

Hello everyone, I'm Sydney Wheeler, a senior at the Gatton Academy of Mathematics and Science in Kentucky. I'm honored and excited to be able to speak with you today about my experiences with gifted education in Kentucky.

Throughout my time in traditional public school, I was given many opportunities to advance and was met with frequent encouragement to learn and challenge myself. In elementary school, my academic team coach, Mrs. Cole, prompted us to explore, declaring that "inquiring minds want to know." In middle school, I was allowed to jump two years ahead in math with a few other classmates, taking Algebra 1 in 7th grade. During my final year at Drakes Creek Middle School, students who were well ahead of the curve in reading were placed in a new, pilot program, called the Academy, rather than a traditional reading class. We were encouraged to explore fields that interested us, doing independently-chosen, long-term projects. At Greenwood High School my guidance counselor worked with my ambitions, letting me take both Algebra 2 and pre-calculus my freshman year so that I could take AP Calculus the next. These types of opportunities kept me engaged in the classroom and challenged me to think beyond what was generally expected.

My time at Gatton has taught me that this isn't the norm; several of my current classmates didn't have the same opportunities to be challenged that I did throughout their school experiences.

Looking back, it was administrators and teachers who took action to try and challenge me or allow me to challenge myself that made a difference for me in school. Hearing those "Yes, we'll let her try," instead of "No, we don't do that" encouraged me to keep working towards excellence.

Another set of key experiences that I had as a gifted student were with the Center for Gifted Study's programs. My time spent in their summer programs for middle and high schoolers, SCATS and VAMPY, were valuable because they let me learn and enjoy learning in an environment surrounded by encouragement to explore and ask deeper questions. It wasn't weird to be excellent at math or writing or biology—and maybe, even, it was a little cool. The sense of community and comradery cultivated by the Center's programs helped me to develop as more than a bright kid. Instead of simply smart, I felt as though people saw me for my other characteristics: passionate, kind, and perhaps, if I was hitting the right punchlines, funny. In addition to the challenge provided in the classroom, these programs prompted me to explore my identity outside of intelligence.

As a student at the Gatton Academy, I've been challenged and engaged like never before. My first semester, Computer Science and Calculus Two taught me how to study and how to ask for help. My work in a research lab studying human perception has shown me how to do real lab science and how to ask and answer tough questions in my discipline. The programs that Gatton has enabled me to participate in, like study abroad trips to Britain and Costa Rica and a summer

research internship in my lab, have fostered my sense of citizenship and further developed my goals.

This fall, I took a neuroscience course at WKU, the topic which I'm planning to study as an undergraduate. Because Gatton provided me with the opportunity to take a course that I was so genuinely interested in, I found that I was engaged throughout the class. I think that's been the dominant theme throughout my school career; when I'm presented with things I'm interested in and challenged by, I am so much more engaged in my learning. It's that sentiment that has made Gatton such a well-matched academic environment for me over the past two years.

Gifted education is important. Providing opportunities, no matter how small, for bright students to be challenged and engaged matters. It's made a difference for me; my experiences with the Center for Gifted Studies, my teachers and administrators throughout elementary, middle, and high school, and especially my time at the Gatton Academy has molded me into the person and student that I am today. What gifted educators do and what legislators do for gifted Ed is important, and I'm so happy that that importance is being recognized here today.