

Gifted Underachievement: Root Causes and Reversal Strategies



*A Practical Handbook for
Guidance Counselors and Teachers*

*Alexander R. Pagnani
The University of Georgia*

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Introduction Statement

Few things upset gifted education teachers more than the words “Why should we worry about the smart kids? They’ll be fine on their own.” High intelligence does not exempt these students from the emotional and developmental struggles of youth, and giftedness often adds a whole new collection of academic, social, and emotional challenges as well. Gifted students, like *all* students, possess specific educational needs and are put at risk for low performance if these needs are left unmet.

Although it is difficult to make statistical estimates on underachievement and drop-out rates, recent academic research has consistently shown that a surprising percentage of our brightest students perform well below their academic potential. Seeley (1993) calculated that 15-40% of gifted students are at-risk for serious academic underachievement or school failure, and U.S. Office of Education data suggest that as many as 50% of students in the top 25% of their high school classes will never graduate from college (U.S. Dept. of Education, 1993). Worst of all, it is believed that 10-20% of high school dropouts come from the gifted population – an alarming statistic, which shows the magnitude and seriousness of the underachievement problem (Rimm, 1995).

This handbook is a guide for the practicing educator, whether serving as a guidance counselor or teacher of the gifted, which seeks to expand awareness of gifted underachievement and offer helpful suggestions. Most gifted underachievers are good kids with serious challenges, and it is my hope that dissemination of this handbook will help we educators to better address the needs of this at-risk population.

Alexander R. Pagnani, The University of Georgia

*Section I: “How can you be gifted,
with grades like that?”*



Student Profile: Larry

Larry is a 6th grade Caucasian boy with disheveled brown hair, hazel eyes that peek timidly through his glasses, and wrinkled clothes that are usually several sizes too large. He is quiet and shy, and although he is careful to be polite with his teachers, he rarely engages anyone in conversation for more than a minute. When he does speak his words are mature and deliberate, revealing a depth of intelligence hidden behind his unkempt appearance, but also occasionally cryptic and dark. It is apparent to all of Larry's teachers that he is working through some serious emotional struggles, and Larry has been regularly seeing the school counselor for two years for depression.

Larry's only apparent interest or hobby is his fascination with professional wrestling, and he seemingly knows every wrestler, move, and theme song by heart. His schoolbooks are littered with doodles and sketches of wrestlers, including many of his favorite superstar: Rey Mysterio. When Larry was in the third grade, his teacher found him ignoring his seatwork while he hurriedly wrote in a notebook, and she demanded to see what he had been doing. Larry sheepishly handed her the notebook, which was filled with over 70 pages of wrestling scripts that Larry had recently authored, complete with stage directions, colorful characters, and even the use of foreshadowing techniques. Larry quietly whispered to her that he and some older neighborhood boys had been videotaping hour-long wrestling shows, in costume, and posting them online. The teacher, who was extremely impressed by his creativity and writing skill, recommended Larry for a giftedness evaluation – which he passed with flying colors, scoring a 99th percentile on the Torrance Test of Creative Thinking, with a high IQ to boot.

Academically, Larry has been a source of constant frustration for his teachers. He has an excellent memory and can easily recall facts from classroom lectures, which helps him to earn a steady stream of B's on all of his quizzes and tests. "If that kid even bothered to study for ten minutes," one teacher sighed, "He would probably have straight A's." Larry's report cards, however, had generally consisted of C's since even the first grade – as teachers could count on docking his test scores each marking period as a result of his almost total disregard for completing any homework. Over the years different teachers had tried different things, from "homework contracts" to parental phone calls, but the contracts were never completed and the phone calls were never returned.

Teachers have had very little luck in contacting Larry's parents, and it is well known that his home life is highly dysfunctional. Larry's mother supports the family with a small housecleaning business, while his father is unemployed. Some years past, Larry's older sister had become involved with the school counselors and state child protection services after she told a sports coach that her father would often drink and become abusive. Although nothing was ever proven, Larry's sister did move in with her mother's relatives shortly thereafter, transferring to another school district across town.

The other boys in the sixth grade are too young to understand Larry's problems, and his oversized clothes and dirty appearance often make him the butt of their jokes. Recently, older school bullies have begun to pick on Larry as well – and teachers have noticed a sharp increase in "sick days," presumably as a result. Larry's grades have never been good, but his teachers fear that if he keeps missing school days at this pace he'll find himself even farther behind.

Questions: What is Gifted Underachievement? How is it Identified?

As Larry's case demonstrates, gifted underachievement is a complex phenomenon, usually stemming from multiple interwoven causes. A large body of academic research literature has been dedicated to the topic over the past few decades, helping educators to better understand these common roots and how underachieving gifted students can be better identified and serviced. In this section, we will examine characteristics of underachievement itself, and ask what identification techniques are helpful for recognizing these behaviors. In the following section, commonly mentioned causes of underachievement will be discussed, tracing the problem's development from student difficulties to classroom distress.

Numerous definitions of underachievement exist, but most the comprehensive is that of Reis and McCoach (2000), who assert that "Underachievers are students who exhibit a severe discrepancy between *expected achievement* (as measured by standardized tests, assessments, etc.) and *actual achievement* (as measured by grades and teacher evaluations)." In addition, the patterns of underachievement must be long term, and not caused exclusively by the presence of a learning disability. Of course, many gifted underachievers do suffer from a learning disability, but the maze of causes must be wider than just this one issue for the gifted underachiever label to be appropriately applied.

Expected achievement can be a tricky term; how do any of us really know what a student is capable of? And what about strengths and weaknesses; just because a student has an IQ in the 95th percentile, are they supposed to be skilled in your particular content

area? While each individual student is undoubtedly different, what is known is that in a promising era where over 65% of high school graduates enter college (U.S. Dept of Labor, 2006), a large portion of our brightest students should not be struggling with poor grades and mediocre chances of academic success. This is not a criticism of educators or schools – it simply highlights the fact that when 10-20% of high school dropouts are gifted, something has undoubtedly gone very, very wrong (Rimm, 1995). Intellectually gifted students are not automatically destined for success, but they should have the skills and tools required to compete and achieve at the appropriate level.

