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Information Sheet 18

Gifted and Learning-Disabled: The Paradox

By Mary Cloran*

Over the past two decades the contradiction of giftedness and learning disabilities occurring in the same individual has been widely acknowledged.

You only have to look at history to see how some of the world's greatest achievers demonstrated that giftedness can co-exist with a learning disability.

Albert Einstein did not speak until he was three years old and his difficulties with spelling and writing persisted until adulthood. Thomas Edison, Auguste Rodin, George Patton, Hans Christian Anderson and Nelson Rockefeller are amongst other eminent people who, despite their learning disabilities, achieved fame and fortune.

While their success stories are proof that giftedness can triumph over the handicap of a learning disability, how many gifted people have lived out lives of frustration, humiliation and underachievement having never been assisted or encouraged to realise their high potential?

The majority of students who are gifted and learning-disabled are found in the regular classroom where their giftedness and learning disabilities are usually 'invisible'. It becomes the responsibility of the classroom teacher supported by specialist personnel to understand, recognise and provide appropriately for these vulnerable students.

Teachers need to have a broad understanding of giftedness and learning disabilities, an extensive range of identification measures and a high level of competence in modifying the curriculum and teaching strategies to meet the unique needs of these students.

Gifted Learning Disabled Defined

The concept of learning disabilities and giftedness occurring in the same child is becoming more widely accepted. Van Tassell-Baska defines the student who is gifted and learning disabled (hereafter GLD) as one who functions at a high intellectual level but who has academic and processing difficulties.

Such difficulties may involve memory or perception and lead to weaknesses in reading, writing and/or mathematics.

Students who are gifted and learning disabled are often categorised into three groups.

The first group includes those who have been identified as gifted but who also experience subtle difficulties in school. These difficulties may increase as they progress through school leading to a widening gap between their perceived potential and actual performance.

These students may perplex their teachers by their exceptional verbal abilities and the poor quality of their written work. The reasons for their underachievement are often attributed to lack of motivation, laziness or poor self-esteem and not to an underlying learning difficulty.

Learning problems in this group may go undetected unless these students fall so far behind their class peers that their academic difficulties are investigated. Learning difficulties are not the only cause of underachievement but the possibility needs to be considered when there is a discrepancy between potential and performance.

The second and perhaps largest group of GLD students are those whose giftedness and disabilities will probably remain unnoticed throughout their school life.

These are students whose abilities and disabilities 'mask' each other and they use their high intellectual ability to compensate sufficiently for their weaknesses to perform at grade level. Their average performances ensure they are ineligible for special programs and they largely go unrecognised and underachieve for much of their school life.

Learning Links is a non-profit charity assisting children who have difficulty learning and their families.

We raise funds to help children from birth to 18 years by offering a range of services including the following.

Early Childhood Services for children from birth to six years.

- Early childhood intervention and support for very young children.
- An inclusive preschool for children with and without special needs.
- An assessment and consultancy service for families who are concerned about their young child's development.
- Specialist early childhood teaching and therapy.

School Age Services for children from Kindergarten to Year 12 who have low support needs.

- Comprehensive assessments.
- Small group tuition and therapy.
- Occupational and speech therapy programs combining specialist education services and therapy.
- Outreach programs.
- The Ronald McDonald Learning Program for seriously ill children and the Reading for Life Program for children falling behind in their reading.

Family Services helping and supporting families and health professionals.

- Centre and home-based family counselling.
- Parenting Programs and groups for families.
- Case Management Services.

Professional Development for teachers and health professionals.

Presentations, workshops and advice on identifying and helping children with learning difficulties, learning disabilities and developmental delays.

Learning Links has branches in six Sydney locations at Peakhurst, Penshurst, Fairfield, Miller, Dee Why and Randwick. We also offer some services to children in country NSW, the ACT, Victoria and New Zealand. A complete list of branch locations and contact numbers is on the back cover.



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The exception to this appears to be when 'hidden' talents are fostered by a classroom teacher who has a creative approach to learning and uses non-traditional teaching methods.

The third group of GLD students are those whose learning disabilities are severe enough for them to have been identified as learning disabled – noticed for what they cannot do, rather than for any demonstrated talent.

