

How to Advocate for Your Gifted High School Student

By Meredith Aby-Keirstead

1. Have your student take the ACT as an 8th grader

One of the best tools to have to advocate for your student is to have data. If your student can earn a 20 or above in a section on the ACT you can make an effective argument that your student has met the criteria for attending community college in that area. The ACT says that a 22 or higher demonstrates that a student is college ready. You can get registration information and testing dates on the [ACT website](#) or you can register your student through [NUMATS](#). Once you get the data you can schedule a meeting with your student's future counselor or the GT coordinator at the school to advocate for a plan that will best meet your student's academic needs which could include grade acceleration or compacting curriculum.

Also a great resource for figuring out how to advocate for your student and how to talk to your student's teachers/counselors/administrators is Karen Rogers' [ReForming Gifted Education](#).

2. Meet with your student's teacher

If your student's high school teacher is using materials or focusing on skills your student has already mastered, set up a meeting with their teacher. It's important to remember that your student might not be representative of the class and that their peers might need to cover this content. Rather than focusing on trying to get the teacher to change the curriculum for everyone, ask if the teacher would be willing to exempt your student from content they already know. Be prepared to have ideas about how they could demonstrate their mastery of this content already (like your student could take the unit exam early or you could show their ACT score) and come prepared with some ideas of what your student would be willing to learn or do instead. For example, if the class is reading [To Kill a Mockingbird](#) and your student has already read it they could read Harper Lee's [Go Set A Watchman](#) and write a paper/essay comparing them instead for the unit assessment. Or to do historical research on the time period in TKAM and do a project on the historical accuracy of the novel. The important thing is to come to the meeting from a perspective that the teacher is a partner for differentiation and an ally.

3. Accelerate your student on your own

If you feel like your student's high school is not going at a pace that matches your child's abilities you should consider accelerating your child on your own. For example, many 9th graders in the metro area take AP Human Geography which is a semester long course in college but in high school it is a year long course. Gifted students do not need a year for that course. So I would recommend that a gifted student who is passionate in social studies could see if they could work on the Arc GIS map contest as a way to dig deeper on that content on their own. Or I would see if they'd be interested in studying independently for the AP Comparative Politics exam. It is also a college semester course and it has a lot of the same themes as AP Human Geography. By preparing for that exam a student would be able to dig deeper into the countries of Great Britain, China, Iran, Russia, Nigeria and Mexico using their geography content. To prepare for an AP exam independently go to your local bookstore and buy a test guide. Consider buying a college textbook on that topic or asking if your student can borrow one from their high school. Your student could take AP exams for classes they didn't take at their high school and demonstrate to colleges that they accelerated themselves at the college level independently. They then could earn awards like AP Scholar earlier.

One way that my parents accelerated my learning in high school was by enrolling me in night or summer community college classes that I was interested in, and by sending me to Concordia College Language Camps in the summer so that I could learn foreign languages not offered at my rural high school.

4. Encourage your student to participate in an extracurricular that will push them academically

One of the ways that was accelerated as a high school student, even though I attended a rural high school with few AP classes, was through my school's debate and speech teams. These extracurriculars exposed me to research skills and new content areas, and developed my abilities as a public speaker. One of the things I most enjoyed though was that through debate and speech I found my peer group. I finally found the other students who had a passion for learning! My students in Science Olympiad, math team, and robotics also have these experiences and echo my experience.

5. Start discussing colleges and begin college planning with your student as a 9th grader

Frequently parents ask me what they should do to help their bright student on their college path. Two resources I really recommend are College Admission: From Application to Acceptance, Step by Step by Robin Mamlet and Christin Vandavelde and College Planning for Gifted Students by Sandra L. Berger. Both books do a great job of talking parents through a timeline of steps to think about each year of high school. A resource I also think is really helpful with teens is chapter 7 "College, Careers & Beyond" from The Gifted Teen Survival Guide: Smart, Sharp and Ready for Almost Anything by Judy Galbraith and Jim Delisle.

I am also asked frequently by parents about high stakes tests. Your student should take the PSAT their 10th and 11th grade years. While only their score from their 11th grade year will count towards the National Merit Scholarship competition, they should use their 10th grade test as a practice. Additionally, I advise students to take the ACT and the SAT so that they can see which test best demonstrates their strengths and then have them retake it so they can increase their higher score.

6. Help your student explore a career in a field they are passionate about

Frequently gifted students are multipotential and are overwhelmed by the question "what do you want to be when you grow up?" because they are successfully academically in a broad array of classes. Instead, they need to be asked "what are you passionate about?" They need to focus on an area that they are excited to do. High school is a great time for students to explore this. One suggestion is for students to job shadow a professional for a day who does things a student thinks they would find interesting. Another is for a student to volunteer somewhere where they can work with professionals in a field they are interested in. I have had many students use their Eagle Scout badge as an opportunity to use volunteering to explore a career. Students frequently are encouraged to do community service as a way to build their resume for college, why not make it meaningful? Lastly, use their passion area as a way to develop their leadership skills. For example, I have a student who is passionate about STEM and he has written his own engineering curriculum for elementary school students. He has designed this program and is now starting an after school enrichment program at one of our elementary schools. Not only has he gotten to deepen his knowledge of computer programming, he has improved his leadership skills and now has an amazing experience to use to shape his future career and college path.

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