Parent advocacy groups are needed to lobby for increased support for gifted programs, to provide scholarship assistance to gifted youth, and to assist in program development and maintenance. These support groups ideally consist of a cross-section of individuals of different backgrounds who serve as “friends of the gifted”: parents, teachers, administrators, psychologists, mentors, and various other community members. It is important for the group to serve the broad function of increasing opportunities for all gifted children to reach their potential, rather than to concentrate solely on the needs of the children whose parents are in the group. When there is a commitment to this special needs population as a whole, there is a higher probability of the continued existence of the support group.

To form an advocacy group, an initial meeting is scheduled, possibly at an administration building to connote district support. There should be a great deal of publicity before the meeting, including radio or even television announcements, newspaper notices, an announcement in the district newsletter, and notices in the school newsletters. Parents of identified gifted children can be contacted directly by teachers or by a telephone tree of other parents of the gifted.

At the first meeting, participants should be provided with an opportunity to discuss their own personal needs and interests in having such a group. A form such as the one attached can be used to collect information on the make-up and preferences of the group. At all meetings, some kind of roster should be kept to keep track of those members of the community who have shown an interest in the organization. A good way to construct a mailing list is to ask participants to write names on a circulated sheet of anyone they know who might have some interest in the aims of the group.

It is useful to have a speaker who is knowledgeable in the field and enthusiastic, but this may be postponed until the second meeting. The agenda of the first meeting should be primarily organizational. The potential members of the group will want to know what such a group can hope to accomplish, how often it will meet and what will be expected of its members. The time spent in describing specific problems which individuals have encountered with their own children’s education should be limited to increase the productivity of the meeting, but a time should be set aside at some point for airing these feelings.

After the initial meeting, those individuals who are willing to hold office in the organization should be brought together for intensive planning. The first order of business is usually drawing up by-laws as a means of guiding the operation of the group. By-laws from similar organizations can be reviewed as models. The Gifted Child Society Constitution and By-Laws can be found in the Appendix of *How to Help Your Gifted Child* by Ginsberg and Harrison (1977).
It is frequently recommended that a group incorporate as quickly as possible as a nonprofit organization so that tax-exempt status can be obtained. This is only feasible if influencing legislation is not one of the stated purposes of the organization. If a sizeable portion of the funds of the organization is to be used for lobbying, filing for tax-exempt status might put the organization in violation of the law. It is advisable to enlist the assistance of a lawyer in making this decision and in drawing up the necessary papers if desired.

Election of officers should be held at the second meeting. If there are few individuals willing to hold leadership positions in the new organization, two offices will be sufficient: chairperson or president and secretary-treasurer. Every attempt should be made to encourage everyone interested to participate on committees. Some suggested committees are program, membership, publicity, newsletter, hospitality, and fund-raising. The Gifted Child Society includes a section on its membership form in which the names of the committees are listed and parents are asked to select the committee on which they would be willing to work (Ginsberg & Harrison, 1977). It is important to convey to parents that their active participation is essential. An organization without willing workers is useless!

After the organization is in full swing, it is a good idea to schedule periodic orientation meetings in which parents new to the organization can learn about the efforts of the group and become able to participate effectively. These orientation meetings may be combined with programs to stimulate public awareness of the needs of gifted children. Orientation meetings are in addition to regularly scheduled meetings of the working group.

If, instead, each working meeting is publicized and open to all interested parties, it will be very difficult to move forward with the objectives of the group. Each meeting could easily become a forum for disgruntled parents who have never been listened to before, and the willing workers will soon become bored and leave the group. In my years of organizational work, I encountered many parents who attended an advocacy group meeting for the first time, complained bitterly, were grateful that someone finally listened and cared, and then never showed up again! Some orientation process is needed to meet this type of need and to enable effective functioning of the organization.

When I organized the Boulder Association for the Gifted and Talented, the overwhelming priority of the group was to develop programs in the public schools. In a national survey conducted by Delp and Martinson (1977), parents complained that the majority of problems which they encountered occurred within the schools. Your organization may choose to focus its energies on assisting the schools to establish gifted programs or you may decide to offer your own enrichment programs, or both. The Gifted Children’s Association of the San Fernando Valley and the Gifted Child Society of New Jersey have been running their own programs for gifted children for over 20 years. This is an alternative worth investigating.
Many articles and books have been written to assist parents in developing support groups for the gifted and in influencing school board members and legislators (American Association for Gifted Children, 1980; Bostick, 1980; Coffey, Ginsburg, Lockhart, McCartney, Nathan & Wood, 1976; Delp & Martinson, 1977; Ginsberg-Riggs, 1982; Ginsberg & Harrison, 1977; Nathan, 1976; Organizing a Gifted Children’s Association, 1980). The main message of all of these articles is to work cooperatively with the schools rather than in an adversarial position. Volunteering with ideas, money or willingness to work to help a program get started is the most effective way to influence the school program. Meckstroth (1989) provides a concrete list of “building blocks” to work cooperatively with teachers. Please see “Ways You Can Help Keep Gifted Education Alive” for additional suggestions.

Gina Ginsberg-Riggs (1982) has written a “Bill of Rights” for Parents of Gifted Children that seems a fitting conclusion:

**For Parents of Gifted Children**

**A Bill of Rights**

_Gina Ginsberg-Riggs_

1. Parents have the right to a free public education for their gifted children.
2. The right to an education that enables them to learn all they are able to learn.
3. The right to educators’ awareness that gifted children learn earlier, better, faster and often differently from most other children.
4. The right to be accepted and respected as parents of children with legitimate and special learning needs.
5. The right to be involved in the planning for the education of their gifted children.
6. The right to information in the child’s file, and the right to explanation if that information is in unfamiliar terms.
7. The right to freedom of expression as they voice the joys and problems of raising gifted children.
8. The right to become change agents in the legislature and schools when gifted children are not adequately served.
9. The right to an environment of acceptance and pride in what gifted children can accomplish for themselves first but also for the quality of all our lives.
Developing Parent Advocacy Groups

Linda Silverman, Ph.D.

REFERENCES


Linda Silverman, Ph.D., is a licensed psychologist and Director of the Gifted Development Center in Denver, Colorado.

http://www.gifteddevelopment.com
Dear Friends,

Thank you for showing your interest in gifted and talented youth by attending this meeting. We have constructed this questionnaire in order to ascertain the needs and interests of all who have come this evening. Please fill out the questionnaire and add any comments that you would like to communicate so that the organization can best serve you.

Name____________________________________________________________ Phone
Number___________

Address__________________________________ _____________________________________________

Please check all that apply:
Parent_____ Teacher_____ Administrator_____ Psychologist_____ Social Worker_____ Other: (Please fill in.)

If you are a parent, please complete the following on each of your children:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>School</th>
<th>Interests</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Which of the following priorities do you feel should be stressed by this group?
1. Advocating for programs in public schools __________
2. Developing after school programs     __________
3. Forming student interest groups__________
4. Providing information for parents __________
5. Other (please specify)

In which area(s) would you be interested in participating?

What day of the week would be best for you to attend meetings?_______ What time?_________
Would you be interested in holding an office? _______ (Indicate preference, if any.)

Would you be interested in meeting with other parents in a parent forum to discuss mutual concerns?____
Are you willing to become a mentor (special tutor)?______ In what area?_________________

How else would you be willing to contribute your time to this organization?

How else can this organization serve you?

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS: