

Educational Advocacy for Gifted Students

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This article by Julia Osborn is the third in a series of three articles on the processes parents go through in raising an exceptionally gifted child. This article, based upon a study of 12 exceptionally gifted students, discusses the experiences of these parents in advocating for appropriate school placement for their children. A list of practical advocacy recommendations is included.

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This article is based upon the family experiences of twelve exceptionally gifted students (students who scored over 160 on the SB: LM) as the parents advocated for appropriate educational plans. Once the parents had accepted the reality of their child's educational needs and had some ideas about how to meet those needs, they needed to work with their schools to set up educational activities that were appropriate. The work of advocacy was ongoing, at times successful and at other times unsuccessful. As the families reflected on the factors that led to success, they had many pieces of advice for other parents about to embark on the same process. One parent cautioned that it was important to prepare for the times when advocacy did not succeed and to develop alternative plans. For one family, this meant removing a child from public school for six weeks until a suitable plan could be developed. While the parents emphasized approaching the school in the spirit of cooperation, some parents also added that it was necessary to take action when the educational program was not appropriate or when the child seemed overly unhappy.

Prior to the student's individual evaluations, eleven of the twelve students had been offered some enrichment or special supplemental instruction in school. While most of the schools were aware that the student's were unusual and had tried to accommodate the learning needs of these students, many of the families felt that the accommodations had not been sufficient. After their individual evaluations, ten of the twelve students experienced additional alterations to their school programs. Five students have been skipped one grade, another student has been skipped two grades. Seven students have been subject matter accelerated in math by, at least, one year. Three students have experienced the combination of a grade skip and math acceleration. Consequently, these three students were in math classes that were two or more years in advance of their chronological peers. Another student attended a school whose regular program included math instruction that was a year, often two years in advance of most schools in the area.

For this particular group, there were many other changes. Six students began in public schools and eventually moved to private schools. Four students in public schools had whole grade acceleration and some had additional subject matter acceleration. Two students began in private schools and changed to home schooling. In short, in addition to advocacy, these families actively sought out programs that permitted flexibility. At the

time of the study, the twelve exceptionally gifted students were enrolled in ten different schools and two were homeschooled. Only one of the students has attended a school that was specifically for gifted children. However, some of the schools had a substantial number of gifted students enrolled in them, even though the schools, especially the independent schools, did not classify their students as gifted or discuss them publicly as gifted. This is an important point as I have often noticed that parents who approach New York City independent schools by openly labeling their child as gifted, highly, exceptionally or profoundly gifted do not regularly receive a warm reception. Yet, schools that might balk at the labels or not understand the labels have provided appropriate education to these students.

Successful School Programs

Some schools were quite successful with these children and others were not. As parents reflected upon the successful school experiences, they repeatedly mentioned several factors. Of greatest importance is flexibility. Successful schools had flexible administrators, who took the educational problems of these students seriously and thought creatively about solutions. This permitted administrators to consider educational activities they had never initiated, supervised or experienced previously with any other student. Administrators in successful schools were willing to take risks. Within the schools, this administrative attitude often engendered teacher flexibility that was translated into flexibility in the curriculum. For each student, the curriculum modifications were different. There were some general modifications that many experienced, including: individualized reading levels, math enrichment, accelerated math classes, individualized projects, and the opportunity to be grouped with other academically strong students. The individualized projects could be as simple as modified weekly spelling lists or as complex as unique science projects. Alongside the administrators and teachers, were flexible G/T coordinators and psychologists. The key element was that teachers and administrators recognized the child's unique learning needs, acted upon those needs and encouraged curriculum experiments that were novel. In other words, teachers, administrators and others had a flexible, thoughtful attitude toward the students and toward their parents, which permitted a collaboration to develop between the home and the school.

