



T.I.G.E.R. Newsletter

Tennessee Initiative for Gifted Education Reform

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U.S. Congress considers increased funding for Javits gifted program

The Javits gifted and talented education program is a federal program that funds research and teacher training in gifted education. Senator Grassley (Iowa) and Representative Gallegly (Calif.) have written letters to their respective appropriations subcommittees urging members to fund the Javits program in fiscal year 2003 at \$25 million – a huge increase in funding.

The Grassley and Gallegly letters have attracted three dozen co-signers, but no one from Tennessee has co-signed the letters. We need to make sure that the Tennessee Congressional delegation is aware of the letters and that they become co-signers! We only have until April 8 to generate Senate co-signers and until April 15 to generate House co-signers.

What parents can do.

Please fax or email letters to each member of the Tennessee Congressional delegation urging them to co-sign Sen. Grassley's and Rep. Gallegly's letter requesting \$25 million in fiscal year 2003 for the Javits gifted and talented education program. See sample letter at right.

U.S. Senate

Fred Thompson (R) Fax: 202-228-3679

Bill Frist (R) Fax: 202-228-1264

U.S. House of Representatives

William L. Jenkins (R-01) Fax: 202-225-5714

John J. Duncan, Jr. (R-02) Fax: 202-225-6440

Zach Wamp (R-03) Fax: 202-225-3494

Van Hilleary (R-04) Fax: 202-225-3272

Bob Clement (D-05) Fax: 202-226-1035

Bart Gordon (D-06) Fax: 202-225 6887

Ed Bryant (R-07) Fax: 202-225-2989

John S. Tanner (D-08) Fax: 202-225-1765

Harold E. Ford, Jr. (D-09) Fax: 202-225-5663

Visit the web pages for the House and Senate at www.house.gov or www.senate.gov. For more information about the Javits program visit

http://www.ed.gov/prog_info/Javits/ and <http://www.edweek.org/ew/ewstory.cfm?slug=40gifted.h20>

Proposed Tennessee gifted legislation is defeated

Congratulations everyone! More than 800 parents, teachers, and children from across the state rallied to defeat proposed legislation that would have (1) moved gifted education out of Special Education and (2) eliminated the mandate in Tennessee law requiring school districts to provide an appropriate education for gifted children.

The bills were designed to solve administrative problems in special education; they were **not** designed to improve gifted programming and they would have resulted in **reduced rights, protections, and local funding**.

The Maddox-Herron and the Bunch-Miller bills are now "off notice" or assigned to "dead-bill" subcommittees. Representative Maddox removed his bill from the House K12 Education Subcommittee calendar on March 6. The Senate companion to the Maddox bill – the Herron bill – was placed in the "dead-bill" general subcommittee on March 8. Representative Bunch and Senator Miller have also assigned their bills to dead-bill subcommittees.

It is a good time to send an email or write a letter to the members of the K12 education subcommittee expressing

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Sample Javits Letter

Dear <representative or senator name>:

I am a resident of Tennessee and the parent of a gifted child in the public school system. Gifted students in Tennessee are in danger of losing many educational opportunities. The governor recently eliminated the Tennessee Governor's Schools and the state legislature came very close to eliminating the mandate in state law to provide an appropriate education for gifted students.

I ask that you co-sign the letter written by <Representative Gallegly or Senator Grassley> to the appropriations subcommittee requesting \$25 million for the Javits gifted education program in fiscal year 2003. By funding the Javits program at this level, Tennessee has a greater chance of receiving funds for teacher training, experimental programs and parent education.

Thank you for helping the 25,000 gifted students in Tennessee.

<your name/address/phone>

TIGER is a statewide, non-profit organization of parents and other advocates working to strengthen educational opportunities for academically gifted children in Tennessee.

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appreciation for their time and their opposition to the Maddox bill. (Visit the TIGER website at giftedtn.go.to for contact information.)

