



Parents Are the Best Advocates

Dr. Del Siegle, NAGC President

Every parent is confronted with questions of “How can I best help my child?”, “When should I intervene on my child’s behalf?”, and “When should I just let events unfold?” Support for gifted children is an important role for parents; in many cases, parents are their sole advocates. Parents of gifted children can advocate for their children along a broad continuum of support that begins with support at home and ends with support on a national level.

Advocacy along this broad continuum includes advocating for:

- the child’s personal performance by helping build his or her confidence and self-efficacy,
- specific services for the child in the community and school,
- greater schoolwide services for gifted children in general,
- state support for gifted education, and
- national attention on gifted education (both legislatively and with the general public).

First and foremost, children need to feel accepted and supported by their parents. Supporting a child also means assisting the child. The difficult issue is knowing when to lend assistance and how much assistance to lend. The Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky proposed that learning occurs within a “zone of proximal development,” or ZPD, where individuals are working on tasks that are sufficiently challenging that they cannot master them independently, yet easy enough that they can master them with assistance (a procedure he called “scaffolding”). The key to learning is to ensure challenge without complete frustration.

Each year Connecticut conducts an invention convention. Hundreds of elementary and middle school students gather on our university campus with their inventions. During registration check-in, it is sometimes difficult to determine whether the child or the parent is more vested in the invention being entered. I make a point to ask the young inventors their names as I search for their registration packet at the beginning of the event. I am amazed how often the parents shout the child’s name before the child has an opportunity to respond. Advocating for our children’s personal growth means giving them the independence to explore, make mistakes, learn, and grow; we should assist them only when the task reaches a level that requires scaffolding. Not everything should be easy, and children need the experience of tackling challenging situations. Self-confidence and high efficacy come from having chosen and mastered difficult goals. Children who never tackle and master challenging material seldom develop the confidence to tackle future challenges.

Unfortunately for many gifted students, school offers few opportunities for them to learn within their ZPD, and many parents will find themselves in the necessary position of advocating for their gifted child. The first step is to learn more about what the child’s needs are. NAGC past-president Rick Olenchak noted that parents need to understand what is involved in talent development and to learn which needs are best served at home, at school, or in the wider community. Parents will be much stronger advocates if they have educated themselves

and can provide evidence to support what they are requesting. The NAGC Web site (<http://www.nagc.org>) is filled with useful information for parents and educators. In a recent issue of *NAUTILUS*, Jullian Gates suggested that when parents approach the school, they should enter with a potential solution that will work for the child in the given context. Parents should be part of the solution, not viewed as an annoyance to be dealt with by the school staff.

Parents also need to be advocates in their community for overall services for gifted and talented students. They accomplish this by helping to educate school and community leaders and administrators about the academic needs of gifted students, explaining the continuum of possible services that could be offered (from simple curriculum compacting in the classroom to whole grade acceleration and special schools), and documenting how minimal adjustments in curriculum and instruction can have dramatic effects on gifted students’ academic achievement and attitude toward school and learning. Some of the most effective community advocates are parents of gifted students who are no longer in school. These parents are able to selflessly share their gifted expertise.

Whether a local school offers services for gifted students is often dependent upon state regulations. Ideally, states mandate that students be identified, that those who are identified receive services, and that state funds are available to provide those services. Some states have all of these components; others have none. State legislators and department of education personnel must understand that gifted students, like all students, have a right to learn something new every day. Advocacy is necessary to maintain these three components if a state has them; advocacy is even more crucial to adopt them if they are not available.

Finally, parent support is needed to ensure that giftedness and high potential in youth are nationally recognized, universally valued, actively supported, and developed. To that end, NAGC is committed to three themes:

- Our nation’s ability to compete tomorrow depends on how well schools challenge advanced students today.
- When gifted students from disadvantaged backgrounds lose ground year after year, our nation is leaving a national treasure behind.
- Every child deserves to maximize his or her potential.

NAGC is committed to helping the public understand these themes and to implement federal legislation to support them. This important effort cannot succeed without nationwide parental support. Jane Clarenbach, NAGC’s Director of Public Education, is organizing a Legislative Action Network (see “Advocating for Our Future” on p. 14). You need to be part of that network. Your children’s grandparents need to be part of that network. Your friends need to be part of that network. We can only turn the dream of every child learning something new every day into a reality if all of us join together. Your child’s future and our nation’s success depend on your participation. Act today by supporting the Legislative Action Network. Do it for all of us. Do it for your gifted child.