In this case the attention of teachers and parents is often so focussed on the disability that any exceptional abilities are in danger of being overlooked. These students are regarded as most 'at risk' as they often feel inadequate because of the emphasis placed on their disability.

The prevalence of giftedness among the population with learning disabilities may exceed expectations. In a study examining the traits of GLD students as many as 33% also had superior intellectual abilities.

Visual-spatial ability

Visual-spatial ability is the capacity to put the world together inside one's head so that they understand precisely how all things relate to all others.

Research at the Gifted Child Development Center in Denver found that a substantial portion of gifted students exhibit extraordinary visual-spatial abilities.

Students with strong visual-spatial ability learn by visualising the relationships between the parts and putting these together inside their head to form the whole picture. They arrive at correct answers without being able to explain the steps.

They excel at problem solving, forming concepts and manipulating abstract ideas. Many are late bloomers.

Spatial abilities also underlie creativity and mathematical talent.

Some students with highly developed spatial abilities attributed to right brain function have weaknesses at sequential learning attributed to left brain function. They may have many of the developmental characteristics of gifted students and show high levels of creativity, excel at abstract reasoning and understand extremely complex materials but they fail to master the sequential tasks involved in reading, spelling, writing and simple calculations.

Identifying students who are gifted and learning-disabled

Children who are both gifted and learning-disabled may never have both exceptionalities identified.

Some may have their giftedness or disabilities diagnosed, but for the majority their abilities and disabilities will remain 'invisible'.

Researchers have attempted to identify these students by a number of methods including:

1. analysing the score patterns of GLD students on the Weschler Intelligence Scale for Children,
2. applying the analysis to the three different groups of GLD students as defined above,
3. analysing the score patterns of GLD visual-spatial learners, and
4. using multi-method evaluation procedures.

A multi-dimensional approach to identify the strengths and weaknesses of GLD students is regarded as more likely to detect giftedness and disabilities than the use of one measure such as an IQ or achievement test.

The use of multiple measures should not mean 'multiple hurdles' for students to overcome. Rather than penalising students, a carefully selected combination of identification procedures will provide more opportunities for strengths and weaknesses to emerge.

Obstacles to identification

There are three obstacles to identifying GLD students in the regular classroom.

The first is the myth held by many teachers that gifted students are gifted in all developmental areas.

Many teachers still assume that the gifted student is a mature, well-organised, highly motivated learner who excels in all areas of academic endeavour. To many teachers this is incompatible with the student who is struggling with reading, writing and maths.

Secondly, traditional class practices emphasise lower levels of learning such as remembering facts and basic comprehension skills. This learning environment does not present opportunities for the student who has a superior capacity for analytical reasoning and creative problem solving but difficulties in sequencing and memorising.

Unfortunately the organisation of primary schools focuses mainly on the development of linguistic and logical-mathematical skills. The concept of intelligence includes at least another five areas: musical, spatial, bodily-kinaesthetic, social-interpersonal, and emotional-intrapersonal intelligences. Many GLD students have strengths in these non-verbal areas and learning experiences that foster their development will give them an opportunity to demonstrate their abilities.

The third obstacle to identifying GLD students is the limited information the class teacher has on individual students and the consequent lack of understanding of their learning characteristics and needs.

Class teachers need to be given training and assistance in how to provide learning experiences that will cultivate students' gifts and how to observe and identify behaviours that indicate both giftedness and learning difficulties.

While some GLD students with subtle learning disabilities may be found in gifted programs, the majority will be in mainstream classrooms with the severely learning disabled receiving some form of remedial intervention. This places the responsibility on the classroom teacher to recognise and accommodate the needs of these students.

Classroom, special education and gifted reference teachers should be trained to develop:

1. an understanding and acceptance of the occurrence of two exceptionalities existing in the one student;
2. a familiarity with and confidence in using an extensive range of identification measures;
3. strategies for modifying the curriculum to meet the needs of all students including those gifted students with learning difficulties; and
4. counselling strategies to assist GLD students with social and emotional difficulties.

This minority group of "at risk" students will benefit ultimately in a learning environment that provides enrichment opportunities for all students in areas not typically included in traditional classroom programs. Such an environment will enable giftedness to emerge.

Richard and his mother Donna

Richard is now 10 years old and attended Learning Links from Term 4 last year until the end of Term 3 2000. His mother Donna explains the difficulties Richard was having at school.

