Finding Your Child’s Best Educational Fit

By Dr. Ellen Honeck and Anne Johnson, NAGC Special Schools & Programs Network

Once your child is identified as gifted and talented, the next question you may ask is, “Which educational environment is the best fit for my child?”

Answers to that question are as individual as the family and the child being served. And, because the quality and variety of programs and services vary significantly throughout the country, available educational environments differ by geographic location. A gifted program available in New York City, for example, might not be available in Kickapoo, Kansas.

Understanding Your Child and Family

Before starting your research, it’s important to reflect on your child’s unique needs and what qualities your family seeks in an educational community. If a school has a wonderful program but is in conflict with your personal beliefs, it won’t be a good match. Ask yourself the following questions:

• What educational settings, programs, or services did you participate in as a child or young adult? What were the positives and negatives about that setting?
• Is that what you want for your child, or something different?
• Are you committed to a public educational setting, or would you consider an alternative setting, such as a private, independent, or faith-based school—or homeschooling?
• How important are standardized test scores and/or school rankings?
• Reflect honestly on your child and his/her individual needs:
  – Is your child working above age peers? At age level? Does he/she need an accelerated program of study?
  – In what areas does your child demonstrate a talent or exceptional area of strength: academics, arts, technology, or athletics?
  – Is your child twice-exceptional? Does she have a need for specialized programming to support her learning differences?
  – Does your child work well in a small or large environment?
  – Does your child struggle with transitions?
  – Are peer relationships important to your child?
• What are your goals for your child and his/her educational setting? If he is old enough, what goals does your child have for himself?
  – What part do you want the educational community to play in the area of spiritual and/or character development?
• What kind of social and emotional support/curriculum/program would be beneficial to your child?

Setting Goals

In Re-Forming Gifted Education, Karen Rogers offers four guidelines in setting educational goals and in evaluating whether a program meets those goals:

• Does it provide for academic progress?
• Does it remediate academic weakness?
• Does it enhance psychological adjustment?
• Does it provide for socialization?

Rogers reminds parents that it’s important to be honest with yourself about expectations, and to realize that you may be looking for a “best” fit, and not necessarily a “perfect” fit for your child and family.

Types of Schools, Programs, and Options

School structures vary according to their goals and the students they serve. Various types of schools include charter, magnet, private, gifted, and online or blended learning environments (combination of classroom and online learning).

Charter. These are tuition-free public schools open to all children, with no special entrance requirements. Often there is a unique school culture or focus (STEM,
arts, project-based, etc.), and while the school receives public funds, they operate autonomously in exchange for accountability of results.

**Magnet.** Magnet schools are free public elementary or secondary schools that focus on specific subject, vocation, or curriculum [such as STEM, International Baccalaureate (IB), or World Languages]. There is generally a lottery system for entrance (no entrance criteria), and diversity is an important element.

**Private.** Private schools may be faith-based or independent, and are typically based on a particular philosophy or focus (e.g. Montessori, Waldorf, project-based, highly gifted, arts, trade, STEM). They charge tuition, and many offer financial aid. Applicants must meet entrance requirements specific to the school.

**Gifted Schools.** Gifted schools, private or public, provide an “immersive” experience where the entire population of the school is gifted, offering gifted students an opportunity to interact with like-minded peers across all grade levels. Applicants must meet specific entrance requirements.

**Online Schools.** Public or private, online schools remove the confines of a physical classroom, and students access classes online via home computer. Teachers work online with students in a virtual classroom environment for instruction and work evaluation.

**Blended Learning.** A blended learning environment combines a traditional brick-and-mortar classroom experience with online instruction. The amount of face-to-face time is dependent on each program, and provides an opportunity for peer interactions and socialization.

**Homeschooling.** Homeschooling is the process of educating school-aged children at home rather than at a school. Homeschooling parents can use a variety of methods to teach their children and focus on areas that their children find interesting and excel in the most. Parents can tailor their lessons to fit their child’s abilities, maturity and interest, while

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**Know Education Lingo!**

**Push-in.** Gifted education teacher comes into the classroom to provide differentiation for the gifted learners in that specific classroom.

**Pull-out.** Students leave the regular classroom to meet with a gifted education teacher for certain content (often a math or language arts-based group).

**Cluster group.** A small group of gifted students are grouped together, within a regular classroom for more challenging instruction.

**Self-contained classes.** All students in the classroom are identified as gifted and stay with their class and the content is differentiated within the context of their classroom. This might also include a magnet program or school, or a “school within a school.”

