

Students for Gifted Education To the School Board and Administration

As a student-group developed to advocate for the needs of students within the gifted program, Students for Gifted Education (SGE) feels compelled to represent for you the views of these students. What better method, we decided, than to transmit the very words of these mature, intelligent students? Eschewing pathetic appeals for unreasonable action, obvious, unethical, unscholarly and, therefore, wasted attempts at blatant manipulation, we believe our positive responses to two basic questions will inspire you with their positive message and provide evidence enough of the effectiveness of the education such a fine program produces, both for the intellectual and for the moral spheres of personhood. For, we truly do believe that the program offers one of the best educations in the state, even in the nation. When speaking of striving to create a “world-class education” for students within the district, the truth is that for at least some of us that seemingly impossible education already exists. Please take the few minutes that the voices of your students deserve in order to read what we have to say.

The following student opinions were written in response to basic questions about the program. We chose to limit responses to 11th and 12th grade students so as to get the most mature responses. Names of respondents have been included or omitted according to request.

What has being in the gifted program done for you?

- It's allowed me to come to terms with my limitations and realize that with the vast amount of knowledge present in the world, I will only ever be able to maintain a tenuous hold on the smallest portion of it. The Academy and the people who comprise it have been my motivation for the past so many years, and I truly appreciate the fact that they've planted in me a desire to know more, to do more, all the while keeping me aware that I am only capable of doing so much. (Samantha G.)
- This program has molded and stretched me in ways that have pushed me to my limits, intellectually, socially, and spiritually. The rigor of the program and the mix of students is perfect for me to achieve my best in every aspect of the world. This program has equipped me to be able to reach for and hope for a great future. I'm excited to be able to feel as though I have something to offer to society. Without this program I may be lost. (Sanjana K.)
- The gifted program has shown me numerous times that a great education isn't simply characterized by learning how to determine a net ionic equation, integrating a function, or being able to list the presidents and their terms. It has shown me that a great education inherently promotes a love of learning, a reverence for teachers, without whom our experience would be less fruitful... (Abid H.)
- I attribute no less than all of my current academic knowledge and understanding to the gifted program. At this point, it would be futile to imagine what sort of person I may have become, had I not participated in the program. My maturity accelerated, my knowledge grew exponentially, and my outlook upon life has been permanently warped—for the better. The Academy caters to my needs on both a professional and personal level, while at the same time warranting the responsibility and proper attitude necessary in life. (Anon.)
- Being in the gifted program has not only helped me in my academic development, it has also broadened my perspective of the world around me... Because the program is

designed to demand a lot from the students in it, those who are able to stay in the program are considerably driven to meet the standards of the curriculum and in turn are driven in their own lives because of the demand they encounter in their schooling...

[The program] goes beyond general high school education to allow us to better ourselves not only academically, but personally. (Anon.)

- I know how to think. If you ask me a question I can tell you an answer, hypothesize an answer, or tell you how to find the answer. (Anon.)
- ...When I joined gifted in the 9th grade, I was constantly being pushed to do more. I became interested in learning and engaged in class; being in gifted has made me want to learn. I know that I can't possibly learn everything, or even much at all, but I push myself to find out as much as I can. Isn't that what education is all about? (Jissell T.)
- The gifted program has allowed me to work with people who all have a unique and different way of thinking. These individuals have shown me and taught me approaches to be a better student. And while we are all challenged to think at higher levels in the classroom and learn from our teachers, we also learn a vast amount of knowledge from each other. Through this process, the program has given me an opportunity to observe and adopt different learning styles from different people and has allowed me to develop great friendships with those people. (Anon.)
- Being in the gifted program has enriched my education in many ways, but what stands out the most is the genuine interest that my teachers take in my education. They take the time to not only teach me what something is or how to do something, but why something is the way it is and why things are done the way they are. I've been taught to not just know, but to understand and even make my own footprints in the field of discovery. 'If you treat someone as they are, that's what they will stay. If you treat someone the way they could be, that's what they'll become.' (Megan J.)
- The Academy has broadened my perspective and increased my desire for the knowledge obtainable in the world. Without the Academy I would have been imprisoned in the rudimentary world of facts—oblivious to the infinite possibilities of knowledge. (Anon.)
- The Academy has helped me to discover and refine my philosophy on learning and knowledge. The Academy has also helped me to define and expand my limitations academically while fostering my hunger and passion to learn. (Joshua D.)

Why should the program continue?

- The gifted program consists of a diverse collection of intelligent, multi-talented students who are committed to receiving an outstanding education. The loss of this wonderful achievement would be devastating, both to the community at large, and to the students who would otherwise have benefited from a distinctive and outstanding educational experience. (Matt E.)
- The gifted program is not a system for challenging students with potential; it forces and unleashes that potential to forge some of the greatest thinkers in the country. The program on its own provides one of the best educations available in the nation, and it is no exaggeration to claim the community and school district would not be able to sustain itself in its absence. It is a unique, extraordinary machine, and the misfortune that would be suffered in its undoing is almost unimaginable. (Tyler M.)
- The gifted program should continue because it has been empirically proven to produce

fine thinkers time and time again. However, it should also continue because behind these apparently fine thinkers is a program that produced them. There are thinkers behind these thinkers, and they are called teachers. The gifted program is not an institution comprised of entirely independent students; it is an institution comprised of driven students who are able to approach the realization of their potential due to teachers who care and a program that works. (Abid H.)

