

Struggling to Teach the Very Brightest

by Amy Pyle, Times Education Writer

A mother who battled to find programs for her son says the L.A. district has a lot to learn. Their story reflects a broader question - how public schools deal with the highly gifted.

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By: AMY PYLE, TIMES EDUCATION WRITER

Fitting the mind of an adult into the body of 6-year-old is a tough squeeze. Finding a place in the public school system that satisfies the needs of that mind and that body is tougher still.

This is the search that consumes Leila Levi, a former schoolteacher who refuses to accept second-best for her son, Levi Meir Clancy. How smart is Levi? Testing him is complicated by his youth, but formal exams intended for older kids have pegged him above the 145 IQ range, one measure of the "highly gifted" designation, bestowed on fewer than 1% of Los Angeles Unified School District's students.

Reality hints at an even higher intelligence. At home in Venice, Levi reads novels in English and Spanish and adds three-digit numbers in his head. Boosted by pillows so he can reach the keyboard, he runs smoothly through sophisticated computer programs such as ClarisWorks. He wants to be a bioengineer.

Nevertheless, the odds that such children will be sufficiently challenged in school are discouraging, experts say. Educators throughout the nation are advocating "mixed ability" classes, and are struggling with the very word "gifted," sensitive to its anti-egalitarian overtones. Many districts do not even recognize "highly gifted" as a distinct category. L.A. Unified does, but its top gifted administrator stresses programs at the students' local schools--including creating independent-study programs for the most extraordinary children.

The Los Angeles district, whose sheer size gives it more options than smaller districts, offers fewer than 400 slots in special accelerated elementary school classes for its 1,600 elementary school-age youngsters who have been identified as highly gifted.

As a consequence, parents such as Leila Levi fear that these children will never reach their potential--growing up, instead, without brilliant peers, made to feel odd or ostracized, becoming discipline problems. Among the experts who consider those fears valid is psychology professor Ellen Winner, who shocked gifted advocates in her 1996 book, "Gifted Children: Myths and Realities." She suggested that the "moderately gifted" belonged in regular classes.

Highly gifted children, by contrast, "are at risk," she said. "A lot get bored or teased in school and they tune out or become disinterested in their abilities and end up underachievers. They need to be in classes with other kids who are like them." Many parents turn to special classes in

desperation after other options fail horribly. Though there are so-called "gifted" programs of some sort in most of the district's schools, some provide as little as one hour a week of enrichment—hardly adequate to satisfy children like Levi.

The question of how to educate Levi is a metaphor for the broader question of how public schools--and society at large--should deal with our most intellectually gifted. For parents, it is a journey radically different, and far more chaotic, than the well-worn paths that have been smoothed for gifted athletes, musicians or artists.

Search Plagued by Obstacles

Leila Levi opted for one of the special programs--an L.A. Unified magnet school--only after two years of navigating. They were two years in which she slammed into a succession of frustrating walls: The wall of the principal who doesn't believe in skipping grades, because that was how his son missed decimals; the wall of the first-grade teacher who never fulfilled another principal's proposed compromise of sending Levi next door for third-grade math and science; the wall of the district, which eventually offered Leila the choice of Eagle Rock Highly Gifted Magnet, but provides a bus for only half the trip.

Leila firmly believes her son's needs are as unique as those of a severely retarded youngster. She and some other parents of the very bright believe their children should be provided a tailored learning plan similar to those required for special education students.

"It's their legal and moral responsibility," Leila said. "And what's more, he's a gift to society. They should want to do it."

By law, special education students must be tested, transported and closely monitored. No such standards apply to the highly gifted, or to the simply "gifted" students, who make up about 6% of the school population and generally fall in the above-125 IQ range. It would be easy to dismiss parents such as Leila as pushy or unrealistic, or to point out that their children will probably succeed regardless of the education they receive, while disabled kids probably will not. But such swift dismissal ignores the burning fears and frustration inside parents such as Westside resident Loren Grossman.

Grossman dragged her son, Max, from therapist to therapist trying to figure out why he was misbehaving at school. When the other kids were sitting on the classroom rug, Max would be crawling on the floor, picking up staples and dust particles. Though he seemed completely distracted, when the teacher would call on him, he would usually be up to speed. One counselor diagnosed mild autism, another attention deficit disorder, still another more obscure ailment. Each time, Grossman was both comforted and confused by the answers.

Then, she insisted Max be tested for giftedness and he scored off the charts. It was midyear, and the only highly gifted magnet openings were at San Jose Highly Gifted in the mid-San Fernando Valley, where Grossman said the 8-year-old boy has excelled, causing her to launch a campaign to begin a highly gifted magnet closer to home.

