

Dear NDAGC families,

I must begin this letter with some sobering trends when considering Gifted Education in North Dakota. Many are not aware that a nationwide study of Gifted Education conducted by researchers at Purdue University gave North Dakota a **failing grade**. Contributing to this grade are the statistics that, "...only about 30% of children from North Dakota even attend a school where they could be identified." The study concludes that, "Clear policy changes are needed to give access to, and equitably identify and serve, students with gifts and talents in North Dakota" (Gentry and others, 2019).

Since this study's publication, two of the state's largest school districts have experienced major changes within their gifted programming. In 2021, budget cuts at Grand Forks Public Schools included a restructuring of the district's Schoolwide Enrichment Program and resulted in the removal of three of its Enrichment specialists and retaining one to oversee GT or Enrichment programming for the entire district. As a result, classroom teachers assumed responsibility for differentiating instruction for GT students after receiving professional development.

This spring the Gifted Services program in Fargo Public Schools lost its longtime champion and leader with Ann Duchscher's retirement. As NDAGC's Past President Yee Han Chu has so aptly stated Ann's expertise and voice for Gifted Education cannot be replaced.

My reason for beginning with these discouraging developments is to allow us to consider the work that is before us. Gifted Education has always needed strong advocates, and I believe now more than ever advocates for the needs of Gifted Children in North Dakota must make efforts to come together.

The lack of services outlined by the Purdue study and recent trends may lead you to ask:

- Are there programs at your child's school that meet their intellectual, academic, and social/emotional needs?

- If there are programs at your child's school, are they aligned with best practices?

And finally, most importantly:

- Does your child learn something new every day while attending school?

I write to you as the parent of a child with gifts and talents. Parents, we must remember that we have a voice. We bring a unique point of view that has tracked the growth of our children every moment, every day, across many years. In the end, parents are responsible for finding solutions that bring nurturance and growth to our children. If your answer to some (or all) of the above questions is NO, and you are moved to make a positive difference, please allow me to suggest two places to begin.

First, at the start of this school year I encourage you to make efforts to develop a collaborative relationship with your child's educator. J.F. Smutny's article "Communicating Effectively with Your Gifted Child's School," originally published in 2002 with an update in 2015, has stood the

test of time due to its valuable advice. The full article is a worthwhile read, however her criteria for a successful conference (and one could argue all family and teacher communications) is worth noting for families:

- Your child [is] the main focus, not the opinions or agenda of you or the teacher.
- Both you and the teacher [listen] to each other and [consider] each other's point of view.
- You [negotiate] for solutions that will meet your child's needs without disregarding the teacher's responsibilities or your knowledge of your child.
- You [come] to an understanding even if you had different opinions.
- You both [agree] to work on a solution that will help your child and to continue working together.
- You both [make] commitments and scheduled actions. (Smutny)

I would like to add, please also allow your child's educator (especially classroom teachers) the space to acknowledge the demands of differentiation for gifted children may be overwhelming. This is the reason why gifted education is needed! If your school does not have a gifted program, a positive relationship with your child's educators provides you the opportunity to ask, "Why not?" with a voice that will be heard.

The second suggestion I have is to make efforts to seek out other parents of gifted individuals. Or, as Dr. Julia Link Roberts and Tracy Ford Inman put it, find your kindred spirits. I believe we are all stronger when we are able to make connections with individuals who share our experiences. In the world of education, a network of committed individuals can make a difference! Roberts and Inman's article from their Effective Advocate's (2006) series provides insightful analysis:

Here's how schools might look at the number of people raising objections:

- 1 Advocate = A Fruit Cake
- 2 Advocates = Fruit Cake and Friend
- 3 Advocates = Troublemakers
- 5 Advocates = Let's Have a Meeting
- 10 Advocates = We'd Better Listen
- 25 Advocates = Our Dear Friends
- 50 Advocates = A Powerful Organization

If you live in the Fargo and surrounding area an exciting opportunity is currently being planned which will provide NDAGC families the opportunity to find their kindred spirits. Our NDAGC Family Subcommittee is diligently organizing its first **GIFTed (Guiding Individuals and Families Together) Gathering!** Our hope is to provide an event the entire family can enjoy, while providing parents the opportunity to meet and connect with each other. By beginning to build a network of support we can take steps towards becoming a collective and powerful voice for the needs of our children.

Sincerely,
Beth Ustanko

References:

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