

Effective Advocates

by Dr. Julia Link Roberts and Tracy Ford Inman



Craft Your Message

Make the year 2006 a year for advocacy! In each edition of Parenting for High Potential, a new column, "Effective Advocates," will focus on a specific advocacy issue: Find Kindred Spirits, Craft Messages, Communicate Effectively, and Be Involved for the Long Run. 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.

Now that you've found kindred spirits, others who believe as you do about gifted children and their needs, it's time to advocate for change. However, before you can advocate for your children, you must first figure out the message. What are you trying to get across? To whom are you directing the message? The effectiveness of your advocacy will depend upon how well you specifically address those two questions. Your answers will help you target what you say to the person or decision-makers who can make what you want to happen really happen.

As you craft your advocacy message, think positively; it is important to focus on what you want to occur rather than on what you don't like that is happening. Few educators will respond positively to a message that your child is bored (that can mean so many things, from the child doesn't have rapport with the teacher to the material is too repetitive). Few decision makers will listen carefully to a litany of negative stories about your child and her school situation. Negative messages may very well fall on ears that have stopped listening. Not much happens if two-way communication breaks down, so keep your message positive.

Effective messages should be easy to understand and easy to remember. The message must be clear. If several people or an organization are focusing on the advocacy message, consistency in the delivery of the message is important. Chances of successful advocacy go up when advocates deliver the same message. Remember to keep it simple, clear, and powerful and make sure that everyone is relaying the same message.

Your goal is to have members of a decision-making group hear what you have to say and (hopefully) take action. The decision maker is most likely to "hear" a message if it ties in with something he believes in or wants to do. What does the teacher understand and care about? Or, if you are advocating for something to happen at the school level, what goals does the school espouse? Wrap your message around something your teacher or school administrators or school council wants to put into place. When that happens, you become part of the solution rather than a problem parent who wants something just for his or her child — and people will listen to possible solutions.

Where can you find such meaningful messages that should resonate with teachers, administrators, school council members, school board members, and/or legislators? Go to the school philosophy or mission statement as a starting point. Often you will see phrases such as "to develop the potential of every student" or "to ensure continuous progress for each student." These phrases can be incorporated into your advocacy message if they will help you communicate your concern. And since these phrases have already been accepted by the school, the transition to include your message should be a natural extension. Policy statements of organizations can provide the "meat" of your message. For example, the Joint Policy Statement of the National Middle School Association and the National Association for Gifted Children includes statements such as "Advanced middle grades learners thus require consistent opportunities to work at degrees of challenge somewhat beyond their particular readiness levels, with support necessary to achieve at the new levels of proficiency." In the current high school reform movement, there are three key words — rigor, relevance, and relationships. All three words could be important in designing advocacy messages for young people who are gifted and talented. For example, rigor is relative to each student, and all students must be challenged to work at high levels if they are to be successful in postsecondary opportunities.

Without personal challenge, the young person doesn't acquire the work habits that will serve him well when he confronts an academic task that isn't easy for him. Another key word in the high school reform movement is relationships. At all levels of schooling, relationships are important; gifted children need the peer relationships of others who think like they do and who share some interests. Reports from government organizations also provide sources for messages. *Rising Above the Gathering Storm: Energizing and Employing America for a Brighter Economic Future* (p. 5-15) states: "A new generation of bright, well-trained scientists and engineers will transform our future only if we begin in the 6th grade to significantly enlarge the pipeline and prepare students to engage in advanced coursework in mathematics and science."

Sample Messages

Of course, the advocacy message must address your specific situation, but some sample messages include the following:

- Continuous progress in mathematics is important if our children are to learn new things every day and continue to be motivated in that important content area.
- No Child Left Behind legislation sets proficiency as the minimum, but doesn't establish a learning ceiling. The learning ceiling must be lifted if every child, including one who is gifted and talented, is to make continuous progress.
- Academic peers share interests and willingness to learn at challenging levels even though they may not be age-peers.
- The future of our community (or state and nation) will depend on challenging all students, including gifted young people, to work hard to prepare them for performing successfully in postsecondary opportunities. It isn't possible to work hard when the content is easy.

Effective Messages Are:

- Positive
- Clear
- Easy to understand
- Easy to remember
- Repeated by multiple messengers
- Built on positions and beliefs already espoused by the target audience

Speaking out on behalf of children with advanced academic needs is vitally important if our schools are to challenge the wide range of learners, including those children who are gifted and talented. You will be a more effective advocate if this message is carefully crafted and connects to policy – especially when you aim it at educators and decision-makers who value continuous progress and the development of the potential of all young people. "All children" is a phrase that isn't limited to those children who are performing at grade level but includes children who are below and above grade level. The future of our states and country depends upon developing the talents and abilities of all of our children to their maximum potential. Be careful as you craft your advocacy message: the future of your child and of children is so important that you must speak out!

Resources

Achieve, Inc. & National Governors Association. (2005). *An Action Agenda For Improving America's High Schools*. Washington, DC: Achieve.

Committee on Prospering in the Global Economy of the 21st Century. (2005). *Rising Above The Gathering Storm: Energizing And Employing America For A Brighter Economic Future*. Washington, D. C.: National Academies Press. Retrieved online version January 19, 2006, from <http://www.nap.edu/catalog/11463.html>

National Governor's Association: www.nga.org.

National Middle School Association & National Association for Gifted Children. (2004). *Meeting The Needs Of High-ability And High-potential Learners In The Middle Grades: A Joint Position Statement Of The National Middle School Association And The National Association For Gifted Children*. Washington, DC: Authors.

Roberts, J. L. (2006). Planning for advocacy. In J. H. Purcell. & R. D. Eckert, (Eds.), *Designing Services And Programs For High-ability Learners: A Guidebook For Gifted Education* (pp. 239-248). Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.