

Effective Advocates

by Dr. Julia Link Roberts and Tracy Ford Inman



Find “Kindred Spirits”

Make the year 2006 a year for advocacy! In each edition of Parenting for High Potential, a new column, “Effective Advocates,” will focus on a specific advocacy issue: Find Kindred Spirits, Craft Messages, Communicate Effectively, and Be Involved for the Long Run. We thank Dr. Julia Link Roberts Chair of the NAGC legislative committee and Tracy Ford Inman, both of Western Kentucky University, for preparing this series.

As parents, you may often feel alone in your thinking. Maybe you see your child bringing home all A's or 100's, but you never see any studying going on or real effort being put into it. You might even question if this is a concern (It is!) or if anyone else feels the same. Maybe your child complains of boredom in school or of covering the same material as last year. Perhaps he's reading *Harry Potter* at home but only allowed to read *Harry the Horrible* in school. You may be confused and rightly concerned. Is your child getting what he needs in school? Is it just your child experiencing this? Is there anything you can do about this?

It's time to speak out. In order to speak out, to advocate for your child, you must discover others who feel the way you do. Step one in advocacy is to find “kindred spirits.” Who else questions easy grades? Who else is interested in advanced math for children who already have mastered the grade-level concepts? Who else in your child's school supports children reading materials that are beyond grade level? Who else shares your concerns or interests? Other parents will undoubtedly share your concerns, but what about educators? Administrators? They, too, may be kindred spirits. They, too, need to find others who share similar beliefs and concerns. Together you are likely to be more effective than you can be alone. Your voice will be much stronger – and better heard.

What happens, though, when the answers to all those questions aren't obvious? What if it's not clear who shares your interests in speaking out to encourage more challenge for children at your child's school or even in the school district? You may discover a fellow advocate at your very own dinner table: your child. Listen when he talks about other children who are reading chapter books when most other children are not ready for reading at that level.

Listen when your daughter describes another child who is very capable in math and enjoys challenging problems. Their parents are possible fellow advocates, kindred spirits. They may indeed be interested in advocating for challenge. Search for others, too. Attend school council meetings and parent-teacher meetings; listen for conversations that indicate an interest in issues related to challenging children to work hard on reading, math, or any other subject to ensure that each is making continuous progress. Consider activities where like-minded people gather: academic team, Future Problem Solving, FIRST LEGO® League, Science Olympiad, Math Counts, Destination ImagiNation®, Odyssey of the Mind – the list depends greatly on your own child's interests. You will find others who think as you do.

Numbers matter when it comes to advocacy. It may be easy to ignore one parent, but a dozen parents get more done. Double that number and the chances of getting your message across also doubles. That is why it is so important to find “kindred spirits.”

Here's how schools might look at the number of people raising questions, as described by Parent Leadership Associates/KSA Communications (the Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence is a statewide education advocacy organization):

- 1 Advocate = A Fruit Cake
- 2 Advocates = Fruit Cake and Friend
- 3 Advocates = Troublemakers
- 5 Advocates = Let's Have a Meeting
- 10 Advocates = We'd Better Listen
- 25 Advocates = Our Dear Friends
- 50 Advocates = A Powerful Organization

Once you've located the kindred spirits in your area, you're ready to craft a message. Stay tuned for the next column!

Recommended Resources

www.nagc.org. See the Advocacy Toolkit, in the Information and Resources section.

Purcell, J. H. & Eckert, R. D. (Eds.). (2006). *Designing Services and Programs for High-ability Learners: A Guidebook for Gifted Education*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press. See the chapter, (Planning for Advocacy.)

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Craft Your Message

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Now that you've found kindred spirits, others who believe as you do about gifted children and their needs, it's time to advocate for change. However, before you can advocate for your children, you must first figure out the message. What are you trying to get across? To whom are you directing the message? The effectiveness of your advocacy will depend upon how well you specifically address those two questions. Your answers will help you target what you say to the person or decision-makers who can make what you want to happen really happen.

