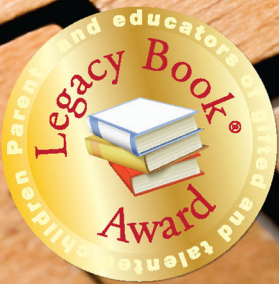


Beyond Gifted Education

Designing and Implementing
Advanced Academic Programs

A **Pruftrock Press** Book



Scott J. Peters, Ph.D., Michael S. Matthews, Ph.D.,
Matthew T. McBee, Ph.D., & D. Betsy McCoach, Ph.D.

Beyond Gifted Education



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Table of Contents

	Preface.....	vii
1	Introduction	1
2	Identification for What?	21
3	The Process of Identifying Students in Need of Advanced Academic Programming	39
4	Total School Cluster Grouping <i>Illustrative Example</i>	67
5	Acceleration <i>Illustrative Example</i>	85
6	But What About Enrichment?.....	105
7	When Addressing Underrepresentation IS the Goal <i>Illustrative Example</i>	117
8	Common Pitfalls in Identification	135
9	An Introduction to Combining Multiple Measures.....	157
10	Conclusion	181
	References	185
	Appendix A <i>NAGC Pre-K–Grade 12 Gifted Education Programming Standards</i>	195
	Appendix B <i>Code of Fair Testing Practices in Education: Prepared by the Joint Committee on Testing Practices</i>	215
	Appendix C <i>NAGC Position Statement: The Role of Assessments in the Identification of Gifted Students</i>	223
	About the Authors	233



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Preface

It is one of the most frequently addressed topics in gifted education journals and newspaper articles about the field. Every handbook and textbook on gifted education devotes one or more chapters to the topic. It is a central concern of parents and, increasingly one on which they will spend money in the hopes of gaining an edge for their child over the competition. In some states, it is the only mandated activity for gifted education and in others, the largest line-item in the budget. And yet it remains as controversial and, in many quarters, as poorly understood as ever. What is it? Identification. Many of us who have worked to help schools develop better, fairer identification policies have concluded that these efforts are unlikely to succeed as long as they are tied to the word *gifted*. The question “Who are the gifted children in this school?” leads to policies and practices quite unlike the question “Who are the children who are currently mismatched with the level of instruction they are receiving?” or even “Who are the children who show talent in this domain that we might help them develop?” Although many have objected to current policies, few have offered specific guidelines for new ones. This book bridges that gap.

The authors begin by boldly announcing that their approach differs radically from gifted education as currently practiced, so radically that they give it a different name: *advanced academics*. Identification of the cognitive,

motivational, and personality traits that might uniquely characterize gifted learners is left for psychologists to investigate and debate. For practitioners, identification should refer to “a formalized system that sets out to determine which students have needs that are not being met by the standard curriculum of a given school or district” (p. 15). The goals and processes for identifying students in need of advanced academic programming are described in greater detail in Chapters 2 and 3. To identify is to predict that a student will succeed (or at least not suffer harm) in a particular instructional program. It is local, not only to the school, but to the particular academic program at that school. At one extreme, students might be allowed self-identify by opting to enroll in a class or participate in a program. At the other extreme, the system can offer (or require) a multi-step, multimeasure assessment that is designed either to prevent unqualified students from entering the program and/or to encourage qualified but unwilling students to participate in it. But it is decidedly not about imposing a more permanent label such as *gifted*.

The consequences for curriculum and school organization are described in successive chapters devoted to Total School Cluster Grouping (Chapter 4), acceleration (Chapter 5), and enrichment (Chapter 6). Then the final three chapters revisit identification, this time addressing knottier issues that are often ignored or mishandled. Underrepresentation is tackled in Chapter 7. Specific guidance is offered on how to use assessment data to achieve better representation of underrepresented groups, a problem that is made much easier when the goal is to identify those who are (or might be) mismatched, not to confer an enduring label. Common pitfalls in identification policies are enumerated and illustrated in Chapter 8. And Chapter 9 gives a nontechnical introduction to procedures for combining multiple measures, a topic that is as poorly understood as it is critical for the success of any identification system that relies on more than one data point for each student.

