

In the early 2000s, *PHP* featured a column called “Effective Advocates.” Today, parents remain one of the most important and necessary groups for affecting change in gifted education policy.

Making Positive Changes for Gifted Students in Your School District and State

By Roberta Braverman

Not all of us live in states or school districts that are supportive of gifted and talented students. It can be very frustrating for parents to learn that their state does not require school districts to identify gifted students or teachers to have received some coursework in gifted education or that the only advanced program in their school district is a middle school math program. The good news, however, is that it is possible to create positive change in your district and state.

There are statewide gifted education associations in most states that provide resources to teachers and families. Many work with state education agencies and/or the state legislature to develop or expand gifted policies and practices to guide school districts. You can find a list of state association websites on NAGC’s Gifted by

State (www.nagc.org/gifted-state) webpage. I encourage you to get involved in state-level advocacy. Not only will you be joining with others who want to see change in your state, but your elected officials want and need to hear from you on issues that you care about.

Be aware, though, that because most states leave many (or all) critical decisions about gifted education services to local school districts, you may also need to advocate for services with your local school board. Keep in mind that it is generally difficult for districts to make instructional exceptions for a single student (e.g., allowing a bright 4-year-old to begin kindergarten early), so joining with other parents who have similar concerns increases the chance for positive change. Check to see if there is a local

gifted education parent group in your school district. If there is no formal group, perhaps you might consider creating one. NAGC offers a free e-book to help you get started (bit.ly/3hfAzJK). Note that even without a formal parent group, small groups of parents can be very successful in securing changes that support their advanced children.

There are some general rules of thumb that apply to advocacy on behalf of gifted children at the local and state level. They aren’t difficult, but they require that parents do their homework—learning about the current situation, where the key decisions are made, what data helps make your case, and who else you might bring into your efforts—all to increase your effectiveness as an advocate.

Lay of the Land

Advocates must learn the current situation for gifted students. I call this “*Do your homework.*”



State level. Learn your state's policies and regulations affecting gifted children. How does your state define gifted students? Does your state mandate identification and services? Does your state provide dedicated funding to school districts for gifted education? The best resource is NAGC's *2018-2019 State of the States in Gifted Education* report, which provides key data points for every state on an interactive map. bit.ly/3CqasIL.

Local level. Learn all you can about your school district's policies and practices that affect gifted students. Does your district identify students for services? If so, when does it occur and for what types of services? Is the process equitable? Is there a gifted education coordinator who oversees services for gifted students? Does your school district use NAGC's national standards for PreK–12 education to guide their gifted services?

Understand the Decision-making Structure

State level. Generally, advocates work with the state department of education and the state legislature. Find out if the department of education has a full-time staff person who is responsible for gifted education. In the legislature, learn who heads the education committees and the committees responsible for funding education. There are other officials, including the governor, who may play a role, but this is a start. You also need to learn the basics of the legislative process: When does your legislature meet and will there be hearings where you or other advocates could testify on the needs of gifted students in your state?

Local level. Generally, district decisions are made by a board of education in collaboration with the superintendent. There also may be committees that make key recommendations, such as a teacher preparation or curriculum and instruction committee. And there may be an advisory committee that includes parents that is part of the decision-making process.

How Your District and State Stack Up

When asked to make a change in laws and policy, elected officials often ask what others are doing about the area of concern.

State level. Use the *NAGC State of the States* report to gather and document key data about your surrounding states, such as whether the states mandate identification and services, whether the states dedicate specific funding for gifted education, or whether the state has an acceleration policy.

Local level. Gather and document examples of gifted education services and practices in neighboring districts. Your state gifted education association may collect some of this data.

Know and Share the Numbers

Having some basic information about gifted education and gifted students helps decision makers better understand what advocates are asking for. The data points vary, depending on the specific change being sought.



Some basic data points for advocacy at the state and local level are:

- **Numbers of gifted students as a percentage of all students.** The data on gifted students may be officially collected or you may need to estimate the percentage of students who may be gifted (most estimates for academically gifted students range between 5% and 10% of the student population).
- **Number of gifted students who are receiving services.**
- **Amount of funding spent on gifted education** as a percentage of total education spending (and how this compares to other states/districts).
- **Your state and district outcomes** in math and reading achievement compared to others. State and school leaders would like to see large numbers of students at the top achievement level, but that may not be the case in your state and district.

Identify and Engage Others

Generally, having more advocates is more effective. Having advocates with different points of view and experiences is most effective.

State level. It's helpful to secure advocates for gifted students

(Continues on p. 19)



How Advocates in New Jersey Rallied Together to Secure A New Gifted Education Law

By Roberta Braverman

Parents, educators, gifted students, and university professors joined forces with the New Jersey Association for Gifted Children (NJAGC) to champion legislation and see it through to the finish line in 2020. And while advocates for gifted children in New Jersey are excited about the new law passed in our state—and are doing all they can to ensure that every school district makes changes to comply with the law—make no mistake, this didn't

“just happen.”

