

Advocating for Appropriate Education for Your Child

The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, Third Edition, defines *advocacy* as "the act of pleading or arguing in favor of something, such as a cause, an idea, or a policy; active support."

As parents the cause that moves us to action is our children. We all want happy, successful children and we know that their education is essential to their success. Yet finding and maintaining a high quality, cost effective education for gifted children is not an easy task. Unfortunately, we cannot just pack their lunches, kiss their cheeks, and wave good-bye, confident their school days will be filled with opportunities for them to stretch to their potentials.

Gifted children are a challenge to schools. We understand - they are a challenge to us.

But we also understand that if we offer gifted children the opportunity to stretch to their limits, our whole society benefits. What must we do as parents to advocate for appropriate education? And how do we do it successfully?

Societal expectations exist in all aspects of life. There may be written rules of behavior and an established, documented protocol for many situations. But there are also unwritten rules of behavior and the degree to which we recognize and follow these rules determines the success we achieve in our quests. Here are some suggestions for successful advocacy for your gifted child.

Learn the Status Quo

One of the most important tools for successful advocacy is becoming familiar with your child's school setting and the people in charge. Learn how your school and the school district are organized.

Begin by making an effort to meet the teachers, counselors, librarians, nurse, secretaries, and principals at your child's school. If your child is beginning a new school make an appointment to tour the school with your child before opening day. If your child is attending the same school as the previous year, schedule a visit in August or early September during the day while your child is in class. Call several days before you plan to visit and leave a message for the teacher that you would like to visit the classroom and ask if she has particular times she

would prefer you to visit. This is to your benefit, in that you will gain the most from a visit if you are able to observe the teacher and students interacting. You do not want to go to all the effort of a visit to only sit through a test or art time. Teachers also appreciate this advance call so they do not wonder if something is wrong.

Check in at the office when you arrive. Often visitors must sign in and wear a visitor badge or nametag for security purposes. Then walk through the halls, visit the library, the counselor's office, and the nurse's office. Introduce yourself to new staff members and reintroduce yourself to those who have returned. The school staff members meet hundreds of parents - they may not remember you the second or even the third time you meet. Observe the atmosphere of the school, the personalities of the staff, the interaction of the students and staff.

Once in your child's class, sit in the back and observe the class setting, atmosphere, and how your child responds and interacts with his teacher and peers. If your child is in elementary school, have lunch with him in the school cafeteria. This will help you meet other children in his lunch group and observe the personalities surrounding your child.

These suggestions will help you come to understand your child's school, but to get an overall feeling of where the educational focus is in your district, you should attend a school board meeting. Observe how the meeting is run and how concerns are handled. Watch which speakers addressing the board are more effective and why.

After the meeting introduce yourself to the administrators and school board trustees. Walk up, extend your hand, and say with a smile, "Hello! I'm ____." Reintroduce yourself each time you meet again until you are sure the person knows your name. When you talk with someone you want him or her to be at ease so they absorb what you say. If they are searching their memory for your name, you will not have their undivided attention.

Establish Yourself as an Ally to Education

Actively support appropriate education for all children through your words and deeds. Quality education depends on a partnership of students, schools, parents, and the community. Parents who project a positive image, who respect the efforts of all those involved in

education, and who work with the schools for the benefit of all children, are the parents who win the respect and the ear of the key decision makers. Parents who show up just to complain then disappear into the horizon again win few allies to their cause.

Many parents, due to time constraints primarily, are consumed with the needs of their own children. To advocate for gifted children, parents need to take the time and exert the effort to show other parents that what benefits gifted children can benefit theirs also. For instance, a school filled with National Merit Scholars enhances the reputation of the school and all who graduate from that school.

One way to demonstrate your support for your child's school is to read the mission statement for your school and embrace it. Then, when talking with other adults about school - or school administrators - you can refer to the mission statement.

Respect the traditions at your school. These can enrich the educational experience. Wild hair day, a pep rally, an egg rolling contest, and a Christmas tree in the classroom all offer opportunities to broaden the horizons of students.

Another way to demonstrate your support for the school and to win allies in the building is to volunteer in some capacity at school that will help many children. For instance, before any new book can be shelved in the school library it must be read by an adult. You could read some of the new arrivals on a regular basis for the librarian. If you read them to your children at home you could spend time with your own children while helping the school. Or you could bake the cookies and serve refreshments for the class that has no room mother. Or you could make presentations on career day, organize the science fair, or judge a speech and debate tournament.

There are myriad ways of volunteering and there should be no excuses. Everyone is busy. This is an investment in your child's education and future. Find something that you want to do, like to do, and do well. Volunteer in this capacity year after year so you become an integral part of the system. Then stay involved through your child's entire school experience, not just in elementary school.

