

# Gifted Dropouts: How This Dutch Program Helps Struggling Students Get Back On Track

By Tijn Koenderink and Femke Hovinga

Meet Freddy, a fictional representative of a teenage gifted child. Diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder by a school psychologist, 15-year-old Freddy didn't have friends in school, faced daily bullying, and received grades well below average. While he was technically qualified to go to a pre-university track school, he ended up in a vocational program, where he grew severely depressed, missed peers to study and spend time with, and wasn't challenged at all. As winter came, he decided not to conform to rules and regulations anymore. He was deemed unteachable and dropped out of the school system, with nowhere to go.

## Dutch Mentality

Unfortunately, Freddy's story is not unique in the Netherlands. The Netherlands is a tiny country. (In fact, it fits into the United States 237 times.) The small population of about 17 million speak Dutch, and inhabitants are known to be tolerant and direct. The national credo, however, may just be, freely translated: *"Please behave normally, because that's crazy enough."* Interestingly, the Dutch tend to put a lot of effort and financing into programs similar to No Child Left Behind,

while historically putting very little emphasis on educating top performers.

These cultural traits feed a popular misconception that is held not just in the Netherlands, but worldwide: that gifted children always receive high grades and test scores. In reality, the correlation between IQ and school performance goes down as the level of education goes up.<sup>1</sup> A bright mind, like Freddy's, is not automatically a high achiever.

## Reasons for Dropping Out

So why are gifted students, despite their talents, at risk for dropping out? Research shows that gifted dropouts start to cognitively disengage during the elementary school years, as their learning environment becomes less stimulating.<sup>2</sup> Three factors lead to dropping out: factors that *push* children out of school, such as failing classes; those that *pull* students from school, such as anxiety, pregnancy, or illness; and factors that cause kids to *fall out*, or disengage. This means students do not see significant improvement in the affective and/or academic aspects of their schooling over time and disengage. Environmental factors play a role too, as Joseph Renzulli and Sunghee Park state in their research: Many gifted dropouts are from low socioeconomic-status families and racial minority groups, have parents with low levels of education, and participate less in extracurricular activities.<sup>3</sup>

"Falling out" of education is a rampant problem among gifted children and adults



in the Netherlands. In fact, the Institute for Gifted Adults in the Netherlands indicates that only 60% of gifted adults have a diploma that matches their learning potential.<sup>4</sup> An educated guess is that one-third of the gifted adults are unhappy with where they are in their lives and careers. Furthermore, high school dropouts are 30.8% more likely to live in poverty and have a 63% higher chance of being incarcerated.<sup>5</sup> The loss of talent and production for society is also enormous, with an estimated cost of more than €600,000.<sup>6</sup> The good news: As a parent or teacher you can make the difference by seeing the whole gifted child, creating materials to match educational needs, and advocating for appropriate programs and services.

### Fitting Education: The Dutch Way

In the Netherlands, we do several things to prevent gifted kids from dropping out. The Dutch variety of No Child Left Behind is called *fitting education*, which, at its most basic level, is a regional budget allocated to schools in order to keep as many children as possible in regular education. This is partially possible because a majority of Dutch schools are public: Only 0.04% of students receive private education.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, people with proven extra needs are sometimes eligible for personal budgets for mental healthcare.

### Feniks Talent: Dropout Center

So, what about our representative gifted teenager, Freddy? Freddy's parents searched for solutions, now that their teenager stayed home, gaming, and eating candy all day. They soon encountered Feniks Talent, a dropout center that is one of a kind. Feniks Talent focuses solely on gifted dropouts, many of whom are twice-exceptional. Feniks Talent staff estimate that 75% of the youth they serve (10–22 years old) come in with a trauma, many who are depressed or suicidal. This is often related to school or self-image.

At Feniks Talent, staff gather gifted youth in groups of 60, exposing them to the peer group that many never encountered in their school career. In these group sessions, students learn how to develop and reintegrate into society, either through school or through learning on the job.

Feniks Talent follows a six-step procedure, based on decades of experience with dropouts and insights from literature:

**Recover and stabilize.** These dropouts are often depressed, lonely, and exhausted. They need to build up stamina to go out into the world on a daily basis.

**Activate.** Using small steps, students sample and experience different things, proving to themselves that indeed they can learn and have interests.

**Participate.** They take part in the programs that are offered, varying from traditional educational classes like math and language arts to less traditional areas of study like mindfulness, woodworking, and design. This is the step which stimulates

long-term commitment to education.

**Learn and develop talent.** What is it that makes them different from others? Are they self-confident in those areas? Slowly, students begin to pursue specific areas and meet goals.

**Explore.** They widen their vision by talking to others outside of the center at other programs, schools, and jobs. Together with staff, the youth look at options for internships, direct application (skipping high school) in specific vocational or arts programs, or any type of meaningful joyful future.

