

GRC Pioneers a Healthy Balance with Electronic Technology

Gifted Resource Council has long been ahead of the curve, thanks to the ongoing input of some of the most effective teachers of gifted students in St. Louis. Beginning almost a generation ago, GRC offered as many as four different classes during the Winter 1990 Learning Lab aimed at unlocking the power of the computer. During the later 2000s GRC pioneered the use of the LEGO MINDSTORMS NXT robotics program in both GRC's Summer Academies and Learning Lab classes. Currently – thanks to the wonderful facilities of Crossroads College Preparatory School and Wydown Middle School – GRC teachers are able to utilize the latest technologies, including SMART Boards in every classroom, to bring up-to-date images and knowledge to children.

On the other hand, GRC bans student use of cell phones and electronic games from its Summer Academies. While embracing the use of technology to advance learning, all GRC courses are structured to promote face-to-face interaction and teamwork. “We see technology as a tool, not an obsession or end in itself,” said Executive Director Sue Flesch.

Bob Coulter, Ed.D., long-term member of the GRC Board and nationally recognized expert in the use of educational technology, presented a Parenting Class during GRC's Fall 2012 Learning Lab on the topic of “No Time for Homework: I'm Too Busy Playing My Video Games!” Dr. Coulter is Director of the Litzsinger Road Ecology Center, managed by the Missouri Botanical Garden. He also leads three National Science Foundation (NSF) grants in partnership with MIT to build children's civic capacity through game-based learning. His workshop offered parents suggestions about how to help students “balance their electronic lives,” he said. “What are they really learning? How can we sort out the truth about game-based learning and guide young people toward good, life-affirming choices?”

Given the recent explosion of electronic technology, at no time has helping students achieve a healthy balance

been more important. It seems hard to believe that the first iPhone had not been launched when President Obama began campaigning for his first term as president. And now? iPhone5 is selling faster than stores can stock it.

People's attitudes have changed almost as rapidly.

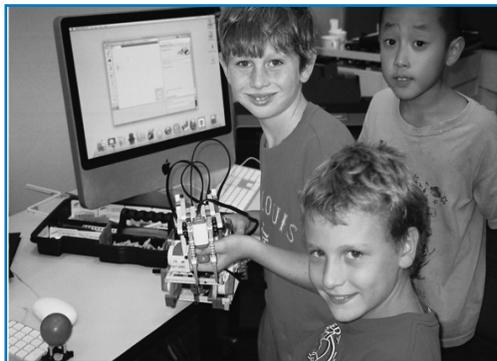
Wanting only the best for their grandchildren, grandparents are giving two-year-olds their personal iPads and delighting in how the child entertains herself in isolation rather than engaging in activities that promote creativity, healthy play and interaction with others. Is having a high-tech babysitter a good thing for preschoolers? Perhaps it's too much of a good thing. The American Academy of Pediatrics has recently advised that children

spend no more than two hours per day in “screen time” activities.

New Technology, New Values—and New Challenges

mLearning and other trends promote online learning. Schools offer online courses. Some teachers promote mLearning using mobile learning devices as a way to personalize learning for gifted students and promote self-direction and self-reliance. There are many cost saving and educational advantages in these approaches, and parents should help their child take advantage of them—when appropriate. At the same time, a child's use of mLearning needs to be monitored and moderated according to the child's other involvement with the Internet and mobile technology. (For more about mLearning, see the fall 2012 GAMbit.)

GRC computer-based classes enhance the learning process. Dr. Coulter sees GRC computer-based classes as “a great opportunity to work with interesting, motivated kids without the artificial boundaries that standards and testing impose. We can just have a great time learning together. Computers are simply an enhancement to that



Dialogue with the Director

The theme for this issue of GRC's *mindwonders* is technology and its appropriate use. Why, might you ask, would we want to spend almost an entire issue on this topic? Simply because I believe that it is imperative that we as parents and educators pay attention to the growing use – and potential for abuse – that technology offers us as we live in the 21st century.

The use of technology – in the form of e-mails at work and at home, texting and talking on our iPhones, interrupting our dinner hour and driving time – permeates our lives. Skyping, Twittering, Facebooking are all amazing advances as a result of the revolution in technology. We are literally being transformed by the ease of communicating with friends and coworkers in ways that were unimaginable a mere decade ago.

