



Dr. Vicki Phelps

Introducing Dr. Vicki Phelps

NATIONALLY RECOGNIZED EDUCATOR JOINING LOCAL AREA SCHOOL COULD CHANGE THE FACE OF GIFTED EDUCATION IN ILLINOIS

Many parents are vaguely acquainted with part-time “gifted education” programs in their local schools, but many parents are not aware that there are entire schools dedicated exclusively to gifted education. Quest Academy, a 40-year-old gifted school in Palatine, just hired a nationally recognized leader and author on Gifted Education, Dr. Vicki Phelps, to be its next Head of School. Most times when schools change Heads, they promote an internal administrator or elevate an internal teacher. Quest Academy is bringing in a prominent author of five books on Gifted Education who’s done cutting-edge research in gifted learning and Evidence-Based Practice. Her book “Collaboration, Co-Teaching, and Coaching in Gifted Education: Sharing Strategies to Support Gifted Learners” received the 2021 Book of the Year Award from the National Association of Gifted Children. Dr. Phelps is going to be a major authority and resource on Gifted Education for educators across the entire area. We recently visited with her to learn more.

In addition to authoring five books, you created a model to help others in the gifted teaching profession. How does it work?

I co-created the Collaborative Process Model (CPM) with Dr. Emily Mofield. Our model is being currently used as part of a grant from the Jacob K. Javits Gifted and Talented Students Education Program, the only federal grantor supporting gifted education in the nation. It’s being used to help guide a study at the University of Connecticut.

This resource came to fruition because in education and in teachers’ lives, there’s never enough time. So how do we make the most of our time when we’re together—to not only communicate and ideate back and forth—but to co-think, co-create, and act together? Collaboration means co-laboring. Through the CPM, teachers are able to come together to set a purpose, to make the most of their time. They plan from that identified purpose; reflect through that process and use their shared understanding while working together. The process is one of engaging each other’s expertise, aligning philosophies, and maintaining that collaborative relationship. Seeing what’s

going well and celebrating that and then seeing what other areas we need to keep working on.

How did this model come about?

This came from my life as a teacher. I’ve been teaching elementary gifted and secondary gifted for about 20 years. Over time, and then with the pandemic, the need to connect and collaborate with others came to the forefront of what we needed to do. In the public education system, very few teachers have any training in gifted education and their focus is on students who may not be gifted, and they think the gifted students will be fine. The key question became, how do we build capacity in general education teachers who have no training in gifted education to understand the needs and target the needs of gifted learners?

What are the perceptions of the public on gifted education?

The greatest myth is that gifted learners will be fine. They’ll find their way on their own, they do not need any extra assistance. Yet there’s nothing further from the truth. Every child deserves the chance to learn something new every day. That means we need to find out what our students already know, unlock the talent

that they have, and be able to help them continue to go deeper in their learning to make contributions and make connections to the real world.

The perception is also that gifted education programs are a luxury for the elite. We have gifted learners in every culture, in every race, in every socioeconomic status, and with every linguistic and socio-familial setting that you can imagine.

Where does giftedness come from, and can it be fostered?

There is a hereditary component to giftedness, but, as with so many things in our society, wealth and social status can determine if talents are recognized and nurtured or left to degrade.

Current research shows that we can grow our gifts: such as when you have a child who has access to all sorts of puzzles, and a high-level vocabulary within the home, and can go to museums. However, when you have a single parent, working long hours and worried about getting food on the table, that child may not have access to the very tools that may promote increases in their IQ scores. It makes such a difference when the teacher is trained and knows the student, and can help leverage their values, motivation, volition, and their passions. We can accomplish so much by properly pacing information to target what the student learns and how it connects to them and their real world.

There is so much talk lately of lack of school culture and how that can lead to increased rates of bullying in schools. Quest Academy is serious about its culture within the school. How will your thinking drive or change policies on culture and bullying?

I believe a big piece of bullying is addressing that it is not acceptable with a zero tolerance policy in place. We also need to build that intrapersonal awareness and esteem among our gifted learners so that they see they have value that cannot be defined by someone else.

This is a real issue. Anxiety is common within gifted learners. When you add bullying on top of that, the anxiety is amplified even more. When we target the needs of gifted learners, beyond the academic needs, such as social emotional learning and character education, we are helping, guiding, and supporting gifted learners to understand who they are as an individual, and to be proud of who they are, to understand their different exceptionalities, and to give them tools for how to recognize if there are triggers that they might have. By celebrating the uniqueness of gifted children, we help them with future innovations that others may never even dream of.

Tell us about the Quest Academy Knights program.

At Quest Academy, our metaphor to teach children the values of good citizenship and good character is the Knights program. As part of their social emotional learning, we have identified eight characteristics of Knighthood—such as honesty, perseverance, teamwork, etc. When children come in at young ages, every student at Quest is a “Page” in the program. As they begin to grow older and demonstrate to their teachers that they are being honest, and so on, they become Squires. Every student has his or her own heraldic banner that keeps track of the traits that they have mastered. Once they have mastered all eight traits, and completed a community service project, they are Knighted. The program is designed to help instill an intrapersonal framework with a strategy that inspires confidence, good character, and humane citizenship.

When I interviewed for this position, the process included being interviewed by a team of students. It was the highlight of my interview experience. They asked me how I was going to implement all these character traits Quest teaches. It isn't just lip service. It is part of who they are. They wanted somebody that would come in and respect that and continue with the Knights program.

I've worked in multiple private schools and quite often, there is a lack of a common vocabulary and a lack of a shared understanding. The Knights program is a gamechanger at Quest Academy. This is a great example of the collaborative process model. How do we make the most of our shared time together?

As the new Quest Academy Head of School, what gap(s) do you hope to fill?

Gifted education has changed dramatically over the last 20 years. There are still schools and systems that are following gifted education models from the 1980s. We've learned so much more about how the brain learns. At Quest Academy, we will look at how we drive our curriculum, based on the latest Evidence-Based Practices, and how we provide social emotional support in today's complex world.

Do you have insights to share with teachers in other school systems?

It's so important that all educators learn to be talent scouts, rather than deficit detectives. This is a mindset change. We need to build on their skills, but also provide opportunities to show what they can do. How are we presenting opportunities to work on areas for growth and make connections in the brain?

How can parents know if their child is gifted?

It can present at different times. Some children will be speaking in full sentences at age one. Asking questions. Then, there are some gifted learners who are more non-verbal and just take off at age 4 or 5. Signals can be their vocabulary, sense of humor, the way they ask questions, or hearing the first response to “why” and taking that same line of questioning to the next level. And there is asynchronous development—they see something that is going on in the real world and it becomes so internal to them. They understand the implications. So sometimes it can be difficult emotionally for gifted learners because they are processing at such a higher cognitive level. But they're still a 4-year-old. That's why it's so important to start early with gifted education.

What do you recommend as the number one strategy for parents and teachers in helping all children learn?

I feel strongly about this! It is to build relationships so that you understand the student's or child's talents, passions, drive—who that person is. They have to find their own voice and be seen, valued, and heard. Then we know how to help them advance in their learning. Every gifted learner is different. You have to be vulnerable to take risks, and in learning, taking risks offers the process of a productive struggle that is the basis for creating important life skills. That “vulnerable risk” may be uncomfortable at first, but the resulting miracles are so worth it. 