

The Twice-Exceptional Child

Schools struggle to help students who are gifted and have learning disabilities, but some are successful



Lawrence Hardy

Was it because she was ill-placed in a French immersion program? Or were there deeper, more profound reasons for the first-grader's lack of progress?

Most every day, at precisely 9:35 a.m., Mary Quackenbush would raise her hand and ask to go to the bathroom. Not coincidentally, that was when language class began at Maryvale Elementary School in Montgomery County, Md.

Mary's mother, Priscilla, says the 6-year-old would go to the bathroom, then spend the next several minutes wandering the halls. She would do anything, it seemed, to get away.

At a conference the next year to discuss Mary's progress, her teacher told Quackenbush: "Mary has the lowest reading ability of

all my second-graders." And how did she compare with the first-graders? Quackenbush asked. The first-grade teacher replied: "Mary has the lowest reading ability of all my first-graders."

That's when Priscilla Quackenbush burst into tears. A military nurse practitioner at Water Reed Army Medical Center and the mother of two gifted teenage boys, Quackenbush knew for some time that her precocious, blonde daughter—who had a knack for organizing things and an uncanny sense of compassion for children and even adults—was different. She seemed to possess extraordinary talent and a devastating disability at the same time.

Another district might have dismissed Mary as lazy, disruptive, or simply unable to achieve. But fortunately, Montgomery

County has pioneered programs for "twice-exceptional" children like her. Since September, Mary—now 8 and diagnosed with profound dyslexia—has been in a special third- and fourth-grade class at another elementary school with six other students, all of whom qualify for both gifted and special education services.

"It's really been wonderful for her," her mother says, "a big turning point in just the way she feels about herself."

DUAL PROGRAMS ARE FEW

Montgomery County is one of the few districts in the nation to have a designated program for twice-exceptional students. Others include the Albuquerque Public Schools and the Cherry Creek School District in Green-

wood Village, Colo.

Montgomery County's policy vows to "identify and serve not only the students who perform, but also the students who show the potential for performance at high levels," including those "who are gifted and simultaneously have learning disabilities," according to the district's *Guidebook for Twice Exceptional Students*.

A 140,000-student district in suburban Washington, D.C., Montgomery County has about 125 twice-exceptional students who spend at least part of their day in special classrooms, located in eight schools (elementary through high school) throughout the county. A far greater number of students deemed twice exceptional—about 10 times that number—receive services in their home schools.

But high-performing Montgomery County is an exception. Many districts don't do enough to serve even the general population of unusually talented students, let alone those with disabilities, according to advocates for gifted education.

"We hear this a lot: 'We'll run out of classes if we allow them to take calculus in eighth grade,'" says Jane Clarenbach, a spokeswoman for the National Association for Gifted Children. One of her responses: "Do you have a college nearby?"

This kind of "acceleration" (the other strategy is "enrichment") is one way to serve gifted students' academic needs. Another is taking Advanced Placement courses in middle school. Acceleration doesn't have to mean skipping grades—something Clarenbach says some school administrators are reluctant to approve.

Many descriptors for "gifted" exist, and there are various estimates of the number of gifted students in the U.S. By some criteria, they are students with IQs above 120 or 130. Or they can be students with exceptional skills in a specific area, such as art or music. Defined by 1988 federal law, gifted students are those whose aptitude and potential for performance are so advanced that they require services and activities not ordinarily offered in regular classrooms.

At least 6 percent of the nation's children qualify as gifted, Clarenbach estimates. Other experts put the number at between 2 percent and 5 percent.

The federal government provides funds for special education students (though not nearly to the extent authorized in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act), but virtually nothing for gifted education, Clarenbach says. Few states fund gifted education, and with state budgets suffering, those that don't have an additional excuse not to do so. This means most of the funding must come from local sources.

Identifying and serving these students is compounded when they have one of a number of disabilities that qualify them as twice exceptional. Examples are dyslexia and other learning disabilities, ADHD and related deficit disorders, autism, and emotional or psychological disorders.

"I think, in general, they're still not serving these kids well, because nationally it's not well understood that you can be gifted and still have a learning disability," says Rich Weinfeld, a former teacher who pioneered Montgomery County's twice-exceptional program in the 1980s.

Many students may have learning disabilities, but because of their giftedness can perform near grade level, Weinfeld says. The result: Neither their giftedness nor their disability is diagnosed. Other times, students are identified as gifted, then do poorly in gifted classes because of their unrecognized disability, and are thought to be simply lazy or lacking motivation.

Says Weinfeld: "The giftedness and the disability mask one another."