This book will delight some, annoy others, but challenge all. It offers a radical, but needed, perspective on what gifted education without gifted students might look like.

David Lohman
The University of Iowa
April 2013

Introduction

1

Gifted or advanced education is focused on providing appropriate education for those students who need it. Regardless of whether or not we call them gifted, students exist in every school who could do more than they are currently being asked to do. Every school has those students who would benefit—academically, socially, and motivationally—from additional challenge. This book is about how to find and serve those children. However, before we begin this complicated trek, we first address how the perspective we offer differs from that of traditional gifted education. To do so we will, in places, offer some seemingly harsh critiques of gifted education. We have all dedicated our careers to the field, and we believe passionately in championing the cause of challenging all learners. We only offer criticisms to the service of this cause, while simultaneously offering suggestions for change and improvement.

Determining whether or not a child meets a formal definition of giftedness is not a particularly useful thing to do from the point of view of the stakeholders in K–12 education—students, teachers, administrators, and parents. Instead, we believe that it is much more educationally helpful to determine which children are not being well-served by the existing curriculum and then design programs to meet their needs. Identification, when it is necessary at all, then becomes focused on answering the question,

“Who can thrive in the advanced academic program(s) we’ve designed?” instead of “Who is gifted?” In place of the old “gifted education” approach, we will provide a new framework that is logical, clear, and free of some of the internal contradictions and atheoretical practices that have been part of the practice of gifted education for many decades. Although our position stands in contrast to many years of practice, we believe it is supported by theory and is also far more defensible than current practice. We believe that the adoption of the framework we describe in this book would result in vastly improved K–12 educational experiences for bright students. Furthermore, our framework securely grounds programs and policies for gifted students within the context of major current educational initiatives such as the Common Core State Standards and Response to Intervention (RtI).

It is time that we, as passionate advocates of gifted education in K–12 schools, recognize that some (but not all) of the criticism directed at our field is legitimate. We have been unable to provide evidence-based arguments against these criticisms. As a result, advocates of gifted education have been less persuasive of policy makers, K–12 educators, and funding agencies than any of us would like. The history of the field is characterized by the slow assimilation of, and reform around, legitimate criticisms from the outside. For example, the historical concept of giftedness was essentially synonymous with high IQ, whereas now the widespread consensus in the field is that giftedness is a multidimensional construct that cannot be adequately measured by a single IQ score (Borland, 2005; Worrell, 2009). This book should be understood as another instance of the same historical trend within the field.

Finally, this book does not provide a step-by-step procedure or a “canned” program for using these ideas. This book is far more in the spirit of a persuasive essay whose goal is to reframe discussion and debate around gifted education. The principles presented in this book argue for advanced educational opportunities that are intensely local, that is, that are closely tailored to the needs and values of a particular setting at a particular time. Providing a canned program for implementation of our ideas would represent a violation of the very principles we espouse. These ideas place much of the burden of responsibility on local district and school personnel to develop appropriate programming for their advanced learners. This perspective is consistent with a philosophical viewpoint that believes teachers are professionals and experts in whose care we entrust the development of our children. Teaching is not, and should not be, a turnkey operation that anyone with a pulse can simply walk into a classroom and do!

Defining Giftedness, Talent, and Advanced Academics

What can be said most confidently about conceptual definitions of giftedness, talent, and high ability is that they are widely inconsistent. In fact, there is so much disagreement on the topic that even a workgroup of the National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC) had much difficulty agreeing on a definition. The two most general types of conceptual definitions revolve around typical academic skills (those important to student success in traditional K–12 school subjects) and those specific tasks that are not as directly related to traditional academics. For example, Renzulli (2005) referred to children who excel in academic subjects as the “schoolhouse gifted,” and he observed that the schoolhouse gifted are not necessarily the same group of children who exhibit adult creative productivity. Some in the gifted education community have taken this as evidence that we, as a field, have been focusing on the wrong individuals or the wrong goals (e.g., Subotnik, Olszewski-Kubilius, & Worrell, 2011). We disagree. Whether a child will or will not become an eminent adult is irrelevant to K–12 instruction; we hope many children will, but it simply is not possible to predict with accuracy which children will attain eminence as adults. Adult eminence is tangential to whether or not that child will spend his entire year sitting through coursework or instruction in content that he has already mastered. Schools are designed to help children develop expertise in a rather circumscribed set of disciplines and skills, and this book focuses on helping schools conceptualize programming to foster more advanced levels of development in those domains.

