



TIGER

Tennessee Initiative for Gifted Education Reform

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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House Education Committee Hearing on HB2934 by Maddox: Summary and Response

On February 26 the House Education Committee in the Tennessee General Assembly heard testimony from supporters and opponents of HB2934, a bill that would remove gifted students from special education in Tennessee.

Dr. Lynnette Henderson, an assistant professor of special education at Austin Peay State University, strongly opposed the Maddox bill and argued that gifted education should remain a part of special education. "Adjusting the curriculum for the needs of children with mental retardation and learning disabilities often requires slowing the pace of instruction and simplifying learning objectives. We need to open our minds equally to the reciprocal changes that need to be made for gifted students. Gifted students should be covered under special education because gifted students differ from their age peers in dramatic ways. These differences can create social stigma and learning handicaps."

Education Commissioner Faye Taylor strongly opposed the Maddox bill because gifted children have significant needs that might go unmet as a result of a hastily crafted policy. Commissioner Taylor said that **if** there is a need to move gifted out of special education, the plan should be carefully crafted and considered by all parties **before** legislation is introduced. The plan needs to include funding as well as mandated and appropriate services with no loss in rights and protections for gifted children and their parents. She stated that the Maddox bill does not meet these conditions.

Dr. Steve Ramsey, a special education administrator in Weakley County, spoke in support of the Maddox bill and outlined its rationale. The main points of the rationale are outlined below, with TIGER's responses.

BILL RATIONALE: Gifted children don't fit into special education – "it's like forcing a square peg into a round hole."

TIGER RESPONSE: Special education is designed to help children who don't fit into the regular program. Forcing gifted children to fit into the regular program is truly like forcing a square peg into a round hole. Not surprisingly, many states include gifted education in special education, including six of the ten Southern states. The leading professional organization in special education—the

Council for Exceptional Children—also actively supports the inclusion of gifted education within special education.

BILL RATIONALE: Most special educators are not trained to handle gifted children's needs.

TIGER RESPONSE: All special education teachers in Tennessee have had some training in gifted education as part of the special education endorsement. Many special education teachers in Tennessee have extensive training in gifted education. In contrast, virtually no regular classroom teachers in Tennessee are trained to meet the needs of gifted children, so moving gifted education to general education would be disastrous. Unlike almost all other states, Tennessee does not have a gifted education teacher certification or endorsement, which would increase the number of teachers trained in meeting the needs of gifted students.

BILL RATIONALE: If gifted education is moved out of special education, then the definition of "gifted" can be broadened and more students can be served.

TIGER RESPONSE: Research shows that the intellectually gifted – the top two to three percent of all students – are at significant risk of underachievement and affective disorders if they are not academically challenged or grouped with intellectual peers. They need academic interventions, which are now effectively delivered under the special education model. School districts are free to create honors and magnet programs under the current laws to expand the pool of bright students being served. However, these programs for bright students often do not adequately serve the needs of the gifted.

BILL RATIONALE: Removing the mandate in state law for gifted education will not threaten gifted programs such as CLUE in Memphis and ENCORE in Davidson County.

TIGER RESPONSE: It was the special education requirement that led to the creation of these programs – eliminating the requirement would clearly undermine the programs. Moreover, if class sizes were increased due to budget cuts, districts would likely eliminate these programs to reduce the negative impact to school systems if the gifted mandate is eliminated.

BILL RATIONALE: Gifted children should not be labeled “disabled.”

TIGER RESPONSE: Special education services are needed because the regular classroom curriculum is as inappropriate for gifted children as it is for other disabled children. Although the use of “disability” to describe gifted students is justified, some states prefer to use the term “exceptionality” in state special education law. This terminology issue can be easily ameliorated without eliminating the right of gifted students to receive an appropriate and challenging education.

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