Actual achievement is a more concrete term, easily measured by glancing at a student's transcript or teacher comments. Educators hope for each student to succeed, but it can be particularly painful when a capable student does not. We tend to harshly blame the student for a lack of effort, telling them that with "just a little more work" they could have bumped that D to a C, or C to a B. While the responsibility of earning good grades should always rest squarely on the shoulders of the student, quick judgments in blame can help to obscure the true root causes of the underachieving behaviors, whether they are academic, social, personal, or family related. In addition, our words may often fall on deaf ears – as underachieving students tend to hold low levels of self-efficacy and see the world through an external locus of control. This is not to say that we should abandon high expectations or notions of personal responsibility however, as these values can play an important role in restoring an internalized sense of motivation. We educators need to affirm these values and expand upon them, being willing to address responsibility issues while also permitting ourselves to consider and evaluate the nebulous web of contributing factors that often produce a long-lasting pattern of underachieving behavior.

The identification of gifted underachievers tends to diverge along two different paths, each concerning a specific group of students. The first of these groups are the identified gifted underachievers – those students who have been previously identified for gifted services based on prior standardized tests scores, yet are no longer achieving academically. Locating these students is comparatively easy work, as cross-referencing prior test scores with current GPA's will quickly bring cases of underachievement to light. One sad note to consider is that many of these students will have unfortunately been “dropped” from gifted program rolls, or may currently be in danger of losing their “invitation” to gifted classes or services. The magnitude of error in that decision cannot be overstated, as gifted students constitute a special-needs population as unique as any other, and their form of differentiated services should be seen as a right and not a reward.

The second group of students can be more difficult to locate, as they represent the non-identified gifted underachievers. Although several states' adoption of a multiple criteria rule has dramatically improved equitable identification, many gifted students (especially of minority status) still manage to slip quietly through the system. Years of mediocre grades lead educators to expect nothing better, never realizing the potential for success that lies within the child. Similarly, underachievement is often seen as a male issue, not because boys perform so much worse, but likely because many non-identified gifted girls remain quiet, hidden, and academically average; blending into the background and keeping their underachievement a secret. Finally, highly creative students may also escape detection, as creativity can be closely linked with rebelliousness, disorganization, and sarcasm, lessening their chances for a teacher referral (Davis, 2003).

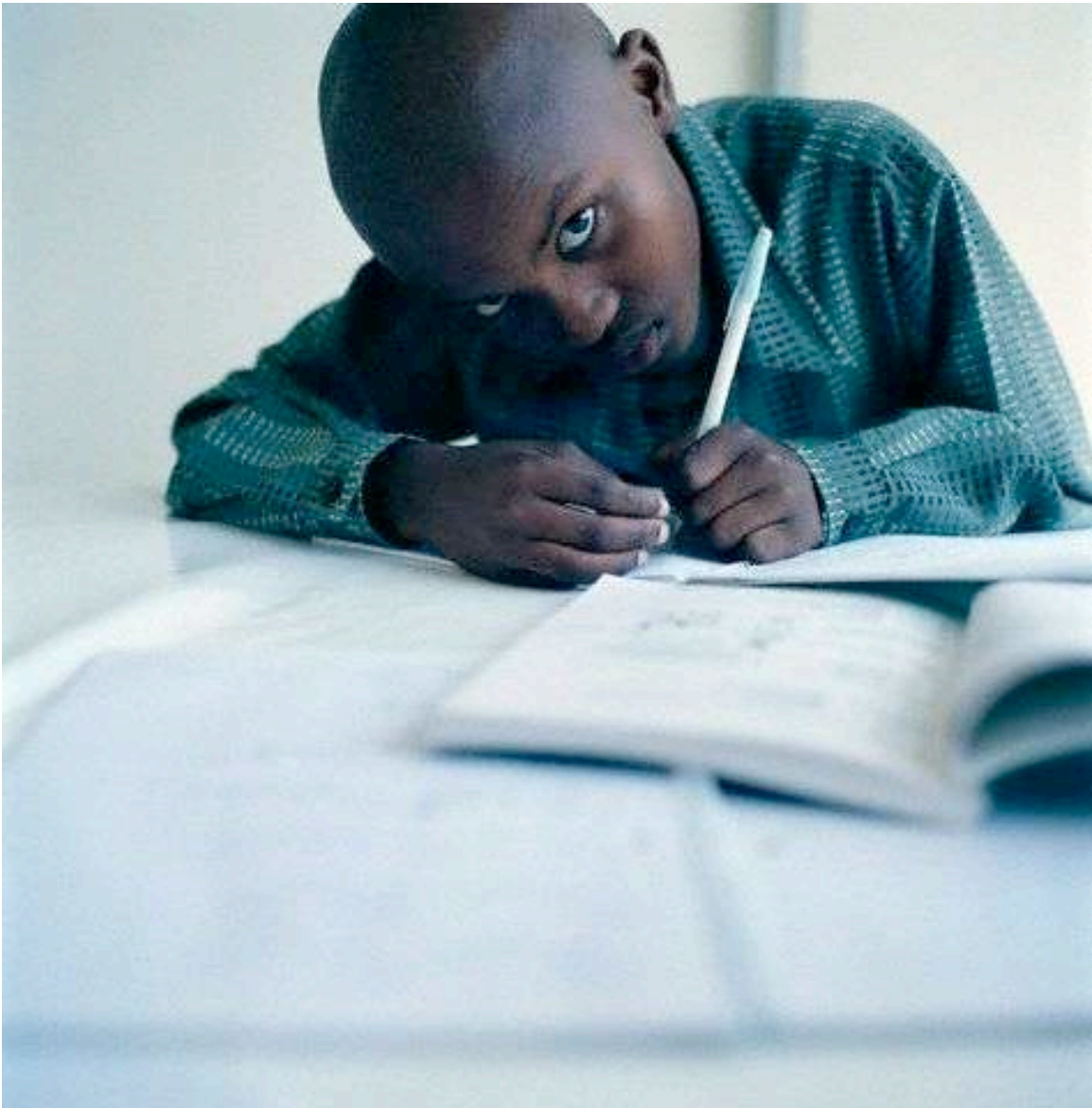
Identification Tips for Guidance Counselors

- Work to educate your school's guidance/counseling staff about the issue of gifted underachievement.
- Actively seek to identify your school's underachieving gifted, and use this handbook to develop a plan of services.
- Continue working to reevaluate and improve your school's gifted identification procedures, to help discover non-identified gifted underachievers.
- Never use gifted education services as a carrot for academic or behavioral expectations, or threaten to withhold them as a stick.

