

Effective Advocates

by Dr. Julia Link Roberts and Tracy Ford Inman



The ABCs of Advocacy

This is a continuing series of columns on effective advocacy. We thank Dr. Julia Link Roberts, Past Chair of the NAGC legislative committee, and Tracy Ford Inman, Chair of PHP Editorial Advisory Board, both of Western Kentucky University, for preparing this series.

Are you new to advocating on behalf of children who are gifted and talented? Or, do you have experience but need a refresher? If either is the case, mastering the ABCs of Advocacy will help you! Preparation for advocating is essential, so take time to know the ABCs of Advocacy before getting started. Then, stick with your role as an advocate because children who are gifted and talented need you!

A is for Be Aware!

An effective advocate is aware of issues in general education as well as in gifted education. For example, consider the importance of the STEM areas (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) in today's global village. In *Rising Above the Gathering Storm: Energizing and Employing America for a Brighter Economic Future* (2007), the National Academies argue:

This nation must prepare with great urgency to preserve its strategic and economic security. . . the United States must compete by optimizing its knowledge-based resources, particularly in science and technology, and by sustaining the most fertile environment for new and revitalized industries and the well-paying jobs they bring.

In a world that has been flattened by technology, remaining competitive in STEM areas is paramount. By linking gifted education to the STEM areas, more ears will be open to what you have to say. After all, preparing gifted mathematicians, gifted scientists, gifted engineers, and gifted experts in technology provides the starting point for a bright economic future.

Advocates also must be aware of people who are key to the advocacy effort. Who are the decision-makers? Consider principals, superintendents, and school board members at the district level. Don't neglect statewide educational leaders, which include state board of education members and the commissioner or superintendent of education. Think outside

the local education arena to state decision-makers. Target legislators, especially those on the education and appropriations committees. Leaders, such as Speaker of the House, Senate President, and Governor definitely make things happen. Also consider national decision-makers such as your senators and congressmen. National issues in gifted education demand their attention. They need to hear that providing for optimal learning opportunities for children who are gifted and talented is important to you. Just look at the Legislative Update on the NAGC Web site (<http://www.nagc.org/index.aspx?id=585&al>) for issues facing gifted education. By being aware of the decision-makers, you're a better advocate.

Effective advocates also are aware of another group of people — kindred spirits. Know that numbers speak loudly to decision-makers, so be sure to flock together with others who share your concerns. Seek out parents of your child's friends and classmates. Join your local, state, and national advocacy groups for gifted education. For a listing of state organization Web sites, see <http://www.nagc.org/CMS400Min/index.aspx?id=609>. The more numerous the voices, the better the message is heard. The way for an advocate's message to be loud is to have many people saying the same thing.

This leads to another critical area — be aware of the importance of shaping your advocacy message. Once you've found cohorts, you must share a unified message. Be positive and make the message clear and easy to remember. Shaping the message around a school or district's mission statement can be very effective when targeting the school or district. (See the June 2006 of *PHP* for the column "Effective Advocates: Craft Your Message" for more information and tips.) What you say is just as important as to whom you say it.

Awareness in the ABCs of Advocacy is the first step as an effective advocate.

B is for Know the Basics!

An effective advocate is well-informed, one who knows the basics. That means that an advocate understands the needs and characteristics of gifted children. He or she can debunk the myths so often believed about gifted children. (See Barbara Clark's *Growing Up Gifted* for information on myths and characteristics.) Advocates also fully understand the rights of a gifted and talented child. NAGC President Del Siegle has written a Bill of Rights, which you can download from the NAGC Web site in English or Spanish. This list provides a strong foundation to any advocacy message.

Effective advocates also know the basic laws, regulations, and policies governing gifted education in their districts and states. Not only does this include all legislation and policy with the word gifted in them, but it also includes those that affect young people who are gifted and talented. For example, the

policy concerning the age to begin kindergarten has significant impact on gifted young people who may be ready to begin school at an earlier age than their age-mates. (See “Effective Advocates: Always on the Alert” in the September 2007 *PHP* for other issues facing gifted learners.) Because of their familiarity with the laws, regulations, and policies, advocates are able to discuss them with confidence and in terms that all decision-makers understand. Without this basic knowledge, advocates cannot be effective.