As you craft your advocacy message, think positively; it is important to focus on what you want to occur rather than on what you don't like that is happening. Few educators will respond positively to a message that your child is bored (that can mean so many things, from the child doesn't have rapport with the teacher to the material is too repetitive). Few decision makers will listen carefully to a litany of negative stories about your child and her school situation. Negative messages may very well fall on ears that have stopped listening. Not much happens if two-way communication breaks down, so keep your message positive.

Effective messages should be easy to understand and easy to remember. The message must be clear. If several people or an organization are focusing on the advocacy message, consistency in the delivery of the message is important. Chances of successful advocacy go up when advocates deliver the same message. Remember to keep it simple, clear, and powerful and make sure that everyone is relaying the same message.

Your goal is to have members of a decision-making group hear what you have to say and (hopefully) take action. The decision maker is most likely to "hear" a message if it ties in with something he believes in or wants to do. What does the teacher understand and care about? Or, if you are advocating for something to happen at the school level, what goals does the school espouse? Wrap your message around something your teacher or school administrators or school council wants to put into place. When that happens, you become part of the solution rather than a problem parent who wants something just for his or her child – and people will listen to possible solutions.

Where can you find such meaningful messages that should resonate with teachers, administrators, school council members, school board members, and/or legislators? Go to the school philosophy or mission statement as a starting point. Often you will see phrases such as "to develop the potential of every student" or "to ensure continuous progress for each student." These phrases can be incorporated into your advocacy message if they will help you communicate your concern. And since these phrases have already been accepted by the school, the transition to include your message should be a natural extension. Policy statements of organizations can provide the "meat" of your message. For example, the Joint Policy Statement of the National Middle School Association and the National Association for Gifted Children includes statements such as "Advanced middle grades learners thus require consistent opportunities to work at degrees of challenge somewhat beyond their particular readiness levels, with support necessary to achieve at the new levels of proficiency." In the current high school reform movement, there are three key words – rigor, relevance, and relationships. All three words could be important in designing advocacy messages for young people who are gifted and talented. For example, rigor is relative to each student, and all students must be challenged to work at high levels if they are to be successful in postsecondary opportunities.

Without personal challenge, the young person doesn't acquire the work habits that will serve him well when he confronts an academic task that isn't easy for him. Another key word in the high school reform movement is relationships. At all levels of schooling, relationships are important; gifted children need the peer relationships of others who think like they do and who share some interests. Reports from government organizations also provide sources for messages. *Rising Above the Gathering Storm: Energizing and Employing America for a Brighter Economic Future* (p. 5-15) states: "A new generation of bright, well-trained scientists and engineers will transform our future only if we begin in the 6th grade to significantly enlarge the pipeline and prepare students to engage in advanced coursework in mathematics and science."

Sample Messages

Of course, the advocacy message must address your specific situation, but some sample messages include the following:

- Continuous progress in mathematics is important if our children are to learn new things every day and continue to be motivated in that important content area.
- No Child Left Behind legislation sets proficiency as the minimum, but doesn't establish a learning ceiling. The learning ceiling must be lifted if every child, including one who is gifted and talented, is to make continuous progress.
- Academic peers share interests and willingness to learn at challenging levels even though they may not be age-peers.
- The future of our community (or state and nation) will depend on challenging all students, including gifted young people, to work hard to prepare them for performing successfully in postsecondary opportunities. It isn't possible to work hard when the content is easy.

Effective Messages Are:

- Positive
- Clear
- Easy to understand
- Easy to remember
- Repeated by multiple messengers
- Built on positions and beliefs already espoused by the target audience

Speaking out on behalf of children with advanced academic needs is vitally important if our schools are to challenge the wide range of learners, including those children who are gifted and talented. You will be a more effective advocate if this message is carefully crafted and connects to policy – especially when you aim it at educators and decision-makers who value continuous progress and the development of the potential of all young people. "All children" is a phrase that isn't limited to those children who are performing at grade level but includes children who are below and above grade level. The future of our states and country depends upon developing the talents and abilities of all of our children to their maximum potential. Be careful as you craft your advocacy message: the future of your child and of children is so important that you must speak out!

Resources

Achieve, Inc. & National Governors Association. (2005). *An Action Agenda For Improving America's High Schools*. Washington, DC: Achieve.

