

King Elementary &gt; West Middle School &gt; Auburn Academy



# Gifted News

A Newsletter from Parents for Gifted Education (PGE) • District 205

## Gunning for Gifted

In Judy Emerson's July 20, 2007 column in the Rockford Register Star, Ms. Emerson writes *"Thompson denies gunning for gifted. But he does want to reform the gifted education program. He is disturbed by the 50 percent attrition rate in Auburn Academy. And he thinks there's too much homework for homework's sake that grinds students down. He said some "old-time" teachers" in the program make it hard for newer teachers to succeed in gifted. He wasn't specific on how he will set about reforming the program, but look for something to happen and expect some pushback from parents and teachers."*

So what does that boil down to for students in the program?

*"reform the gifted education program"* Since last year when new administration was put in place at Auburn, there has been talk of a "caf " approach for the Academy. If this were implemented, students would no longer be part of a core group required to take Academy level classes in all core subjects. Those more interested in math would focus their course work in that area while students with higher aptitude for social studies could take those gifted classes and perhaps traditional or honors math and science. No other specifics of reform or revitalization have as yet been suggested, but this suggestion concerns PGE.

One question raised about the possibility is how this sort of program would differ from students at any RPS205 high school who take AP classes in their area of interest and traditional or honors classes in other areas? The chief instructional officer has suggested all teachers in the district receive gifted endorsement, and there has been a push to increase the AP offerings at all high schools in the district. For those living on the north or south east sides of town, what would be the draw to travel all the way to Auburn on the far west side when they can get the same level of classes at the school closer to their home? Without a core group of students moving together through the program, how long could the Academy survive?

Parents and teachers of gifted students know the significance of attending school with their intellectual peers. They realize the need to group gifted students together and the importance of the INCLUSION of gifted teaching techniques into all subject areas (see National Association for Gifted Children-NAGC-Position Statement in the side bar). But the single crucial component of

the program is the teaching staff. That brings us to another point.

*"some "old-time" teachers" in the program make it hard for newer teachers to succeed in gifted".* Consider if you will, that all teachers new to the Academy last year will not return to teach those classes next year. Administration blames it on the high expectations of the experienced teachers who know and teach Academy classes at a level commensurate with the level of intelligence of the students. Parents see it differently (see NAGC Position Statement in the side bar) and are concerned whether experienced teachers with proven outcomes (old-timers) will want to continue giving 110% for our children while being publicly criticized by their bosses.

In the past, when an Academy teacher was hired, there was a matrix used to determine best candidates. Gifted endorsement was requested, but since the loss of state funding from the program, can no longer be required. If a candidate had not completed the classes for endorsement, there was credit for having taught gifted students. A major in the field of the subject was a plus. If the applicant didn't major in that area, having at least demonstrated success teaching the specific subject was a plus. And applicants to teach AP classes were expected to have taken the AP training for their class.

### NAGC POSITION STATEMENT ON ABILITY GROUPING

(from an article sent to PGE by district administration)

The practice of grouping enables students with advanced abilities and/or performance to be grouped together to receive appropriately challenging instruction. NAGC wishes to reaffirm the importance of grouping for instruction of gifted students. Grouping allows for more appropriate, rapid, and advanced instruction, which matches the rapidly developing skills and capabilities of gifted students.

### NAGC POSITION STATEMENT ON TEACHER COMPETENCIES

(from an article sent to PGE by district administration)

NAGC believes that all children deserve the highest quality of instruction possible and that such instruction will only occur when teachers are aware of and able to respond to the unique qualities and characteristics of the students they instruct. Gifted and talented students present a particular challenge to teachers who may not have had training in gifted education pedagogy and related classroom

(Continued on page 2)

## Gunning for Gifted (cont'd)

(Continued from page 1)

Yet last year (and again this fall), we had first year teachers hired to teach AP classes outside their primary area of study with no AP training, no gifted experience, no gifted endorsement and no experience teaching the area for which they were hired. In fact, Auburn students were exempt from taking four of the "required" AP tests last year because the material had not been sufficiently covered.