Identification Tips for Teachers

- Seek alternative means to help identify gifted minority students, including the Frasier TAB's (Traits, Aptitudes, Behaviors) Checklist.
- Encourage high-potential female students to challenge themselves in academic areas they have not yet developed comfort with. Do not let them "blend in."
- Be aware of the existence of "Twice Exceptional" students – Many gifted underachievers struggle with a learning disability, complicating their identification as gifted learners and leaving them frustrated about their abilities.
- Remain optimistic about your abilities to help correct underachievement behaviors. Refuse to give up on any student's potential for success.

Section II:
“There’s no good excuse for bad grades...”



Student Profile: Dwayne

“Dwayne, you’re gonna be late for school again,” yells Dwayne’s mother from downstairs, “I’m leaving for work – get up and get going!” Dwayne, knowing that his mother won’t be around to check, hits the snooze button and figures that missing first period won’t be the end of the world. Besides, why would a video game programmer need to learn Spanish?

Dwayne, a 10th grade African American student at Briar Creek High School, was identified for his district’s gifted and talented program in the 6th grade after receiving high IQ and creativity scores, but has never achieved a commensurate level of academic success. He doesn’t like school (“They make me learn things I don’t need to know.”) and would rather spend his time joking with friends, working on personal art projects, or playing video games. His report cards were strong in elementary school, but he began to struggle once he entered the sixth grade – around the same time as his mother and father’s divorce. Over the following two years, his grades slid from A’s and B’s to C’s and D’s. Halfway through the eighth grade year, Dwayne was removed from his beloved gifted education classes as a result of his poor grades. “How can he be gifted, if he can’t even do better than a C in social studies?” one teacher noted.

Dwayne’s academic struggles continued through his first two years of high school, and in the ninth grade he received his first failing grades, in Spanish and algebra. He was embarrassed at first, but was relieved when his mother didn’t get angry like Dwayne thought she would. “It’s OK,” she told him, “I was never good at school either.” His peer group didn’t seem to mind at all – many of them were failing classes as well.

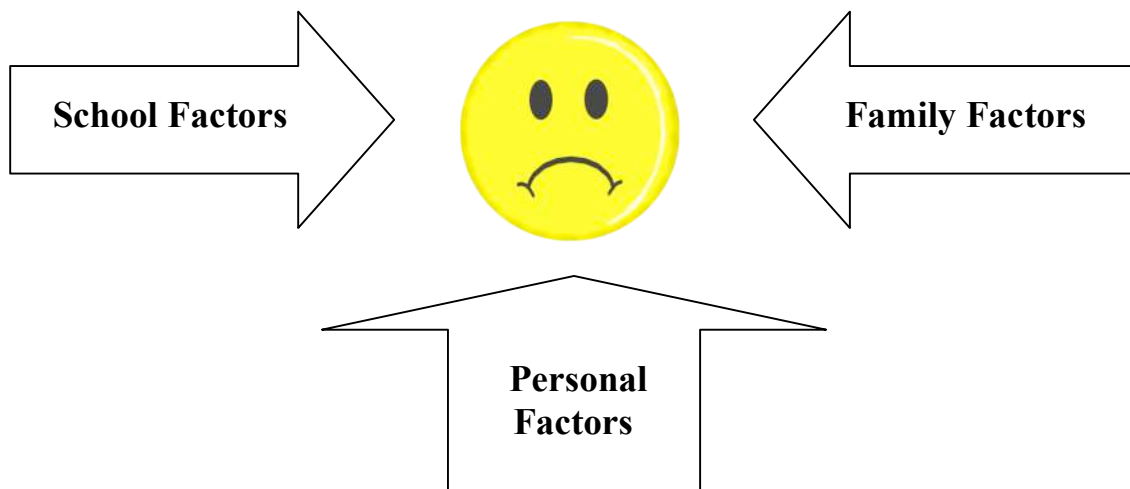
Dwayne doesn't feel good about his lack of achievement however, and his poor grades have caused significant damage to his self-concept and sense of worth. Sometimes he thinks about his teachers' suggestions to "just work harder," but he's come to see success as something out of his reach.

Dwayne's favorite time of the day is the afternoon, as his mother's long work schedule means that he can do whatever he pleases. Usually, he races home and plays video games until his mom returns at 7:00 pm, which he considers a form of practice for his "future career" as a video game designer. In truth, Dwayne possesses a high level of creativity and technological know-how, and probably would do well in that field – but in reality he has no concept of the steps he would need to take to actualize that dream. To make matters worse, his poor marks in the 9th and 10th grade have set him back on graduation requirements – forcing him to focus on core content classes and stop taking computer science electives.

Another relevant component of Dwayne's story is that of his turbulent relationship with his older brother, Jermaine, which has caused Dwayne much anxiety over the years. Jermaine is five years older than Dwayne, and has experienced his share of trouble with the law. Jermaine completed high school – barely – but spent most of his time involved with drugs and alcohol, and shortly after graduating was arrested for petty theft at his workplace. Dwayne loves his older brother dearly, yet feels stress and tension whenever he's around. His brother still runs with a dangerous crowd, and Dwayne never knows if he should be happy or worried when he arrives home from school to find Jermaine and his friends partying at the house.

Questions: What Causes Gifted Underachievement? How do we Know?

Underachievement is not simply caused by laziness. Nor is it caused by low self-esteem, a mismatched curriculum, an abusive relative, high absenteeism, depression, peer group issues, or mixed parental messages alone. What *does* seem to cause gifted underachievement is a combination of school, family, and personal challenge factors – even if the exact combination appears different for each individual student.



When gifted students experience singular setbacks, research literature has generally shown them to be surprisingly resilient (Neihart, 2002). Their usually high self-efficacy, problem solving abilities, positive explanatory style, and heightened senses of humor are often able to keep them focused and emotionally healthy. When multiple setbacks and challenges accumulate however, the resulting pressures seem to bear down on gifted students and generate underachieving behavior patterns. *This highlights the need for teachers of the gifted to remember that underachievement is usually not the cause of the problem; it is instead a symptom of many other problems in the child's life.*

Recent works by Baker, Bridger, and Evans (1998) and Reis and McCoach (2000) examined the multiplicity of negative factors that hold many gifted underachievers down.

