

Section II

Advocacy With Local Decision-Makers

How You Can Become an Effective Advocate at the Local Level

It is vital that those who are interested in gifted children's education be involved in the advocacy movement. Most advocates begin at the local level by supporting school activities and becoming informed by talking with and asking questions of parents, teachers, school principals, and other administrators.

Steps to Becoming an Effective Advocate at the Local Level

- 1. Get to know and communicate regularly with:**
 - teachers interested in gifted and talented education,
 - your school principal,
 - your GATE program coordinator, and familiarize yourself with the program guidelines and any new laws affecting gifted education,
 - parents of gifted students.
- 2. Become an active participant at the school site by:**
 - attending meetings,
 - serving on the school-site council, GATE advisory committee, or PTA.
- 3. Form or join an advocacy group.**
- 4. Become aware of the duties and responsibilities of your local Board of Education and how they are implemented.**
- 5. Become an advocate with the local Board of Education.**
- 6. Encourage other community members to become involved. Lobby your local officials.**
- 7. Use appropriate websites, when available, to stay current with local legislative information and action.**

STEP 1

Get to know and communicate with teachers and other local educators interested in gifted and talented education, as well as parents of gifted students.

Every California school district receiving GATE funds is required to have an application and plan available to the public which details the district's goals and objectives, means of identification, and program design and resources. The GATE application should, by law, be available in the district office. You may be charged a reasonable fee to obtain a copy of the district plan.

Even though GATE Plans are no longer required from the California Department of Education, districts should consider including gifted education in their Local Control Accountability Plan.

Some of the questions to ask the principal and/or the district coordinator are:

- Is there a district GATE program?
- Does the district receive state funds under LCFF?
- Where can a copy of the district LCAP.
- How are students identified?
- Has an assessment of gifted and talented students' needs been made?
- Was the program designed to meet students' needs?
- How are teachers trained?
- Is there a full- or part-time district GATE coordinator?
- Is there a GATE District Advisory Committee?
- Who established program goals?
- Is there a long-range plan?
- Are there district or school-site GATE meetings or committees?
- Are GATE services available to all identified GATE students?
- What are the program options?
- Is there a parent support organization at the local level?
- How is the GATE program evaluated?
- How is the program modified based on the evaluation?
- What are the options for involvement in program development, implementation, and evaluation?
- How are both the curriculum and instruction differentiated?
- How are the funds spent?
- Is there a GATE coordinator for the school?
- Does your district allocate funds for GATE?

STEP 2

Become an active participant at the school site.

Visit classrooms, talk with teachers. Volunteer! Ask for specifics of the GATE program. If the program is under site-based management, read the Site Plan. Does it include services for gifted students? Talk with the principal or administrator in charge. Attend school GATE meetings. Help define the school goals for the GATE program and services. Find ways to support goals with resources of people, time, and money. Form a parent support group or committee. Make sure GATE teachers and parents are on each of the school's governance teams, school-site councils, and the local Parent Teacher Association. Volunteer to help, and attend meetings of district GATE coordinators and parent representatives.

Visit the county department of education. Is there a county GATE coordinator? Is there a county directory or file accessible to parents describing the various districts' GATE programs or services? Visit other exemplary GATE programs. Does the school, city, or county library have publications on the education of gifted and talented children?

Parents who make an effort to know the many elements of their local educational systems contribute the most to advocacy efforts.

STEP 3 Form or join an advocacy group.

If you want your school district to start, change, or expand a program, organization is the key to effective advocacy.

If there is no GATE program, parents, teachers, administrators, and/or community members can:

- Organize themselves and agree upon appropriate educational goals.
- Find out about GATE programs in neighboring districts.
- Identify individuals who may know the superintendent or a board member.
- Identify a group to visit the superintendent to present a proposal for a GATE program or a GATE program review.
- If necessary, visit each board member to advocate for his or her support for the proposal.
- Fill the boardroom with potential GATE teachers, parents, and their children once the proposal is brought to the board for discussion and vote. Have data available should questions be raised or inaccuracies may find their way into the board's discussion.
- Research the benefits of providing services to gifted and talented students, and be prepared to counter negative criticism.
- Persevere. If you lose on your first attempt, don't give up. With continued commitment and enhanced political savvy, it can be done. As elected officials, most school board members are extremely responsive to intelligent presentations from teachers and parents representing students with special educational needs.

A large gathering of advocates
in support of the same issue is always noticed
at a meeting, even if not one advocate speaks

If there is an existing GATE program, advocates must be vigilant to ensure that the program is not eliminated or starved to death as the result of the diversion of current funding to other programs, which is, in fact, permissible under the law. Have a GATE parent at each board meeting, even when there are no GATE-related agenda items. Become a GATE watchdog of board members' instructional and budgetary interests and practices.

If one parent is willing to assume the responsibility for monitoring board meetings for the entire school year, the benefit is that the board will come to recognize that person sitting in the audience as a GATE representative. If different people attend each meeting, they should introduce themselves to as many board members as possible prior to the meeting, identifying themselves as GATE parents.

