

Letting Go While Holding On

Dear Parent,

Teaching our children to self-advocate is a lifelong gift. Though all people would benefit from speaking up for themselves, it's especially important for outliers like gifted kids. As they transition into middle and high school, they can begin to take charge of their own academic path.

Your child may be reticent about self-advocating because she believes the same myths as many misinformed adults: Gifted kids have it made. They don't need help. Other students have greater needs.

You can help your child understand that she not only has the right to an appropriate education, but she has a responsibility to lead the process.

As parents, you are the primary source of support for your child. To be effective, however, you must be knowledgeable. Both you and your child need to understand the nature of giftedness, your rights within the educational system, your child's learner profile, and possible options and alternatives.

Working together empowers your child to self-advocate for the rest of his life.

Deb Douglas

*The Power of Self-Advocacy for Gifted Learners:
Teaching the Four Essential Steps to Success*



1 Begin by gathering information. Read and discuss:

- *The Gifted Teen Survival Guide: Smart, Sharp, and Ready for Almost Anything*, a good overview written for kids by Judy Galbraith and Jim Delisle (2011).
- Your school district's mission statement and its implications for gifted children.
- Your district's policies and plans regarding gifted education.
- Any state or provincial laws regarding gifted students' education.

2 Together consider options that match your child's learner profile.

- Help your child assess and reflect on her learner profile in five areas: cognitive ability, academic strengths, interests, learning preferences, and personal traits.
- Study your district's *Course of Study* booklet and, for comparison, those of neighboring districts.
- Discuss which options are available, which might be added, and which are best for your student.

3 Plan for success. Help your child take the lead in each of these:

- Choose a short- or long-term goal and create a step-by-step plan to achieve it.
- Communicate the plan to the adult advocates who can help make it happen.
- Put the plan into action.
- Regularly assess progress and make revisions as needed.
- Celebrate the student's success.
- Choose a new goal and begin again and again, each time with your child taking on more and more responsibility.

Self-advocacy is the process of recognizing and meeting the needs specific to your learning ability without compromising the dignity of yourself or others.

-Loring C. Brinckerhoff

Please share the article on the following pages with your gifted child. If your learner is ready, willing, and able to begin taking charge of his own education, your support and feedback at every step of the process may be your most important advocacy role from now on.

Changing BLAH to AHHHHH!

Dear Student,

I'll bet you were handed this article by a super supportive parent who has been making important school decisions for you forever. But this school year may be the right time for you to reverse those roles and take charge of your own education.

Why? Because no one knows better than you what is going on in your head when you leave for school each day, sit in classes, walk the halls, and do your homework. You may not feel that this school thing is all it could be, even if you have high test scores and earn good grades.

Toni felt that way. She didn't mind school, but science and math never went deep enough or fast enough. Language arts meant books she'd read long ago. Band was fun, but the music was too easy. So she spent hour after hour and day after day waiting for something interesting and challenging.

Like Toni, you have the right to learn something new every day. The question is, what do you want to do differently? Read on to find out how you can change "blah" into "ahhhhh!"

Your Ambassador of Self-Advocacy,
Ms. Douglas

Your Rights

It's not wrong to want something different. In fact, it's your right. Look at what the Federal Definition of Gifted and Talented says:

Federal Definition of Gifted and Talented

"The term 'gifted and talented' means [those] who give evidence of high achievement capability in such areas as intellectual, creative, artistic, or leadership capacity, or in specific academic fields, and who need services or activities not ordinarily provided by the school in order to fully develop those capabilities."¹

Your Responsibility

As a student with "high achievement capability," you also have a responsibility to take charge of your own education.



The Sky's the Limit

Of course, gifted kids are as different from each other as they are alike. But no matter what your unique strengths, interests, or personal preferences might be, there is no limit to what changes you might propose. Here are some ideas of what could be modified. There's more about the "how" in a bit.

FIND APPROPRIATELY CHALLENGING ACADEMIC WORK

Do your classes move too slowly or do your assignments seem too easy?

These options might help: compact a class, test out of a class, replace a class with independent study, or accelerate in a subject or even a whole grade level.

First step? Choose a goal. Here are some "greater challenge" goal examples:

- Finish both algebra and geometry in 8th grade.
- Do civics as an independent study.
- Skip 8th grade English.
- Take as many science classes as possible.
- Enroll in college classes during high school.

For example, *Panhia's language arts skills were far above grade level, so her 8th grade teacher helped her set up an independent study. Instead of the regular curriculum she did an extensive comparison study of Harry Potter, The Lord of the Rings, and King Arthur. She also worked on individual creative writing projects and published a student anthology involving the whole school.*



Do you spend much of your school time in mixed-ability classes?

If you want more contact with kids who have similar abilities, try one of these options: residential and semester schools, study groups, summer programs, and extra-curricular clubs and teams.

