



home & school REPORT



Be PRACTICAL

Effective Advocacy in Small Town America
by Kathy Jones

Living in rural America can be a joyous experience. It is a safe place to raise a family, a place where you know your neighbors, and where people help each other by coming together for common causes. In a small town, you can be anywhere in ten minutes. You don't have to stand in line for movie tickets, but can arrive at the theater five minutes before the movie starts and still get a good seat. And if you want to see someone, she will probably be at the high school game on Friday night. Small town life, though, is not like Lake Wobegon. Outside observers (and most teens) think there is "nothing to do." The community may be quite conservative and not culturally diverse; its citizens having less income, less education, and limited travel experiences. Exposure to the arts is usually inadequate. And, due to fewer dollars and a possible educational philosophy that could be labeled as "what was good enough for grandpa," schools may not provide many extras.

When it comes to educational advocacy, especially for gifted education services, all parents may experience struggles. But, in rural areas, it takes extra care, effort, practice, collaboration, and devotion to make effective change.

Advocacy is defined as speaking or writing in support of something. We all advocate daily, selling our ideas of what we want or think is important. Though the concept of advocacy is simple, being an effective salesperson is not. Effective advocates have special characteristics that allow them to accomplish their goals. Effective advocates are PRACTICAL.

- P** Persistent (Never give up.)
- R** Resourceful (Including people, information, strategies, funding.)
- A** Articulate (Speaking and writing skills are critical.)
- C** Creative (In ideas, solutions, and strategies.)
- T** Tactful (Be blunt and firm, but tactful. It's hard to regain trust.)
- I** Informed (Keep abreast of factual information and trends.)
- C** Courageous (If you don't support positive efforts, who will?)
- A** Aware (Every school has its politics. Be aware of them.)
- L** Leaders (Learn leadership techniques and apply them.)

Be Persistent

Change takes time and it is even slower in small towns. Due to what are often conservative attitudes, there may be a belief that what used to define a quality education is still the standard. When parents are focused on the needs of gifted learners, others may not understand or even care. It takes a lot of small steps to make systemic change. Even if a new program or service won't affect your child anymore, it is still worth your advocacy time and efforts. There will always be children who will benefit. In addition, because there may be a lack of understanding of the needs of high-ability learners in your community, your efforts may take longer; changing attitudes is a long-term process.

Be Resourceful

Some resources, like funding, are limited in a small town. But there are human resources that can be tapped. Find people (including the students themselves) who can benefit from advocacy efforts. Students, including those already graduated, may have the strongest voices.

Are there grants available for areas with a high population of students receiving free or reduced price lunches? Are local business people, farmers, and other leaders willing to fund school improvement so their future work force can find creative solutions to challenges?

Collaboration with friends is a mainstay of small town life. Often you are on committees or in clubs with those who can help improve the quality of services for gifted and other high-ability students. You know someone (or someone who knows someone) who works in every aspect of the community that could be a mentor. High-quality gifted education services can and should extend beyond the school day. Not all services have to be provided by teachers.

Be Articulate

Develop speaking and writing skills. Learning to write effective letters or editorials is a boost to anyone wanting to make good impressions. As parents, it is critical to be clear and concise, yet not offensive, when you address school officials,

teachers, or other stakeholders. You won't get the respect you deserve if you use poor grammar while trying to explain the needs of gifted students.

In small towns conversations seem to work better than formal presentations. You will find many opportunities to discuss adding challenging opportunities for students in the local schools over coffee, at a social gathering, after church, in a downtown store, at a ballgame, or with members of your 4-H club. These conversations should be calm and forthright, without letting them become argumentative. If you have a good understanding of the needs of high-ability students and their characteristics it will be easy to mention something that becomes food for thought. Another time you can add to the discussion. And as opinions begin to change, you will start to see progress.

Be Creative

Find innovative ways to solve the problems that exist. Can you write a grant? Who can volunteer to organize field trips? Can you run the end-around play to get something done? There is no reason to be subversive, but there are ways to achieve your goals and still play by the rules. Brainstorm ways to get policy changes. School board policy (a public document) is the rule of the school. What does it say about challenging curriculum? Is there a statement about all students making educational progress? Are students allowed to start school early? Get dual credit? Take algebra early? Skip a grade? Gain credit by exam? Does state law have anything to say about these areas?

Is the school board supportive of gifted education? Have you considered running for the board or encouraging supporters to become teachers, principals, or policymakers? (Gifted students can make very good teachers, not just attorneys, doctors and engineers.) If you don't feel comfortable approaching someone in a position of power, who do you know who will? Another parent? A teacher?