Because the approach we describe is so different from what is usually practiced under the rubric of gifted education, we consciously have decided to give it a different name. We refer to our approach as *advanced academics*. We clarify the precise meaning of the term in later chapters of the book. To summarize succinctly, gifted education is about identifying and serving a distinct class of individuals—the gifted. Advanced academics is about providing students who are not challenged by the ordinary curriculum and instruction with faster, deeper, and more rigorous instruction than they would receive within their typical academic experience, regardless of whether or not they are formally identified as gifted. Many students in need of such instruction may have been identified as gifted, but many others who also need and can benefit from such instruction have not. To better

contrast our approach against other ideas, next we review some influential definitions of giftedness that inform current practice.

Defining Gifted and Talented

The current federal definition of “gifted and talented” comes from the 1993 *National Excellence* report created by the U.S. Department of Education:

Children and youth with outstanding talent perform or show the potential for performing at remarkably high levels of accomplishment when compared with others of their age, experience, or environment. These children and youth exhibit high performance capability in *intellectual, creative, and/or artistic areas, possess an unusual leadership capacity, or excel in specific academic fields [emphasis added]*. They require services or activities not ordinarily provided by the schools. Outstanding talents are present in children and youth from all cultural groups, across all economic strata, and in all areas of human endeavor. (p. 3)

What is interesting to note about this definition is that the term *gifted* is conspicuously absent and instead the term *outstanding talent* is included. Although having a national-level definition might seem convenient for the sake of consistency, given the absence of any federal mandate for its use, identification, or programming, this definition serves as little more than guidance for states and districts. In practice, taking a closer look at the state-level definitions reveals many stark similarities.

Also at the national level are multiple conceptual definitions offered by the National Association for Gifted Children, the official current form of which is as follows:

Gifted individuals are those who demonstrate outstanding levels of aptitude (defined as an exceptional ability to reason and learn) or competence (documented performance or achievement in top 10% or rarer) in one or more domains. Domains include *any structured area of activity with its own symbol system (e.g., mathematics,*

music, language) and/or set of sensorimotor skills (e.g., painting, dance, sports) [emphasis added]. (NAGC, 2010b, p. 1)

This recent NAGC definition is broader and more inclusive than that of the U.S. Department of Education (1993) report and includes a wider range of skills and abilities than are typically addressed in public schools. Even if a school were to adopt this definition verbatim, the school still would have to decide which content areas or domains it would serve under the purview of advanced (specific) academic programming. In addition, this definition specifies the percentage of individuals at 10% or fewer. It is likely that most percentages used in conceptual definitions are arbitrary. Therefore, it is somewhat unusual to mandate that no more than 10% of some unknown group could be considered gifted and/or talented in any single area without first considering what the “other” people can or will do. However, because the NAGC definition does not specify a norm group, the terms *outstanding* and *exceptional* remain open to interpretation by the end user.

State-Level Definitions

Fortunately, a conceptual definition of giftedness turns out to be not all that important when it comes to fostering advanced academic skills. In other words, we don’t need a fixed percentage or a psychological framework in order to provide students in need with subject-specific advanced content. However, many states do provide some structure and/or mandate when it comes to anything falling under the guise of “gifted” education. Because of this, programs for advanced academics should, when possible, align with any required state definitions or mandates that relate to gifted education. At the time of the 2010–2011 *State of the States in Gifted Education* report, 41 (out of 45 states responding) states had an official state definition for giftedness (NAGC & Council of State Directors of Programs for the Gifted [CSDPG], 2011). However, only 32 of these required that their definition be followed, allowing individual schools and districts much latitude in defining and identifying giftedness. For example, the State of Wisconsin dictates that gifted and talented students can and must be identified in five areas: intellectual, specific academic area, leadership, creativity, and visual and performing arts (Wisconsin Administrative Rule PI 8.01(2)(t)2, 2012; see <https://docs.legis.wisconsin.gov/code/>

