

# Gifted Education at West

Roger Avedon, April 2013

Giftedness is not an anointment of value. A person who shows extraordinary ability for high levels of performance when young and, if provided appropriate opportunities, demonstrates a development of talent that exceeds normal levels of performance, is gifted. [SENG](#)

This is a highly contentious topic. You will probably be made uncomfortable and/or defensive reading this series of questions. Questions about giftedness touch on issues of perceived self-worth, fairness in society, and race, ethnicity and class. The US in particular has always been schizophrenic about intelligence and education. On the one hand, we celebrate success outside conventional education norms. College drop-outs Bill Gates, Steve Jobs and Mark Zuckerberg are lionized for their achievements. On the other hand, parents are willing to go to extraordinary lengths, including gaming the system or facilitating [cheating](#), to help their children obtain elite credentials.

“If you had a program for the gifted, that would mean that there are children who aren’t. That’s a truth a lot of parents here won’t tolerate,” says a therapist who lives in Lexington.

“Let’s say there are two parents chatting over the fence,” says Joseph Harrington of Stoughton, a European-history professor who founded the private academic-enrichment summer programs College Gate and College Academy.

“One can brag about a child hitting three home runs. But the other can’t do the same about the kid reading Darwin in the eighth grade. That would be taken as, What are you saying - my kid is dumb?”

For this and other reasons, affluent suburban towns are among the many that do not have programs for gifted children. [Dan Sheridan](#)

The obvious first question to ask is **whether gifted children (about 1 in 50 children) are an *un- or underserved population at West***. Do teachers/administration think of the gifted as a special needs population, requiring particular expertise, or as part of the general spectrum of different student learning styles that is well served by differentiated instruction? **What are the perceived problems for the gifted at West?** What about the highly gifted (about 1 in 750 children)?

GATE stands for Gifted and *Talented* Education, and in some interpretations talented children are non-gifted who perform at high enough academic levels to need additional support. **What is the difference between academic high achievers and the gifted?**

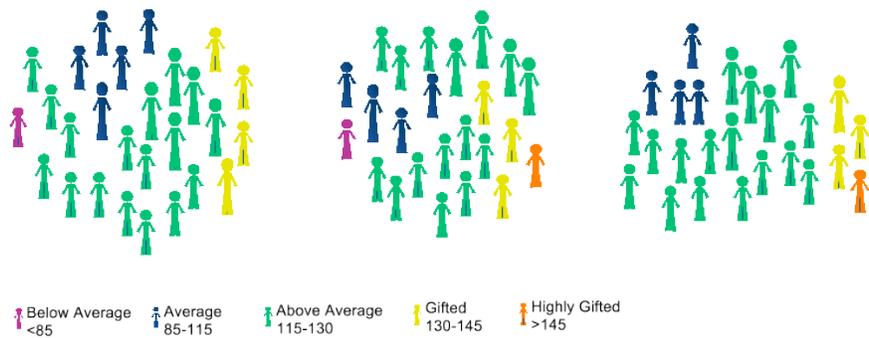
Within the West parent community, there is a sizable group who think that academic achievement is a function of student effort and parental reinforcement unrelated to innate student ability; what has recently come to be known as [tiger parenting](#). It is important NOT to equate tiger parenting with the Asian community or traditional Asian educational norms! There are Caucasian tiger parents (at West!) and tiger parents of gifted children (at West!). In fact, some parents of gifted children may view their use of extra-curricular academics for their children (e.g., Kumon) as providing challenge and interest rather than additional practice for mastery. **So, do tiger parents even accept the concept of *giftedness*?** If not, does that affect how the gifted are identified and/or educated at West?

**How many gifted children are there at West?** Intelligence is highly-correlated with educational attainment and income level, so one would expect HCSD to have a disproportionately bright student

population as compared to the US average. Note this has implications for HCSD STAR scores! Here is a picture of a grade for a school of West’s size with the average US statistics for intelligence:



and here is the picture at West if we assume that the “average” West student is as bright as an “above average” student nationally (i.e., if the West “average” is one standard deviation above the national mean):



↑ Below Average <85    
↑ Average 85-115    
↑ Above Average 115-130    
↑ Gifted 130-145    
↑ Highly Gifted >145

**Does this match your intuition or experience?** One confounding factor is the prevalence of [redshirting](#) at West, where a significant fraction of students are two to four months older than the oldest statutory age for a given grade.

The official district trigger for classifying GATE students is the top 2% of STAR test scores for 2 years. The earliest this can occur is 4th grade. There is [scholarly research](#) challenging the value of standardized testing for identification of the gifted. **Is this process considered adequate and effective by staff and by parents? If not, why not?** Are teachers comfortable raising the subject of giftedness with parents or is it usually broached by parents? Given the large number of above average children at West—perhaps even a majority of the student body, most of whom are likely to be academic high achievers—**is it difficult or easy for the staff to identify the gifted beyond relying on STAR testing?** What methods are used?

Given the number of above average children at West who may come from tiger families, is it a concern that children may be identified as gifted who are instead coached for STAR testing? More generally, does the use of standardized testing to “award” GATE status in the district *encourage* parental competition? If a GATE program were instituted in the district with a testing-based mechanism to qualify, would some parents drill their children in order to qualify? Is that a problem?

There is no existing GATE *program* in the district, so any differentiation for the gifted must fall within the context of the normal classroom environment. **How does differentiated instruction serve the gifted in specific?** How would differentiated *curriculum* serve the gifted were it offered?

**What is the district policy and practices for [ability grouping](#), including grade [acceleration](#), subject acceleration and the subdivision of a class by ability to study a particular topic?** Grade acceleration for the gifted is often opposed on the basis of social and emotional development concerns despite the fact that [there is no research showing such negative effects](#).

Does parental competition in general, and tiger parenting in specific, influence such policies and practices? Should it? If parents are willing to provide academic enrichment sufficient for their children to accelerate to higher grades, should this be allowed? Does the above average (and sometimes older) student population at West create de-facto grade acceleration?

There has been some discussion about how the incoming Common Core Standards (CCS) may or may not benefit gifted education.

The drafters of the Common Core did not write standards for advanced learners and have acknowledged that some students will be ready to move beyond these standards before the end of the year. [NAGC](#)

While public comment on the CCS reflects the desire that the CCS meet the needs of the gifted, there is concern that they do not go far enough. See [corestandards.org](#).

Lastly, [some myths about gifted education and their rebuttals](#).

## **Other general resources and reading:**

The [National Association for Gifted Children](#)

The [Davidson Institute for Talent Development](#), host for the [Davidson Young Scholars](#) program for profoundly-gifted youth.

[SENG](#), Supporting Emotional Needs of the Gifted, a non-profit organization that “cares and advocates for the unique social emotional needs of gifted children and their families”.

[Hoagies' Gifted Education Page](#), a general resource site.