the Traditional Classroom: A Guide to Alternative Programs and Services*. Waco, TX: Prufrock Press.

Online Resources

After School Alliance <http://www.afterschoolalliance.org>

The After School Corporation <http://www.tascorp.org>

Education First <http://www.ef.com/>

Institute for Educational Advancement Program Database <http://www.educationaladvancement.org/resources/search/programs.php>

National After School Association <http://www.naaweb.org>

National Association for Gifted Children <http://www.nagc.org>

Talent Search <http://www.jhu.edu/~gifted/>

Academic and Enrichment Competitions

Odyssey of the Mind <http://www.odysseyofthemind.com/>

Destination ImagiNation <http://www.destinationimagination.org/>

Academic Decathlon <http://www.usad.org/>

Future Problem Solving <http://www.fpsp.org/>

Mock Trial <http://www.nationalmocktrial.org/>

Arts and Music Organizations

Tanglewood Music Festival <http://www.tanglewood.org/>

Pueblo Opera Program <http://www.santafeopera.org/>

Peabody Institute <http://www.peabody.jhu.edu/>

Interlochen Center for the Arts <http://www.interlochen.org/>

Examples of University

Enrichment Programs

College of William & Mary <http://cfge.wm.edu/sep.php>

The Johns Hopkins University <http://cty.jhu.edu/summer>

Northwestern University <http://www.ctd.northwestern.edu/sep/>

University of Virginia http://curry.edschool.virginia.edu/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=713&Itemid=67

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