

GRC's Academic Challenge Cup: Parents, Teachers Praise Outcomes

GRC's Academic Challenge Cup (ACC) engages more than 1,500 academically talented students, grades 2-8, in weeks of preparatory skill-building and provides them with opportunities to participate in friendly competitions in creative problem-solving, linguistic and math challenges. Awards are given for creative team names and costumes as well as for teams who "rise to a level of excellence."

Gifted Resource Council has sponsored Academic Challenge Cup for 28 years. The 2012 competitions occurred over four days on the campus of Washington University and four days at the University of Missouri-St. Louis. Students attended from 93 different schools (public, private and parochial) and 17 school districts throughout the metropolitan area.

Creative Convention Jumpstarts Early Learning

Students in grades 2-3 work together to design and build a special project—such as a school of the future, a fitness center or a peace monument—that is revealed to them only on the day of the competition. They work in teams of five, earning points for both their creativity and for how well they work cooperatively. At the conclusion of the event, each team formally presents its creation and explains how they designed it to their parents and teachers.

"George participated in his first Creative Convention, and he enjoyed it a lot," said Allison Harris about her 8-year-old son. "It gave him a chance to work with his peers in a thought-provoking environment. It is a good way to improve both self-confidence and teamwork skills. He looks forward to returning next year."

Long-term Benefits

Michelle Braungardt, a teacher at MOSAICS Academy in the Parkway School District, describes the long-term benefits of Creative Convention. "I believe it's important

to teach students creative thinking and problem solving," she said. "After all, this is what makes the world go around!

The United States has been the leader in creativity and innovation. We want to keep this competitive edge, as it's important to our economy and builds character. To accomplish this, we must build this kind of thinking into our daily school curriculum at

every level. Not to mention, it's these creative tasks that keep our students interested in school and knowing their ideas are a valuable renewable resource!"

Strengthening Verbal Skills

"What I like most about LinguiSHTIK is that it takes the focus off of technology in terms of spelling, grammar, word usage, etc.," said Braungardt. "So many of our students do not know how to spell or write complex sentences due to the 'overuse' of technology. I'm sure some may argue this point! However, LinguiSHTIK brings these important skills back to the classroom by inspiring teachers to continue teaching these skills and encouraging students to



Dr. Thomas F. George, Chancellor of the University of Missouri-St. Louis, and Dr. Thomas Walker, Dean of Continuing Education, perform a jazz improvisation for the second and third grade students participating in GRC's 'Creative Convention' at UMSL.

learn them!"

"What a fabulous opportunity for my 9-year-old to compete and expand her intellectual potential in a friendly competition," said Christine A. Sigman, MD. "Caitlynn was so proud to be a part of LinguiSHTIK, and I was so excited to watch her confidence grow."

A Wealth of Teaching Opportunities

Equations inspires students to learn math skills that they would not be exposed to in the course of their regular school classes. "The game of Equations provides a wealth of opportunity for teaching numerous math related concepts and problem solving skills, both critical and creative," said Braungardt who has been bringing teams to compete in Equations for 15 years.

"Embedded within the conceptual learning is the problem

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Dialogue with the Director

As I turned off the microphone at the podium following the final day of Academic Challenge Cup competitions at UMSL, a father of a student approached me saying, “My son didn’t get an award!” I braced myself for the expected conversation, but before I could begin, the father continued, “I’m glad my son didn’t get an award! I’m very happy that not every student here received an award today.”

What a refreshing conversation ensued! And what a relief that I didn’t need to explain – yet one more time – as I had just done to the entire group of children, teachers and parents assembled at the conclusion of the Creative Convention portion of GRC’s Academic Challenge Cup. Yes, Gifted Resource Council values and encourages academic excellence by the very nature of our programs. But we also want our children to recognize that it is in the process – in the working together as a team for a common goal – that meaningful learning takes place.

Awards are tangible symbols of a job well done. Indeed, GRC recognizes a few teams who for each of our Academic Challenge Cup competitions “achieve a level of excellence”. We also applaud those teams who create a unique team identification or who invent a particularly creative team name. But we truly believe that ALL children who participate in our friendly competitions are “winners”. They are winners because they have accepted the challenge to learn new concepts – whether it’s a math fact or type of language structure or creative problem-solving approach. Students have bonded as a team while they worked together for a common goal. They have grown as individuals, as well as a team, and learned something new.



Sue Flesch, GRC executive director

Gifted Resource Council encourages young people in all of its programs – Academic Challenge Cup, Learning Lab and Summer Academies – to stretch themselves, to try to understand the more difficult concept, to achieve a sense of self-esteem through honest effort in a worthy endeavor. Easy answers to easy questions rarely give a sense of true accomplishment, and children know this instinctively.