So do our experienced teachers make it hard, or were the teachers not qualified to teach this level of student and coursework? Effective teachers draw in colleagues with similar strengths. Our staff takes pride in the program and is hesitant to have staff not willing to teach to the established level. If the new teachers felt their mentors' expectations were too high, perhaps they and the Academy were not a good fit. And in hiring replacements, is our administration doing everything possible to "work the system" to prevent hiring a staff member just because they have seniority, or do they find themselves hamstrung by the union contract?

"there's too much homework for homework's sake that grinds students down" is a concern PGE attempted to address with a survey not long after Dr. Thompson arrived. Class of 2005 seniors, when asked about the level of homework in the Academy responded with an astounding 90% that the level was just right. There were 3 students who thought there should be more and only one student who felt the level was too high (refer to boxed student comments) A second survey was conducted asking students about their experience with the infamous junior "word paper" and again there was resounding support for the benefit of the assignment. Most who had difficulty completing the work took personal responsibility for their procrastination. (see sidebar)

"the 50 percent attrition rate in Auburn Academy" means what? Yes, we have had

### **QUESTIONS ABOUT PARENT ADVOCACY IS IT TOO LATE?**

Definitely not! Considering Dr. Thompson's public declaration stating the program is in need of reform and revitalization, parent activism may be the key to maintaining a semblance of the successful gifted program for which RPS 205 is known. Our

years where we graduate 55-60 Academy students out of the 90-100 who began as freshman. Yet the Academy class of 2008 is on track for closer to 80 graduates. We need more in-

#### STUDENTS COMMENT ABOUT ACADEMY HOMEWORK

"The only times I feel really pressured are when I procrastinate."

"With ... opportunities comes responsibility, one that I'm fully willing to take for the incredible education I've been given here."

"I wish there was more work, not more busybody work ... but actual valid work."

"Homework is an individual commitment to school, I make it a priority."

"Limiting the amount of work teachers can assign would undermine the purpose of the Academy."

"I have two friends who are freshman at the University of Chicago. One attended the Academy, the other Boylan. The Academy graduate is taking four classes and enjoying herself; the Boylan graduate is struggling with three classes. There's a reason Academy students are assigned more work."

"They are also fair with giving extensions to individuals or to whole classes who have something important going on and need more time."

"I've been to schools that assigned too much work. Too much to do makes me lose interest, and schoolwork here is just right. (However honors and general classes really need more.)"

"I get all of my homework turned in, I'm in bed by 11:00 with 2 sports and a decent GPA."

"As far as I know the program is optional, if you don't like it get out!"

"Occasionally I feel overwhelmed but that's what I partially signed up for."

"Having these challenges will definitely prepare me for the work in college. I also believe that the challenges in school help me to deal with other types of challenges in life."

formation to theorize why the numbers fluctuate. For example, what happened to the numbers when, during the court order, we stopped testing students for entrance into the program for middle and high school? Were there students who should have exited but continued? On average, how many students leave town or move to another school (such as the students who leave to attend IMSA each year)? What is the average rate of attrition for students in the traditional program across the district? Of those leaving the program, do any actually drop out of school? And considering the Academy upper grades are primarily college level course work, and colleges typically have a 50 percent attrition rate, if that statistic for the Academy were correct, would it be out of line for such a level of education?

The most disturbing aspect of the program *revitalization*, is its one-sidedness. Thus far the discussion hasn't left downtown. We believe any discussion should begin with a review of the history of the program and how it has progressed to its current configuration, as well as a look at the disaggregated outcomes. For example, during the lawsuit there was a challenge to the centralized program. Data was disaggregated for the middle and high schools (information PGE has repeatedly and unsuccessfully requested over the years) and the representative from the court, being blown away by the statistics, suggested the district was doing something right to have those outcomes and supported continuation of current district educational practices for our gifted students.

