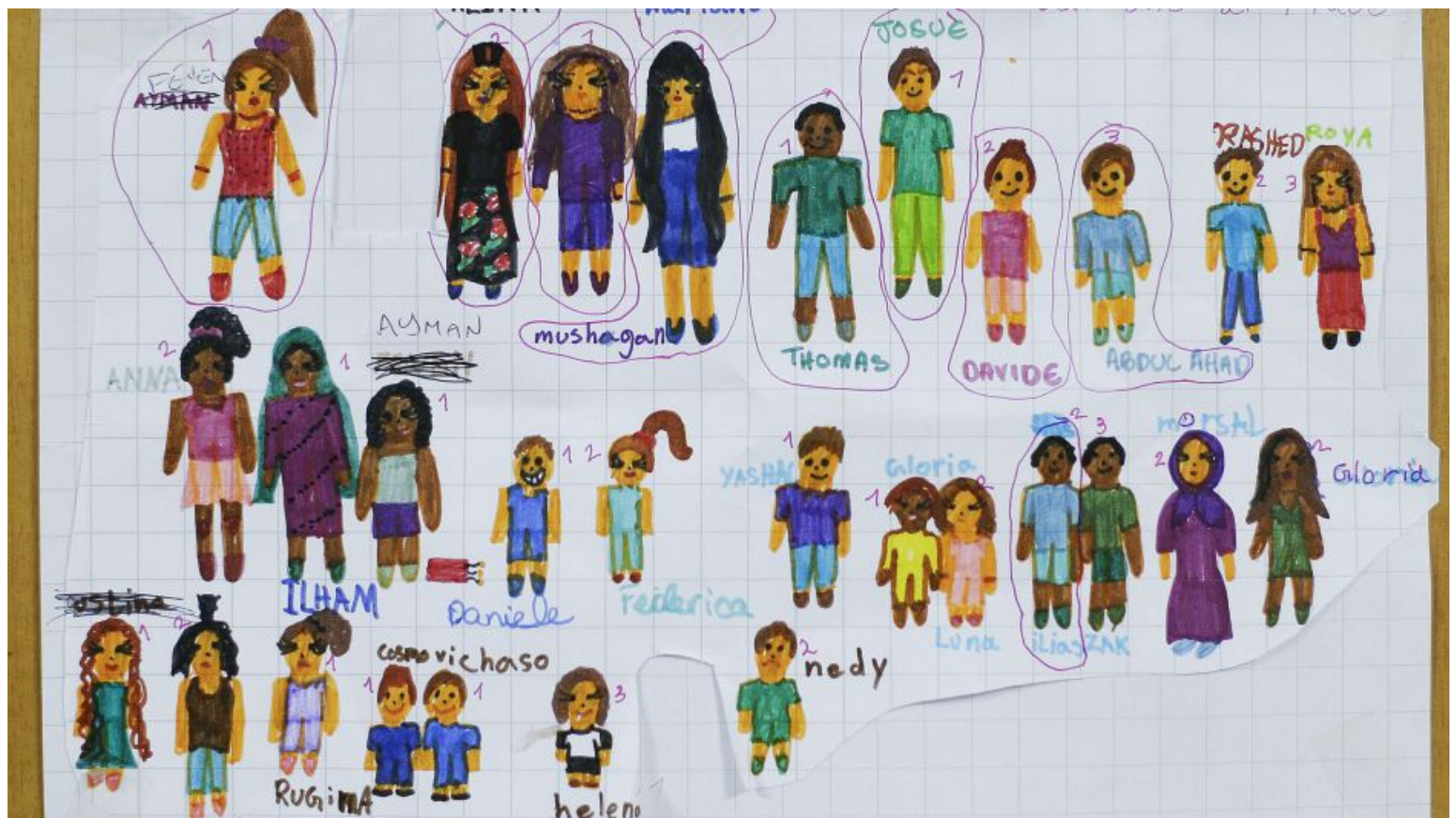


BAD EDUCATION

# How gifted and talented programs are failing our kids



There's no one size fits all. Reuters/Max Rossi

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Take a minute and think about the most talented colleague at your office—not the most popular, not the nicest, but rather the smartest person who comes up with those unforgettable, out-of-the-box solutions. He's that person you seek when you need a real expert.