GRC encourages students to search for answers to hard questions, to consider all aspects of a problem before drawing their own conclusions. We teach children HOW to think, not WHAT to think.

GRC also consciously promotes the development of friendships among bright and talented children from throughout the metropolitan area. We select our outstanding teachers not only for their knowledge in a particular subject area, but also for their ability to understand gifted children and to foster growth of interpersonal skills.

Perhaps that father’s son did receive an award at Creative Convention! The award was not a tangible medal, but the award was of a more intrinsic type. We believe the awards that all GRC students receive come from their own efforts and their own realization of the joy of learning...

Susan C. Flesch

Summer Academies Become Families' Traditions

Students come from across the country and from generation to generation to attend GRC's Summer Academies. For the Suppiger children, GRC's Space Academy is a "magical summer destination." For the Schusters, it's expanded to three children in the second generation. In the articles below, parents explain how they have come to value GRC programs enough to make them family traditions.

Gifted Campers from California

"I'm going to Space Academy in St. Louis," her mother heard Maryse Suppiger proudly say when other middle school girls in their car pool were talking about their vacation plans. And it's true. This marks the 5th consecutive year that Maryse and her brother William have come from California to visit their grandmother in St. Louis and attend GRC's Space Academy. When they were younger, they experimented with other programs, but once they attended GRC's Space Academy, they knew they had found the camp for them. Kudos to their grandmother, Fay Strabala, who forwarded an article about GRC's Summer Academies to her daughter Polly Suppiger in California.

Never Bored

"My children love being with all 'smart kids' in small groups," Suppiger said. They love investigating a topic in great detail at a good pace. My son said there is never time to get bored. Both children have had stellar teachers and teaching assistants. And they love that the curriculum includes a physical training component that incorporates the curriculum! They also love the recap sessions where you hear about what the other classes have been studying."

Other Benefits

"They both have enjoyed the well-planned field trips as well as the guest speakers that were selected," she said.

"My husband and I appreciate our children's exposure to all of the different careers that are available to students who pursue the study of science," Suppiger said. "From getting a sample of a strawberry's DNA (on a field trip to a local community college) to programming a robot, they have been exposed to a wide range of engaging, fun applications of science. They both look forward to returning each year. While our children are fortunate to attend high performing, rigorous, schools in California, at GRC's Space Academy, our children get a glimpse of what a stellar gifted program will look like."

Friendships Formed

"Finally, everyone has been so welcoming. Even though we are from out of state and only participate in GRC for two weeks per year, my children have loved how inclusive everyone has been. They have both made many good friends."

"We feel very fortunate to have found GRC! It's a magical summer destination," she concluded.

GRC Benefits Two Generations

Twenty-three years ago David Schuster attended his first Space Academy. His mother, Jackie Schuster, credits GRC for sparking his interest in math and science. "At the time, David's older sister was a NASA engineer, and she got him interested in space," his mother Jackie Schuster said. "We enrolled him in GRC's Space Academy, and he loved it. It helped deepen his interest and channel it in constructive ways. I think that's why he earned a Ph.D. in physics and now teaches physics at Webster Groves High School."

Schuster said that they still have a framed poster about Space Academy with a note to her son signed by 'Captain' P.W. Cash who taught the course. Cash was a retired dentist with a huge love of all things related to space who taught GRC's Space Academy 'cadets' in the early years.

Fast forward a few years, and David's son, first grader John Paul Schuster, is participating in GRC's Summer Academies for the second time. Last summer he took Math, Marvels & More. His cousins, Spike and Thomas Schuster, who are a little older, have been attending GRC programs even longer than John Paul.

"It's a wonderful experience for my grandsons," Schuster said. "Even the 'after care' program is a learning experience. College students work with the children one-on-one to encourage and stimulate them in areas of their personal interests. It's much more than child care."

"I'd absolutely encourage other parents to send their children to GRC programs," she continued. "I guarantee their children will have a rewarding experience, just as my son and grandsons have had."



David Schuster proudly accepts his Space Academy certificate in July of 1989 while Captain P.W. Cash looks on.

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solving, which is an essential math skill. The game inspires students to apply strategic thinking and problem solving, not only because of the competitive nature, but also because most gifted students love the challenge of ‘problem development’. The competitions hosted by GRC are like ‘icing on the cake’! They offer a means for students to apply their learning outside the boundaries of the classroom to a real event and provide a means of encouragement to achieve at high levels!”

“The competition is a guise under which I teach students about powers, roots, team work and problem solving,” said Melissa Hill, a teacher at Rockwood’s Center for Creative Learning. “The kids love it. I am excited in class and at the competition because their excitement is infectious.