The most commonly appearing causes are as follows:

School Factors	Family Factors	Personal Factors
Excessive Absence	Unclear Behavioral Expectations	Poor Mental Health
Boredom; Lack of Acceleration Opportunities	Disorganized Family Environment	Emotional Disturbances
Curriculum Mismatched to Student's Needs	Lack of Parental Support or Emotional Involvement	Behavioral Disturbances
Clash Between Instructional Style and Learning Style	Parental Unpredictability; Mixed Messages	Poor Self-Concept
No Extracurricular Involvement	Low Emphasis on Education or Work	Perfectionism, or Fear of Failure
Peer Group Issues	Differing Parenting Styles Between Mom and Dad	Depression
Unreasonable Teacher Attitudes or Expectations	Excessive Independence Given to the Children, or	External Locus of Control
Poor Academic Environment	Excessive Control Retained by the Parents	Learning Disability (ADHD Most Common)

The school factors contributing to gifted underachievement are a varied bunch; some, like excessive absences, peer group issues, and a lack of extracurricular involvement are highly dependent upon the individual. Others pertain to the classroom, such as a clash between learning style and instructional style, or a having a teacher who expects too much from a gifted student or too little from everyone else. Others even

apply to the school at large, including a lack of curriculum compacting or acceleration opportunities to alleviate boredom, a mismatched curriculum that emphasizes one area of study at the expense of others (i.e. The artistic child in the “math and science” gifted program), or the existence of a poor academic environment overall.

The implicated family factors are more consistent in nature, with most stemming from a lack of familial cohesion, organization, or expectations. Children need structure and goals to guide them through the development process, and when expectations are not made clear, or behavioral boundaries firmly set, confusion sets in and grades suffer. Rimm (1995) characterized underachievement as a problem of “dominance or dependence,” arguing that families who are too authoritarian and families who are too permissive actually produce almost identical results. Perhaps the most interesting familial factor however, is that of a parent’s low emphasis on education or work. A parent who cares little for schooling is likely to raise similar children, but Peterson (2001) demonstrated that a parent who constantly complains about their work can also negatively impact the child’s education. In her survey of 31 gifted underachievers, only 6% had a mother who felt happy with her work, and only 29% of fathers enjoyed theirs.

The saddest list of contributing factors is the personal domain, with large numbers of underachievers reporting mental, emotional, behavioral, or mood disorders. Learning disabilities, perfectionism, and fear of failure also played a role – each of which is a difficulty easily complicated by giftedness. Finally, external locus of control and poor self-concept were also reported, with students believing that the world “acted upon them” rather than “them upon the world.” Some of these factors will require educational training to fix, yet most are perhaps better left to the realm of traditional counseling.

Tips for Guidance Counselors

- Help students to see the “how’s” of their career goals, and what they need to do right now to make those a reality. For example, if a student hopes to become a paleontologist, show them how good biology grades will open doors for them.
- Be prepared to help student confront serious issues in their lives, and guide them to appropriate outlets for counseling if necessary. Underachievement may look like a grade issue, but often times it’s a mask for something worse.
- Actively involve parents in your work as much as possible, helping those who may not understand how to be a good advocate for education to improve.
- Get to know your students as much as possible, so you can help them to select courses that you both agree are vital to their interests and career plans.

Tips for Teachers

- Recognize the diverse array of contributing factors that can lead to gifted underachievement. Understand that it’s not just laziness, but involves multiple interwoven strands.
- Do your best to remain aware of your students’ outside lives and family situation.
- Don’t be shy about recommending underachieving students for school counseling if you suspect that a more serious issue might lie behind the behaviors.
- Stress relevance in your classroom lessons, clearly explaining the connection between course material and students’ interest and career goals. Students who believe that they “don’t need to know this” are the first to turn off.

Section III:
“But How do we Fix This?”



Student Profile: Rosá

As Rosá gently brushes a horse's mane at the university stables, she talks openly about her experiences as a underachieving teen. "It wasn't easy for me," she says, "My family had a great life in New York City, and I had friends, good grades, and acting lessons. When we moved out to the country, *everything* changed."

Rosá is a second generation American, whose parents came to their new home in the 1980's from Nicaragua. Her father had chosen to relocate the family to New York City, accepting a job offer from a childhood friend. Rosá was born in New York and sees herself as a "typical American girl," while acknowledging that a resultant cultural rift separates her views of the world from those of her parents. As a young child, Rosá had difficulty in school due to language problems, as her parents had mainly spoken Spanish in the home. She was briefly moved to a Spanish language classroom halfway through the 1st grade, but began to learn so quickly that her teacher requested a Spanish language IQ assessment. Following a score in the top two percent, Rosá was formally identified as gifted, began to receive accelerated English instruction, was mainstreamed back to the English classroom for 2nd grade, and was invited to join the school's new gifted enrichment program upon entrance into the 3rd grade. Rosá's elementary and middle school experiences were delightful, she had good friends, high grades, and had developed passionate interests in science and theatre. Her school arranged for her to take high school biology while in the eighth grade, and her parents supported her acting talents by providing lessons and taking her to local play auditions. She was happy – until her parents decided it was time to move.

Rosá's father had been offered a new, better paying job, but it required a painful relocation. Against Rosá's objections, she, her parents, and her two younger siblings packed up a van and drove south, moving to a small, rural community in western Georgia. Rosá quickly realized that life was much different in the country, especially on her first day of school for the 9th grade. Whereas her middle school had 2000 students, her new high school only had 136. There were no advanced science classes, and the school didn't even have a theatre club. Rosá felt abandoned and alone, and grew frustrated when she found difficulty in making new friends. She began to withdraw academically, mostly out of boredom, but also because she felt anxious and afraid about possibly receiving a bad grade and embarrassing herself in front of her new classmates. Grades were the only aspect of Rosá's former identity that she felt control over anymore, and she was petrified of losing them too. Over the course of Rosá's 9th grade year her fears intensified, and she became increasingly perfectionistic. She would pour over small assignments for hours, fret over minutia, and panic if she had a test approaching. That worry led to decreased performance, and eventually to an "If I don't try, I can't fail" attitude. Rosá's parents didn't seem to mind that her grades were falling, either. "My parents are traditional in their ways," Rosá explained, "They were happy to see me achieving in school as a young girl, but I'm getting older now, and they dream about walking me down the aisle, not footing a tuition bill."

Toward the end of Rosá's 10th grade year, the school's guidance counselor, Mrs. Williams, was reviewing Rosá's transcripts prior to their course selection meeting when she noticed the sharp contrast in achievement. She sat Rosá down in her office, and had an open conversation about her recent struggles; seeking to identify the causes behind the

behaviors and salvage the young woman's dreams. Rosá was defensive at first, but as the two discussed the emotional impact of her family's relocation she began to tear up and talk about her life. Mrs. Williams reassured Rosá that positive steps could be taken to rebuild her achievement, and demonstrated with scholarship brochures that Rosá's hopes for college could easily become a reality if Rosá was willing to work hard and dedicate herself to making positive changes in her life. Rosá agreed, and the two began to discuss a plan for reversing her recent pattern of underachievement.