This amazing use of technology is good in many ways. It has produced the ability to communicate with people around the world in almost instantaneous time. But does it come with unintended costs? The increasing difficulty that many people recognize (perhaps subliminally) in their ability to communicate effectively face-to-face. And for children, the unlearned ability to recognize and respond to each other's facial expressions and body language.

Gifted Resource Council has for many years encouraged teachers to assist gifted young people in our programs in their abilities to interact positively with each other. We have promoted the growth of cooperation, student interaction and teamwork. Learning to recognize personal as well as academic strengths is an important goal of GRC programs.

Indeed, this spring for GRC's Creative Convention (offered for second and third grade students from throughout the metropolitan area), we will be encouraging children to grow in their abilities to recognize each other's facial expressions – and more. As part of our planning process for this exciting portion of GRC's Academic Challenge Cup competitions, a group of devoted adult volunteers creates new and unique challenges each year that will be presented to the students.

One of GRC's long-standing volunteers, Elaine Unell, has written a poem that sets the stage for Gifted Resource Council's 2013 Creative Convention. The message of this poem is so concise and appropriate that I feel compelled to share it with you. Enjoy!

Susan C. Flesch



Sue Flesch, GRC executive director

“Face Look”

by Elaine Unell

Can you see me? I'm right next to you.
Do you know what I think? How I feel?
Can you tell by my eyes if I have a surprise?
You see... I'm a person; I'm real!

Can you see if I smile
Or if I frown?
Are you looking at ME,
Or do you only look down?

Ipods and cell phones have entered our lives.
They're fun and helpful too.
But, while they are good, do you think they should
Take me away from you?

So, while we love
Our little toys,
Let's not forget
Our face to face joys!

Speak to me... let's play and laugh.
Let's get together somehow.
I really want to be with YOU!
Can you hear me now?

24 Years and Counting: Extraordinary Volunteer Continues to Serve Linda Sher's commitment and skills positively impact GRC

Linda Sher has served as a volunteer in various capacities for GRC since 1988. For the past 21 years she has served as graphic designer and production artist for all GRC newsletters and program brochures. Twice a year she produces GRC's newsletter, *mindwonders*, twice a year she produces the Learning Lab brochure, and once a year she does GRC's Summer Academies brochure. These five tasks take countless hours each year and save GRC many thousands of dollars that can be used to provide more program activities for children.

"Linda has provided a huge service to GRC by her extraordinary commitment to helping us generate five important printings a year over the past 21 years," said Executive Director Susan Flesch. "She's continually upgraded her professional skills as technology has changed over the years and has never failed to finish well ahead of deadlines. I know I can always count on her."

First Involvement: Academic Challenge Cup

Linda initially got involved with GRC as a volunteer for Academic Challenge Cup (ACC) in 1988, 24 years ago. When it appeared the 5-year-old program would be discontinued because GRC lacked the funds to adequately staff it, Linda stepped up and volunteered to serve as volunteer coordinator of the program from 1989-1991. As coordinator, Linda helped to establish it as a well-respected, highly visible and well attended community-wide program.

This laid the ground work for the dramatic expansion it took when other volunteers, Tom Campbell and Chris Dadian, had the idea of using a database for routing players to tables, for pre-printing table and player sheets, and for entry of the student results to assist in the scoring and tallies. Tom and Chris created the programs that made this possible. This enabled ACC to expand from 30 teams to more than 300. "Had Linda not saved Academic Challenge Cup, none of this dramatic expansion would have been possible," Flesch said.

"ACC is a very special part of GRC and has long-lasting impact on children who prepare for months to master the advanced language, math and creative skills the games require," Sher said. "It's very satisfying to know that I was instrumental in getting it going again. I've gone through quite an evolution with ACC. First, the work to recreate it. Then, facilitating my own children and their classmates to participate. Following this, I helped students at other elementary schools within our district to participate. Those students have now graduated from college! And it's the gift that keeps on giving as I hear about children of some of my younger friends who are currently enjoying ACC."

Governance & Philanthropic Support

Linda also served on the GRC Board of Directors for four years, from 1990 to 1993. Her board service came at a crucial time as the young organization founded in 1983 was reassessing its initial successes and gearing up to have a long-term impact on the community.

More recently, Linda was instrumental in GRC receiving financial support from Sign of the Arrow, a philanthropic retail needlepoint and gift shop, founded by the St. Louis Alumnae Club of Pi Beta Phi Fraternity. Since its founding in 1966, Sign of the Arrow (www.signofthearrow.com) has donated more than \$3.45 million to charities like Gifted Resource Council. Linda is an active volunteer with the organization.

