

Advocating Up the Ladder

by Wendy Skinner

Author and gifted advocate Wendy Skinner visited Connecticut for the Westport Minds In Motion on March 29, 2008, where she presented a workshop about her experiences advocating for her gifted child. She shared the basic strategy and philosophies developed through her efforts advocating for her son, Ben. Her approach was to encourage informed decisions and mutual respect while attempting to formulate a plan with consensus, yet she found out her journey demanded that she take the initiative, think creatively, and remain flexible.

Wendy outlined her recommendations in the linear format below; however, she is careful to note that advocating and the development of relationships do not necessarily follow a straight-forward path. As she says, the process is more spiral, looping, and just plain tangled at times. She suggests the following outline be used as a basis from which to begin your advocacy.

Educate Yourself

- Read, read, read. Gifted books, magazines, and websites provide a wealth of information and wisdom. (Editor's note: The resources section of MCGT's website, www.mcgt.net, has links to many helpful websites.)
- Talk, talk, talk. When you speak with other parents who have gifted children you will learn of opportunities and they can help avoid pitfalls they've already experienced.
- Find and read your school district's policy on subject and grade acceleration. Know the procedures and the philosophy of your district.

Formal Assessment or Tests

- If at all possible, start with formal assessments -- not just a grade level exit exam, a grade level state standardized test, or grades on a report card.
- Formal assessments or tests administered by qualified personnel and licensed psychologists make a huge difference. An IQ and an achievement test will allow your child to demonstrate his or her abilities well beyond what other tests can measure and what teachers and parents might expect. Most educators have at least a general understanding of the significance of test results. Parents can begin to understand how their child fits in or compares with what is expected from average children.
- If your child tests exceptionally above the norm, the district is still obligated to meet his or her needs through planned, implemented, and concrete strategies.

Meeting With Parents and Educators: A Two-Step Process

Begin establishing a mutually respectful relationship:

- Parents: Allow your child to demonstrate his/her potential and abilities. Present meaningful and accurate information to educators (not just anecdotes or hunches), then talk about options and how much, as parents, you will support these opportunities. Remain open-minded.
- Educators: Inform parents of your experience, programs, and willingness to accommodate the academic and social/emotional needs of the child. Above all, listen. Validate parents' concerns and their abilities, as well as their fears. Take risks, be creative, but remain honest and realistic.

First Step: Informational meetings:

At every informational meeting, parents can follow this basic strategy.

- Ask for the educator's observations and opinions about your child.

- Listen.
- Learn more about the school's and district's services, procedures and policies.
- Ask for each educator's perspective about gifted students, classroom teachers, school programs, and the district overall.
- Then, communicate your concerns, including your child's behaviors and feelings about school.
- State test results, assessments, and any other information you have learned about your child from previous teachers, report cards, achievement tests, etc., as well as your personal observations.
- Take notes.
- Listen more as you discuss each other's concerns.

Pull it all together.

- Assemble all your information and discuss your experiences with your parenting partner, (spouse, grandparent, best friend). Data, opinions, feelings -- consider it all.
- Talk with and listen to your child's opinions and feelings.
- Prioritize your goals.
- Articulate what you have little wiggle room on, and what you are willing to forego or wait for.
- Formulate a proposal to bring to your action meeting(s).
- Be prepared to be flexible and open-minded.

Second Step: Action meetings:

Meet with the intention to form a mutually agreed-upon plan to meet your child's academic and social/emotional needs.

- Set agreeable time tables. When gifted children are in crisis, it may seem imperative to parents that the child have a positive change immediately. Expectations and time tables are often quite different between parents and educators, but once you take time to meet, concerns that are backed up by evidence can be cause to adjust or expedite the schedule of accommodations.
- Meet "up the ladder." If a parent is not satisfied at any point, respectfully go up the ladder. This does not have to reflect negatively on the parent or the educator. It may simply be that what the parent is asking for is not within the power or ability of that particular educator. He or she may not have the experience, ability, or the power to make certain decisions regarding the child's needs.

- Classroom teacher. He or she is the frontline person with firsthand experience with your child.

Honor this.

- Gifted resource teacher or district gifted coordinator. Parents will be less naive, have more realistic expectations, and be able to speak with the principal on a more equal plain if they are well-informed from this expert.

- School principal. He or she has final say in decision making. Respect their position and humanity. If parents think it would be helpful, they can bring an advocate with them (psychologist, gifted advocate/experienced parent, or a friend who is familiar with your situation and understands your priorities). Your advocate can also help you take notes.

- Team meeting. If parents or educators have test information and/or a proposal that has the potential to initiate changes, especially radical changes, and if it is not already part of the acceleration policy or procedure, ask to meet with a team.

Notes on team meetings:

- A "team" could include: the child's past and current classroom teachers, gifted coordinator/resource teacher, school psychologist and/or the child's psychologist, school counselor, the child's parent(s), and the current and/or receiving principal.

- A team of qualified educators is important so that everyone who may be involved with your child's educational decisions, in one way or another, hears the same information and the same discussion.

Also, whoever is advocating with you will be stronger because they can address the group instead of every individual person. And whatever decisions are made, everyone knows who is accountable.

- Another advantage to the team approach is that all involved will know how decisions will affect the child as he or she progresses up through the grades as gifted services change.

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