The following September, Rosá began the 11th grade with a renewed focus and a completely redesigned action plan. Her guidance counselor had spoken with the district's gifted education coordinator, and together they had convinced Rosá's teachers to implement a curriculum compacting plan to let Rosá "test out" of sections of material she already knew. This had helped to alleviate her in-class boredom, and Rosá was now free to use her newfound time to take a distance-learning AP biology class from the Nebraska University online high school. In addition, Mrs. Williams had arranged for a local veterinarian to mentor Rosá, who was passionate about animals as well. In exchange for these modifications, Rosá had agreed to meet bi-weekly with the school counselor's perfectionism support group, and had also agreed to take an organization and study skills seminar through the guidance department. Mrs. Williams had even contacted Rosá's parents and held a quiet meeting to discuss Rosá's academic potential, the importance of their support for her education, and to provide information about scholarships.

"I can't believe how long ago that seems," Rosá muses as she walks out from the stables behind the veterinary building. Her second successful semester of college is now drawing to a close, and it's time to get to theatre practice.

Questions: How can we Reverse Underachievement? What Really Works?

Educational researchers have spent over five decades exploring the root causes and behavioral manifestations of gifted underachievement. As a result, the educational community now possesses a wealth of informative, accurate literature on the subject. Significantly less can be said about our knowledge of underachievement reversal strategies; most experimental programs sought to address only one component of the problem, met with mixed results, and were tested well over 10+ years ago.

Among the attempted reversal schemes are four studies that deserve special mention. Baymur and Patterson (1965) attempted unsuccessfully to resolve the issue strictly through a student and family counseling approach. Supplee (1990) led an ambitious drive to create special classrooms that used pro-reversal teaching strategies, but met with only mixed success. Hastings (1982) described an organizational study skills program implemented by her district, which helped three students but did not help three others. Finally, Baum, Renzulli, and Hébert (1995) piloted an independent-study based program - using curriculum compacting and student-interest projects - that was fairly successful in reinvigorating student attitudes about learning.

Each of these programs was a praiseworthy attempt, but none could consistently demonstrate long-term success. In each case, this was most likely the result of placing too narrow a focus on only one aspect or cause of underachievement. The problem of gifted underachievement is a multilayered challenge with numerous interwoven causes, and successful reversal approaches are likely to be multilayered as well - simultaneously

responding to the child's academic, social, and emotional needs. These "academics *and* counseling" approaches hold the most promise for helping our students to succeed, yet require significantly more work as well. Two such programs have been academically suggested; Weiner (1992) argued for simultaneously strengthening reward systems, addressing cognitive and emotional handicaps, filling educational gaps, and modifying passive-aggressive tendencies, while Rimm's (1995) "Trifocal Model" emphasized a firm partnership between educators, parents, and psychological counselors to fix a larger number of root causes.

With a lack of proven models in the past, and the slow speed of future research, modern educators may understandably feel at a loss for the present. "What about *my* students," they ask, "how can I help the ones in our classrooms *right now*?" Although a prepackaged programming model has yet to show results, there are plenty of strategies that guidance counselors and teachers of the gifted can use right away to help underachieving students. These remedies are traditional, common sense, focused on student needs, practical, and appropriate. The key is for educators to correctly identify the student's challenges, and tailor a customized package of services that targets as many of these causes as possible. As each student's reasons for underachievement may differ, so too will the treatment packages. A similar step-by-step process can help guidance counselors and teachers to identify these needs and generate response strategies however. Consider, for example, the suggested reversal program and sample cause-response suggestions that appear on the following two pages. This program is a general guide, and by no means authoritative, yet does provide a promising and easy-to-follow framework for targeting underachievement.

Reversing Underachievement: The Matched Needs Strategy

1. Identify the gifted underachievers in your school, by comparing standardized test scores to grades or GPA. (Be prepared to discover a 2:1 male to female ratio)
2. Discuss your concerns with other counselors and teachers, to get a feel for the students' achievement or underachievement overall.
3. Select a counselor or teacher who (ideally) has a preexisting relationship with the child to intervene.
4. Meet independently with the students, develop a rapport, and use open discussion to identify the root needs behind the pattern of underachievement. Trusting relationships take time to build, and this may progress slowly.
5. Reassure the student that with help and determination, their situation can be improved. When they agree to consider an "Achievement Plan," proceed.
6. Consult with guidance counselors, teachers, school counselors, and/or gifted coordinators to discuss the root causes and develop response strategies.
7. Draft a plan of services ("Achievement Plan") that carefully and deliberately matches educational services to demonstrated student needs. The following chart provides helpful sample strategies for many common causes of underachievement.
8. Meet with the student's parents to discuss the proposal. Avoid placing blame in this discussion, and make clear that the school hopes to work *with* them to correct this problem. Ask the parents for help in reinforcing academic messages at home.
9. Sign the "Achievement Contract" along with the student, agreeing to provide desired opportunities (i.e. independent study, mentoring, etc) in exchange for student participation in the less pleasant components (i.e. counseling, study skills training, homework signature sheets).
10. Continue to hold the student accountable for their contract. Maintain high expectations, and hold regular progress meetings with the student.
11. Reevaluate the program often, making modifications as necessary.

Reversing Underachievement: Sample Responses to Student Needs

The following responses are only suggestions – but do provide an idea of common services that are offered to treat underachievement-related problems.

