

Advocating for Our

by Jane Clarenbach

Future

In almost every setting, parents are their children's first and strongest advocates. Parents of gifted and talented learners are no different. They see their children's strengths and understand the frustrations that can develop when there is a mismatch between a child's abilities and the grade-level curriculum offered in the local school district. As advocates, parents most often first direct their attention to improving their children's situation in their school building, working to ensure appropriate placement and curricular decisions. Often this important advocacy role expands, as parents learn how doors open and favorable decisions are made.

Many parents then find themselves involved in broader efforts to influence policy and funding at the district level, sometimes joining with other parents to form advisory groups, presenting testimony before the school board, conducting surveys on the range of services supported by the community, and otherwise working to ensure that district leaders have the information they need to provide high-quality gifted education services and programs for all gifted students in the school district.

At some point—sometimes after years of effort at the local level—a percentage of parents devote their advocacy time to increasing their impact by becoming active at the state level, where a new audience—state legislators—makes key decisions affecting gifted education. Parents often join their state gifted education associations to advocate for state funding of gifted education and on policy decisions that have a direct impact on gifted learners such as: teacher training requirements, acceleration strategies that include permitting high school graduation credit for college coursework, and lowering the minimum age for entrance to kindergarten, and whether a school district will recognize a child's identification as gifted from another district in the state.

During state-level advocacy campaigns, advocates find that working with other organizations to increase the number of advocates on behalf of advanced students has a greater impact on legislators; that strong, consistent messages, backed by research and data, add to effectiveness; and that it can take years of persistent efforts to yield success. Advocacy at the state level is not for the faint of heart! However, working at the state level can be very satisfying when the effort and time that goes into a successful legislative and policy campaign results in increased awareness and victories that impact thousands of students across the state.

National Impact

Just as working at the state level increases the number of students who benefit from funding and policy decisions, working at the federal level has the potential for systemic changes that would benefit gifted students across the nation. Even at the federal level, individuals make a difference. You're already familiar with numerous campaigns that resulted from the actions of one person or a small number of individuals. Rosa Parks comes to mind, as does the Susan G. Komen Race for the Cure. The efforts of Mothers Against Drunk Drivers, among many grassroots efforts, changed public opinion and influenced federal legislation and policy.

Although the federal government is a limited partner on education funding (the federal government provides 7–9% of the total funds spent on education), and provides no funds directly to districts specifically to support gifted and talented students, there are federal grant programs that support gifted learners, and there are other federal laws—No Child Left Behind as an example—that have an impact on what is happening, or not, for gifted children across the country.

NAGC Campaign

Recently, NAGC has significantly increased its federal advocacy resources to raise awareness of the needs of gifted students and to influence policy decisions in Congress. We've been working for years with the state gifted education associations, our members, and other organizations to support a range of initiatives—and we've had many successes. But we're redoubling our efforts (it's not just adding more effort—but we're also thinking more proactively and strategically), and focusing on two or three approaches that we expect will have an even greater impact. The first two components of the enhanced NAGC advocacy campaign are increasing contacts with Congress, both in Washington, DC, and back in the home states of the legislators, and a targeted media effort that raises awareness of the issues surrounding gifted children and reinforces our messages with policymakers.

Our legislative agenda—and overall advocacy messages—focus on strengthening federal education policies in several key areas:

- *Diversity and equity.* Our nation is clearly leaving talented students behind. We need to educate policymakers that there is diversity within the population of high-ability learners—not only that they span all cultures, races, classes, and backgrounds, but they also have diverse learning needs. Too often our schools fail to recognize giftedness in diverse populations or do not have services and programs to meet their needs. The federal government can do more to level the playing field by supporting all gifted children, including those who may be difficult to identify and serve.

DID YOU KNOW?

- that less than 3 cents of every \$100 spent by the federal government on education went to gifted and talented education in 2007, compared to more than \$3.00 for Reading First.
- that since 2002, the federal government has cut funding for the single federal program investing in the needs of disadvantaged gifted students by 33%.
- that only 23% of teachers say that academically advanced students are a “top priority” in their school, yet 86% of teachers feel that they should be focusing equally on all students in the classroom (Fordham Institute, 2008).