"Hang out with other kids" examples:

- Join a writers group.
- Find other kids who want to learn to speak Tolkien Elvish.
- Check into Talent Search summer programs.
- Start a philosophy club.
- Find an online gifted kids community.

For example, *José created an academic quiz bowl and set up team practices and competitions during lunch. Although the team was open to any student, it primarily drew those kids who had a wide range of academic knowledge, enjoyed intellectual activities, and could hold their own in the friendly but competitive environment.*

SPEND MORE TIME WITH OTHER GIFTED KIDS



EXPLORE AN INTEREST

Is there something you're passionate about studying that isn't covered in your classes or offered in school?

Try one of these options: online courses, college classes, independent study, out-of-school mentorships, and community volunteer opportunities.

"Follow my passion" examples:

- Study Latin.
- Learn more about animation and Photoshop at the community college.
- Study in Sweden my last year in high school.
- Get a mentorship with the National Weather Service.

For example, *Sam was interested in medicine and thought he might want to be a doctor. He designed a mentorship/independent study that was approved by his high school and the local hospital administration. Every day after school he volunteered in the pathology lab, observing and assisting in whatever ways were legal and ethical. The physicians were so impressed with his work, they received permission for him to attend an autopsy—a thrill for Sam!*

MAKE ADJUSTMENTS TO MEET YOUR PERSONAL NEEDS

Do you need to make changes in school or at home in order to match some of your personal characteristics? It's possible that traits like perfectionism, motivation, introversion, or intensities can add to or get in the way of your success.

"Adjust life to suit needs" examples:

- Create a quiet study hall at school.
- Figure out why I procrastinate.
- Start a support group for perfectionists.
- Change my math class to the afternoon.
- Set up the perfect study space at home.

For example, Lucia was a night owl by nature and was able to change her

schedule so P.E. was her "wake-up" class first thing in the morning, and her most demanding classes were in the afternoon when her mind was more alert. Alan couldn't tolerate eating breakfast early in the morning. So, he got permission to stop in his counselor's office and eat a healthy snack mid-morning.

Getting Started

If you're tired of the same old, same old, you can fix that! But wishing for change won't make it happen. You need to self-advocate—know what you want and make it happen.

Take a moment to reflect on these questions:

How happy are you with the way things are going right now?

Do you ever find your school day dragging? If so, when?

Do you find classes too easy, homework a drag, or group work frustrating?

Is there something big or little that you'd like to change? If so, what?

Plan Carefully

A four-column template is an easy way to get organized:

- Write down every step you need to follow in order to get from "here" to "there."
- Write the name of the person responsible for that step.
- Write the date that step will be completed.
- Check when done.

An action plan for math might begin this way:

GOAL: PRE-TEST OUT OF SOME MATH UNITS

Step	Person	Date	Done
Research examples of pre-testing	Mom & me	Sept 1	✓
Look through math textbook	Me	Sept 5	
List concepts I feel I've mastered	Me	Sept 5	
Discuss the best way to approach my math teacher	Mom & me	Sept 5	
Make appointment to talk to my teacher	Me	Sept 6	

Don't take shortcuts when trying to bring about change. Being well informed, choosing your goal carefully, and articulating your plan clearly to others are three important steps. See *10 Tips for Talking to Teachers* on the next page.

LET YOUR DREAMS SOAR

Your path to graduation and beyond can (and should) be as unique as you are. What will make you look forward to each new day? What adventures, investigations, contemplations, or collaborations will inspire you?

Imagine where you want to be tomorrow, next month, next year, 5, 10, or 20 years down the road, but be ready to change your destination as you experience more and more of life.

Remember, when you take charge through self-advocacy you can bring joy to each step of the journey. 🌟



10 TIPS FOR TALKING TO TEACHERS²

1. Make an appointment to meet and talk.
2. If you know other students who feel the way you do, consider approaching the teacher together.
3. Think through what you want to say before going into your meeting with the teacher.
4. Choose your words carefully.
5. Don't expect the teacher to do all of the work or propose all of the answers...make suggestions, offer solutions, bring resources.
6. Be diplomatic, tactful, and respectful.
7. Focus on what you need, not what you think the teacher is doing wrong.
8. Don't forget to listen.
9. Bring your sense of humor (not joke-telling kind, but ability to laugh at misunderstandings and mistakes).
10. If your meeting isn't successful, get help from another adult.

ENDNOTES

¹ U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement. (1993). *National excellence: A case for developing America's talent*. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.

² Galbraith, J., & Delisle, J. (2011). 10 tips for talking to teachers. *The gifted teen survival guide: Smart, sharp, and ready for (almost) anything* (4th ed.) (pp. 133). Minneapolis, MN: Free Spirit Publishing.

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