Members of the groups backing the Maddox bill have indicated that they will reintroduce a version of it next year. TIGER will prepare its strategy over the summer to counter this continuing legislative threat to gifted education and will develop a proactive plan to improve gifted education in Tennessee.

TIGER growth

TIGER has grown tremendously in the last few months, and we plan to continue to grow the parents' network over the summer. In order to better meet the needs of and communicate with parents in all regions of Tennessee, TIGER will promote regional chapters. If you are interested in helping TIGER in your area, please contact us.

Memphis

Mike Arcamuzi, (901) 210-0701, meacpa@saridan.com

Chattanooga

Alan Clark, (423) 894-9714, aclark176@comcast.net

Knoxville

Terri Lyon, lunalyon@chartertn.net

Nashville

Mike Swanson, (615) 794-7740, swanson.Michael@comcast.net

"Pushy Parents" ... Bad Rap or Necessary Role?

By Arlene R. DeVries (Used with permission. Originally published in the CAG *Communicator*: Volume 30, No. 3, Summer 1999.)

"My Abigail, who has been grade-skipped to second grade, is in a classroom with a fine teacher whom I respect, but Abbey runs out of things to do ALL THE TIME! She is reading chapter books and there is no one with whom she can discuss them. I'm happy to help in any way, but meanwhile, there's my little petunia in the onion patch, marking time and suffering the slings and arrows of children who are not her intellectual peers and who have not learned respect for others."

This mother's concern is echoed over and over across the country, as parents of bright children are asking, "What can we do?" How much do you speak up for your child and how much do you back off? Are "pushy" parents getting a bad rap, or is this a necessary role?

Schools are a reflection of our society, and parents are a vital part of the culture. Tax-paying parents have more power than educators. Without parent support and advocacy, gifted education would not survive. The universal goal of education is

to meet the needs of students. Parents of gifted children, though representing a small percentage of the students, are minority stakeholders in the schools and deserve to have their children's educational needs met. It is vital that parents of gifted speak up for the needs of bright children. How can you effectively do that? Here are some tips.

Establish rapport with the school.

Be a friend to the school. Let teachers and administrators know you appreciate their efforts. When was the last time you wrote a note of appreciation to school personnel? Let them know you recognize their initiatives and the time they spend with your children. Be specific. Early in the year, write an "anticipatory praise" note to your child's teacher telling him or her how you are looking forward to your child being in their classroom because . . . of the excellent science activities they do; the gerbils they loan to student helpers for the weekend; or the myriad of paperback books available in their classroom. Share information about your child that might be helpful to the teacher. Express your willingness to discuss any concerns the teacher may have about your child, and offer to be of assistance throughout the year.

Parents can aid schools in delivering appropriate education in many ways. Some involve working directly with students. Others are behind-the-scenes activities that send the message to teachers that you care and that you understand the monumental tasks they are facing with limited time and money. Some suggestions are listed here.

- Serve as a mentor to an individual student, perhaps with one who is accelerated in reading or mathematics.
- Serve as a coach for Future Problem Solving, Odyssey of the Mind, Academic Decathlon, Junior Great Books, Math Olympiad, History Day, or Science Fair.
- Organize a lending library of professional materials for parents and educators.
- Assist in compiling, editing, or printing a newspaper or anthology of student work.
- Provide career exploration for students.
- Compile student interest surveys.
- Use the Internet to research a topic being studied in class and share the information and web site with the class.
- Research material for a local music concert, drama production, or art exhibit. Share the information with students and transport them to the performance.
- Judge contests such as science fairs, mock trial competitions, or invention conventions.
- Arrange for a guest speaker, a field trip, or a student shadowing experience.
- Transport students to the public library and assist them in a computer search or the use of the reference room.
- Organize and lead a book discussion group.
- Offer to video tape a school event.
- Make computer mailing labels or computer generated certificates for students.
- Assist in collating and preparing a mailing.
- Donate books or a magazine subscription to the school library.
- Spearhead a school ground beautification project. Donate time and plantings.

