

10 Myths about Gifted Education

Why do we accept that a gifted athlete needs a coach who will train her/him and opponents who will challenge her/him, but do not accept the same for the academically gifted child? An estimated 6-10% of our students are academically gifted; additional students may be identified in other areas of giftedness, such as creativity, visual and performing arts, and leadership, yet we often do not provide the education experience they need to fulfill their potential. For decades, myths about gifted education have distorted educators' and the public's perceptions of what gifted students are able to do and what they need in the classroom. The result has been an underfunding of gifted education services, a widening achievement gap between high ability poor children and those from middle and upper families, and too many children across this nation who feel unwelcome or misunderstood in their classrooms.

Each month we will share a couple of these myths about educating high-ability children followed by the truth of what these children need.

Myth 1 *Gifted children will do fine on their own.*

TRUTH: Gifted children cannot teach themselves. Just as star athletes train with skilled coaches, gifted students need guidance from well-trained teachers who challenge and support them in order to fully develop their abilities. Gifted students may be so far ahead of their same-age peers that they know more than half of the grade-level curriculum before the school year begins. Others learn new concepts quickly, but are made to wait until classmates catch up. Their resulting boredom and frustration can lead to underachievement, despondency, poor work habits, or, even to dropping out of school.

Myth 2 *Teachers challenge all students in the classroom.*

TRUTH: Most teachers have not been prepared to work with advanced students; therefore, many of these children are not learning new material every day. Gifted students learn differently from other students, yet their teachers often lack the training in how to best serve them in the classroom. The vast majority of classroom teachers have had no preparatory training in teaching highly able students nor have they received any professional development from their school district focused on this student population. Taken together, the data confirms what many families have long known: in spite of commitment and dedication, teachers are often unable to recognize and support gifted learners without specialized training.

Myth 3 *Gifted students are role models for other students in the classroom.*

TRUTH: Average or below-average students do not look to the gifted students in the class as role models. Although teachers and family may hold up the performance of gifted students as exemplary, most students model their behavior on those who have similar capabilities and are coping well in school. Watching those who are expected to succeed does little to increase a student's self-confidence. Instead, average students are motivated and become more self-confident when they observe success by others with similar ability. Gifted students also respond to and benefit from classroom interactions with their academic peers.

Myth 4 *All children are gifted.*

TRUTH: All children have strengths and positive attributes, but not all children are gifted in the academic sense of the word. The label “gifted” in a school setting means that when compared to others his or her age or grade, a child has an advanced capacity to learn and apply what is learned in one or more subject areas, or in the performing or fine arts. This advanced capacity requires modifications to the regular curriculum to ensure these children are challenged and learn new material. Gifted does not connote good or better; it is a sorting term that allows students to receive education services to meet their unique needs.

Myth 5 *Academic acceleration is socially harmful for the accelerated students.*

TRUTH: Gifted children are often happier with older children who share their interests and abilities than with children their own age. Many gifted students do not have intellectual or interest peers at school, which can lead to social and emotional discomfort and isolation. Acceleration interventions, such as single-subject or whole-grade acceleration, can provide the flexibility in curriculum delivery to meet student needs without negative consequences. Accelerated students go on to succeed professionally at higher levels than those in the general student population and report that they wished they had even more opportunities for acceleration while in school. For successful acceleration placements, there are several strategies, including referral policies, student screening, and transition planning, that can ensure acceleration is used only when appropriate.

Myth 6 *Gifted education programs are elitist.*

TRUTH: Gifted education program funding and availability of services can be elitist, but meeting the need is not. High-ability learners are found in all cultures, ethnic backgrounds, and socioeconomic groups. However, many of these students are denied the opportunity to maximize their potential because of the way in which programs and services are funded, or due to flawed identification practices. For example, reliance on a single test score for gifted education services may exclude selection of students with different experiences and opportunities. Additionally, with no federal money and few states providing an adequate funding stream, most gifted education programs and services are dependent on local funds. This means that in spite of the need, often only higher-income school districts are able to provide services, giving the appearance of elitism.

Myth 7 *Students getting poor or average grades cannot be gifted.*

TRUTH: Not all gifted students are academically successful. The causes of under-achievement, which is the discrepancy between a student’s performance and his actual ability, differ greatly. High-ability students may become bored or frustrated in an unchallenging classroom causing them to lose interest, learn bad study habits, or distrust the school environment. Other students may mask their abilities to try to fit in socially or have not achieved because they lacked access to a rigorous, high quality early education.

No matter the cause, it is imperative that perceptive, well-trained adults recognize gifted learners and help them achieve their full potential.

Myth 8 *Gifted students are happy, popular, and well-adjusted in school.*

TRUTH: School can be a negative experience for some gifted students. Many gifted students flourish in their school and community. However, gifted children are more prone to emotional and moral intensity, may be more sensitive to expectations and feelings, struggle with perfectionism, and/or have deep concerns about societal problems. Others do not share interests with their classmates, resulting in isolation or being labeled a “nerd.” Because of these difficulties, time in school is something to be endured rather than celebrated. Therefore it is important that counselors and other school personnel have been trained to recognize their sensitivities.

Myth 9 *A child receiving special education services cannot also be gifted.*

TRUTH: Having strengths in one area does not preclude the need for support in another. Some gifted students have learning or other disabilities. These “twice-exceptional” students often go undetected in regular classrooms because their disability and gifts mask each other, making them appear “average,” and therefore ineligible for either gifted or special education services. Other twice-exceptional students are identified for special education services but are not considered for gifted services. In both cases, it is important to focus on the students’ abilities and strengths, providing access to challenging curricula in addition to receiving support for the disability.

Myth 10 *Gifted education programs require an abundance of resources.*

TRUTH: Offering gifted education services does not need to break the bank. Serving gifted learners does not require a profusion of resources, although developing an effective and comprehensive gifted education program requires an investment in professional development, assessments, and advanced curriculum. However, launching a program requires only the belief and understanding that gifted students require something qualitatively different from the regular curriculum offering. This view, coupled with a commitment from the community and district personnel to meet student needs flexibly, is the most critical component in developing successful gifted education programs and services.