Richard was in Year 1 when a Psychometric Assessment showed above average results in most areas. Despite such good results Richard was struggling with reading at school.

"He didn't pick up on reading and was way behind the class average at the end of Kindergarten," said his mum Donna.

"He was not recognising sight words, but I knew he was quite bright."

Richard was included in the school's reading tutor program in an effort to help him, but still wasn't progressing very well. His results in the Year 3 Basic Skills test were very poor.

"After the Basic Skills Test result he was assessed by Learning Links and they found he was two years and ten months behind in his reading," said Donna.

"He started at Learning Links with the Lindamood program in Term 4 last year. Within 12 months Richard had picked up the three years he was behind. His comprehension is now on par and his reading rate is a bit slow, but that's through lack of practice. He is still a bit reluctant to read, a hang over from his problems.

"It has really helped his self-esteem and his behaviour is also better, not that it was a big problem. He's a lot more confident.

"He's not scared to put his hand up in class now and does his homework by himself."

Donna is grateful that Richard received help and the improvement has come so quickly. "It was very hard knowing that his IQ assessment was above average but he couldn't seem to grasp something as basic as reading. I now know this is a common problem, but it's still very worrying when it's your child who is struggling at school.

"His teachers at school are very pleased with his progress and his overall attitude to school has improved dramatically."



Early and continuous identification

Identification and appropriate intervention for students who are gifted and learning disabled should begin as early as possible to prevent serious emotional and behavioural problems associated with failure.

Ideally, identifying giftedness and learning problems should be a continuous process throughout the school years as a student's abilities and needs change.

Once teachers have acquired knowledge of behaviours and how to observe them, they will be more successful in identifying 'hidden' gifts and disabilities in the same student. Unevenness of performance over various areas should alert teachers to probe further and seek the advice of specialists on staff.

School counsellors/psychologists may have information about the behaviour of a GLD student during the administration of the WISC III or equivalent test. These students frequently impress the examiner with the depth of their knowledge about particular subjects and their ability to think in creative ways.

Reading specialists, special education teachers and gifted program reference teachers are all important resource personnel to assist the class teacher in identifying these students.

The use of behavioural checklists as part of the identification process is also common. Monitoring both positive and negative behaviours assists in identifying gifted underachievers as well as outstanding ability in visual, spatial and dramatic expression.

Parents can be the best source of information about their children. They can provide biographical data related to the child's special interests outside school that may indicate giftedness not readily identified in the classroom.

Information collected from student nominations and interest surveys could also highlight extra curricula activities and hobbies that may indicate advanced thinking and creative ability. Peers can also be extremely perceptive in identifying outstanding ability in classmates and may provide otherwise unnoticed information.

Michael and his mother Molly

Michael is now 16 and starting Year 11. He was diagnosed with learning problems in Year 1.

"We were lucky it was identified early," said his mother Molly. "A teacher was sensitive enough to recognise that he was bright, but having problems with reading and spelling. His handwriting was abysmal, even for Year 1."

A Psychometric Assessment showed Michael had a very high IQ but his reading age was low. He also had poor phonological skills, was not picking up sounds and had difficulty expressing himself on paper.

"A speech pathologist helped him with phonological skills, reading and structuring language," said Molly, "while an occupational therapist helped him with handwriting and fine motor coordination.

"He was also having attention problems and a paediatrician prescribed Ritalin, but it had a terrible effect on Michael and we stopped it. Eventually we got a second opinion and have had good support.

"He has been on dexamphetamine for the last five years and this helped him over the first years in high school. It is really noticeable when he doesn't take it."

Michael's attention problems have improved with maturity but he still has some trouble organising himself and sequencing information in written work.

"He had a bit of help at school but most has come from outside. He didn't want to be pulled out of class at school to go to a different teacher," recalled Molly.

"His self-esteem plummeted and has never really recovered. He knew he was clever and had great story writing ideas but he couldn't get them down on paper. The kids kept teasing him."

Outside school, Michael has been involved in the Charles Sturt Gifted Program and programs through the Australian Museum Society.

"He was mad on Natural History," said Molly. "It's difficult to find things that cater for him but we've provided lots of things at home. Everything that has happened to help him is because we made it happen.

