

Taking a Larger Stand For Gifted Education:

**Your District, Your State
... And Beyond!**

By Dr. Joan F. Smutny

Many influential scholars and educators in the field of gifted education today began their journey as parents confronted with the reality and responsibility of raising a gifted child. Other parents who have not entered the field professionally have nevertheless had a profound influence on services for the gifted through tireless advocacy and a commitment to communicate their message to whoever will listen. It is fair to say that without the advocacy of parents, gifted education would simply not be where it is today. Many of the services and programs that exist in schools throughout the United States owe their genesis to a small band of parents who campaigned for gifted education.

This article takes the subject of parent advocacy beyond the question, “What can I do for my gifted child?” to, “What can I do for the cause of gifted education in my district or state now and in the future?” You may be a frustrated parent who has explored every avenue you can think of to get better educational services for your gifted child. Or, you may be a parent who finally found a satisfactory solution for your gifted child, but you object to the idea that parents have to campaign to get any services for their gifted children. In either case, your concern about your own child or about gifted children generally has led you to a larger view of advocacy at the district, state, or even national levels.

Work with Other Parents, Not in Isolation

If you don’t already belong to a parent group for families with gifted children, consider finding or starting one. Even contact with one other parent is better than working alone, as this mother discovered:

My fourth-grade son and I live in the city and, except for a few gifted magnet schools, there’s nothing. To get into these schools, you have to do well on standardized tests and Javier’s just never scored well. But he’s an “A” student and can write like a poet. When I started talking to his teacher, he was sympathetic to a point but said that there’s nothing he could do. He said he didn’t know anything about gifted education, and that the teachers in our district have a hard enough time dealing with overcrowded classes and hardly any resources. I kind of despaired for a while, but then I met another mother who was at the school waiting for her son Jerry, a friend of Javier and he’s also gifted. We got together and contacted our state gifted association who put us in touch with a professor who specializes in gifted education. We’ve met with her once and she gave us a whole packet of information—books we could read, procedures for starting a parent group of our own and ideas about how we could present our case to the principal, the superintendent, etc. We have a long way to go but we feel at least we have an advocate to help us and we don’t have to wait until that magical day when we move to another district. We can start working for changes right now.

Working together enables parents to pool ideas and resources, identify concerns, establish common goals, develop plans and strategies for action, and share responsibilities.

Parent groups come in all forms. Some may have only a few parents who unite to achieve specific goals (e.g., getting professional development in gifted education for the teachers at their school; hiring a gifted education coordinator; lowering the age for the school’s gifted program). On the other side of the spectrum are larger, more permanent groups who hold regular meetings for a variety of purposes including social events, sponsored lectures, long-term campaigns at the district and state level, and networking sessions to organize their own summer gifted programs.

Shopping for a parent group. If you wish to join an already established parent group, contact your principal, your district office, or state gifted association to find out what groups exist in your area. The NAGC website (www.nagc.org) can help you locate an organization in your state. Once you locate one, arrange to attend a meeting. Ask in advance what activities the group is currently engaged in and what the meeting will focus on. Not all parent groups are alike. You may find some more effective and useful than others. When you visit a group or groups, consider the following questions:

- Does the group have a clear purpose or mission and goals?
- Do members have bylaws that establish the election of officers and their responsibilities?
- How does a new parent join? Are the dues reasonable for parents from different economic backgrounds and are newcomers welcomed?
- When does the group hold meetings and does it have agendas for its meetings?
- Does the group ever have events that include other family members?
- Do parents have opportunities to share information, resources, and ideas?
- Does the group ever sponsor speakers or special workshops on topics of interest to the members?
- How well does the group stay in touch with its members and keep them informed about the activities of the group?

Effective parent groups don’t have to include all these elements. Pay particular attention to the dynamics of the group and the content of the meetings. Try to avoid groups where one or two parents dominate discussion or other activities, and where there seem to be no by-laws or procedures for the group’s meetings. Also, be aware that sometimes group meetings may devolve into gripe sessions. While it’s normal for parents to express their concerns or frustrations, a group that spends most of its time on this will probably not accomplish much in the long run. Look for groups that respond sensitively to the needs of individual members, but also stay on course with their primary goals and commitments as an advocacy group for gifted students in their district and state.

