

## Decades Ahead of the Curve: GRC Addresses the Creativity Crisis

Recent studies show that creative thinking abilities - as distinct from intelligence - remain static or decrease starting at 6th grade for many US children, although not elsewhere in developed countries. This concerns educators because the ability to think and act creatively is becoming increasingly important for success in a world of widespread task automation and global competition. Reasons for this decline appear to be multiple. Some researchers identify overemphasis on standardized testing or rote learning. Others cite longitudinal studies showing that children are more likely to develop their creativity when their parents provide psychological safety and freedom to experiment, and that this appears to be happening less frequently. Whatever the causes, the creativity crisis hobbles American students in the short term and threatens their futures.

Remarkably prescient, Gifted Resource Council has sponsored programs for 33 years that are designed to develop what the National Education Association (NEA), in its publication *Preparing 21st Century Students for a Global Society*, calls the “Four Cs”: Critical Thinking and Problem Solving, Communication, Collaboration and Creativity and Innovation.

### Creative Academic Challenges

GRC’s **Academic Challenge Cup (ACC)** involves nearly 1,500 students who prepare for months under volunteer coaches trained by GRC. All three ACC activities stress creative problem-solving, teamwork, task organization, idea generation and collaborative decision-making through friendly competition.

**Equations**, for example, is a friendly math competition that forces students to think outside the box. Yes, there’s certainly logic in mathematical thinking, but linear thinking isn’t enough. Equations players must THINK CREATIVELY about math, repeatedly. “I like the way math is incorporated into a fun game and that I can play the games with friends and then compete with and meet new people,” said 12-year-old Molly O’Brien who has been involved with Equations for four years through Christ the King School in University City. “It’s creative because you have to come up with unusual and complex solutions to get a simple answer. You must be creative, open-minded and resourceful. It’s a good challenge!”

The same is true for **LinquiSHTIK**—it’s designed to

engage students to think creatively as they stretch their verbal skills in ways they never would in a traditional school situation.

And **Creative Convention** for students in grades 2-3? The name says it all. While they engage in hands-on creative exercises for weeks in their training sessions before or after school, students are given a completely new problem to solve when they arrive at ACC, such as designing a grocery store complete with healthy food choices. Each team goes through the creative design/problem-solving process that engineers use, a process involving divergent (brainstorming), convergent (planning and focus) and emergent (elaboration and creation/building) thinking.

GRC’s Creative Convention long preceded the recent surge of schools interested in “Makerspace,” an interactive, community-oriented space where students can collaborate, learn, share ideas and make something together. For example, ACC students are given materials from the Teachers’ Recycle Center to build a model of their team’s conception, whether that be schools of the future (2010) or a healthy grocery store (2016).

Teamwork and creativity are also fostered by the imaginative names and costumes each ACC team creates for itself. To foster this team-bonding and creativity, GRC publicly identifies teams with some of the most creative costumes and names that reflect their team’s identity, whether it’s Flying Emos or My Peeps—the names of two U. City teams that earned recognition this year.

No wonder parents, educators and their students are so



*Creative Convention participants craft a concept model of a healthy grocery store during GRC’s Academic Challenge Cup 2016.*

## Dialogue with the Director

As I reflect on the road that brought me to my position as the new Executive Director of Gifted Resource Council, I can see there were many avenues that led me to this place.

The starting point of the path I have followed began inherently. You might say education is in my blood – my maternal grandfather was a superintendent of schools in a small town in Pennsylvania, my mother a first grade teacher and my father a professor of aerospace engineering. Some children inherit their family business; I guess I inherited a desire to help others embrace learning. Retiring after twenty-five years of teaching - twenty-one of them as an educator of the gifted - I found myself wanting to give back to Gifted Resource Council, an organization I found to be a wonderful resource in which my students had regularly participated in programs such as Academic Challenge Cup.

Hired by Sue Flesch, former GRC Executive Director, as a Summer Space Academy instructor over 10 years ago, I became familiar with GRC's Summer Academies and their excellent cadre of teachers and impressive curricula. As I was teaching GRC's Space Academy in 2013 and pondering aloud about my upcoming retirement from teaching, Sue inquired if I might be interested in helping with the 2014 Academic Challenge Cup. So began my journey, albeit just a small tract of it, to learn more about the day-to-day operations of Gifted Resource Council.

My next sojourn then began in September of 2013 as I became the 2014 Academic Challenge Cup Coordinator. Appreciation for Gifted Resource Council grew as I participated in the coordination of this highly attended event. The preparations were massive, manned only by a small but dedicated group of volunteers, several of whom have helped with ACC since its infancy.

