

Developing a Voice at Your School to Support Gifted Education

Joan Kerr

There is nothing as inevitable as change, and the past few years have brought many changes to gifted programs throughout California. With the shift to the Local Control Funding Formula, the funds previously allocated specifically to a school district's gifted program are now included in general funds to be used in any way the district determines to be the most important. In many cases, districts have made the commitment to continue their formal gifted program. In others, services for high ability students have been reduced or modified. And in some districts, gifted programs have been eliminated altogether.

The good news is that parents have a stronger voice than ever in the education of their children. California school districts are required to annually solicit input from staff members, parents, and community members on how best to meet the needs of the districts' students. Let's examine the ways in which you can make a positive difference, not only for your own gifted child in his or her classroom, but for all high ability children in your child's school and district.

Working in Partnership with Your Child's Teacher

Whether or not your children are in a formal gifted program, you want to ensure that their academic and social/emotional needs are being met in the classroom. The most effective way to accomplish this is to work in partnership with your child's teacher. While it can be frustrating when you feel that a teacher is not providing the enriched or accelerated curriculum and instruction that you know your child needs, keep in mind that, while your concern is naturally for your child, the teacher is responsible for an entire classroom of children – often of many different abilities – whose needs are equally important.

Here are some ideas for establishing the most effective partnership with your child's teacher:

- Come to the meeting with the attitude that you and your child's teacher are a team and that you both have the best interests of your child at heart.
- Respect the teacher's busy schedule and set up an appointment just as you would with a doctor or other professional. When you make the appointment, let the teacher know the purpose of the meeting so she can best prepare the information that will help you understand what is going on in your child's classroom.
- If you feel that the teacher has not yet recognized your child's abilities, bring in some examples of your child's creative or academic work done at home.
- If you have not seen any evidence that your child is receiving an advanced curriculum in the classroom, ask the teacher to explain more clearly what instructional strategies are being used to meet the needs of high ability students. Some of the strategies used for differentiating the curriculum, such as the prompts

of depth and complexity, are used with the whole class but allow the gifted students to reach deeper understandings of their studies. Ask if the teacher is providing opportunities for your child to do alternative advanced or creative work once he or she has demonstrated mastery of the grade level standards. Does the teacher provide opportunities for independent study in an area of personal interest to your child? Is the teacher using flexible grouping strategies to allow students to work with others of similar readiness and ability? There are many ways in which the teacher may be meeting the needs of high ability students that may not be immediately apparent to you without some explanation.

- Ask the teacher to suggest ways in which you can supplement the school curriculum with activities that will extend your child's learning at home.

Advocating for Gifted Students in your School District

Your first concern is naturally your own child's education and well-being, but if yours is one of the districts that has reduced or eliminated services for gifted children, you may wish to become an advocate for restoring these services. The Local Control Accountability Plan (LCAP) meetings, which are required under the Local Control Funding Formula, are held at your school each year. These meetings provide the perfect opportunity to share your concerns, comments, and wishes regarding all of the programs and services provided by your district.

The more information you have about gifted students, the more effective an advocate you can be at the LCAP meetings. Here are some ways to prepare:

- Become well informed about what is already going on in your own district. What kinds of GATE services are currently offered? Are gifted students placed into all classrooms or clustered together in a few classrooms? Does your district use a "pull-out" program in which students are in a dedicated GATE classroom for one afternoon or one day per week? If so, how are their academic needs being met on the other days? Have all teachers with gifted students received professional development on meeting the needs of advanced learners?
- If your district has a GATE Advisory Committee, join the group or attend the meetings as an observer to become better informed about the district's services for gifted children. The Advisory Committee meetings also offer a good opportunity to learn more about the social and academic needs of gifted children.
- Take advantage of the wealth of information online about advocacy for gifted education. The California Association for the Gifted and the National Association for Gifted Children have extensive resources to help both parents and teachers.
- There is strength in numbers. Find other parents who share your concerns and work together to bring your ideas to the district. As in working with your child's teacher, you will be more effective if you work in partnership with the district, remembering that you are all concerned with the well-being of every one of the students in the district.

A group of committed and informed parents can truly make a difference in the work of a school district. By entering the discussion with a spirit of cooperation and teamwork, parents can encourage districts to make positive changes that will impact the education of all students, including those of the highest ability.