Yet now, when the District has a program producing a group of students consistently averaging scores of 28-29 on the ACT, a program the community and school board members have repeatedly referred to as a "shining star" in the district, a program which works because of the inclusive nature of its teaching methods, a program which is not broken, why does it need to be fixed?

students did experience a drop in AP performance to a 72% pass rate from the 80% of last year. But scores for students in classes taught by the "old timers" remained high (Statistics 94%, World History 94%, Microeconomics 93%, English Literature and Language 83% and U.S. History 80%). To put this in perspective, consider last year's average pass rate of 30% experienced at other district high schools.

## **"A FOOLISH FAITH IN AUTHORITY" IS THE WORST ENEMY OF TRUTH" Einstein, 1901**

When it was decided our freshman Academy students would not be in the building with the rest of the Academy, parents appropriately questioned the placement. At a February 20, 2007 Education Committee meeting, the chief instructional officer held up a sheaf of papers claiming them to be articles supporting the district's contention that gifted students have the same social emotional needs as their peers and therefore their placement at the freshman campus was appropriate. Yet PGE knew the NAGC (National Association for Gifted Children) and other organizations supporting gifted education have published statements supporting student placement with mental rather than chronological age peers (refer to article in this newsletter titled Promoting Positive Social Development).

With that in mind, copies of the articles supporting the district's position were requested immediately following the committee meeting. The administrator did not have time to make copies, nor would she allow us to see the articles so as to copy the titles and authors. Instead she had another district employee write down their internet links. Unfortunately only one link (to the American Psychology Association paper "Cultivating Otherwise Untapped Potential") worked, so the next day PGE requested hard copies of all the referenced articles. Instead we were given names of some websites and "favorite authors" and directed to do our own research on the internet, with the caveat that "of course these authors are giving their own opinions". When we restated our request for copies of the exact articles shown at the ed committee meeting, we were told they would be forthcoming, but the administrator was very busy and besides, could not seem to locate them amid the piles of papers in her office.

On March 9, 2007, we submitted a FOIA (Freedom of Information Act) requesting copies of the articles. It was denied based with the explanation that the articles could not be located. On March 21, 2007 we appealed. Finally, on March 22, 2007, over a month after the initial meeting, we received hard copies of some articles in the mail. None of those copies had links to the internet anywhere near matching those we were originally provided.

Of the six papers received, two were duplicates of "Giftedness and the Gifted: What's It All About?" (one from the NAGC

website and one from the website of the Council for Exceptional Children). Two others were NAGC Position Statements, one specific to "Differentiation of Curriculum and Instruction" and another with a more general list of NAGC Position Statements. Then there was the paper, "Educators' Perceptions of Barriers to the Identification of Gifted Children from Economically Disadvantaged and Limited English Proficient Backgrounds." And finally, 4 pages from a teacher's guide to "Managing the Social and Emotional Needs of the Gifted".

Even if these were not the papers originally presented as literature substantiating the district's position to place Academy Freshman off the main campus, did they at least support administration's position? Decide for yourself after reading these quotes from articles provided by district administration:

### **NAGC (National Association for Gifted Children)**

#### *"ADDRESSING AFFECTIVE NEEDS OF GIFTED CHILDREN*

*Educational and counseling programs must provide all children with opportunities to develop understanding of themselves and their role in society. Because, by definition, gifted children differ significantly from others, these programs should be responding to the social emotional or affective characteristics that distinguish gifted students from others."*

### **APA (American Psychology Association)**

#### *"CULTIVATING OTHERWISE UNTAPPED POTENTIAL*

*Kids who don't have access to true peers, particularly among the highly gifted, tend to have significant ongoing problems," says Montana clinical child psychologist Maureen Neihart, PHD, explaining that gifted children need interaction with others who share the same interests, abilities and drive—qualities they seldom find in 'normal' same-age peers."*

The point is, your family needs to be informed consumers. This may mean questioning administrators and questioning data. The stakes are high—your child's education and future depends on parent advocacy. Were it not for the parents of students before you, the centralized program probably wouldn't exist. It is a great program which provides an incredible education and it's your turn to get involved in its preservation and potential changes.