"He went from being phobic and eccentric, crying all the time, basically clinically depressed and ended up the school year happy, thriving, he could not wait to get on the bus."

A Promising but Exhausting Start

Everyone wants a smart kid, but having a child so far out of sync with the norm can be scary. As a baby, Levi barely slept, began walking at 5 months and spoke well at age 1, mixing English and the Spanish he heard from his bilingual mother. At age 3 he came to Leila while she was doing the dishes and solemnly suggested they needed to talk.

Leila recalls her only child saying: "Mommy, you have to learn another language because I have to learn another language. By the time I'm in the work force, being bilingual won't be good enough and the best way for me to learn another language is for you to learn it and teach it to me."

He thought maybe Chinese would be a good start. For kindergarten, Leila chose the bilingual immersion program at Grandview Elementary in West L.A., figuring that reinforcing the two languages spoken at home would keep her son's mind busy. The following summer, she enrolled him in a third-grade math class in Culver City Unified, then volunteered to help out. She said what she observed took her breath away: She had been a teacher for years but had never seen a student learn as quickly as her son.

Back at Grandview in the fall, Levi came home in tears, saying he was helping teach the first-grade class. The state's top administrator for gifted education, Cathy Barkett, says such use is common, and unfair.

"Teachers tend to teach to the middle and . . . the students at the top often are misused as teachers," said Barkett, who moved her own children to an all-gifted class in suburban Sacramento. "The message to them is, 'You've met that standard, so help someone else.' "

Leila decided she needed ammunition if she was to get Levi what he needed. She asked to have him tested and was told he was too young. She insisted, and eventually won. Usually, students are tested only if their teachers suggest it two years in a row, and even then months of delays stretch beyond the end of second grade--frequently too late to nab a coveted spot in the magnet gifted programs, most of which begin in third grade.

But Leila had an advantage over the average parent: She knows the ropes because she taught middle school art until 1996. She also knows how to take on L.A. Unified's bureaucracy, having once launched a State Department of Education investigation into treatment of limited-English speakers that ended with sanctions against the district this fall. When Levi's impressive test results came back, Leila pressed for alternatives. First the psychologist who tested him recommended the Brentwood Science Magnet, which had set aside two highly gifted classes. But when Levi arrived there, Leila discovered the accelerated classes did not begin until third

grade, where he was not welcome to enroll at age 5, and an interim plan for him to spend part of his days in those classes never materialized.

In frustration, Leila pulled Levi out of school altogether and taught him herself for 10 months. She started with the basics--mostly math and English--but said he consumed most of the elementary school curriculum in just three months. During the course of the year, he read hundreds of books, including a 50-volume set on countries around the world, and began questioning his mom about such theories as group consciousness. Worried that she would accelerate Levi to the point where no public school could accommodate him, Leila tried to help him gain the experience to match his intellect. She took him to art openings and other cities, helped him learn to roller-blade and play chess, and took him with her to a computer graphics class at UCLA Extension.

Levi remembers it as a freeing time, when he could pursue interests at his own pace. His mother has a different recollection.

"It was exhausting and it got to the point where there wasn't much I could do for him anymore," she said.

She realized she would have to try the district again this fall. "When he asks a question, I always kind of gasp for air," she said. "I don't know if I can go there. . . . I have a master's degree, I've been a teacher for years, but I feel so inadequate."

A Long Commute to a Special Class At 6:25 a.m., Levi is napping in the front seat of Leila's car as she pulls up in front of Hillcrest Elementary in the Crenshaw district, a 20-minute drive from their Venice condominium. The bus waiting for him there will bump over surface streets all the way to Eagle Rock, picking up four other children along the way, and Levi may not arrive home until nearly 5 p.m. Just a month into the school year, Levi's accomplishments already are legendary.

Nine-year-old Jennifer Ho, who boards the bus in Chinatown, says in reverent tones: "Did you hear about him? He's 6 years old but he's in fourth grade!"

The mother and child chose Eagle Rock from the list of three elementary magnets for highly gifted children in L.A. Unified's "Choices" brochure, which was sent to all district parents for the first time last year. One non-magnet--Carpenter Elementary in

Studio City--also has a popular program for the highly gifted, but no transportation is provided. (Cracked one mother: "You have to listen to the mommy tom-toms" to know it even exists.) Eagle Rock accepted Levi into its mixed second- through fourth-grade class and he now works with ease at the top of that continuum. That is partly his own doing. Just a few weeks into the school year, during his long morning bus ride, Levi got thinking about the time his mom persuaded a college counselor to waive her prerequisite art courses. Right then and there he penned a note to his teacher:

Dear Mrs. Muraoka: I think this homework is too baby. So, if you can, bump it up a couple of grades. --Levi.

