

Advocating for Talented Youth:



Lessons Learned from the National Study of Local and State Advocacy in Gifted Education

By Dr. Ann Robinson and Dr. Sidney M. Moon

In Iowa, a parent-led advocacy group elected a school board member by endorsing a supportive candidate in a tight race. They activated a phone tree to inform parents of gifted students in the district of the endorsement. The ballot box did the rest!

In New York, a parent advocacy group succeeded in getting its district to adopt a policy to specify services for gifted learners, broke down barriers to grade acceleration, started a Saturday enrichment program, and organized a regularly published newsletter. They have become major players in district planning.

In North Carolina, the state association spearheaded an effort to pass state legislation mandating local gifted education program plans. They used a strategy called “Bag It.” Participants were given two paper bags and asked to take someone at their local level to lunch. They targeted a principal, a school board member, a lead teacher, a superintendent, the PTA president, or a newspaper reporter. They also provided advocates with suggestions for beginning

the conversation and with stamped postcards to return to the state association with a short summary of their lunchtime gains. Through this strategy, they built coalitions and new supporters.

In Colorado, advocates learned that a state mandate for gifted education services was not possible in the current political climate. Rather than give up or alienate their legislative supporters, they re-grouped and worked with sympathetic legislators to craft an amendment that gave them increased funding and identified gifted learners. By identifying gifted students in the legislation, advocates successfully gained official recognition for this special population of learners.

Reports of successful advocacy come from every corner of the country, and parents are often key players in securing educational opportunities for their gifted children. A national study of advocacy in local school districts and of statewide efforts provides us with a fascinating picture of dedicated people at work on behalf of gifted and talented youth. The stories differ, but there are common lessons that can inform the plans and day-to-day actions of advocates.

Advocates give support to a cause or take a public position on an issue. Sometimes they work to maintain the status quo, but often they work to encourage change. This may include securing more resources to serve gifted and talented children or

starting programs where none exist or making changes to those that do exist. The ways in which people took on these tasks and made things happen for gifted children interested us. In this article, we share our observations and conclusions regarding lessons learned from the national study of local and state advocacy in gifted education.

Who was in the sample?

Sixty-one examples of advocacy from 34 states were summarized through surveys sent to state directors of gifted education, state affiliates of the National Association for Gifted Children, and to collaborative school districts from the National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented. The people who responded to the survey came from all constituencies in a gifted child’s life: parents, teachers, gifted and talented administrators, state department of education leaders, community leaders, and university researchers. Six of these 61 survey responses were selected for more in-depth investigation by case study researchers who visited the sites, talked with stakeholders (individuals affected by a program such as parents, teachers, administrators, community members or students) and advocates, and examined documents relevant to the advocates’ work. Finally, the surveys and the case studies were examined once again to identify general principles and practical lessons that other advocates might use. Here’s what we found.

What happened?

Most advocates targeted one of two things: either demands for increased funding or general policy changes. Sometimes they would advocate for both at the same time; sometimes they advocated for one or the other. Most advocates, about 70 percent, reported that they “wanted something new.” About 18 percent reported they wanted to change something that already existed with which they were not pleased or felt needed improvement. Even when they focused on the new, very few of the advocates in the national study reported clean slate advocacy—advocacy in which nothing at all existed before they began their efforts.

Why so few reports of clean slate advocacy? It is probably due to the kind of research questions we asked in the study and the kinds of advocates who responded to our survey. We asked people to tell us about *successful* advocacy. By that definition, something positive must have happened! We also sent our inquiries to the network of state departments and school districts that were already part of the nationwide gifted education community. These were places where some service, even if minimal, was already in place.

What defined success?

Looking carefully at the six sites, that were developed into case studies, we were able to see common threads that invited success. Although there were several factors that we organized into the categories of *influences, leadership, and advocacy strategies*, we concentrate here on the three factors that are most likely to be useful to parent advocates: policies, champions and leaders, and communication strategies for raising awareness. Each one of the factors led us to a take-away lesson that advocates can use, with the understanding that they are all overlapping, that not all lessons would apply in all situations, and that not *all* are necessary for success in a specific situation.

