

What to Do With Gifted Students?

By Jay Mathews
Washington Post Staff Writer
Sunday, April 27, 2008; 9:22 PM

I received a letter a few weeks ago from a mother in Prince William County, home to one of the Washington area's big suburban school systems. It starkly captured the parental frustration at the heart of the national debate over what to do with very gifted students. I ran her letter, with a short response, in my weekly Post column, "Extra Credit," in which I answer reader mail. That column produced so many letters that I decided to lay out the debate in this column, using the limitless space of the Internet. I have not been very sympathetic with parents of gifted kids. Some of the reaction below echoes things I have said. But I find it difficult to justify forcing Nancy Klimavicz's son to spend valuable time on busywork. If anyone has any good way out of this impasse, e-mail me at mathewsj@washpost.com.

Dear Extra Credit:

I've started this letter many times over the past several months. After my gifted son received rejections from Virginia Tech, James Madison University and William and Mary, I figured it's time to warn other parents. If you have a very bright student, home-school him.

My son was reading a college-level book in third grade when the gifted education specialist recommended just that. Academically, we figured he'd learn and grow regardless of the environment, but his weakness was social interaction with his peers. We believed childhood should include high school sports teams and clubs, and we remembered being influenced by one or two teachers who were passionate about their subjects. We decided to leave him in public school.

Fast-forward to high school. To minimize frustration, we focused my son on learning, not grades. If he could get a 100 on an exam without doing the homework, we believed his time was better spent doing another activity in which he actually learned something. His grades are less than stellar (3.275 GPA), but he has done very well on all his standardized tests (SAT: 800 verbal, 760 math; SAT subject tests: 800 higher math, 740 chemistry, 710 biology; ACTs: 34). As a junior, he took three AP tests and scored 5 in chemistry, 5 in calculus BC and 4 in U.S. history. He's enrolled in the University of Cambridge program. He's taking seven Cambridge/AP classes, including third-year biology, third-year chemistry and second- and third-year physics combined.

He was not encouraged or pushed by the counselors, but he is more motivated because he is learning at a pace he needs, and he has discovered his passion for science and math. He'll take AP exams in biology, physics, statistics and U.S. government this year. So what's the problem? He has gone way beyond the class work to learn the material in-depth and has demonstrated his knowledge on national and international exams. Unfortunately, none of these exams is factored into high school grades or college admission decisions.

Prince William County's grading system requires a minimum of 18 assignments each quarter. My son received a C-plus in his chemistry class because he didn't do all of his assigned work and received zeros on many of the 18 assignments. The class didn't move fast enough to cover all of the material, so he did different work -- on his own -- and handed notes to his teacher and classmates to help them. He's the only student in the history of the school to get a 5 on the AP chemistry exam, but this type of result never gets fed back into the course grade. He still got a C-plus, not an impressive grade for someone who wants to major in chemistry or chemical engineering.

We've spent considerable time talking to admissions counselors at Virginia Tech. They say they won't look at AP scores until after the students are admitted, don't look at SAT subject test scores and don't recognize the educational value or rigor of Cambridge classes. I have a student who will place out of a year (about 44 credits) of college classes, but they won't let him in because, in their opinion, his GPA indicates he's lazy, he can't do college-level work and he's an underachiever because he scored well on his tests but has only a 3.275 GPA. They recommended that he go to a community college (where the classes are much less intense than the Cambridge curriculum), so he can prove he can handle college-level work. These are my tax dollars at work.

Why is his GPA low? As an example, look at his geography class, a required course. The first day of class, the teacher gave the students the state Standards of Learning exam from the previous year. My son passed at the advanced level with one question wrong, and he has mastered the course work for the year. But the class is taught to the minimum standard. He got an F one quarter because he didn't do 65 percent of the 18 assignments, even though he still got 100s on the tests. He got a B for the class (3.0, not good enough for Virginia Tech). Students can test out of college classes but not high school classes. (He enjoyed reading almanacs and the atlas in elementary school, so there was not much to learn in a class where students thought Canada was one of the 50 states).

The good news is my son got the opportunity to letter on sports teams for three years, participate in Model UN and help his scholastic bowl team win many times. The school principal has been amazingly supportive. My son has been accepted at Clemson, Iowa State and Kansas State universities, where he can study chemical engineering. The bad news is that Clemson costs \$30,000 each year. After paying considerable Virginia taxes for the past 36 years, I feel cheated that top Virginia state schools won't let him in because of his high school record.

If he had been home-schooled, they'd have had to look at his same test grades and SAT subject test scores and let him in.

