

Effective Advocates

by Dr. Julia Link Roberts and Tracy Ford Inman

The Time Is Now: Talk to Your State Legislators

This is a continuing series of columns on effective advocacy. We thank Dr. Julia Link Roberts, Past Chair of the NAGC legislative committee, and Tracy Ford Inman, both of Western Kentucky University, for preparing this series.

As the year 2008 approaches, state legislative sessions across the nation will also begin. Now is the time to advocate for children who are gifted and talented.

Before the session starts, though, be sure to lay a solid foundation. Remember that the more people who are involved and the more consistent the message, the stronger the foundation. For most states, there is a state advocacy group already established; if so, join it. For those with no such group – or one that isn't vital – it's time to form one. (Go to www.nagc.org for a complete list of organizations and contact information.) If you advocate as a single person, your legislative impact varies greatly from someone who is representing a substantial number of folks with the same message. So be sure to have other kindred spirits to help you craft the most appropriate message to meet the needs of the gifted. (See past editions of *Parenting for High Potential* to help you accomplish that.) Remember, too, to stay alert for the words *gifted* and *talented* in the news and in legislation; but don't neglect other areas that impact the gifted (such as district and state policies for grouping, entrance into Kindergarten, and acceleration). Now this unified group – who is knowledgeable about the needs of the gifted and the current laws and regulations concerning them and who has crafted a message – is ready to spread that message – but not just to legislators.

For example, there are other critical groups who need to be aware of the needs of children who are gifted and talented. Take, for instance, your state board of education. Typically state boards set a budget priority list, and from this list the department of education develops and submits a recommended budget to the legislature. Since this group is considered the voice of education in the state, governors pay close attention to its recommendations and priorities. Work



hard to get gifted on the priority list.

How can you do that? Arrange to be on the state board agenda, but do so well in advance of their budget meeting. Attend their open meetings in your state, passing out powerful reminders of your message such as a one-page list of facts containing your message.

Make sure gifted children are represented and on their radar. If the budget has already been put together, don't let that weaken your advocacy plans. Just plan for the next budgetary session and get gifted children on the priority list of the state board of education at that time.

Another very important thing to do before the session starts is to build a relationship with your legislators while they are still at home. Often legislators have much more time to devote to issues before the session begins; once it starts they are hurrying to committee meetings, meetings with constituents, and general sessions as well as traveling back and forth between home and the state capital. Make sure your local legislators know who you are and understand your message well before January. Be sure that other members of your organization are doing the same thing in other areas of your state. Be where legislators are – that means volunteer fire department gatherings, press conferences, speaking engagements, and ribbon-cuttings. Then be sure to share your message. Also invite legislators to where you (and gifted young people) are. Have them speak to student leadership groups. Invite them to attend an art or science showcase. Ask them to spend part of the day in the gifted program. Relationships mean everything!

Once the session begins, the advocacy pace intensifies. Since you have already established a relationship with your legislators, now it's time to get to know the legislative aides and the people who work in your legislators' offices. These people are ones who open doors for you – not only do they schedule face-to-face meetings, but they also manage the calendar of events for the legislator. If you want the senator or representative at a function, the office person can often make it happen. The importance of legislative aides cannot be over-emphasized. They have the direct ear of the legislator, so their words and opinions are highly regarded. Take time to get to know them and share your message as well.

The goal during the legislative session is to be noticed in a positive light. Make sure that you set up appointments in advance; a personal letter or phone call proves ideal for making that contact. Simply showing up and expecting a meeting is not only naïve, but likely to lead to disappointment.

Since your message concerns children, bring them! Take young gifted people to your capitol to meet with legislators, serve as pages, or display posters. Take full advantage of Gifted Education Week. The one in Kentucky, for example,

is February 4 – 10, 2008. (Go to www.wku.edu/kage for a complete list of ways to celebrate.) One very powerful tradition for Kentucky is having the Governor sign a Proclamation. A personal invitation from constituents to their legislators ensures a crowd for the signing. This occasion is perfect for getting a photo with the legislator and the children who have come for legislative day. The photo can be submitted to the newspaper. The PR is invaluable to the legislators as well as to the advocates.

