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Building Advocacy Through Program Design, Student Productivity and Public Relations

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Abstract

Building advocacy for programs serving high ability students should be a priority for all persons working in these programs. In this article, the process of building advocacy through the program itself, the superior products of participating students, and the continued commitment to public relations is introduced. Factors common to programs that have survived the current economic crisis in New England, including sustained advocacy efforts, are also discussed.

During the most depressing wave of cutbacks of gifted programs ever experienced in New England, we've asked ourselves numerous times why some programs have survived and others have not. Why have the dire economic circumstances in so many parts of our country resulted in the elimination of some of the most prestigious programs in our highest socioeconomic communities when some smaller programs in poorer towns have not even been considered in the long lists of cutbacks being drafted by superintendents and school boards? Our reflections on the dramatic turn of events experienced during the current economic crisis in our country and its impact on gifted and talented programs have caused us to reexamine the impact of program advocacy on program longevity. In this article, the role of program design, the productivity of our high ability students, and the need for public relations will be discussed as will the factors that we have identified that seem to be present in the programs that have survived the current crisis.

Our focus will be on local advocacy rather than state or federal efforts. The types of efforts required at the state or federal level are very different from those we are proposing for local districts. And while local gifted program personnel must be recruited into state and national advocacy networks, their efforts on those levels will be necessary on a less regular basis than the effort required for local district advocacy. For example, when a national attempt was being made to gain appropriations for the previously authorized Javits Act, in the final analysis only six states were crucial. Groups in those states were targeted because either a senator or a member of the U.S. House of Representatives was on the congressional appropriations committees (Reis, 1987, 1988). Advocacy at the local level, on the other hand, requires a different approach, one that takes into consideration the much more direct and visible relation between the program and the persons upon whom we are dependent for support. Superintendents,

boards of education, the general faculty, and the public at large are much “closer to the action,” therefore, we need to bring certain types of information to their attention on an organized and regular basis. Traditionally, the gifted-youth-as-national-resources argument and the unique-needs-of-gifted-students argument have served as the bases for most advocacy efforts. Although these approaches may have value in statewide and national campaigns, we believe that local advocacy requires much more concrete and visible examples of program impact and effectiveness.

It is argued here that at the local level the best advocacy for a gifted program is the program itself. In the sections that follow we will discuss three areas upon which local advocacy efforts should focus: program design, student productivity, and public relations.

Program Design

What have we learned during the past two decades about program models and designs? A wide variety of research on human abilities (Bloom, 1985; Gardner, 1983; Sternberg & Davidson, 1986) has clearly and unequivocally pointed to justification for much broader conceptions of giftedness, conceptions that argue against the restrictive student selection methods that guided identification procedures in the past. Lay persons and professionals at all levels have begun to question the efficacy of programs that rely on narrow definitions and base identification mainly on IQ scores and other cognitive ability measures. Continued advocacy for special programs requires that we use this research to develop more flexible identification procedures and that we pay serious attention to including traditionally underrepresented groups and individuals whose potentials are manifested in ways other than test scores.

Flexible identification also requires that we demonstrate a high degree of internal consistency among the definition of giftedness that a local district adopts, the methods used to identify students, and the specific programmatic services that are made available to students as a result of their identified potentials. In other words, program designs must be based on the behavioral characteristics that brought individual students to our attention in the first place. Finally, flexible identification requires that we view special programs and services as places where we develop gifted behaviors rather than merely find them. In this regard we should judiciously avoid saying that a young person is either “gifted” or “not gifted.” It is difficult to gain support for programs when we use as a rationale statements such as, “Elaine is a gifted third grader.” It is precisely these kinds of statements that offend many people and raise all of the accusations of elitism that have plagued our field. But note the behavioral orientation when we say: “Elaine is a third grader who reads at the adult level and who is fascinated by biographies about women of scientific accomplishment.” And note the internal consistency reflected in the services provided:

1. Under the guidance of her classroom teacher, Elaine was allowed to substitute the third-grade reader for books that were of an appropriate challenge level in her area of interest. The resource teacher helped the classroom teacher locate these books, and they were purchased from the special program budget.

2. Elaine was allowed to leave the school two afternoons a month (usually on early dismissal days) to meet with a mentor who was a journalist specializing in female scientists and other accomplished women. The resource teacher arranged transportation with the help of the program's parent volunteer group.

3. During Elaine's regularly scheduled pull-out time, which was arranged so that she would be out during her strength areas (i.e., reading, language arts, and spelling), the resource teacher helped her prepare a questionnaire and interview schedule to be used with local women scientists and science faculty members at a nearby university.