INDIVIDUALIZATION IS KEY

Weinfeld started working with groups of twice-exceptional students in the mid-1980s at Montgomery County's Westbrook Elementary School and later taught similar students in Westchester, N.Y. The designation was informal back then. Parents knew their children were different and were not being served in the district's regular gifted pro-

gram, and were just happy to have a teacher who recognized their dual needs.

In the mid-1990s, Westfield led a Montgomery County middle school program for twice-exceptional students, and a few years later he became the district's head of special education.

"That was my formal introduction into this program," Weinfeld says. "But I realized I was already working with these children. I just didn't have a name for them."

Weinfeld later co-authored two books on the topic, including the 2006 manual *Smart Kids With Learning Disabilities*. He describes four core principles of teaching twice exceptional students: focus on their strengths, don't ignore their disabilities, adopt appropriate adaptation and accommodation strategies, and develop a comprehensive case management system that involves parents and key school staff.

An example of an accommodation for language arts would be using a computer and its spell-checking functions for students who have problems with handwriting, spelling, and punctuation. An adaptation could involve allowing the student to present a report orally, rather than in writing.

Again, the key is not to ignore the disability but to provide, in the words of Montgomery County's handbook, "open-ended outlets for the demonstration of knowledge" and to choose "activities that focus on students' individual gifts and interests."

Dennis Higgins, a longtime teacher of twice-exceptional students in Albuquerque, N. M., knows all about individual gifts—and needs. His fifth-grade class at Bellehaven Elementary School has just eight students, but that small class size doesn't mean he has less to do.

"With these eight students, I basically have eight lesson plans every day," Higgins says. "Everything is individualized."

In fact, at Bellehaven there is "a running joke," Higgins says. "I have eight children, but I'm probably one of the most swamped teachers in the building because I have so many lesson plans to do."

This is Higgins' third year with the same



students, having started with them in third grade. Teaching the same group means Higgins has a good understanding of their needs and never has to repeat a lesson. In the past, most of his students have been diagnosed with Asperger syndrome, but recently he has had one student with extreme learning disabilities and two with severe depression.

Higgins, who also consults with districts on the subject with his wife, a professor at the University of New Mexico, says there is a continuing lack of awareness regarding twice-exceptional students. He says educators still often ask him: “Could a gifted child really have learning disabilities? Is that really possible?”

A PROGRAM AT WORK

Come into Taryn Veith’s class at Wyngate Elementary School in Bethesda, Md., and you’ll find that the answer is yes. Just seven children are in the combined third- and fourth-grade room, located in one of several portable classrooms behind the main school. (Montgomery’s student population is growing rapidly, but still the district has reserved two portables for twice-exceptional students, Veith’s class and Jackilyn Spencer’s fifth-grade classroom next door.)

Reed Fedowitz, a soft-spoken fifth-grader

with a lock of brown hair falling over his forehead, has a serious learning disability that makes it hard to read. But he is also an accomplished artist, who has learned to work in a variety of media, including oils. Like others in Spencer’s class, he is mainstreamed for part of the day, but he enjoys Spencer’s class the best.

“I like it a whole lot because there’s not very many kids, so it’s easier to focus,” Reed says. “And Miss Spencer is really nice, and it’s quiet.”

On a brilliant, cold winter morning, Reed and his classmates sit down for their first “Inquiry Circle” of the school year to discuss Randall Jarrell’s *The Bat Poet*, a story about a bat with an artist’s soul who, unlike the other nocturnal bats, loves to explore his world in the daytime but can’t get his friends to join him. The theme of seeing and experiencing what others do not is especially appropriate for these children, whose lives are at once similar and very different from their peers.

Spencer asked the students to cite places in the story where a character exhibited sensitivity. The children understand immediately, but they’ve never done this kind of circle exercise before, and it can be difficult to get them to focus.

“When the teacher’s with them, then they’re on task,” says Marisa Stemple, the

coordinator for Montgomery’s GT/LD program, which stands for Gifted and Talented, Learning Disabled. “When the teacher goes away, they go away.”

Yet when they do focus, the students come up with excellent examples, sometimes reading much further into the text and the author’s sensibility than would a regular student. At one point, to illustrate a concept, one boy quotes from Teddy Roosevelt. He doesn’t get the quote quite right—and he knows it—but is happy to share it with his classmates just the same.

Over in Veith’s third- and fourth-grade class, two boys are conversing, one at a table, the other bouncing around a computer but not exactly using it to do his language arts work. There are just too many other interesting things around, including the boy at the table, who is telling him what it would be like to invent a machine that could stop and start time.