Volunteer as Advocate for GRC

"I mention GRC to anyone who I think could benefit from its programs and services," Linda explained. "It's difficult for schools to offer quality programs for gifted children. This becomes more and more true as budget cuts occur. GRC is a tremendous resource to help fill this gap for area students who need it. In addition to wonderful programs, it offers gifted students the rare opportunity to be with others like themselves. And the programs for parents are great too!"

What would she say to parents considering enrolling a child in a GRC program? "Give it a try and see how your child likes it. GRC is a rare, community gem."



Linda Sher

Sustained Impact

"No one has had greater impact as a volunteer in such a variety of ways over such a sustained period of time as Linda Sher," said Flesch. "Although much of her work is behind the scenes, it's invaluable. I am extremely grateful for all that she has done and continues to do to help GRC thrive. Her services have helped keep our tuition lower and made it possible for many more children to benefit from GRC's hands-on, engaging programs."

"It is extremely satisfying to know that I can impact needy students in some small way," Linda offered. "I consider gifted learners as those with special needs. It's just that it's the kind of need that frequently doesn't get met in the traditional school setting."

Parents Ask: How can we help our gifted child learn to use, but not misuse electronic technology?

by Dennis O'Brien

Teachers and savvy parents are increasingly recognizing that electronic technology offers both great benefits and potential problems for gifted children, depending on the choices they make. The benefits seem obvious; the potential problems, not so much. Smart phones and iPads, as well as computers, the Internet and social media provide instant access to information and contact with others. This can expand children's capacity to acquire information and stay in touch with friends. All good.

But teachers also find that technology is often so overused and misused that even bright students are not learning how to spell, use correct grammar, punctuate, write complex sentences or develop their ability to formulate and articulate complex analytical thoughts. For example, texting, while helping children communicate rapidly in jury-rigged shorthand, also compromises their ability to acquire important writing skills. Likewise spellcheck and grammar check enable students to write without learning essential language skills or how to express nuanced ideas. And who needs to know basic math when a smart phone will compute for you?

In addition to undermining academic growth, misuse of technology can also be a barrier to emotional and social development. Heading the list are texting, Facebook and Instant Messaging (IMing). When these become the primary way of communicating—as they are for many children—children are deprived of the opportunity to learn how people are really feeling by reading verbal and nonverbal cues. This not only damages children's social growth, but also limits their ability to develop intimacy with others throughout their lives.

Here's what parents can do to protect and nurture a child.

➤ **Keep in mind that what works for you may not for your child.** Perhaps it was our good fortune that we adults were raised without the benefit of instant access to electronic technology. As a result, most of us learned to compute, write coherently, express complex ideas, socialize personally and acquire the ability to recognize and respond to the feelings of others. So, given this strong foundation, excessive reliance on electronic technology now will probably not impair us as much.

But today's children will not have these same opportunities for personal and academic growth unless parents are savvy and committed to helping them develop these skills. Gifted children often have difficulty developing appropriate social relationships with their age-mates. Using electronic technology as a crutch can make this even more challenging. Failure to develop meaningful friendships and acquire appropriate social skills can impair your child for life.

➤ **Model healthy values.** If you are texting or on the phone at meals or in the car, how can you expect your child to believe you when you tell her that it's not acceptable for her to do so? Instead, be proactive about using these occasions to converse, learn more about your child's day and help her

develop her social skills. Ask yourself: how would you feel if your child, at age 16, were to do what she sees you doing when you drive? Are you texting or researching with your phone at your son's soccer game whenever he checks on you? Do you dive into your smart phone or iPad to immediately research any area of dispute or unclarity during a conversation? What message does your behavior send about your real priorities? How does it affect your child's?

➤ **Confer with your spouse and agree about the skills and character traits you want to foster in your child.** Agreeing on these skills and traits is the first step toward helping your child successfully acquire them. Think beyond the narrow scope of technology. What do you want for your child? In addition to academic success as measured by grades, do you want him to develop a passion for learning? To have the ability to think analytically and process information? What character traits do you prize? Conscientiousness? Optimism? Persistence when things are not easy? Cooperating well with others? Approaching new situations confidently? Being comfortable meeting new people and developing close friendships? Being well-rounded?