Joyce Muraoka responded, giving him fourth-grade math books the next day and fifth-grade the day after that. Not only is Levi the youngest in his class, but he is small for his age--a full head shorter than his classmates, with room to spare in his size 6 jeans. The classroom furniture is so big that his feet dangle and he has to stand up on his knees to write. At first he felt oddest during recess, when the older kids didn't want him to play ball. But this brain magnet is a place where students actually talk about books during recess, too, and

practice their parts for a Halloween performance of "Macbeth." A place where Muraoka doesn't think twice about using words such as "perusing" and "eccentric." In such an environment, Levi feels comfortable enough to share his thoughts without fear of being mocked. When Muraoka hands out a new math game originally developed by the Mayans, Levi raises his hand and asks whether she knew the Mayans sacrificed animals and, by the way, so did the Egyptians. And they also put animal heads on their Gods.

Acknowledging Levi's tangent, Muraoka tells the class about an Egyptian history museum in San Jose visited by magnet students on a parent-sponsored field trip several years ago. Levi raises his hand again: Would she like to see a magazine he brought to school, which has some Egyptian royalty in it? Later, Muraoka observes that, like many home-schooled kids, Levi struggled at first to stay focused on the lesson at hand, taking out a book to read whenever he felt bored. There are gaps in his learning, too, that she must find and fill.

When he digs in to his homework one night, he is so used to being able to do math in his head that he can't remember how to regroup for harder subtraction problems. Shown once, however, he zooms through the rest of the page like a human calculator.

Frustrated Parents Driven to Activism

Last spring, Leila unwittingly joined the gifted parents lobby when she attended her first meeting of the Committee on Gifted Education at school district headquarters. She went there on a personal mission: If lower-level administrators would not take responsibility for Levi's education, she would go to the top in a forum in which she could not be ignored. At the end of the meeting, she shoved Levi's home-school notebook in front of Sheila Smith, the district's gifted-programs coordinator.

"I was so aggressive, I was almost embarrassed," Leila recalls.

That first meeting, she was stunned by how angry the other parents were. She felt irritated that all the attention seemed to be on high schools simply because most of the parents had older kids. In the past, the committee has found little school board sympathy for its primary causes--to make testing routine and increase the number of special gifted classes to serve those identified. Last year, members presented a plan to then-board President Jeff Horton and never heard back.

Horton acknowledges that is because he is torn on the issue--between agreeing the system could be improved and worrying about the equity issues, including the traditional underrepresentation of poor children in the programs. Members are hopeful that times are changing because the new superintendent, Ruben Zacarias, prides himself on having increased the numbers of identified gifted students during his stint as an Eastside regional superintendent.

An unexpected flurry of activity occurred last spring: Applications far exceeded space at North Hollywood's Highly Gifted magnet after the campus received heavy publicity for topping the local heap on Advanced Placement tests. Parents complained about the lack of slots. That uprising—among some of the very parents the district likes to showcase whenever funding for magnets is threatened--"made the district aware of the need," said the district's high school director, Bob Collins.

Advanced programs were created at seven high schools around the city to accommodate the overflow, though information was sent only to those turned away from North Hollywood. "The joke in the district is these are the stealth programs--parents don't even know they exist," said founding committee member Carol Knee, who got involved in spring 1994, after she was informed that there was no room for her son in a gifted middle school, even though he had attended a gifted elementary.

Board member David Tokofsky, who took the helm of the board's curriculum committee from Horton during the summer, believes it will take such advocacy to bust through an administrative culture he claims favors "equity over excellence." The district's own delays in testing and a lack of emphasis on getting quality programs into more schools have created a constituency that will be hard to please with anything short of separate gifted magnets, Tokofsky said. Tokofsky has never met Leila Levi, but he can describe her perfectly: always adamant, now angry.

"The thing is," she said, "I had the wherewithal to know where to look. I had a clue--and it was still impossible."

Specially tailored programs for highly gifted students, with enrollments:

ELEMENTARY

- * Brentwood Science Magnet: 44
- * Carpenter: 56
- * Eagle Rock Magnet: 33
- * Multnomah Magnet: 55
- * San Jose Magnet: 121

MIDDLE

* Portola Magnet: 252

* Reed: 122

HIGH SCHOOLS

* Crenshaw Magnet: 10

* Eagle Rock: 47*

N. Hollywood Magnet: 245

Source: L.A. Unified School District