What doesn't get counted doesn't count. Our state situation was pretty grim. Prior to the new law, the state department of education (DOE) did not ask districts to report data on their numbers of identified gifted students nor the number of gifted education specialized staff employed, among other basic data points, even though state administrative code from 2000 directed that this should be done. A

law was needed to ensure compliance. Since New Jersey is mostly a “home rule” state and there is no state funding to school districts specifically for gifted education, decisions and practices across the state significantly varied by district from excellent to poor to non-existent. Lack of accountability and guidance from the DOE led to these discrepancies.

The “asks” are clear. NJAGC has

(Continues on p. 20)

(Continued from p. 17)

that reflect the state population. Parents, teachers, administrators, special education professionals, business leaders, psychologists, and guidance counselors would make a powerful group.

Local level. Parents have the most powerful voices but it is always helpful to have professionals in your community (e.g., psychologists, scientists), college recruiters, and business leaders speak to the benefit of advanced learning opportunities and the need for advanced curriculum for future careers.

Look for Opportunities to Raise Awareness

Creating change can take time so it is important to raise awareness of the needs of gifted students as often as possible in multiple venues. I call this, “*Show up and speak up.*”

State level. Look for opportunities to bring your requests to the state education agency and to the legislature such as by testifying or volunteering to serve on a committee or advisory group. Make appointments with staff in key offices to share information and explore possibilities.

Local level. Attend school board meetings and any committee hearings. Testify if possible. Ask questions about how changes under consideration will impact gifted students. Volunteer to serve on a committee. Not only will you meet school leaders but

committee service offers an opportunity to advocate for the needs of gifted students.

Successful advocates help educate elected officials at every opportunity by providing data and other information to support their requested change. There are numerous examples where well-informed parent advocates made the difference in changing minds. It may take time, but you and other parents working together on behalf of gifted children can secure services for your children so that they will be challenged in the classroom to learn new things every day. ☺

Resources

Nilles, K. (2017, March 12-14). *Influence of parents & third-party validators to drive change*. [Conference presentation]. NAGC Leadership and Advocacy Conference, Washington, D.C. bit.ly/3noHaU5

Robinson, A. & Moon, S. (2003). *Advocating for talented youth: Lessons learned from the National Study of Local and State Advocacy in Gifted Education*. bit.ly/3ChCohs

National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) is a national assessment for students in Grades 4 and 8 (and periodically in Grade 12). This report provides state-level information. See www.nationsreportcard.gov/. District-level achievement, based on your state tests, is available from your state department of education’s website.

National Association for Gifted Children. (2019). *Pre-K-grade 12 gifted programming standards*. bit.ly/3GvdDRo Advocates share the standards with school districts as best practice when developing or expanding their gifted education services.

Author’s Note

Roberta Braverman has been a volunteer advocate in gifted education for decades. Her 25 years of service includes leadership at the state and national levels, working with NAGC, NJAGC, the National Education Association, and the NJ Education Association. She makes connections with education groups by writing for their publications and presenting at their conferences. Her multiple terms on NAGC’s Public Policy & Advocacy Committee inspire Roberta to share strategies that resulted in NJ legislation. EDUK8OR, her NJ vanity license plate, describes this advocate/teacher/consultant’s pride, profession, and passion. Look for her on LinkedIn, Twitter, and Facebook: @RobertaBraverman

5 Ps of Advocacy

Preparation. Research what the laws and policies say, know the jargon, learn about current education trends, and create “do-able asks.”

Politeness. Respect the professionals’ intent to help students and provide information as needed about gifted, make appointments rather than dropping by, and write thank-you notes (which also allow you to re-emphasize your points and repeat what you may have been promised).

Patience. Change will not occur overnight; allow time for answers and follow up.

Perspective. Where does gifted fit? “Hop aboard moving trains” of educational trends such as social-emotional learning, equity and access, special education, and STEM.

Persistence. Continue to pursue goals, revisit the “asks,” and take the message to new and varied stakeholders.

(Continued from p. 18)

been testifying at the public hearings of the New Jersey State Board of Education (NJSBOE) about the unmet needs of gifted students and their teachers in the state's 600+ school districts for years. Our requests for change varied slightly over the years, depending on what the NJSBOE was focused on. However, we repeatedly requested that gifted education be included in all DOE initiatives and correspondence with school districts on topics including the core curriculum, equity issues, English Language Learners, special education (as many gifted students are twice exceptional), federal education law compliance and funding, monitoring, data collection, and dissemination of best practice information. In addition, we asked that a staff person be appointed to address gifted and talented education and to lead the DOE through needed changes. In 2018, the NJSBOE sent us a letter indicating that our concerns

were largely the responsibility of the DOE. However, they also indicated that we should advocate for legislation. This was the catalyst we needed to organize and get the job done. When your state BOE suggests that legislation is needed, the DOE and the state legislature sit up and take notice.