Then honestly assess your child's progress. This will help you refocus your strategy to nurture your child's overall development in healthy ways. What's on track? Where would you like to see improvement? If your child is to mature in the healthy ways you have identified, how should electronics fit into her life?

➤ **Encourage your child to develop the character traits and skills you value.** Tell her clearly what you value. Explain why. Praise your child when she demonstrates them or attempts to do so. Praising effort is often more important than praising outcomes because consistently making the effort eventually leads to success. Encouraging your child may mean role playing social situations that trouble her. It may mean making sure she's involved in activities where she participates but may not excel. It may also mean helping her get involved in sports or extracurricular activities where she learns teamwork.

➤ **Discuss the appropriate use of electronics.** Emphasize that they should be supplemental tools for learning and enhancing communication with others, but should never be considered primary means. Explain both the advantages of technology and the reasons why it must be used appropriately.

You will need to make this an ongoing conversation, depending on the age of your child and the technologies she has access to. For example, texting should be discussed when your daughter is closer to getting her own phone. Prior to that you may need to focus on what's acceptable behavior with an iPad or computer. Factor in your assessment of your child's social skills and developmental needs. These vary from child to child and from developmental milestone to

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developmental milestone.

➤ **Identify for your child what's inappropriate.** Start by eliminating what's not healthy or is outright dangerous, such as disclosing personal information or being in chat rooms with people she does not personally know. Be clear also that she is never to use technology to bully or gossip. Is it ever appropriate to text at school? Should your child be allowed to have a phone at school? What would make that necessary? Not having a phone at school eliminates the temptation to text rather than interact personally. At what age do you consider Facebook appropriate? Make clear what's acceptable and that you will check regularly. Explain your reasons, including the long-term damage an impulsive or inappropriate post can have, such as compromising college admissions or getting a job.

➤ **Set guidelines and post them.** For example, she must never give away personal information to a stranger on line. The time your child is allowed to be involved with social media each day should be spelled out and consequences established for exceeding them. The two-to-one rule is a good starting point: your child loses the right to use a technology for two days for every day she exceeds the limits you set. Because it is more public and enduring, consequences for misusing Facebook or IMing must be more serious, perhaps losing online privileges for two weeks for every inappropriate post.

➤ **Enforce limits.** Nothing changes behaviors more effectively than following through on predicted consequences. Make it clear that you will check your child's phone regularly (daily if you must) to be sure that she does not violate guidelines you have established on texting, including both the amount of time, the time of day and the people. If she uses her phone at school, apply the two-to-one rule.

➤ **Bottom Line:** Clarifying the appropriate use of electronic technology for your child's current developmental progress, combined with your willingness to set limits and enforce consequences, will go a long way to assuring that your child learns to use technology to enhance her growth, not stunt it.

Dennis O'Brien is a licensed clinical social worker, experienced educator and therapist. In addition to writing educational materials used by the Washington University School of Medicine Dept. of Psychiatry and weekly columns on parenting for the Suburban Journals, he writes monthly columns for St. Louis Moms and Dads, and regular columns for CHARACTERplus, Family Connection (Mo. Dept of Mental Health) and Gifted Association of Missouri. O'Brien's April 6 column, "Prevent teen suicide by addressing it," won the 2010 Missouri Institute of Mental Health award for outstanding reporting on suicide.

Games in the Ecosystem of Modern Childhood

by Bob Coulter

As virtually every parent knows, kids these days seem attached to electronic devices. Statistically, 99% of boys and 95% of girls play video games at least occasionally. This ubiquity should give us pause: What does this near-universal experience tell us about modern childhood, and how should we respond? As a first step, I suggest we gain a little perspective. While there is a tendency to blame violent outbursts (usually by boys) on video games, we need to remember that the game-playing population of boys is quite large — in fact 1% less than the population of oxygen users. No one is banning the latter option because some misuse it. Seriously, games (and breathing) are universal experiences. We can't let fear of the extreme edge dictate everyday decisions. Rather, we need to leave clinical cases to experts and look at what promotes growth and development for your child.

In that spirit, I share a few ideas to consider based on a lot of time spent with kids and games:

Look for opportunities for kids to build and construct, not just consume. Many games such Little Big Planet (on PS3) and Amazing Alex (iOS and Android) offer opportunities for players to create their own levels within the game. For the slightly more adventurous, tools like Star Logo TNG and Scratch (both from MIT) provide the tools for kids to create their own complete games. Given how much of kids' days are locked down into pre-set agendas over which kids have little control, it's good to have these spaces for creative authorship.