admin_code/pi/8/01/2). Such state-level guidance in the form of a mandate makes gifted/advanced academic programming easier than if a given state had no formal definition or did not require adherence to such a definition. In theory, all Wisconsin schools must identify students in these five areas and then provide these learners with appropriate services. This is similar to the other 31 states that require either identification or services, or both (NAGC & CSPDG, 2011). However, just because a state has a formal definition and a mandate to identify and serve does not mean the mandate is universally followed or that all areas of the mandate receive equal attention. Some Wisconsin schools have no gifted program even if they do identify students, and many others only identify high-ability learners in math and language arts.

The situation is similar in other states; for example, a recent survey of the high school gifted coordinators across the state of Indiana revealed that although Indiana mandates that all school districts have a gifted and talented coordinator, only 75% of respondents indicated such a position or person existed (Peters & Mann, 2009). Given that the surveys were sent to the person listed by the state as the gifted coordinator, it's clear that having a state mandate does not always assure action. Furthermore, although states such as Wisconsin and Indiana specify that multiple measures must be used in student identification, both stop short of requiring specific assessments to be used, again leaving that decision to the school or district.

States such as Georgia have a conceptual definition similar to Indiana and Wisconsin. In Georgia, a gifted student is defined as

A student who demonstrates a high degree of intellectual and/or creative ability(ies), exhibits an exceptionally high degree of motivation, and/or excels in specific academic fields, and who needs special instruction and/or special ancillary services to achieve at levels commensurate with his or her abilities. The abilities manifest in a collection of traits, aptitudes and behaviors that, when taken together, are indicative of gifted potential. (Georgia Department of Education, 2012, p. 7)

Although this definition is similar to Wisconsin's in that it includes general intellectual, creative, and specific academic abilities, the Georgia definition does not include leadership or visual art abilities (although these perhaps could be considered part of creative talent). However, Georgia

does allow for a high degree of motivation as being sufficient to identify gifted ability in these areas, whereas high ability or achievement are required in the other two states mentioned. Although Georgia leaves some freedom to local districts to decide criteria for identification, the state does specify initial eligibility criteria based on the five areas of their conceptual definition. Students in Georgia then have two pathways to identification. They can either receive high scores on a nationally normed measure of mental ability (99th percentile in K–2, 96th percentile in 3–12) and on achievement tests (90th percentile or “superior” rating), or they can follow an alternate path that involves additional tests of creativity and motivation. For a discussion of some of the inherent issues and complexities with such a system, see McBee, Peters, and Waterman (in press).

The *State of the States* (NAGC & CSDPG, 2011) report is a biannual survey of gifted education policies across the country. In the 2010–2011 report, 45 states responded to a wide range of questions regarding gifted education practice in their respective states. As mentioned above, 41 of the responding states reported having a formal definition of giftedness. Of these, the most common area of giftedness listed was intellectual giftedness (34 states) followed by creatively gifted (26), performing and visual arts (25), academics (23), and specific academic areas (21). Other areas listed less frequently included leadership, culturally diverse, English language learners (ELL), disabled/twice-exceptional, highly gifted, and underachieving.

Within the *State of the States* (NAGC & CSDPG, 2011) report, 45 states responded to the question regarding identification practices. Of those states, 33 required the use of specific identification practices (such as in Georgia, as outlined above). Such requirements included multiple criteria (20), IQ tests (16), achievement tests (13), a menu of state-approved tests from which schools can choose (10), and nominations (8). However, even when specific criteria are required for the local schools, often the process and procedures are not specified. Only eight states mandate a specific process be followed, while seven states allow for collaborative decision making by the state and local district. In 15 states, schools are completely free to create an identification process. For example, how “multiple measures” are to be used in a state that requires such a practice (e.g., Arkansas, Indiana) is not specified, leaving each local district or school to decide what combination of measures to use and/or how to combine them. In another example, eight of the 33 states responding require nominations as

part of the specific methods of identification: Some list specific tools that are approved or recommended, but others do not. The same can be said for virtually all of the various required methods. Even though a class or type of assessment (e.g., IQ test) might be required, the definition specifies neither which particular test to use, nor the manner of its use. Because of this widespread emphasis on local control in education, the roles of the district coordinator, school board, and other local stakeholders can be extremely important in fostering effective identification and programming for academically advanced students.

