Finding the Missing Gifted Student

November 5, 2026

Lorie Sisk, Gifted Support Service Specialist

MISSISSIPPI
DEPARTMENT OF
EDUCATION

Vision

Every student is prepared for success.

Mission

To build a world-class education system that equips every student with the knowledge and skills to succeed in college, careers, and life in Mississippi and the world.

Strategic Plan Goals

1. Every child has access to a high-quality early childhood program and is prepared for kindergarten
2. Every student develops strong literacy and mathematics skills in all grades
3. Every student graduates prepared for success in college, career, or military service
4. Every school and district demonstrates strong academic outcomes and continuous improvement
5. Every school is fully staffed with qualified, effective teachers and leaders
6. All students attend schools and districts with safe, engaging, and supportive environments

Agenda

11/5/2026 Finding the Missing Gifted Student

Point 1: Find the "Why"

Point 2: Build Relationships Before Expectations

Point 3: Give Students More Voice

Point 4: Make Learning Authentic

Point 5: Challenge Without Overwhelming

Point 6: Build Belonging

Point 7: Discover Hidden Interests

Point 8: Celebrate Strengths

Point 10: Talk With Students—Not About Them

Point 11: Partner With Families

Point 12: Watch for Warning Signs

The Student I'll Never Forget

11/5/2026 Finding the Missing Gifted Student



Think of one gifted student who:

- refused to come
- quit participating
- never completed projects
- wanted to stay in the regular classroom
- had tremendous ability but little motivation

Think about these questions:

- What made this student memorable?
- What frustrated you?
- What do you wish you had understood sooner?

Keep this student in mind throughout today's session. By the end, we're going to build a plan specifically for that student.

Find the WHY



Many teachers immediately jump to solutions.

Instead...

Become a detective.

Gifted students rarely disengage "for no reason."

Possible reasons include:

Find the WHY

11/5/2026 Finding the Missing Gifted Student

Academic Reasons	Social	Emotional
• Too easy	• Friends aren't in gifted	• Anxiety
• Too hard	• Doesn't feel accepted	• Depression
• Perfectionism	• Doesn't want attention	• Stress
• Fear of failure		• Burnout

Find the WHY

11/5/2026 Finding the Missing Gifted Student

Personal

- Family responsibilities
- Sleep deprivation
- Extracurricular overload

Program

- Same activities every year
- Too many worksheets
- Not enough challenge
- Doesn't match interests

Activity

11/5/2026 Finding the Missing Gifted Student

Disengaged Student Scenarios

Brainstorm:

- "What might really be going on?"
- There are no wrong answers.
- The goal is considering multiple possibilities before making assumptions.

Scenario 1: I’d Rather Stay

11/5/2026 Finding the Missing Gifted Student

Jordan – Grade 4

Jordan qualified for gifted in second grade and was excited during his first year. Now, every week, he asks if he can remain in his regular classroom instead of attending gifted.

His classroom teacher says he enjoys science and often helps classmates. His gifted teacher notices that Jordan completes every assignment but rarely smiles or joins discussions. During projects, he does just enough to finish and then quietly waits for others.

When asked if anything is wrong, he simply shrugs and says,

"I'd just rather stay in my class."

Discussion Questions

What facts do you know?

What assumptions might teachers make?

What are three possible reasons for Jordan's behavior?

What questions would you ask Jordan?

Scenario 2: The Perfectionist

11/5/2026 Finding the Missing Gifted Student

Emily – Grade 5

Emily earns outstanding grades in every subject.

She spends hours making every project perfect.

During gifted, she frequently erases her work, starts over, and worries that it isn't good enough.

When projects are shared, Emily often asks not to present.

If she receives constructive feedback, she becomes upset and sometimes cries.

Her parents describe her as "very hard on herself."

Discussion Questions

Is Emily disengaged?

What might be causing her reluctance?

How might perfectionism affect participation?

What supports could eventually help?

Scenario 3: The Inventor

11/5/2026 Finding the Missing Gifted Student

Marcus – Grade 6

Marcus loves building things.

He can spend hours creating elaborate LEGO structures, designing video games, and taking apart electronics.

However, during gifted he refuses to complete written reflections.

He often says,

"Can't I just show you instead?"

Teachers describe him as capable but unmotivated.