It is truly the driving force of Sue Flesch, now

GRC's Program Director, and the rest of the hard-working staff and volunteers that enable GRC programs such as Academic Challenge Cup to run

smoothly even when there may be a few bumps in the road. I am learning that there are so many intersections that need to connect in order to operate these programs, and with that I am undergoing a huge learning curve. Gifted Resource Council is very fortunate to have people who share the same commitment in providing enrichment programs and resources for bright children throughout the St. Louis region (and beyond), which is the founding mission of this organization. I am fortunate to be able to continue this mission with

Sue Flesch. Thankfully, I also have assistance from a meticulously organized office manager, JoAnn Hetisimer, support from a numbers-wise bookkeeper Marla Dell, help with development and word mastery from Denny O'Brien, and a myriad of volunteers whom I am sorry I cannot all list at this time. All of these people have, and continue, to pave the way for the organization's 33 years of helping children strive to reach their potential.

As an educator for over 25 years, I believe in the benefits of life-long learning. Stepping in to the Executive Director position at Gifted Resource Council provides an opportunity for further erudition, and I am learning volumes about what goes on behind-the-scenes of this small non-profit organization! As I forge ahead on this journey, I plan to continue GRC's tradition of providing avenues of enrichment for bright and talented children.



*Susan Jesse, GRC Executive Director*

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enthusiastic about ACC. “Under the direction and guidance of volunteer coaches like Greg Zink-Duda, an architectural engineer who has headed the effort for 15 years, Equations has empowered our students to excel in math, to be more confident and to enjoy math,” said Christ the King principal Susan Hooker.

### **Creativity, Collaboration, Problem-Solving and Hands-on Learning**

Gifted Resource Council’s Summer Academies are unique. GRC students are not lectured to, urged to study a curriculum, write papers or pass tests. Instead, they are challenged to learn about a topic by working collaboratively in groups, dividing learning tasks, sharing what they discover and creating a culminating project that demonstrates both their mastery of material and their teamwork.

This summer, for example, **Ancient Academy** students will break into teams, do research and recreate life in ancient Rome. Synthesizing what they learn and using their imaginations, teams will organize dramatic presentations, complete with props and costumes, role-playing life as patricians, plebeians or Roman slaves while exploring the mythology, writing and public speaking accomplishments of this great culture. And yes, wearing their homemade togas, these young historians will feast on Roman food at the festival for Fortuna, goddess of fortune and chance.

Meanwhile, young astronauts will be learning how to cope with life on their space station before colonizing Mars. **GRC’s Space Academy** cadets will use Lego EV 3 robotics to make robots to help with planetary expeditions and maneuver on the Martian terrain.

Elsewhere in the building, young **ECO Academy** entrepreneurs will use creative thinking skills to plan their budget, design, manufacture and market a product that will, they hope, return a profit on the stock they have sold to friends and family. Throughout this process, these innovators are learning about the economy and ecological responsibility. *All* of GRC’s Summer Academies engage learners in challenging, hands-on activities designed to foster cooperation and teamwork while stimulating their intellectual curiosity and creative problem-solving abilities, as do GRC’s 6-week Saturday **Learning Labs**.

With Gifted Resource Council being so far ahead of the curve in the way we involve students in active learning that NEA prizes, our students develop the creativity, communication and critical thinking skills that will enable them to be the leaders of tomorrow that society needs. That’s why the alums featured in *mindwonders* last spring—Major George Johnson, Illinois Assistant Attorney General Bill Phillips and attorney Dana Jacob who clerks for a Federal Magistrate Judge—send their children to GRC programs. They want their children to have the opportunity to benefit from GRC

enrichment programs as much as they themselves benefited, preparing today in stimulating, hands-on creative programs in order to become leaders tomorrow.

## **School District Promotes Academic Challenge Cup**

“Students from all four elementary schools in the School District of University City participated in the March 1-4 Gifted Resource Council 2016 **Academic Challenge Cup** (ACC) on the University of Missouri - St. Louis campus,” begins a feature article in *PRIDE*, a publication of the school district. The article describes in some detail the benefits to its students participating in the ACC competitions - **Creative Convention** and **Equations**. It also recognized a Flynn Park 4th grader who had one of the top individual scores in Equations. The U. City School District is not alone in promoting GRC’s Academic Challenge Cup. Students from 91 schools and 20 school districts participated in ACC this year over seven days at the University of Missouri - St. Louis and Washington University. Kudos to them all for taking advantage of GRC’s Academic Challenge Cup which provides enriching educational opportunities for their students!



*A Creative Convention team applies creative problem-solving skills as they collaborate in building their prototype using a wide variety of materials at GRC’s Academic Challenge Cup.*

**Thanks to...**

...the following individuals who made financial contributions to Gifted Resource Council from April 2015 through April 2016. We apologize for any names which may have been inadvertently omitted or misspelled.

