

PATHWAY TO SUCCESS

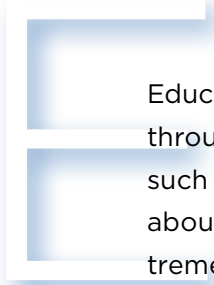
Menlo Park Academy
gives gifted children
a unique space where
they can thrive

By Lyman Millard





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Education policy debates tend to focus on students who are most apt to fall through society's cracks. Although much attention should be paid to students such as these, we mustn't overlook gifted and talented children in discussions about improving education for all. These "high flyers," after all, have tremendous potential to become the entrepreneurs and business titans who drive economic growth; the scientists and engineers who invent life-changing products; and the civic and cultural leaders who protect our way of life.

In Ohio today, approximately 250,000 students—rich and poor alike—are formally identified as gifted. Yet all too often, they sit in "grade-level" classrooms, bored with material they already know and held back by a system that too rarely challenges them. In this paper, Lyman Millard of the Bloomwell Group profiles Menlo Park Academy, a Cleveland-based charter public school that is dedicated to meeting the unique needs of gifted children. This isn't the first time we at Fordham have spotlighted Menlo Park; five years ago, Ellen Belcher wrote an article for us about the school. As recounted here, much has happened since then. Most notably, Menlo Park has moved into a sleek, refurbished home near downtown Cleveland, and it's planning to double enrollment in the coming years. But amid the changes, the school's focus on gifted education has not wavered. In the following pages, you'll read the story of how Menlo Park is helping two precocious youngsters, Cael and Teagan, thrive both educationally and socially. Should we develop more schools that nurture the innate talents of gifted children? We think so. And our hope is that this account will provide inspiration that, yes, creating specialized schools for gifted students can be done.

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— AARON CHURCHILL
Ohio Research Director
Thomas B. Fordham Institute



Heather with Cael and Teagan.

From the outside, Heather’s daughter was doing just fine at her suburban district school. “Teagan picked up concepts quickly and was one of her teachers’ favorite students,” said Heather. It was no surprise then, that she was identified as gifted.

While Teagan was excelling academically, she was having other challenges. “The older she got, the more anxiety she had about school,” said Heather. Teagan loved the academic side of school but found herself becoming increasingly isolated, especially at lunch and recess. Still, she found a close group of friends and was managing her way through elementary school, even if she was not being challenged to her full potential.

Things were very different for her younger brother, Cael. Even in preschool, it was clear that he was profoundly gifted. “When he got excited by a topic, he went really deep into it. Way beyond what you would see in a typical four-year-old,” said Heather. Given his love of learning, he was looking forward to Kindergarten, but school was a struggle for him from day one.

Cael was well above grade level in the subjects he found interesting. Yet it was nearly impossible to engage him in other subjects, and he struggled to connect with his teachers and classmates. “When Cael gets frustrated, he can just shut down,” said Heather, “and it takes a long time to get him back.” Like many gifted students, Cael experienced asynchronous development: he excelled well beyond his peers in certain areas but lagged behind in others.

Heather spent countless hours working with Cael’s teachers and district officials to make accommodations for him, but even the most experienced educators started to run out of ideas. “Cael is a square peg, and they kept trying to pound him into a round hole.” By his first-grade year, Cael’s anxiety around school had become a major roadblock. “He had grown to loathe school and began making any excuse to stay home.” It was clear to Heather that he needed a better option.

Heather's mother, a lifelong educator with a Ph.D. in child development, saw her daughter and grandchildren struggling in a traditional school. She knew Teagan wasn't happy and was especially worried for Cael. She encouraged Heather to look into moving the kids from their suburban district into a Cleveland charter public school that had been specifically designed to meet the needs of gifted learners. Menlo Park Academy proved to be just the kind of school Teagan needed to thrive. For Cael, Heather calls it "a life saver."



"This was a district with a great reputation, but they fought me on even the most basic accommodations," remembers Teri. "I was in tears, and they just kept telling me 'She'll be fine.' I knew she'd pass the tests, but she'd never meet her potential and continue to love learning."

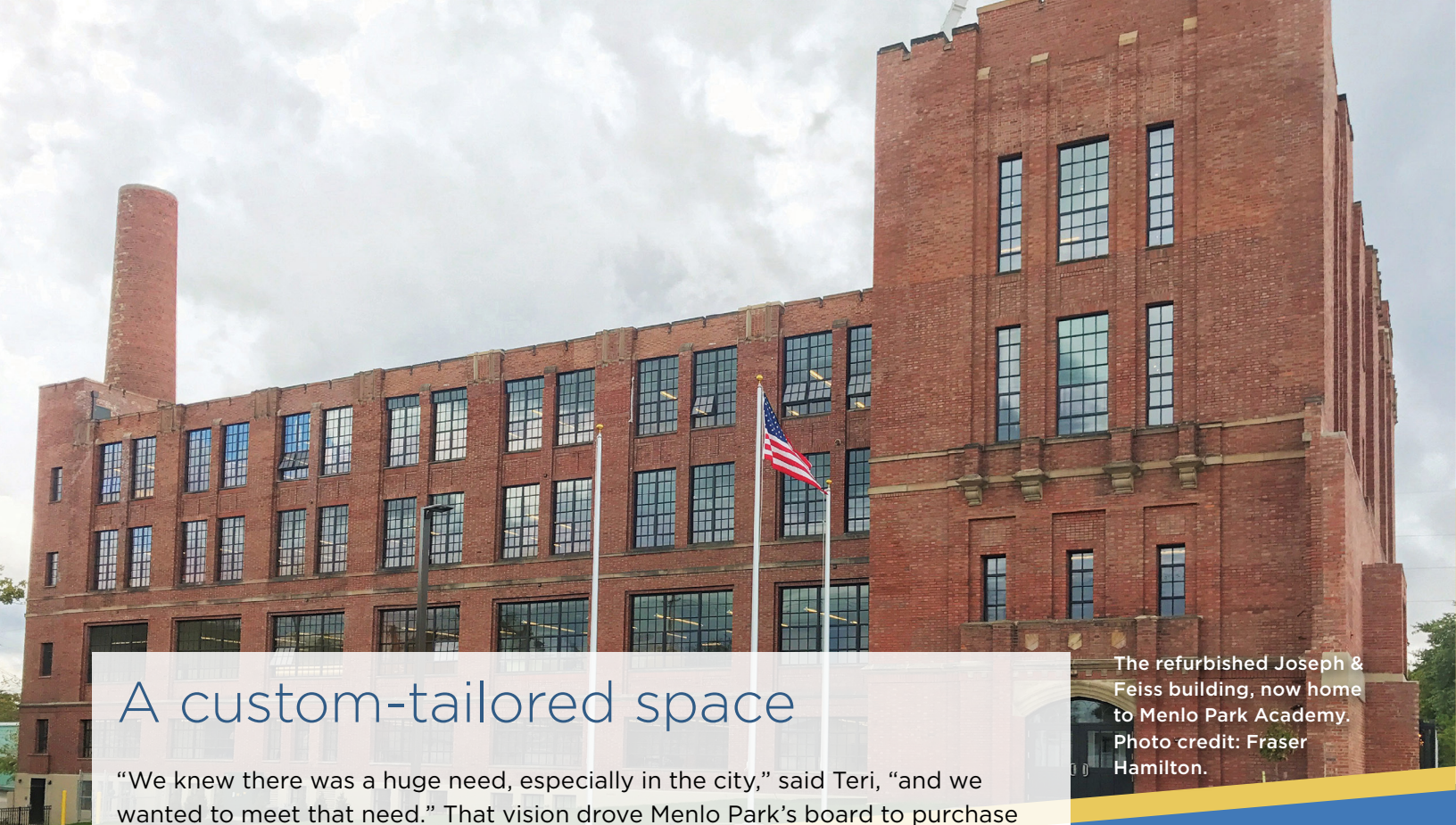
Not taking "no" for an answer

Menlo Park Academy was formed by a group of parents who refused to take no for an answer. Its founders had all sent their children to the Lorain School for the Gifted, a charter public school that was seen by parents as a "godsend" to gifted children struggling in traditional schools. The irony of gifted learners is that, despite their intelligence, many children hide their abilities or become so disenchanted with school that they drop out. In fact, the drop-out rate is so high that the Ohio Department of Education considers gifted students to be "at risk." "It's not that these kids are better; they just learn differently," said one parent of a gifted student.

Enrollment at Lorain School for the Gifted had always been small, and at the end of the 2008 school year, the school's management company decided to close it. "We saw an emergency board meeting posted on the website," remembers founder and current board chair of Menlo Park Academy Teri Harrison, "so a few of us showed up." It turns out there wasn't much to see. The board immediately went into executive session and emerged about an hour later to tell the parents the school was closing. Instead of accepting the decision, the parents began working to take over the school's charter.

A small group of parents worked all summer with the school staff, landlord, and school's sponsor to transfer the charter from its old governing board to one formed by the school's parents. However, by the beginning of the school year, it still wasn't clear that Menlo Park was going to be able to open, so Teri enrolled her children in their local district. "This was a district with a great reputation, but they fought me on even the most basic accommodations," remembers Teri. "I was in tears, and they just kept telling me 'She'll be fine.' I knew she'd pass the tests, but she'd never meet her potential and continue to love learning." Despite a last-minute delay that nearly derailed the process, the state approved the charter transfer just days before the deadline, and Menlo Park Academy opened its doors in September.

The school opened with only thirty-eight students, but as word quickly spread among the tight-knit gifted community, enrollment grew to sixty students by the end of its first year. Enrollment continued to swell as the school moved into a series of former Catholic school buildings located on the outskirts of Cleveland. By 2015, Menlo Park had 400 students and a long wait list. Some school leaders might have been satisfied, but Menlo Park's leadership wanted to do more for Cleveland's gifted students.