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- Organize a fine arts day. Invite local artists and performers.
- Offer to teach an after-school or Saturday class in an area of your expertise or interest.

Educators, parents, and community persons are appointed to serve on such district committees as: district advisory committees, textbook selection committees, building parent-teacher committees, financial oversight committees, and building and property committees. Parents, who support individual school board members in their campaigns for office, also have their ear when a concern about gifted education arises. Attending school board meetings, or better yet, being a candidate for the school board, indicates you care about education. A friendly face gets a warmer reception when it's time to discuss a difficult situation.

Be informed.

What do you need to know to be an effective advocate? More than you think! Understand the budget, the educational philosophy, board members' positions, and the organizational hierarchy of your entire school system. What is the district mission statement and what are the board policies? Who has the power and who makes the decisions? Read the board minutes to understand the issues facing the school system. Attend board meetings and observe who speaks, how they dress, what style is effective.

Next, become an expert on gifted education, both in your district and across the country. What is the district policy statement regarding gifted education? What is the funding source? Is it adequate? What are the state regulations and funding guidelines? Who is the coordinator of gifted and who is on the staff? In what talent areas are students served? What assessment methods are used to identify gifted students? What are the program components for serving these children? Learn about gifted children and gifted education in general. Read books, attend conferences, talk to parents in neighboring districts. Visit with teachers and other professionals, with area and state gifted consultants, to discover the acceptable practices in gifted education.

To know yourself and know your children is the most important element of all. Are you comfortable with who you are? Do you understand your children's abilities and shortcomings? What are your strengths? How can you make them work for you? What are your liabilities? What traits do you have in common with your children? Many parents have found the SENG (Supporting Emotional Needs of Gifted) model of guided discussion groups helpful in understanding both themselves and their children. This ten week series based on the book, "Guiding the Gifted Child," provides opportunities to read, discuss, and interact with other parents to better understand the behaviors and parenting skills needed to support these children. To be confident in your own abilities is the first step to success.

Use effective communication techniques.

School and home share some common goals for the emotional, social, and academic growth of the child. Both want students to

acquire some basic knowledge, some thinking and problem solving skills; to develop their gifts, talents, and creativity; to attain social skills, a good self-concept, and a lifelong love of learning. To achieve these goals for your children, it is imperative that parents and educators become partners rather than adversaries. Although the child the school sees is the same child you send out the door each morning, teachers and parents relate to the child from different perspectives. Each has unique insights into the child's needs, aspirations, interests, and aptitudes. It is this cooperation between school and home that can be powerful in contributing to students' success later in life.

When you wish to communicate with the school, follow the chain of command by talking first to the classroom teacher. He or she has the most knowledge about your student. Teachers are increasingly more informed about gifted children and their educational needs, but are also hampered by the constraints of the educational system in which they work and the demands to meet the diverse needs within their classroom. Many teachers have had no formal pre-service training in gifted education and only limited in-service. Despite these handicaps, most are willing to cooperate with parents in finding appropriate educational solutions.

True communication is hearing what others say; sensing what

...it is imperative that parents and educators become partners rather than adversaries.

they are feeling; and responding empathically to both. An attitude of "What can we do together for my child?" receives a more positive response than one of "blaming" or asking, "What are YOU going to do?" Prepare for the conference by discussing with your child his or her feelings about school. Identify specific behaviors or interests in your child. To establish a common understanding, initially ask for the teacher's overall perception about the child. Then build on the positives as shared by the teacher. Be diplomatic, respectful, and tactful. Learning the educational "jargon" and the terms for varied gifted education delivery methods increases your credibility and respect with the teacher. Be aware of your body language and the words you choose. You may want to avoid some "hot button" words such as, "bored, brilliant, always, last year!" Some "softener" phrases might include, "I'm curious about..." "I'm wondering if..." "Can you help me understand..." It is far better to ask questions than make demands. "Have you thought about..." "I wonder what would happen if..."

