

The Best of Both Worlds

Part-time Public School and Part-time Homeschooling for Elementary Gifted Children

BY CAROL DANZ

Imagine being granted the opportunity to provide enrichment for your gifted children at home one or two days a week, while they continue to receive the benefits of their public school experience the rest of the time. Recently I received approval for such a proposal, and to our delight, we now provide the best of both worlds—part-time public schooling and part-time homeschooling—for our elementary age daughters.

As a parent and former high school teacher, I thought our children would benefit academically from homeschooling. I also believed they could benefit from the socialization and basic instruction provided in their public school classrooms. Since I have a high school teaching background, I did not feel adequately competent in elementary education methodology, and therefore did not choose to pursue homeschooling as a full-time option for my children. As a result of our successful proposal, we now provide our children with the best of both worlds by keeping them at home one or two days per week for at-home enrichment. It “buys time” for our children to receive the “gifted education” they are unable to receive at school.

As many parents of high ability children repeatedly attest, there are numerous frustrations facing gifted youth in classrooms where their needs are not addressed. Our own children were expressing frustration because their lessons provided little of “anything new.” They also complained of boredom since they mastered classroom content in a short period of time, but were not pro-



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vided with added enrichment activities. Without that necessary classroom enrichment or differentiation, we believed our daughters were destined to mostly grade-level learning experiences and deprived of learning which matched their abilities and interests. They were also too young to participate in our district’s very limited after-school G/T (Gifted/Talented) enrichment program.

DOING OUR HOMEWORK

We knew what we wanted to do. However, we discovered there was no precedent for such a proposal. In discussion with the head of the California Department of Education’s office for gifted education, we were told that our request for an IEP (Individualized Educational Program) for our gifted children was reasonable. In fact, some districts do provide IEPs for gifted children, but they are usually in districts where no G/T program is in place. In those districts, IEPs are usually administered to gifted students on a part-time basis by district personnel. In our own district, IEPs applied only to special education students and no provision for IEPs for gifted children

was in place. With this information in hand, we pressed on with what we knew we wanted to do for our own children, and we began to prepare a formal proposal.

It was necessary to first gain an understanding of the provisions within the California Education Code that would allow parents to administer IEPs to their own gifted children. The Deputy General Counsel for the California Department of Education informed us that our proposal could come under the

Independent Study clause (Education Code Section 51745 and following; Title 5 of the California Code of Regulations, Section 11700 and following).

The Counsel’s e-mail memo to us stated:

Independent study is an alternative to classroom instruction. It allows students to carry on their education outside the classroom based on a written agreement. The agreements include requirements consistent with the local school district’s course of study, and general supervision of each pupil’s independent study by a credentialed employee of the school district in which the child is enrolled. A child may pursue their (sic) studies through this alternative full-time or part-time, depending on the school district’s policies, the child’s interests/needs and certainly, abilities. A district should assess the child to determine whether independent study would be workable for the child and his or her situation. If the child would be able

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to achieve as well or better, then the child would be a candidate for independent study. Talk with your district about the possibility.

BUILDING A CASE FOR A PROPOSAL

This meant that the opportunity for such a proposal lay in the hands of our own school district. With the help of friend and mentor, Dr. Robin Schader at the National Research Center for the Gifted and Talented (NRC/GT), as well as valuable resources from NRC/GT and CAG (and a good credit card!), I began the process of drafting an Individualized Learning Program (ILP—to distinguish it from an IEP). I depended a great deal on NRC/GT resources and several of Renzulli's books. Much like an IEP, the ILP enabled me to pursue a "student with special needs" proposal for our gifted children. Without it, it would have been more difficult for the district to justify my part-time home-school request.

It was also essential that I had a good working relationship with our children's teachers, principal, and our superintendent. As Site Council President, PTA board member, and member of the district Parent Advisory Committee, I was able to have regular communication with these people, all of whom were critical to the process.

I first approached our daughters' teachers casually about the matter. Without boring or overwhelming them with details, I asked for their input on the idea. We determined that since Fridays were largely review days with little new material presented in class, they would be good days for home enrichment. Upon receiving their input and support, I proceeded to speak to the principal, and eventually the superintendent. We then contacted individuals at the county education

office who were well-versed in education code provisions.

DISTRICT CONCERNS

Our district had legitimate concerns about a proposal such as ours. They included:

- parents might not adequately implement an ILP once drawn up and approved
- parents might not be willing to learn gifted education methodology before attempting to teach gifted children at home
- there might be a flood of requests for the option and the district needed time to work through a pilot program first
- prior approval of teachers, principal, and superintendent was necessary to assure curriculum compacting for our children Monday through Thursday.

As a result, assurances of parent responsibilities and approval of interested parties were written into the proposal. (Note: parents need not be professional educators to provide suitable at-home enrichment for their gifted children. Parents merely need to do some homework and use the wealth of resources available to us to do so!)

Dr. Schader stressed the importance of not "steam rolling" anyone with our idea. We found the gentle persuasion approach absolutely necessary in maintaining dialogue with the necessary parties. It was also critical that I tempered my occasional overenthusiasm and newly acquired knowledge of these matters in our discussions.

As simple as the request sounds, it took some tenacity in getting it approved. Timing was also an important factor. To my good fortune, the time was now ripe in our district for such an idea because our district homeschool charter had just been put into place and other progressive programs had also been recently approved. The entire process took approximately two years of self-education, as well as a great deal of drafting, writing, and

rewriting of this advocacy proposal.

PUTTING THE PLAN INTO ACTION

The ILP is employed much like any homeschool operation. The advantage to this is that a parent can rely on the school to provide basic state-mandated instruction; what is taught at home is largely driven by student interest. Depending on one's preferences, a parent can enrich that basic content or present something entirely separate to their children. For example, while our daughters were learning about Africa in school, we pursued a study of "Inventions" at home, something our daughters were very interested in. Naturally it had to be modified for our 5-year-old and our 7-year-old.

Our plan currently falls under our district's Independent Study/Homeschool Charter umbrella, overseen by our Director of Independent Studies—the "credentialed employee" under whom we operate. The proposal is currently a pilot program for this school year; the results will then be reviewed by the superintendent, and with his approval, it will be presented to our local school board; we hope it will then be offered to other parents of gifted children within this district for the next school year.

To say that this is a rich experience for our family would be an understatement. We are able to apply the ideas from CAG conferences and NRC/GT research results to our daughters' homeschooling experience. This has truly excited them about learning. Our children express enjoyment for their home-school days while also benefiting from the special experiences of their public school classrooms. They are pursuing learning at a level matching their abilities and interests. What a joy this has been for us as parents! ■

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