

Improving Academic Performance of Gifted Underachievers: A Multi-dimensional School Based Project

There is a widespread myth that gifted students are high achievers. Let's dispel this myth: Giftedness does not always equal high achievement. Based on our observations over the past few years, we recognize that many of our gifted students do not realize their full potential and present a profile of underachievement. We have observed a discrepancy for many gifted students between their intellectual potential and their demonstrated academic performance. The underachievement of gifted students contributes to a loss of valuable human ability and talent as well as unrealized personal potential. No two learners are identical. Each of us has a preferred learning style, a personal profile of multiple intelligences, and a distinct combination of strengths and challenges. Westmount Charter School's goal is to provide each gifted learner with opportunities to optimize his or her own unique potential, and in order to fulfill that goal we have to understand the specific learning needs of each student. We believe that in moving towards greater independence as a learner, students need to know how to address their own learning needs as well as how to advocate for themselves. Researchers have cautioned that defining underachievement based only on academic success or failure may be limiting. However, we believe our responsibility as educators is to support our students in their pursuit of higher education and provide them with all available opportunities.

Gifted literature identifies possible causes of underachievement that relate to:

- Physical, cognitive, and emotional disorders (for example, learning disabilities, attention deficits, emotional disturbance, psychological disorders, or health impairments)
- Mismatches between the student and the school program (for example, language based programs or private schools for highly capable children may provide a challenging curriculum but may be too concrete and sequential in nature for the highly creative gifted learner)
- Personal characteristics (for example, low self-esteem, low motivation, disorganization, impulsivity, and attention issues)
- Many gifted students learn that achievement is easy and that they achieve success with minimal effort.
- In middle and high school, the curriculum becomes more complex and students often feel less able to be successful and more at risk for failure.

- Some students are able to apply appropriate study habits. Others are threatened and engage in avoidance behaviours, believing it is too risky to make an effort at school for fear of failure.
- Underachievement for these students is characterized by procrastination, incomplete assignments, poor organization, inattention, and careless work habits.

To address the problem of gifted underachievement, researchers recognize the following global interventions:

- Providing counseling to support students.
- Modifying the curriculum, providing differentiated instruction at all levels, compacting the curriculum, accelerating student learning to their appropriate level, and providing an enriched curriculum.
- Providing individual student recognition and attention.
- Students need reassurance that they are indeed capable but may require individual support and encouragement to set more realistic learning goals in order to realize success and to improve their self-esteem as a learner.

In recent years, Alberta Education has given schools the opportunity to identify areas for school improvement and has provided significant funding for innovative proposals over a three year implementation cycle. The project is identified as the Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AIS). During the last three year cycle of AIS, our teaching faculty met on a regular basis in Professional Learning Communities to build teachers' skills and competencies in educating our gifted students. Our focus for this three year AIS project was on identifying and addressing the areas of underachievement in our student population. This involved:

- Increasing student success and confidence in those areas of unique learning challenges
- Developing greater effectiveness in teacher-student-parent communication
- Sharing the educational responsibility through collaborative efforts

Our multi-dimensional project focuses on the teaching of critical skills to deal with the causes of gifted underachievement. We began the project by asking our teachers to name the skills which our students need in order to realize greater academic success. Our teachers identified the following critical skills:

- Organization skills
- Work/study habits

- Time management
- Improving planning/communication
- Overcoming perfectionism
- Decreasing stress/anxiety in learning

Our discussions focused on how to involve all teachers in a meaningful, consistent, and sustainable process to support students in their skill acquisition.

Comprehensive support for gifted students also comes from parents or guardians within the home environment to reinforce positive skill development. Parents are encouraged to get involved in this partnership with students and teachers by:

- Helping with organizing homework materials
- Ensuring their child has access to a work/study space in the home
- Reviewing the daily agenda of school activities and homework together to stay informed and involved in the child's academic life
- Keeping a calendar to facilitate time management between school, extra-curricular and community activities

The purpose of our program was to provide our students with the tools essential to address their specific learning challenges. The intent was to provide the students with information about the critical skills identified by our teachers, yet allow them to make choices about what pieces of information they felt they would benefit from most. This approach empowered our students while promoting the acquisition of critical skills. We began with our middle and high school students in grades six through twelve. We assisted our staff with resources and ideas when delivering skills in the areas of organization, time management, project management and study skills. We involved our Student Services team of resource and guidance personnel to work with classroom teachers. Collaboratively, they developed a list of strategies as a general toolkit which students and teachers identified as particularly helpful to address obstacles to their learning.

The toolkit brainstormed by students and staff for overcoming underachievement comprised the following areas:

- Organizational skills
- Time management

- Leadership/intrapersonal skills
- Social/interpersonal skills
- Study skills

Strategies in the area of organization skills include:

- Take responsibility for belongings.
- Ensure that report cards, field trip notices, etc. are seen by parents.
- Transfer all important dates from the school calendar to a calendar at home...Often assignments are missed or turned in after the due date...or you may see a student who is a perfectionist who never submits his/her work because it is not “good enough” or it is “incomplete”. Also check whether students know what is meant by ‘editing’ a written assignment.

Strategies identified for effective time management include:

- Break down assignments in chunks...Students need support organizing assignments and chunking the work into smaller, more manageable units.
- Use class time effectively and Make appropriate seating and/or group choices in class...Our students often make very poor use of class time and then complain about too much homework.