Student Needs	Sample Responses
(Always beneficial)	Mentoring, interest-based projects, organizational study skills training
Boredom, lack of acceleration opportunities	Curriculum compacting to make room for independent study or acceleration
Mismatch between student interests and school's curriculum	Schedule restructuring, mentoring in a field of interest, independent study
Poor academic environment at school	Allow student to enroll in a local college or community college course for credit
Learning styles clash with teacher, inappropriate teacher expectations	Conversation with teacher, schedule modification
Peer group challenges	Enrollment in extracurricular activities, bibliotherapy, lunchtime discussion groups
Perfectionism, asynchrony, other "gifted" social and emotional challenges	Group counseling through gifted program, bibliotherapy and cinematherapy
Poor self-concept, external locus of control	Break assignments into small parts to build confidence in abilities, then slowly expand
Learning disability present or suspected	Follow district's identification procedures, provide counseling and IEP changes
Excessive absence from class or school	Investigate causes, speak with parents, demonstrate school's importance to child
Parenting problems, poor parenting style, emotionally detached home life	Parent conference, connect student with the school counselor
Mental, emotional, or behavioral health	Individualized counseling, whether school-based or private
Drugs or alcohol suspicions	Follow district's protocol, ensure that counseling begins
Physical, emotional, or sexual abuse	Follow district and state protocols, involve proper authorities

Tips for Guidance Counselors

- Focus reversal programs on matching tailored services to demonstrated student needs. Recognize that each student's reversal plan will look different as a result.
- Act as a liaison between teachers, school counselors, gifted education coordinators, and parents to create a services plan. Disseminate information and ensure that all are on the same page.
- Educate parents on the need to express consistent, positive messages about education and its importance.
- Support outreach programs that educate new parents on child development, parenting styles, and the "happy medium" between dependence and domination.

Tips for Teachers

- Emphasize self-efficacy to build student motivation. Show students that they can achieve by assigning small projects at first, and building up in scope and complexity as the child's self-confidence improves.
- Maintain high expectations for your students at all times. Expect them to succeed and show them how to succeed.
- Work to actively teach organizational study skills. Demonstrate that one's process is as important as one's products.
- Build close connections with students' parents if possible, both to understand your students' home lives and to ensure that parents are sending the same messages that you are.

Reversing Underachievement: Lesson Strategies That Help



Sample Lesson Strategy: Bibliotherapy / Cinematherapy

One of the most creative ways to address students' social and emotional needs, whose deficiencies can often cause gifted underachievement, involves the use of therapeutic books or films. Bibliotherapy and cinematherapy (often called "guided reading" or "guided viewing") each have a long history in academic research – and an even longer history of use in "real world" educational settings. Books and films hold cherished places in our culture, and matching students to a story is a good way to show them that they are not alone in their problems.

When students read a book or view a film that features a similarly troubled protagonist, they often progress through four stages of emotional response: Identification, catharsis, insight, and application (Hébert & Kent, 2000). The first stage involves realizing the connection they share with the character, based on the common challenges they face. The second stage is one of emotional relief, echoing the words of C. S. Lewis in that "We read to discover that we are not alone" (Hébert & Kent, 2000). The third stage is one of insight, as the student reads or watches as the protagonist solves or copes with his dilemma, providing a model for the student to follow in his or her own life. The final stage occurs when the student takes the lesson and applies it to his or her own social or emotional challenges, hopefully with a similar positive outcome.

Teachers and guidance counselors who successfully use bibliotherapy and cinematherapy to aid their students' development typically follow a six step plan:

1. **Assess the student's needs and interests** - What factors are causing the child to underachieve? Does a quality book, in an area of student interest, exist to help?
2. **Choose an individual or group approach** - Is this problem common? Would bringing a group of similar students together be therapeutic - or embarrassing?
3. **Select an appropriate book or film** – Is the book interesting to students? Is it realistic? Have I previewed it, to make sure it is clean and appropriate?
4. **Enjoy the book or film with your students** - individually or as a group/class?
5. **Discuss the story together** – How can I use the book as a lens to address student needs? What questions can help them progress from identification to insight?
6. **Assign fitting follow-up exercises** – What extension activities would help learning to continue? Which ones would have real meaning and value?

Discussion is the lynchpin of bibliotherapy and cinematherapy – and educators must be careful in structuring their questions. Students need to be brought along to the idea of “opening up” quite slowly, and must be provided with introspective “cool down” time as well. I recommend a “bell curve” approach to question intensity, with non-threatening opening questions, gradual incorporation of the character’s issues, open identification discussion, time spent discussing the character’s solutions, and a return to non-threatening concluding remarks.

Plenty of resources exist to help counselors and teachers locate quality books or films that address common social and emotional challenges. Three of the most beneficial, yet most overlooked, are the school’s media center specialists, public librarians, and bookstore employees. In addition, the Internet can be a treasure-trove of book recommendations and reviews. When selecting a book or film, remember that it must have initial appeal to the students – look to their interests and hobbies, and try to “hook” them with those. Remember as well that you are *not* looking for a book about underachievement, but rather about the problems causing your student to underachieve.

Sample Lesson Strategy: Independent Projects

As previously stated, educational researchers have had a difficult time in finding proven programs to consistently reverse underachievement. That is not to say, however, that these programs have not demonstrated some degree of success. One such reversal strategy, which has been shown to partially benefit underachieving gifted students, is that of incorporating individual interest projects within their academic curriculum.

Baum, Renzulli, and Hébert (1995) pioneered the use of independent projects to reverse underachievement behaviors, and those familiar with Renzulli's (1977) enrichment triad model will not be surprised to find that it mirrors his classic approach. Many underachieving gifted students report a dislike for school, a mismatch between their interests and curriculum, and dissatisfaction with the emphasis on "knowing" when they would rather be "doing." The use of independent interest-based projects, therefore, constitutes an attempt to actively answer these criticisms by bridging the gap between student interests and schoolwork.

The use of independent projects usually begins with a contract between the school and the student, offering the student time to research an agreed upon topic of their choosing and create a real-world project, in exchange for the student's cooperation with a new, streamlined curriculum. Curriculum compacting is then utilized to create blocks of time for the student to work on their research project; this is often done with unit pre-tests to identify the material already known and exempt the student from those lessons. It is especially important to note that the purpose of curriculum compacting is just that – to compact the curriculum by removing unnecessary time and work. Thus, teachers should

never ask compacted students to complete class work for days that they have been exempted from, lest the independent project shifts from “my work” to “my extra work.”

To aid the student in their project, a gifted education teacher should contribute and supervise in a helpful facilitator’s role, and a mentorship opportunity is sometimes established as well. Working with a mentor whose career is connected to the student’s project provides guidance for the student and shows them the practical applications of their new knowledge. Most importantly however, it also demonstrates that good career opportunities exist in a field that the student finds interesting – thus providing the student with a rational reason to work and achieve.