If you take examples of products produced outside the school day, or results from private psychological tests, introduce them in a way that is not threatening to the teacher. Not, "See, I told you she was smart." But rather, "I know you are interested in each individual student, and I thought you might enjoy seeing these examples of Mary's work." Parents can share the child's out of school interests, skills, leisure time activities, and home responsibilities; things the child especially enjoys about school or experiences the child finds frustrating; any unusual happenings that might affect the emotional well-being of the child. Be specific about concerns. Focus on solutions or problem-solving attempts in small steps and ones that are

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achievable. Try to come to an agreement on a plan of action. If the suggestion is one you cannot accept, reflect on the possibilities and indicate you will follow-up at a later date. Express a willingness to work together and to be informed. Be positive about the child, the teacher, and the school.

Only after conferring with the child's teacher, should you move on to the next person in command. Even then, it is wise to inform or include the teacher in a conference with the principal. Other persons that might be helpful are the supervisor or director of gifted education, and curriculum supervisors. If you are still experiencing frustration over your child's education, it might be appropriate to talk to the director of elementary or secondary education, an assistant superintendent or a superintendent. Involving the board of education is a last resort! Educators dislike being questioned by the board of directors and this can lead to hostile feelings toward a parent by administrators.

Know what to expect from a gifted program.

Parents can be effective if they know what questions to ask regarding the gifted program.

- Does the district have a clearly written plan with a philosophy and goals specifically for gifted students?
- Does the identification method use multiple criteria?
- Are teachers who serve the gifted supportive and have they received appropriate training?
- Are there multiple programming components designed to meet individual needs and learning styles, and are they articulated across grade levels?
- Is there an emphasis on problem solving, higher-level thinking, and student generated products of high quality?
- Is curriculum presented at an appropriate level and pace?
- Are there opportunities for students to interact with ability-level peers?
- Does the program have a component for parent and community involvement?
- Does the program address the social and emotional needs unique to gifted students?
- In addition to academics, which are recognized as part of the total school curriculum, are there after school and Saturday enrichment opportunities in the areas of student interests?
- Does the program have a systematic and on-going evaluation?

Join with other parents.

Parents joining together can speak collectively for the needs of gifted children. A parent support group offers moral support and an opportunity to increase your knowledge about gifted students and appropriate educational opportunities. Meet with a nucleus of other parents who share a concern for the needs of gifted children. Involve the district coordinator. Perhaps he or she will be willing to give you names of other parents, or notify them of a meeting time and place. Establish a minimum structure for the group: officers, by-laws, meeting date, and dues structure. You will need some funds for communication, refreshments, and mileage for speakers. Plan interesting and informative programs.

At one of the first meetings, school personnel might give an overview of the district's gifted and talented program, its structure, personnel, and funding. Communication with members and programs of interest to parents are essential to maintain a successful group. These program ideas have been used: a presentation on the characteristics of gifted children; a parent-child creative writing night; a discussion of state legislative issues; planning, searching and applying for college; creative activities in the home; the social-emotional needs of gifted children; competitions for gifted students; parents as volunteers; a summer opportunities fair; a local librarian sharing the latest books for children and parents; family games night; parenting young gifted children; appropriate computer games and web sites.

Some parent groups reach out to the community by enlisting the mayor to issue a proclamation for Gifted Education Week; providing scholarships to summer programs; organizing Saturday or summer enrichment classes taught by their members; contributing books or magazines to school libraries; honoring gifted students for special awards or achievements.

If parents feel supported, informed, and connected with other parents, they can become a powerful advocacy group. When the president of the parent group addresses the board of education or writes to the administration, it is as a representative of all the gifted children in the district, not just a single person advocating for his or her child. There is power in numbers!

Are pushy parents getting a bad rap? Perhaps. But informed parents who advocate for their gifted children are a necessity if gifted education programs are to survive!

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