Could even the staunchest antigifted proponent argue against the logic or the appropriateness of these services? The classroom teacher was delighted with the services because she was the person who identified Elaine's special ability and interest, she was involved in some of the planning, she had a choice in scheduling Elaine's out-of-class time, and she received help from the resource teacher in locating appropriate books for Elaine. This caused the classroom teacher to view the special program as an extension of the general education program, and she viewed the resource teacher as a partner in Elaine's education rather than a competitor.

Finally, note that the recommended services are far different from the usual practice of taking Elaine and all the other "gifted third graders" off for a few hours a week to practice thinking skills and logic problems, to participate in the ubiquitous mythology or dinosaur unit, or to engage in creative ways of making *chocolate fudge*! When programs focus on developing the behavioral potential of individuals (or small groups who share a common interest), it is no longer necessary to organize groups in a given time block merely because all students happen to be third graders. And the role of resource teachers takes on unique dimensions because they are focusing on the development of individual talent potentials. The special program teacher in this case was truly a resource to Elaine because she did not replicate the role of a regular instructor, and she was a resource to the classroom teacher because she provided specific books, the location and purchase of which the classroom teacher would not ordinarily be able to pursue.

We believe that special programs can make the best use of their always limited resources by the type of targeting suggested in Elaine's case. Although a small number of whole group activities may be warranted, one of the pitfalls of present programs is that we tend to do all of the same things with identified students most of the time. And in most cases, the whole group activities that have been the mainstay of special programs (e.g., thinking skills, guided fantasy, creative dramatics, and units on topics that are only different because they are not covered in the regular curriculum) are activities that can and should be made available for all or most of the school population. Our biggest source of criticism, and therefore lack of support, comes from classroom teachers and administrators who can't see the kinds of differentiation that were plainly evident in Elaine's case. Advocacy at the local level will increase dramatically when classroom teachers and administrators view every special program activity and service as demonstrably different from the regular program and when they view resource teachers

as persons that they simply can't do without—persons who extend services in ways comparable to those of speech therapists or learning disabilities specialists.

A second issue related to program design is concerned with sharing some of the technology traditionally used in special programs with the school program at large. Many of the thinking skills and process-oriented activities that have been the mainstay of special programs are now acknowledged to be appropriate experiences for the regular curriculum. Indeed, the thinking skills "movement" that swept the country in the 1980s is clear evidence that one of the foundations of most special programs has now found its way into general education. When gifted program personnel take an active role in sharing instructional techniques such as thinking skills and process development technology with the general faculty, we expand our constituency and thus broaden the base for program advocacy. As a case in point, we would like to share some reactions from parents and teachers in districts that used a model which emphasizes the infusion of general enrichment activities into the regular curriculum (Renzulli & Reis, 1985). (This model also uses an expanded "talent pool" of targeted students [approximately 10–15% of the total school population] that is comprised of students who have gained entrance on the bases of both test-score and non-test-score information.) Parents of students who received general enrichment services in the classroom but who were not formally identified as talent pool members made numerous positive comments about their children's opportunities to participate in challenging enrichment experiences. A parent who recently attended a conference sponsored by the Connecticut Association for the Gifted told us: "I know my daughter isn't formally identified, but she receives so many benefits in the form of enrichment activities, mini-courses, and extended classroom opportunities that I wanted to show my support for the whole gifted education movement." Needless to say, this parent would not have been in a position to reflect upon services that her daughter received unless effective public relations activities had called attention to the impact the special program is having on nontargeted students.

Comments by two other parents from evaluation studies in districts where this model is employed are as follows:

> As a result of the expanded talent pool approach, our child was able to participate in the program, thereby receiving a very worthwhile and enjoyable experience which she would not have normally been involved in. We strongly endorse the schoolwide enrichment and expanded talent pool approach.
>
> We are very pleased with this approach because it gives more children an opportunity to become involved in things that were only available to a few students in the [former] gifted program. (Reis, 1981, p.86)

Similar kinds of positive comments by teachers have been documented in evaluation studies carried out in districts where extended efforts have been made to share special program technology with classroom teachers and to promote more interaction between classroom teachers and resource teachers (Reis, 1981; Delisle, Reis, & Gubbins, 1981; Reis, 1983; Renzulli, 1982, 1988). Comments such as the

following exemplify reactions of classroom teachers who were involved in evaluation studies:

> For me, this approach has been a nice alternative to the [former] system that was too organized and rigid. Often, I nominated students in good faith for our program only to find that they did not have the appropriate scores on their Stanford to get accepted into the program. I then took on the "why bother to nominate" attitude. This model has certainly given me an uplift because I hear you saying, "I care about your judgments regarding my students." I, too, believe that my judgments regarding abilities, task commitment, and the like are more realistic than test scores.
>
> Whether or not you've tried, you helped me to evaluate my own teaching styles and understand that I, too, need to be more responsive to students in their individualities and interests. For that, I thank you! It has certainly changed my ideas about teaching and given me a new outlook. (Reis, 1981, p.97)

A program design that builds advocacy is inclusive, extends services to a wider range of students than has been traditionally identified in the past, and extends the technology usually available to trained teachers of the gifted to other members of the faculty. The role that the gifted program plays in extending and sharing services must be brought to the attention of teachers, parents, and administrators through active public relations activities, and all persons at the local level must be regularly informed about the role that the special program plays in promoting more integration between the regular and special programs.

Student Productivity

High quality student products are also a major factor in promoting advocacy at the local level. Our emphasis on product development is based on theoretical concerns related to the roles that products play in the overall development of creative productivity (Reis & Cellerino, 1983; Reis & Hébert, 1985; Renzulli, 1983, 1988). We view products as vehicles for the synthesis of a wide range of cognitive and affective processes that are major goals of programs for high potential students. At the same time, exemplary student products are the most visible manifestations of the work that students actually do in special programs, and therefore they represent high quality media for public awareness and advocacy. They also represent excellent examples of the extended effort, long periods of time, and old-fashioned "hard work" that program participants must devote to activities that place a high premium on product development.

The story presented (see Figure 1) was written for a local school newspaper by three young girls who became involved in a long-term study about recycling Styrofoam lunch trays. The story is packed with information about participation on the part of administrators, board members, and business leaders, and it is the kind of "success story" that would not have been possible without the focus on a particular project. Numerous public awareness activities resulted from this project, and thus the project served as a major advocacy vehicle.

Figure 1

Landmarks
Sorrento Springs School - Sixth Grade, Parkway School District
Creve Coeur, Missouri
GIFTED-CLASS PROJECT
BY ANNE UNDNER, JOANNA KEISER & TIFFANY MCLAIN

"If Styrofoam destroys the ozone layer, why are we using these trays in our cafeteria?"

This question started our major project in our fifth-grade, gifted class at Sorrento Springs. We are three girls who became concerned from news reports describing the harmful effects that chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) have on the protective covering for our world, the ozone layer. We began researching CFCs by reading many science journals and magazines. We learned that CFCs weaken, then deplete, the ozone layer; then ultraviolet rays touch the earth. The rays damage the whole earth, people, and all natural resources.

We thought we would propose to our Board of Education that we ban the trays. When we researched the lunchroom trays we use, we were surprised to find they were made of polystyrene, not Styrofoam. That changed our whole direction.

Now what to do? We called many manufacturers of polystyrene and found out they have plants that recycle their products. We were very relieved to discover this. Companies that agreed to work with us are James River Products (Dixie Cups), Delco (egg cartons), and Amoco (the Polystyrene), and Landfill Alternatives, which recycles polystyrene. Representatives said they would help us transport the trays to Chicago to be recycled because there is no plant in the St. Louis area. We invited them to visit with us to tell how to start.

We thought then was the time to propose to the board the idea of recycling. We created a logo and printed sweatshirts with the logo on them, and we even made earrings out of the polystyrene trays. We wrote a proposal asking for recycling to start in our district; then we presented the board with our research. Were they impressed! They understood why we think recycling is so important. They arranged for a follow-up meeting among the superintendent, the district's director of public affairs, and us, plus our teacher of the gifted. Superintendent Senti said he had already changed some of his ways by not using disposable cups. He wanted to be included in the meeting when representatives from the companies came to talk with us about how Sorrento Springs could begin recycling.

Our work was just starting. Planning a meeting for high-powered officials in large corporations was not something we had ever done before. We rolled up our sleeves and dug in. First, invitations: administrators, board members, media and other interested people had to be informed. Next the agenda had to be set; the presentation had to be planned; the hand-outs had to be prepared. So much to do! We thought refreshments should be served because the representatives were flying in from all over the nation. We baked cookies and decorated them with the companies' names. These were a real hit. We served juice—natural and healthful!

The day the meeting took place was the most exciting day of our lives! Never before had a forum such as this been set up where the makers of polystyrene and school district personnel sat down together to plan a way to solve such an important issue. We were so proud that we had caused it to happen.

The coverage by a major television station and the newspaper was great. We presented our concerns, outlined our desires, and stated the facts, which were received by all with real desire to support our proposal for recycling. We think our accomplishment is important, and everyone else says so, too.

Kids can make a difference!