## **IS PGE DOING ENOUGH?**

PGE is only as strong as its membership. The voice of a handful of parents is ineffective compared to the roar of the crowd. Although the current administration does not like having disagreements aired publicly, the time for closed door discussions has passed in favor of open communication.

## **PGE OPPORTUNITIES**

Officers: Vice President and Secretary are currently unfilled positions  
 School Liaisons: Parents who attend PTO meetings and exchange information between the school and PGE  
 School Board Liaison: Attends board and committee meetings as an advocate for the program  
 Newsletter: Someone to compile and edit articles. Next year we will also need someone to format.  
 Website: Webmaster in reserve to take over for our parent who's student graduates at the end of this year.  
 Parent Advocate: Attend PGE meetings and sign up for opportunities on the PGE membership form.

## SUPPORTING EMOTIONAL NEEDS OF THE GIFTED: Promoting Social Development

From the Gifted Development Center website, [www.gifteddevelopment.com](http://www.gifteddevelopment.com). Reprinted with permission.

By: Linda Kreger Silverman

It has been apparent ever since gifted children were first studied that they tend to select friends who are their mental age rather than their chronological age (Gross, 1989; Hollingworth, 1931; Mann, 1957; O'Shea, 1960; N. Robinson & Noble, 1991; Terman, 1925). Roedell (1985) found that gifted children develop social skills more easily when they have the opportunity to interact with true peers.

- The term "peer" does not, in essence, mean people of the same age, but refers to individuals who can interact at an equal level around issues of common interest... The more highly gifted a child, the less likely that child is to find developmentally defined, true peers among age-mates...
- For children whose development is highly uneven, true peers may vary depending on the activity. A child with extraordinary intellectual but average physical skills might have one set of peers for reading and discussing books and another set for riding tricycles and playing tag...
- Special efforts are needed to help gifted children find companions with similar interests and abilities. Without such efforts, gifted children run the risk of being labeled different and strange by their age-mates. They may internalize these labels and become socially alienated at an early age (Whitmore, 1980)... Gifted children can learn the skills necessary to interact successfully with many different types of children.
- There is no substitute, however, for the social and cognitive growth that occurs through the interaction of peers of similar developmental stages. (p. 8)

With true peers, gifted children can be themselves, laugh at the same jokes, play games at the same level, share the depth of their sensitivity and develop more complex values. There is more opportunity for give and take in relationships on an equal basis. And through interaction with others with similar capabilities, they quickly learn that they cannot be the best at everything or always have their own way. Boys and girls alike are happier and better adjusted when they have opportunities to relate to other gifted children.

According to a series of older studies, children choose leaders who are slightly above the average intelligence of their group (Finch & Carroll, 1932; Hollingworth, 1926; McCuen, 1929; Pasternak & Silvey, 1969; Warner, 1923). If there is too great a discrepancy between the intelligence of the group and the intellectual level of the child, communication will pose a

major barrier (Stogdill, 1974). Therefore, leadership, too, develops best in gifted students when they are placed with other students of comparable ability.

Many researchers have found that gifted students enrolled in special programs experience enhanced self-esteem (Coleman & Fults, 1982; Feldhusen, Sayler, Nielsen, & Kolloff, 1990; Karnes & Wherry, 1981; Kolloff & Feldhusen, 1984; Maddux, Scheiber & Bass, 1982), primarily because of the opportunities these special classes provide for social interaction with true peers. The benefits of summer programs for the gifted have been well documented also (Higham & Buescher, 1987; Kolloff & Moore, 1989; Olszewski-Kubilius, 1989; VanTassel-Baska, Landau & Olszewski, 1984), with some unexpected bonuses.