Some areas of giftedness and talent are easier to assess and evaluate than others. In fact, several states specifically name the local education agency (school or district) as the deciding body for matters related to conceptual definition. For example, both North Carolina and Florida require locally developed plans to guide gifted identification and programming, although in both cases, these plans are reviewed at the state level for their compliance with the state rule.

In conclusion, states vary widely in their definitions of giftedness and their identification of students for gifted or advanced programming. With regard to identification, some states do not specify content areas at all (leaving terms like *specific academic area* to be operationalized by the district or school), other states specify content areas but not how these areas should be assessed, and still others specify the types of assessments but stop short of naming specific assessments to be used. Interested parents or professionals should investigate state-level policies before attempting to create a new framework or program for a specific school or district. *In some cases, the advanced academic approach is sufficiently different from gifted education that schools may not need to worry about whether the advanced academics program is in compliance with the state's gifted education policy, especially for students not currently identified as gifted or in settings where gifted status is not tied to funding. After all, advanced academics are not gifted education!*

Local Definitions

In cases where a state lacks an official definition or specifically leaves the decision to the local education agency (LEA), the decision falls on local school personnel. This situation obviously allows the greatest flexibility for implementing advanced academic programs.

Whenever advanced academic programs are being contemplated, the first step should be a needs assessment. What skills, aptitudes, and dispositions need additional development, in the form of educational programming, as justified by local values and unmet student need? This final point is very important. If student need is being met by the general education curriculum, such that even the highest performing students are challenged and engaged, then *it is unnecessary to create an advanced academic program in that area*. This may seem like a trivial issue, but when defining gifted or advanced, a major consideration needs to be what content is offered as standard or grade level in the given district, school, or grade. The need for specialized academic programming arises from a mismatch between a given student and his or her environment. Therefore, when a school board or group of individuals sets out to define advanced academics in a local setting, both existing local curriculum (and its accompanying student needs) and the characteristics of the local student population must be taken into account. Using a national perspective for comparison is likely to result in a large mismatch between the type of content and level of skills students need and what is actually being delivered. Lohman (2006) illustrated this issue with the example of a high-achieving school where an average student's achievement is around the 95th percentile relative to the national average. At this school, the content offered as standard or grade level would be much more advanced than that offered at a more typical, average-performing school district.

Even in the world of increasingly strict content standards, wide variation within a single school district is common. In average performing school districts, a subject such as Algebra I might be viewed as advanced, honors, accelerated, or gifted for eighth graders. However, in the high-achieving schools referenced above, Algebra I might be considered grade-level content for seventh graders. As Renzulli (2005) argued, "Even in schools where achievement levels are below national norms, there still exists an upper-level group of students who need services above and beyond those that are provided for the majority of the school population" (p. 271). Thus, supplementary advanced academic services should focus on *needs that are not being met as part of the general curriculum of a local school or district*, rather than on a statewide or national grade-level standard. This local-norm perspective is critical if a program is to best connect with local students' levels of need. This also means that some students who would be in an advanced academic program at one school would not have a need for

such a program in a different school, and that some students within a given school might be in need of a program one year, but not the following year.

Needs change across time and across schools, and programming should be responsive enough to change with them. When national standards or national norms are used for gifted and talented identification, a few schools will end up having 0% or 100% of their students being classified as gifted. Although the 100% instance might seem very appealing (what a wonderful thing to have 100% gifted students), the idea is rather absurd. If 100% of the students in a school are identified as in need of “advanced academics” (meaning they require more challenging curriculum than is being offered by the standard curriculum), then the standard curriculum is simply inadequate! It is impossible to specify on an a priori basis a desirable percentage of students who should be receiving advanced academic opportunities in a given school. However, when the percentage grows steadily over time (as we have seen it do), schools need to reconsider what level of content they offer as their standard, grade-level curriculum. In other words, when large numbers of students need advanced academics, this suggests there are deficiencies in the standard curriculum. Rather than shunting those students into special programs, the standard curriculum needs to be upgraded.