Committee on Prospering in the Global Economy of the 21st Century. (2005). *Rising Above The Gathering Storm: Energizing And Employing America For A Brighter Economic Future*. Washington, D. C.: National Academies Press. Retrieved online version January 19, 2006, from <http://www.nap.edu/catalog/11463.html>

National Governor's Association: www.nga.org.

National Middle School Association & National Association for Gifted Children. (2004). *Meeting The Needs Of High-ability And High-potential Learners In The Middle Grades: A Joint Position Statement Of The National Middle School Association And The National Association For Gifted Children*. Washington, DC: Authors.

Roberts, J. L. (2006). Planning for advocacy. In J. H. Purcell. & R. D. Eckert, (Eds.), *Designing Services And Programs For High-ability Learners: A Guidebook For Gifted Education* (pp. 239-248). Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

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Communicate Effectively

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You've found kindred spirits who share your interest in advocating for gifted children. You've even crafted the message that explains what you are advocating for. Now you are ready to communicate that message – but you must be careful in how you communicate. You have to keep your goal in mind as well as your audience. Effective communication, critical in advocacy, doesn't just happen; you must plan well.

Identify Goal

The first step in effective communication is establishing your goal. What exactly are you trying to accomplish? Yes, of course, you want to share your message that you've so carefully crafted – but if you want decision-makers to act on it, you must consider the nuances of the communication itself. Maybe your purpose is persuasion; if so, then you must be prepared with details and data that support your message. Perhaps you're trying to build rapport and trust. This indicates a sharing, a give and take, in communication. If your intent is to promote an exchange of ideas or possible solutions to issues, then you need to emphasize your open mind as you bring multiple possibilities to the table. In short, the purpose of your communication should be woven throughout the discussion as you carefully select words, examples, and details to further your goal. If you plan this before you begin the discussions, you're on your way to success.

In the last column we mentioned the importance of a positive message. That positive approach is also vital in communication. Although it is easy to slip into the mode of telling horror stories about what hasn't happened for your child, you will be more effective if you concentrate on what you want to occur and why – if you focus on your message and the reason for it. If you can tie what you are advocating for to something the decision-maker also wants, or the school espouses in its mission statement, you are a step ahead.

Identify Audience

Another aspect of effective communication is consideration of your audience. Who do you want to listen to your message? Who can make a difference if they "catch on" to your advocacy? Who will make the decision or determine whether what you want to happen

for children will occur? It is important to educate the listeners who make the decisions and who determine if your advocacy message will be implemented. For example, are you advocating for change at the classroom, school, district, state, or national level? Targeting your message to the appropriate audience allows advocates to focus their time and energies on decision-makers who can make your goals become reality. Be sure to communicate with those individuals or groups using the most effective skills that you have.

Practice Listening Skills

One of the most effective skills in communication is listening. Effective communication is two-way communication that includes talking and listening, not just talking to someone. You like to talk with people who listen to you; they don't just tell you what they want you to know. Likewise your advocacy will be more successful if you listen as well as talk. If your audience knows that you are truly listening to their points, the chance of their truly listening to you increases. What behaviors indicate that you are truly listening? You can start by taking notes and asking questions to clarify what's being discussed. Don't hesitate to restate what's been said to make sure that you understand. Be sure to maintain eye contact and be sure to send out nonverbal signals that indicate attention and openness (such as nodding). There must be an exchange of information for anything substantial to occur. Establish the tone of two-way communication early in the conversation.

Ongoing Contact

Preferably this important discussion won't be your first (or only!) with the decision-makers. Hopefully you have ongoing communication with individuals who make decisions that determine appropriate services for your child or determine policy or law that will make a difference in gifted education. "Ongoing" is a very important concept in advocacy. Waiting until you have a problem isn't the best idea. An already-established relationship with decision-makers makes trouble shooting easier. You have a greater chance of success if you talk with decision-makers on an ongoing basis.