## WRITTEN BY

Jenn Choi

Is this person also a bit “rough around the edges”? Do you feel she or he could be “really great someday” if he could just learn to... (fill in the blank)? And yet this individual has a job because everyone knows he or she has an indispensable gift.

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Most everyone has someone like this at their office. It’s inevitable. But when you go to a classroom full of children, even a classroom of so-called “gifted” children, there might be that one highly gifted child who is just like your colleague, except for one big difference: This gifted individual is still a child and, thus, his quiriness or even downright bad behavior need not be tolerated. Today, children who are similar to that highly talented colleague of yours are at risk of not receiving an appropriate education that matches their intelligence. Not only would their talents be squandered but also the social and emotional skills delays may cause them to be isolated and fall through the cracks.

Aidan, now a fourth grader in New York City, is one such child. He taught himself to read before ever stepping into a classroom. By second grade, he was able to read at a fifth grade level and was working on middle school math problems. IQ assessments that his parents had done privately showed him to score at 99.6% on almost every section of these tests.

## The quintessential exceptional kid (2e).

You would think that, as a resident of New York City, Aidan would be attending one of the highly sought after schools for gifted and talented students such as NEST+M or the Anderson School—but that’s not where you’ll find him. He actually never completed the qualifying exam for the city’s Gifted and Talented program that he was supposed to take before kindergarten because he simply walked out midway during the exam. “He just didn’t want to be away from me too long,” Aidan’s mother told

Quartz. (Aidan is a pseudonym used to protect the child’s identity.)

His mother sent Aidan to a charter school where things started out well. In kindergarten, Aidan was given extra assignments whenever he finished his work early and was even given a special space with art supplies when he needed to take a break from the everyday noise and activity that sometimes overwhelmed him. However, his first grade teacher did not understand why Aidan would not follow along like everyone else and even said that she didn’t think Aidan was a particularly accelerated learner. This worrisome predicament caused Aidan’s parents to have him take the Gifted and Talented exam again. He scored in the 98th percentile and began attending a regular public school, which had a special classroom for students his age who’d also scored highly on the exam. Thus, as a class, they would be learning at a faster pace than in general education classrooms.

Aidan’s mother hoped her son would fare better in a class for similarly talented children. But the truth was that Aidan’s social skills weren’t nearly as good as his academic prowess. He didn’t always know how to engage his classmates, and sensory issues made it difficult to deal with noise, making activities such as gym, lunch, and recess a nightmare instead of a welcome reprieve from the classroom. Aidan ended up becoming bullied by other students, misunderstood by teachers, and perhaps worst of all, he wasn’t learning much at school.

## The highly-abled can be disabled too

When the bullying became physical halfway into the school year, he completely lost interest in learning. Aidan’s parents were not blind to his lagging social skills. Before the 2012-13 school year began, they had requested an evaluation for an individualized education plan (IEP), which is given to students as a result of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). While Aidan is highly gifted, he also has social and emotional skills deficits that hinder his ability to learn in a regular classroom.

Aidan is the quintessential twice exceptional kid (2e), which is more commonly known in the gifted community as “twice-exceptional” when a child who is gifted also has special needs which can include learning disabilities, autism, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, and anxiety to name a few. Sometimes with 2e kids their disabilities hide their giftedness. Likewise, their giftedness hides their disabilities as many naturally try to overcompensate.

**ly-hired psychologist  
l to Aidan’s mother  
pull her son out of  
prevent any more**

Many people who work in education understand that these individualized plans would only be provided to children with a learning disability or a physical disability but this not always the case. US law requires that every child receive a “free and appropriate education.” Placing Aidan in a class, gifted or not, without any accommodations for his special needs could not be deemed as appropriate. It is times like this when you can imagine what it might be like for that special co-worker of yours with his quirky ways, his brusque nature, having to do overly simple work alongside many other co-workers doing the same task. It’s an impossible scenario for such professionals in any industry. Likewise, for these young students with even less social know-how to guide them, these scenarios are even more

unrealistic.