Policies

Policies are courses of action established or set by elected or appointed decision makers. In relation to gifted education, some examples of policies include: “This district does not endorse grade acceleration,” or, “School districts must identify and serve gifted learners in grades K through 12.” In the case of the first example, advocates might work to have the policy preventing acceleration removed; in the second, advocates might work to increase funding to

support the law that mandates services. In either example, advocates need to be very knowledgeable about the current policies in their local and state context. In fact, our case studies demonstrated that successful advocacy often depended on knowledgeable advocates who made thorough examinations of gifted education, local policies, state policies, and the political processes necessary to create or modify them.

The lesson for advocates found in all these cases was that time spent studying the current policies and the political and administrative avenues for affecting them or developing new policy is time well spent.

Advocates who are well informed about current policies are also equipped to respond in a crisis (for example, where policy makers attempt to change policy without sufficient discussion with the public). In terms of long-range efforts, advocates with a thorough knowledge of policies will be able to engage in ongoing advocacy in many and varied situations. These might include social situations where advocates come into contact with policy makers outside of the usual forums (memberships in clubs, churches, social groups, or sports organizations), where ongoing contact

The National Study of Local and State Advocacy in Gifted Education

The complete study is reported by Ann Robinson and Sidney M. Moon in the “National Study of Local and State Advocacy in Gifted Education.”

To learn more about the National Study of Advocacy, look for the Gifted Child Quarterly Special Issue on Advocacy, Volume 47, Winter 2003.

The case studies of local and state advocates are:

- *Five Ingredients for Success: Two Cases of Effective Advocacy at the State Level* by Marcia A.B. Delcourt
- *The Art of Bridge Building: Providing for Gifted Children* by Donna Enersen
- *Increasing Black Student Enrollment in Gifted Programs: An Exploration of Pulaski County Special School District’s Advocacy Efforts* by Tarek C. Grantham
- *Advocacy: ‘On the Cutting Edge...’* by Nancy B. Hertzog
- *Custer, South Dakota: ‘Gifted’s Last Stand* by Dorothy Kennedy.

helps to develop a deep well of support and knowledge between advocates and decision makers like school board members and state legislators.

Champions and Leaders

Leadership that existed in two different, but related ways, influenced successful advocacy. There were individual leaders we termed *champions* and there were organized gifted education associations in which groups of advocates carried out the leadership function. In our study, individual champions were parents, university educators, teachers, or leaders of advocacy organizations. The gifted education advocacy organizations were either local parent groups or state gifted education associations. In one case, a teacher-champion first created a gifted education program in her local school and then worked with other teachers and parents to found a statewide advocacy association. In other words, one type of leader (a champion) could create the second type (an advocacy organization) over time. It doesn't have to be lonely out there on the advocacy front lines. A committed individual champion can create a structure of support on many different levels.

The individual champions who appeared in the case studies were motivated, knowledgeable, and possessed the leadership skills of problem solving and communication, which included knowledge of public relations. They often persisted long beyond the time their own children were involved in gifted education services and through both exciting and difficult times. For example, the two champions in one of the case studies were parents of children attending the same district. They did not necessarily agree on all their goals or have a common approach. They did have staying power beyond the bumps and disagreements within the parent advocacy group they were part of, and through their lengthy

dealings with the school district. In another of the case studies, the champion was a school employee who used a court-ordered desegregation plan to increase the participation of minority students in gifted education programming. Her strategies were varied. She designed more equitable identification procedures, improved the infrastructure in predominately minority schools, increased the numbers of minority staff involved in gifted education, and built an understanding of the benefits of gifted education in minority communities.