Create a vision and a plan. NJAGC's first step was to gather, with NAGC's assistance, examples of recent legislation for gifted from other states. We received help from Washington state in the form of draft bills and a chart template explaining why their legislation was needed. We modified those based on the needs we had identified and formed a committee of parents, educators, and a university professor to lead the process. Several others who testified before the NJSBOE were included in communications from the committee. A key part of our research was to find leaders in our state legislature, especially those on

the education committees of the state Senate and Assembly. Luckily, my state senator was one of only five on the Senate Education Committee and my state assemblywoman was the chair of the Assembly Education Committee. As a constituent, I requested meetings to explain the need for a bill to address the problems and asked that my representatives be primary sponsors. They became the conduits to the Office of Legislative Services for the draft bills. Eventually identical bills were released simultaneously in both houses of the state legislature.

Share the story, be ready for last-minute changes. The advocacy team secured support from the New Jersey Education Association (NJEA) and other state education groups. The knowledge and expertise of NJEA's government relations department helped us navigate the legislative process. Our team testified at the education committee meetings when the bills were introduced. We were moved by the personal stories of committee members who recognized the need for improvements in gifted education. They gave their support and passed the bill out of committee to the Senate and Assembly floor action calendar.

An eye-opening aspect of this journey was working with the legislative calendar. As elections for the New Jersey Assembly occurred during the 18 months of preparing and presenting this bill to the legislature, there were many blackout dates to work around. At the eleventh hour, just before the bill was to be brought to the Senate floor for a vote, the lead sponsor heard from two large administrator education groups that they had issues with some wording in the bill.



Modifications were needed if we were to win that vote. Our advocacy team worked tirelessly for two days via phone conferences with representatives from other education groups in the state to come to a consensus.

Strength in numbers. NJAGC advocacy leaders shared a chart outlining reasons to support the bill with every state representative in both houses via email contacts and phone calls. We also reached out to voters via email lists, social media, and the NJAGC website asking that they contact their elected state legislators. A scripted message was provided to make it as simple as possible. The bill unanimously passed the Senate in June 2019, on the last day of voting before the summer recess. The Assembly was not in session until after the November election cycle. The bill passed the Assembly on December 19, 2019, and was signed into law by Governor Phil Murphy on January 13, 2020.

Update: Post-Legislative Work Continues

A committee was formed by the DOE in February 2020. The statewide call for participants brought more than 50 interested parents, educators, and community members. It was decided that all volunteers could participate on one of five subcommittees: implementing the law; professional development; identification; programs and services; and the integration of cognitive and social emotional needs of gifted students.

Then the COVID-19 lockdown began. Meetings were held virtually to create resources for the law. NJAGC and committee chairs also contributed to DOE's links for virtual learning. The leaders of the five subcommittees continue to meet with staff of the DOE

to contribute and advise them of best practices and provide help with "Lunch and Learn" sessions hosted virtually by the department.

By the time school began in Fall 2021, NJDOE had updated its web pages. Raising awareness, meeting the needs of gifted students, and clarifying school district responsibilities are ongoing goals of NJAGC's grassroots advocates. What a journey! 🌟

Resources

New Jersey Department of Education gifted education webpages: www.nj.gov/education/standards/gifted/index.shtml

NJAGC webpages: "Unpacking the law:" www.nj.gov/education/standards/gifted/index.shtml

New Jersey's Strengthening Gifted and Talented Education Act: www.nj.gov/education/standards/gifted/legislation.shtml

Author's Note

Roberta Braverman has been a volunteer advocate in gifted education for decades. Her 25 years of service includes leadership at the state and national levels, working with NAGC, NJAGC, the National Education Association, and the NJ Education Association. She makes connections with education groups by writing for their publications and presenting at their conferences. Her multiple terms on NAGC's Public Policy & Advocacy Committee inspire Roberta to share strategies that resulted in NJ legislation. EDUK8OR, her NJ vanity license plate, describes this advocate/teacher/consultant's pride, profession, and passion. Look for her on LinkedIn, Twitter, and Facebook: @RobertaBraverman

DON'T MISS THESE IMPORTANT RESOURCES FOR PARENTS FROM NAGC!

Gifted & Talented Resources Directory

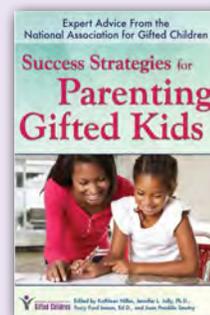
- Summer camps and enrichment materials
- Curriculum for home
- Other programs and services

NAGC Engage



- Online community to network and share ideas with other parents and caregivers

Newest Book



- Curated collection from *PHP*
- Easy-to-understand, with practical advice and discussion questions
- Perfect for parents groups and families

All available at www.nagc.org