Numerous other student projects and product-oriented studies have resulted in excellent vehicles for promoting advocacy. Studies about the impact of acid rain on a community, the prevalence of alcohol-related arrests in various geographic sections of a city, the impact of local press coverage on the merits of a mayoral campaign, the effects of the loss of a volunteer fire department on a community, the effects of child abuse, the creation of a toy safety campaign, and many other topics have placed before the public in a highly visible fashion the tangible work that students pursue in special programs. Parents, teachers, and administrators can see the results of extended student effort, ability, interests, and task commitment. These products create what we sometimes call the "Oh Wow" criterion for program effectiveness. That is, parents and professionals who have learned about the products say, in effect, "Oh Wow—I can't believe that this was done by a fifth grader!" A research project like the recycling program described in Figure 1 and a unit taught by a sensational teacher of the gifted may have similar goals, but the visibility of the product is more beneficial to program advocacy because it creates a sense of school and community pride and highlights the types of work that are not ordinarily found in the regular curriculum. These high quality products become the "trophy case" of the gifted education program and the academic equivalent of the athletic awards and trophies that are prominently displayed in the showcases of the foyers of our schools. In this sense, a focus on product development plays an important part in defining what is meant by "qualitative differences" in programs for the gifted and talented. We have attempted to develop a set of criteria for calling attention to those aspects that are qualitatively different from the regular curriculum through the use of the following set of questions:

1. Did every student do it?
2. Could every student do it?
3. Should every student do it?
4. Would every student want to do it?
5. Did the student do it willingly and zestfully?
6. Did the student use advanced resources and authentic methodology?

If the answers to the first four questions are "no," and the answers to the last two are "yes," then we believe that a segment of special program activity has been identified which qualifies as a qualitatively differentiated activity (Renzulli, 1982).

Public Relations

In their efforts to start and maintain gifted programs, many coordinators and teachers ignore public awareness efforts or delay them until the program is firmly established. And vigorous public awareness activities are often not initiated until there is a threat to the program's existence. We believe that public relations must be an ongoing activity and that special program activities should be undertaken with a view to the public relations benefits that might result. The history of advocacy for the gifted has been plagued by the social attitudes and the sometimes anti-intellectual climate that exists in our country. Researchers and scholars in our field have pointed to various high and low points of national interest and commitment to educating the gifted and talented (Gallagher, 1979;Tannenbaum, 1983). Gallagher described the struggle between

support and apathy for special programs for this population as rooted in our historical traditions—the battle against an aristocratic elite and the concomitant belief in egalitarianism. Tannenbaum portrays two peak periods of interest in the gifted as the 5 years following Sputnik in 1957 and the last half of the decade of the 1970s. Tannenbaum described a valley of neglect in which the public focused its attention on the disadvantaged and the handicapped separating the peaks. “The cyclical nature of interest in the gifted is probably unique in American education. No other special group of children has been alternately embraced and repelled with so much vigor by educators and lay persons alike” (Tannenbaum, 1983, p. 16).

Tannenbaum’s portrayal of the peaks and valleys in our effort to educate high potential youth is both accurate and insightful. Many educators of the gifted are concerned about the current emphasis on basic skills, competency-based assessment, and elimination of grouping or substitution of cooperative learning for grouping (“Gifted Education and the School Reform Movement,” 1991). These by-products of the present educational reform movement may result in either a “peak” or a “valley” depending on the ways in which we bring information about these reform movement proposals to the general public and the community of educators at large.

The cyclical nature of education of the gifted has implications for all persons who enter the field. Not only do we have to do our work on a daily basis like our colleagues, but we also often have to fight for and even justify our existence on an annual basis, highlighting our efforts in a very public forum—the community in which we work. When gifted programs are not mandated and budget cuts are ordered, these programs appear on the same list with other nonmandated services such as athletics, various art programs, foreign language instruction, and a host of optional activities. Unfortunately, this occurrence often results in the public viewing these programs much like other extracurricular options—as frills. A strong public information program can dispel this myth and help to gamer the understanding and support our programs need. And unless efforts are made on a regular basis to promote public relations, even the most effective gifted programs may be eliminated due to funding cuts or “valleys” of interest in this population.

We recommend three underlying activities for building a strong public relations campaign: documentation, documentation, and documentation! Write-ups of student products suitable for distribution to the local press or school district newsletters are essential. Similarly, photographs of students’ work and visiting community speakers interacting with students are excellent material for news releases. Invitations to central office administrators, school board members, and local government officials should be extended on a regular basis, especially when highly visible student projects are being presented. Arrangements for students to display their work in shopping malls, bank lobbies, and public buildings should be a regular part of the public relations effort. An end-of-year “Product Fair” should be arranged to include local radio, television, and newspaper coverage. Similarly, student presentations of their research at meetings of local civic dubs, senior citizens centers, nursing homes, hospitals, and other places where community service is provided help highlight the social goals of special programs. These presentations also reinforce the idea that young people are being

encouraged to use their gifts and talents in ways that respect positive community values and civic-mindedness.