Where Does Giftedness Begin?

Often state or district policy identifies a set percentage of students as gifted. The use of these percentages may be arbitrary, but it is also likely that these target percentages were based on intelligence test percentiles (e.g., an IQ of 130 = approximately 2.5% of a population) and are rooted in the historically fixed percentages of some special education diagnoses (i.e., intellectually disabled, which traditionally has required an IQ score below 70, in addition to other criteria). Although those students in need of more challenge beyond the standard curriculum should by definition be *somewhat* rare, in this book we will not argue for any specific percentage of a population as being in need of advanced academic programming. Instead, *the percentage of students served by advanced programming should be directly proportional to the number of students whose needs cannot readily be met in the general education classroom as it currently exists in a particular setting.* In a district with a large portion of above-grade-level students, the percentage of the population labeled as in need of such programs could actually be

relatively small (e.g., 1%–2%) because the high-achieving nature of the school population requires that most needs typical of high-ability students are met as part of the general curriculum. Such a situation might occur in a high-performing high school serving an affluent population, where nearly all students take several honors, AP, or above-grade-level classes and go on to college. In this instance there (ideally) would be services that would not necessitate a label or advanced program because they already exist for most students as part of the general curriculum (so that, because the need is being met, no special program is required). The opposite could also be true. In a very large school in which the majority of students are low performing, the percentage of students identified for advanced academic services could be relatively high (e.g., 10%–15%) because these students are unlikely to have their needs met in the general education curriculum. Such a case could exist in a middle school where most students take pre-algebra in eighth grade, and algebra and geometry are not offered until high school. In this setting, some middle school students who are ready for advanced algebra, geometry, and trigonometry are unlikely to have their needs met in the general education classroom and are more likely to need special services.

These examples run contrary to the popular wisdom that says high-performing districts can expect to have a larger percentage of identified high-need students and low-performing districts would have a smaller percentage of such students, although such scenarios are also possible. When *educational need* is locally defined based on the students enrolled in a particular school or district and the standard curriculum of that district, the percentages of students who require academic programming outside of the standard grade-level curriculum varies. For this reason, our use of particular percentages in the examples does not imply that any set number or percentage is the “right number” for any advanced academic program.

A point that arises throughout this book is that predetermined percentages (or cutoffs) that only serve to arbitrarily limit the number of students who can receive a service should be avoided. The use of percentages can lead to a fixed number of spaces being set aside for a given program; this puts the needs of schools ahead of the needs of their students, rather than focusing on students’ needs as they differ from year to year and grade level to grade level. In contrast, percentages can be very useful for the purpose of comparing the ethnic, gender, racial, ELL, and socioeconomic status (SES) makeup of the identified student population. If dominant cultural

groups are overly represented in the population served by advanced programming, additional services might be necessary or the administrators and staff of the local school might consider reevaluating the philosophical, cultural, and practical base of their existing program. Because score discrepancies are correlated with cultural, ethnic, and especially economic status on nearly every existing measure of academic achievement or academic aptitude (Valencia & Suzuki, 2001), it may not be realistic to expect that students who are identified based on their performance on such measures should be representative of overall student population in a given school. Nevertheless, we suggest, existing discrepancies usually are far more lopsided than test scores alone would predict. We return to this issue in more depth in Chapter 7.

Does It Really Matter if a Student Is Gifted?