Other important aspects of the basics are the services, programs, and opportunities available to young people. Not only does the advocate need to know what is available at the school and district level, but the advocate also needs to know what is possible. For example, acceleration is a viable option that many districts shy away from. The 2004 landmark study, *A Nation Deceived: How Schools Hold Back America’s Brightest Students*, is a must-read for any advocate wanting to know more about the research and reasoning behind acceleration. (Free copies are available at <http://www.nationdeceived.org>.) The more knowledgeable a person is about possibilities, the better advocate he or she can be.

If you Know the Basics, then you’re on your way to becoming an effective advocate.

C is for Communicate Effectively!

C embodies the all-important concept — communication. Effective communication is what will make or break an advocacy plan. Start with the message. It must be clear, concise, and powerful. It also should fit your purpose. For example, if you’re trying to persuade someone to establish a new policy, word the message so that it includes data and information that substantiates your point. Also remember to be positive in the wording. Consider, too, the audience. The message for a school may differ from the message for the Speaker of the House. Include language fitting to the particular audience. Audience and purpose are critical in crafting an effective message.

What you are communicating is only half the battle. How you communicate is equally important. Face-to-face communication is most effective because you can use active listening to clarify your point. The give-and-take in face-to-face communication lets you clarify misunderstandings and answer questions. You also can read those nonverbals; a person’s gestures and facial expressions may say more than his or her words! Your nonverbal communication can emphasize sincerity, knowledge about the subject, and even camaraderie. Simply maintaining eye contact establishes rapport.

Communication cannot be just a one-time occurrence. An effective communicator establishes a relationship with the individual or individuals. Don’t wait for a crisis to begin the discussion! If the decision-maker already knows you to be a knowledgeable and dependable resource, then he or she will listen more intently when problems arise. The more valid and reliable the communication, the more the audience will heed the message. (See the September 2006 *PHP* for the column “Effective Advocates: Communicate Effectively” for more ideas.)

The ABCs of Advocacy are formed by being Aware, learning the Basics, and knowing how to Communicate effectively. Most of us begin as advocates for our own children by starting with their classroom teachers and branching out within the school. Then, when our children graduate, we’re done. But, we shouldn’t be! Please don’t stop there. All children who are gifted and talented need you. Expand your advocacy efforts to the district, state, and then the nation. The goal is advocacy and appropriate educational opportunities for all children, including those who are gifted and talented. By knowing your ABCs of Advocacy, you’re well on your way to making a difference in the world!

Resources

Clark, B. (2008). *Growing up gifted: Developing the potential of children at home and at school* (7th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Prentice Hall.

Colangelo, N., Assouline, S. G., & Gross, M. U. M. (2004). *A nation deceived: How schools hold back America’s brightest students* (Vol. 1). Iowa City, IA: The Connie Belin & Jacqueline N. Blank International Center for Gifted Education and Talent Development.

Committee on Prospering in the Global Economy of the 21st Century. (2007). *Rising above the gathering storm: Energizing and employing America for a brighter economic future*. Washington, DC: National Academies Press.

Roberts, J. L., & Inman, T. F. (2006, June). Effective advocates: Crafting your message. *Parenting for High Potential*, p. 24-25.

Roberts, J. L., & Inman, T. F. (2006, September). Effective advocates: Communicate effectively. *Parenting for High Potential*, p. 8-9.

Roberts, J. L., & Inman, T. F. (2007, September). Effective advocates: Always on the alert. *Parenting for High Potential*, p. 14-15.

National Association for Gifted Education: Advocacy Toolkit <http://www.nagc.org/index.aspx?id=36>

National Association for Gifted Education: Bill of Rights by President Del Siegle <http://www.nagc.org/uploadedFiles/PHP/Bill%20of%20Rights.pdf>

Your state department of education Web site: Search for gifted and talented or high ability students. Know the laws, regulations, and policies of your state.

“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it is the only thing that has.” ~ Margaret Mead