Stay Informed

As an advocate for gifted education, it is important to stay informed. The state gifted association is a ready source of information about state policies on issues related to gifted children and about opportunities for gifted children in the state. Various websites on gifted education provide a wealth of information on

a variety of topics of interest to parents and educators. For good sources of information on issues and policies, you may check out websites for the National Association for Gifted Children [www.nagc.org] and the Davidson Institute [www.gt-cybersource.org]. Another good source for state policies in gifted education is *Designing Services and Programs for High-Ability Learners: A Guidebook for Gifted Education*, especially the chapter on state policy in gifted education. Another book that provides information comparing state requirements and funding is the *2004-2005 State of the States*; both books are available through the NAGC online bookstore. Knowing where to find answers that decision-makers ask about is every bit as important as knowing the answer. Once you have found the information requested, then you need to get it right back to the individuals who asked the question. You have learned, and so have they.

Timeliness

Communication needs to be timely and show consideration. Advocates need to stay tuned in to what is going on; and, of course, that is more likely with regular communication. Waiting until there is a crisis complicates the possibility of educating the individuals making the decision. Being timely is vital in advocacy because there are limited opportunities to provide input on key decisions. Timeliness also applies to when you communicate your messages and to when you thank the individual(s) after the decision is made. Thanks are in order if you got what you requested, but a note of appreciation for the opportunity

to discuss the issue is appropriate even when the decision wasn't exactly what you had hoped for. Acknowledging their consideration of your request in a note will be the next step in your communication. Since advocacy is ongoing, you will want and need to keep the communication channels open; and timeliness and consideration are key ingredients to do just that.

Remember to maintain your communication with decision-makers as you would with a good friend. Communicate often, sharing your thoughts regularly. Really listen to what the person has to say asking questions and giving feedback; you also share your ideas. Make certain that he or she knows what you are saying. Be interested in what he or she thinks about your thoughts. Keep two-way communication ongoing throughout the relationship. This is effective communication, and effective advocates must be effective communicators.

For more information about communication and advocacy, check out these resources:

- Sandra L. Berger's *Supporting Gifted Education Through Advocacy*. (ERIC #E494) (<http://www.nagc.org/CMS400Min/index.aspx?id=201>)
- The National Association for Gifted Children's *Communication Tools for Advocacy*. (<http://www.nagc.org/CMS400Min/index.aspx?id=594>)
- Joyce Van Tassel-Baska's chapter State Policies in Gifted Education in J.H. Purcell & R.D. Eckert (Eds.). (2006) *Designing Services and Programs for High-Ability Learners: A Guidebook for Gifted Education*. Corwin Press.

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Lifelong Advocacy: If Not You, Then Who?

This is the fourth article in a series on effective advocates, "Effective Advocates," which focused on specific advocacy issues: Find Kindred Spirits, Craft Messages, Communicate Effectively, and Be Involved for the Long Run. We thank Dr. Julia Link Roberts, Chair of the NAGC legislative committee, and Tracy Ford Inman, both of Western Kentucky University, for preparing this series.

An effective advocate doesn't just materialize out of nowhere. Rather, becoming an advocate is more of an evolution; you begin with concerns about your own child's learning. From there you find kindred spirits who share those concerns. Together you craft a message that is communicated in a consistent, rational manner to decision makers. This process takes months (and often times years!) before change is effected. Unfortunately, though, too many advocates see their child's high school graduation as their graduation as well. Advocacy stops when college starts. The experienced, effective advocate retires – and children suffer because of it. Young people who are gifted and talented desperately need lifelong advocates willing to speak out for their educational opportunities!

Retiring from advocacy hurts untold numbers of gifted children. Being interested in gifted children for a year or two makes no sense, yet that is the pattern that many advocates follow. They demonstrate interest when their child is first identified for gifted services in elementary school and then fade in their advocacy. Consider the following: if it is important to have excellence in education today for your children, don't you want appropriate services to be in place for your grandchildren? Thinking beyond the here and now stretches us; but, when we stretch our thinking, we realize that what is important for our children is important to our neighbors' children, to children in our community, as well as in our state and country. Looking beyond our own needs to the greater good will serve us well today and in the future, especially in the flattened world in which we live.