But where do students like Aidan go when the city's only gifted and talented system is unable to provide them with an appropriate education? Aidan's parents had worked hard with the public school all year long to come up with ways to alleviate the situation, even though their original requests for an evaluation were brushed off by the school psychologist. It became clear that the school couldn't or didn't know how to make adjustments so that Aidan could make real academic progress.

In May, toward the end of Aidan's horrible year as a second-grader, a privately-hired psychologist suggested to Aidan's mother that she pull her son out of school to prevent any more damage. "He was crying every day on the way to school, sobbing, begging not to make him get out of the car," she said. A former teacher herself, Aidan's mother made the difficult decision to homeschool him for the few remaining weeks of the school year.

By then, the city's department of education was willing to provide Aidan with special education services, since his parents had spent thousands of dollars on testing and were able to uncover deficits, based on a diagnosis of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder made by a neuropsychologist at the NYU Child Study Center. Still, the city could not come up with a placement for Aidan for the rest of his second grade year nor for the current school year. Had the whole process of evaluating Aidan for more support taken place when his parents wanted to pursue it back in the beginning of the school year, he might have had more options. But now he had missed admission application deadlines for the very few schools that fit his profile as some states (including New York) pay the tuition for children to attend private school when an appropriate placement in a public education setting cannot be found. During those last weeks that Aidan was home, the city sent a teacher for a total of six hours of home instruction in the six weeks he had left of the school year.

While there is not yet much concrete data showing just how many 2e students like Aidan exist, many professionals that work with the gifted community will tell you that this kind of twice-exceptionality exists in many gifted children and adults. In fact, some researchers in gifted education are attempting to redefine giftedness as a condition of asynchronous development where an individual develops skills unevenly to the extent that the higher the intelligence, the more likely he or she will experience problems of a social nature; the gap between the strengths and weaknesses could be quite large.

One of the leaders in the study of twice-exceptional students is psychologist James T. Webb, a former dean and professor of psychology at Wright University and the founder of Social Emotional Needs of the Gifted, a 30 year-old not-for-profit organization dedicated to bringing

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## will need to value aptitude rather than relying only on demonstrated achievement.”

attention to the unique emotional needs of gifted children and adults. Webb has heard countless stories like Aidan’s and currently works as a publisher of books about the gifted at Great Potential Press. Using just a few words, he captured the heart of the issue: “It’s widely known that judgment lags behind intellect.” Even if Aidan didn’t have a learning disability of an academic nature, his neurologically-based disability still prevented him from learning in a classroom without special accommodations.

“When we talk about wisdom, what we’re talking about is someone who is right but also has judgment,” he told Quartz, citing wisdom as something that can’t necessarily be reasoned out. “What’s the logic behind not asking someone how much they weigh?”

In fact, the National Association of Gifted Children released a position paper in 2010 [redefining giftedness \(pdf\)](#) to include that some gifted individuals face barriers due to issues such as poverty, discrimination, learning disabilities as well as motivational and emotional problems. “Identification of these students will need to emphasize aptitude rather than relying only on demonstrated achievement,” the paper stated.

### **Educational options for the gifted but not neatly-packaged student**

If homeschooling is not a preferred option, how would students like Aidan receive an education? Dr. Ellen Richer, the founding head of the new Quad Preparatory School, a private school in New York City, which serves gifted middle school students who also have special social, emotional and/or learning needs, explained to Quartz that gifted education is inconsistent across states and even school districts. Protecting Aidan’s right to receive an appropriate education that matches his intellectual capabilities may not be clearly defined. “For example, the Common Core standards mandate a certain scope or sequence of education for all of the academic subjects,” she said, but “they have nothing that is well thought out in a scope and sequence point-of-view for gifted education.”

Richer is accurate in her assessment as even the definitions of gifted education vary by state. A recent report by the National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented at the University of Virginia’s Curry School of Education surveyed schools across the country and found that they rarely examined student learning outcomes to guide gifted education programming. The report also stated that school districts were rather dependent on local funding for providing gifted education services. Nearly 40% of districts with elementary gifted programs received no

state funding. Moreover, the gifted and talented classroom where Aidan had been placed isn't the most prevalent model in the US. Fifty percent of students who receive gifted education usually receive pull-out services for just one to four hours per week.