Ask for time on the agenda to have one of the GATE teachers illustrate the successes of the GATE program. The presentation can be enhanced with projects, slides, exhibits, honors won, and test scores as well as brief testimonials from several parents as to positive changes in their children as a result of the program.

The role of educators as advocates at the local level is different from that of parents and other community members. Because professional educators have information about gifted and talented children and district programs, and because they have the opportunity to make contact with many parents, they have a responsibility to:

- Share their knowledge about gifted and talented education.
- Provide opportunities for parent involvement at the local level.
- Encourage others to become involved in the advocacy movement.

STEP 4

• Actively participate in gifted and talented organizations.

Become aware of the duties and responsibilities of your local Board of Education and how they are implemented.

The people elected to serve on the local public school board are no less important for the future of gifted and talented education in your area than the governor and the legislators in Sacramento. While the Legislature authorizes and provides funds for GATE, and the State Department of Education reviews and approves GATE program applications from the districts, it is the local district superintendent and school board who:

- Decide to institute or maintain a GATE program.
- Decide on the criteria for district GATE identification.
- Determine at what age or grade level students will be identified.
- Determine the type of program coordination and oversight.
- Decide what form the program will take (e.g., magnet schools, site-managed, cluster grouping, classroom differentiation).
- Decide whether or not to augment state GATE funds with local general funds.

School board members are faced with the necessity of making difficult educational decisions. It is imperative that advocacy at this level be well planned and coordinated if gifted and talented programs are to provide quality educational experiences that survive over time. Each local community may be at a different level of development in meeting the needs of gifted and talented students. An effective advocate must become aware of local issues and concerns affecting educational decisions.

STEP 5

Become an advocate with the local Board of Education.

As a member of the community you can become an effective advocate to the local Board of Education members by:

- Familiarizing yourself with what is required by law.
- Finding out what is available in other, similar-sized districts.
- Conducting a needs assessment by finding out what is going on for gifted students and then deciding what you would like to see happen.
- Asking the district superintendent or a board member to request a presentation to the board on the GATE program or some aspect of the program, such as its goals and accomplishments. (Note: The calendar of board presentations is often scheduled very early in the school year.)
- Researching how gifted students in your district compare in achievement to gifted students in other districts.
- Requesting that board members visit the program, preferably one at a time, accompanied by one or two parents. Make sure visitors know the goals of the program, have opportunities to speak with students, and see the program in action.
- Providing a fact sheet on the history of state and local programs.
- Having students make presentations related to specific topics or experiences.
- Eliciting interest in and support of the program before a crisis develops.
- Talking informally with board members. Information about specific district program successes are always of interest to board members.
- Citing anecdotal information on program "graduates." Where do they go on to school? What do they accomplish in school or beyond? Do they attribute part of their success to participation in the program? Such individual, local-level information is enormously impressive to board members faced with hard decisions.
- Monitoring board meetings. A parent, identified with a CAG or GATE lapel button or label, could be present at most board meetings. The parent(s) should be sure to sign in

at the visitors' register. Not only will this keep members aware of an advocate's interest in gifted and talented education, but it will also help the advocate communicate with members of the board about their district responsibilities, concerns, and problems related to the GATE program.

- Helping to elect board members. Interview candidates prior to election as to their viewpoints toward the education of gifted and talented students. Advocates or an advocate group may decide to support one or more candidates with volunteer time and money. Support, in case of endorsement of more than one candidate, should be more personalized (e.g., one group of parents work on one campaign, another group on a second campaign). You may wish to consider becoming a candidate for the board of education yourself.
- Sending a letter or e-mail to board members telling them about your child's experiences and your appreciation for the board members' interest and support of gifted and talented programs. The frustrating reality is that parents or community members with complaints are heard from far more often than those with compliments, thus distorting the board's perception of programs.

STEP 6 Encourage other community members to become involved.

Many people in the local community other than school board members can also significantly influence decisions at all levels related to education. Some people to consider contacting and involving in advocacy efforts are:

- Elected community leaders such as councilmen or women, county board supervisors, county school board members, and members of county Democrat and Republican Central Committees. An elected official who is willing to speak or write on behalf of gifted and talented education carries the weight of several parents and educators writing letters.
- People interested in education who may be your friends or neighbors and who have close ties to members of the school board, state legislature, or other elected and non-elected leaders in your community.
- Leaders in the various ethnic or minority communities. One of the most powerful actions gifted and talented advocates can take is to find and enlist advocates among these communities.
- Parent Teacher Association members and other school leaders such as members of the school's site council. It is best to choose those to whom most school board members listen and respect.
- Representatives of professional groups including lawyers, doctors, journalists, dentists, engineers, and nurses.
- Teachers in regular classrooms.
- College and university professors and officials.
- Religious leaders.
- Corporate officials. Business and industrial leaders are becoming increasingly concerned with the U.S. position in the world regarding innovative leadership and research and development. For this reason, many are becoming more interested and involved in enhancing elementary and secondary education.
- Leaders in other organized groups. The Association of American University Women (AAUW), League of Women Voters, chambers of commerce, Lions, Rotary, and groups which support the arts are just a few of the many organizations that can have a positive interest in and effect on improving educational opportunities.