

## ***Gifted Students with Executive Functioning Challenges***

*Helping students Move From Fragmented to Focused*

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Whether you are a gifted college student struggling to write papers, a graduate student burdened by your dissertation, a faculty member challenged by a publish or perish environment, or a writer failing to meet book deadlines, often the underlying struggle is related to problems with executive functioning – the set of cognitive skills required to plan and execute a complex, multi-step task.

It's important for educators to understand there is little relationship between intelligence and executive functioning skills. In fact, a high IQ can make tasks more difficult - as a flood of creative ideas combine with an ability to see an issue from many angles. Then, add a dose of perfectionism, followed by a flood of anxiety, and a gifted individual often becomes paralyzed. Gifted students typically need the teacher's support and understanding, assisting with poor executive functioning and helping them move beyond roadblocks.

### ***What does "gifted" mean?***

*Does "gifted" mean highly intelligent as measured on one of the standard IQ tests? Does it mean a high level of creativity? Does it mean outstanding ability in a singular talent such as music?*

### ***Gifted students identified by the public school system***

*"Gifted and Talented" programs in public schools tend to select students into their highly competitive programs based on grade point averages, IQ scores and teacher recommendations. What these measures may select for is not our most truly gifted and talented students, but those students most likely to do well in school.*

What's wrong with that, you might ask? Nothing is wrong if the goal is to identify students most likely to succeed in schools as they are currently designed. Students,

that is, that are able to tolerate and accommodate to the tedium of classes in which they have little interest, or to the discipline of completing homework assignments requiring repetition of skills that

they have already mastered. Nothing is wrong with this selection process if what we want to do is to identify students that have high level skills across a broad range of academic skills – those that can write well, read efficiently, recall easily, memorize scientific facts readily, and understand mathematical concepts and problem-solving. In other words, we have a selection system that identifies students with a generally high level of ability across typical range of academic subjects.

But what about those students that are brilliant in math, but write awkwardly and haltingly. What about students with enormous creative potential whose handwriting is illegible and whose organizational skills are lacking? What about students that demonstrate a tremendous gift in creative writing, but struggle to memorize rote facts in chemistry or understand mathematical concepts. What about musically gifted students that cannot help but listen to music inside their head instead of to the teacher at the head of the class? By leaving out students with highly uneven gifts, we may be missing the most gifted and talented of them all.

### **What about those that can't tolerate the standard restrictions and expectations of school?**

Bill Gates, who famously dropped out of Harvard University and went on to become the wealthiest man on the planet, is a classic example of a student with an incredibly narrow focus and an unwillingness to conform to standard academic expectations. He developed advanced computer skills as a high school student by using the University of Washington computer lab in the middle of the night – the only time that it was available to him. He then managed to avoid his senior year in high school, convincing his rather progressive private school to allow him to do an “independent study project” during his senior year – basically working full time at one of the early high tech companies that sprang up in the Seattle area.

Other famously gifted individuals that could not tolerate or “achieve” in school include Leonardo da Vinci, Winston Churchill, and Thomas Edison.

### **What are the components of giftedness?**

**Paul Torrance**, who developed one of the most highly recognized measures of creativity, writes of “giftedness” as a combination of:

- **Ability** (high IQ)
- **Persistence** (sticking with an activity until a highly advanced skill level is achieved)
- **Creativity** – which he defines in terms of “divergent” thinking – the ability to move from a single idea to many different related ideas, allowing for creative problem-solving

If you believe that your child is highly gifted, yet does not qualify for “gifted and talented” programs in the public school system, then other paths must be developed. Challenge, stimulation and support are critical to prevent your child from becoming so frustrated with the educational process that he or she rejects it altogether – to his own detriment and to the detriment of society. A gifted mind is a terrible thing to waste.