

## The Carters: Finding the right fit meant skipping a grade

**Mason Carter was so disengaged when he started fifth grade that he made up songs about it.** He also came home so frustrated, he says, he felt like a dam that was going to burst.

Before moving to Iowa, Mason had been in a full-time, streamlined program for gifted children in Miami. His father, Andrew Carter, accepted a coaching position at a university, and the family moved to a new city, one without a full-time, self-contained gifted program. Mason languished in the regular classroom, asking for more work, which he quickly completed. It was not a happy time.

“Flags went up for us,” Andrew says. “Until that year, school was where Mason wanted to be. Where I work (in athletics), people want to promote, or sometimes even hitch their wagon to, a star. But that wasn’t happening in Mason’s classroom.”

Andrew, with Mason’s mom, Kimberly, decided they had to begin advocating for their son, or “pressing buttons,” as his father calls it. Mason began an enrichment program, but the 90-minutes-a-week “escape” it offered—Mason’s word—was not enough.

As intimidating and time-consuming as their advocacy on behalf of Mason was, Kimberly says, “we were more scared to do nothing.”

The Carters read the research and talked to gifted education researchers at the University of Iowa. At the end of fifth grade, Mason attained a perfect score on the ACT *Explore* test, a test for eighth graders. On the *Iowa Assessments* (formerly the *Iowa Tests of Basic Skills*), Mason tested in the 99th percentile in all subjects; in some subjects, his performance was similar to advanced high school students.

Mason Carter with his parents, Andrew and Kimberly.  
(Photo: Mark Tade)

The Carters began pushing for whole-grade acceleration for Mason and, after additional testing and a number of team meetings with district-level administrators and teachers, Mason was allowed to skip sixth grade. As a seventh grader, he was immediately moved out of pre-algebra and into algebra. He’s doing advanced work in other courses, too. And, most importantly, he’s loving school again.

Mason participated in the decision to skip a grade—something his parents said they would not have pursued if their son hadn’t wanted it. They note that parents may have to push for whole-grade acceleration for gifted children if that option is outside a school’s comfort zone.

“Don’t be afraid,” Andrew says. “A lot of the conventional ‘wisdom’ just doesn’t fit. The hesitancy that even some educators express always starts with the social ramifications. And in our case, we just haven’t seen that.

“Don’t believe the hype. Involve the child in the decision-making, and fully vet it with him or her.”

Andrew, who also consults in sports curriculum development, says the widely accepted Long-Term Athletic Development model holds that children don’t necessarily develop at the same rate or at the same age. The “best practice” in sports now, he adds, is to group children based on their developmental stage rather than their chronological age.

“It’s possible,” Andrew says, “that sport development theory has outpaced conventional education theory.”

Another tip Andrew offers parents seeking the right fit for their gifted child is to focus on their child—“take care of yours,” as one of his friends advised, and don’t try to reform the whole educational system. “I had to shelve my instinct to ‘fix’ the system,” Andrew says, “and instead focus on the immediate task.”