

Gifted is Special Education

Editorial by Sandra S. Jowers ~ mother of two gifted sons, educator of gifted students

“America’s stand on public education has historically and legally been that each child should have the opportunity for a free and appropriate education. Gifted children have special needs that must be met in order for them to be educated appropriately.” – Sandra S. Jowers

January brings in the New Year, and many of us take the time to ponder and evaluate our past year, and to set goals and define aspirations for the next year. For the supporters of Gifted Education we clearly remember last year’s efforts to have Gifted Education removed from the umbrella of Special Education. In January the citizens of Tennessee inaugurated a new legislature. For those of us who support Gifted Education, we ask where will this new legislature stand on Gifted Education? Will the legislators be supportive of gifted programs; will they support last year’s attempt to remove Gifted Education from the umbrella of Special Education?

As parents, grandparents, and educators of gifted children, we know that the inclusion of gifted students within the Division of Special Education is an appropriate and proper placement because of the special needs of these children. The regular curriculum cannot meet the special needs of gifted children. These children differ in the speed at which they learn, in the depth and complexity of their understanding, and in their social and emotional needs. Just as important or perhaps more so, these children need to spend a portion of their day with students who are like themselves (Webb, pp. 145-160). The regular curriculum fails to meet these special needs; therefore, these students must have modifications that will enable them to develop their full potential. Most of these modifications in the regular curriculum can only be mandated by an Individualized Educational Program (IEP) through the support of Special Education.

Furthermore, many gifted students in regular classrooms are pressured to modify both their behavior and their intellectual development “to fit in with regular students.” This “fitting in” pressure comes not only from their classmates but also from their teachers (Webb, p. 1). Few regular teachers have received any training about teaching gifted students. For far too many teachers, the concept of more is an acceptable adaptation of the curriculum. Doing more math problems on an already mastered concept does not increase the complexity of the assignment, nor does it challenge the students. A gifted math student quickly learns to use up the allotted time and to miss a few problems in order to “fit in” and to avoid having to do 60 problems to everyone else’s 30 problems.

An analysis of Tennessee’s Value Added Assessment System (TVAAS) indicates that the majority of the brightest students fail to achieve to their potential year after year (1998, p. 254). Explanations offered for this lack of achievement included no opportunity for high achievers to proceed at their own pace, a lack of challenging material, a lack of accelerated course offerings, and a concentration of instruction on the average or below average student. These mathematical, logic-based statistics from Tennessee’s own report on student achievement across the state clearly indicate that high achieving students will not always make it on their own (1997, p. B-66). These students have special educational needs that must be met by the schools in order for these students to develop their full potential. Denying these students the protection of Special Education denies them the chance for a free and appropriate education.

Arguments against funding programs for the gifted have run the gamut from a lack of funds to the charge that the programs are elitist. America’s stand on public education has historically and legally been that each child should have the opportunity for a free and appropriate education. Gifted children have special needs that must be met for them to be educated appropriately. Meeting the needs of these gifted students lies within the historical and legal descriptions of public education. The taxpayers of America spend millions across the nation on special programs for those students who are “gifted kinesthetically.” These prized athletes represent only a small number of the student body; yet they receive the benefits of a highly specialized program restricted to only the best who can meet stringent standards. Likewise, those students who are musically gifted participate in programs designed to meet their needs. Special musical programs such as jazz bands, show choirs, and concert orchestras, to name a few, are restricted to those students who can meet stringent audition requirements. These students also represent only a small number of the student body. No one considers these special programs elitist. These programs meet the needs of these special students.

How is Gifted Education different from these programs? Students who are intellectually gifted have special educational needs that cover their lifelong learning processes. Gifted students do not choose to learn differently from other students; they do not choose to process material differently from other people. Their uniqueness, for the most part, is a result of genetics and nature that occurred at birth, and this uniqueness should be nurtured and developed with the same intensity and focus that the gifts of athleticism or music are nurtured or developed. We must ask ourselves this question: What future Thomas Edison, George Washington Carver, or Bill Gates will fail to reach his full potential because he adapted to just “fit in?”

Every education dollar is precious and is no doubt stretched to the maximum. However, this is not a valid excuse to avoid the needs of the gifted. Nationally, only 2 pennies of every 100 dollars for education are spent on the gifted. Exactly how much money will Tennessee and individual districts save by eliminating Gifted Education? What are the costs of eliminating programs for Tennessee’s gifted students? The data from the TVAAS reports clearly indicate that Tennessee’s best and brightest students are failing to achieve to their potential year after year. What is the cost of this continued failure to the state? How much will be saved, and, more importantly, what will be the costs to Tennessee’s gifted students? Any individual considering changes in Tennessee’s laws governing Special Education must consider all of these questions.

Furthermore, removing Gifted Education from the Division of Special Education by changing Tennessee’s IDEA law will eliminate the mandate for funding of Gifted Education. The information network of concerned citizens – TIGER (Tennessee Initiative for Gifted Education Reform) at <http://tigernetwork.blogspot.com/> – recently conducted a survey of gifted programs throughout America. In those states that had removed their gifted programs from the umbrella of Special Education, the gifted programs were eliminated within one to two years. If there is no state mandate for gifted programs, the funding for gifted programs becomes fair game in any budget crisis.

Additionally, the state of Tennessee has recently been evaluated by the Office of Civil Rights concerning state identification procedures for gifted students. An OCR mandate has resulted in changes in these procedures at the state level and, subsequently, at the local level. Would sudden changes made by Tennessee at the state level violate the agreement the state has with the OCR? If such changes do not violate the “letter” of the agreement, such changes would seem to violate the “spirit” of the agreement. This agreement should be considered before making any changes in Tennessee’s programs for gifted students.

Truly, the gifted students of Tennessee have special needs that must be met in order to fully develop their incredible potential. These are needs that are not and cannot be met within the regular curriculum. These students should most definitely be covered by the Division of Special Education. These students and their needs should not be abandoned or ignored by the educational systems of Tennessee.

Those of us who know and understand gifted children and their needs must advocate for these children. Please take the time to meet with your local legislators to voice your concerns about Gifted Education, and please provide these legislators with information in order for them to make informed decisions about Gifted Education. Our children, all of our children, are our future. Let us create an environment in which all children can reach their full potential.

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Sources:

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