

Help me pick a school for my child: Eight questions to separate the wheat from the chaff.

By Anthony Stevens (QAGTC President)

I'm enquiring on behalf of a parent friend. He is very keen to learn more about QAGTC and is in need of the exceptional support you offer for his son, who seems to display the traits of giftedness, along with the social awkwardness. My friend has had the usual frustrating exchanges with well-meaning school authorities, all be it to no avail. He wasn't aware of your organisation until today and...

We're moving interstate because of my partner's work commitments and I am looking for a list of schools in our area who offer support for gifted students...we are very happy to travel if necessary.

Moving to Brisbane next year and wanted to know where the best schools are located that cater for gifted before we decide about where to live.

My son has been doing maths at home from books 4 years above his age level. I've spoken to his teachers and the principal but they won't do anything to adapt his classwork. He says he's very bored with lessons ...

Above are examples of the many queries received by the QAGTC office. Choosing the right school for your child is not a set and forget decision. Your child will have different needs at different developmental stages and it is important to ensure that you are getting the maximum benefit from the specialists you trust to support your child. Parents who ask questions about gifted education tend to be those who suspect (or have just discovered) that they have a gifted child or those who know that their child is gifted and want to fix a perceived problem.

As an educator of significant length of experience and variety of teaching locales, I've found that parents, who attempt to fix the problems their child is experiencing, are part players in a much larger narrative. Often, children can have a very blinkered view of how their world works, how the players in their world should behave and what their motivations are. Primed up with a few well-selected (with carefully manicured adjectives) stories to support a narrative line of the child's choosing, unsuspecting parents can be easily manipulated (knowingly and unknowingly by the child) into a situation of conflict where none may exist.

There is always the potential for well-meaning parents to set up unnecessary, negative feedback loops which can become tricky problems to handle in later years. Simple questions like, 'Did everyone appreciate your brilliant poem?' or 'Did you get bored today?' can sometimes (given a set pattern and frequency) set the perception scene where every day must be perfect. If you really want to see a negative feedback loop in action, keep asking your children targeted questions about what is wrong with the home meals you present to them. Don't let them fob you off, keep at it until you get to the root of the problem!

Children need to learn that there is a time to work, a time to play, a time to be the centre of attention and a time to make others the centre of attention: a time to have fancy desserts and a time for boring vegetables and salad (not that vegies and salad can't be exotic and exciting!) The Australian Curriculum is designed around a broad set of essential skills – the content of which will appeal in different topics to different children. Teachers have a set of passions of their own which, too, appeal to different tastes at times. How to deal with occasional boredom is a skill that children need to learn. Stage directing every moment of a child's day to avoid boredom does not promote self-efficacy or resilience. In a full and hectic day schedule, there is little time to daydream, imagine and create the unknown. However, constant boredom is not something that any child should encounter from a school in this age.

Balancing the decision about schools is a tricky endeavour. Does one travel for hours to have the opportunity to attend the “must-have” school? I know of a school where parents buy property in the catchment area to be eligible to attend. Some don't live there but it's important to have the ‘school name’. Others will only attend a huge school because they assume that this provides much more opportunity and a diversity of activities. Some will go for the ‘old school tie’ whereas others will prioritise being able to walk the kids to school. Regardless of the defining criteria, gifted children have specific needs that go beyond any of the superficial *pub tests* that define what makes a good school.

In primary schooling years, we were new to the gifted education scene. A psychologist remarked that we could walk into any school with our son's WISC test and expect a full scholarship. Instead, we decided to stay within our local area. After years of seeking reasonable accommodations from a system which did not have any experience in providing reasonable accommodations, we settled on a school which provided a mix a some good and some very bad experiences; and we decided to celebrate the good and tolerate the bad. Importantly, tolerating the bad included NOT discussing our opinions with the children.

Helen Jentz, ACE CEO is quoted in theeducatoronline.com with the following: “Rather than fixating on a singular ‘solution’ that will supposedly deliver improved outcomes [across the board], as was noted in the Gonski Review into Australian Education, what is needed is greater flexibility in curriculum delivery, reporting and assessment regimes.”

Over the years, I heard a staggering variety of opinions about what gifted children need to thrive. Some of it is supported by research (and I keep pointing people to google “P18 John Hattie Challenging All Students” and watch the youtube clip) and some is supported by archaic myth and unchallenged belief systems. I've even heard a teacher of gifted students from a school publicly proclaim that pairing high ability students with lower ability students is good for them. Enough to say that there is a good mix of knowledge and ignorance about gifted education out in the wild.

Over the years, I have witnessed some schools' reactions to parents challenging the teacher's classroom practice resulting in an immobilising fear about having to ‘get it right’: ‘We don't know exactly what to do about this incredible set of scores and so we'll play it cautiously and do nothing but observe – everyone is already cranky. This will be better than risking a huge mistake.’

On other occasions, I've seen professional oversight by people who are not trained in gifted education. They have good management skills and good intentions but lack the background and experience to lead change in an effective manner. Often, they become victims to others who sabotage their work by trotting out the old myths and unchallenged beliefs. The majority of people are not gifted. The majority of people have no training in gifted education and no interest or prior experience to draw from - and majority rules!

