

The Power of the Parents

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The past few years have brought some major changes to our California public schools. The foremost among these are the expansion of Transitional Kindergarten and pre-school programs, the adoption of Common Core State Standards (CCSS), and the implementation of the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF). These newly adopted programs have potential benefits for all of our children, including our gifted students. Happily, LCFF also allows parents a greater voice than ever before in their children's education.

This article will briefly describe each of these programs, the benefits of each for our students, and some of the ways in which parents can help insure that their own school district effectively continues and expands services to its gifted students.

Transitional Kindergarten

Senate Bill (SB) 1381 amended the California Education Code to change the required birthday for admission to kindergarten and first grade from December 2 to September 1. This program allows parents whose child's birthday falls between those dates to enroll their child in a Transitional Kindergarten that uses a modified kindergarten curriculum that is age and developmentally appropriate. For even younger students, many school districts are increasing their Pre-K programs.

Many of our schools have traditionally waited until second grade or beyond to formally identify children for gifted programs, but the parents of these children often recognize the signs of advanced ability years before the start of formal schooling. A renewed focus on early education helps our youngest students be better prepared for the more rigorous curriculum in the later grades. It also allows teachers an opportunity to identify and meet individual students' needs, including those of gifted students, at an earlier age.

Common Core State Standards

The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) grew out of an initiative by the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers to bring more consistency and quality to the previous curriculum standards existing throughout the United States, which varied from state to state in quality and rigor. The CCSS in English-Language Arts and in Mathematics were developed to provide students with the 21st century knowledge and skills needed to be college and career ready by the end of high school. The CCSS are more rigorous than previous state standards, emphasizing critical thinking and literacy not only in language arts, but in history/social science, science and technical subjects. However, it is important for both teachers and parents of gifted students to understand that the standards do not specifically address how to meet the needs of students with special needs, including advanced learners. Unfortunately, some school districts view the more rigorous Common Core State Standards as an adequate replacement for gifted education and have reduced or suspended their services to gifted children.

The CCSS English-Language Arts document includes information on what is not covered by the standards. This section includes the following statements:

- The Standards do not define the nature of advanced work for students who meet the standards prior to the end of high school. For those students, advanced work in such areas as literature, composition, language, and journalism should be available.
- The Standards set grade-specific standards but do not define the intervention methods or materials necessary to support students who are well below or well above grade-level expectations. No set of grade-specific standards can fully reflect the great varieties in abilities, needs, learning rates, and achievement levels of students in any given classroom.

The CCSS define what students should know or be able to do, but they do not say how the standards should be taught. This gives teachers a great deal of flexibility in the resources they draw upon and the strategies they use to meet the needs of students of varying abilities in their classrooms.

Local Control Funding Formula

The 2013-2014 school year brought with it a major change in the way funds are directed to our California schools. In the past, schools received separate funds for the various programs intended to improve educational opportunities for students in special needs populations, such as English language learners and gifted learners. The Local Control Funding Formula replaces the old “categorical” funds with a base grant to each school district that is then supplemented with additional funds to meet the needs of three targeted student populations: English learners, students who qualify for free and reduced meals, and foster youth.

The LCFF has given school districts an unprecedented opportunity to direct their funds where the district determines the funds are most needed. To determine these needs, districts are mandated to develop, adopt, and annually update a three-year Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP). When developing the LCAP, they must solicit input from teachers, parents, and community members. These meetings provide the perfect opportunity for parents to have a real voice in the implementation of school programs, including those for gifted students.

How Parents Can Advocate for Our Gifted Students

The most important things parents can do is to take advantage of the opportunity provided by LCFF and the LCAP meetings to become part of the conversation about what goes on in your children’s school and district. Here are some tips for becoming involved and for speaking with your district personnel:

- Check with your school or district to find out when they will be holding LCAP meetings. You may choose to be included on the Parent Advisory Committee or to submit your comments in writing.
- Find out if your district already has a GATE Parent Advisory Committee. If so, you may wish to join this group. The GATE PAC should also be providing input to the LCAP committee.

- Remember that there are gifted children within the special focus populations of English learners, children in poverty, and foster youth who have often been under-identified for gifted programs. Encourage your district to examine their identification procedures to make sure that they are finding and providing services to *all* of their advanced learners.
- Encourage your district to provide professional development for all teachers on recognizing the characteristics of gifted learners. Many teachers never received specialized training on gifted education in their own teacher preparation courses and may have misunderstandings about giftedness. Some gifted children whose academic and social/emotional needs are not being met in school may mentally “drop out” or may act out inappropriately in school.
- Likewise, encourage the district to provide professional development for *all* teachers on differentiated learning in order to meet the needs of all of the students in their classroom. If the district does not have personnel to provide this training, the California Association for the Gifted offers several professional development opportunities each year through their summer institutes and annual state conference.
- Speak up for the rights of *all* students to learn something new every day. Gifted students are often already proficient on the Common Core State Standards. Their progress should be measured, not by proficiency on the state assessments, but by growth.

Finally, remember that the California Association for the Gifted website (www.cagifted.org) and the National Association for Gifted Children website (www.nagc.org) have many helpful resources to help you learn more about the Common Core State Standards and their impact on gifted education, as well as many other issues surrounding gifted children. CAG also has regional representatives around California who are available to answer your questions and to provide support and advice. Check the CAG website for your local representatives. We are always happy to hear from parents and to offer information and support.