



Hitting the Ground Running

By Dr. Jim Brooks

I recently met with a group of parents at Wake County PAGE's *Super Saturday* event to discuss advocacy strategies they might use to effect change at the local and state levels in North Carolina. At a point late in the discussion, a dad asked me, "Dr. Brooks, you've repeatedly said we need additional funding for AIG programs? Why? What do we need additional funds for? If I am going to go ask decision makers for additional monies, I have to convince them of the need. What is the need?" At that point, I was reminded again how often I discover that we have failed to thoroughly and effectively disseminate essential information to parents and others who share our concern for gifted children in this state and nation.

I answered by first explaining that North Carolina uses a formula to allocate approximately \$947 per identified AIG student, but that this per capita amount is capped at 4% of each school district's average daily membership rather than based on actual head counts of identified gifted students. Because we identify roughly 11% of students statewide as AIG, the dollars spent on gifted students are stretched very thin. In most school districts, there is very little money left to purchase books and materials, pay for teacher in-service, or support things like fees for students wishing to participate in academic competitions. In other words, very little is left for the programs themselves.

Moreover, in a large school district like Wake County's, where around 20,000 students are identified as gifted, nearly the entire state allocation is used to pay the salaries of AIG specialists, many of whom must serve more than one school. The end result is that the amount of time AIG teachers can spend working in consultation with regular classroom teachers (increasingly used as the primary service option, driven in part, by lack of funding) is often quite limited, while the amount of time AIG teachers can spend providing direct instruction to gifted students has been reduced to the point that the AIG program is almost ethereal. With continued population growth and an expansion of our programs to include students from populations traditionally underserved in gifted education, it is likely many teachers of the gifted either are beginning to feel like Reed Richards (Mr. Fantastic) or Patrick Swayze in the movie, *Ghost*.

The questions parents directed to me were not asked in a confrontational way or to put me on the spot, but so that these parents could effectively articulate the case when they stand before legislators, school boards, and other decision makers. I answered their questions as best I could, but looking back on it later, I thought, “Well now, those are the essential questions all of us in leadership positions need to address, aren’t they?” And yet, to my knowledge, neither the leadership in general or special education, nor the leadership in gifted education in North Carolina has convened in some time to assess the current state of gifted programs and the legislation and policies that impact them. Instead, finding ourselves in a political era that emphasizes local control and local decision making, we dedicate and limit ourselves to writing and re-writing our 3-year plans, replete with a little grousing here and there, but failing to move outside these immediate spheres of influence.

Dr. Jim Gallagher, ever astute and able to both see the big picture and take the long view, issued a challenge at the recent NCAGT Institute on Acceleration, calling us out, as it were, in his own amiable and incisive way, to step to the forefront and convene a task force to examine where we find ourselves and where we are going here in Giftedland. It is time to take Dr. Gallagher up on his challenge. It is time to put one foot in front of the other and move forward.

Because it is sometimes difficult to change the inertia of a body at rest, we have to find reasons to make people want to pick up that brick and throw it. I hope to begin this process by posing a number of issues for our consideration, some of which may seem blasphemous or harsh, but all of which, I believe to be important.

Issue 1: Article 9B

What has the impact been on services for gifted students since the Creech Bill under 94-142 was supplanted by Article 9B of Chapter 115C of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act? Have program services improved or expanded? What measures do we have in place to make this determination statewide? What types of impact should we be looking for? Closer alignment with general education and the standard course of study? Due process protection for gifted students? Performance on state-mandated assessments? State funding? Local funding? “Client” satisfaction?

The bottom line is to determine whether or not gifted students are being better served as a result of Article 9B than they were when they fell under the aegis of Exceptional Children’s Programs (even though at the state level, AIG programs still remain as part of the organizational structure of Exceptional Children’s Programs) and 94-142. If they are not, then perhaps Article 9B needs to be revisited.

Issue 2: Local Plans

Do parts of Article 9B related to the establishment and review/rewriting of local plans need review and rewriting? For example, what do AIG coordinators have to say about

having to rewrite the local plan every three years? Would a five-year span be better? Why or why not? Are there components of the plan that should be added or deleted?

Issue 3: Teacher Licensure/Preparation

Ostensibly, movement to college and university-based AIG licensure, rather than LEA based, is an effort to ensure some degree of quality control over the licensure process, and this is needed. This decision, of course, assumes that those colleges and universities offering this licensure, have well-qualified instructors teaching these classes. Is this the case thus far? And if these college courses are offered through distance learning technologies, does this present quality control issues? So far, I don't believe it does, but I think it's a fair question to ask.