Earlier, Mary Quackenbush and Veith worked on Mary’s reading skills using the Wilson language program, one of several interventions Veith and her assistant, Sharon Clifford, have adopted for the third-grader.

This particular exercise involves isolating the various components of three- and four-letter words, then having Mary “tap” them in the air by snapping her fingers.

“B-all,” Mary says, and taps. Then “H-all” and “M-an.”

“Good job, Mary,” Veith says. “What about our bonus words?” Then they proceed to say and tap simple sentences.

Before Mary learned Wilson’s tapping strategy, the words and letters would seem like they were jumping around the page, her mother says. “She would say, ‘My eyes hurt; my head hurts.’”

“She said since she started tapping, the letters stay still better.”

A GIFT FOR MARY

Priscilla Quackenbush realized Mary needed extra help as early as first grade. The Quack-

enbushes are a military family, and Mary had learned a little bit of Korean as a kindergarten when the family was stationed overseas. Her mother valued that experience, so when they later moved to Montgomery County, she tried to get Mary into the district's Chinese immersion program, but no slots were available. Later, however, a space at Maryvale Elementary's French immersion program opened up, and Quackenbush and her husband, an army colonel, enrolled Mary in the school.

From the beginning, it wasn't a good fit, but at first the Quackenbushes and school officials weren't sure if Mary's problem was with the French language or with something deeper. After being evaluated by a child psychologist and developmental pediatrician, Mary's parents were told that it didn't matter what lan-

guage Mary was learning in—she had profound difficulties decoding the most basic sounds.

Priscilla Quackenbush remembers one of the doctors showing a bell curve representing a second-grade reading ability.

“And here is Mary,” [the doctor said]. He was pointing at below the first percentile.”

In second grade, a school team monitored Mary's progress and talked regularly with her parents. She continued to struggle with reading and writing. Yet, at the same time, she was wonderfully adept at spoken language and always willing to help the teacher, often in ways that only an adult would understand. In the grocery store, she'd see an old person shopping and want to help him get hard-to-find items. She loved organizing things, and often asked her mother to draw bar graphs for

her so she could compare quantities of different things.

Whether her IQ is truly in the gifted range—like her two brothers, both of whom have attention disorder problems and are, thus, also twice exceptional—is immaterial, Quackenbush says. The school district looked at her disability, and beyond it, and realized she had some extraordinary gifts that didn't necessarily show up on a spelling test or a book report. Mary has thrived at Wyngate, and for her it is just the beginning.

“She's able to concentrate,” he mother says. “And she feels that everyone recognizes that she's smart.” ■

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A teacher's gift: Helping a dyslexic student find her way

Rich Weinfeld was warned about the quirky student coming into his fourth-grade class.

Her handwriting was sloppy, the third-grade teacher told him. Her sentences ran on and on. She used no punctuation. No capitalization. In short, the teacher concluded, she couldn't write.

Some educators might have been disappointed, anticipating the remedial work that lay ahead. But Weinfeld was intrigued and did something Mary White's third-grade teacher apparently never attempted: He actually tried to read the 8-year-old's prose—not concentrating on her mechanics or her handwriting, which Weinfeld admits was “a mess,” but on her ideas. And he was astonished.

“I knew she was gifted, and that's what I focused on,” says Weinfeld, then a teacher in Bethesda, Md.

Under Weinfeld's tutelage, Mary bloomed.

That was 35 years ago, before anyone had heard the words “twice exceptional.”

“If she had proceeded to have teachers like her third-grade teacher, she would have stopped writing,” Weinfeld says.

Mary White, now in her early 40s, has vivid memories of that difficult time. Her parents, both researchers at the National Institutes of Health, were going through a divorce, and she felt lost at school. She says Weinfeld “was the first teacher who really talked to me, who really communicated with me.” Regarding her depression and a learning disability that made organization (and tidy handwriting) difficult for her, she said Weinfeld “didn't care. He looked right past it.”

White now lives in Belleview, Wash.

Not coincidentally, she is a special education teacher for middle school students. Along the way, she graduated magna cum laude, with a major in literature and philosophy, from Beloit College in Wisconsin. She became a lawyer, worked in civil rights, criminal defense, and legal services for the mentally ill, and then returned to college for a master's degree in education. Now she's come full circle, in a sense, by returning to the classroom.

Along the way, the girl who couldn't write received the Hart Crane Memorial Award for poetry. She e-mailed Weinfeld recently to thank him, telling him about her multiple careers and asking for advice on how to teach students, some of whom are not so different from herself.

“How do we help them deliver their gifts to the world?” she asks. “Personally, to me, that's the question.”