In addition to high levels of motivation, both individual champions and association leadership advocates needed a broad base of knowledge to help them achieve their goals. Three kinds of knowledge seemed to be important to them: knowledge of best practices in gifted education (for example, what kinds of curricula have research support?), political savvy or knowledge and understanding of the political process in which the advocates work (for example, who makes what decisions in our district, or in the state legislature? who are other influential people or groups in our district or state? how to make a positive contact with them?), and practical know-how about advocacy strategies (for example, what is a postcard blizzard or what is a phone tree, and how do we use them in our district or state?) One of the parent champions learned to use the Freedom of Information Act to request information from the school district, which was relevant to his advocacy efforts. Association leaders in another state devoted a full year of concentrated self-study of the legislative processes as part of their effort to pass a mandate for gifted education. Both individual champions and advocacy organizations used various strategies in their efforts to raise awareness, and secure resources or change policies. The strategies varied to suit the context, but again we found common threads.

The lesson for advocates is that an individual champion or a small group of association leaders with an appropriate knowledge base, can provide the momentum for successful advocacy campaigns. It does not take a cast of thousands to make progress.

Advocacy Tools and Strategies

Advocates used a variety of strategies to achieve their goals. They planned. They collaborated. They communicated. In some cases, they even developed gifted education programs. The national study reinforced the importance of planning in effective advocacy. Each of the successful sites we studied in depth involved powerhouse planners. And, just as advocacy model builders suggest, successful advocates have learned to collaborate with other groups of parents, educators and decision makers. For example, members of the advocacy association in one of the state-level case studies worked hard at building positive, supportive relationships with key decision makers and other education groups in the state. One of their strategies was to make appointments to meet newly elected or appointed officials and then to maintain contact with those officials on a regular basis. This strategy led to a positive relationship with their new state Secretary of Education, which in turn, led to collaborative goal setting. Eventually, the collaboration that was forged with the Secretary of Education led to many positive outcomes for gifted and talented education. One was a series of state-level awareness initiatives, the establishment of a State Advisory Council on Gifted Education, and a modest amount of new state funding for competitive grants for school districts.

Communication is part of an advocacy strategy that lends itself to concrete examples and actions for parents who want to become successful

advocates. Communication as part of a strategy seems obvious, but we found advocates engaged in a broad range of innovative communication activities which other advocacy groups could import into their own contexts. We focused on communication activities for raising awareness and offer them as possibilities for parents and

parent advocacy groups to consider. These are the kinds of activities that form the backbone of what we call “advocacy for acceptance”—advocacy intended to increase understanding of the nature and nurture of gifted and talented children and create a positive climate for increased resources for gifted education. Advocates focused on three

kinds of raising awareness activities to communicate acceptance for the needs of gifted children: informational products for general and specific audiences, staff development activities to assist general education teachers in understanding the needs of gifted and talented students, and public relations events. Our survey respondents and the six case study sites provided several examples.

Tips For State Level Advocacy

From the Three State-Level Cases in the National Study of Advocacy
(From articles by Delcourt and by Enersen in the Winter 2003 issue of the *Gifted Child Quarterly*)

Build an effective state advocacy organization.

- Align your state organization with NAGC
- Educate your members about gifted education and particularly the history of gifted education in your state
- Educate your members about the legislative and administrative processes in your state and about advocacy in general
- Build local affiliate groups of parents and teachers
- Design ongoing and fast response systems (e.g., adopt a legislator programs and phone trees)
- Keep a database of members with particular attention to those who have personal or professional connections with decision makers

Build collaborative relationships with decision makers and other education organizations.

- Build relationships and collaborations with your State Superintendent of Education, State Board of Education, State Gifted and Talented Office, university administrators, etc.
- Build relationships with other education groups such as teacher unions, administrator organizations, and other advocacy groups that may be promoting an appropriate education for children with disabilities, or those with English as a second language
- Work with your State Department of Education to establish a state-level advisory board for gifted education
- Write position papers or adapt those developed by the National Association for Gifted Children
- Visit with officials before they are elected (during campaigns) and again when they take office to provide information on your organization and goals. Do the same with appointed officials and staff

- Keep in touch with key legislative committee members and their staffs on a regular basis
- Get to know the staff in legislative offices and offer to organize education advisory committee’s for them or offer to serve on an existing one
- Be truthful, professional, and positive. Know the arguments against your issue as well as your own and always be willing to compromise to achieve your goals on an incremental basis

Communicate a clear and consistent message.

