

Grade Acceleration Case Study: The Scholar Athlete
Grade Acceleration: 7th to 9th Grade

Submitted by Parents of a Scholar Athlete

“Julie” is an athletic fourteen-year-old completing her freshman year at an Ohio OCC Division 1 high school. She is and has always been a “straight ‘A’” student.

Because she was reading at age two and understood basic math, Julie was tested by a school psychologist for early admission to kindergarten when she was four years old at her parents’ request. She was accepted. However, her parents recognized that she was an introverted child who did not adapt to new situations easily and reconsidered early entrance, opting instead for a second year of pre-school.

About the time Julie was in kindergarten, she began to show athletic ability beyond the average five-year-old. She participated in a variety of sports at the YMCA and recreational leagues.

By second grade, Julie was splitting her day with reading and math in a 3rd grade classroom and the rest of the day in second grade. The following year the building principal wanted to accelerate her to 4th grade. Julie’s family thought it would be doing her a disservice socially because of her shy personality. It would also have forced her to compete athletically with older children, and they refused the placement.

Instead, Julie’s parents requested a 3rd grade, 4th grade split as had been done the previous year. The building principal denied this request based on the fact that the district’s elementary buildings house only K-4. A 4th/5th split would involve two buildings in different parts of town, the elementary and the intermediate school, as that would be the logical next step if a 3rd/4th split was granted.

Mid-way through the year the district’s gifted coordinator developed a plan for Julie that allowed the building’s gifted teacher to be Julie’s reading teacher, essentially an independent study program. In addition, a high school honors student athlete worked with Julie at least once per week designing a web site as well as other special projects.

Julie’s 4th grade teacher was experienced with gifted students and did an outstanding job meeting her academic and social needs while understanding her organizational challenges. She also had several friends who supported her in keeping track of materials and assignments. She scored in the advanced proficient level in all categories of the Ohio Fourth-grade Proficiency tests. Julie developed more friendships and regained some self esteem which was quite low at the end of 3rd grade.

Unfortunately, 5th grade was even more disappointing than 3rd grade had been. In preparing for a new building, Julie’s mother met with the guidance department to request that Julie be placed in a situation similar to 4th grade. She was placed in the homeroom of the building’s literacy coordinator. None of her friends from her elementary building

were in her class, and she didn't make new ones. The teacher required massive amounts of what Julie perceived to be busy work. There were daily journals and weekly journals in reading and writing that Julie could never quite keep straight as to the teacher's requirements for each. The teacher was very rigid in requiring things to be done a certain way which caused Julie to be frequently in trouble over organizational and materials management issues, never the quality of her work.

On the Stanford Achievement Test Series, Ninth Edition, taken in October of Julie's 5th grade year, she scored in the 98th percentile for total reading, the 99th percentile for total math, 99th percentile for language, 98th percentile for science, and 99th percentile for social studies. On the Otis-Lennon School Ability Test, Seventh Edition, her total SAI score was 141, 99th percentile, with a verbal score of 131 and nonverbal score of 147.

The only thing that got Julie through the year was the district's gifted department which had her one full day per week. She lived for Tuesdays.

In January of her 6th grade year, at age 12 years, 2 months, Julie took the SAT in which she scored an 1100: verbal 590 and math 510. The Midwest Talent Search honored her for the verbal score and sent a packet of materials with suggestions for 7th grade based on her scores.

Julie's parents met with the Middle School guidance, administration, and gifted staff requesting advanced work and appropriate placement for her based on the SAT scores and recommendations. However, the school was not set up to meet their requests and little assurance was given that Julie would receive the services her tests scores, school records, and personality all indicated were needed.

After the first nine weeks of 7th grade, Julie and another student were pulled from their language arts class to work independently with the gifted teacher in place of the 7th grade curriculum. Creative writing, in depth research, and special projects were individualized to meet her needs. In addition, the Middle School gifted teacher enjoyed working with her, understood her sense of humor, and challenged her to further develop her creativity.

At the same time Julie continued to excel as an athlete in two sports. She was active in both school and travel competition in both. She again took the SAT in January at age 13 and improved her score by 40 points to an 1140. She complained daily about being bored and that her class work was too easy.

At this point, Julie's parents began to pursue an option in the district of taking several classes at the high school while remaining an 8th grader. Julie was most interested in English or a foreign language since none were available at the Middle School. There was one large concern, however. Even though the Middle School and High School were within walking distance of each other, her parents were aware of Julie's continued struggle with time management and organizational issues and envisioned many misplaced books and assignments and late arrivals.

Julie and her parents discussed options with the gifted coordinator and guidance department. Again, the option of grade acceleration was discussed. From an athletic perspective, many families make choices allowing their child to be one of the older competitors. With a November birthday, this had never been an issue. Even though it meant moving to a different building and competing with older athletes, Julie and her parents decided there was nothing further academically that the Middle School had to offer Julie and that had to come first for her. She was to move from 7th to 9th grade.

Much of the transition occurred during the summer. In order to qualify for the appropriate math placement in 9th grade honors geometry, Julie was required to demonstrate proficiency in Algebra which she would have taken in 8th grade. Her 7th grade math teacher tutored her and certified her course completion after six weeks. However, the biggest change was in the athletic department's expectation for high school versus middle school athletes. There were team camps and other events which had to be fit into a summer that had been scheduled with events such as OWjL Camp for Julie and activities for her younger siblings with the expectation that she would be entering 8th rather than 9th grade. It was a challenging summer for her entire family.

"I was afraid," said Julie. "I didn't want to make the move that much. I did it because my parents made me. Now, I am glad we did. It has been good," she continued. "It is easier to make friends because more kids are at your level. Being in athletics helps you get to know people. It helps if you are good. They can tell you belong there."

Julie played at the JV level in both of her sports with some varsity playing time. More importantly, she excelled in her classes with A+'s and A's. At first, making new friends outside the sports arena was challenging as Julie remains an introvert and an independent thinker. However, as the year progressed, she developed friendships in the classroom.

While there have been moments when her confidence wavered, Julie believes more in herself and is more in tune with her academic abilities and goals. She applied to an academically challenging boarding school and was accepted, something she would not have had the confidence to do prior to the grade acceleration. Ultimately, her parents decided this was not the path that made sense for the entire family. Nevertheless, it speaks to Julie's desire to reach beyond the familiar and see where her academic and athletic potential might lead.

Julie and her family are proponents of gifted services for all identified students and, where appropriate, grade acceleration with any necessary supports. Without the gifted coordinators' and teachers' support and suggestions throughout Julie's school years, she would not be the accomplished young woman she is today.