LEARNING

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Facing a quiet crisis

Parents unite to see that gifted students' needs are met in public schools

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As a parent, Kay Carter was worried. Her 8-year-old son, Ryan, an easygoing, fun-loving third grader attending public school in Massachusetts, was showing signs of emotional stress. "I hate school. I hate all the kids, and they hate me!," Ryan shouted most days after school before disappearing through the back door into the woods.

Ryan's anger and frustration intensified every "awful Sunday" as the school week approached, according to his mother. Kay Carter's alarm was underscored by the fact that this was a child who not only liked his teacher but for whom school could have been a favorite place: Ryan showed exceptional intelligence, scoring at the high school level and beyond on cognitive tests.

Confused, Carter dialed a parent support line she had stumbled across months before, and learned that Ryan's behavior was a serious warning sign. "I was told that third grade was a turning point for children of high intelligence like Ryan, that his personality change and unhappiness should be taken seriously, and that suicide was a factor," says Carter, who now counsels and advises parents over the same hot line sponsored by the Hollingworth Center for Gifted Children in Dover, N.H., and who also serves as a board member for the Massachusetts Association for the Advancement of Individual Potential.

"I get calls from families all over the nation whose gifted kids have dropped out of school or committed suicide," she says.

The fact that many academically gifted children are also isolated and unhappy in public school – and are even troubled and failing – may come as a surprise to the general public, but the phenomenon is familiar enough among learning specialists to have coined the label "the quiet crisis" in public schools.

"These kids get bored and negative about school, and they're also at risk emotionally because they feel so different and isolated," says Ellen Winner, senior research associate at Harvard's Project Zero and psychology professor at Boston College. The assumption that gifted children are trouble-free and do not need special attention is one of the nine myths Winner identifies and dismantles in her most recent book, "Gifted Children: Myths and Realities." Also debunked by Winner are the widely held beliefs that gifted children are talented at ev-

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erything, and that accelerated learners always become eminent adults.

Winner's assertions are underscored by research. Studies published in educational and child-psychology journals during the last two decades show highly gifted learners have twice the rate of social and emotional problems as average children, 45 percent of identified gifted children have below average grades; and gifted learners compose a disturbing 14 percent of the high school dropout rate.

"I've seen gifted kids get depressed, turn off to school, stop doing their homework, and stop wanting to be gifted," says Judy Brown, a specialist in gifted education who teaches at the Walsh Middle School in Framingham. While some gifted students react to boredom and isolation by withdrawing, others devise ways to get attention and approval, according to Brown. Brown, who has 20 years' experience teaching and counseling gifted children, says she knows of a gifted child "who had quite a lucrative business going selling pornography" obtained off the Internet. "These kids find subversive ways of challenging themselves."

Yet public schools continue to eliminate programs for gifted students and fail to train regular classroom teachers about their needs. In a national study of 7,500 schoolteachers conducted by the National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented, or NRC/GT, at the University of Connecticut at Storrs, researchers found 60 percent of the teachers had never had training in teaching accelerated learners and that the last thing teachers worried about was was modifying curriculum for high-level students.

In Massachusetts, schools are not required to address the cognitive or emotional needs of accelerated learners, although this is mandated for learning-disabled students. The state's 1993 Education Reform Bill does endorse the idea of establishing programs for gifted students, but leaves it up to the districts to decide whether thay will spend time and money identifying and implementing programs that stimulate exceptional students. As a result, out of 352 school districts in Massachusetts, only 75 currently offer programming for gifted students.

Until recently, parents of gifted children in public schools have remained silent, in many cases muted by the reactions of those they turn to for advice. Margaret Campbell, a parent in Bolton, received what most say is a typical set of responses to requests for help with gifted children. "One teacher I spoke with said: 'What do you mean? There is no such thing as a gifted child,'" says Campbell, who has a son and daughter in public elementary school. "My son's teacher last year told me to put him in private school because he was way ahead of the others."

In an age when the term "gifted" is considered elitist by many anti-tracking advocates and when educational trends frown on strategies that best challenge and support gifted learners – such as accelerating children to higher grade levels and grouping gifted students – parents find themselves being ambivalent about their child's abilities and keeping quiet about their child's needs.

GLOBE PHOTO / CHRISTOPHER FITZGERALD

Judy Brown, shown here with Walsh Middle School seventh graders, has 20 years' experience teaching and counseling gifted children.

