

What Makes a Parent Group Successful?

By Colleen Elam

We are all searching for a magic formula for a successful parent group. We wish we could just assemble the ingredients, stir them together, and magically create an effective, dynamic parent group. But alas, it's not so quick and easy. We do know the essential ingredients:

► Cause

Parents must understand a purpose for expending their time, effort, and money to organize as a group. They must understand the strength of numbers versus individual pleas, in that advocacy for the needs of a large group is more effective than advocacy for the needs of one child. Parents are motivated to act when they see the unfulfilled needs of their own children and a universal purpose, encompassing all gifted children in the district, will enable the parents as a group to gain wide support. The purpose of the parent group must be well-defined and articulated to prevent misinterpretation.

► Administrator

Ideally, the administrator actively involved with the parent group is the district coordinator for the gifted program. If there is no G/T coordinator in the district, or if the G/T coordinator does not support gifted, a principal or teacher or anyone with an administrative position could act as the liaison and contact point for the parent group. The administrator acts as a voice within the administration whose endorsement lends credibility to the parent group. The administrator is crucial for contacts, introductions, and support, and also serves as a source for accurate information for the parent group, as well as principals, teachers, and community members. Logistically, the administrator handles the reservations of central schools for the parent group meetings.

► Parent to chair the effort, lead the group

This key parent must be an interested stakeholder whose children will benefit from a viable gifted program in order for the parent to be willing to devote the time and effort necessary. More than any other person, this is the driving force and public face for the organization. Therefore, this parent should be diplomatic, literate, positive, and a persistent worker and organizer.

► Parents representing schools across the district

Parent representation from schools across the entire district provides the political weight and the clout of the entire district. It demonstrates there is a broad base of interest and support for the cause of the organization legitimizing the advocacy efforts. District-wide representation also broadens the contact base for the parent group so that information on schools and school practices district-wide is available first hand. As a result, the parent group is able to perceive a broad view and tap an extensive support network when working on programs.

► Teachers

It is essential that the parent group form an alliance with teachers. Teachers, parents, and students must work cooperatively as partners in education. Teachers should understand the group's purpose and support the group's efforts. One way for the parent group to endorse the work and commitment of the teachers is to grant teachers of the gifted an honorary membership in the group. Thus, through the group's newsletter in their mailbox at school, teachers are kept up to date on news and events in the district and in the state, and they are informed of the group's upcoming programs and meetings. Another way to involve teachers is to create teacher liaison or representative positions on the group's board. This direct input adds valuable perspective to the parent group.

► **Tangible form of communication/Newsletter**

Frequent communication is essential for maintaining a continuing membership base. The newsletter is a powerful tool for distributing information on the local program, on state legislation and rules, on national influences, movements, trends, and on the nature and nurture of gifted children. Furthermore, an informative, timely, professional-looking newsletter projects a positive image of the parent group. The newsletter is a vehicle for distributing the names and contact information of local and state officials to enable the membership in advocacy efforts. Also, every issue of the newsletter should list the names and contact numbers of the local group's officers. *[Note: Since the publication of this article, the explosion of the internet has changed the nature of communication. Many parent groups use electronic newsletters and frequent e-mails to communicate more frequently and cheaply with members and other stakeholders.]*

► **Program**

Strong programs enhance the group's reputation and garner wide support. Conversely, weak programs precipitate a decline in the group's effectiveness. Programs with the widest appeal include speakers on gifted traits, parenting gifted, and educating gifted. The group's programming should disseminate information and stimulate a bonding among parents.

► **Money**

Dues must be significant enough to support the workings of the parent group organization. Otherwise, the board's time and energy will be expended on fund raisers. Included in the dues schedule should be a written policy for donations.

Those are the essential ingredients. Then we must add:

► **Time** ► **Hard Work** ► **Positive approach** ► **Persistence**

We must renew and affirm it with every program, every meeting, every year. Yes, it requires time and work—vast quantities of time and hard work. Of course it does. Is that not what we teach our children? Hard work, time, and persistence pave the road to success.