Know What Should Be Happening

An educated and informed parent makes a better advocate for her children. Familiarize yourself with what is supposed to be happening in the classroom, in the school, and in the district. Read the handbooks, newsletters, and information sent home by the school and

district. Know the state laws on gifted education. Read the research on gifted and other educational issues of interest to you. Ask questions and learn the meanings of the terms used in "educationese."

Read some of the books on gifted so you understand who these children are, how they learn, what they need, and why. If you know the facts about gifted children and the policies and programs that help and hinder them, you can argue these issues with other parents and educators who are not as well versed and therefore do not understand the need.

Raising Champions, compiled and written by Dr. Michael Sayler and available through Texas Association for the Gifted and Talented, gives an excellent overview of the information crucial to parents of gifted with references to some of the most recommended books on the subject. Another book every parent of gifted should read is *Guiding the Gifted Child* by Dr. James Webb, Elizabeth Meckstroth, and Stephanie Tolan and published by Ohio Psychology Press. This book provides a wealth of practical information that will hold you captive from cover to cover.

Another way to inform yourself on the issues surrounding gifted education is to obtain a copy of the state mandate for educational programs for gifted and talented students from the Texas Education Agency at 1701 North Congress Avenue, Austin, TX 78701-1494. Gifted education has been mandated in Texas since the 1990-91 school year. The wording of the law is changed periodically and it is important to stay abreast of the changes in state legislation.

Thanks to the 74th Session of the Texas Legislature, 1995 was a landmark year for education. For the first time since 1949, the Texas legislators embarked on a major attempt to revise and rewrite the laws for Texas public schools. The end result was an overhaul of the Texas Education Code, often referred to as Senate Bill 1. One of the major themes in the revision is the emphasis on parental rights and responsibilities stipulated in Chapter 26.

Then in November of 1996, Texas took another giant step forward. The State Board of Education adopted the Texas State Plan for the Education for Gifted/Talented Students.

Request a copy of Chapter 26 and a copy of the Texas State Plan for the Education for Gifted/Talented Students from the Texas Education Agency. Or access copies of those documents from the TEA site online. Education and the educational process are fluid; this flux allows parents the opportunity to initiate changes in education.

Still another way to become educated about needs of gifted students is to attend meetings of your local parent support group for gifted, attend local presentations by speakers on the gifted, or attend sessions at the TAGT annual state conference. If your school district does not have a district-wide parent advocacy group for gifted education, form one yourself. Do not leave it for someone else to do. A large group of parents with a common goal for many children has a larger impact than one or two parents pleading for their own children. A district-wide gifted support group also provides an opportunity for parents to network with other parents and for gifted students to meet gifted students from other schools.

Give Credit for Jobs Well Done

One of the best ways to establish yourself as an ally is to recognize and acknowledge the effort of your school's faculty and staff. It's important to realize there are obstacles hindering the educational process at any school, but with encouragement and support, problems can be solved. Take the time to say or write something positive to teachers, principals, administrators, and staff when they do something exceptionally well. Usually it is problems and objections that are voiced. Make an effort to commend jobs well done. Two lines and two minutes can make a teacher's day, renew her energy, and shore her efforts. At the end of the year write a letter to each of the good teachers your child had that year, thanking them for their teaching skills and their contribution to your child's education and our world's future. Send a courtesy copy to the principal. When the time comes for you to express a concern or voice an objection, your negative stand will carry more weight because you have been actively positive in the past.

Choose Your Battles

Accept that everything cannot be perfect for everyone at all times. Explain to your children that life offers challenges and opportunities under many guises. Teach your children ways to overcome obstacles to their education and/or happiness. The ability to "turn lemons into lemonade" is a valuable asset through out life. Model this behavior in your life, maintaining a positive, can-do attitude.

Recognize issues that should be addressed by the school and act in a timely manner. If you wait weeks or months before acting, the options for change are reduced. Contact the appropriate person when you have a concern. It does no good to call another parent to complain. That parent does not have the power to make the change. Instead, prepare your case and present it to the person with authority to make a change.

Prepare Your Case

Once you have identified the problem that you would like your school to address, take the time to investigate the situation and research the facts. Universalize the problem. Relate it to the mission and goals of the school and community. Determine how it affects all the students and the community. Extrapolate consequences. Strive for a reasonable and rational case. Emotion tends to detract from your credibility and professionalism.

Write a synopsis of your case in order to organize your thoughts. State the problem as you interpret it, present the evidence of the problem, and then list alternatives that might alleviate the problem.

View the problem from the perspective of the student, the teacher, the principal, and the administrator. Determine student benefits, school benefits, economic benefits, and community benefits that would be a result of your proposal. Consider any problems that might occur with your proposal and options. Organize your thoughts and notes into an outline of what you want to discuss with the person with authority to make the decision. Compose your initial presentation so that you can succinctly state what you have to say in approximately one to three minutes. Always use "we", not "I" and "you". And remember to compose yourself before you punch in that phone number. Never call when you are angry or very emotional.