-- Nancy Klimavicz

Nokesville

Here is my response:

In a happy footnote, you told me that Virginia Commonwealth University just offered your son a four-year, full-tuition scholarship. Virginia Tech's associate provost and undergraduate

admissions director, Norrine Bailey Spencer, told me her office highly values Cambridge courses, but also emphasizes grade-point average as a measure of persistence and responsibility. "When you go to Virginia Tech, you have to go to class and fill out your lab reports," she said. I am more interested in hearing from readers about the standard high school educate-by-the-numbers system that for very quick students seems to condone busywork. I have a friend whose ninth-grader suffered under this system this year and became much more engaged with his studies when they switched to home schooling, just as you suggest. Isn't there something schools could do to save such students from so many hours of what is to them useless drudgery?

* * *

Here is a selection of the letters inspired by Klimavicz's story:

I found this article very interesting for so many reasons. I also have a child who is very smart and spent the latter part of her teen years in a public high school per her request. She was bored a lot, but we understood that rules needed to be followed, assigned work turned in on time and completed. She graduated high school with a high GPA and SAT scores, which allowed her to gain entrance to the school of her choice. She attended community college during high school to take college level courses on her own time, plus she took several AP courses and received 5s. As parents, I think we need to understand that whether or not our kids are gifted, they do need to learn to follow rules like everyone else. Kudos to the parent for finding ways to keep her child stimulated, but in school all kids need to learn to follow guidelines and follow through on assignments.

In life, and especially in the workforce, no one cares that you are gifted. Every organization has rules to follow, and unless you want to be fired, you will need to conform. It's life. School is a great place to start learning this lesson.

-- Cheryl Williams

This is a great article, and Ms. Klimavicz is getting at the heart of one of the big problems in the education system. In California, where I've been a math teacher for 15 years, and in most of the world, we sort students by grade level according to their age, not by their ability. I am not so sure that this is good for the individual, our culture, or our nation.

In my experience, very intelligent children who can do arithmetic in their heads when they are very young often don't see the point of useless homework in the early grades and develop a habit of not doing any because it wasn't necessary.

My son read "The Hobbit" in the first grade. As a senior in high school, he earned the highest grade, of two classes, on the physics final, and flunked the class. A girl in his class, who was one of my students (I taught at the same school), had trouble with logical thinking, problem solving, and was earning a generous D in geometry, but earned a B-plus in physics, even though she never passed a test. However, she did all of the lab assignments with, of course, a lot of help from her lab partner ("cooperative learning").

The difference between my son and Ms. Klimavicz's son is, even though my son earned 1550 on his math and English SAT, he decided not to go to college because he had seen the flaws in the education system and didn't like school. He instead studies and learns what he is interested in.

When I have that kind of student in a class, I give what I call "seat credit." They are the students who don't need to do any homework in order to understand the concept and get A's on all the exams. They participate in class discussions in a manner far above that of their classmates. They are engaged in the class on a deeper level.

We need to ask ourselves, as educators, what we are looking for as outcomes?

If, as educators, we value independent, out-of-the-box thinking, the kind that will encourage a student to be an innovator, then perhaps we need to revise the system. The system currently in use in our culture is one that rewards students for all the work they turn in (even if it is not their own -- cheating is rampant, see cheatouse.com), not the depth of their understanding nor the creativity of their mind. This may lead to creating good employees, but not great thinkers. Remember, Einstein didn't do well in school. Given the system, and we touched on only one aspect of the problem, it is not surprising that the U.S. ranks 24th out of 29 developed nations in math education.

-- *Karen Carter*

San Rafael, Calif.

As a former IB teacher for many years, my only question to the mother of the genius son who nevertheless did not make the grade towards college admissions is this: If he is so darn smart, why couldn't he figure out a way to complete more than 65 percent of his assignments? I applaud Virginia Tech and others for recognizing that more than test scores will make a student a good match for university-level work. Grades indeed reflect "persistence and responsibility" as stated, along with maturity, a strong work ethic and dedication -- qualities needed for lifelong success.

Additionally, I would love to hear an accurate description of "busywork." If there was a fair way to dole out assignments based on individual ability rather than group needs, why, that would be fantastic, not to mention less work for the already overtaxed teacher. How about a test measuring ability BEFORE a student is allowed to enter an IB or AP class? Those with higher scores can receive fewer homework assignments. But wait, if anyone simply interested in joining an advanced class is welcome, as per Challenge Index standards, how could that work?

Unless a student, gifted or not, has some highly compelling personal circumstances (illness, etc.), signing up for any course means it is his responsibility to complete his assignments, period. I doubt you'll print this letter, but I do hope you'll at least consider another point of view.

-- *Prastavna Sinha Mehta Fairfax*

I am not often compelled to write a letter like this, however I read Mrs. Klimavicz's letter this evening and felt the need to respond. Every parent thinks their child is exceptional and gifted, no matter their ability. However in this case the parent is correct!