Starting a parent group. If no groups exist in your area, you can start one by talking to the gifted education coordinator about getting contact information for other parents of

gifted students. You can post notices on the school bulletin board, at the local library or community center, or advertise in a PTA newsletter or local newspaper. Here's how one family started a parent group:

We were concerned about our twins even before kindergarten. They were both reading second-and third-grade books at age four and we thought, "How will they manage in a class where most kids are still learning their letters?" We started out attending other parent groups (some of them were pretty far away, but it was worth the ride for all the information we got). One group had parents who lived close to us and so our group started with these parents and us meeting in our living room. At this point, we all just wanted one thing: gifted education for younger kids. Theirs were in primary school and our twins hadn't even started school yet! Our first step was to do research and we divided up the topics: one person researched parent group organizations; another read up on parent advocacy strategies in schools; another investigated state policies and so on. We're still in process, but I have to say that working with these parents has inspired me no end. I feel much less discouraged about my two kids and there's something about banding together with like-minded people to make you feel hopeful about the future.

Once you have even a few parents, you can hold an organization meeting where you establish your philosophy and mission as a parent advocacy group, and your goals and objectives—both short- and long-term. If possible, consider having a consultant (gifted education coordinator, local expert in gifted education) attend the first meeting in an advisory capacity. Like the group just described, you may find that at first you prefer to focus on resolving a problem that affects your child right now—such as, the lack of services for primary gifted students.

During the first few meetings, create a list of topics that interest members as well as areas where they need more information. Here are some examples:

- learning needs and characteristics of gifted children
- social and emotional needs
- underserved populations (e.g., bilingual, multicultural, girls, underprivileged)—identification and intervention
- supporting children's abilities at home and in the community
- communicating effectively with teachers
- school and district policy issues
- state legislative issues.

These topics will change as the group evolves over time, and they should also relate to immediate interests of parents (e.g., the need to improve identification methods for the school's gifted program, or allocation of district funds for gifted education). Whatever other activities the group does, a central goal should always be to gain more expertise in gifted education. Parent groups need to be informed and equipped with up-to-date research in order to communicate knowledgeably to teachers, administrators, and policy makers.

Going to the Superintendent

The value of a parent group becomes evident when you go to the superintendent. First, though, be sure that you have talked to the child's teacher (or teachers), gifted education coordinator (if there is one), and principal before taking this step. If you go straight to the superintendent, he or she may send you back to the teacher and principal; you might risk losing their support when they find out you went over their heads. Also, it's a good idea to keep detailed records of all your communications, meetings, telephone conversations, as well as observations of your child's challenges, gifts, and experiences.

Plan your presentation. Before meeting with the teacher, principal, or superintendent, gather your notes, research, and any other information together and plan what you're going to say. This is the time to review your records on all the steps you took at the school up to this point. The record—combined with what you know about the needs of gifted students—should practically speak for itself. As a group, you can identify the most important points and use your records and research to support your requests. In some cases, the issue may be that no services for the gifted exist at all; in other cases, it may be that the services provided present certain problems—perhaps an over-dependence on standardized tests for identifying gifted students or too few resources for the gifted education coordinator, or no coordination between the gifted education teacher and the regular classroom teachers.

Meet as a group. Whenever possible, go to the superintendent as a group; even a few members of the group will be preferable to going alone. Superintendents usually understand that parents are a powerful constituency and that it is important to listen to even a relatively small group. A group of parents with a clear, well-conceived presentation and evidence to back their claims can be highly persuasive. A couple of parents who wanted to discuss problems with their school's gifted program came up with a unique strategy for preparing their presentations:

We were really nervous about this superintendent because he has a reputation for being kind of hard-nosed. So, we decided who would say what and we practiced it a few times! I know that sounds like a weird thing to do, but it really paid off. We instantly felt calmer and the superintendent actually helped us plan our presentation for the school board.

The influence superintendents have to create change depends on the relationship between them and their school board. The school board hires the superintendent and the latter's sphere of influence depends on this board's interests, priorities, and governing style. A school board who micro-manages a district may limit the authority of the superintendent. But superintendents can initiate action on some issues, such as changing the criteria for admission to the gifted program or scheduling professional development in teaching gifted students in the regular classroom.