Present Your Case

For a classroom problem contact the teacher first. For a school problem, speak with the principal. Follow the established chain of command in your district. Traditionally the chain of command is: teacher > principal > instructional specialist > superintendent > board of trustees. If you are unsure of the protocol in your district ask a secretary in the principal's office. Allow the person most directly involved the opportunity to hear your concern first.

Call for an appointment first but be prepared in case the person is able to speak with you at that time. Leave a message with your name, your child's name, your telephone number at work and at home, and the reason for requesting a return call or appointment: "I would like to speak with Ms. Jones concerning the English group project assigned to her sixth period class last Monday." By leaving relevant information the teacher can be prepared with any materials in hand when she returns your call. This will save you both time. Allow 24 hours for your call to be returned, then call again. If your call is not returned after three tries, move up the chain of command.

Greet the person warmly. Your tone of voice can set the tone of the entire conversation and the consequent actions and reactions. Thank the person for returning your call or meeting with you. Then come immediately to the point. State your facts calmly and in order. Ask your questions or make your request. Then listen without interruption. Take notes on the response. Briefly repeat back your interpretation of what was said; if you need clarification of a point, this is the time to ask. If it is necessary for you to respond with an answer, agree on a time when you will communicate again.

Build bridges; do not burn them. No two people have the exact same beliefs on all issues. Through the years you will be aligned with some people today on one cause and other people in the future. Remain focused on your goal. Do not sidetrack onto a laundry list of complaints. Supply data to support your position and back it up with personal stories. Include yourself in the suggested win-win solutions.

If you are happy with the result of the meeting, say so and say thank you. However, if you are not happy, take your case to the next higher level on the chain of command and then the next. Do not skip a level unless you make an attempt to reach the person at that level and they are unavailable for an unworkable length of time. Keep trying and don't be discouraged. Consider compromises.

Through this entire process you are teaching your children. First and foremost, you are demonstrating in actions that you love them and consider their education a priority. Second, you are modeling some of the most important lessons in life: Every human counts so respect others as well as yourself; problem solving involves creativity, logic, protocol, challenge, time, and commitment; think before you respond; take control of any situation as it occurs in your life; act, don't react; be positive and persistent and fight for what you believe in.

Advocating for appropriate education for your child is a continuous process. Your positive, persistent involvement will foster your child's success in school and in life.

References

Courtright, R. D. (1993, November). Advocacy and the gifted program: Use it or lose it. Presentation at the annual conference of the Texas Association for the Gifted and Talented. Austin, TX.

Sayler, M.F. (1994). *Raising Champions: A parents' guide for nurturing their gifted children*, Austin, TX: Texas Association for the Gifted and Talented.

Webb, James T. "Bridging the gap: Guidelines for parents and teachers. Presentation at the annual conference of the Texas Association for the Gifted and Talented. Austin, TX. (June 1995)

State Resources for Information

Texas Association for the Gifted and Talented (TAGT)

The Texas Association for the Gifted and Talented (TAGT) was chartered in 1978 as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit education corporation to promote awareness of the unique social, emotional, and intellectual needs of gifted and talented students and to impact the development of appropriate educational services to meet these needs. The Texas Education Code defines "gifted and talented students" those "who performs at or shows the potential for performing at a remarkably high level of accomplishment when compared to others of the same age, experience or environment and who:

- (1) exhibits high performance capability in an intellectual, creative, or artistic area;
- (2) possesses an unusual capacity for leadership; or
- (3) excels in a specific academic field."

Contact TAGT when you need information on gifted issues. Mailing Address: 1524 South IH 35, #205, Austin, TX 78704; Phone: (512) 499-8248; Fax: (512) 499-8264; website: www.txgifted.org

Texas Education Agency (TEA)

Contact TEA when you need information or clarification on state laws and rules. The Texas Education Agency's, Advanced and Academic Unit oversees gifted education and advanced academics. Kelly Callaway is the Director of Gifted and Talented Education and Advanced Academics. Mailing Address: 1701 North Congress Avenue, Austin, TX 78701-1494; Phone: (512) 463-9581; Website: www.tea.state.tx.us/gted

State Board of Education (SBOE)

Contact the SBOE when you have questions, concerns or comments on state rules. To find the names and contact information for the current board members, go to www.tea.state.tx.us/sboe/board/index.html, write to - The Texas State Board of Education, William B. Travis Building, 1701 North Congress Avenue, Austin, TX 78701-1494, or call (512) 463-9007.

Colleen Elam, the author of this article, is a past president of the Texas Association for the Gifted and Talented (TAGT) and a past TAGT Parent of the Year.