During the legislative session, be sure to have some way of contacting fellow advocates. Frequently, issues develop quickly during the session, and the legislators need to know their constituents' stand. An email alert and a phone tree are two ways to initiate fast communication. Accuracy of message and speed of delivery can make or break legislation. Remember that the more personal the delivery, the better.

The importance of this personal communication cannot be overemphasized. The least effective form of communication is unfortunately the first one that many of us turn to: email. Think how easy it is to push delete with only a quick scan at the subject line. Use email as a last resort unless the legislator knows you well and will respond when he or she sees your name. What, then, is most effective? Without a doubt, the personal visit is best for all the reasons already mentioned. Vying for best is the one that also incorporates personal time and attention: a handwritten letter. Few of us are quick to toss a letter without reading it first. In this electronic age, a handwritten form of communication screams, "Read Me." If you can't write a letter by hand, then the second-best written form is a computer-generated letter. The downside to this means of communication is that it's so easy to send out mass communication by only changing the salutation so the message may be discounted for that reason. (That's one of the greatest strengths of the handwritten letter – it's so personal.) If you are sending a computer-generated letter, by all means personalize it as much as possible so that the legislator knows it was meant for just one person – him or her.

Do visit or write a personal letter first. If that's not possible, send a computer-generated letter. You can always make a personal call as well. Notice the word personal in that sentence. A personal phone call is not a message left with a receptionist or a voice mail stating an opinion. It's direct communication. If you can't speak to the legislator right away, leave your message and request a return phone call. But if you've tried all other means of communication, then a message or an email may be better than nothing.

So, start laying the groundwork for a successful legislative session. Make connections. Create relationships. What are you waiting for? See that the message is heard. Your advocacy can make the difference for children who are gifted and talented. The time to move is now!

Parenting and Gender Stereotypes

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provoking activities to help teens match their interests and talents with potential careers.

- Jeanne Webster (2007). *If You Could Be Anything, What Would You Be? A Teen's Guide to Mapping Out the Future*. Clayton, GA: Dupuis North Publishing.

Recipient of the iParenting Media Award, this book is an excellent resource for parents of teens who are considering career options.

- Terry W. Neu and Rich Weinfeld (2006). *Helping Boys Succeed in School*. Waco, TX: Prufrock Press.

This is a guide for the parents of boys who are seeking strategies to encourage their sons to be successful in school and beyond.

- Sylvia B. Rimm (2003). *See Jane Win for Girls: A Smart Girl's Guide to Success*. Minneapolis, MN: Free Spirit Publishing.

In this adaptation of *See Jane Win* (also by Sylvia Rimm), the author gives advice on the challenges facing teenage girls such as breaking stereotypes, discovering talents and interests, dealing with parents, finding a mentor, and handling social problems.

Online Career Development Resources

- A Parent's Guide to Career Development

(http://www.jobweb.com/resources/library/Parents/A_Parents_Guide_to_136_01.htm)

Parents will find 10 tips for helping their children plan for a career on this website.

- A Career Awareness Guide for Parents of Teens

(http://www.carleton.ca/cwse-on/leaving_the_nest.htm)

The authors of the booklet found on this website have compiled information for parents on how to guide their children toward employment that is valuable and meaningful, with particular attention to issues of gender and ethnic diversity.

- Job Star Central (<http://jobstar.org/tools/career/spec-car.php>)

This website provides a comprehensive guide for planning for a wide range of careers. It includes information about education and training requirements, typical salaries, and descriptions of career life.

Author Note. Dr. Kathleen Moritz Rudasill is Assistant Professor of Educational Psychology at the University of Louisville in Louisville, KY. Dr. Carolyn M. Callahan is Professor of Education at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville, VA and is completing her term as Chair of the *PHIP* Editorial Advisory Board.