As you have likely guessed, the independent interest projects described by Baum, Renzulli, and Hébert (1995) are no academic walk-in-the-park, either. The goals of the program are clearly described to students from the start, and high expectations are maintained for both their topic and their project. Students are not to select general research topics and simply check the school’s reference library; they are expected to develop a meaningful, insightful research question and create a project for use in an authentic, real-world setting. Renzulli (1977) describes these projects as an exercise in “creative-production,” meaning that students are using their intelligence and creativity to actively *do* and *produce* – in a way that mirrors the activities of a practicing professional. Thus, while “researching skateboards” may not be an appropriate research topic, “completing an internship project at a local skateboard shop to learn small-business financial skills” might hold great merit. In the end, what’s most important is that the topic comes from the student’s own passions, and that the project is of demonstrable value with real-world application and meaning.

Sample Lesson Strategy: Organizational Skills

New teachers are often shocked to find that their charges lack the basic skills of learning; students' notes are a mess, their assignment books are jumbled (or empty), and they often assume that "studying" means skimming the chapter once while watching TV. While organizational skills and study skills are tools that all children need to develop and hone, numerous research studies have found that the underachieving gifted are much less organized than their achieving counterparts. As a result, some attempts have been made to create "organization/study skills" programs for underachieving students, hoping that teaching them *how* to work will convince them that they are capable of *doing* the work. In this way, organizational skills can be said to share a cyclical relationship with self-efficacy and motivation; students are disorganized and lack study skills, so they believe that they cannot successfully accomplish their assigned tasks, so they lose any motivation to make the attempt. The loss of motivation, in turn, leaves their skills flat and causes the cycle to begin anew.

In response, Hastings (1982) created a study skills course at the middle school where she worked. A scan of guidance department records helped to identify six gifted underachievers, all of whom agreed to participate. Students were provided with organizational strategies, weekly checked homework books, support discussions, and a quiet study hall with teacher supervision. Although the program did not completely reverse the students' underachievement, it did prove beneficial to four of the six – not bad for a single-focus pilot program. While a course in organizational skills and study habits

may address only the surface behaviors of underachievement, and not the root causes, it still appears a positive addition to any multi-component reversal program or strategy.

As for the root causes, a study conducted by Rimm and Lowe (1988) concerning the family environments of gifted underachievers yielded an interesting discovery: Although underachieving students' families were as active and busy as other families, they had noticeably more difficulty in managing their schedules and organizing their commitments. The apple doesn't fall far from the tree, and many children's poor organizational skills could be traced right back to the lack of organization in their home.

Not all underachievers have disorganized parents however. Creatively gifted students tend to be disorganized regardless of their parents' state, and their high levels of creativity may actually contribute to patterns of underachievement. This occurs because creative students tend to possess "holistic" learning styles, which focus on big ideas, new concepts, grand projects, etc – at the expense of detail oriented analytical tasks, such as the majority of school assignments (Redding, 1989). Disorganization, it would seem, actually *does* come naturally to these students.

Schools looking to address gifted underachievement would be remiss to ignore organizational and study skills, provided that they are included as an *aspect* of a reversal plan and not seen as the plan itself. Valuable skills such as note-taking, outlining, record-keeping, scheduling, draft-writing, editing, and keeping an verified assignment book should all be included. These skills could also be taught as either a guidance department sponsored seminar or within the natural classroom, depending on preference. Many districts are currently attempting to improve student organizational skills overall, making this the perfect time to push for such a program.

*Section IV: “An Ounce of Prevention
is Worth a Pound of Cure...”*



Student Profile: Jiang

Jiang is only 14 years old, but he's already seen more of the world than most people ever will. He was born in California to recently immigrated parents, but three years later they decided to move the family back to Singapore when their small business went bankrupt. Four years after that transition the family uprooted again, this time settling in Thailand where Jiang's uncle had purchased a boarding house and hoped to convert it into a small hotel. "My happiest memories are of that boarding house," Jiang muses, "For almost a year my family worked to knock down walls, plaster ceilings, pour concrete, and paint the rooms. It took a long time, but it was a blast."

The boarding house was located in a rough section of town however, and Jiang was never allowed to wander far from the front gate. "Thailand has some beautiful places," he says, "but some dangerous ones too. Drugs were a big problem in my area, and there were plenty of homeless people living on the streets." Jiang, like many gifted youngsters, has always been emotionally sensitive and morally aware. One time, when he was nine years old, his mother caught him sneaking a plate of leftovers out of the house to give to a homeless man. She scolded him, not out of meanness, but because she didn't want her nine year old walking around alone at night when there were drug dealers and street gangs about. "But Mom," Jiang had argued, "If I don't help them, who will?"

Jiang's parents divorced the following year, and Jiang's father decided to take him back to America. His mother remained in Thailand, remarrying soon after. Jiang's father forbade her to have contact with Jiang, and Jiang has not spoken to his mother in almost five years. Jiang had been home-schooled as a child, but when his parents split he

found himself in a public school for the very first time. The change was difficult for him. “I hated school!” Jiang recalls, “When I was home-schooled, I could study anything I was interested in. I read good books, watched documentaries, etc. At school, they just *tell* you what to learn. Nobody cares if you’re interested or not.”

Jiang’s sixth grade teacher, Ms. Byrd, was quickly puzzled by her new student. When she forced him to do work he would complete it quickly and well, but usually he just stared out the window and conveniently “forgot” to do any homework. Also, she could tell that he was emotionally upset – a classmate’s playful “Yo’ Mama” joke had recently resulted in a fistfight. Jiang’s grades weren’t terrible – three B’s and two C’s – but Ms. Byrd had a feeling that he could do much better. One January afternoon, she received a flyer from the gifted education coordinator. The school was creating a program to identify and support the “underachieving gifted,” and was looking for likely candidates. Ms. Byrd knew exactly who to recommend.

The school counselor had agreed to interview each recommended student, and she was glad after meeting with Jiang. She quickly realized that his parents’ divorce and lack of interest in the school curriculum were driving his behaviors, and she recommended that an achievement plan be designed to address these factors. Jiang was invited to join a bi-weekly discussion group for students of divorced parents, moderated by the counselor, and curricular modifications were made to allow for curriculum compacting and interest-based projects. After Jiang mentioned his experiences repairing the old boarding house, a teacher also helped him to join Habitat for Humanity. Jiang is now in the eighth grade, and has rebounded nicely. His interest is back, his emotions are settling, and his grades have improved. “School’s OK now,” he admits, “and I feel like me again.”

Question: What Academic Policies can Help Prevent Underachievement?

Preventing underachievement is a lofty goal, and requires a district-wide commitment. The good news, however, is that the policies which prevent these behaviors are also good educational practices in general and help all students to succeed.