I had the pleasure of teaching Mrs. Klimavicz's son. He was in an eighth grade geometry class that was composed of some of the brightest and most gifted students I have ever taught. Teachers aren't supposed to say one group of kids is exceptional, [but] we do secretly in the teacher's lounge, where others might not hear. This group truly was exceptional. He stood out among them. He has a gift for mathematics that in my 15 years of teaching I have seen in only a handful of students. Not only does he have that gift, but more importantly he has a love of mathematics that kept him engaged and wanting to know more.

He will still contact me to say hi and to actually ask questions about what he is doing in class. So I know that his love of mathematics and his curiosity has stayed with him. I wish him all the best and know that wherever he goes to college he will excel. He is an exceptional young man.

-- Cami Craig

Marsteller Middle School

Prince William County

Reader Nancy Klimavicz clearly has a very bright son, and he's to be commended for the learning he has done through his own initiative and by taking advanced courses. The family's frustration in his failure to gain entry into several Virginia universities is understandable but, I believe, misplaced. Yes, some of his high school courses may be too slow-paced for such a "gifted" person and, yes, he probably acquired more knowledge in his independent academic pursuits than he might have completing the required assignments of his high school courses. But the fact remains that he, apparently with his parents' support, chose not to complete the assignments he knew were mandatory for a high grade. That's his prerogative. But by exercising that prerogative he also must accept the consequences.

Perhaps the parents might want to consider the other lessons their son is learning from their attitudes. Is he "too smart" to be held to the same standards as the other students? Does he, as a student, get to determine the best use of his class and study time? Are all the dull tasks in life beneath some people? Might he find a way to make the dull assignments more interesting? If he's that bright, couldn't the assignments be completed quickly and easily?

Interestingly, his parents decided to leave him in public school because his weakness was social interaction. Are his social skills likely to be improved with an "I'm way too smart to do some work" attitude? If the boy lettered in sports, he knows that on a team the most outstanding athletes perform the same repetitious drills as the weakest members.

There are larger life lessons at issue here. Life is full of dull tasks that must be done, even though our time could be better spent. Some time during our careers, most of us wind up working with people who are either very bright or at least moderately dim. The ability to deal with all these

situations effectively and gracefully probably gets us further than a truckload of book learning. Much has been written about how today's youngest workers find it difficult to adjust to workplaces where they aren't considered special and they are expected to start at the bottom with the lowly tasks that involves.

This is not an apology for teachers who don't find ways to stimulate their brightest students or for static environments where new ideas are squelched. But there is something to be said for "paying your dues" and growing in empathy and understanding. And there's even more to be said for accepting the consequences of your decisions.

Young Mr. Klimavicz no doubt will excel academically at any college or university he attends. Let's hope he's equally successful in other areas.

-- *Cecelia Blalock*

Howard County

Nancy Klimavicz's letter impelled me to write. I taught middle and high school English for 10 years, worked in college admissions for two years and have raised two daughters who are now a freshman and a senior in college. So I understand how difficult the college and grad-school search can be.

While Ms. Klimavicz obviously loves her son, her attitude is mistaken. How could her son's AP Chemistry teacher have awarded a higher grade than the C-plus he earned, when she admits "he didn't do all of his assigned work"? That wouldn't be fair to the students who did turn in all the assignments. Admissions counselors must evaluate grades as well as test scores. Neither one, by itself, "makes" the student. Admissions committees understand very well what that C-plus means; they also know that high school grades are excellent predictors of college grades. Moreover, no matter how much Ms. Klimavicz pays in state taxes, or how well her son scored on the AP and SAT tests, no public university owes him a place in the freshman class.

You're absolutely correct that our educational system is imperfect. Since public education serves all students, it may indeed "condone busywork" for those who are gifted. Still, even if classes like geography are taught to "a minimum standard," a student should complete all the assignments. Sometimes, even adults have to do things we don't like. Native intelligence doesn't automatically guarantee success; you have to do the work. In my view, students shouldn't be allowed to complete a large number of college credits through AP exams. Duke University, where my younger daughter is a freshman, limits students to six AP credits.

I congratulate Ms. Klimavicz's son for his scholarship to VCU. I certainly don't mean to attack another mom, as I'm far from perfect myself. Just ask my daughters. When my older daughter, a senior at William and Mary, declared in January that she "didn't know what to do with the rest of (her) life," I was positively apoplectic. Her story has a happy ending, too: she'll be starting law school at Villanova next fall.

Instead of "warning other parents," I would simply advise them, in Bette Davis style, to fasten their seat belts. Do your research, and make sure your student applies to a wide range of universities, both "safety schools" and "reach schools." Beyond the stress, the anxiety, the arguments and the disappointment of not being admitted to their (or your) dream school, there's hope for your student -- and for you.

-- *Madeleine French*

Fairfax