

Kathy Hargrove, Ph.D.

## Advocating in Tough Economic Times

Rumors about cutting gifted programming have been circulating among my students for months. Last week a report in a local paper about just one school district confirmed their fears:

Blaming shriveling state funds, [XYZ] school administrators approved a second round of layoffs that will hit teachers and some of the district's prized programs. . . . A 10-page list provides a myriad of impacted areas along with affected schools. It divulges few specifics but shows all elementary schools and most secondary schools facing teaching cuts. . . . Programs downsized include early childhood, multilingual services and *gifted and talented*. *Administrators say no aspect of the district remains immune.* [emphasis added]

I couldn't help but take this personally, as I had invested 20 years of my own career in this district and watched the gifted program grow from a small pull-out in grades 3–6 to a K–12 effort. In my state, gifted education is mandated, so while we may expect downsizing and restructuring of programs that reduce the time that gifted children spend with specialist teachers, no district can completely eliminate gifted program services. Across the nation, however, there are many states in which programs may disappear. The following are just a sample of headlines that tell the story:

- District 64 Cuts Jobs, Kills Gifted Program, Increases Class Sizes

- Superintendent Wants to Eliminate Academically Talented Program
- Gifted Program in Danger in Nebraska
- [District] Could Cut Special Education, Gifted Program Funds

There is no doubt that in tough economic times, services for the gifted are an easy target. To many consumers, they seem to serve a small group of students, who, after all, are intelligent and can “take care of themselves.” This, of course, is a famous myth prevalent among educators not informed about the nature and needs of gifted learners. But to parents, their gifted children, and teachers of the gifted, cuts are a different story. This column could easily turn into a defense of gifted programs and arguments for making provisions to meet the learning needs of gifted children. However, if you are reading this column, you probably don't need an apology for providing services for gifted children or for maintaining special programs that serve them. Advancing arguments, justifying programs, and sharing stories may make us feel better, but they rarely result in improving education for the gifted. It would be more productive to consider how advocates might actually make a difference and influence how school districts allocate their limited funds.

I confess that for the last few years I have probably become complacent about advocating for the gifted. Although funding has not been growing dramatically, I have seen only a few rather small reductions. Certainly there hasn't been any unified effort to eliminate gifted education. In times like those,



## The following are just a sample of headlines that tell the story:

- **District 64 Cuts Jobs, Kills Gifted Program, Increases Class Sizes**
- **Superintendent Wants to Eliminate Academically Talented Program**
- **Gifted Program in Danger in Nebraska**
- **[District] Could Cut Special Education, Gifted Program Funds**

it was easy to just rock along and let things happen. But today's economic climate calls for a new push for advocacy. In one Midwestern community, parents of the gifted have united to save their program. "We don't think it should happen," said John Torrence, president of the Parents for Gifted Education in Rockford, IL (see [http://www.wifr.com/home/headlines/Gifted\\_Students\\_Parents\\_Unite\\_to\\_Save\\_Program\\_114913189.html](http://www.wifr.com/home/headlines/Gifted_Students_Parents_Unite_to_Save_Program_114913189.html)). He believes that the program provides benefits to the entire community, citing the number of parents attracted to the district because of the program.

The Parents for Gifted Education group illustrates an effective advocacy tool. Often, when things are going well and parents are happy with their children's gifted services, groups such as this shrink in size and activity, only to grow when programs are threatened. Recently, I decided to ask a group of state leaders in gifted education to brainstorm around the topic of advocacy. I collected some of their advocacy ideas in the hope that they might be useful to all of us.

- Are you sure that the school board and parents know how many students are served in your district? Seeing these numbers can be persuasive.
- Ensure that everyone knows how the GT specialist contributes to

the regular classroom teacher (e.g., differentiation, support).

- Enlist the help of the classroom teachers in the cause. For example, the classroom teacher might share how the gifted specialist has helped a child and then ask the parent to write a note about this to the school board.
- Communicate, communicate, communicate! Make certain that everything about the program is transparent. Inform everyone in the district about the policies and procedures, especially those designed to make the program inclusive.
- Celebrate successes and make opportunities for these to be known. Do you have a newsletter, or could achievements be noted on district or school websites? Can gifted students demonstrate their prowess at community programs?
- Share with students what is happening in the real world. One expert wrote, "From a political aspect, it is important to share with students what the current funding situations mean for gifted programs." We need to tap the power of our students to make a difference. Information may make a big difference.
- Help students "count their blessings" and share what gifted edu-

cation has meant for them. Then ask, "What will the future hold for other students?" Their ideas will spark all kinds of advocacy efforts.

- Encourage the constructive use of social media. There are excellent student-made productions on YouTube. Could your students write and produce an advocacy video?
- Search for articles on advocacy for the gifted. A search in the university library yielded several pages of articles in professional journals offering ideas. Interestingly, almost all of these articles were written in response to a "crisis" in the early 1990s.

If these ideas have sparked your creativity, look for other resources. For example, on the National Association for Gifted Children's website (<http://www.nagc.org>), there is an entire section on advocacy and an advocacy toolkit. Check your state association's website. In Texas, the Texas Association for the Gifted and Talented's website (<http://www.txgifted.org>) has a section devoted to parenting, including tips for being a strong advocate.

And one last suggestion: Take personal responsibility. This job will not be done by someone else. That someone is *you!* **GCT**