

Promoting Gifted Education in Your Community

by Kristen Stephens

Despite the fact that there is a strong need to build awareness of the purposes for gifted programs and the special needs of the students these programs serve, developing solid advocacy efforts for gifted programs has been an overlooked area in the field. Public awareness could rescue gifted programs from budget cuts and benign neglect by gathering much needed support, and parents can play a vital role in communicating with the public the necessity of maintaining appropriate educational experiences for gifted students.

Why Gifted Programs Need Community Support

The educational needs of the nation's gifted students continues to be a controversial topic. The general public holds many different attitudes and beliefs relating to gifted and talented students. Unfortunately, there are also a number of misconceptions about gifted students. For example:

- * they need no special programming, that they will succeed anyway;
- * their families are always supportive;
- * they are not aware of their differentness unless they are identified as gifted;
- * they enjoy being examples for other students; * they prefer social isolation.

These common misconceptions are directly related to the lack of knowledge many have about the characteristics and educational needs of exceptional students. If we hope to build and maintain community support for gifted programs, we must increase the awareness in the community of the unique needs and qualities of gifted students as well as the benefits of gifted education programs so we can

- * resolve the equity vs. excellence debate;
- * dispel myths about gifted students;
- * locate and maintain funding sources for gifted education;
- * recruit teachers into the field of gifted education; and
- * create policies and/or mandates for gifted education.

Equity vs. Excellence

Advocates of gifted education need to address the "Equity vs. Excellence" issue. Many community members perceive gifted programs as elitist. However, it is neither fair nor reasonable to provide equal educational programming and hold equal expectations for all students, regardless of their abilities. By providing enrichment and acceleration experiences for gifted students, we are providing them with what they need, not superfluous or unnecessary education. Helping the community see and value the educational needs of gifted and talented students will help generate support for their special programming requirements.

Dispel Myths

It is vital that advocates dispel the myths associated with gifted students. Several of the more common myths are:

It is undemocratic to give special attention to the gifted. This myth relates back to the equity versus excellence debate. All students should receive educational programming that is appropriate to their needs and abilities.

Gifted students will do well on their own. Gifted students need special educational programs to meet their complex learning needs. Without special considerations, these students may not reach their full potential.

Gifted students should strive to be part of the mainstream. Our country was founded on the premise that all individuals would develop their natural talents for the benefit of society. We should not be satisfied with mediocrity when excellence and preeminence are necessary to compete in the ever-changing world marketplace.

Gifted students in special programs will have social-emotional problems. The reverse of this myth is probably more often true. If gifted students do not receive the necessary enrichment experiences they need, social-emotional discontent may surface.

Improve Understanding

Educating the general public about the characteristics and needs of gifted students is of utmost importance in gaining community support. Presenting clear facts and information relating to current research can help improve the public's knowledge and perceptions of gifted children and the programs that serve these unique students. Enhancing community support for gifted education will help locate and maintain financial support for gifted programs. Funding for gifted education is limited, with additional budget cuts occurring from year to year. In order to keep gifted programs appropriately funded, it is imperative that we improve public opinion and awareness of the benefits of quality educational options for gifted students. As taxpayers, citizens play a crucial role in the appropriation of funds for various programs that affect

gifted education. As stakeholders in the system, these same community members need to be made aware of the impact appropriate gifted programming can have on both students and the community as a whole.

Recruit Teachers

Strong public support will encourage teachers to enter the field of gifted education and to sustain, perhaps increase, the number of teachers pursuing degrees and certification in gifted education. It is essential that student-teacher ratios be kept low in the gifted classroom to ensure that the needs of these exceptional students can be adequately addressed. Whenever teacher units are cut, class size grows. Continued public support can assist in recruiting and maintaining quality teachers for gifted students.

Finally, public endorsement is desperately needed to advocate for state mandates for gifted education so that appropriate educational opportunities can be assured to all gifted students. Again, citizens play a vital role in developing and establishing policies relating to education.

Continued legislative support is needed to ensure a certain future for gifted education.

Why Parents?

There are several reasons why parents make excellent ambassadors for spreading the word about gifted education. Parents are a primary, direct link between the school and the general community. This link can be nurtured and strengthened to become a vital and valuable resource. In addition, parents of gifted children have first-hand experience with the characteristics of gifted children and youth; they can influence other parents; they can make issues relevant and clear to the general public; they may have direct contacts to those in influential positions at the local, state, or national level; school administrators listen to parents; and parents can network to pool their skills for formulating an effective public relations plan.

While parents can be an excellent connection to the community, to be an effective advocate it is necessary to become well informed of the issues and policies relating to gifted education within the local school districts and state. Thorough research to acquire a strong knowledge base on concerns relating to gifted education will enhance accurate communication with the public. Misinformation can create more harm than good. Below are some more guidelines and activities:

- * Speak out on behalf of gifted and talented children and appropriate educational programs and services;
- * Be sure to stay on top of developments in your local school budget and curriculum planning decisions. It is always easier to have an impact on key decisions before they are made, rather than trying to undo unfavorable determinations;
- * Advocate as individual parents and join others as well;
- * Check to see if there is a local organization in your area already working on these issues;

- * Check with your state gifted education organization. They may know of activists in your area.
- * Offer to work with the state association on issues in the state capital and in Washington, DC;
- * Consider starting your own local group to work with parents, teachers, and your local school board;
- * Help make sure that gifted education programs and services in your area, as well as student activities and competitions, receive coverage in your local paper. The public gets behind local success stories!

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