

ADVOCACY: The Importance of Joining Your State Gifted Organization

by Dr. Julia Link Roberts and Dr. Tracy Ford Inman

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Perhaps you have heard that a whole is no stronger than its parts. That generalization is certainly true for organizations, whether the parts refer to the people in the organization, the committees, or the affiliate groups that create the organization as a whole. An advocacy organization, then, is much more effective when its affiliates are active and strong, and strength enhances the opportunity for goals to be reached. A state organization is more effective with healthy local groups, and a national organization is empowered by strong state advocacy organizations. This important generalization transfers directly to you as a concerned parent, educator, or citizen who is interested in speaking out on behalf of children who are gifted and talented.

Why should you belong to a local affiliate of your state organization for gifted children? Why should you join a state organization if your local chapter is more in tune with what happens locally? What do state advocacy organizations offer to their members? Reasons to join can be described in three words that begin with the letter I: Impact, Information, and Involvement.

IMPACT: Numbers count when you want to make a difference. An organization can only impact legislation and policy at the state and national levels if numerous voices support your cause. An individual may change what happens in a classroom or school, but multiple advocates working together make changes happen at a level that affects all children in the state. A statewide organization provides the vehicle for many advocates to join together to address the academic, social, and emotional needs of children who are gifted and talented. Legislation that establishes regulations and policies that must be followed for all children who

are gifted and talented can make a great impact. Examples include regulations for gifted services, required college-level courses at every high school, teacher requirements for gifted endorsement, and age limits to start school. This potential impact applies to state and national levels when local groups support the state organization and state groups support the national organization. The advocacy voice flows from the local level to the state and national levels.

INFORMATION: State organizations for gifted education provide information that educates members: they send newsletters, operate listserves, update websites, and offer conferences and other professional development opportunities. If you want to stay up-to-date on what is happening concerning gifted education in your state, then you need to be a member of the state organization. Not only is this state organization your direct link to the latest information, but it also is a source for opportunities that help you make appropriate decisions for your gifted child. Such information makes you a far more effective advocate for your gifted child and other gifted children.

INVOLVEMENT: If you want to help make things happen in your state, your state organization for gifted education is the obvious place to join with others who are also interested in advocacy for gifted children. You will find others who share your interest and passion. From planning events to contacting legislators to writing an article for the newsletter, your talents and efforts are needed. You will have numerous opportunities to be involved and make a lasting difference in the lives of gifted and talented children.

continued on back page

continued from page 1

So, how do you respond to someone who says, "I want to join the local gifted organization, but I don't think the state group makes any difference to my child or children"? The response is simple. Although you may be tempted to put your membership dues toward a field trip to a museum through your local group, those same dues plus a little more on the state level can have a more profound impact when targeted toward policy or advocacy on a grander scale. In other words, you can make a little difference on your own. You may change what is happening for your own child during one school year. But, if you want to make a lasting difference, one that affects more than your child this year, you must add your voice to what happens in your state. You do this by joining the state affiliate. There is no doubt that numbers count when it comes to state-level advocacy. The number of members in an organization is often a question asked by legislators. They want to know how powerful the group is—they want to know if the state gifted advocacy organization is a force to be reckoned with. Add your membership to your state organization. You will add to the impact your organization can have, you will receive valuable information, and you will have numerous opportunities to increase your involvement in gifted education. By joining your state organization, you are ensuring that the parts are indeed strong and that the whole is powerful.

To find out specific information about your own state's advocacy organization for gifted and talented children [KAGE], go to <http://www.nagc.org> [www.wku.edu/kage] where you can click on "Gifted By State." You will find contact information as well as other important facts such as funding and gifted regulations.

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Advocacy requires members who believe in opportunities for gifted and talented students. It is hard for a general to fight a war without soldiers. Also, it is hard to replace attitudes of apathy and indifference with enthusiasm and support without dedicated members willing to go the extra mile.

DAN REEDER, Past President of KAGE

Thank you for supporting YOUR state organization, the Kentucky Association for Gifted Education (KAGE).

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The three I's (Impact, Information, and Involvement) describe the three main reasons to be a member of the state advocacy organization. Now let's look at specific reasons to join your state gifted organization.

1. You will learn about opportunities for your children who are gifted and talented.
2. You will receive newsletters, e-mails, and mailings to keep you up-to-date about what is happening that relates to the education of children who are gifted and talented.
3. You will have a presence for gifted education in your state capital through your state organization.
4. You will be in the loop for knowing what is and is not happening in your state capital, so you will have time to contact decision-makers to influence decisions.
5. You will be in a network with others who are working to ensure appropriate educational opportunities for children who are gifted and talented in your state and across the country.
6. You will have the opportunity to hear leaders in the field of gifted education at state conferences, experts you otherwise might be unable to access.
7. You will be part of a state organization with name recognition among educational and civic groups that can support decisions that impact the education of children who are gifted and talented.
8. You will have access to a speakers bureau to keep your local affiliate alive and active in addition to being well informed.
9. You will be a member of a state organization with the primary goal of advocating for appropriate educational opportunities for gifted and talented children.
10. In combining your voice with others who advocate for children who are gifted and talented, you can make a difference.