Going to the School Board

If you are seeking fundamental changes in your district, you will have to present your case to the school board. They usually make decisions about the allocation of state funding and establish educational priorities for the district. The school board, together with the superintendent, may decide the fate of a gifted program, select identification criteria, the grades to be served, and the form that services will take.

Do your homework. Before presenting before the school board, you will need to do some preliminary research. Here are some questions to explore:

- What are your state laws on gifted education?
- How is your district funded (specifically, how much is allocated from the state to your district for gifted education)?
- What are other districts in your state doing for gifted students?
- What is the school board's yearly schedule (e.g., when are decisions made concerning funding for gifted education and when do they schedule presentations)?
- What can you learn about individual board members that might help you with your presentation? Are there any that might be sympathetic to your cause? (Talk to the superintendent about this and attend a couple of board meetings to get a feel for the biases and interests of individual members).
- What is the board currently working on and how can you time your presentation to make the strongest impact?

Present your case. What follows are general guidelines for making presentations to a school board (adapted from pp. 153-156 of my 2001 book). You will need to adapt and adjust according to your unique situation.

1. Start out by giving the school board the big picture: What kind of an issue is it (e.g., Curriculum issue? Funding issue?); How many families or students will it affect? Bear in mind that most boards will not be that interested in issues that relate only to a few children in the district.
2. Have plenty of evidence to substantiate your claims. This would include information (from the most current studies and research) on whatever aspect of gifted education most relates to your issue as well as data you have gathered from students and parents in your district. You can contact your state association to identify sources that deal with your subject.
3. Get straight to the point. Clearly state the reason for your presentation and what sorts of changes or adjustments you, as a parent group, feel should take place. Provide a short history of what has led your group to this point—the steps taken prior and the personal experiences of one or two members of your group that illustrate the problem under discussion.
4. Be prepared to explain why services for the gifted are necessary. Without overwhelming the school board with too many details, provide persuasive arguments and evidence that: (a) gifted children exist in the district; and (b) gifted

children cannot thrive without appropriate services.

5. Have evidence at your fingertips that supports whatever claims you make. If you already have a gifted program and it falls short of its goals, be ready to demonstrate this to the board.
6. Give each board member a summary of the problem, the evidence substantiating it, and possible recommendations or solutions *in writing*. (Don't overlook commendations for their efforts and past support!)
7. Take a strong stand for what you feel is right, but be diplomatic and patient with board members, even if they seem unsympathetic or uninformed about gifted children.

Even one school board member can become a powerful advocate for your cause. It is not unusual for one or two board members to help a parent group and advise them on the best procedures for approaching the full board. Bear in mind that change takes time and may need to occur in smaller steps than you envisioned when you first started working on your presentation.

Presenting Your Case to the State

Sometimes, parents decide to take their advocacy to the state level. Given that districts can only do so much with the funding they receive from the state, you may discover that the problem really lies at the state level: too little funding to provide adequate services for gifted students. Meeting with a legislator can be intimidating, but again, if you go as a group (or with representatives from different groups) and pool your research and expertise to present a strong case, you will probably get results.

Whenever possible, try to attend your legislators' community meetings and scheduled appearances, and take notes on his or her interests, concerns, and any insights you may get that will help you in your own communications. Sometimes legislators have aides who meet with their constituents. Contrary to what parents may think, aides have considerable authority and influence in the development of policy and it is not a bad sign if a legislator sends his or her aide to meet with a parent group. Use the opportunity to find out all you can about procedure—when you should write letters or make phone calls about bills under consideration, what methods work best to ensure your message gets across to the legislator.

In this regard, if you don't already belong to your state gifted education association, join! State associations (or committees within them) often publish newsletters that tell you when bills on gifted education are up for discussion and provide data on how current policies and regulations affect gifted students. Some associations even provide letter samples that address specific issues and/or outline all the points you need to include to argue for or against a particular policy.

Many state associations for gifted children provide useful pointers, such as this one from the California Association for the Gifted's "Advocacy in Action" handbook (p. 33)

How Can You Make the Most of a Meeting with a Legislator?

