

Communicating Powerful & Timely Advocacy Messages

By Julia Link Roberts and Tracy Inman

Advocacy is all about working to convince those in decision-making positions that your cause is worthwhile. In order to be convincing, you have to know your message and to be timely in communicating that message. In real estate, they say what matters is location, location, location; in advocacy, it is communication, communication, communication.

The message must be planned so that it resonates with others. The National Association for Gifted Children has three messages that will resonate with a variety of individuals in order to garner support for appropriate educational opportunities for gifted and talented children. Each one is important, and together they send critical messages about the impact of gifted education and all gifted children across the country, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

- Message #1—Our nation’s ability to compete tomorrow depends on how well schools challenge advanced students today.
- Message #2—When gifted students from disadvantaged backgrounds lose ground year after year, our nation leaves behind a national treasure.
- Message #3—Every child deserves to maximize his or her potential.

Let’s look at the NAGC advocacy messages and a few facts to support each of the messages.

Message #1—Our nation’s ability to compete tomorrow depends on how well schools challenge advanced students today.

Not challenging gifted children to reach their potential creates a “quiet crisis,” one that won’t be noticed for a few years. In *National Excellence: A Case for Developing America’s Talent* (1993), Richard Riley, former U.S. Secretary of Education, says it is a

“quiet crisis” that continues in how we educate top students. Youngsters with gifts and talents that range from mathematical to musical are still not challenged to work to their full potential. Our neglect of these students makes it impossible for Americans to compete in a global economy demanding their skills. (p. iii)

Fully aware of the world picture, two U.S. Senators requested that the National Academies identify actions that the U.S. must take in order to prosper in the global economy of the 21st century. *Rising Above the Gathering Storm: Energizing and Employing America for a Brighter Future* (2007) explores those recommendations. Recommendation C, the third of four recommendations, reads: “Make the

United States the most attractive setting in which to study, perform research, and retain the best and brightest students, scientists, and engineers from within the United States and throughout the world” (p. 9). The National Academies fully realize the critical role that academic challenge plays in our country’s future. The report argues:

This nation must prepare with great urgency to preserve its strategic and economic security. . . .the United States must compete by optimizing its knowledge-based resources, particularly in science and technology, and by sustaining the most fertile environment for new and revitalized industries and the well-paying jobs they bring. (p. 4)

The only way to optimize our knowledge-based resources is to make our children experience an academic sweat. Challenge is the key.

Message #2—When gifted students from disadvantaged backgrounds lose ground year after year, our nation leaves behind a national treasure.

“The talents of disadvantaged and minority children have been especially neglected” (Ross, 1993, p. 5). Authors of *Achievementrap: How America is Failing Millions of High-Achieving Students From Lower-Income Families* (2007) state, “As we strive to close the achievement gaps between racial and economic groups, we will not succeed if our highest performing students from lower-income families continue to slip through the cracks” (p. 7). The report found that “high-achieving, lower-income students mirror America both demographically and geographically,” but by the time they enter fifth grade, only 56% of them maintain their status as high achievers. Moreover, these same students have a high school dropout rate that doubles their high-achieving peers from higher economic levels. The trend continues in college. Only 59% will graduate from college while 77% of their peers will graduate. Advocating for all children of high ability pays off and creates more appropriate learning opportunities for children who may not have advocates to speak out for them.

Message #3—Every child deserves to maximize his or her potential.

Each child goes to school to learn, and each one deserves to gain at least a year of achievement growth for that year of instruction. Such a simple goal is getting lost in many schools as the focus on proficiency dims the

goal of continuous progress for each child. *High-Achieving Students in the Era of No Child Left Behind* (2008) explains that “the narrowing of the gap during the NCLB era is largely due to a significant improvement in the performance of low achievers and smaller gains by high achievers” (p. 23). Certainly, it is both admirable and imperative for all children to make achievement gains; however, it is unacceptable that “while the nation’s lowest-achieving youngsters made rapid gains from 2000 to 2007, the performance of top students was languid” (p. 1). The founder of the Value-Added Research and Assessment Center, William Sanders (1998) argues that “statewide aggregated evidence suggests students at the highest levels of achievement show somewhat less academic growth from year to year than their lower-achieving peers” (p. 3). This means that students who are gifted and talented may not even make a year’s progress in a year’s time!

Each of these messages plus your own advocacy message must be communicated in a timely manner. For example, because the Fordham Institute’s *High-Achieving Students in the Era of No Child Left Behind* was just released, you could probably assume that your legislators and district decision-makers haven’t had a chance to become familiar with it and its important implications for high-achieving students. Take the opportunity to share its message (and you could even hand them a copy of the report: download it from http://www.edexcellence.net/detail/news.cfm?news_id=732&id=92). Timing is critical.

Advocacy messages are to convince others, including decision-makers, that it is imperative to include appropriately challenging educational opportunities for all children, including those children of high ability. Children who are gifted and talented come from all backgrounds, all socioeconomic levels, and all racial and ethnic groups. They possess high ability in a variety of talent areas—overall intellectual ability; specific academic ability in math, science, social studies, or language arts; creativity; leadership; or the visual and performing arts. Advocacy messages must educate decision-makers and others who influence them so they understand the imperative of developing the gifts and talents of our children. Individuals who believe the old myth that gifted children will make it on their own will feel no urgency to provide appropriate educational opportunities for gifted children.

Communicating powerful advocacy messages in a timely fashion can influence and change opinions and bring about support for practices, policies, and legislation that provide appropriate educational opportunities for children who are gifted and talented. To make the great-

est difference, it is necessary to build relationships, and that is something that happens over time. Consequently, the most effective advocates begin to build relationships before they need them. Communication is part of what makes advocacy effective.

There are a few things to keep in mind as you generate your advocacy message. Make the message powerful, and deliver it in a timely manner so that you enhance your opportunity to be heard and to influence decisions. Remember—communication, communication, communication. That is what will optimize opportunities for children who are gifted and talented to achieve at levels commensurate with their abilities. Then we will have a win-win situation for our children and country.

References

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