

Choosing A School!

A guide to finding the right school for your
gifted child



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This material was first developed working with parents as a fellow-parent, through parents' groups and through the New Zealand Association for Gifted Children, as a teacher working with gifted children and their parents, and as Advisor on Gifted and Talented Children for the Special Education Service. It first put in print form in *Tall Poppies*, the journal of the NZ Assn for Gifted Children, March 1996.

CHOOSING A SCHOOL....

How do I know if this school will be good for my child?

Rosemary Cathcart

How can I choose the best school for my child? How do I know whether a school will meet my child's needs?

These are questions that concern many parents as their children either approach school for the first time or face the transition to intermediate or secondary, or perhaps move with the family from one district to another.

For parents of gifted children, it is a particularly important issue. Many are only too well aware from previous experience, or from the experiences of friends and relatives, that schools differ widely in how well they cater for the gifted child – and that while some are sensitive, caring and helpful, the impact of an unsympathetic or uninformed environment on a child's learning achievement, attitude to learning and self esteem can be devastating.

What can we do to try to avoid such a situation for our children?

No magic wands!

This is not an issue which has one simple answer. There is no easy formula or checklist to apply. What suits one gifted child will not necessarily suit all other gifted children. Schools themselves are not completely static organisations. They change over time, sometimes almost imperceptibly, sometimes quite radically, reflecting changes in their staffing, their boards of trustees, and their community. And it will always be the case that no matter what the prevailing environment may be, the relationship of one particular child and one particular teacher is highly individual and sometimes very difficult to predict.

Nevertheless, there are some useful pointers which can guide us in making our choice.

The starting point

The starting point is actually *ourselves*. The first step in choosing a school is to examine our own ideas and values and to define exactly what it is we are looking for. A "good school"? Yes – but what does this really *mean*?

For example, if we are the parents of a child approaching secondary school, is a "good" school for gifted students one which can point to a sustained record of success in public examinations? Many schools promote themselves on this basis: many parents appear to accept this as a leading criterion in evaluating a school: probably most of us will agree that academic achievement, at least in the areas of ability, is a relevant goal for a gifted child.

But is examination success a reliable indication that the academic needs of the gifted student are being fully met? Some researchers believe that competitive examinations *restrict* academic development by discouraging creativity, enquiry, experimentation

and thinking beyond the curriculum. What does academic development mean to *you*? And are academic needs the only needs a gifted student has at this level? If not, what else do we expect the school to do for the student?

Similarly, many parents say they simply want their child to be happy at school, that they don't want to push their child, that they just want his or her needs met. But what should the school do or offer if your child is to be happy there? What are the needs she or he has that you would like the school to meet?

In short, before we can begin the process of choosing a school, we need first to establish our own priorities and then to work out the specific questions we need to ask or the specific factors we need to look for that will tell us whether our priorities can be met.

The process of discussion involved in doing this can help us, not only to clarify our expectations, but also to see how realistic they are and where we might be able to compromise without losing anything essential. Some people find it helpful to divide the factors they are looking for into a list of "must haves" and "would likes"; some add "definite no-noes".

From the earliest possible stage, children themselves can have some part to play in this discussion. Quite apart from the benefits to them of being involved in family decision-making, gifted children are often remarkably perceptive about their own learning needs: their comments may materially help us to clarify what we are looking for.

Specific factors

What are the factors we might consider? Our list could include questions like these:

- Does the school have a specific policy on providing for gifted children, and has it allocated time, resources and staff for this purpose?
- How are children identified as gifted? Does the school draw on information from a variety of sources, or only from tests? Does it look for creatively gifted children or children with abilities in other than academic areas? Is the school prepared to listen to parent information? Is it prepared to review its conclusions if more information comes to hand?
- Is the school responsive to individual differences? Can it be flexible in meeting children's needs? Is it prepared to allow the child to work ahead of his or her age group if this is appropriate? Can a child work at more than one level?
- Is programming classroom-based first, so that the child's whole learning experience, and not just the occasional episode, is matched to his or her needs?
- Are there regular and frequent opportunities for gifted children with similar levels and areas of ability to work together?
- Are gifted children encouraged to develop their creativity? Are lateral thinking, interest in enquiry and debate, and willingness to challenge received views encouraged?
- When does identification and access to programming begin? Is the school willing to consider the possibility from the moment of entry, or does it delay the process for months or even years?

- To what extent are parents and children involved in decision-making about a child's involvement in any programmes for the gifted? Is there any level of consultation, and at what stage? How well does the school keep parents informed, explain what it's doing and why, and explain any implications there may be for the future?
- Is attention paid to other than academic needs? For example, are gifted children helped to develop self esteem, understanding of themselves and of others, the ability to work independently and with perseverance?

Once we have reached this point, how do we find out how well a particular school matches our needs and requirements?

What does the school tell us?

The first place to look for information is in what the school itself says about what it does.