- Systematic studies at the larger regional university programs have reported significant gains in academic performance and skill competence, strengthened self-esteem and self-image...
- More interesting in some ways than these measured gains are the unanticipated benefits specialized summer programs appear to induce. Parents, in particular, and secondary school teachers as well, comment in letters, telephone conversations, and direct contacts with program directors across the country about startling changes occurring with an adolescent son or daughter... changes in responsible behavior, self-discipline, confidence in challenging or stressful situations, and willingness to seek out opportunities that stretch and mold identified talents... Some teenagers, for example, report that for the first time in years they were able to meet, enjoy, and interact deeply with a peer. (Buescher, 1989, pg 17)

The best news is that there is a ripple effect from these positive social experiences: "many adolescents report that the 'effect' carries over to their regular schools when they return home; they are able to feel comfortable and socially adept in a peer group which is more diversely composed" (Higham & Buescher, 1987, p. 88).

When a solid base of self-esteem is developed in early childhood, gifted students are better equipped to branch out and make friends with others who are unlike themselves. Adolescence is developmentally the most appropriate stage for these widening horizons of social interaction. Gifted adolescents select their closest friends from among their mental peers, but they can also participate in team sports, band, extra-curricular clubs, church and community activities, and social events in which they have opportunities to interact with students who have a wide range of abilities. With a support system of gifted friends and class-mates, they can join in other groups without fear of rejection, and they are more likely to gain respect and assume leadership positions.

### KUDOS

Congratulations to Auburn Academy senior John Brown who scored a perfect 36 on his ACT test.

2007-08 School Year Student Directory Registration Form

**King Gifted Elementary, West Gifted Academy,  
Auburn Gifted Academy**

Each year, PGE, in conjunction with the King School PTO, publishes a Gifted Program Student Directory that is distributed or available to all families in the program at King Gifted Elementary, West Gifted Academy and Auburn Academy. This directory serves as an important networking and informational tool for parents and PGE and as a class directory for your child.

**Attention: This form must be filled out to be included in the directory. West and Auburn families must fill out this form to receive a directory. An email address is required to receive updates.**

**Please list only students enrolled in the Gifted Program (King, West & Auburn Academy and CAPA)**  
Use **one** form for **all** schools. Do not use a separate form for each school.

STUDENT FIRST & LAST NAME	SCHOOL	GR.

This is our first year in the gifted program  
**Parent/Guardian #1**

Name \_\_\_\_\_  
Address \_\_\_\_\_  
City \_\_\_\_\_ Zip Code+4 \_\_\_\_\_  
Home Phone \_\_\_\_\_  
Cell Phone \_\_\_\_\_  
E-mail \_\_\_\_\_  
(Please print clearly)

**Parent/Guardian #2**

Print information **only** if different from #1

Name \_\_\_\_\_  
Address \_\_\_\_\_  
City \_\_\_\_\_ Zip Code+4 \_\_\_\_\_  
Home Phone \_\_\_\_\_  
Cell Phone \_\_\_\_\_  
E-mail \_\_\_\_\_  
(Please print clearly)

**Special instructions:**

**All information listed above will be included in the directory unless special instructions are provided below** (e.g.,

Do not list phone number, list only parent #1, do not list e-mail but keep me informed, etc.)

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Membership**

Parent organization membership is free and not required to be included in the directory.

\$ \_\_\_\_\_ **PGE** donation - \$10.00 suggested donation will help cover directory and newsletter expenses

\$ \_\_\_\_\_ **PGE Teacher Appreciation** Event

\$ \_\_\_\_\_ **West PTO** donation

\$ \_\_\_\_\_ **Auburn Booster Club** donation

\$ \_\_\_\_\_ I would like to contribute to the Ruth Harris Scholarship Fund

\$ \_\_\_\_\_ **Total** amount enclosed

You may **make out one check payable to PGE** and specify how you want it disbursed. PGE will take care of disbursement. *(Additional donations are also welcome.)*

**Volunteer**

I am interested in helping support Gifted Education in Rockford with various volunteer activities checked below. Please contact me.

