

BULLETIN

Alternatives to Public Schools for Gifted Students

While the primary mission of PAGE is meeting the needs of gifted students in the public schools, the Board of Directors recently recognized that some of our members may be seeking alternatives to public education. To address this audience, we decided to publish a Bulletin which would address three alternative educational settings: *Montessori schools, private boarding secondary schools, and home schools*. This is not to be taken as an exhaustive list of alternatives, but merely a sampling. Descriptions of these alternatives should not be construed as an endorsement by PAGE. Two sections of this Bulletin were prepared by individuals with specific expertise in these alternatives. We encourage dialogue regarding these and other alternatives; selected responses will be published in a forthcoming *UPDATE*.

Montessori and Gifted Students: Is It a Match?

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Every time I walk into a Montessori classroom, a wave of nostalgia passes over me. I see children moving quietly around a bright room with colorful materials attractively displayed. Children, alone or in groups of two or three, are working at small tables or on a mat on the floor. In a special area a teacher is meeting with a small group. An aide moves around to answer questions or give suggestions. There is a happy buzz of activity. This is the classroom of my childhood that I was only too happy to re-enter as a beginning teacher some thirty years ago.

To capture the feeling of a Montessori classroom, one has to capture its essence: a deep respect for the child not only as a student but also as an individual. The Montessori classroom was a creation not based on educational philosophies but on thorough observation of children at work.

Maria Montessori who developed the concept was a medical doctor and anthropologist who developed materials and strategies to teach children who were mentally retarded and the children of the slums of Rome in the earliest years of this century. She didn't look for ways to help children adapt to the school environment, she looked for ways to adapt the environment to be inviting to children. Her methods were so successful that her pupils outperformed other children in social and academic skills. Many of her (then revolutionary) ideas are now commonplace in any school.

The core of Montessori education is "The Prepared Environment," an environment that is created to invite students to explore and engage in active learning experiences. There is no adult at "center stage" to direct students through a series of daily activities. The clock doesn't dictate when it's time for math, science, or reading. A large variety of manipulative materials is carefully designed to guide students through the curriculum. Children attend the same classroom for three years so there are older children to model after and younger children to help. The motto is: *Help me to do it myself*. The end-goal: a child's dignity and self-respect.

The student in this prepared environment is encouraged to be self-directed. The Montessori materials are essential in allowing this to happen. These materials are attractive so they appeal to the child and they are in most cases self-correcting so students can be independent and do not need to call the teacher to see if they have it "right." These materials are not *games*; they are instructional and once introduced to the child hold the student's attention for prolonged periods of time. They progress through the curriculum from the concrete, through the symbolic to the abstract. The quality of the Montessori materials as instructional tools gives the child the opportunity to teach him/herself. The control of error that is built in helps the student discover errors and correct them. The logical sequence builds skills step by step and guides the child through the curriculum at his/her own speed.

Every Montessori classroom has materials and activities to meet the needs of children starting slightly below the lowest grade level in the room and extending beyond the highest grade level in that same room. This is ideal because children of the same age are hardly ever in the same place in their development. While traditionally children are expected to progress more or less in tandem along a pre-designed course for one year at a time, Montessori children have a 3-year time block within which each one can grow, learn and mature at his own pace. This is a strategy that some traditional schools are trying to emulate with *looping*.

The role of the adult in a Montessori setting is quite different from the role of the traditional “teacher.” The Montessori “directress” (as she was originally called) helps, suggests, encourages, teaches, and observes. She may sit with one child to introduce a new material; she may teach a short reading lesson to a small group; she may be moving around the room assessing, observing and helping.

There is a lot of opportunity for students to follow their own interest. Apart from scheduled lunchtime and specials such as art or physical education, the student can use the day as he sees fit. In other words, if a student is totally engrossed in writing a play based on a story she read, she can keep writing until it’s done or take a break and work on something else for a while. Nobody says at 10:30, “Get your math books out, put that writing away.” These extended periods of time give students the opportunity to study a topic in depth or to make great jumps in progress through intensive and prolonged involvement.

Most Montessori schools start with 3-year olds so a gifted toddler can explore to his heart’s content. They have many materials that develop fine and large motor

skills and also offer the opportunity for children to develop number sense, and to write and read when and if they are ready. Therefore, gifted children tend to do very well in a Montessori setting.

