Gagné’s Differentiated Model of Giftedness and Talents (DMGT) suggests reasons why underachievement happens. (The diagram of the DMGT is found in the Giftedness and Talent Fact Sheet). If the catalysts or the developmental process are missing, weak, ineffective or not meeting the student’s needs over a period of time, then gifts will not fully develop into talents and underachievement occurs.

To identify a gifted underachiever, you must first identify the giftedness. Parents and carers are very good at recognising giftedness in their children. This can be confirmed by completing checklists and an IQ test. (More information on identifying giftedness can be found in the Identification Fact Sheet).

Gifted underachievers exist in all communities and are often found within, but are not limited to, culturally diverse populations, communities with a low socio-economic status, and individuals with a learning difficulty.

To identify the gifted underachiever you need to measure the difference between a student’s giftedness (ability) and a student’s performance. The student’s performance can be assessed using one of many standardised tests. Schools need to ensure the age, literacy level, cultural background and other characteristics of the students are considered when selecting the test(s). Any resulting difference can be used to confirm underachievement. In addition, gifted individuals who have a specific learning difficulty may also underperform in tests or other usually reliable measures. Careful observation by teachers and parents is a necessary component for determining giftedness.

A useful way to understand the feelings, behaviours and needs of gifted students has been developed by Neihart and Betts (2010) in the form of six different ‘Profiles of the Gifted and Talented’. Five of these profiles are particularly useful for understanding gifted underachievers. Revised Profiles of the Gifted and Talented are detailed in the table below.

Gifted underachievers may share some common motivational and attitudinal characteristics. They may lack the motivation to achieve and will need intervention strategies to enable their giftedness to be identified.

The characteristic found most frequently and consistently among gifted underachievers is low self-esteem. These individuals do not believe they are capable of accomplishing what their families or teachers expect of them or what they should expect of themselves; in fact, the low self-esteem they feel may be directly related to these pressures to ‘be gifted’.

Student performance which is noticeably short of potential can be a very frustrating challenge for both teachers and parents or carers. While it may seem difficult to reverse a long-standing pattern of underachievement, there are models or strategies which have proven to be very successful. These models require collaboration between the school and the student’s family in the implementation of a series of steps.

It also requires parents, carers, teachers and other relevant professionals to be patient, dedicated and supportive.
GIFTED AND TALENTED GIFTED UNDERACHIEVERS

Acknowledgement: Maureen Neihart and George Betts, 2010

Type 6: The Autonomous Learner

Freedom to make choices;
Lifelong learning modelled;
College and career planning;
No time and space restrictions;
Friends of all ages;
Inclusion in family decision making;
Support for risk-taking;
Facilitation of continuing growth;
Self understanding and acceptance;
Affirmation of their strengths;
Gifted role models provided;
No time and space restrictions;
Inclusion in family decision making;
Help to build a support team;
Role models who cross cultures;
An audience to listen to what they have to express;
Can be confident enough to communicate to them;
Confidence in their abilities affirmed;
Risk-taking opportunities provided;
Strategies to cope with potential psychological vulnerabilities.

Type 3: The Underground

They can feel conflicted, guilty to the 'forced-choice dilemma' – the choice between excelling academically and being accepted by the peer group – by... acceptance. Unfortunately, they may then become afraid that they will lose this acceptance if they drop their camouflage.

Type 2: The Creative

They can have a diminished sense of self.

Type 1: The Successful

An environment that develops strengths; To learn to self-advocate;
To develop resilience;
To develop an incremental view of their abilities;
Emphasis on strengths:
Self-control nurtured.

Type 4: The At-Risk

Can develop the will to succeed;
To develop an incremental view of their abilities;
Emphasis on strengths:
Self-control nurtured.

Type 5: The Twice-Multi Exceptional

May feel guilty for denying their gifts.

Often, the focus is on the disability rather than on the whole child.

Types 1-5 are profiles of gifted underachievers; an important goal of gifted programs is to assist all gifted students to become Type 6: Autonomous Learners.