"School hasn't catered for Michael, although he blossomed under a teacher he had in Year 5. He was included in a gifted class in Year 6, but he had problems because he couldn't produce the written work even though he was capable verbally.

"He also went into an extension class for two years, but having to do the reading and retain everything was hard work because of his attention problems. Gifted programs don't cater for children who have learning problems.

"The school system has failed him because now he wants to leave," said Molly.

"A lot of teachers can't handle gifted children with learning problems. Schools find it hard to reconcile a child who is bright and has learning difficulties because the child is erratic.

"There is a lack of support and understanding. We've been lucky to find the resources and be able to pay for them. We're also lucky Michael's problems were identified early.

"Programs for gifted children don't cater for children who are gifted and learning disabled. They are caught between two baskets and don't fall into either. They constantly underachieve.

"For Michael it's like being a Maserati Sports Car with a fuel blockage – he never quite makes it."



Formal Assessment of Students who are Gifted and Learning-Disabled

Data gathered from formal assessment measures can be used to build up a comprehensive profile of GLD students.

Formal assessments can include individual/group intelligence and achievement tests, competitions, and tests of creativity. Psychometric instruments such as the Wechsler Pre-school and Primary Scale of Intelligence-Revised (WPPSI-R), the WISC III and the Stanford-Binet (Form L-M) can identify both outstanding strengths and weaknesses in sub-test scores, rather than the full-scale score.

Gifted students with learning disabilities may find their scores depressed on standardised achievement tests. Students with reading, writing, perceptual and processing difficulties are at a great disadvantage when achievement tests are timed and/or presented in the written form.

If a student has had a psychometric assessment, any discrepancy between IQ and achievement test scores (potential and performance) should be further investigated.

Two other tests of aptitude that can be used in the school to screen for giftedness are the Standard Progressive Matrices to assess non-verbal ability and identify mathematically gifted students and the Slosson Intelligence Test (SIT-R) to screen for verbal precocity.

Competitions such as the Australian School Science, English, Mathematics and Computer Studies Competitions and the Maths Olympiad and Future Problem-Solving Contests can identify students gifted in specific areas. Unfortunately some mathematically GLD students may do poorly in competitions that depend on speed and accuracy and shine in other competitions such as the Maths Olympiad that allows students to demonstrate more creativity.

Tests of creativity may provide valuable information on learning, thinking and problem-solving abilities that cannot be assessed using typical achievement and aptitude instruments. These tests have less reliance on reading, spelling and writing proficiency than most and can be useful in identifying students with outstanding divergent thinking abilities.

Implications for classroom practice

The majority of GLD students will remain unidentified throughout their school life.

Frustrated with their unrewarded attempts at learning, many GLD students may become unco-operative, disruptive and anti-social as they struggle to protect their fragile egos from a daily battering. Failure to meet the needs of these students means that for some their talents may never be developed, while others whose self-esteem has not suffered unduly may realise their potential in adulthood.

The key to developing the strengths of these students lies in a learning environment that is committed to recognising, accommodating and valuing individual differences. This is not the traditional primary classroom setting, which places priority on developing the linguistic talents of all students.

For the gifted child with a disability in the area of reading and writing, it is all but impossible to express his/her talent in such a restrictive learning environment.

The creative teacher in a supportive, flexible learning environment that facilitates the development of talent will:

1. provide for multiple intelligences and the preferred learning style of all students;
2. present information using a multi-sensory approach;
3. offer a challenging curriculum;
4. accept and value alternate ways of receiving and producing information;
5. incorporate social skills training;
6. teach compensatory strategies according to individual need;
7. focus on the students' strengths rather than their weaknesses; and
8. work collaboratively with specialist teachers and parents.

This learning environment is the ideal and far removed from the reality of most educational environments where teachers teach as they were taught. Most teachers will require continuous support to create a flexible learning environment that values and supports individual differences.

There is a great need for sustained teacher training and development, high quality pre-service training, acknowledgment and support of the Principal and school executive and Special Education Programs that include a compulsory component on GLD students.

Specialist teachers could work collaboratively with class teachers in identifying strengths and weaknesses in students and in developing, implementing and evaluating unified programs.

The provision of a creative, flexible and supportive learning environment where diversity is celebrated will benefit all students as well as give gifted students with learning difficulties every opportunity to create, learn and develop their potential.