- Attend district school board and/or committee meetings
- Newsletter collation and distribution
- Volunteer as a PGE Board Member or Teacher Liaison
- Help with Events and Teacher Appreciation Parties  
\_\_\_\_\_ provide food \_\_\_\_\_ help serve (check one or both)
- I don't know. Call me.

**Please complete this form and turn it in at registration.** If you are not able to do that, please mail your completed form to:

**PGE**  
**7024 Perrietta Lane**  
**Rockford, Illinois 61107**

The contents of all documents—including Directory—are copyright ©2007 by Parents for Gifted Education (PGE) and are intended only for use by members for the purposes of organizational and personal correspondence. Reproduction or use by non-members, and use by members for commercial purposes are expressly forbidden. We respect your right to privacy. By providing your name, e-mail address, and other information, you are giving PGE permission to contact you. PGE will take reasonable care to protect your privacy. You agree to release PGE from any liability for any reason.



**PARENTS FOR GIFTED  
EDUCATION**

4913 Birch Ave  
Rockford, IL 61114-6205

Email: [johnte@insightbb.com](mailto:johnte@insightbb.com)

**Back to Auburn School Meeting August 7<sup>th</sup>  
at 6:30 pm in the Auditorium at the  
Freshman Campus (former Wilson building).**

**PGE MEETING**

September 10, 2007 at 7 PM in the West Library  
Please check for updates on this and other meetings at  
registration and on our website: [PGE205.org](http://PGE205.org)

## PGE ON THE WEB: [PGE205.ORG](http://PGE205.ORG)

**Back to Auburn School Meeting August 7<sup>th</sup>  
at 6:30 pm in the Auditorium at the  
Freshman Campus (former Wilson building).**

Dr. Jancek, Auburn Principal, has been working hard with his staff to prepare for this coming Fall. After last year's schedule snafus, the staff has been working hard to plan ahead of time for making Auburn's complex schedule work for all. In addition, a high turnover of teachers and the need to fill the new Freshman Academy students at the former Wilson building will make the transition into the Fall even more challenging. Consequently, Dr. Jancek and his administrative team have offered to meet with PGE parents ahead of time to discuss the plans for this school year, including schedules, the Freshman Foundation, new teachers, course options, and other challenges and opportunities to make this school year better. He will also be prepared to discuss individual schedule challenges. Counselors will be available the next day to meet individually with parents and students to solve any schedule difficulties. The meeting will last about an hour...Dr. Jancek hopes to see a lot of students and parents.

**PGE MEETING**

September 10, 2007 at 7 PM in the West Library  
Please check for updates on this and other meetings  
at registration and on our website: [PGE205.org](http://PGE205.org)

### **WHAT CAN PARENTS DO?**

While communications with board members has always been encouraged, those contacts may be ineffective in fostering communication with administration. Besides, programmatic changes do not require board approval. The effect of letters and calls to downtown will probably be limited as well since that administration has a conceptually different view of how a gifted program should be structured. PGE feels a positive course of action is making leaders throughout the community aware of the strengths of the program in hopes they will appeal to the administration on its behalf. Letters to the editor of the newspaper from satisfied consumers is one suggestion. A group of alumni student and parent have already met to pursue this avenue and you can add your voice to a letter as well. PGE is also planning to meet with various community groups and leaders to disseminate information and explain how Rockford benefits by having such a model academic program. If you have other suggestions for how to protect the centralized gifted program in the secondary schools, please call or email John Torrence (815-961-0456, [johnte@insightbb.com](mailto:johnte@insightbb.com)). Finally, get involved in PGE! Administrators have been quoted as saying the first step toward changing the program is to "break the back" of PGE. We believe in our parents and their willingness to step up to the plate when needed. Guess what? You're needed. Now.