

I Understand the Social/Emotional Needs of My Child, But I Also Understand the Need for Rigor

By Ginny Riley, Parent of a Jeffco Student
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As a parent of a first grader in a Montessori school, I wondered if my son was "getting it". So we started visiting one of those strip mall computer-based math/language tutoring centers. The center results told me that my son was capable of third grade math. While his teacher was skeptical of the level of assessment, it made me wonder if my concern really shouldn't be: Was he "getting it?" My concern should have been: "was he getting enough?"

About the same time, my son's creative enrichment teacher suggested I have him tested. This took place in the days before Jeffco screened every child in second grade. Testing for a gifted program was at your expense, and at your request, for the most part. In the end, my son qualified for a gifted center program, so for second grade, we transferred him from Montessori to the GT Center School. The gifted center accelerated him one year in math until middle school, where he picked up an additional year of acceleration.

Despite arguments from a local high school's math director that "middle-schoolers are not ready for that higher-level of thinking," my son's progression in math has taken him beyond his high school's traditional math offerings. As a junior, he completed AP Calculus BC and aced the exam. As a senior, he is currently enrolled in Multivariate Calculus and Differential Equations in an online college level course. We'll see how that will work, stay tuned. But he is not unique. There are eight other young adults in his high school class that need the higher level of math not provided at his school. His high school is not a gifted center. It is a typical Jeffco high school. But what did this mean to my son academically? One of the characteristics of the gifted is that they learn with less repetition. They process concepts faster. Because of his ability to grasp concepts quickly, my son was bored. He was not motivated by school. There was no challenge. Except in math. Math kept his mind moving as he assimilated new concepts. But math also provided him the skills in high school to take the accelerated sciences he had been craving since elementary school: Honors Chemistry, AP Biology, AP Physics B and, this year, AP Chemistry. If the students don't have the math, they can't take the science! For a student that was cruising through elementary and middle school, I believe I am finally seeing his potential.

My son has chosen to pursue a career in the military. What we have learned through his visits to the academies has really opened my eyes to the importance of academic rigor and variety that needs to be available to our gifted children. At this level, the focus tends to go to the grade on the AP exam, not his class grade, his final exam score. For all of the academy applications and nominations completed to date, only one academy has asked what his AP school grade was...in Spanish. Keep in mind, these top tier schools have their own tests. For example, during the summer training at the Naval Academy, plebes have the opportunity to "validate" Chemistry, English and Calculus. The cadets are still there for four years. So, what replaces those courses they validate? Cadets have the opportunity to double major, or begin work on their Master's Degree. That rigor the high school provided will allow my son, if he validates, to begin post-baccalaureate education while still fulfilling his four year commitment to the academy. But let's assume your child doesn't want a career in the service academies. What does that rigor, that availability of advanced education provide your student? How about a year less in college? If the cost of college is keeping you up at night, would one less year of tuition and fees help you

to sleep better? As I said, my son is not unique at his school. He has a cohort of at least a dozen other students with a program as rigorous. By the end of senior year, assuming the students achieve a 4 or 5 on their AP exams or receive CU Succeed or Red Rocks Community College credit for their courses, they could have upwards of thirty credit hours. If you do your research and find a college they want to attend that will also accept their AP credits, you've just reduced your tuition and fees by one year of college, or afforded your child the ability to secure a double major or a master's degree within the four years at university.

We lucked out in our local high school and got a principal that in six years took the school from adequate to ranked in the top 2% of public high schools in the nation. The principal almost doubled the number of AP courses offered during his tenure. And my son and his cohorts benefited from this visionary's work. The high school will graduate students this year with more AP passing grades than ever, more college credits than ever. That not only translates into college-ready students, but students that colleges pursue for admission and scholarships. If your student can handle the rigor (and not hurt their GPA, but that's for another column), an accelerated math program combined with an accelerated sciences curriculum provides your student opportunities to distinguish themselves from the pack...and succeed.