Numbers count in advocacy! Gifted children need as many spokespersons as possible. Because the percentage of children who are gifted and talented is fairly small, it is important to retain advocates – especially experienced ones who have developed strong relationships with decision makers. Gifted children need to have parents, grandparents, educators, and interested citizens to speak out on their behalf. They need adults to realize that the needs of gifted children are created by their strengths, which often makes them look the opposite of "needy." However, their needs make them just as different from the average child as

the needs of children with severe disabilities. Both groups need accommodations and services if they will have opportunities to develop their full potentials. A single message relayed in many voices has a much greater impact.

You will still be living and working in your community long after your child has graduated. Having the most challenging educational opportunities available for young people who are ready for advanced learning is important for the economy of your community, state, and nation. Lifelong advocates can ensure that those opportunities are available. In a knowledge-based economy, it is the creative mind that will fuel the economy through innovation and entrepreneurship. Gifted children offer the possibility of becoming the entrepreneurs if provided opportunities to gain the knowledge and skills to do so. Young people who have laboratories and educational environments positively impact their communities and their nation. With the emphasis in schools today on reaching proficiency, the learning ceiling is far too low for many gifted children. Certainly advocates recognize the need for young people to have proficiency in literacy and mathematics; however, that focus provides barriers to learning for children who are already at grade level or above in these important content areas. Advocates must speak out on behalf of continuous progress. Continuous progress for gifted children parallels the continuous progress of our nation's economy.

Becoming or staying internationally competitive means focusing on appropriately challenging educational opportunities for America's youth. If being internationally competitive is important today, it will remain so tomorrow, so being an advocate remains a high priority. The U.S. Commission on National Security for the 21st Century says in its report, *Road Map for National Security: Imperative for Change* (February 15, 2001): "Second only to a weapon of mass destruction detonating in an American city, we can think of nothing more dangerous than a failure to manage properly science, technology, and education for the common good over the next quarter century ... The capacity of America's educational system to create a 21st century workforce second to none in the world is a national security issue of the first order. As things stand, this country is forfeiting that capacity." The United States faces one of its greatest challenges as Asia (specifically, China and India) soars to economic and scientific heights. Both Fishman's *China, Inc.: How the Rise of the Next Superpower Challenges America and the World* and Friedman's *The World is Flat* point out numerous

ways that the United States is slipping academically, economically, and technologically. In *Rising Above the Gathering Storm: Energizing and Employing America for a Brighter Economic Future*, “2005”, the National Academies of Science 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.” In a world that has been flattened by technology, remaining competitive in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) is critical. We can only be competitive when our gifted children have no ceiling to their learning. Lifelong advocates can make that possible.

Still the most important reason to be a lifelong advocate for gifted education is that children who are gifted and talented are happier, more productive children when they are with intellectual peers and when they have challenging academic tasks to do. What could be more important than that?

The reasons for becoming a lifelong advocate are indeed numerous – as are the ways to become one:

- Belong to local, state, and national advocacy groups
- Question elected officials: What is your role in gifted education? What does gifted education look like to you? What information do you need to help you make an informed decision about gifted education?
- Get to know legislators and their support staff
- Show appreciation for legislator’s support
- Tell the truth: say you don’t know the answer when you don’t (but find it out)
- Stay in the loop: keep updated on the subject; know what other schools, districts, and states are doing; have copies of the law and regulations
- Use real people to illustrate your points (cute kids make an impression!)
- Persevere, persevere, persevere

Reconsider, then, when your last child graduates from high school. Don’t retire. Share your expertise in advocacy with those just beginning their journey. The world will be a better place because it.

Resources

www.advocacy.org. Website of the Advocacy Institute in Washington, D. C.

Committee on Prospering in the Global Economy of the 21st Century. (2005). *Rising Above the Gathering Storm: Energizing and Employing America for a Brighter Economic Future*. Washington, DC: National Academies Press. Retrieved online version JNovember 15, 2006, from <http://www.nap.edu/catalog/11463.html>

Fishman, T. C. (2005). *China, Inc.: How the Rise of the Next Superpower Challenges America and the World*. New York: Scribner.

Friedman, T. L. (2005). *The World is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-first Century*. New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux.

U.S. Commission on National Security for the 21st Century. (2001). *Road Map for National Security: Imperative for Change*. Wilkes-Barre, PA: Kallisti Publishing (<http://www.kallistipublishing.com/>).