Gifted underachievement is often described as the behavioral result of an affective “perfect storm;” when students are struggling to cope with family challenges, school challenges, and personal challenges, they shift academics to the backburner and lose their motivation and self-confidence. These underlying factors can be difficult to predict or prevent, as many lie outside of the educational system’s control. Changes in academic policy will not prevent parental divorce, or ADHD, or even an occasional mismatch between a student’s learning style and a teacher’s preferred means of instruction. What changes in academic policy *can* do however, is to better equip the school district to identify and deal with these challenges when they arise, while working to minimize risks and keep students academically engaged.

Preventing underachievement begins in the earliest years of education, perhaps even before students have entered the first grade. Family problems are among the top causes of gifted underachievement, and school districts should do everything in their power to support community outreach programs that educate new parents on doing their job well. Once children have reached schooling age, this parent-school relationship must continue to grow; convincing parents to echo the importance of education and achievement with messages consistent to those their children hear in the classroom.

Early education teachers play a crucial role as well, as they are the vanguard of problem-identification and basic skills training. These educators must balance the responsibilities of four main objectives: Providing content knowledge, building self-confidence and self-worth, actively teaching organizational study skills, and carefully noting any indications of mental, emotional, or psychological unease. Identifying and servicing these disorders from the earliest possible age addresses the problem before the child is already far behind, and thus provides opportunities for the child to witness new success and understand that they are indeed capable of admirable work. Later years of schooling should continue these themes, but also pay increased attention to students' sense of identity, interests, and learning styles. As children begin to ask questions about their places in the world, they will need teachers with high expectations to help them set commendable goals. Even more important however, is that teachers use motivational techniques to build self-efficacy and ability awareness in each child, so that they recognize their skills and understand their potential. Classroom activities should be varied in learning style and type, to provide opportunities for different types of children to locate their strengths, and teachers should utilize an "organizational process" approach to clearly demonstrate the "how's" of each task.

Beyond the classroom, school administrators, guidance counselors, and school counselors each have important roles to play as well. Administrators must take a firm lead in supporting gifted education as an element of educational individualization, with a goal of providing each unique student with the similarly unique services they need. Guidance counselors must remain aware of student testing data and grade disparities, while also seeking to match curricular scheduling to student interests and career goals at

every possible opportunity. In addition, they must also help students to understand the world of employment possibilities that could await them after graduation, as well as the concrete steps that must be taken along the way if one is to realize those possibilities. Underachieving students are often unaware of the doors they are closing, and guidance counselors are providing a great service when they “tell it like it is.” Finally, school counselors play a crucial role in underachievement prevention and reversal, due to the high number of underachieving students with an emotional challenge or affective burden. Whether helping a student to deal with peer conflicts, alcohol use, learning disability coping strategies, or academic perfectionism, the school counselor stands in a unique position of opportunity to support personal growth and positive change.

Above all else, the achievement-oriented school district should wholly adopt a singular maxim: That the goal of education is to provide *individual* students with the concrete skills *they* need to succeed. In our era of differentiation, it will come as no shock that specific students have specific needs, and that their correct educational paths could – and should – differ. By working to correctly identify the challenges and goals in each child’s life, educators can deftly apply services while using curricular modifications to address interests and benefit learning. Doing such keeps students engaged, helps them to see the relevance of their studies, and leads them to see the connection between hard work now and a better future tomorrow.

Tips for Administrators

- Support parent groups, community education campaigns, and family counselors to help promote healthy family dynamics and parenting practices.
- Recognize gifted education as a vital component of differentiation services, and seek to maximize its efficiency in your school.
- Remember to keep a broad focus in this era of federal standards, maintaining emphases on both minimum competencies and higher-level accomplishment.

Tips for Guidance Counselors

- Remain aware of ability/achievement gaps in your students' records, and do not hesitate to intervene at the earliest opportunity.
- Sponsor an organizational study skills workshop for struggling students.
- Work to improve your school's academic atmosphere, encouraging respect for learning and achievement.

Tips for Teachers

- Work in partnership with guidance counselors and school counselors, sharing information and pooling efforts to help students succeed.
- Use a diverse range of teaching methods and strategies, to address varied learning styles and pique students' attention.
- Incorporate student interests in the classroom and projects, to communicate respect and keep them engaged.

Concluding Thoughts

Most people, myself included, are natural procrastinators. We pack our calendars and scheduling books, do what we can, and shift the rest down the line – day after day, week after week. Life keeps us busy, and the ambitious projects we’ve been meaning to start can quickly fall by the wayside. Addressing gifted underachievement is the type of goal that can suffer as a result, one that we recognize is important but can also appear superfluous in an age of defined standards and basic skills. For each day that goes by however, another wave of underachieving students continues in their ways, loses more faith in their abilities, and struggles to deal with their problems on their own.

Finding ways to help these students is not difficult. A great deal has been written on the problem of gifted underachievement, and it is my hope that this handbook has provided you with some practical, real-world suggestions. The hard part, of course, is getting the ball rolling and putting your ideas into action. The best way to do this often involves recruiting others to help, such as inviting a small group of educators from your school to come together, discuss underachievement, and formulate a plan.

We think of the gifted as being almost automatically successful, but this is not the case. Gifted students are just as likely to be born into bad family situations, suffer from a learning disability, or experience social or emotional difficulties. Without help, 50% of our brightest students will never graduate from college (U.S. Department of Education, 1993), and 10-20% of high school dropouts will continue to come from the “superior” ability range (Rimm, 1995). If we renew our dedication to these students and work to match appropriate services to their specific needs, they can – and will – do better.

Appendix: “So You Want to Know More...”



Recommended Reading List

Books:

- Brophy, J. (2004). *Motivating students to learn* (2nd ed.). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Rimm, S. (1995). *Why bright kids get poor grades: And what you can do about it*. New York: Three Rivers Press.

Research Articles:

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About the Author

Alex Pagnani currently resides in Athens, Georgia, where he is pursuing an educational psychology Ph.D. in gifted and creative education. His academic research interests include gifted underachievement, bibliotherapy, the extracurricular lives of gifted students, and neuropsychology. He has experience in a number of educational contexts, having served as a teacher, research assistant, and collegiate student affairs professional. His future goals include teaching educational psychology and gifted education strategies to pre-service teachers, and he takes great joy in returning to the classroom each summer to teach gifted young men and women at the Duke TIP program.

Alex can be contacted at apagnani@uga.edu, and welcomes any questions.