A final aspect of the public relations effort focuses on expanding the number of advocates for special programs. This aspect of public relations is related to our earlier discussion about program designs and is probably best described through use of an example. A gifted program in a small New England city was responsible for the organization, training, and financial support that resulted in implementing the Talents Unlimited (Schlichter, 1986) program in several elementary schools throughout the city. This program provided training in a broad range of thinking skills for all elementary teachers. The implementation of the program was highly successful, and large numbers of students expressed their satisfaction and shared with their parents many examples of the activities they were pursuing in the Talents Unlimited program. Without appearing to be self-serving or publicity “hungry,” the program coordinator and the resource teachers used their district and school-based newsletters and public communication vehicles to “remind” school personnel and the public that the Talents Unlimited program was part of the overall general enrichment services sponsored by the gifted program. The public awareness information also called attention to the vital roles that were played by building principals and classroom teachers. The public relations message was very clear—an exciting thinking skills program had been added to the general school experience, and it was “brought to you by the gifted program.” Such an approach informs the general public about the ways in which the school lives of all students are touched by certain (not all) program activities. This approach greatly expands the advocacy base because people can see “something in it” for their own children. And when it comes time to obtain board of education support or expanded funding, this larger constituency will have a much greater impact than previous approaches which requested supplementary funds that would benefit a fraction of the school population.

Conclusion

An analysis of several gifted programs that have survived the current economic crisis in New England revealed several features that are similar but not identical to the key features of successful gifted programs identified in an earlier research study (Reis & Renzulli, 1983).

1. Longevity—The programs that have survived were those that had been in existence long enough to create a constituency and to become a part of the total school program.

2. Administrative Support—The district superintendent, assistant superintendent, and the principals had clearly supported the continuation of the program.

3. Gifted Program Leadership—Either a coordinator or a teacher who assumed a coordination role was present and served as organizer, facilitator, and general program liaison with the administration, school board, and community.

4. Policy—The existence of the program had resulted in the adoption of a policy by the local board of education or school committee about a definition, identification, or programming model, or some type of administrative design such as advanced subject area classes for identified students at the middle school level. The adoption of policies means that programs cannot be eliminated because of arbitrary decisions by administrators or changes in “philosophy” when a new superintendent comes to town.

5. Program Design and Organization—Programs that provide services to a broader spectrum of students, in which excellent work is routinely completed by students, and that often share enrichment experiences and technology with students who are not identified have been more likely to survive since these programs avoid the charges of elitism that are often leveled at gifted programs.

6. Ownership—Successful programs have consistently reached out to staff members and community members and resulted in faculty involvement. Ownership can be defined as convincing the entire school staff that everybody has a stake in the gifted program and an important part to play in the full range of services provided to gifted students (Reis, 1983).

7. Prior Evaluation Reports—When a program is effective, constituent groups are satisfied, appropriate student growth is apparent, and program goals are met. Evaluation reports from effective programs can document the benefits to students and further extend program support by providing the results to administrators and community members.

8. Sustained Public Relations Efforts—It is not enough to engage in public relations efforts in the early years of a program; this must be an ongoing effort. Program handbooks, newsletters, news stories, presentations, and various other media efforts (slides, videotapes, scrapbooks) must be used to provide information about the program to different interest groups. Teacher and parent handbooks should be developed and distributed and every effort should be made to point out ways in which the program benefits other students.

Over a decade ago, the question was raised, Will the gifted child movement be alive and well in 1990 (Renzulli, 1980)? The movement does, indeed, survive and the Jacob K. Javits Gifted and Talented Students Education Act has resulted in an infusion of federal funds for model programs, curriculum writing, a new national report, the recreation of a federal office of gifted and talented and the establishment of a National Research Center on the gifted and Talented (NRC/GT). It is somewhat ironic that the federal funds have been made available at a time when so many local programs have been threatened or reduced due to economic setbacks and the effects of the reform movement. It is not surprising, however, that the absolute priority of the Javits Act is model programs and research efforts focusing on the underserved gifted. If the gifted child movement is to be alive and well in the year 2000, we must double our efforts to identify young people with potential from all economic classes, all races, and all backgrounds and remember that talent development is the right of all children and the responsibility of all educators.

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