**Fly out!** Students go out on their own—with follow-up coaching and counseling provided.



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## What can you do to prevent your child from dropping out?

As gifted children progress through school, they may grow more and more disengaged. Luckily, there are many ways you can help your child stay on track.

- 1. Help your child learn how to study.** A major reason for dropping out is the lack of information about how to study, so the student focuses only on memorizing the material, not understanding it.
- 2. Look for common signs.** Often, it takes years for a child to get to the point of dropping out. Keep an eye out for indicators such as fear of failure, absolute underachieving (failing classes), relative underachieving ("ok" grades below her ability), feeling mentally unwell, and expressing loneliness and a lack of challenge.
- 3. Talk!** Even though teenagers are often not very keen on long conversations with their parents, try to talk about what school was like for you, or use examples of successful people who are gifted or twice-exceptional.
- 4. Seek outside help and support when needed.** This can vary from alternative therapists to a psychologist, depending on the challenge you are dealing with. Often, it will not be a "one-stop shop," but rather a puzzle with different pieces from different therapies, classes, and people.
- 5. Advocate.** Self-advocacy is very important, as much for you as a parent as for your child.
- 6. Reach out.** Peers are very important for your child, whether they are in school or elsewhere. We have seen how children's well-being can improve for weeks after spending a couple of hours with kindred spirits.

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The Feniks Talent youngsters typically come in four days a week for the duration of a year. Depending on their needs, they are guided by professional counselors, subject matter experts, and educational psychologists. All children have a mentor who tracks their day-to-day progress. Interestingly, a majority of the Feniks Talent youth come in with a diagnosis. Some of them “recover” from their misdiagnoses of Autism Spectrum Disorder or ADHD at the dropout center.

Feniks alumni are everywhere, from studying at universities to learning on the job. This includes our dropout Freddy, who now takes part in a project that combines work with education. ♡

## Resources

### Web

**Feniks Talent** (*In Dutch but Google Translate may help*):  
[www.fenikstalent.nl](http://www.fenikstalent.nl)

**SENG (Supporting Emotional Needs of the Gifted)**  
[www.sengifted.org](http://www.sengifted.org)

### Books

Douglas, D. (2017). *The power of self-advocacy for gifted learners: Teaching the four essential steps to success*. Minneapolis, MN: Free Spirit.

Galbraith, J., & Delisle, J. (2015). 10 tips for talking to teachers. In *When gifted kids don't have all the answers* (Rev. ed.). Minneapolis, MN: Free Spirit.

Galbraith, J., & Delisle, J. (2011). *The gifted teen survival guide: Smart, sharp, and ready for (almost) anything*. Minneapolis, MN: Free Spirit.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Chamorro-Premuzic, T., & Furnham, A. (2005). *Personality and intellectual competence*. Mahway, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- <sup>2</sup> Hansen, J., & Toso, S. (2007). Gifted dropouts: Personality, family, social, and school factors. *Gifted Child Today*, 30(4).
- <sup>3</sup> Renzulli, J., & Park, S. (2000). Gifted dropouts: The who and the why. *Gifted Child Quarterly*, 44(4), 261–271.
- <sup>4</sup> Emans, B., Visscher, E., & Nauta, N. (2017). Heel slim en toch zonder werk, hoe kan dat. Retrieved from [www.ihbv.nl](http://www.ihbv.nl)
- <sup>5</sup> Breslow, J. M. (2012, Sept 21). By the numbers: Dropping out of high school. *Frontline*. Retrieved from: <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/by-the-numbers-dropping-out-of-high-school>
- <sup>6</sup> Netherlands Bureau for Economic Policy Analysis. (18 August 2009). *Budgettaire effect samenvoeging WWB, Wajong en WSW*. Retrieved from <https://www.cpb.nl/sites/default/files/publicaties/download/budgettaire-effect-samenvoeging-wwb-wajong-en-wsw.pdf>
- <sup>7</sup> Van der Wel, J. J., & Van der Ploeg, S.W. (2005). *Particulier onderwijs in Nederland*.

## Authors' Note

**Tijl Koenderink** is a textbook case of education gone wrong. Despite a high IQ, he was an underachiever and severely depressed in high school. Now, Tijl focuses on underachieving bright students, many of whom have dropped out of school and society. He is the founder and CEO of dropout center Feniks Talent, the founding board member and principal of the School of Understanding, and the co-founder and head trainer at Take On Talents.

**Femke Hovinga** knows first-hand what kind of struggles extreme giftedness can cause while finding one's way through the educational system. Despite her struggles, she graduated with a master's in management from Nyenrode Business University. She is the executive director of Supporting Emotional Needs of the Gifted (SENG) in Europe, coaches highly and profoundly gifted children, and runs a recruitment agency to help gifted adults find work.