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## GRC Instructor Wins Prestigious Teaching Awards

**Rob Lamb** has inspired young astronauts in GRC's Advanced Space Academy since 2012. GRC has long been committed to recruiting the best teachers of gifted students from throughout the St. Louis metropolitan area. The recent honors awarded to this science teacher from Pattonville High School underscores our success at doing so. Lamb was recently selected as one of six science teachers nationwide to receive the 2016 Robert E. Yager Foundation Excellence in Teaching Award from the National Science Teachers Association. Of the six, he was also singled out as the 2016 Yager Scholar because of his "exemplary science teaching skills." Earlier this year, Lamb was one of 14 selected nationwide as a Discovery Education Program Champion by the Discovery Education community. Also, Lamb was the recipient of the 2015-2016 academic year High School Chemistry Teaching Award sponsored by the St. Louis Section of the American Chemical Society. Lamb also serves as the technology chair for Science Teachers of Missouri.

"My summers teaching at GRC give me the opportunity to work with a group of students who are highly engaged in the subject matter and desire to learn as much as they can about it during the time we have together," Lamb said. "They actually push my skills and knowledge of the content through their questioning. This is refreshing, new and exciting every summer, and I look forward to it. My teaching is renewed and made better by my time at GRC in the summer."



*Rob Lamb gives a demonstration of conditions in space to GRC Space Academy students. He is assisted by fellow GRC Space Academy instructor Lisa Hummel.*

### BECOME A MEMBER OF GIFTED RESOURCE COUNCIL

Now *you* can participate in shaping America's future by becoming a member of **Gifted Resource Council**, a not-for-profit 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

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## Parents Ask: How much screen time should we allow our child? Because she's very bright, we want her to be well prepared and know what's going on in the world.

By Dennis O'Brien

Probably a lot less time than you think. A little goes a long way, and excessive screen time endangers children in multiple ways. Here are some practical suggestions to help parents protect their children.

### ⇒ **Learn about the dangers of excessive screen time.**

The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) recommends no more than two hours/day for children over the age of two. However, according to the AAP, studies show that children three to 10 years of age average eight hours/day and older children and teens spend 11 hours/day on entertainment media, including televisions, computers, phones, video games and other electronic devices, far more than the two hour maximum. In addition to the well-known risk of sleep deprivation and weight gain due to inactivity, there are other even more serious threats to a child's well-being.

Studies show that children who exceed the AAP two hour limit are more than twice as likely to have more attention problems than children who don't. Teachers also report that children have increasing problems paying attention and staying on task. Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is 10 times more common today than it was 20 years ago. Although ADHD has a genetic base, scientists believe this frightening increase is primarily due to behavioral changes driven by technology, especially too much screen time and faster-paced shows, video games and media content.

The AAP also recommends that "all television and entertainment media should be avoided for children under age two. A child's brain develops rapidly during those first years, and young children learn best by interacting with people, not screens." A television should not serve as a baby sitter, nor a tablet as a child's toy - however fascinating he may find it. And don't confuse a child's adeptness with electronic devices like tablets with giftedness. Although her adeptness may be possible because a child is bright, the very activity is destroying the high intelligence that could flourish later in many venues. Trust the experts.

How long does screen time risk persist? Environmental influences, scientists say, are a large factor in brain development - and the prefrontal cortex isn't fully formed until age 25. The AAP insists that teens need age-appropriate limits as much as toddlers do, perhaps even more so because their risk-exposure opportunities are greater.

### ⇒ **Document your child's use of screen technologies.**

The AAP has a Media History Form readily available online for parents to assess their child's screen time. Answering these questions will help you get an overview of the various media devices you are currently allowing your child to use. However, the AAP form needs to be supplemented to include similar questions about smart phone and tablet usage which

are much more common now than when the screening form was developed. After completing your survey, keep a log of your child's actual screen time for several weeks. This will give you an accurate - and possibly alarming - picture of the amount of screen time she is exposed to.

⇒ **Determine your priorities.** What screens does your child spend excessive time in front of? How dangerous are they? It makes a difference what sort of computer games a child plays. Shooting games, for example, are much more dangerous than problem-solving games. What do you consider acceptable or even valuable? Using the information your log reveals, decide which screens should be eliminated completely and which others can be allowed in limited fashion.

