

Work With Others

Issues that require new initiatives, or changes in funding, school services, or teacher training require the concerted effort of many activists. Therefore, it is imperative that advocates find ways to urge others to join the cause. Here are four strategies to help you maximize your impact.

1. Strength in Numbers

Multiple letters and phone calls have a greater effect than does a single communication. Therefore, your challenge as an advocate is to get others to let your elected officials know about the need for strong gifted education programs and services. You might try the following:

- Ask the parents and teachers of the high-ability students in your child's school to support local, state, and federal initiatives. In some instances it may be appropriate for students to contact elected officials or to testify at a hearing about their experiences.
- Join your national, local, and state gifted education associations and urge others to do so as well. These organizations provide an excellent network of resources and support; they are also a logical source for a letter-writing campaign.
- Local business leaders in your community should be supportive - they need creative, critical thinkers as future employees. Many of them may not be aware of the status of services for high-ability learners in your community, state, or in the nation. Local and statewide professional and service organizations may also be receptive to your message. Keep in mind that many of these potential supporters are themselves products of gifted education and they would be happy to share their support with decision makers, if asked.
- Make contact with other education organizations in your state. Offer to do a short presentation (to the executive committee, legislative committee, etc.) on the educational needs of gifted students and how new initiatives in your state and in Congress would make a difference in your community and state. Additionally, it may be possible to appeal directly to their members for support by writing a guest column for the education association's newsletter.
- Recruiting "VIPs." Although every constituent letter carries weight in a legislator's office, the reality is that some citizens have more influence on specific issues or with specific elected officials than others. For example, a legislator's lifelong friend, relative, or former business associate is likely to have influence. Likewise, a former state superintendent of education generally has built-in credibility on education issues, even when he/she does not know the legislator personally. We all know VIPs or have access to them. It may be a work colleague, neighbor, or someone with whom we worship or volunteer. Generating letters from these VIPs is usually a matter of asking them and then providing them with sufficient information to craft a high-impact letter. You might even offer to draft it for them.

2. Working with Others

Whenever possible, it makes sense to work with other groups in support of an issue. Developing coalitions not only increases the numbers of supporters on specific state or local issues, but also broadens awareness of your issue with the membership of the other groups. It also can open doors for many other opportunities.

For example, a local gifted education group can partner with a local business organization to sponsor an informational meeting for parents and policymakers. Two groups supporting expanded gifted education services is stronger than one because decisionmakers realize that this is an issue of concern to more than just a dozen families. In addition, the members of the business organization learn more about the needs of gifted students and the services they need. They may also initiate internships and mentorships for many of the gifted learners in their area.

Think about coalitions as broadly as possible - there are many groups in your community and state that have an interest in education issues, child issues, and business issues that can foster natural partnerships. We have provided a [sample letter](#) you might use to contact the leaders of other organizations in your community and state and a [sample brochure](#) you might develop jointly to distribute to the members of the partner organizations.

3. Use the Local Media

Many local and statewide media outlets would be happy to cover gifted education news stories -- if they only knew about them. Additionally, every newspaper has a letter-to-the-editor section. Use every opportunity to make points about the need for gifted education. Your state and federal legislators (or staff) read the local papers so that they can keep up on issues important to constituents. Also, articles and letters-to-the-editor offer the chance to reach the general public, many of who would be supportive if given the opportunity and pertinent information.

Read about strategies to elicit a positive response when contacting media at the [Working With The Media](#) page.

4. Other Ideas

Arrange Visits to a Gifted Program

One very powerful way to make the case for gifted and talented education is to invite legislators, school officials, and other influential officials to visit a gifted and talented program in action. Most schools would be very happy to coordinate a visit. Depending on the age of the children, include some time for the visitor to interact with the students. Visits to gifted programs can increase awareness about the needs of these students. It can also provide an opportunity to discuss characteristics of these students as well as help establish relationships for further contacts with the visitor. It is important that the visitors have the chance to observe high-ability students at work, whether it is in the classroom or on a stage. Many gifted children are articulate advocates for themselves and their programs. It isn't necessary to be an education expert to understand that there is something special, and different, going on with a group of motivated gifted students!

Get to Know Staff

As education issues become more complex, many elected officials have staff that coordinate the flow of information on the issues and act as the eyes and ears for the official, often attending local conferences and meetings and making school visits. As a result, well-informed staff can be key to gaining support for the changes advocates seek. Similarly, school district and school board personnel can help advocates navigate the intricacies of school policies and practices as well as provide information about key decision-making opportunities, such as the schedule of budget and curriculum hearings, in which advocates might participate or seek to influence. A good general rule of thumb is to consider every contact as one that may be helpful and useful in the future.

Follow up

Regular, thoughtful communications have an impact and can leave a positive impression. Take every opportunity to share information that supports gifted education programs and services.

From www.nagc.org