

# Effective Advocates

by Dr. Julia Link Roberts and Tracy Ford Inman



## 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 of it.

## Resources

[www.advocacy.org](http://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/>).

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statements that draw on scientific evidence, although she is aware of the complexity of gaining consensus among experts that would be needed to generate them. Ultimately, parents will always continue to make their own decisions, for a variety of personal reasons that extend beyond scientific evidence; it would, nonetheless, be valuable to have access the research-based information to guide analysis, discussion, and decision-making. It may always be true that, no matter how much parents desire to "get it right," there will be many situations and decisions for which they will never know enough to be 100% certain about the best decisions and actions, and so they will continue to seek the advice of others. Rankin concludes that the "popular authorities on parenting are important voices in this process, but they should not be the only voices. Too much is at stake."

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To learn more about the PEG program at Mary Baldwin College, call 540-887-7039 or e-mail [peg@mbc.edu](mailto:peg@mbc.edu).

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