In this state of disarray, it is not surprising that Aidan couldn't find any support to remain receiving gifted education through the public school system. It's worth noting also that federal law requires that he not be excluded from gifted programs based on his disability. In an official letter, the US Department of Education stated in 2007, qualified students with disabilities should be given the same opportunities to compete for and benefit from accelerated programs and classes as are given to students without disabilities.

Yet Aidan's mother did not feel the benefit of these protections: "We were working so hard to work with them (the school) that it wasn't clear to us that all they wanted to do was get him out of the school." The city was never able to find him a suitable placement and his parents were able to enroll him for third grade in a private school that served students like Aidan, many of whom were gifted with special needs. Aidan's parents later sued the city for tuition reimbursement. The city settled with Aidan's parents and gave a partial reimbursement of the tuition which still left thousands of dollars of tuition and lawyer fees that Aidan's parents would have to pay on their own. For every year Aidan attends this school, they must hire a lawyer and sue for tuition even though the city had never come up with a placement recommendation for him when they most needed one.

For those children that do find themselves in the public special education system, oftentimes their learning environments are still inappropriate. "The academics are completely shifted to the sidelines," says Richer noting that students at her school have experienced this often. "They languish in special ed classes."

Webb emphasized that "extraordinarily few" teachers have ever received training to recognize the flashes of brilliance that they so often see with the gifted kids.

Brilliant is an understatement when trying to describe students like 16-year-old Jacob Barnett, another twice-exceptional student who is a child prodigy living with autism. Barnett is famous for his work in quantum physics and could have been one of those children destined to languish in special education. The teen scientist described it best in his TEDxTeen video, "So, they took me to special ed which was extremely special in the fact that it didn't educate me at all." His YouTube video "Forget What You Know" has reached over 3 million views.

## **A gifted education model for all children**

Halley Potter, a fellow at The Century Foundation and co-author of the forthcoming book *A Smarter Charter: Finding What Works for Charter Schools and Public Education*, recently published an article describing what she found to be an ideal situation for gifted students. It involves no admissions testing, works within guidelines of evidence-based research, and successfully creates an integrated and productive environment where not only gifted students but all students can access academic enrichment in a school where 20% of the students were also receiving special education services.

The Bell Academy in Queens, New York, is a middle school that employs the Schoolwide Enrichment Model created by gifted education researchers Joseph Renzulli and Sally Reis. Potter had been studying the efforts at Bell Academy because she was interested at looking at different models that took the lessons in gifted education but didn't create the kind of racially and economically segregated environments that are seen in many gifted and talented programs today.

Potter said that the educational model that Bell Academy uses allows all the students in the school to take part in gifted enrichment but also address issues of special needs that require extra support. At Bell, teachers have access to tools such as databases for reading materials based on topics and interests that also help them provide such materials at "just-right" levels for students' individual needs. "It is a tool that can really help a sixth grade teacher who is having to differentiate instruction for this integrated classroom," Potter told me, as teachers could have students coming in reading at several levels below grade level as well as several levels above.

It is difficult to believe that a school can be productive this way but at Bell Academy, Potter found that teachers can approach curriculum differently. The high performance levels on the students' standardized test scores for the school indicates that Bell is more than meeting state expectations.

Even better than test scores, a visit to a classroom speaks volumes about the efficacy of this type of gifted education. Potter said that some students may test out of a unit on a pretest and be given a challenge instead. She observed a time when a class had been learning environmental sustainability around the same time they were learning about Greek civilizations: "Students who had shown that they were advanced in both of these subjects were pulled out for this individual unit to work together on a self-directed project where they designed what the most sustainable Greek city would have looked like," Potter observed.

Perhaps if Aidan attended a school like Bell Academy, things would have been different for him. But Bell Academy is only available to students living in a school district in which Aidan

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does not live. Webb also questions whether the Renzulli model could meet the needs of gifted children who lack motivation and are more commonly known as “underachievers.”

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Despite the hardship, Aidan’s parents are happy to have their son back. Aidan’s mother recalls telling him he didn’t have to return to the gifted and talented classroom that caused him tremendous pain. “The day that we told him he didn’t have to go back to school, it was like a light came back on. Within a week, the nightmares were gone, the interest was back.”

BY SIEMENS

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