In a 1997 survey, TAGT parent affiliates shared their perceptions on their most successful programs, the reasons for a surge in group membership, and the reasons for a decline in membership. These dedicated parents have made a positive impact on gifted education in their districts and across Texas. Here is what they report:

Successful Programs that Parent Affiliate Groups Recommend:

1. Speaker on social-emotional needs of gifted children and consequent parenting approaches.
2. G/T coordinator explanation/update of the local gifted program as applied in the classroom; followed by discussion groups facilitated by a G/T teacher and a parent (perhaps split by age, such as primary, elementary, middle and high school); or followed by time to meet the G/T teachers and central office representatives.
3. Student-focused fun day, such as:
 - an educational show for members only
 - "Super Saturday" with half-day classes for kids and sessions for parents
 - "Super Science Saturday" with hands-on science activities
4. Student-focused meeting, such as
 - Science fair preparation
 - Youth programs—art, archeology, etc.

- Drama workshop
 - Study skills
 - Recognition of students' events and activities
 - Displays featuring work G/T and advanced students from high school
 - Transitions to middle school and/or high school
5. Speaker
 - G/T coordinator discussing current legislation effecting gifted education
 - Parent group panel—student panel—teacher panel
 - New superintendent
 - TAGT speaker
 - School board president
 6. Scholarships
 - TAGT scholarships—how to fill out applications
 - College information session/scholarship information
 7. Summer programs
 - Summer camps for gifted children
 - Summer reading programs, book exchanges
 - "Star-Spangled Summer"—mini-classes for members only
 8. Alternatives for gifted children
 - Charter or private schools
 - Home schooling options
 - Residential programs, such as Texas Academy for Math and Science (TAMS) or the Texas Academy for Leadership in the Humanities

Reasons for a Surge in Group Membership

1. Crisis in the schools or the school district
2. Programming offered
 - Summer mini-classes for kids—available to members only
 - Entertaining educational programs for children—only available to members
 - Programs for people with an academic interest, e.g. college information
 - Strong first meeting of the year
 - Door prizes, such as books on gifted
3. Frequent communication
 - Regular newsletter of good quality
 - Frequent mailings
 - Frequent e-mail messages and information
 - High energy level of volunteers in getting the word out
4. Parental interest
 - New group
 - Revitalization campaign
 - New group of children identified for G/T program
 - Parents seeking information
 - Concerns for students' academic well-being
 - Concerns for lack of G/T resources
 - Concerns over state legislation regarding gifted education
5. Charismatic leadership
 - Strong, positive public image
 - Focus on all age G/T students—needs, dreams, etc.
6. Increase in potential membership base
 - Increase in number of students identified
 - Reaching to a broader base, such as AP students, as well as those in gifted

7. Support of administration
 - District-hired academic consultant
 - New G/T coordinator or administrator

Reasons for a Decline in Group Membership

1. No imminent crisis in the schools or school district (or crisis resolved)
2. Parent apathy
 - Lack of time, concern, interest
 - Too many distractions, conflicts and/or commitments
 - Lack of good leadership/few leaders spread too thin
 - Low priority
 - Parents drop membership when children enter high school
 - Members do not renew due to lack of interest or lack of reminders
3. Programming offered
 - Parents reluctant to join if nothing offered that can't be received for free
 - Negative speaker—harmed group's reputation
 - Group is poorly organized
 - Meetings not held regularly
 - Programs lack widespread interest
 - Too much focus on political agendas
4. Lack of communication
 - Infrequent or poor quality newsletter
 - Lack of positive coverage in local newspaper
 - Lack of knowledge about group's purpose, strategy, approach, membership, etc.
5. Results of parent group advocacy
 - Perception that parent group is ineffective
 - Lack of change in G/T classroom instruction (if change is sought)
 - Lack of support of gifted education by administration
6. Lack of understanding or sympathy with the need for gifted education programs/services

Parent Affiliate Groups Have a Positive Impact in their Local Districts

Across Texas, parent groups have had an impact on their local districts due to their existence, their programming, and their advocacy. This impact is due to the time, the work, the persistence, and the positive approach of many parents. Many commonalities were reported, including:

- high expectations for local accomplishments
- membership fluctuates dramatically from year to year
- all groups tend to struggle through waxing and waning cycles
- parents flock to the group when there is a crisis and drift off when the situation improves
- volunteers are hard to find
- it is challenging to maintain representation from every area in a school district

In spite of the struggles, parent groups are effective in improving gifted education. For every member that joins, more information on the unique characteristics of gifted children, their strengths, and their vulnerabilities can be disseminated. For every member that joins, more information on teaching methods that work with the gifted and publicize opportunities that are available for gifted students can be shared.

Colleen Elam is a past-president of the Texas Association for the Gifted and Talented (TAGT), the 1994 TAGT Parent of the Year, and past-president of the Parents for Academic Excellence (PACE) in Fort Bend ISD.