So what is giftedness and who are the gifted? These two questions have driven eight decades of educational philosophy, research, and practice. Even today, more than 90 years after the 1922 publication of Terman's seminal work, scholars still have not coalesced on a consensual, paradigmatic definition of the term. This lack of a common definition of the term *gifted* (and the related term *talented*) is frequently decried by researchers in the field (e.g., Lohman, Korb, & Lakin, 2008), for whom the lack of definitional consistency leads to great difficulty in synthesizing research results across studies. Furthermore, varied and inconsistent definitions don't tell us what to do with those students for whom the standard content or curriculum is inappropriate. Teachers need to know "Who needs more challenging math on Monday?" and "What do I do during reading time for my kindergarten students who can already read chapter books?" In the context of K–12 schooling, these are the questions that matter.

The lack of definitional consistency for the term gifted suggests there may be other fundamental flaws and logical inconsistencies in current educational practice. As we detailed in a recent paper (McBee, McCoach, Peters, & Mathews, 2012) the concept of giftedness does not really answer the educationally relevant question of "Who needs harder math problems?" Although it might seem like the gifted students would be those with unmet needs (and some scholars have argued that giftedness *itself* creates need), in our experience this is simply not the case. Every student who attends the North Carolina High School for Science and Math, for example, could be

considered gifted according to the field's most common definitions of that term. Does that imply that the education they are receiving is automatically inadequate—that they need more by virtue of being gifted? Do only neighborhood schools need a gifted program? What about a high-poverty school in which no students meet the criteria for being identified gifted? Are we prepared to argue that none of those students can and should be doing more than what they are asked to do academically? In many cases, there will be substantial overlap between those students who would be identified as gifted under traditional definitions and those who would be determined to have unmet academic needs, but this overlap is not perfect. Furthermore, the very term gifted, due to its long history, carries with it many unhelpful and unavoidable connotations in the minds of teachers, parents, children, and the academy. Replacing the concept of giftedness with the much more contextual notions of *academic need* and *advanced academic programming* removes an invisible intellectual straightjacket that has tied our hands and blinded our eyes to obvious changes our schools must make to support high-achieving or potentially high-achieving students.

We realize that our last few paragraphs may have alarmed the reader. It is critical at this point to clarify what we mean. We do *not* argue that bright children do not exist—we have collectively worked with many extraordinarily bright students whose minds work in qualitatively different ways and whose cognitive skills far surpass their physical and emotional development. It is precisely for this reason that we argue explicitly, forcefully, and passionately that many children in our schools need a great deal more challenge, opportunity, and intellectual rigor than is provided in the typical K–12 setting. Discarding the concept of giftedness on the part of parents, teachers, researchers, and advocates for gifted children is the very best thing that can happen to the gifted child when it comes to the educational experiences he or she receives in K–12 schools, provided other appropriate changes are made in order to meet bright children's educational needs.

The Case for Separating Advanced Academics From Gifted Studies

Gifted education has grown out of several fields and represents a truly multidisciplinary arena. Although psychologists dominated the first era of research and theory on giftedness, today gifted education is a *mélange* of several branches of psychology (primarily educational, cognitive, and

developmental) and education. Some of the long-running lack of consistency in definitions and theoretical conceptions must surely result from the diversity of perspectives brought by people who approach the study of giftedness from varying intellectual traditions.

Psychologists have contributed perhaps more theory than any other single constituent groups. However, psychologists have, in aggregate, quite different priorities and interests than educators. Psychologists interested in high ability often aim to understand and predict eminent achievement in adulthood. Psychologists yearn for a common definition of giftedness that is constant across settings and domains (and therefore consistent across studies), hoping to operationalize the construct of giftedness in the same way that they approach constructs such as depression. For example, to determine whether someone is depressed or not, his or her symptoms are compared against an operational definition that is defined objectively with respect to some external criteria. Whether or not someone is classified as depressed is not at all affected by whether that person happens to be the most or least melancholy person in his or her social context. In this way, and unlike definitions of giftedness, depression is a criterion-referenced construct as opposed to a norm-referenced construct.