Some leaders focus on a 'herd immunity' approach to education where lifting the general scores offers a promise of better outcomes for all. These are the people who lack vision to address the problems that have been highlighted by the international testing regimes like PISA and TIMSS for years. Imagine if we trained our Olympic teams with that mentality? No medals, but a great average base.

Regardless of the excuses offered over the years for the inaction of some institutions, there are schools out there who offer a good quality education that will be of great benefit to your gifted child. Some of them may be the expensive private schools, some the local schools. Some of them will be huge and some of them will be small. Keep in mind that, as parents, YOU are the first educators of your child. It is key to understand what you *really* want from a school for your child.

When people ask me, I always fall back on the idea that a good school will be the one that will listen to what your needs are, help you understand what is really important, and want to assist you to provide what YOU SEE as the best outcome for your child.

When comparing schools, it is difficult to line up location, convenience, gold leaf, shiny marble halls, huge pool, Old School Tie, quality teachers, fantastic results (at least that's what the advertisement says), caring community, etc into a formula that makes any sense - much less cross comparable. The association has received feedback from just about every type of school imaginable and it is interesting to note that we receive very good and very bad comments about the same school.

What are the "gotchas" in all this? No matter who you question in the school, most likely, they have heard it all before. It helps to understand that, in Australia most schools have much in common. Governmental registration ensures some quality control and marketplace forces take care of other factors.

Essentially, all schools, by their nature, are on an improvement agenda of some sort. We all have annual goals, and improvement targets that cover governance, teaching and learning, community relationships, etc. As well, all schools have students as the focus of their existence. Some do it well with an individuality down to the child, where others choose to make decisions of scale. I knew a Principal in Sydney who solved a big school issue of students missing out on their choice in winter activities by reducing the options from 15 to 2. He could then promise that every child would get their choice of soccer or football in winter activities. It's all in how you look at the solution.

Keep in mind that schools teach the Australian Curriculum. The specific nature of the outcomes and learning opportunities ensures that every school should have comparable experiences at the subject level. They are taught by qualified professional who have attended higher degree institutions that have met the government standard for registrations – so teachers have similar experiences in initial teacher training. All teachers are subject to human nature.

So, what are the questions that parents need to ask (and keep asking) of any potential school? Here are some suggestions in no specific order:

Question	Average response	Better Response	Even betterer!
What do your teachers know about gifted education?	<i>We expect our teachers to differentiate for children in every class.</i>	<i>We have trained people who support teachers to cater for their gifted children</i>	<i>Teachers know where students' knowledge level is and how best to support them to progress to achieve their learning goals. This is an expectation of every teacher in every class and we support this with our school goals.</i>
Do you offer programs for gifted children?	<i>All of our teachers are specialists in their fields.</i>	<i>We have many lunchtime clubs and after school activities.</i>	<i>We offer extension classes and scholarship courses. We ability group in some courses and openly discuss acceleration options.</i>
If I walked past my son's class next week, what would it look like?	<i>Students would be quietly working under the direction of the teacher.</i>	<i>Students would be working on assigned tasks with support from teacher and peers.</i>	<i>Students would be fully engaged and working on tasks that are targeted to their learning goals.</i>
Who looks after gifted education in your school?	<i>Different departments handle it differently.</i>	<i>We have a Special Needs teacher who does that. We have a group of interested teachers who meet.</i>	<i>We all do, but we have a member of the Leadership Team who directly oversees that area.</i>
How do you track gifted students?	<i>We analyse their end of year reports.</i>	<i>We have a Special Needs* teacher who does that.</i> <i>*Of course, you could exchange SN with a Learning Support Teacher, Educational Coach, Mentor, or whatever term applies</i>	<i>We analyse their reports and discuss students' progress against their expectation and goals. We have ability and progress tests which compare the class results to provide both individual measures and group measures. The mentor then discusses goals, strategies and options</i>

			<i>with the student for progress.</i>
<i>My child was in a gifted program at XXX, is there a program here?</i>	<i>All of our programs offer challenge.</i>	<i>We always let them settle in for the first 6 months and then see how they're doing.</i>	<i>Let's give 4 weeks to settle in with the other students and then have a look at their past work and current work. Collect any assessments you have and let's make another meeting specifically to talk about our options here.</i>
<i>How do I know that the teacher is catering for my child in a gifted sense?</i>	<i>All of our teachers are good quality educators.</i>	<i>If we sense that your child is not progressing well, we'll certainly be in contact.</i>	<i>Your child is on our radar for this and we'll be checking regularly with the teacher, you and your child.</i>
<i>What happens if my child doesn't achieve where we expect?</i>	<i>All children will be good at some things and not so good at others.</i>	<i>We can regroup at the end of assessments and find out what happened.</i>	<i>We all have input into your child achieving their goals. We need to meet to re-evaluate what the real goals should be for your child.</i>

So, big or small, near or far, faded weatherboard or shiny marble, these questions may assist in being able to provide a yard stick for discerning the better schooling opportunities for your gifted child's education.