Successful Parent Advocates

The Parent's Perspective: Parents also reflected on the ways that their behavior and attitudes had led to a successful, problem solving relationship with the school. The parents in this study contributed these important thoughts about themselves during the advocacy process. Many parents believed that their attitude toward the schools was a key to their success. Approaching schools respectfully, was a reflection of their awareness that the school was there to meet the needs of all children, not just their child. Many parents acted on this generous social view by volunteering for activities that benefited many or all students. Of key importance to many parents was avoiding feelings of entitlement, as in 'this is what my child is owed'. They acknowledged that the school's role was to educate all children and understood that this might mean curriculum changes for many. They also believed that this included their child and would likely require individual curriculum changes for their child. Others parents emphasized being

patient with the process, especially with themselves, by recognizing and accepting that they might make mistakes and that they might advocate for activities or programs that would not work well for their child. An important aspect of this was a willingness to be honest about the child, particularly the child's shortcomings, and to be honest about unexpected failures in the plans. Many stressed the need to reach for collaboration with the school. As one parent put it, when someone at school suggested the child's educational needs were "a good problem", the effective response was "Although this may seem like a good problem, it is still a problem and we need your help." Another parent urged, "don't make negative assumptions about the school's, they may surprise you."

The Psychologist's Perspective: My observation is that the parents who more closely adapted their behavior to these guides were more successful in advocacy. I need to add that advocacy is stressful for some parents, and during stress they can undermine their own role in the process if they begin to act in an adversarial fashion. My experience has been that school officials are less likely to cooperate with parents who will not permit an open exchange of information about their child. This is especially true when parents will not permit the outside evaluator to collect observational information from teachers or school psychologists. When school officials feel that their observations have not been included in an outside assessment, they often will minimize the legitimacy of the findings and ignore the recommendations. Another impediment to a collaborative home-school relationship occurs when parents try to hide or deny a child's weak points. It certainly can be quite difficult for some parents to be open about a child's weaknesses as well as strengths. Many parents fear that they will undermine their advocacy efforts if they acknowledge their child's weaknesses. Yet I have observed that school officials are more respectful and cooperative with parents who are open and honest. To put it bluntly, most teachers and principals can readily see developmental or educational problems in children. When parents act unaware of their child's problems, some educators will discount or ignore parental requests. Being forthright about a child's strengths and weaknesses is usually the more effective strategy.

Important Steps in the Advocacy Process

In addition to being positive in attitude, parents took many, carefully planned steps toward advocacy. All the families were engaged in this process for years and the most successful families were the ones who worked diligently, patiently and tactfully at the process.

Step 1: Obtain an evaluation: The first step was to gain a thorough knowledge of the child's learning strengths and weaknesses. Most parents stressed that an independent, professional evaluation was an important tool. The analysis of the child's scores, work-style, approach to tasks and personality, helped them understand their child more fully. The scores and reports then became important documents on which to base educational requests. An equally important part of obtaining the assessment was insuring that the school respected the evaluation. There are several important factors to consider. Most parents permitted the evaluator to speak extensively to teachers, principals and school psychologists prior to or during the child's assessment. Gathering

important background information improved the quality of the assessment and it also established a spirit of cooperation with the school. In general, schools were more willing to attend to an outside consultant when the outside consultant had listened to them. Parents increased the possibility that the evaluation results and recommendations would be accepted if they permitted the open exchange of information. Secondly, it was important the evaluator used measurement instruments that schools respected and understood. This usually means the use of one of the currently normed and standardized intelligence tests (WISC-III or SB: IV), rather than the sole use of the older SB: LM. Most of the parents in this study felt that the SB: LM score had contributed to their understanding of their child's educational needs. However, all of the students had been tested on other more currently normed and standardized tests and the SB: LM scores were interpreted within that context. No parent used the SB: LM score alone for advocacy.

Step 2: Read extensively: A second and equally important step was to read everything about educational programs, plans and options that had been tried in other places. Becoming highly informed was essential as many parents found that educators often were unaware of unusual educational options and the relevant research. In addition to learning how other schools approached the education of exceptionally intellectually gifted students, parents also needed to understand in some detail how these alternative programs worked. In short, parents needed to develop a sophistication and knowledge about education if there were to talk credibly with educators and especially if they were to request unusual modifications to the curriculum. In this study, the parents found the work of educators who specialized in exceptionally gifted students to be most helpful to them. In particular, they found the work of Dr. Miraca Gross and Dr. Leta Hollingworth to be important to their understanding of their child's educational and social needs.