Here are some useful steps to consider when planning meetings with your state legislator:

1. Call or write a letter requesting a meeting with your elected decision maker stating the topic for discussion and asking when he or she would be available. If other advocates plan to attend with you, include their names. If there is no response within a reasonable time, place a follow-up call.
2. Prepare in advance so you can clearly make your points in less than half an hour. Review information supporting your request for action.
3. At the meeting, introduce yourself and other advocates with you. (Three to four advocates should be an easily accommodated number for an office conference).
4. Tell your legislator why you are there.
5. If possible, leave printed information for later review.
6. Always write a thank-you note expressing appreciation for your elected decision-maker's time and for his or her consideration of your request. Also, include any information the person requested.

The more information you can provide for the legislators about gifted students, the greater impact you will make. People unfamiliar with gifted education tend to think of gifted students as somewhat privileged — a small group of predominantly white, upper middle class kids who already have a lot going for them. For this reason, include examples of gifted students from culturally different, bilingual, underprivileged, and other communities — communities who often have the least services and need them the most. Legislators want to see the broad spectrum of a student population, not just a few parents concerned about a few children.

As you become more outspoken about gifted education, other advocacy organizations may take note. An opportunity could arise for you and a few other parents to present testimony at special hearings that affect the future of gifted education in the state. Legislators respond well to parent testimony because it provides immediate evidence of how the programs they fund are working on the ground. Your personal experience will illustrate — more powerfully than any other source — why the state should consider changes in its policy or in the allocation of funds.

Once you get to the state level in your advocacy, you have clearly stepped into an arena beyond your own child and family. Whenever you speak at a hearing or give a speech in front of a larger audience or talk privately to legislators or even journalists, you will find yourself addressing the needs of the state's gifted children, not just those in your school or district. As you gain practice, you will become more adept at developing persuasive arguments about how current legislation does not provide for them and what needs to occur to prevent the widespread loss of talent in all the state's communities—from the inner city to rural farm areas.

Many parents who have become advocates for gifted education never thought they would go this far. What kept them going was the responsibility of caring for a gifted child and a heart-felt conviction that they were only demanding what any decent parent would ask: a chance for their child to learn. But in the process, they became advocates for all gifted children and this is a much longer journey than they originally intended it to be. As one father put it:

It all started with me taking off from work early on Friday and going to meet Justine's teacher. One thing led to the next thing. The school couldn't do much so we formed a parent group that's still growing and we went to the school board. Now we're involved with our state gifted association and all kinds of other things. Sure, it turned Justine's life around, but in the process, it helped a lot of other families and put us on a journey I never imagined. It's like we started out doing the 50-yard dash and now we're long-distance runners!

Recommended Resources

California Association for the Gifted (CAG). (Undated).

Advocacy in Action: An Advocacy Handbook for Gifted and Talented Education. \$12.00. Available from: CAG, 18548 Hawthorn Street, Fountain Valley, CA 92708.

Clark, B. (1997). *Growing up gifted: Developing the Potential of Children at Home and at School.* 5th edition. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Knopper, D. (1997). *Parent Education: Parents as Partners.* Boulder, CO: Open Space Communications.

Rimm, S. (1994). *Keys to Parenting the Gifted Child.* Hauppauge, NY: Baron's Educational Series.

Smutny, J.F. (2001). *Stand Up For Your Gifted Child: How to Make the Most of Kids' Strengths at School and at Home.* Minneapolis, MN: Free Spirit Publishing, Inc.

Websites

Gifted Children Monthly (www.gifted-children.com)

An offshoot of Gifted Children Monthly, an award-winning newsletter for parents of gifted children.

GT World (www.gtworld.org)

An online support network for parents of gifted and talented children, although it does not seem to have been updated since 1999.

Hoagies' Gifted Education Page (www.hoagiesgifted.org)

An extensive online resource for parents and teachers on a range of subjects related to giftedness.

NAGC (www.nagc.org)

Includes links to state affiliates and organizations

National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented (www.gifted.uconn.edu)

Offers a variety of resources, many of which are downloadable.

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