His parents say he spends most evenings creating inventions in the garage with his grandfather.

Discussion Questions

Is Marcus unmotivated?

What strengths stand out?

What barriers might exist?

What additional information would you need?

Scenario 4: The Quiet Student

11/5/2026 Finding the Missing Gifted Student

Sophia – Grade 3

Sophia consistently scores among the highest students in her grade.

She attends gifted every week but rarely speaks.

She chooses to work alone whenever possible.

During discussions she avoids eye contact.

Her written work is exceptional.

When classmates present ideas, Sophia quietly writes notes but almost never shares her own thinking.

Several teachers have commented,

"I wish she'd participate more."

Discussion Questions

Is participation always verbal?

Could quietness be mistaken for disengagement?

How would you learn more about Sophia?

Scenario 5: Finished Already

11/5/2026 Finding the Missing Gifted Student

Tyler – Grade 5

Tyler completes every activity in record time.

After finishing, he often spins in his chair, distracts classmates, or asks repeatedly,

"What do I do now?"

Teachers say he has enormous potential but is becoming increasingly disruptive.

Tyler says,

"This is easy."

Discussion Questions

What might Tyler need?

What assumptions should teachers avoid?

What information would you gather?

Scenario 6: The Social Student

11/5/2026 Finding the Missing Gifted Student

Ava – Grade 4

Ava qualified for gifted this year.

She enjoys learning and performs well academically.

However, every gifted day she becomes upset before leaving class.

She tells her parents,

"My best friends stay behind."

Her classroom teacher says Ava participates enthusiastically during regular classroom lessons but becomes withdrawn in gifted.

Discussion Questions

What might Ava be experiencing?

What questions would you ask her?

Could belonging be affecting participation?

Scenario 7: The Hidden Leader

11/5/2026 Finding the Missing Gifted Student

Carlos – Grade 6

Carlos rarely volunteers answers in gifted.

He sits quietly during discussions and often appears disengaged.

However, during field day, robotics competitions, and service projects, classmates naturally follow his lead.

Teachers consistently describe him as respectful and dependable.

When assigned leadership roles in gifted, Carlos declines them.

Discussion Questions

What strengths do you notice?

Why might leadership appear in one setting but not another?

What additional information is needed?

Scenario 8: The Missing Assignments

11/5/2026 Finding the Missing Gifted Student

Lily – Grade 5

Lily generates amazing ideas during brainstorming.

Her questions are thoughtful and creative.

However, many projects are never finished.

Materials are frequently misplaced.

She often forgets deadlines and becomes overwhelmed by large assignments.

When reminded, she says,

"I wanted to do it...I just forgot."

Discussion Questions

Does unfinished work always indicate lack of motivation?

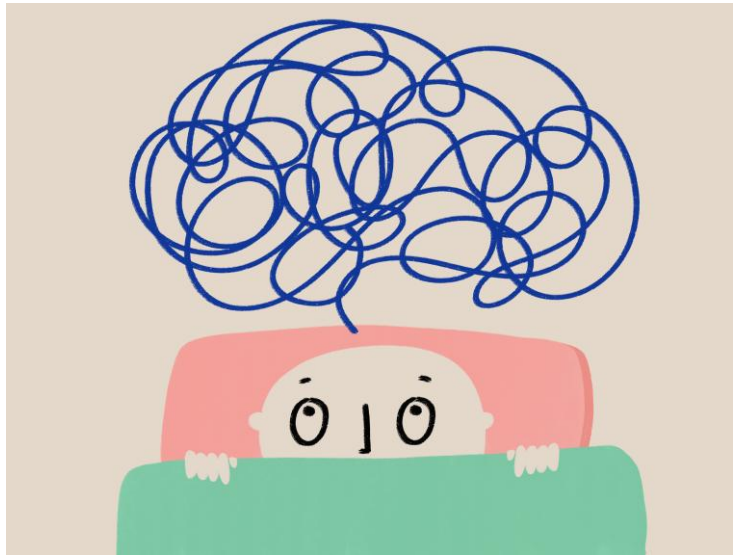
What possible barriers could exist?

What supports might help later?

Debrief

11/5/2026 Finding the Missing Gifted Student

The same behavior can have many different causes. Before choosing an intervention, we must understand the student's story. The goal is not to fix the student but to discover what is preventing them from fully engaging in gifted learning.