"People are embarrassed to have a bright child," says Sally Reis, educational psychologist and assistant professor at the University of Connecticut and also principal investigator of the National Research Center. "It's a politically charged subject."

"I don't want my child to be educated at the expense of other kids," says Kay Carter, who successfully advocated to accelerate Ryan four grades in Chelmsford (a practice prohibited in many schools), where he calmed down and developed close friends despite the age difference. "I just want him to be educated to be the best he's able to be – which is one level above where he is, so he has to reach. We do this so well with learning-disabled kids here in Massachusetts, why can't we do it with gifted kids?"

A growing number of parents are beginning to ask the same question. About 20 support groups of parents who want to keep their accelerated child in the public school system, either for financial or philosophical reasons, now exist in towns across the state. Many of these groups have formed in the last two years. Each of the groups advocate in their own way according to their school systems, only some of which have programming for the gifted .

In Northbridge, one such group, Parenting for Potential, has set up a Web-site-monitoring task force whose members scan 25 to 30 accelerated learner Web sites and print up anything of interest for teachers and parents. And in Holliston, parents of the group REACH last year brought in a speaker on gifted children's needs and this year organized a series of workshops on classroom strategies and materials for faculty.

"One of our major goals is to provide staff with the development they need," says group member Eileen Muller, mother of two sons and a daughter attending public school.

She says she is well aware that teachers have their hands full accommodating all levels of learning. "Since we are asking them to do this job, we feel it's only fair we provide teachers with the tools," Muller says.

In Framingham, one of the few towns where a program for gifted students is available through middle school, parents of the Gifted and Talented Parent Advocacy Council, or GATPAC, are advocating for a trained guidance counselor at the high school level and have expanded their group to included elementary, middle, and high school parents.

"We want to help educate and support parents in what can be some trying circumstances," says Judy Platt, the mother of two accelerated learners attending school in Framingham and advocacy council's president. "And, our second goal," she says, "is to support and educate the school system by giving feedback. One thing we can do is tell the system what is working and what isn't."

Informing the efforts of these support groups is a growing body of research on what gifted children need and how to implement strategies in the regular classroom. Sally Reis and her husband, Joseph Renzulli, director of the National Research Center, have conducted scientific research on the emotional and academic needs of accelerated learners and compared it with how they are being taught in today's classrooms. They have found that, in public and private schools alike, classroom teachers make only minor modifications in regular curriculum to meet the needs of gifted students.

"One of the biggest problems we face with gifted kids is underachievement," says Reis, the parent of both a gifted and a learning-disabled child. She says she believes both extremes of learning can, and should be, addressed in the public schools. "What happens to gifted kids in today's schools is the same thing that happened during the '50s and '60s – they get a lot of repetitious extra work. So they learn to hide their intelligence."

What gifted children need, say Reis, Renzulli, and other learning specialists, is programming specifically designed to address learning needs, such as diversified and compacted curriculum, tiered assignments, and flexible grouping so kids are allowed to interchange ideas at least part of the day with like-minded and interested peers.

Professor Renzulli is careful to point out that this is not to suggest tracking – the now disfavored practice of separating high and low achievers into flexible routes toward college or vocational jobs.

"Tracking is indeed a black spot in American education," says Renzulli, whose School Enrichment Model plan used in some Connecticut schools seeks to identify not just cognitive but creative talent potentials in all children. In contrast to tracking, Renzulli advocates flexible grouping, including clustering kids together around subjects of intense interest.

"Our philosophy can be likened to building a ramp (toward achieved full potential)," says Renzulli. "We believe schools should employ everything – from advanced placement for the exceptional child in chemistry to arranging mentoring programs for a kid who is a good writer. These are the resources out there – you just have to use them."

The idea that gifted children can and should be accommodated in the public school system in an inclusive way is supported by parents like Timberly Ecklemann, who helped form Parenting for Potential in Northbridge last year.

"We want information to be as accessible as possible to anyone who needs it," says Ecklemann, a mother whose fourth-grade son is an accelerated learner. Ecklemann's group decided to locate their file of 'Net information and other materials in the town's public library, rather than in individual schools, so that the entire community would have access to the information. She says her group is committed to crossing economic boundaries and avoiding elitism.

"We have a belief that if we raise the bar for our children, it will raise for all children," says Ecklemann, speaking for the 30 parent members of her group. "We are united over improving school for all kids."