In order to benefit from the many advantages the Montessori experience offers gifted students it is important that the school faithfully adheres to Montessori’s philosophy. How can parents be sure of that? Before selecting any school for your child, do an on-site visitation. Check the school’s and the teacher’s credentials. Make sure the school is affiliated with the American Montessori Society (AMS) or the Association Montessori International (AMI) and that the teachers are AMS or AMI certified. Take your child for a visit; observe him in the school setting, interacting with the teacher and other students. Consider the distance from the school to your home. Is the commute worth it? What program offerings does the school have beyond 3rd grade or 6th grade? (In this country Montessori schools that go through 6th grade and beyond are few and far between.)

Do I support Montessori schools for gifted children? Absolutely! The opportunity for students to work at their own pace, to work on self-selected activities, to be able to explore topics in depth, and the atmosphere of respect for the individual meets the needs of all children, and gifted children in particular, very well. Will all gifted children do well in a Montessori school? That depends! Children who lack direction, are not self-motivated and/or have poor work habits, may do no better in a Montessori classroom than they would anywhere else.

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Considering Independent Boarding School as an Educational Alternative

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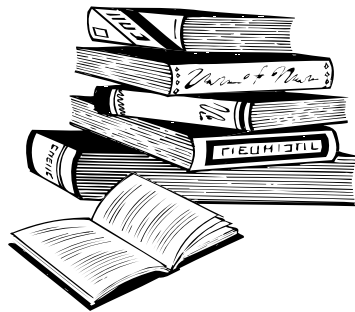
Independent residential secondary schools can be viable educational options, but they are by no means equal, especially with respect to genuinely gifted students. There is a large distinction between independent schools that compel closer examination and those that would probably fall short in meeting the needs of gifted students. There are a lot of independent schools that possess impressive educational attributes such as accelerated/AP courses; small classes; comprehensive art, athletic, and computer facilities; culturally diverse student population, etc. Indeed, many schools have the look and feel of small liberal arts colleges.

But beyond academic rigor and extensive and well-maintained buildings and grounds, can or do these institutions truly serve those with academic and/or creative talent?

For starters, any boarding school that is worth serious consideration by parents of a gifted student must have a significant proportion of its student body made up of talented individuals. Being among kindred spirits is especially important at boarding schools, as students are learning in and outside of the classroom with and from fellow students 24 hours a day.

One can get an idea of the relative capability of the student body through a review of average SAT and/or ACT scores and the listing of the colleges at which the graduates of the school have matriculated over time. Combined SAT scores should average over 1200. This information may be derived either from school admission literature or via one of two leading guidebooks on independent schools found in most public libraries: *Peterson's Private Secondary Schools* and *The Handbook of Private Schools*.

One can also inquire about a school's typical admission rate among its applicant pool. Unlike highly selective colleges, acceptance rates at independent residential schools, even at very competitive institutions, are relatively high. This is due to the fact that there are relatively few families who seek out the independent school option, and among those who do, the goal is to enroll their child at an institution which best fits the child's academic abilities. Thus, a family with a son or daughter with average capability will not tend to look for placement at a highly competitive school. Selective schools generally dissuade candidates from applying if it is felt that a prospective student would not be able to handle the academic load. It is not unusual for some schools to have an acceptance rate of 90% or over. Among more competitive institutions, a general rule for acceptance is 65%.



Another way to determine the intellectual calibre of a school's student population is to study the curriculum for range, depth, and graduation requirements. Families should not only get a feel for the highest levels of math, science, and foreign language courses that are provided, but also the scope and complexity of the English and social studies courses and the extent to which writing and analysis are required. Essentially, the more advanced course offerings at a strong independent school should compare to a course of study for first-year, or even second-year, college students.

Finally, the ability to support an extensive curriculum and to attract capable students normally requires substantial amounts of financial resources. In general, the strongest independent residential secondary schools tend to possess endowments that are comparable to highly

selective small colleges. Not that the ability to generate sizable endowment income translates into keeping tuition costs down, but it does prevent the school from becoming too tuition dependent in meeting operating expenses. This, in turn, allows the school greater flexibility and freedom in course offerings, educational approach, admission standards, faculty hiring, and scholarship awards. A guideline for an endowment figure would be \$60 million.