Be Tactful

It is hard to regain trust and mend fences. With a relatively stable population, people remember if you usurped their authority or offended them in the past. You may need to rock the boat to get your child what she or he needs, but follow the chain of command. Respecting authority does not mean taking "no" for an answer. If the problem is in the classroom, the first person to go to is the teacher. Provide a chance for change to happen. If you don't achieve positive movement, give the teacher another chance. If that doesn't work, then go to the principal. Skipping the teacher causes anger and embarrassment, because there was no chance to save face.

By offering some solutions to the problem, teachers are often willing to implement something they believe is of value and will benefit several students. Again, think conversation, not confrontation. Most teachers are not well trained in the needs of gifted children. They have many plates spinning at the same time. Adding another plate for students they perceive will "master it anyway" may not sit well with them. What can you ask for that becomes a time saver for the teacher?

Be Informed

In small towns the understanding of what gifted students are like and what they need is too often based on belief systems that are not accurate. Read, learn, and attend state conventions. You can provide information that many in the community are not aware of. Be sure what you share is factual by using research-based information and what current literature says about gifted education. Be ready to dispel myths. You can have a more interesting discussion if you have the facts, know the policies, and know the laws.

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Remember, most teachers are not trained to teach gifted children. Most colleges and universities do not provide for this special area in undergraduate courses. Can you ask for staff development for teachers? Be ready to explain how this will improve education for all students. Use the Internet including NAGC's website (www.nagc.com), the National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented website (www.gifted.uconn.edu/nrcgt.html), and their links. The more information you have at your disposal the easier it is to counter bias statements and misinformation. Provide copies of articles to influential persons in the school and community and especially to parents of other gifted children. Other parents, like you, are struggling to raise special-needs children. The more who understand, the easier change will be.

Be Courageous

You may feel like a one-person army. But if you don't advocate, who will? Your child deserves to learn something new each day at school. High-ability children should not be spending the majority of their school day (or year) reviewing information and skills they already know or could learn in much less time than other students require. It is stealing their opportunity to struggle, to learn a work ethic, and to stimulate them so their potential can be more fully realized. Are your children learning to advocate for themselves?

Usually in a small town there is no parent support group for gifted education. Start one. You will soon find common bonds with other parents. In a small town, many parents don't like being known as the "pushy parent" and are less likely to speak up for their child's needs on their own. With the power of numbers, the group can be a united front and speak for many children. Contact your state gifted association or your child's gifted education teacher to find out how to start a group. Teachers may not be able to give you names of other families, but a fairly comprehensive list can usually be obtained through asking your child. Because it is a small town this information can be readily obtained through unofficial channels. It is possible that the school may feel threatened by a support group, but that doesn't mean it should be avoided. See that meetings don't become complaint sessions by providing information and discussion with a focus on improving the quality of services provided. Your state gifted education association or local university may provide free or reduced-rate speakers. Family field trips may help get parents interested in a support group.

Be Aware

Do you understand school politics? Who are the influential people? What is the problem? Is the problem a state issue, a local issue, a building issue, or a classroom issue? Are policies not being enforced? Is the problem money, time, paperwork, high caseloads, lack of university training, or lack of other resources? Find out and zero in on it. Become friends with your state gifted education association's parent liaison (see the NAGC website for links to state associations). She can give you advice or steer you to someone who can help. Many parents waste time and effort trying to fix something by going to those who don't own the problem. Take some time to analyze the situation, get the facts, and find out who has the power to change it. You may not fix the entire problem immediately, but you can make progress. Small steps, over time, solve big problems.

Be a Leader

Leaders are not always those who conduct meetings. Many successful leaders work behind the scenes. They do research, write, or make other quiet contributions. In small towns, you may be one of those or know others who prefer that role. Encourage their participation. Take charge, organize others, or work quietly.

The changes, even if you don't see them for some time, will make your little town a better place to live. Even if it takes years to gain momentum, think about the impact you will have had. Maybe your grandchildren will benefit. Progress may be slower than you want, but the future is worth the effort.

If you believe, you will advocate. You will. As Ralph Waldo Emerson said, "Nothing great was ever achieved without enthusiasm." Let your passion for your child and others like him drive you to advocate in your small town for the continued improvement of educational opportunities for gifted and other high-ability learners.

Some Recommended Resources

- Rogers, K. B. (2002). *Re-forming Gifted Education*. Scottsdale, AZ: Great Potential Press.
- Neihart, M., Reis, S., Robinson, N., & Moon, S. (Eds.). (2002). *The Social & Emotional Development of Gifted Children: What Do We Know?* Waco, TX: Prufrock Press.
- Smutny, J. F. (2000). *Stand Up for Your Gifted Child*. Minneapolis, MN: Free Spirit.

Kathy Jones was a teacher of the gifted in southeast Kansas for ten years, and is currently a member of her local school board and is First Vice President of The Kansas Association for the Gifted, Talented and Creative, (KGTC). Kathy's interest in advocating for the gifted began over 25 years ago as she began her teaching career and was cultivated during the raising of her children