**Ability groups.** Children are placed in groups based on ability and skill level, either contained within the classroom or between classrooms.
meeting homeschool curriculum standards for their state.

In addition to reviewing the types of schools options available, it’s important to consider the programs within each school. Some schools address the needs of gifted learners through the push-in/pull-out program method; others may choose to cluster group, ability group, or even have self-contained classes. It’s important to understand the educational lingo in order to effectively speak with school and program administrators in your quest to find the best educational fit for your child. (See sidebar on page 21.)

The Evaluation Process

Gather information. Start your information gathering process via the Internet. Visit school and program websites to obtain the most accurate information. Look for the following items:

- Statement of mission, philosophy, and goals
- Approach of curriculum offered (hands-on, textbook-based)
- Focus on gifted learners or statement about gifted education services
- Quality of faculty and staff (How long they have been in the field of education? What types of professional development do they experience? Is the faculty trained in gifted education?)
- How the program is implemented

Visit schools and/or programs. It’s important to physically visit the school or program to get a better sense of the actual environment. Some things to do when visiting:

- Ask questions.
- Look at the environment (children’s work on wall, students engaged in the classrooms).
- Talk with faculty, students, and parents (as available).
- Determine admissions requirements, processes, and fees (if any).

Identify your choices. After researching the options and visiting the programs, you’ll need to identify your top choices. When considering the options, you should note the following:

- Is it a fit for your child and family?
- Does your child meet the admissions requirements?
- Do you understand the financial obligations? Volunteer commitments?
- Is the commute time or transportation feasible?

Go for it! Remember that your child’s priorities and needs will change throughout her academic career—this doesn’t have to be a school for life! A school that is appropriate for your young student may not be a good fit in later elementary school. When things no longer feel “right,” learning needs aren’t being met, or your child exhibits a change in behavior or attitude toward school, it might be time to look again for a different environment.
Conclusion
Finding a school or program for your child can be a very stressful process. However, there are lots of resources out there, and many parents who have been on this journey are willing to help. The most important thing is to jump in: Reflect on your goals and get the process started.

Resources
Gifted Development Center
http://www.gifteddevelopment.com/resources/schools-gifted
Hoagies’ Gifted
http://www.hoagiesgifted.org/schools.htm
International Association for K–12 Online Learning
http://www.inacol.org/our-work
Magnet Schools of America
http://www.magnet.edu/about/what-are-magnet-schools
National Alliance for Public Charter Schools
http://www.publiccharters.org/get-the-facts/public-charter-schools
National Association for Gifted Children
http://www.nagc.org/resources-publications/gifted-state
The Special Schools & Programs Network believes that gifted and talented students are served in a variety of alternative settings, such as private independent schools, magnet, or specialty schools; Saturday or summer programs; and university-sponsored schools and institutes. The Network promotes alternative, experimental, comprehensive services to gifted individuals beyond traditional public school settings, and reports findings and activities practiced in special schools and programs in order to benefit all gifted students.

Authors’ Note
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Endnotes

Ask the Creativity Experts!

Q. As a parent, what can I do to help my child be innovative?

A. Most children are born with the potential to be innovators, but need to be exposed to and embrace three elements in order to become one:

1. Similar to nurturing a garden, children need creative climates to grow and flourish. They need diverse resources and experiences, inspiration and encouragement, high expectations and challenges, and freedom to be alone and unique.

2. Creative attitudes such as open-mindedness, biculturalism, complexity-seeking, curiosity, playfulness, spontaneity, independence, resilience, persistence, compassion, and self-reflection are all attitudes that help children become resourceful and resilient hard workers.

3. Lastly, children must apply creative thinking skills to facilitate innovation. “Inbox, Outbox, Newbox,” is one method for analyzing and evaluating ideas. “Inbox” thinking works like a zoom lens, helping children zoom in on narrow knowledge and to look closely at details. “Outbox” or outside-the-box thinking is quick and broad, working like a wide-angle lens to take a broad field of view and imagine many spontaneous approaches to a problem or opportunity. “Newbox” combines the elements of both Inbox and Outbox, transforming them into a new creation (or Newbox). This process of analyzing, refining, and synthesizing unrelated ideas into a creation, is what is ultimately recognized as an innovation by others.

Parents are essential in ensuring their gifted children are raised in home and school environments that foster these elements so that they have the right skills to become innovators.

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