Strategies for Teaching Students who are Gifted and Learning-Disabled

There is no single program or intervention for meeting the needs of students who are gifted and learning-disabled (GLD students) in the classroom.

Teachers can use a variety of strategies such as gifted provisions, remediation, classroom modifications, compensatory strategies and technology, strategies for the visual-spatial GLD students and counselling. This article discusses the benefits and suitability of the different approaches.

Gifted Provisions

Students who are gifted and learning-disabled need:

1. extension/accelerated programming in their areas of strength;
2. developmental instruction in subjects where they demonstrate average growth; and
3. remediation and compensatory instruction for their disabilities.

The old adage “nothing succeeds like success” should be kept in mind for these students.

More gains are evident when intervention focuses on the gift rather than the disability. Students who are gifted and learning-disabled who have not had opportunities to demonstrate their gifts at school generally become disinterested in and frustrated with most learning experiences.

Building on strengths is easier if a program is flexible and individualised and students are able to select learning experiences that are meaningful and relevant to their interests and level of achievement. For GLD students with strengths in non-academic areas, extra-curricular activities should be viewed as an integral part of their education as success in their area(s) of strength enhances confidence, competence and self-esteem.

Strategies that are appropriate for all gifted learners can be used with GLD students in their area(s) of strength. They require high level instruction that is enriched, accelerated, integrated and hands-on with activities that involve independent study, research and problem solving.

Subject acceleration can support a GLD student who is gifted in a specific area such as mathematics.

The strategies, content and methodology of an advanced class will enhance the student’s specific talent as well as nurture their motivation and self-esteem.

Pull-out programs such as the School-wide Enrichment Model have also proven effective because they give these students access to the talent pool, educational experiences that evolve from their interests and strengths, and encourage creative productivity.

Another part-time program that has been adapted for students who are gifted and learning-disabled is the Betts’ Autonomous Learner Model that offers enrichment in an environment that supports self-advocacy.

The use of mentors from the general community is frequently advocated for gifted students to supplement educational experiences in particular areas of expertise. Similarly, GLD adults should be sought out as mentors for students who are gifted and learning-disabled. Mentoring experiences with successful adults can lend credibility to their status and provide young, struggling, frustrated gifted students with hope for their own futures.

Remediation

The use of remediation should be examined carefully for students who are gifted and learning-disabled. Strategies and approaches to remediation and enrichment are opposite and GLD students are frustrated by remedial approaches that emphasise drill, repetition and rote learning of isolated facts.

Remediation strategies typically break tasks down into manageable components that ensure success for students. This breakdown of basic skills may not be appropriate for remediating the learning difficulties experienced by gifted students who are motivated by successful accomplishment of tasks they find meaningful and that meet the high internal standards set by such students.

Students who receive programs only for their learning disabilities have been found to have lower self-esteem than those who receive either a combination of gifted and special education or gifted only.

When the focus is on remediation, students may not have the opportunity for higher levels of thinking and interaction and demonstration of their gifted behaviour. As both strengths and weaknesses must be considered when programming for GLD students, including both gifted and special education increases the chances of the student receiving programs and services that are multi-dimensional and tailored to meet their individual needs.

Classroom Modifications

A classroom environment that nurtures, values and respects individual differences will best meet the needs of GLD students.

These students do not want a less challenging curriculum but alternate ways to receive and produce information. The challenge for the class teacher is to modify enrichment activities without ‘watering them down’ to accommodate gifted students in their areas of difficulty.

A teacher can acknowledge and provide for multiple intelligences and preferred learning styles of all students and by presenting information using a multi-sensory approach that includes auditory, visual and tactile-kinaesthetic input.

Teachers of students who are gifted and learning-disabled must allow them to present information in a manner best suited to their strengths. This may involve taking the emphasis off written products for students who have disabilities in reading, writing and spelling and encouraging and valuing the presentation of information in alternate ways.

Co-operative learning structures within the classroom can also benefit students who are gifted and learning-disabled as they allow them to assume leadership in areas of strength and to gain assistance from peers in areas of weakness.

The physical placement of GLD students in the classroom needs careful consideration. Seating should be close to the teacher and in a quiet area of the classroom where distractions are fewest.