Build Relationships Before Expectations

11/5/2026 Finding the Missing Gifted Student

Students don't care how much we know until they know we care.

Gifted students often hide behind:

- humor
- sarcasm
- perfectionism
- silence

Relationships uncover motivation.

Ideas:

- Interest interviews
- Lunch with students
- Attend performances
- Read books they recommend
- Learn favorite YouTubers
- Know siblings
- Celebrate birthdays

Build Relationships Before Expectations

11/5/2026 Finding the Missing Gifted Student

Example

- A student hated every research project.
- Teacher discovered he loved fishing.
- Next project?
- Designing the perfect bass fishing tournament.
- Engagement skyrocketed.

Activity

- Create five questions you'd ask one reluctant student.

Give Students More Voice

11/5/2026 Finding the Missing Gifted Student

Gifted students crave autonomy.

Instead of assigning:

"Research Abraham Lincoln."

Try:

"Choose any leader who changed history."

Or...

"Choose anyone who SHOULD be remembered."



Give Students More Voice

11/5/2026 Finding the Missing Gifted Student

The Choice Menu

Students choose:

- Research topic
- Partner
- Technology
- Product
- Audience
- Difficulty level
- Presentation style



Make Learning Authentic

11/5/2026 Finding the Missing Gifted Student

Ask:

Would an adult enjoy this? If not...

Why would a gifted student?

Instead of a Research paper

Do:

Podcast

Museum exhibit

TED Talk

Business pitch

Community campaign

Escape room

Children's book

App design

Challenge Without Overwhelming

11/5/2026 Finding the Missing Gifted Student

Gifted students need challenge... Not frustration.

Discuss

Flow Zone

Too easy → boredom

Too hard → anxiety

Just right → engagement

Challenge Without Overwhelming

11/5/2026 Finding the Missing Gifted Student

Examples of scaffolds:

- Graphic organizers
- Models
- Mini conferences
- Peer coaching
- Milestones

Challenge Without Overwhelming

11/5/2026 Finding the Missing Gifted Student

Activity: Rate assignments

- Too easy 
- Too hard 
- Just right 

Challenge Without Overwhelming

11/5/2026 Finding the Missing Gifted Student

Gifted students are like racehorses, bursting with potential, speed, and energy. But here's the catch: without the right guidance, they can either run wild or burn out much quicker than you'd expect. As educators or parents, we often find ourselves in a tricky spot—how do you push these bright minds to their limits without crossing the line into overwhelm? It's a balancing act, and honestly, it's one of the most challenging tasks in education.

It's tempting to think, "If they're gifted, they can handle more, right?" Not necessarily. Gifted students can easily become overwhelmed if the challenges are too intense or they're thrown too many at once. This can lead to:

- **Burnout**: They may become exhausted, lose interest in learning, or even stop trying altogether.
- **Perfectionism**: Gifted students often set extremely high expectations for themselves. Constantly pushing them to their limits can exacerbate this tendency.
- **Anxiety and stress**: While they may appear confident, these students can feel immense pressure to succeed, leading to unnecessary stress and anxiety.

The goal is to find that sweet spot where students feel challenged but not crushed by the weight of expectations.

Challenge Without Overwhelming

11/5/2026 Finding the Missing Gifted Student

- Differentiate the Curriculum
- Use Open Ended Questions and Projects
- Introduce Independent Study
- Encourage Peer Collaboration
- Focus on Depth, not Just Speed
- Incorporate Critical Thinking and Problem Solving
- Provide Opportunities for Leadership
- Address Emotional Needs

Remember, it's not about pushing harder or faster—it's about fostering a love for learning that will carry them through life. After all, education isn't a sprint; it's a marathon. And gifted students, like everyone else, need the right pacing to go the distance.

Build Belonging

11/5/2026 Finding the Missing Gifted Student

Many gifted students say:

"I'm weird."

"I'm different."

"No one gets me."

Teachers create belonging by:

- Normalizing mistakes
- Celebrating quirky interests
- Using collaborative challenges
- Having classroom traditions
- Student leadership

Build Belonging

11/5/2026 Finding the Missing Gifted Student

Activity:

What classroom routines communicate

"You belong here."