Leadership and intrapersonal skills include:

- Ask for help when needed... Many students are reluctant to request assistance in class. Our teachers provide tutorial support at lunch hour and after school.
- Understand individual learning style preference and know how to advocate for myself... We use Gardner’s Multiple Intelligences with our students so that they come to understand their preferred learning style. It is also important to help students learn compensatory strategies to deal with those instructional styles that are not strengths for them.
- Attempt to solve problems in appropriate ways...When our students encounter social dilemmas, they often seek support from a teacher, counselor or administrator. Listen carefully to what is being discussed in the classroom before and after class is in session to hear what problems or issue the students are dealing with. Example: High school girls at the LRT station...
- Challenge self...Risk-taking is often avoided. Students frequently need opportunities to discuss possible consequences or outcomes of a decision.

Strategies for improving social and interpersonal skills are:

- Recognize and utilize social cues appropriately...We have noted the importance of this as our student enter middle school...Example: Grade 6 and Grade 8
- Respect another person's opinion...In disciplinary situations, students need to understand and respect the perspective of another person.
- Participation in school and community-base activities...This may cause a great deal of **stress** as students try to balance all of the performance expectations.
- Gain confidence in social situations...**Example:** Middle school curriculum – Ready Set Go program – an opportunity for student discussion in homeroom period

Finally, strategies to improve **study skills** include:

- Learning how to study is important and we cannot assume that all students know how to do this effectively!
- Encourage students to establish a study area in their home which is available for regular study time.

These strategies within the five goal areas have been used as the basis for each student's Personal Education Plan (PEP). Students were asked to select one of the strategies on the list provided as their PEP goal for each reporting period to focus on. Parents were also involved by reviewing their child's goal selection and having the opportunity to select a second PEP goal they felt could benefit their child for that reporting period. For those students who needed extra support to achieve their PEP goal beyond their own initiative and teacher/parent support, small group direct instruction was provided by Student Services personnel. Progress towards each PEP goal was measured through pre-tests after selecting a strategy and post-tests after implementing that strategy in an on-line surveys for students. Progress was also reviewed at Parent-Teacher Conferences throughout the year using a tracking sheet.

The results were based on evidence from report cards, teacher, parent and student observations and anecdotal comments, as well as student pre- and post-survey comparison. We learned that students give themselves the lowest pre-survey scores when it comes to the area of study skills. While students have reported that the use of games, flashcards, mnemonic devices, etc. have not been a valuable part of their study plan, a connection was drawn between their study environment and their ability to study effectively. Implementation of this strategy has shown the greatest improvement of any strategy on the survey. We have also observed improvements in the area of time management. While students still see

room for improvement, there is a broader use of effective strategies to pace themselves and to divide assignments into smaller sections. Additionally, teachers have noted student progress in using class time more effectively and making better group/seating choices within the classroom.

Overall students reported feeling confident in the area of leadership and intrapersonal skill set. Cumulatively, we have seen this area having the highest score for students, with continued improvement observed in student respect for self, others, and the school community. Likewise, greater comfort in social situations was reported by students and noted by teachers and parents in the area of social and interpersonal skills since the implementation of the Personal Education Plan. Unfortunately we have seen no improvement in the area of organization skills. There was a decline in daily planner usage; fewer students reported that they were using their planner in a proactive manner or writing all assignments and important dates in their planner.

From these results, we are exploring ways of improving the PEP program to benefit our gifted underachievers. Some initial student frustration was anticipated and observed as long-held student habits were challenged and replaced by more structured and functional work habits. As a result, we decided to introduce the PEP strategies in our elementary classrooms (grades one through five) so that students would become familiar with the vocabulary and expectations of the PEP goals early in their learning development. We saw this as important to lay the foundation for effective learning before maladaptive learning strategies have the opportunity to form. Students also reported that enhanced staff support in the areas of organization and time management skills is beneficial. To that end, we have increased resource teacher support in the Student Services department, resulting in increased availability for small group support and training as well as daily learning assistance opportunities for students.

We believe some of the positive improvements we have observed since the implementation of the PEP program is due to the earlier identification of student difficulties, earlier notification to parents of student progress, and improvement in the teacher-parent dialogue regarding student learning. In the cases where progress reports at each reporting term were not meeting student needs, communication was enhanced by each household and teacher having access to each other's email addresses to facilitate the sharing of information. We have also been looking at ways to address the slow progress in the area of organization skills. While the agendas provided by the school were not a successful strategy to improve student organization, we noticed that students who had access to electronic organizers were using these devices to their benefit. Additionally, we have found that encouraging student use of email

reminders to themselves has been beneficial in promoting greater independence in student organization. We are continuing to explore strategies to further improve the area of organization for our gifted underachievers. Finally, we have also noted improvements in provincial achievement scores in Westmount Charter students since the implementation of the PEP program; however, further research is needed to clarify the relationship between our program and achievement test scores.

In summary, while many gifted students are extremely bright and articulate, it does not mean that each child is achieving his or her highest potential. The goal of the Personal Education Program is to provide students with strategies to obtain the critical skills needed to realize greater personal and academic success. By building a consistent culture of achievement from elementary through high school and providing the required level of support for all learners, we hope to prevent or reverse gifted underachievement and raise student accomplishment.

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