Parents Value Equations

“My third-grader, Karl, has been excitedly assembling his costume and counting down to the Equations competition for weeks,” said Sara Oswald. “A couple of weeks ago, he pulled out



Students enjoy dressing in colorful costumes while they stretch their brains in ‘LinguiSHTIK’ competitions.

paper and pencil to lecture me on how the Equations game works!” Oswald continued. “He was very positive about his day. He specifically said that he especially enjoyed the one game that he was scorekeeper, because it’s a busy job and ‘I love being busy!’ He gleefully recounted to me how loudly he cheered when friends of his won awards. We look forward to next year.”

“I think the experience was good for my son because he tends to be a deep thinker,” she said. “I especially liked the emphasis on the team effort. I also enjoyed the chance to meet other parents to talk about the challenges - and the joys! - of our gifted kids. It was great to be in an environment that was so accepting and encouraging, and I could tell that even the hour that I was there was carefully structured with gifted talents/challenges in mind.”

Another parent, Nancy Tice, who also serves as a volunteer coach, adds, “I have sons in 6th and 4th grades who have each participated in Equations since 3rd grade. I also have a 1st grader who can’t wait to compete when he is old enough! I think Equations teaches my boys that an after school activity can be fun and academic.”

How Schools Prepare

“One of my favorite parts of the Equations process at Immacolata is watching the older students teach the game to the younger students (and to the parent coaches),” Tice said. “This year four 7th graders stayed after school twice a week—once with other 7th and 8th graders for their

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Parents Ask: How can we get our gifted child who does only the minimum to take school seriously?

By Dennis O'Brien

Some children are smart enough to get by in school with little effort—and consequently with little in-depth learning in return. Of course, this vexes their parents. Since gifted children tend to be curious as well as rapid learners, a key question is: Why does a bright child do only the minimum? What prevents her from being the aggressive learner she could be? Here are some effective strategies for parents to find out and address the issues.

★ **Examine your parenting style about school and academic achievement.** Perhaps the way you communicate your interest in your child's success at school is causing him to shut down. "I check his homework every day," one parent told me recently. "He tries to avoid it because he knows I'll see that he's done the minimum he can get by with. Of course, I tell him he needs to try harder, that what he's done may be enough to get by at school, but not at home where we really value education. Yet, nothing changes."

However well intended, this is a failing strategy. Ask yourself if you are using some variety of it. Do you monitor your child's homework too closely and point out how much better it could be? What's your parenting style? What messages about school, your child's efforts and his accomplishments do you communicate, whether deliberately or unwittingly? How does this seem to affect your child?

★ **Make a plan to change your behavior** if you are part of the problem. It should include a way to monitor and record the number and type of interventions you make. If your child is simply bored at school, that's one thing to address. But if she's reacting to your parenting style, you need to change before you can expect your child to. If it's a combination of your style and the school, then you must address both issues.

Your plan should include a strategy for maintaining a positive relationship with your child as well as pursuing the educational objectives you have identified for your child. Put it on a timeline, and make sure it's realistic.

★ **Back off.** Micromanaging, combined with negative feedback, may be sending a message that your child can never meet your standards. So rather than try and fail, it's safer to not really try. The more your inquiries and comments send the message that what a child's doing is not good enough, the more determined she will be to do only the minimum. Not having really tried, she hasn't really failed. This shields her self-esteem from taking a hit, but it certainly stunts her growth.

★ **Praise the efforts your child makes** rather than focusing on what he could have done. In general, the more positive attention you give your child, the more he will undertake and persist at new behaviors. Avoid pointing out mistakes which often comes across as criticism. Praising the positive works far better than criticism.

★ **Show curiosity in what your child is learning.** Ask, for example: What interests you about ancient

Egypt? Would you like to learn more about the significance for everyday life between the gods Hapi and Hathor? How could you do that if you wanted to?

★ **Evaluate what's actually possible,** given the school, your child's classmates and his teacher. Does the teacher have the time and resources to challenge the brightest students, or is she swamped just by dealing with a large class? What is the school's culture? The general academic level of students? Is this an environment that will stimulate and challenge your child's intellectual growth?

★ **Let the teacher take the lead on issues that clearly concern her.** A parent recently expressed her frustration about her child's sloppy handwriting. As much as she prodded him to improve, he didn't. Of course, she was fighting the wrong battle. If handwriting is so poor that it frustrates the teacher, that's her issue to deal with. Mom needs to back off and focus on more appropriate objectives.