Discover Hidden Interests

11/5/2026 Finding the Missing Gifted Student

One interest (passion) project can transform participation.

Examples:

- Architecture
- Crime Scene Investigation
- Fashion Design
- Artificial Intelligence
- Sports Analytics
- Movie Production
- Game Design
- Animal Rehabilitation
- Space Exploration
- Food Science

Celebrate Growth, not Perfection

11/5/2026 Finding the Missing Gifted Student

Gifted students often believe:

If I'm not immediately good...

- I'm not gifted.
- Teach
- Mistakes
- Iteration
- Drafting
- Revision
- Resilience



Celebrate Growth, not Perfection

11/5/2026 Finding the Missing Gifted Student

Famous Failures

Thomas Edison

J.K. Rowling

Michael Jordan

James Dyson

SpaceX

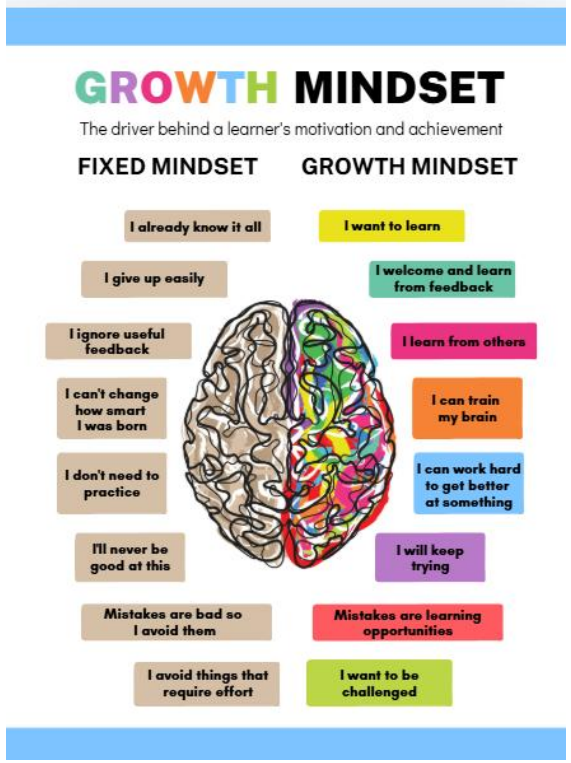
Share Personal Failures

11/5/2026 Finding the Missing Gifted Student

Activity:

Discuss what students learn when teachers model mistakes.

Growth Mindset:



MISSISSIPPI DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

Give Learning Purpose

11/5/2026 Finding the Missing Gifted Student

Gifted students ask

"Why does this matter?"

Give them real audiences.

Examples

- Design playgrounds
- Create museum exhibits
- Develop community service
- Interview veterans
- Design city parks
- Create children's books
- Present to the school board

Listen More Than You Talk

11/5/2026 Finding the Missing Gifted Student

Teachers often assume.

Students know.

Use:

- Exit slips
- Surveys
- Student advisory groups
- One-minute conferences
- Reflection journals

What are five questions that uncover student voice.

Student Case Studies

Ashley Barefoot
Gifted Education Teacher
Lamar County Schools



Partner With Families

11/5/2026 Finding the Missing Gifted Student

Families know motivation.

Questions:

- What excites your child?
- When do they lose track of time?
- What frustrates them?
- How can gifted support those interests?

The Missing Student Action Plan

11/5/2026 Finding the Missing Gifted Student

Return to the student from the opening activity.

Complete:

- Student strengths
- Possible barriers
- Engagement strategies
- Resources needed
- Timeline
- Success indicators

The Missing Student Action Plan

11/5/2026 Finding the Missing Gifted Student

Closing Activity

"The Missing Student"

Share ONE strategy they will implement this year.

Every disengaged gifted student represents an opportunity—not a failure. When we slow down, listen carefully, build relationships, and design learning that is meaningful, many of our "missing" students begin to reappear. Sometimes the difference isn't a new curriculum or a new program. Sometimes it's one caring teacher who refuses to give up on a child.

Finding the Missing Gifted Student

Lorie Sisk
Gifted Support Service Specialist
lsisk@mdek12.org

MISSISSIPPI
DEPARTMENT OF
EDUCATION