

What Gifted Students Need From You

By Anthony S. Colucci

Can you imagine having a young Mark Zuckerberg in your classroom? What about Lady Gaga in her preteen years? Both participated in gifted and talented programs when they were students.

Today, the National Association of Gifted Children estimates that nearly three million American students are gifted and talented. Teaching these students can be rewarding: They often learn new skills quickly, absorb oodles of information, take on leadership roles, and eagerly employ higher-order thinking skills. But to truly meet the needs of gifted students—especially those who, like Mark Zuckerberg and Lady Gaga, may have an independent streak—can be challenging. Here are some practical tips to help you get started:

Find out what "gifted" means in your district or state.

States and districts are not required to use [the federal government's definition](#) of "gifted and talented," so there is considerable diversity in how these students are evaluated for gifted programs. Some states focus on students who score well on report cards or standardized tests, some rely on IQ scores, and others have more nuanced assessments.

Help identify students who qualify for "gifted and talented programs"—and those who do not but might need individualized supports.

Knowing your district's definition of "gifted and talented" will help you match students with the supports they need. Don't shy away from recommending students for an evaluation—it's generally an easy process and can be life-changing for some students. If your state is one that takes measures other than grades or standardized test scores into account, reviewing [a list of characteristics of gifted students](#) may help you with identification. Keep in mind that a gifted student can come from any culture, ethnic background, or socioeconomic group!

As you learn more about the criteria for your district's gifted programs, you will likely identify students who don't officially qualify but may benefit from individualized challenges or strategies in your classroom.

Use data to differentiate instruction and create appropriate challenges.

Teachers today have an abundance of data about our students—and if we don't have it, we can acquire it. Analyze performance data to determine what your gifted students already know and what they still need to learn. If students know the material, they should be learning something else.

At the beginning of this year, I administered baseline reading and math assessments to my students. Not surprisingly, some of my students scored 90 percent and higher...one student even scored a 100 percent! The data showed me areas in which individual students needed grade-level instruction and areas in which students were ready to tackle more advanced concepts and skills. I can do a better job of teaching my students when I know their stats.

Maintain realistic expectations about what your students know and can do.

This is one of the most hurtful comments an educator can make to a gifted student: "You figure it out...you're gifted." Gifted students still need to be taught. While many are capable of absorbing a great deal of information independently, they still rely on your expertise and guidance. I have yet to see a student who can figure out long division without instruction.

Don't be intimidated by your students' intelligence.

I am pretty sure that all my students have higher IQs than I do. If I spell a word incorrectly, I hear about it. If my New York accent slips out, I hear about it. My 3rd graders tell me the definitions of words that I don't know. At the same time, I have something on them: many years of education, life experience, and teaching expertise. Your students can teach you new things every day—if you have a receptive attitude. But you will teach them a lot more as you help them build their knowledge, cultivate their talents, and make connections between school and "the real world."

Support your students' social and emotional learning.

Ever noticed that some of your gifted students don't like to work in groups or have an uncanny ability for getting under their classmates' skin? About twice as many gifted students as non-gifted students have social and emotional difficulties (approximately 20 to 25 percent), according to the National Association for Gifted Children.

Work with colleagues to identify appropriate supports for these students, such as mentor programs, direct instruction in social skills, or counseling. I have found mentoring to be

particularly effective in working with students with high IQs, since such students often prefer the company of adults over children their own age. Once they bond with a mentor, powerful transformations can occur.

Laugh!

Having a good sense of humor and being light-hearted are important traits for any teacher—and they are especially critical when teaching gifted and talented students, who often have keen senses of humor themselves. When this humor shows up at the wrong times (as it sometimes does), I recommend correcting the behavior gently.

Focus on learning—not on grades.

Some teachers tell students that grades don't matter as long as they try their best, but expect gifted students to earn all A's in every academic subject. Keep in mind that gifted students are not necessarily gifted in all areas... and tend to perform best in the subjects that interest them most.

It is also very important to remember that gifted and talented students are often plagued by perfectionism and a fear of failure. Lecturing them about grades may only exacerbate these problems—or lead to a power struggle. Keep the focus on effort and learning, not grades.

Support any gifted and talented programs your school offers.

Most of my students love the gifted enrichment classes I teach. I like to flatter myself—but I know that it isn't about me. These students appreciate the challenges I provide and the camaraderie of being with other gifted and talented students. When gifted students return from enrichment class and say it was "fun," please understand that "fun" does not mean "fluff." It means that they have experienced a concentrated dose of instruction—at a pace that comes naturally to them. Gifted and talented education is not about a group of students "getting something extra." It is about a group of students getting what they need.

These suggestions are not "silver-bullet strategies" for supporting your gifted and talented students, but they offer a starting point. Consider pursuing professional development to deepen your expertise in this area, or at least reaching out to your school's enrichment staff to learn more. And, if like me, you specialize in teaching gifted students, look for opportunities to share your expertise with your colleagues beyond an individual student's paperwork!

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