Step 3: Study the school's structure: For most parents, this meant learning everything they could about the school - its programs, its policies, the identity of the key decision-makers and, especially, the educational point of view of the decision-makers. Many parents requested, read and thoroughly understood the district's written educational policy. This was especially important in order to respond to erroneous statements about educating the gifted students in the district. It is important to add that, within a district, the key decision-makers may not agree on the best approach to take to the education of a gifted child. Some may be more accommodating and experimental than others may be. I have certainly observed situations when a transfer from one public school to another within the same district permitted a child to have a modified educational plan. These kinds of adjustments usually occur only when a parent has learned a considerable amount about the district and its key decision-makers.

Step 4: Formulate a tentative plan: After completing this substantial amount of work, many parents then formulated a tentative educational plan. They did this in a flexible way themselves, thinking of options, anticipating objections and planning their responses to these objections. Parents who were most successful in presenting their ideas to the schools were those parents who expressed a willingness to consider alternative educational plans. Parents would come to meetings with general goals and a

willingness to discuss how those goals might best be met.

Step 5: Request planning meetings: With a secure knowledge of their child, of the school and of possible options, they requested planning meetings. In doing this, parents were careful to follow the chain of command within the school, not skipping over key decisions makers or moving, too soon, over the heads of teachers and principals. In general, the planning meetings were most successful when the people who were to implement the plans, that is the teachers, were also included in the planning.

Step 6: Generate a paper trail: Meetings were requested, acknowledged and, later, summarized, in writing. Parents took notes at meetings, listing topics discussed, actions agreed upon and items for further discussion. Follow-up thank you letters were as important as the record keeping. The parents who did this most successfully were the ones who understood that the extra efforts that teachers and administrators made on behalf of their children were indeed extra efforts and often voluntary ones. For example, in the state of New York where educational services for the gifted are not mandated, the work that educators did on behalf of individual students was done voluntarily. Parents who understood this and expressed appreciation generally had greater cooperation from educators.

Factors Leading to Unsuccessful Situations

Working successfully with a school, to find suitable accommodations for a gifted student, is a time consuming task. While parents can take many steps toward success, especially in their own attitudes and behavior, they cannot control everything. Factors that created unsuccessful situations and led some families to leave schools, either for other schools or homeschooling, were inflexible statements of policy ("we never... students", "we always... students"), inflexible administrators or teachers and fearful or overly cautious administrators or teachers. Other factors that impeded success were school and peer cultures that overly valued sports and social interactions and that undervalued intellectual or educational activity. The absence of other children with similar interests was a major limitation of some schools. An unwillingness to learn about exceptionally gifted children was also an impediment that was difficult to overcome. While some parents were able to establish collaborative relationships with their original schools, others quickly realized that collaboration was not possible and sought other alternatives.

As one parent put it, "you have to make a decision whether to stay in an existing structure and try to change it, to go to another structure or to create your own structure." Another piece of sound advice was "Take a deep breath, you don't have to do anything instantly. This is a long process and 1 or 2 decisions aren't going to be the end of it. This is the beginning of a long process in dealing with the child's education, really, the child's life."

A list of very specific do's and don'ts were offered by the parents:

1. Get a professional evaluation. Don't demand a specific test; look for information on strengths and weaknesses.
2. Use tests that the schools understand and respect so you can talk their language. (SAT, the WISC-III, the SB: IV)
3. Be cautious about using tests that are less familiar and well respected (SB: LM).
4. Learn everything you can about your child. Pay attention to what your child loves to do. Study standardized scores for signs of your child's strengths.
5. Study the school. Learn everything you can about the programs and the key decision-makers.
6. Study other programs.
7. Read the district policy statement.
8. Make an educational plan for your child.
9. Give yourself permission to make mistakes.
10. Stay calm: don't act belligerent, don't act entitled, don't talk when you are angry.
11. Document everything.
12. Practice your responses to false or misleading statements.
13. Anticipate objections, have ready responses.
14. Think about how the school fits into your child's life rather than how your child fits into the school.

Summary

Advocating for an appropriate education for an intellectually gifted child is a time consuming and stressful process. When it is successful, it can enable a gifted child to be well educated within many different school settings. In order to accomplish this task, parents must take the advocacy role seriously. This means that they must become well informed about their child and the school. At the same time, they must be careful to take the steps that others have found to be helpful and avoid some common mistakes. To be a successful advocate for one's own child requires time, skill, hard work and considerable self-discipline.