Are some school districts deciding to continue to offer a local endorsement in gifted education, having determined that such is sufficient as far as they are concerned? Has the movement toward college and university-based licensure, and its concomitant cost, driven them to this in part? Cost still remains a major factor in regard to licensure, both to the colleges and universities offering the coursework and to those teachers seeking the AIG licensure. The numbers of school systems and institutions of higher learning that have "partnered up" like Durham Public Schools and Duke University, to reduce or eliminate this cost, is very small.

Issue 4: Teacher Shortages

How many AIG teachers will school systems in the state need over the next decade? This is important to determine, since the number of identified AIG students continues to grow. If school systems cannot find certified AIG teachers, will they begin to fold AIG program options back into the regular classroom, or hire teachers who "don't have a clue" about gifted kids? Is this happening already?

Issue 5: Defining Giftedness

We have moved a long way from those days when most of us talked of intelligence as a unitary concept and threw out terms like "Spearman's *g*" and referred to point-specific IQ scores. I do acknowledge gradations in intelligence, but at what point does "everyone is gifted in some way" become "no one is gifted". Has our endorsement of the many flavors of giftedness become another form of political correctness? I suspect in some cases it has, and I see a hidden danger here. Some students are gifted and some are not. That's the truth of it. Some are just good, above-average students whose performance falls statistically somewhere around one standard deviation above the mean. These students can be adequately served in the regular classroom, but some cannot. Those students we refer to as highly, severely, or profoundly gifted fall two or more standard deviations above the mean. These are the gifted students I am most worried about. These are the gifted students whose parents are the most vocal, and for good reason.

Issue 6: Acceleration

Why don't we have a complete set of state and local policies that provide accelerative options for these kids **without limitations**? The information and tools are there to help us make the correct decisions regarding these kids, and the research is unequivocally supportive of acceleration. As Susan Assouline and Nick Colangelo have told us, the decision to accelerate should no longer be determined by an administrator's personal opinion or bias. Policies are needed to overcome this blockade.

Issue 7: Student Contact Hours

In an article he wrote in *Gifted Child Quarterly* back in 2000, Dr. Jim Gallagher asked for the establishment of "minimum standards of time commitments to services for gifted students", suggesting that this minimum be at least three hours per week of direct instruction with a gifted specialist, or five hours per week if that specialist acted as a support person for regular classroom teachers. Is this unreasonable to expect? Well, is it any less unreasonable to expect that parents and the kids themselves would want more than a shadow of a program, a program that exists for only 45 minutes to an hour and half a week? We have to ask ourselves, as Dr. Gallagher has, are we in danger of becoming a "ghost" program? Are we already there?

By accepting this minimal presence as the norm, by coasting along with the status quo, are we devaluing our kids? And, yes, I know this is going to take money, a lot of money. More importantly, it's going to take people, lots and lots of people as there are nearly 160,000 identified gifted kids in our state. But first – first, we need a new attitude!

Final Comments

There have been times over my 30 plus years as a teacher of the gifted when I have felt we have made significant progress as advocates for these kids. There have been both highs and lows during this span. Right now in North Carolina we have been flying pretty high, having just hosted the most successful convention in NAGC's history, followed by our own terrific Institute on Acceleration, chaired by Kristen Stephens. But now it's time to get down off our perch and use our inertia to hit the ground running. Now is an opportune time to spur others into action on behalf of our kids. It is the time to reach out and create new partnerships and strengthen old ones. It is time to swell our numbers and increase our presence. And, it is time to convene a new task force on behalf of our wards.

Fourteen years have passed since a truly major effort was last made to bring together a task force in this state to create a shared vision and acknowledge the shared responsibility we have to best prepare our gifted children for the future they will inherit. Fourteen years is a long time in the face of globalization and a rapidly changing world. We need to provide them with every advantage we can, so let's gear it up folks! I hope I have provided you with fuel for the fire. I close with the poem by Richard Hodgetts that is very fitting to this discussion...

*Every morning in Africa a gazelle wakes up.
It knows it must outrun the fastest lion
or it will be killed.*

*Every morning in Africa a lion wakes up.
It knows it must outrun the slowest gazelle
or it will starve.*

*It doesn't matter whether you're a lion or a gazelle –
when the sun comes up,
you'd better be running.*

Jim Brooks is past-president of the North Carolina Association for the Gifted and Talented.