

# Effective Advocates

by Dr. Julia Link Roberts and Tracy Ford Inman



## Always on the Alert!

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

Advocates for gifted children must remain alert! Admittedly, we are on the lookout for anything with the word gifted embedded, and the word talented also piques our interest. But we must not limit ourselves to those words alone. Of course, gifted funding, policies, and regulations are important; however, other policies and legislation also impact the education of children who are gifted and talented. For example, what is your state's policy concerning age to enter kindergarten? In many states, even if your child has been reading since her fourth birthday and can do mental math, if she happens to be born in September, then she would not be eligible to enter school for another year. Age wins over readiness. You had better have a plan B. (And we certainly hope that advocating for a new policy is part of that plan!) Other topics also prove crucial to educating those children who are gifted and talented and perhaps merit your advocacy efforts: deadlines for entering kindergarten and first grade, grouping for instructional purposes, virtual learning opportunities, graduation requirements, high school classes during middle school, availability of college-level classes, and professional development.

When children enter school influences their start in formal education. As mentioned, birth dates for entering kindergarten can be rigid or (hopefully) the state may allow for opportunities to assess the child's readiness to start school. Hard-and-fast deadlines for school entrance put up barriers for the child who is ready to learn. Waiting until others are ready to start school sets a bad precedent that may signal years of waiting for others to catch up. Likewise, what are the policies concerning entry into first grade? Must a child have completed kindergarten or meet the same calendar deadline in order to become a first-grader? Know what your state and district policies are. Are they best for all children – including those who are gifted and talented?

You may also want to explore what happens once those children are in school. What are the policies (both formal and informal) in the school district or the school for grouping children for instructional purposes? Grouping for instructional purposes can mean many things; one form of grouping would be classes that only have children of similar ability in them. Another form would be internal grouping in the class itself; based on a preassessment of what the child already knows or can do, children are put into different groups where everyone is focusing on the same concept but on varying levels or in different ways. The goal is continuous progress for all. (For more information on grouping, see Chapter 7 in *Strategies for Differentiating Instruction*.) In order for children to make continuous progress from the time they enter school until they graduate, it is imperative to have ongoing opportunities to be grouped and regrouped for instructional purposes. School leaders who deem that fairness means that there is a gifted child or two in each class fail to remember that fairness for gifted children includes the opportunity to learn with peers who are also ready to learn at advanced levels. Grouping children for the right reasons helps all children make continuous progress, especially when the teacher has the understanding and skills to differentiate instruction.

What opportunities are available in your school, district, or state that allow virtual learning when similar advanced classes are not available on site? State law in Kentucky, for example, says that fifth, sixth, or seventh graders who take an Advanced Placement or high school class and earn an A or B must have that class included on their high school transcripts. Virtual classes taken as high schoolers also count towards graduation. Such opportunities may be available through a virtual high school that is state run or is made available through another agency. For many, virtual learning provides high-level options not available at their home schools. The key questions are what virtual learning opportunities are available to students in your location and do those classes count as a credit toward graduation.

Are high school classes available to students who are not yet in high school but who are ready for advanced learning? Mathematics classes present a prime example, as algebra during middle school is a “must” since it is a gatekeeper class for rigorous work in math and science during high school. High school success in math is, in turn, the primary factor in postsecondary success. Clifford Adelman, Senior Research Analyst at the U.S. Department of Education, found that “of all pre-college curricula, the highest level of mathematics one studies in secondary school has the strongest continuing influence on bachelor’s degree completion. Finishing a course beyond the level of Algebra 2 (for example, trigonometry or pre-calculus) more than doubles the odds that a student who enters postsecondary education will complete a bachelor’s degree” (<http://www.ed.gov/pubs/Toolbox/toolbox.html>). A specific age does not dictate what a student is ready to learn, so it is very important that high school classes are ones that students may avail themselves to if they are ready. Once again, this policy may be formal or informal.

Likewise, are college courses available to students during their high school experiences? These classes may be College Board Advanced Placement (AP) courses ([www.collegeboard.com](http://www.collegeboard.com)), International Baccalaureate (IB) courses ([www.ibo.org](http://www.ibo.org)), or dual credit courses taken at the college or in the high school. (Dual credit involves paying college tuition and having a college professor or other qualified educator teach the class at the school or having the child travel to the college for that class.) Availability of college courses to high school students has benefits that include saving money when the courses count (when the students go to college), providing challenge for young people ready for advanced study, and preparing students for success in college by linking study habits with success in academic experiences. In fact, research shows that college students who have not taken an AP class have a 33% chance of completing a Bachelor’s Degree within 5 years; college students who have completed one AP course have a 59% chance of completing a Bachelor’s Degree within 5 years; and college students who have completed two or more AP courses increase to 76% their chances of attaining a Bachelor’s Degree within 5 years (<http://www.ed.gov/pubs/Toolbox/toolbox.html>).

Another policy issue that affects students is the number of class credit requirements versus the number of years required to take the classes. For example, a high school’s policy may dictate that students must take four years of English in order to graduate – rather than earn four English credits. Although this policy appears sound, it becomes a barrier to early graduation for a student who has exhausted the offerings at his high school. If a student earns four English credits in fewer than

four years, this policy would prevent his early graduation. Another way that the policy can be worded that is not so limiting is to say that a student must have English each year that she is in high school. What does your district’s policy say?

All educators must receive professional development each year. Professional development in a school or school district may be provided on topics that relate to gifted education, such as differentiation, strategies for acceleration, and thinking skills. School leaders (i.e., principals, curriculum coordinators, gifted resource teachers) may provide professional development on an ongoing basis, and it may be addressed through articles in mailboxes, regular reports and discussions at faculty meetings, as well as through daylong workshops or the attendance at conferences with a focus on advanced learning. What is available in your school or district to train educators to provide challenge and continuous progress to all students, including those who are gifted and talented? The professional development that is or is not provided sends a strong message as to how important it is to address a wide range of learner needs and to ensure continuous progress.

None of these policies directly states that it affects gifted children— they don’t even have the word gifted in them. However, each does affect children who are ready for accelerated, advanced learning. The goal of school is for each child to make continuous progress. Formal and informal policies may unintentionally provide barriers to learning on an ongoing basis. Advocates for gifted education need to be alert to various policies that facilitate or put up barriers to continuous learning. You need to find out what the policies are and then examine them through a gifted lens. They make a huge difference in the educational opportunities that are available to all children ready to learn at advanced levels.

## Recommended Resources

- Colangelo, N., Assouline, S. G., & Gross, M. U. M. (2004). *A Nation Deceived: How Schools Hold Back America’s Brightest Students (Vol. 1). The Templeton National Report on Acceleration*. Iowa City: University of Iowa.
- Roberts, J. L., & Inman, T. F. (2007). *Strategies for Differentiating Instruction: Best Practices in the Classroom*. Waco, TX: Prufrock Press.
- Robinson, A., Shore, B. M., & Enersen, D. L. (2007). *Best Practices in Gifted Education: An Evidence-Based Guide*. Waco, TX: Prufrock Press.