

# Advocacy

## A Checklist to Guide Your Advocacy for a Gold Standard School

Dr. Julia Link Roberts and Tracy Ford Inman

What does the concept of a Gold Standard School have to do with advocacy? The answer to that question is “a lot,” as it is both easier and more effective to advocate for something specific when you are working to better meet the needs of gifted children and youth. And, because advocacy usually starts at the classroom and then grows to the school level, the checklist for a Gold Standard School could be useful to parents and educators as they advocate for appropriately challenging opportunities for children and young people who are gifted and talented.

For purposes of this article, Gold Standard Schools are places in which gifted children and young people thrive, but so do all other children. Gold Standard Schools may be elementary, middle, or high schools; but they will all have four distinguishing characteristics. First, they stand out among other schools because their focus is on individual student growth. In other words, the focus in these schools is on continuous progress for all children. Second, these schools have school leaders and teachers who see themselves as talent developers, and they provide opportunities in a wide range of content and talent areas. Third, schools that meet the gold standard have policies in place that remove the learning ceiling to ensure continuous progress for all students. Fourth, school leaders and teachers understand the cognitive and social-emotional needs of children who are gifted and talented, and ongoing professional development supports and enhances their understanding of the needs of this group of children and young people. Let’s look at these four characteristics and points of evidence that they are present in your school.

### Characteristic 1: Focus on Continuous Progress

A focus on continuous progress is evident at the school and classroom levels so it is easy to detect interest and track progress in learning as children and young people engage in learning in multiple content areas. The National Association for Gifted Children has as one of its advocacy goals: Each child has the right to learn new things at school every day (Siegle, 2008). What are the points of evidence that the school focus is on continuous progress?

#### 1.1 The school mission statement specifies that every child will realize his potential or each child will make continuous progress.

Note the emphasis on each and every child rather than children in general. So many times people seem to forget children who are gifted and talented when they speak of all children. Of course, advocates must remind others when they seem to forget the needs of children who are gifted and talented when they remark, “But this is for all children.”

A school that meets the gold standard adopts continuous progress as its mantra. Every decision links back to the question: Does this help all of our students, including those who are gifted and talented, make continuous progress? If the answer is “no,” decisions are changed. The mission statement can be seen in classroom practices that ensure continuous progress for all students.

- 1.2 Preassessment is routine and establishes the interests, preferred ways of learning, and levels of readiness of all students.
- 1.3 Grouping for instructional purposes is a standard practice in order to facilitate all children (remember that includes gifted children) learning at appropriately challenging levels. Most groupings are flexible to allow students to be regrouped as the level of readiness changes with different content or topics as well as when interest shifts into high gear.
- 1.4 Assessment is ongoing to see that all children are learning. This type of assessment is called formative, and it is important because it monitors progress to make certain that a child is neither practicing skills incorrectly nor misunderstanding content.
- 1.5 Lessons are differentiated to match the level of challenge to the needs of individual students or clusters of students. Differentiated learning experiences are not “just different” nor are they simply more of the same.

## Characteristic 2: Talent Development

What are the points of evidence that the school is a place where talent development is fostered?

- 2.1 Opportunities in a variety of content and talent areas are sought out, announced, and encouraged.
- 2.2 Achievements in a variety of content and talent areas are recognized and celebrated.

Educators (and parents) in a Gold Standard School set talent development as a top priority. One elementary principal includes this important concept in all personnel interviews with the question, “How are you a talent scout?” That same principal starts the year encouraging each teacher to be a talent scout. She then celebrates all accomplishments in a town meeting each morning of the school year. If town meetings aren’t a possibility, including accomplishments in the daily announcements or in the school paper and newsletter can be just as powerful. Recognition of talent is a public testament about priorities. Just look at how our society recognizes those with athletic talent! All talents from math to drawing should be recognized, nurtured, and celebrated. Remember that continuous progress is the goal for all academic and talent areas.

Children and young people learn about opportunities on an ongoing basis. Keep in mind that an opportunity isn’t really an opportunity unless people know about it. Contests, competitions, summer camps, Saturday enrichment classes, dual credit, and travel abroad programs are potentially life-changing for gifted children. However, too often, information about these and other opportunities sit on someone’s desk. Gold Standard Schools have a system in place that channels opportunities to the people who will do something about them.

## Characteristic 3: Policies That Remove the Learning Ceiling

What are the points of evidence that the school has policies that remove the learning ceiling, allowing children and young people to make continuous progress?