- I know that the program has drastically changed the way I view the world, for the better; everyone should have the same chance that I had to learn so much. Because different perspectives are emphasized, the students become accepting of everyone's opinions; no one's ideas are ever shot down or ridiculed in a hurtful way. This attitude helps students think for themselves, believe in their ideas and be courageous enough to put their own ideas out there. Every child deserves the chance to believe in him/herself, and the gifted program offers this chance, and more. (Anon.)
- The program is structured to cultivate forward-thinking minds who have the capacity to lead society into the future. Of course, these minds can be produced in other ways, but nowhere else in Rockford are such thinking skills valued as highly as in the Academy. (Anon.)
- The Academy is the shining star of RPS 205. Considered on its own as a separate school, it has test scores and college entrance rates that place it comfortably with the top ten high schools in the nation. To destroy such a unique conglomeration of individuals would be a blow not only for the students who thrive in it, but also for the district! Even if not for the glory that the Academy continually heaps upon Rockford schools, the Academy is vital for the gifted students of Rockford. Left to flounder in regular programs that do not challenge them, gifted students are unmotivated and often perform poorly. To not continue the program would be to scatter a tight-knit community to the wind and in the process destroy the lives of hundreds of bright students. (Anon.)
- The program provides the best teachers and reflects the best scores. Not only should the program continue, it should be more heavily advertised and expanded. The students, teachers, and parents have a dedication and work ethic unmatched by any other school. (Mark F.)
- The gifted program does not just educate students at a faster pace, but teaches them to become upper level thinkers. Education should not only be about completing worksheets for grades and memorizing facts for tests. Through the gifted program students learn to apply themselves to much higher levels of education. The students in this program are innovative thinkers and are the future of our community. They are just what Rockford needs. (Sarah T.)
- The program should continue because it takes students beyond the standard and teaches them to question and seek and discover. It challenges students to not be satisfied in their academic journey and allows them to take that journey alongside students with the same zest for learning. (Megan J.)
- Why shouldn't it? This program offers the necessities for an accelerated learner. The environment itself is the ideal mix of culture and cognition, and it produces some of the greatest thinkers I've ever met. It isn't financially sound to eliminate the program, since most would leave and the district would lose around four million dollars in one year. There's no sound reasoning behind eliminating the program. So why shouldn't it continue? (Forrest W.)

- Education occurs when one goes above and beyond a standard; if the program is terminated, it will rob future children of the humbling experience that I have received. It will rob children of an exquisite public education. (Satoshi T.)
- The gifted program takes kids with potential to learn and shapes them into kids with the potential to transcend, not only beyond what's expected of them on a standardized test or in the classroom, but beyond what is expected of them by the world. It provides children with an environment without limitations to how much they can learn... (Haley B.)
- Purely on an educational basis, I admire the Academy's mission to always challenge students to such a point that it creates an actual hunger for more knowledge. An atmosphere of students who vary from the ridiculously intelligent to the very normal, coupled with their drive to accomplish all of the educational challenges the program provides, is an incredible experience. It is not just a bunch of challenging courses, it is a lifestyle that will change students forever. (Anon.)
- Knowledge is greater than money. (Anon.)
- Its influence over the minds of students is enormous. It convinces them that hard work and the pursuit of knowledge is the most important life skill that you can learn. (Anon.)

Accepting that the financial situation is clearly dire, we acknowledge and willfully submit to the notion of necessary change: All stakeholders must sacrifice. Class sizes must increase, program options may need to be limited, money must be spent more efficiently—unwished for but understandable and hopefully temporary changes. However, it is inconceivable to us that the program would be eliminated. As a special education program, it is, by design, meant to meet needs of students who are ill-served in a regular education program. We deeply fear that the undeserved reputation of the program as a breeding ground for snobbery and elitism may unfairly cloud understanding of the foundational idea for its inception: All students, no matter physical ability, mental ability, social or racial or economic background, deserve an education consciously designed to best meet their unique needs. As distasteful and outrageous, and possibly unethical, as it may be to say that “special education” (in its traditional sense) can no longer be funded, so should it be when talking about the district's innovative gifted program.

The PGE, certain board members, administrators, and parents in general have spoken in support of gifted education and have provided, we feel, adequate argumentation (in terms of finances, programming, etc.) for maintaining the program, so we can only meekly and humbly express our gratitude for the rich inheritance from which we've benefitted as part of a program that so thoroughly and joyfully embraces and disseminates education and do our best to represent the one voice that ultimately does matter, the students'. We hope, too, that you embrace the wisdom of maintaining this invaluable, unique service to our community.

Thank you for your time and service,

Kylie Defenbaugh
President, SGE