- Conduct creative awareness campaigns to create a positive climate for your advocacy goals
- Compile and disseminate factual information about gifted education in your state on a regular basis to your members, to policy makers, and to the media
- Develop specific, clear advocacy goals and review them on a regular basis to see if they need to be changed or updated
- Publicize your message in concise, clever, and consistent ways
- To overcome the issue of elitism in gifted education, always present scenarios of GT children from all socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds in all areas of your state
- Be visible (e.g., attend hearings and committee meetings, make statements to the press, but only after careful consideration, develop a newsletter, write op-ed pieces for the local papers, wear buttons with your organization’s message/logo)
- Before lobbying understand the limits of your association to do so under the law and then teach organization members how to lobby effectively including writing letters to legislators (e.g., include bill, recommendation for related funding, explanation of association’s position on the bill, and why the bill is important to you and your child)
- Engage a lobbyist only after careful review and interviews to ensure that the lobbyist you hire doesn’t have conflicts of interest in the groups he or she represents

Say “Thank You.”

- Express appreciation frequently and creatively to all who assist you

Informational products.

State and local parent associations developed tangible products such as parent handbooks, informational flyers, and position papers for use with the media, state and local decision makers, and the general public, and to use to

recruit advocates. In at least one case, an advocacy handbook, was published and reached a national audience.

Staff development activities.

While staff development activities are more likely to be carried out by

educators for educators, there are also examples of staff development activities by local and state advocacy organizations. In our studies, both state and local advocacy associations organized conferences for parents, teachers, and administrators, both to

Tips For Local Advocacy

From the three local cases in the National Advocacy Study (Winter 2003 issue of *Gifted Child Quarterly*, articles by Grantham, Hertzog, and Kennedy)

Be knowledgeable

- Be informed about your child and your district and school, its policies and practices
- Learn the principles behind gifted education
- Read books and articles on how to advocate effectively
- Understand federal laws, state laws, court decisions, and school policies that affect your efforts
- Gather specific data and statistics about local programming
- Understand all stakeholders, their conceptions of giftedness, and their views of gifted education.
- Be aware of other issues and pressures facing schools and administrators and teachers

Build awareness and support

- Be positive, trustworthy, and professional
- Create and disseminate informational materials that are customized for your community (e.g., flyers, handbooks, reprints)
- Educate teachers, administrators and school board members about gifted education and expose them to both sides of controversial issues
- Create task forces, groups or committees with broad stakeholder representation to make recommendations on controversial issues and draft local policy statements so that policy makers will understand what you are asking for. These groups could include parents, representatives of the business and faith communities, and others with an interest in education in your community
- Use varied techniques designed to meet specific situations to ensure that all perspectives on gifted education issues are heard, discussed, and addressed

Find champions in the school system

- Identify administrators and Board members who support gifted education and work with them to create change
- Expend most of your efforts on decision makers who are supportive or neutral but don't underestimate your ability to change peoples views

Set clear goals

- Be clear about what you want to accomplish, yet ready to compromise and accept incremental gains
- Keep policy goals separate from implementation goals (e.g., getting the policy in place for gifted education and funding that initiative)
- Be ready to respond quickly to policy or funding changes that might affect local gifted education programs and do this by being at the table for all education discussions even if they aren't directly relevant to gifted education

Assist in developing written policies to guide local gifted education efforts

- Address controversial local issues with clear policy statements that all stakeholders can support
- Draft policy statements and circulate them for comments from all stakeholders

Address issues of equity as well as issues of excellence

- Advocate for services for all students and for gifted students from all socio-economic levels and ethnic and cultural backgrounds
- Advocate for identification practices that are effective with underrepresented populations in gifted programs
- Work to Increase minority student participation in local gifted education programs
- Strengthen the understanding and commitment of minority communities to gifted education
- Improve the infrastructure in schools with large minority and lower socio-economic populations so that it allows for appropriate programs to be developed
- Work to Increase the involvement of minority educators in gifted education

raise awareness and provide detailed information on the nature and nurture of gifted students. Some of these conferences were funded with advocacy grants from the National Association for Gifted Children, which were awarded to state advocacy organizations.