One important source of such information is the school's set of *policy statements*. This is of course a public document, and anyone is entitled to read it whether they have any existing connection with the school or not. So you most certainly can ask to see the policy statements before you enrol your child. In practice, many schools keep a copy in the school office for just this sort of request, although you will probably not be allowed to take it away to read because of the cost of re-printing if it were not returned.

Look first to see whether the school actually has a specific policy on gifted learners. In some cases this may be called the policy for "CWSA" ("Children With Special Abilities"). In other cases, gifted learners may be incorporated into the policy on Special Needs.

A good policy should include:

- a definition which acknowledges that exceptional ability can occur in any area of learning, not just in academic areas;
- a commitment to:
 - a school-wide approach to providing for gifted learners, to ensure continuity and consistency;
 - an identification process which:
 - is on-going and open to review
 - draws on *all* relevant sources of information
 - is inclusive, seeking to find *all* gifted learners
 - recognises that ability can occur in children from all cultural and socio-economic backgrounds, of both sexes, and in some who are disabled;
 - the provision of learning programmes which genuinely meet the needs of gifted learners;
 - the continuing provision of professional development to ensure *all* teachers know how to recognise and cater for gifted learners;
 - the provision of sufficient funding and resources to support all of the above.

A school which has such a policy has at least at some stage given some careful thought to this issue, and the fact that the policy exists gives you something tangible to refer to should any problem over meeting your child's needs arise.

If the school has a prospectus, this can be a useful source of further and more specific information. For instance, it may tell you that the school has a "CWSA" withdrawal group for children from Year 4 onwards which meets for 1½ hours weekly, and it may give you some description of the activities offered to the group.

The school principal, if you arrange an interview, will be able to give you even more detailed information and, of course, to answer any questions you may have. School newsletters, bulletins to parents, annual school magazines, even a visit to classrooms, can also all give you a "feel" for how the school operates and what its general climate is.

However, there are some caveats on all these sources of information.

First of all, we should not automatically assume that a school without a policy is also a school without a programme. Some outstanding programmes are running in schools which haven't got round to writing formal policies. Nonetheless, absence of a policy *may* indicate that the school as a body has less commitment to the programme – it may, for instance, rest on the enthusiasm and special interest of one particular teacher. What happens if this teacher leaves?

Conversely, we can't assume that the existence of a policy is a guarantee of a good programme. It is unfortunately true that policies are not always implemented, or are implemented only in part or not very well. Similarly, a prospectus may give an absolutely honest account of the school's programme, but it probably won't tell you that your atrociously untidy, argumentative, highly divergent thinker who rarely finishes "boring" school assignments but spends hours on exotic self-initiated projects is, in some schools, unlikely to be selected for the programme. And as principals themselves may ruefully admit, their accounts of their schools' programmes are sometimes, in relation to some classrooms, descriptions of what *should* occur rather than of what actually does.

Other ways of accessing information

Thus, while it's essential to get the "official" information, to discover the school's stated philosophy and to know exactly what it promises, it is also vitally important to find out how far and how effectively this translates into practice.

There are a number of ways in which we can do this.

Talking to parents of NON-gifted children attending the school

When we're looking for opinions about a school, it's usually easier to find the parents of non-gifted rather than gifted learners, simply because there are more of them (and also because parents of gifted learners do not always announce the fact). Their accessibility means too that we can get a *range* of viewpoints and experiences.

These parents can give us valuable information about the school's general attitude and response to parents and children. For example:

- How well does the school communicate with parents? Does it keep them well-informed, both generally in regard to the whole school and specifically in relation to their particular child or children? To what extent does the school create opportunities for parents to become involved in their children's learning and in school activities? To what extent does it consult with parents and involve them in decision-making? Does it initiate contact if there's a problem? How approachable is it when a problem does arise? Do teachers break into educationese when parents raise an issue, or listen and try to explain without too much professional jargon? Are they willing to discuss alternative solutions?
- How does the school handle its relationship with children? Does it seem to value all children equally, regardless of ability, behaviour or background? Does it care for the child as a whole person? Are teachers generally thoughtful and sensitive to children's feelings? How responsive are they to children's different interests, likes

and dislikes and ways of working? Are children generally happy about going to school? If a child has a problem, does he or she feel confident about taking it to the teacher? Are children encouraged to make choices, take the initiative or think creatively?

If a school scores poorly on these kinds of attributes for children and parents in general, it is unlikely to provide a sympathetic environment for the gifted child.

Finding and talking to parents of gifted children

Finding them is of course the first step. If you belong to a local branch of the NZAGC, this is easy. (If not, now's the time to join!) But if there is no branch in your area, what can you do? There are two or three possibilities:

- Write to NZAGC nationally and ask if there are any other families in your area who may have had experience of local schools. (This contact may well have other benefits – you might, for instance, find you now have the nucleus of a local branch).
- Ask your existing school or early childhood centre if they know of any other families with gifted children who have gone on ahead of you to any of the schools you are considering.
- The school you are looking at may be prepared to put you in touch with other parents who have had children involved in their programmes.
- You can advertise in the local paper for parents of other gifted children willing to share their experiences.