★ **Meet with the teacher and discuss your concerns and learning priorities.** She may be able to challenge your child more if she knows you support her efforts. An effective parent-teacher or parent-counselor partnership can make a significant difference in a gifted child's education. However, it is important to keep in mind that there can be many reasons that a well-intentioned teacher might not be able to meet your child's needs as well as you would like. Teachers have many children demanding their time and attention, not just your child.

Keep in mind that most classroom teachers, through no fault of their own, have not been prepared to adapt their teaching style to gifted children. In Missouri, teachers are exposed to only one class—not a course, just one class—on gifted education as part of the Psychology of the Exceptional Child course that is required for certification. Thus, however genuine her concerns for your child, your child's teacher may not be equipped to maximize his learning opportunities.

★ **Encourage your child to develop and pursue personal interests that go beyond the school curriculum.** Ask yourselves: What are my child's interests? How can we nurture them? With books? Family outings to the Science Center, the Magic House, the Art Museum or the zoo? Trips to historical sites, such as the Lincoln Library in Springfield, IL? What other resources or encouragement will encourage our child to pursue her passions?

★ **Establish your own educational program** if you must. Set deadlines, tie it into incentives. For example, some families require an hour of reading each day, with the child choosing any book he would like. Others expect a child to research and write papers on topics ranging from history or literature to science. An alternative strategy is to involve a tutor, not to remediate, but to enrich. This was

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the strategy my parents used when they concluded we were not being challenged enough in the parochial schools we attended. The advantage of hiring a tutor to monitor the process is that it takes you out of the loop and minimizes conflict. On the other hand, it costs money and may not be necessary, depending on your relationship with your child.

If you decide to establish a learning program of your own to supplement what's available in school, explain it honestly to your child. Be tactful about characterizing the school while explaining that you have decided to supplement what your child does at school with some other learning activities at home.

★ **Utilize extracurricular programs that stimulate bright children to pursue their intellectual interests.** Gifted Resource Council was founded in 1983 precisely to provide students with the stimulation and hands-on intellectual challenges they could not receive in their normal schools—for a variety of reasons. For nearly 30 years, GRC has served more than 42,500 students through its three programs: Academic Challenge Cup, Saturday Learning Lab and Summer Acade-

mies. As one teacher put it, “GRC programs inoculate students so they can get through the rest of the school year.” In many ways, this is exactly true, and with the ongoing cutbacks in funding for schools in general and gifted programs in particular, the need for GRC programs has never been greater.

In addition to a challenging curriculum, GRC's three unique programs provide students with successful experiences interacting cooperatively with other gifted youngsters and teach them HOW to think rather than WHAT to think. Long-term, this will help them develop their potential as academic achievers and leaders.

Dennis O'Brien is a licensed clinical social worker, experienced educator and therapist. In addition to writing educational materials for the Washington University School of Medicine Dept. of Psychiatry, he writes weekly columns on parenting for the Suburban Journals, monthly columns for St. Louis Moms and Dads, and occasional columns for Family Connections and other publications.

GRC Teacher Honored

GRC hires the best teachers of gifted students in the metropolitan area, and once again a GRC teacher has been honored. Rob Lamb, who will teach Advanced Space Academy for GRC this summer and currently teaches chemistry and physical science for Pattonville High School, was recently selected to receive a Peabody Energy Leaders in Education award for “heroes in education who help our children achieve their potential.” Lamb was also named a fellow at the Siemens STEM (Science-Technology-Engineering-Math) Academy. Congratulations, Rob!

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own Equations practice and once for the 3rd grade practice. Watching the 7th graders coach the younger children was delightful—and the 3rd graders really respond to older children, especially after a full day at school with adult teachers. It's remarkable the dedication these students have to the game. Immacolata has been sending students to Equations for 15 years.”

Benefits of Socialization, Visiting College Campus

“I think some of the greatest benefits in addition to intellectual/skill building are socialization—both with friends from Immacolata at practice each week and with students from other schools,” said Tice. I heard things like, ‘You wouldn't believe the equation the student from Christ the King used!’”

“I love getting the students on a college campus—exposing them to what that might be like at a young age,” she

added. “This year a parent told me that the evening after her daughter competed in Equations the two of them had a long discussion about academic success and what the daughter would need to do in her academic career to be successful. It's hard initiating these kinds of conversations with 6th graders—Equations helps make that possible.”

For additional information about parents' reaction to Academic Challenge Cup, read an extended version of this article on our Web site: www.giftedresourcecouncil.org.

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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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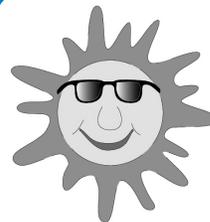
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to help bright and talented children achieve their potential.