Listen to your kids, especially when they don't know you are listening. Given that games are the coin of the realm for kids, they are often the topic of conversation among friends. New games to try and strategies for existing games are staples of what I overhear routinely. You'll also gain another window into how your child approaches challenges. School-thinking is often cut and dried, with grades affirming whether you are "good" at something or not. Games reinforce a model of continuous effort, going back and trying again to improve performance. Schools should take note.

Look for balance. While games are essentially universal and can be a vehicle for good learning, we need to be sure kids have plenty of physical activity, art and music experiences, time curled up with good books, and more. Don't sweat periods of intense focus, but over time look for a range of projects that build on different interests.

Occasional relaxation is a good thing. Let's not romanticize our own childhood. While we may wish kids were performing Beethoven and reciting Shakespeare after they were done proving the basis of the quadratic formula, most of us grew up on a diet closer to disco and Disney. One unfortunate characteristic of modern childhood is a tendency for kids to be over-scheduled. Be sure there is some down time in each day, and be glad that it's not filled with intellectual fare.

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process: how can we use tools to extend our thinking, explore things in depth, and create projects kids are proud of?" In short, the GRC approach helps kids understand that technology is simply a tool to be used in the service of learning, not an end in itself. Dr. Coulter's work for the Missouri Botanical Garden, NSF and MIT "explores how games and simulations help kids learn more engaging and more sophisticated science and math than they typically encounter in school. GRC courses are also a great idea incubator for me and my colleagues."

Overuse of technology, however, can stunt other aspects of academic growth. "So many of our students do not know how to spell or write complex sentences due to the 'overuse' of technology," said Michelle Braungardt, a teacher at MOSAICS Academy in the Parkway School District. "What I like most about (GRC's) LinguiSHTIK (competition) is that it takes the focus off of technology in terms of spelling, grammar, word usage, etc.," said Braungardt. "LinguiSHTIK brings these important skills back to the classroom by inspiring teachers to continue teaching these skills and encouraging students to learn them!" GRC involves some 1,500 children in LinguiSHTIK and the Equations game each year through its Academic Challenge Cup—another powerful instance of GRC's efforts to address the needs of gifted children.

The Internet can be addicting—and harmful. For some children, the Internet and mobile technology seem to offer what reality does not. Unfortunately, children who spend too much time surfing the Internet or engaged in multiplayer online games increasingly pull away from involvement with the real world. Their performance in real life activities suffers, especially school, personal responsibilities and social relationships. And as reality based activities suffer, the need to spend more time in a virtual reality online increases.

Social Networking can also be addicting—and isolating. Children who spend too much time using social media, such as Facebook, Twitter, and IMing, can become more dependent on online relationships than they do real life interactions with people. The more they come to find these satisfying, the less time they devote to real-life socializing with friends. They feel anxious when not on their smart phones, computers or tablets, and the addiction to social networking grows.

But GRC helps gifted children build real-world relations with other children by stressing interactive learning and teamwork. For example, GRC students don't just study Ancient Egypt: they reenact it together, complete with costumes, feasts and dramatic presentations. Young pioneers in Academy Americana work together to build their Conestoga wagons, make their own clothing and food to recreate the westward trek of the mid-1800s. GRC alums attest to forming real-world friendships that have lasted into and beyond college.

GRC Offers Hope, Guidance

Gifted Resource Council can be a resource for parents. With its focus on hands-on experiences, stimulating curriculum and interactive learning, GRC offers parents opportunities to expose

their child to healthy experiences that promote both learning and social growth. Parents can continue the conversation regarding the appropriate amount of technology use for their child when Dr. Catherine Hasler presents a Parenting Class on the topic of "Media Wise: Parenting in a Digital Age" during GRC's Winter 2013 Learning Lab. Varying approaches to the use of technology are addressed in two additional articles in this issue of *mindwonders*. For more on the appropriate use of games as a technological teaching tool, see the article by Dr. Bob Coulter on page 5. For some specific parenting suggestions regarding the use of technology, please see the "Parents Ask" article by Dennis O'Brien on page 4.

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You are your kids' primary educator, and their guide in finding a fulfilling life. Your support, guidance, and modeling are critical for their growth. Over time they will learn from you and craft their own identity as they move toward adulthood. It's good to watch the road, but also be sure to relax and enjoy the journey.