⇒ **Set clear, firm limits.** Start with the two hours/day limit that the AAP recommends for children. That's the outside limit. Then consider how screen time can be spent. Also, it's not just about screen time on a device, you also need to make it clear what types of usage are acceptable, what are not. Can your child use a tablet or computer for researching school assignments if he does not exceed the two hour limit? That's different than using it for video streaming or social media. Spell out the time your child is allowed for each. Be specific about the usage - or non-usage - for various screens. Your decisions will depend on multiple factors, including your child's age, maturity and honesty about what he does. Explain your rules and reasons for them.

⇒ **Create screen-free zones and times.** Keep screens out of the bedrooms, your own as well as your children's. This is basic. Yet 71% of children and teens have a TV in their bedrooms. Everyone needs to sleep without the temptation of watching TV or checking their phones, tablets or computers. They should be recharging in the office, the kitchen or somewhere else in the house far away from sleepers who might be tempted to do one more game, text, email or search. Of course, no screens, including television, at meals. Those are also screen-free times.

⇒ **Promote other activities.** As the AAP says, "It is important for kids to spend time on outdoor play, reading, hobbies and using their imaginations in free play." Perhaps more than ever, it's important for parents to make sure that their child has a chance to be well-rounded.

⇒ **Watch with your child.** View TV, movies and videos with your child. Ask questions about what you are viewing. Use it as an opportunity to discuss family values or other issues. Make it a bonding as well as an educational experience.

*Parents Ask, continued on page 7*

*Parents Ask, continued from page 6*

⇒ **Set consequences.** 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. Also, the total screen time should be cut by twice the amount of time involved in the infraction for two days. If problems persist that these simple consequences do not suffice, increase them. Keep in mind that screen time is a privilege, not a right or a necessity.

⇒ **Strive to have a predictable daily schedule.** It may vary from day to day, depending on soccer practice, dance class or your work schedule. But if your child knows in advance that on Wednesdays, 4-5:30 is free time to recreate, family dinner is at 6 followed by cleanup, 6:30-8:30 is homework time and 9 is bedtime, life will be much calmer and the chances of extra screen time minimized. And yes, family dinner is important. It should be a relaxed meal, a time to catch up, talk about the day, what's upcoming and to enjoy one another. Make it a high point of the day, not a time to ingest food individually or in front of a television.

⇒ **Enforce limits.** Nothing changes behaviors more effectively than following through on predicted consequences. Make it clear that you will check regularly (daily if you must) to be sure that he does not violate the screen time rules, including both total time spent and the type of screen time. Follow through promptly and matter-of-factly. No negotiating. No "last warning." Any violation triggers an automatic, pre-determined consequence.

⇒ **Model healthy behavior.** Make sure that your own screen time is not excessive. If you are texting or on the phone at meals or in the car, how can you expect your child to take you seriously 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. Do you immediately turn to your tablet or smart phone to research any question? What message does your behavior send about your priorities?

⇒ **Bottom line:** Clarifying the appropriate use of screen time for your child, combined with your willingness to set limits and enforce consequences, will go a long way in assuring that your child learns to use technology to enhance her growth, not stunt it. And a final caveat: this does not address the inherent dangers of social media. That's for another column, coming soon.

*Dennis O'Brien is a licensed clinical social worker, experienced educator and therapist, who has led five nonprofits. He has written educational materials used by the Washington University School of Medicine Dept. of Psychiatry, weekly columns on parenting for the Suburban Journal/Post-Dispatch and numerous columns for St. Louis Moms and Dads, 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.*

## Barb Wnek - 30 Years Challenging GRC Students to be Healthy & Fit

This summer will be the 30th year that **Barb Wnek** has served as a Physical Training (PT) teacher at GRC's Summer Academies. Her Ferguson-Florissant students recently sponsored a workshop, "Health Beats," at the Florissant Civic Center to teach interested adults how to blend healthy eating with an active lifestyle. Wnek herself keeps remarkably fit. In January, she participated in the Bermuda Triangle Challenge: three races in three days. She has competed in nearly 150 marathons en route to her goal of running a marathon in every state. Typically, she and fellow PT instructor Michael Moore engage GRC students in games that combine fun with plenty of physical activity. "Barb Wnek has continued, year after year, to offer GRC's youngest Summer Academies students engaging, enjoyable, energetic activities that stretch their minds as well as their bodies," said Program Director Susan Flesch. "She has literally touched the lives of thousands of children - helping them see physical activity as 'fun'."



*Barb Wnek at the Paris Marathon in 2013.*

## mindwonders

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

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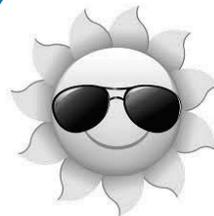
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Gifted Resource Council is a not-for-profit education agency serving the greater St. Louis Metropolitan area.  
Its purpose is to bring together the resources of the community, the schools and parents  
to help bright and talented children achieve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