To lessen the stress and frustration resulting from the learning disability, class teachers can further support these students by showing flexibility in regard to deadlines for assignments and projects. Finally, a structured social skills training program is essential for GLD students whose feelings of frustration and inadequacy can lead to problems in making and keeping friends, maintaining harmonious family relationships, relating to teachers and low self-esteem.

Compensatory Strategies and Technology

As GLD students will always have their learning disability, there is a need to teach them compensatory skills. The strategies taught will depend on the individual needs of students.

Those with sequencing difficulties can be taught brainstorming and mindmapping strategies as a means of generating overviews and organising written work. Students with poor organisational skills will require specific instruction in time management strategies to help them keep track of personal belongings and set priorities and goals. The use of visualisation techniques, mnemonics and calculators will benefit students with short-term memory deficits. Books on cassettes and content outlines will assist reading-disabled gifted students.

The rapid growth of technology over the past decade has enormous potential for students who are gifted and learning-disabled and can provide them with assistance in these areas of weakness and enrichment in areas of strength.

These students need to be taught word processing skills so that they can provide written assignments more easily and be able to take pride in the presentation of their work. They also require computer literacy to compensate for problems with handwriting, creative writing and spelling. Preventing these students from using word processing is like prohibiting blind children from using texts printed in Braille.

Strategies for the visual-spatial gifted learning-disabled student

Most of the research on gifted learning disabled visual-spatial learners has been carried out by Linda Silverman at the Gifted Child Development Center in Colorado, Ohio, USA.

Silverman describes these students as having outstanding visual-spatial abilities and impaired auditory sequencing skills. This combination leads to a mismatch between the student's learning style and the traditional classroom where the curriculum, workbooks, teaching methods and most of the teachers are sequential.

Gifted learning-disabled visual-spatial learners thrive on complexity.

They love difficult puzzles, excel at maths analysis, understand complex relations and systems, have high abstract reasoning ability and keen visual memory and are usually creative and imaginative. Their weaknesses are evident in tasks related to sequential processing. They may be poor at reading, spelling, phonics, calculations and the memorisation of facts. In class they may appear disorganised and inattentive. They perform poorly on timed tasks and dislike any form of drill and repetition.

An understanding of the spatial learning style is crucial if teachers are to re-assess their expectations and teaching methods for these students. Visual-spatial GLD students need a holistic approach to learning.

They need to be introduced to the 'big picture' at the beginning of any instruction in order to understand how the parts relate to the whole. Once they understand the basic concept, their learning is relatively permanent and there is no need for repetition and practice.

Silverman recommends a number of teaching strategies and adaptive techniques to assist classroom teachers in modifying instruction and tasks for these students.

These include:

- presenting information visually as do teachers of the deaf;
- allowing students to explore more advanced concepts before they have mastered easier material;
- telling students the goal of the lesson first so they can link the parts of the instruction with the whole;
- using discovery learning strategies when possible;
- teaching them visualisation techniques to assist memory;
- using a sight-word rather than a phonic approach to the teaching of reading; and

- giving them access to information technology as early as possible.

If the classroom instruction is more consistent with the learning style of spatially oriented learners, GLD students will be assisted to compensate for sequential weaknesses and will achieve success in the classroom.

Counselling

Students who are confronted by repeated failure in daily academic tasks experience a variety of negative emotions towards school achievement.

The major impact of the dual exceptionality is on self-esteem.

GLD students show symptoms of stress, discouragement, anxiety, frustration, rejection, isolation, powerlessness and inadequacy. When these feelings remain unexpressed for long periods of time they can result in aggressive, disruptive and anti-social behaviour both at home and school.

While the behaviour of some frustrated GLD students may improve with the provision of a more challenging educational environment, entrenched negative attitudes and behaviours must be addressed before a change in academic achievement can be expected.

GLD students benefit from either group or individual counselling. Group counselling allows students to see that others share similar problems. It also provides a good forum for learning and practising social skills that often pose particular difficulties for these students.

Some students such as those who are emotionally traumatised, very aggressive, shy, or withdrawn may need individual counselling prior to group participation. Parents, families and teachers may also need counselling to help them understand the characteristics and needs of their children and share their own feelings of frustration and helplessness.

In addition to addressing the social and emotional needs of students, counselling can also be extended to include advice on subject selection and electives, extra-curricular activities and post-secondary school options.

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