When described on paper (admission literature, educational guidebooks, or web sites), a school's facilities, curriculum, financial resources, and student body could suggest that the school satisfactorily addresses the needs of gifted students. However, this issue is moot if the school neither wants to understand or appreciate the requirements of gifted students, nor is willing to accommodate the needs of exceptional students in its program. This *lack of care* on the school's part can manifest itself in any of three ways:

- **First, the school is lax in challenging a talented student.** The school believes in a prescribed course of study that allows limited flexibility in exploring beyond basic academic requirements or offerings. In this instance, the school may be unwilling to create, or give access to, higher-level courses to meet the needs of a highly capable student.
- **Second, the school feels limited obligation** to address a gifted individual's academic inadequacies or educational gaps. For example, an incoming ninth grader whose ability to handle college-level math courses is offset by poor writing skills may find limited guidance or support in non-scientific course work.
- **Third, the school makes minimal effort to alleviate the social and emotional stresses** often felt by gifted students. A school may not acknowledge or recognize that a highly capable student likely is different in significant ways from other students. On top of possible discomfort arising from being academically talented, the gifted student may well face difficult adjustments relating to socioeconomic differences as well as to living away from home and friends.

In sum, the bottom line is whether a school pays lip service to gifted students or whether the teachers and staff are sensitive to the complexities of giftedness and are genuinely committed to helping talented students fulfill their potential.

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Home Schooling

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Although it requires an enormous commitment in time and effort, home schooling offers the parents the ultimate in custom tailoring of the curriculum. The level of the work can be placed at an appropriate level of challenge, and the child's interests can easily lead the instruction. Flexibility is maximized. An interdisciplinary approach to subject matter, projects, hands-on learning, and problem-based learning may provide variety and thereby increase motivation. Critical thinking, the arts, values, and family living skills can all be integrated with the traditional core subjects. The child can progress at his/her own pace in each given subject area.

What about academic achievement? An article by Lawrence Rudner published in March, 1999, by the Education Policy Analysis Archives (available: <http://epaa.asu.edu/epaa/v7n8/>), reports a study of the demographic characteristic and academic achievement of over 20,000 home schooled students nationwide. Highlights of the report include the following:

- 700,000 to 1,200,000 students are enrolled in home schools in the U.S.
- 24.5% of the home school students were one or more grade levels above the grade usually associated with the student's age (i.e., academically accelerated).
- The median scores for home school students were well above (12 to 41 percentile points) their public, private, and Catholic school counterparts, in every subject and in every grade.
- On average, home school students in grades 1 to 4 performed one grade level above their age level public/private school peers on achievement tests. The gap became even greater after grade 5.
- Amount of money spent on education, family income, and parent education had positive effects on achievement; amount of television viewing had negative effects.

- A 1997 study cited in the report found that home schoolers were in the 65th percentile of all ACT test takers (.38 standard deviations above the national average). It must be remembered that this study does not demonstrate that home schooling is superior to public or private schools, because it was not able to consider the many differences in the two populations, such as commitment of parents to education, family income, academic engaged time, and student ability levels. It does show that home schooled students perform well on standardized tests.

What about social skills? Studies indicate that there is little need for concern. Home schooled students are likely to have a broader age range of friends than their schooled peers, and they often meet and socialize with peers in their neighborhood and at community classes and activities.

What about college? Limited research suggests that home schoolers are able to do well in college. In lieu of traditional high school transcripts, colleges are often open to considering Advanced Placement courses; SAT scores; transcripts from community college courses; letters of recommendation from persons who have worked with the home schooler in tutorials, apprenticeships, community service, and social activities; and portfolios of completed projects. The admissions interview is particularly important. There is also a growing number of recognized diploma programs for home schoolers in Pennsylvania.

Additional information on home schooling gifted students may be found in the following sources:
<http://kidsource.com/kidsource/content4/homeschool.gifted.html>
<http://www.ocsc.com/hoagies/artopic4.htm#homesch>
<http://www.pahomeschoolers.com>
Understanding Our Gifted, September 1992 (volume 5, issue 1) Home schooling

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