Bob Coulter is director of the Litzinger Road Ecology Center, managed by the Missouri Botanical Garden. He is also the principal investigator and project director for three National Science Foundation grants exploring how kids learn and develop civic capacity through games and game design. Previously he was an award-winning elementary school teacher for 12 years.

Longtime GRC Board Member Dies

Carol Thudium, a member of the Gifted Resource Council Board of Directors since 1995, passed away on October 3, 2012. Carol had been a teacher of the gifted in the Ferguson-Florissant School District for many years. Sandy Kalin, a fellow Board member, remembers that Carol's dedication to teaching gifted children attracted her to service on the GRC Board. "Her love of learning encouraged all students, but particularly gifted students, to reach for the stars," said Kalin.

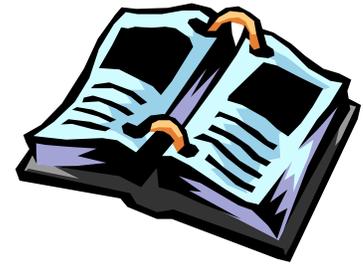
Leslie Lackey, Carol's daughter, also spoke of her dedication to furthering opportunities for gifted children throughout the metropolitan area.

Carol served on a variety of committees during her tenure with the GRC Board. Sue Flesch, Executive Director, states that "Carol will long be remembered as a devoted cheerleader for GRC, always offering positive comments regarding the work that we do with gifted children and their families. She will be missed."



Carol Thudium and Family

Mark Your Calendar



January 26, 2013 – Summer Opportunities Fair at John Burroughs School, 755 South Price Rd.

February 2-March 9, 2013 (Six Saturdays) – Winter Learning Lab at Wydown Middle School, 6500 Wydown Blvd. Parenting Classes will be offered.

February 26 & 27, 2013 – Academic Challenge Cup's **Equations** Competitions at University of Missouri-St. Louis. Parenting classes will be offered.

February 28 & March 1, 2013 – Academic Challenge Cup's **Creative Convention** at University of Missouri-St. Louis. Parenting classes will be offered.

March 12, 2013 – Academic Challenge Cup's **LinguiSHTIK** Competition at University of Missouri-St. Louis. Parenting classes will be offered.

March 13 & 14, 2013 – Academic Challenge Cup's **Equations** Competitions at Washington University. Parenting classes will be offered.

June 17-July 26, 2013 – GRC's Summer Academies at Crossroads College Preparatory School, 500 DeBaliviere Ave.

Call GRC at 314-962-5920 for more information on any of these events.

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Now *you* can participate in shaping America's future by becoming a member of **Gifted Resource Council**, a not-for-profit education agency serving bright and talented young people. Your tax-deductible contribution will enable us to improve existing programs, extend offerings and reach more children. Your membership will not only benefit gifted children, but also entitle you to receive the following:

Gifted Member: \$60

- ★ Priority registration for all programs
- ★ *FREE parenting classes (\$160 value)*
- ★ Use of GRC Library

Intelligent Friend: \$100

- ★ All of the above, *plus*
- ★ \$10 discount off two Learning Lab registrations

Sharp Sponsor: \$150

- ★ All of the above, *plus*
- ★ Additional \$25 discount off a Summer Academy

Talented Patron: \$250

- ★ All of the above, *plus*
- ★ Additional \$25 discount off a Summer Academy (\$50 total)

Brilliant Benefactor: \$500

- ★ All of the above, *plus*
- ★ One FREE Learning Lab course *or*
- ★ Learning Lab scholarship in your name at your request

Wise Philanthropist: \$1,000

- ★ All of the above, *plus*
- ★ GRC logo lapel pin
- ★ The undying gratitude of gifted children throughout the metropolitan area

Imaginative Institution: \$100

- ★ For schools and other not-for-profits

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mindwonders

informs the public about activities of Gifted Resource Council and about issues relevant to the development of bright and talented children and youth.

Gifted Resource Council
357 Marshall Ave., Suite 6
St. Louis, MO 63119
314-962-5920
www.giftedresourcecouncil.org

Susan C. Flesch
Executive Director
JoAnn Hetisimer
Administrative Assistant
Linda Sher
Editor

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Gifted Resource Council is a not-for-profit education agency serving the greater St. Louis Metropolitan area. Its purpose is to bring together the resources of the community, the schools and parents to help bright and talented children achieve their potential.