If anyone cites the Privacy Act, remember that you can always ask for your own name to be passed on rather than for names to be given to you.

When you are talking with other parents, first find out when they were involved with the school. Check to see if any particularly helpful or unhelpful teacher is still with the school, whether the principal is the same or whether there have been any major policy changes in this area. Also ask parents a little bit about their own children. Remember that gifted children are a particularly diverse group, and your child may have interests or aptitudes which could make his or her responses quite different.

Once you have this background, what are some of the things other parents may be able to tell you?

- Did they know their child was gifted before enrolment? If so, how did they go about telling the school? How did the school react? If not, when and how did they find out, and what then happened? If the school made the identification, were they told what process was used? When and how did the school advise them their child was gifted?
- How has the school attempted to cater for their child's special needs? How successful has this been? What factors have specially hindered or helped?
- At primary or intermediate school, has provision been consistent from year to year, or has it depended very much on the individual teacher? Are gifted children ever grouped together in any way, in class, across class levels or in withdrawal groups? Have their children had continuing involvement in such groups or how frequently does it happen? Have they found the work offered in such groups really challenging and exciting? Does the regular classroom programme also make provision for their learning needs?
- At secondary school, have their children been involved in accelerate classes or other similar groupings? Was there any opportunity for choice about involvement in such programmes? Did involvement limit or extend subject choice for the

students at any stage of their school career? Were students pressured to sit external examinations, or did they have a choice? How sensitively did the school handle the issue of labelling? If their children were not selected for accelerate programmes, how responsive was the school to representations from the parents? Have any other provisions been made for their children? If they attend a school which does not offer such programmes, what has the school done to recognise and provide for their special areas of ability? Has this been effective?

- Whatever the child's age or level of schooling, how well has the school kept parents informed of the provisions it is making for the child's special needs? How well does the school explain the implications of any steps it takes (eg, at secondary level, the implications of accelerate placement for subject choices at more senior levels)? Are parents consulted before decisions are made? What opportunities do parents have to make suggestions or comments, or to be actively involved in their children's learning? How well does the school handle any problems that arise?
- Has their child been happy going to this school?

Arranging a group interview

If you have the opportunity, either through your local NZAGC branch or through the parent contacts you have made, another effective way to learn about what a school has to offer for gifted children is for a *group* of parents to organise a meeting with the school on this issue. You might meet at the school or invite it to come to your group, or alternatively you might invite several schools to send representatives to meet with your group in a panel-type situation.

The advantages of this are several. A group of parents represents a wide range of experience: it is highly likely that some will be able to ask valuable questions on issues that hadn't occurred to others or that they didn't previously know about. In the group situation too, some may raise issues they or others would feel hesitant about raising in a one-to-one situation. And because it's a group, schools themselves are able to spend more time answering questions than they ever can with one individual. They may also be willing to involve more than one teacher, and they may undertake more extensive preparation.

Arrange a personal interview

Ask to see the principal or the teacher in charge of programming for able students. (NB: *Always* make an appointment beforehand for such an interview - this is a courtesy appreciated by busy teachers, and a teacher or principal who is prepared for your visit will be able to respond to you much more fully).

The advantage of such an interview is that it enables you to ask questions and raise issues which are directly relevant to your child's specific individual needs. It gives you a chance to resolve any concerns you may have or to explore in more depth points which may have only been touched upon in a more public forum. It also means that you are making a first personal contact, and this too is important for both sides in building the necessary partnership between school and home.

If there is any opportunity for your child to see round the school or visit a classroom, that's extremely valuable too: after all, he or she is going to be the person most affected by this decision.

What's next?

Once you have acquired as much information as you reasonably can about the schools you are considering, it's back to the family for another round-table discussion.

At this point, your original checklist of priorities comes into play. It's a good idea to review it before you begin. Are your priorities still the same? Are there any points you didn't think of in the first instance which you now wish to include?

How does each school compare with your reviewed checklist? Which comes closest to your ideal?

It should be said at this point that of course feelings play a part too. We can't completely rule out our subjective impressions, and nor should we, because often those instinctive responses have a reality in them that no amount of logical analysis can replace. And where all else is equal, they may well be the best deciding factor. Nevertheless, we do need to make sure that subjective impressions are fair, and we may need to allow some time for un-pressured reflection or perhaps to arrange a further meeting or visit to help us decide just how real or significant such feelings are.

When all of these factors have been taken into account, we may at last feel ready to make a decision.

Following on...

But of course that's not exactly the end of the story: it's just the beginning. Whatever decision we have made, there will be a continuing need for us to monitor our children's progress, to make sure that programming continues to be appropriate, to provide support and guidance for our children in working through problems which arise, as they inevitably will even in the best of situations, to help with reviewing needs as these change and develop, and to liaise cooperatively with teachers in making our children's learning experiences as rewarding as they can possibly be.

Thus there is also a continuing need for us to keep ourselves well informed, to work at building sound relationships with teachers in which information and views can be honestly and openly shared, and perhaps at times to be prepared to be advocates for change and forward movement in what the school does for gifted children, our own and others.