- *Excellence.* America's competitiveness is dependent on the pipeline of future talent, which in turn, depends on a high-quality K–12 education system that enables each learner to maximize his or her ability. The U.S. will remain the world's economic leader only if we equip our high-ability students with the tools necessary to innovate, compete, and lead in the 21st century.
- *Teacher preparation.* Appropriate services for gifted learners begin with well-trained teachers. Although most gifted students are placed in the regular classroom, more than 60% of classroom teachers have not received training to meet their needs. Federal teacher preparation grants should include training on a range of gifted education strategies.
- *Accountability.* What gets measured gets attention. Under No Child Left Behind, above-proficient children often have been ignored as districts struggle to provide support for their low-performing students. NAGC believes that the Congress, with support from the public, must insist that school districts are accountable for the learning progress of all children, including those who are gifted.

We've begun using these policy themes in meetings with key legislators and have successfully placed opinion pieces that raise these issues in major newspapers across the country. Based on these results, we're confident that we are on the right track and will be ready to reach out in a coordinated way to even more members of Congress and the new Administration when they arrive in Washington, DC, in January.

Grassroots Support

The final critical component of the NAGC advocacy strategy is to harness your enthusiasm and convert it to a coordinated grassroots advocacy effort.

Well-informed parents can be instrumental in ensuring that important messages about gifted education are not forgotten, which is why your efforts are critical to raising awareness and to enacting new laws and policies. Elected officials at every level of government need—and want—to hear from their constituents about issues of concern. Members of Congress read the local papers, hold public meetings, visit schools, meet one-on-one in their offices, and rely on staff members who do likewise to learn which education issues are most important to the voters in the state or Congressional district. Membership organizations like NAGC have a role to play in the advocacy process, mostly by providing a national perspective—but whether or not Senators and Representatives support new initiatives is due largely to what their constituents ask them to do. In order for the NAGC advocacy strategy to be successful, we need as many of you as possible to join our efforts.

Legislative Action Network

NAGC has dubbed the grassroots strategy the “Legislative Action Network” (LAN). It will focus on legislation, of course, but we want to emphasize that by participating in the LAN, NAGC members and others interested in federal advocacy will become part of a network of concerned advocates focused on ways to move the nation forward on gifted and talented education.

From the NAGC perspective, we are truly creating a network of individuals that we can call upon to contact members of Congress, write letters to the editor of their local papers, and be counted on to raise awareness in their communities. Prior advocacy experience is not required. NAGC will provide the messages and background information, keep network members up to date on activities in Congress and the timing of legislation, and make suggestions for ways network members can raise awareness and keep gifted education in their local news. Not every network member will be interested in or able to follow up on every advocacy suggestion, but our hope is that every network member will commit to communicating with their members of Congress as a start.

As we look ahead to the 111th Congress, and to a new Administration, NAGC eagerly looks forward to our continued advocacy efforts with our partners in other national organizations, the state gifted education associations, and you. We're confident that we can have an increased impact on Capitol Hill with your help. We invite you and others to add your voices to ours. Please visit the NAGC Web site at <http://www.nagc.org> to sign up for the Legislative Action Network.

Author's Note:

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Resources

State Gifted Education Associations: NAGC works with a network of state gifted education associations and encourages parents to get involved. For a listing of the state associations and links to their Web sites, visit the state pages of the NAGC Web site at <http://www.nagc.org>.

Advocacy Toolkit: NAGC has compiled information in an online toolkit to help advocates get started. For specific suggestions on communicating with Congress, including writing letters, making phone calls, and preparing for in-person meetings, visit <http://www.nagc.org/index2.aspx?id=36>.

Helpful Addresses for the 111th Congress:

United States Senate: <http://www.senate.gov>
United States House of Representatives:
<http://www.house.gov>

To locate your U.S. Representative, insert your zip code + 4 at the following:
<http://forms.house.gov/wyr/welcome.shtml>

Recent Research: Two national studies focusing on high-ability students were released in 2008.

The Achievement Trap, produced by the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation, examines advanced achievement in children from low-income backgrounds. To download a free copy, visit http://www.jkcf.org/assets/files/0000/0084/Achievement_Trap.pdf

High-Achieving Students in the Era of NCLB, released by the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, finds that the performance of top students has flattened since the passage of No Child Left Behind. The report also presents results of a national teacher survey that show that advanced students are a low priority in our nation's schools. To download a free copy, visit http://www.edexcellence.net/doc/20080618_high_achievers.pdf

Learning More: NAGC has assembled a selection of online and print resources for parents to navigate the world of gifted education. The *Mile Marker Series*, in CD format, is now available from NAGC's online bookstore. See especially Mile Marker 5, which focuses on advocacy.