The refurbished Joseph & Feiss building, now home to Menlo Park Academy. Photo credit: Fraser Hamilton.

A custom-tailored space

“We knew there was a huge need, especially in the city,” said Teri, “and we wanted to meet that need.” That vision drove Menlo Park’s board to purchase and renovate the Joseph & Feiss building, a former garment manufacturing facility located just west of downtown Cleveland. The building had been closed for more than a decade and sat in disrepair, even becoming a popular target for graffiti artists. Thanks to a mix of tax credits and loans, Menlo Park Academy was able to breathe new life into an iconic building and create a learning space designed to meet their students’ needs.

The Joseph & Feiss building was a blank canvas where Menlo’s educators could finally design a space to meet their unique academic model. They dedicated most of the building to open learning spaces that encourage creativity, flexibility, and collaboration. They included small nooks throughout the building for kids who need quiet spaces to read, study, and reflect. The furniture is also unique: a mix of traditional desks, soft chairs, and several types of seats designed specifically for the sensory challenges common among profoundly gifted kids. In addition to these practical concerns, they also made use of the building’s large windows, historic features, and some of the more artful graffiti to create a beautifully unique learning space.

The new, larger location brought new opportunity to Menlo Park Academy. Its leaders entered into a formal partnership with the Cleveland Metropolitan School District, as part of The Cleveland Plan. Some critics had questioned the district partnering with a school they saw as too small and serving students from communities outside of the city. Yet their move closer to downtown and nearly doubling in size over the coming years “gives Menlo the chance to help close the opportunity gap for hundreds of gifted learners in Cleveland,” says Teri. Less than a year after moving to their new location, Cleveland’s need for a school like Menlo Park Academy became even more pronounced as the district considered merging its only gifted school into a traditional neighborhood school.

“The best way to engage gifted kids is to challenge them, let them fail a little and push them to come up with their own answers.”

— RACHEL MABE



Cael working in Rachel Mabe’s classroom.



“At my old school, I got bored easily, so I stopped engaging. But at Menlo that isn’t an option. Menlo encourages creative liberty and open thinking with a lot of interactive projects; it’s completely different.” — TEAGAN

Appreciating differences

On a recent visit to Menlo Park Academy, Rachel Mabe’s fourth grade class is digging into a challenge they’d been working on all year: a zombie apocalypse. Integrating social studies, math, science, and language arts, Rachel has created an engaging “zombie-based curriculum.” During this visit, her students play a life-sized board game that combines lessons on teamwork, entrepreneurship, product development, pricing, marketing, economic systems, and equity—all while trying to survive the zombies.

About ten minutes in, Rachel stops the game: “I just had an argument with this group over here, and I want to share it with the rest of the class because it was really good.” It turns out Rachel designed the game to be intentionally vague: “Real life doesn’t come with a rule book.” The class has a quick conversation on how students could adjust their strategies to be more successful. The students enthusiastically dive back into the game. Talking with Rachel after class, she explains her rationale. “The best way to engage gifted kids is to challenge them, let them fail a little and push them to come up with their own answers.”

One student noticeably absent from the game is Cael. He sits in a corner with his head down for most of the class, only looking up once or twice. Rachel explains, “Cael’s having a tough day, so we’re giving him his space.” He may not be engaging with the class, but Rachel knows from experience that he’s taking it all in. “Cael has a different learning style, and he keeps us on our toes, but we’re figuring out when we need to push him and when we need to support him.”

Cael’s mom Heather couldn’t be happier with the way Menlo approaches these challenges. “Menlo is used to kids who are just different.” She appreciates that the teachers and leaders at Menlo Park Academy maintain a supportive environment, frequently making accommodations or finding alternative ways for their gifted student to demonstrate mastery. “I feel really well supported,” says Heather. “We’re all working together to help Cael, and I really appreciate that they are constantly willing to meet him halfway.”

As for her daughter Teagan, while she initially struggled with the higher-level content when she changed schools, she’s thriving at Menlo. “At my old school, I got bored easily, so I stopped engaging,” she says. But at Menlo, that isn’t an option. “Menlo encourages creative liberty and open thinking with a lot of interactive projects; it’s completely different.” Teagan especially loves this year’s bright, open, and fluid new learning space. “It’s a lot more comfortable and breathable,” says Teagan. “They brought the whole idea of Menlo and what it means to be a gifted learner to light.”

Menlo Park Academy families often say, “We don’t know what we would do without Menlo.” For Teagan, Menlo offers her the challenge and freedom to fully develop her abilities and love of learning. For her brother Cael, his teachers’ flexibility and experience ensure his amazing gifts do not derail him academically. Over the coming years, Menlo Park Academy will grow to provide these same opportunities to more than 800 gifted students each school year. As Ohio’s only K-8 gifted and talented school, Menlo Park Academy will be many gifted children’s best hope for reaching their true potential.