Educators, on the other hand, may be tolerant of much less rigid definitions—a fact that has challenged researchers in the field for some time. Educators' primary concern must be with providing optimal services and education to students. Advanced academics should focus on designing, implementing, evaluating, and improving instructional models, program design, and curriculum for those students who need more—the question of whether a psychologist might define that student who needs more as *gifted* is completely irrelevant. Advanced academics, therefore, is a completely needs-based and *school-based* construct that stems directly from historical conceptions of gifted education with their focus on student need. Therefore, assessing the degree to which a student's level of academic need matches with his or her currently provided level of education becomes the key feature of any "identification" system. Although insights, discoveries, and theory from high-ability psychology may occasionally be applicable to advanced academics, there should be no attempt to force this connection. Indeed, the progress of our field has been stunted precisely *because* of our insistence on theoretical unification across subfields. The psychological focus on understanding talent, creativity, and eminence (which we refer to as high-ability psychology) is still incredibly important as a scientific dis-

cipline and undoubtedly requires additional research. But schools should have a different focus, a focus on advancing students' academic skills. Although there are many important areas of human endeavor worthy of investigation from a psychological point of view, not all content areas or domains can be the purview of K–12 schools. Instead, schools focus on a semistandardized set of academic skills, and some students demonstrate far greater proficiency in those areas than their grade-level peers, necessitating the provision of programs or services to meet their advanced academic needs. The term advanced academics that we promote throughout this book is meant to capture educationally relevant, academically oriented, needs-based programming geared toward students who have already mastered the grade-level curriculum or who have the capability of doing so far faster than their chronological peers.

The notion that giftedness is a stable trait has naturally led to a great deal of concern and attention in our field being directed to the effort of *finding the gifted*. The common misconception is that if we could just create or purchase the right test, then we would be able to find those gifted kids. The prevailing “trait” theory of giftedness has naturally led to the labeling of children as a primary concern. Labeling is only useful to the degree that it provides diagnostic information, and perhaps to a lesser extent as a means of directing funding toward specific needs. The label *gifted*, just like the label *tall*, provides little diagnostic information. We believe that effort expended in the interest of finding children who *need more* educationally than their peers is a better investment of resources—indeed this is what tests in schools are supposed to be for; however, *identifying* the gifted has been dramatically overemphasized and has crowded out other more educationally relevant efforts, such as what to do with these children once they are identified. We know of schools that have spent 100% of their gifted education funding for a year on a single test, only to have no funds remaining for programming. In the state of Connecticut, the identification of gifted students is mandatory; however, school districts are not required to provide programming or services for gifted students. We find such policies and practices absurd.

Legitimate Critiques of Gifted Education

Gifted education is under constant attack by critics with a variety of perspectives. As a field, we have frequently failed to provide convincing counterarguments to some of these criticisms. In this section, we explore common criticisms of gifted education; some of this discussion continues in Chapter 8. If gifted education is to grow beyond the niche program that it so often is, often surviving on the thinnest margins of public support, then the field must change the way that it operates so that these critiques can be honestly addressed.

Why Do We Set the Identification Cutoff Where It Is? Is the Child Who Scores One Point Below the Cutoff Really so Different From the One Who Scores One Point Above?

A child must exhibit a score or scores above some cutoff(s) in order to be identified as gifted. These cutoffs vary, in some cases dramatically, from state to state and district to district. For example, for a child to meet the “intellectual ability” aspect of the state of Georgia’s mandated definition, students must score above the 96th percentile on an appropriate test. This prompts the question, “What is so special about the 96th percentile?” As it turns out, there is *nothing* special about the 96th percentile. It’s simply an arbitrary cutoff. Proponents of the status quo would argue that you have to draw the proverbial line somewhere, and that the act of “line drawing” is not unethical.

Is there any evidence that a child at the 95th, 92nd, or 90th percentile on mental ability would be unable to keep up with the “top 4%ers” in the advanced educational services that (should) follow identification? If we had evidence that a cut score at the 96th percentile actually *does* discriminate between those who can and those who cannot succeed in an advanced educational program, then perhaps that cutoff would be justified. But such evidence does not exist. So a cutoff-based system that sorts children into the gifted and nongifted without sufficient thought and/or evidence for the creation of the cutoff appears to bestow a desirable label on some students but not others. This practice cannot be defended convincingly, and it only reinforces the image that gifted education is an optional luxury. Instead, cutoffs or identification criteria should be based on the demands