Public relations activities.

Advocates used public relations at both the local and state levels to build support. For example, one district organizes an ice cream social each year to share the successes of its gifted students and its program. Parents, students, and community members are invited to a showcase of student projects and accomplishments. One of the state-level advocacy case studies reported that a statewide Gifted Education Month was established by the Governor to raise awareness of the needs of gifted children and youth. Other public relations examples include a blanket of thank-you letters to legislators who voted to pass a state-level mandate and radio public service announcements read by children in a local gifted program.

The lesson is that successful advocates plan, collaborate with others, and communicate through speaking, writing, and organizing public events.

Lessons Learned

The advocates we studied provided several useful lessons for other parents, educators, and policy makers who work on behalf of gifted and talented students. First, advocacy is a continual process, a campaign in many ways, not an event around which boundaries are easily drawn. Successful advocates are vigilant and advocate all the time for the issues and causes they believe in. Successful advocates build up a deep well of good will and contacts on which to draw when focusing on a particular policy or funding crisis arises.

Second, successful advocacy often takes the form of advocacy to improve understanding of the needs of high-ability learners, or what we term advocacy for acceptance. Successful advocates for gifted education are willing to devote time to gaining recognition for the needs of talented learners in order to create a context ripe for other more tangible advocacy goals such as increased services in the schools or extracurricular opportunities for gifted and talented children.

Third, successful advocacy can be initiated and sustained by a small group of people even at the state level. Often a single individual who serves as a champion can inspire other advocates to stay the course over time.

Fourth, chance favors the prepared advocate. Opportunities can arise quickly, and advocates with a clear message and an effective messenger make the most of them. Being a knowledgeable messenger who can speak effectively and quickly with policy makers can be extremely important.

Fifth, successful advocates use non-adversarial strategies, and believe that strategies that focus on collaboration and consensus building are most likely to be effective. School personnel, including teachers and administrators, school board members, and legislators respond more positively to parent advocates who are knowledgeable about the range of issues facing them and are willing to negotiate to reach their goals.

Sixth, successful advocacy campaigns create intermediate goals to measure progress and maintain the enthusiasm of the participants. While many advocates view the final goal as mandated services to gifted and talented students, successful advocates use recognition, public relations campaigns, incremental policy making and implementation, and the establishment of ongoing advocacy

groups as intermediate outcomes and indicators of their progress.

In the end, the keys to effective advocacy for parents are planning, becoming informed, communicating with one another, and making positive contacts with individuals and groups who can support the interests of gifted children through good decisions, enlightened policies, and increased resources. Our research found parents across the country using a variety of advocacy strategies effectively and enthusiastically. They collaborated with schools. They built networks and coalitions. They persuaded policy makers. In all these contexts, parents were impressive advocates with interesting and inspiring stories to share.

Recommended Resources for Legislative Advocacy

Arkansas Association of Gifted Education Administrators (undated).

Legislative handbook: How to Communicate with State and National Policymakers. Little Rock: Author.

Bootel, J. A. (1995). *CEC Special Education Advocacy Handbook.* Reston, VA: Council for Exceptional Children.

California Association for the Gifted (undated). *Advocacy in Action: An Advocacy Handbook for Gifted and Talented Education.* Mountain View, CA: Author.

National Association for Gifted Children. (undated). *Advancing Gifted and Talented Education in the Congress: An Advocacy Guide for Parents and Teachers.* Washington, DC: Author.

Dr. Ann Robinson is a Professor at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock and a former editor of the *Gifted Child Quarterly*, and **Dr. Sidney Moon** is a Professor at Purdue University in West Lafayette, Indiana and a member of the *PHP Editorial Advisory Board*.