### 3.1 A policy for acceleration is in place.

If the goal is curriculum without limits, then acceleration is a must. Acceleration, according to a *Nation Deceived: How America Holds Back Its Brightest Students* (Colangelo, Assouline, & Gross, 2004), delineates 18 types of acceleration from early entrance into kindergarten to grade skipping to Advanced Placement or dual credit classes. Gold Standard Schools design acceleration policies so that each child makes continuous progress.

### 3.2 A policy for performance assessment is established.

The school or, better still, the school district develops policies about performance-based assessment. For example, if a seventh grader completes algebra in a 3-week summer talent identification camp, a Gold Standard School documents the accomplishment and places him in geometry. A Gold Standard School would allow a child who is very accomplished in science the opportunity to take a placement test that lets her take an Advanced Placement science class when she is a freshman or sophomore or sooner. Performance-based policies encourage growth or continuous progress.

### 3.3 A policy for educational enhancement is adopted.

These schools have an educational enhancement policy, allowing students to miss school if they are participating in an educational event such as acting in a community play or competing in a competition or attending a youth forum on a topic of community interest. Students have an excused absence, or better yet, are not considered absent because they are engaged in learning.

### 3.4 Policies and practices do not inhibit continuous progress.

Gold Standard Schools do not have policies that could restrict students such as a two-class limit on computer-based classes or only offering Advanced Placement classes to juniors and seniors. Policies encourage continuous progress; they don’t hinder it.

## Characteristic 4: Ongoing Professional Development

The fourth component that characterizes Gold Standard Schools is ongoing professional development that promotes understanding the cognitive and social-emotional needs of gifted children and young people and provides strategies to accommodate their needs. It is key to remember that needs for gifted children often result from their strengths, which is far different from the usual expectation that an educational need relates to a deficiency. What are the points of evidence that the school plans and offers professional development

that promotes understanding of the needs of children and youth who are gifted and talented?

**4.1 Professional development about gifted education and talent development is embedded throughout a school year.**

Principals, teachers, counselors, librarians, and special teachers of physical education, art, and music need to understand the characteristics of gifted children and their social-emotional and cognitive needs. No one falls for the myths that gifted children will “get it on their own,” that only students who aren’t problems in the classroom are gifted, or that students who have a learning difficulty can’t be gifted. A Gold Standard School discovers students’ needs, interests, abilities, and levels of readiness, so individualized learning takes place and so that each child learns new things every day she is in school—elementary through high school.

These four descriptors and the related points of evidence are combined in a checklist for guiding the development of your school to a gold standard. This checklist can be used to focus your advocacy efforts as well as to determine the impact of your advocacy.

Our next column will focus on role groups in the school and what these educators do in a Gold Standard School.

**Resources**

Colangelo, N., Assouline, S. G., & Gross, M. U. M. (2004). *A nation deceived: How schools hold back America's brightest students* (Vol. 1). Iowa City: The University of Iowa, The Connie Belin & Jacqueline N. Blank International Center for Gifted Education and Talent Development.

Siegle, D. (2008, December). Parents are the best advocates. *Parenting for High Potential*, 3.

**Authors' Note**

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Tracy Ford Inman, M.A., serves as Associate Director of The Center for Gifted Studies at Western Kentucky University. She has presented at the state, national, and international levels; trained hundreds of teachers in differentiation; published multiple articles; and served as writer and editor for The Center’s award-winning magazine, *The Challenge*. She and Julia Link Roberts have coauthored another book project: *Assessing Differentiated Student Products: A Protocol for Development and Evaluation* (2009).

# Checklist for a Gold Standard School

## Characteristic 1: Focus on Continuous Progress

- 1.1 The school mission statement specifies that every child will realize his potential or each child will make continuous progress.
- 1.2 Preassessment is routine and establishes the interests, preferred ways of learning, and levels of readiness of all students.
- 1.3 Grouping for instructional purposes is a standard practice in order to facilitate all children (remember that includes gifted children) learning at appropriately challenging levels. Most groupings are flexible to allow students to be regrouped as the level of readiness changes with different content or topics as well as when interest shifts into high gear.
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## Characteristic 3: Policies that Remove the Learning Ceiling

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- 3.2 A policy for performance assessment is established.
- 3.3 A policy for educational enhancement is adopted.
- 3.4 Policies and practices do not inhibit continuous progress.

## Characteristic 4: Ongoing Professional Development

- 4.1 Professional development about gifted education and talent development is embedded throughout a school year.