



M. René Islas  
Executive Director  
National Association for Gifted Children  
[mrislas@nagc.org](mailto:mrislas@nagc.org) | 202-785-4268

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**Remarks at The Washington State Legislature Senate Early Learning & K-12 Education Committee**

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**Introduction**

Chairman Zeigler, Vice Chair Fain, Ranking Member Rolfes, and members of the Senate Early Learning & K-12 Education Committee, thank you for welcoming my advocates for the gifted to participate in your Education Committee Working Session focused on the needs of highly-capable gifted and talented children in the state.

I am happy to be with you in Olympia on Washington's Gifted Education Day. I stand in solidarity with the over 200 leaders and advocates for gifted children walking the halls of Washington State Legislature, and I have the pleasure of representing the National Association for Gifted Children, a national network of over 20,000 individuals working to support gifted children. We—parents, educators, researchers, and corporate leaders—are all united by the common vision of a nation where giftedness and high potential are fully recognized, universally valued, and actively nurtured to support children from all backgrounds in reaching for their personal best and contributing to communities.

My primary goal today is to serve as a resource for you on the nature and needs of gifted children and gifted education. In my formal remarks I will offer a picture of the gifted child, call attention to the need to address equity and access, and offer ways to ensure that children from all backgrounds get the support they need to actualize their potential.

**A Portrait of the Gifted Child**

I am sure that each of you have met a gifted child. Many of you may be mothers, fathers, aunts, and uncles to gifted children. These children often amaze us with their uncanny ability to learn new information rapidly, their extraordinary ability to memorize information, their large vocabularies, their unusually mature insights, and their intense levels of concentration on things that interest them. When we encounter these children we are surprised, compelled to smile, and intuitively know that they are special and have unique needs that require different types of support.

Our nation acknowledges these unique needs through the federal definition of gifted and talented. The definition states: "The term 'gifted and talented,' when used with respect to students, children, or youth, means students, children, or youth who give evidence of high achievement capability in such areas as intellectual, creative, artistic, or leadership capacity, or in specific academic fields, and who need services or activities not ordinarily provided by the school in order to fully develop those capabilities."

Federal reports give us conservative estimates of the percent of gifted children enrolled in public schools. According to the most recent data collection by the U.S. Department of Education National Center for Education Statistics, about 6.7 percent of children in public schools are enrolled in gifted and talented programs. I should say that more recent research by analysts at Duke University show that this may underestimate the number of children who need the types of support in gifted programs. For example, a study in Florida revealed that 6 children out of a class of 20 (30 percent), and 7 children out of a class of 20 (33 percent) perform at least one level above their age assigned grade in reading and math.

Let me also call your attention to the last clause in the definition. It says children with this extraordinary capability “need services or activities not ordinarily provided by the school in order to fully develop those capabilities.” I am pleased that the State of Washington attempts to address this statement through its highly capable program.

Let me tell you a story about a first grader named Myles who was enrolled in his neighborhood school in Virginia. The neighborhood is considered upper middle class with low levels of poverty. Myles is gifted and talented, and he needed his school to offer additional services that were out of the norm, particularly in mathematics. School frustrated Myles. His parents received calls from his teacher that he would lie down during class and go to sleep.

When questioned by his parents, Myles replied with a grumpy tone that he was bored, his teacher didn’t teach anything new, and he didn’t want to go back to school. The parents shared this feedback with the well-meaning teacher who responded that Myles was behind in mathematics. The parents were perplexed because at home he loved mathematics and enjoyed figuring out his sixth-grade brother’s math problems.

Something didn’t seem right, and Myles’ parents were not successful in convincing the teacher that the child might need more challenge rather than less to succeed in class. They moved him to a public school that was knowledgeable about the needs of gifted children and familiar with gifted education strategies. The new school faculty quickly found that Myles was in fact performing several grades above his age placement. It took a school that was flexible enough to match instruction to his ability level to engage Myles. Without these accommodations by knowledgeable and trained educators, Myles’ intellectual development and psychological well-being may have been hampered. We cannot afford to risk damage to any children under our care.

I am pleased that the State of Washington recognizes that gifted children, like Myles, have unique needs that require out of the norm supports. I am also encouraged that the State takes the bold step in establishing its highly capable program as basic

education. This important and courageous move shows that Washington's leaders believe that every child should be given the supports they need to learn something new every day. My hope is that the State of Washington can ensure that the programs and services offered to gifted children have stable and reliable support to ensure excellence and equity.

### **Equity & Access**

There is a pernicious problem in our nation's schools today. There are barriers to equitable access to quality instruction, services, and supports. This is a well-known issue in our schools and many well-intentioned leaders and educators across the country are actively working to solve this ugly problem.

However, many are not fully aware that we also must address this issue for gifted children. Some may mistakenly believe that gifted children will naturally rise to the top without explicit support. Some may believe that poverty and other factors may be insurmountable barriers to high achievement. We know that this is not the case.

A 2016 summary report by the U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights (OCR) shows that there is unequal access to gifted programming for Black and Latino students. The report shows that "Black and Latino students represent 42 percent of student enrollment in schools offering gifted and talented education (GATE) programs, yet 28 percent of the students enrolled in GATE programs." Further, the report offers the following findings:

- While English learners are 11 percent of students in schools offering GATE programs, fewer than 3 percent of GATE students nationwide are English learners.
- Similarly, students with disabilities served by IDEA are 12 percent of all students in schools offering GATE programs, but represent fewer than 3 percent of GATE students nationwide.

These datum clearly show disproportionality in representation. Washington State mirrors the disproportionality that exists across the nation. OCR Data Tables estimate that White students make up 67 percent of enrollment in gifted programs compared to .5 percent of American Indian students, 6.6 percent of Latino students, and 9.2 percent of Black students.

I want to applaud all those in the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI), advocates for the gifted, parents, and hardworking teachers who are working to ensure equity in access. I implore them and you to continue the work to ensure equity in access.

What is challenging for them and us is that many may be misinformed about the reasons for this disproportionality. Some may think that the reason children living

in poverty, from racial and ethnic minority groups, or English learners are absent from gifted programming is that they are not qualified or achieving at levels comparable with their peers in gifted programs. This is absolutely not the case.

According to federally-funded research from the National Center for Research on Gifted Education, children who are living in poverty, are from racial and ethnic minority groups, and English learners are 2.5 times LESS likely to be identified for gifted programs, despite achieving at the same exact levels as their peers in gifted programs. This is unacceptable, and we must all work together to eliminate this barrier to access to services needed by these children. Our nation can and must do better!

### **Ensuring That Gifted Children From All Background Thrive**

To conclude my remarks I offer a few things that our gifted children, particularly the underserved, need and deserve from us.

The first is leadership. We must be willing to dispel the myths about gifted children and ensure that all children across the ability and achievement spectrum get the services and supports they need to thrive in school and ultimately life. We must demand that we recognize extraordinary ability and talent in children from all backgrounds and offer them the quality services they need and deserve.

Second, we must live up to our commitment to fair identification. The OSPI has strong policy on identification for the highly capable program, but more education of parents and professional development for teachers and administrators is needed to ensure the promise of the policy and process.

Thirdly, we must ensure access to quality services and supports. While many are reluctant to participate or implement strategies like grade and subject acceleration and flexible grouping of students, we need to implore them to rely on the evidence from research that shows that these supports are effective and help all children as they reach for their personal best.

Finally, I want to emphasize the importance of stable, reliable, and equitable funding for gifted programs. We must show that we are committed to helping all children thrive, grow, and develop to the best of their abilities.

Thank you for your time, your openness, and your true leadership. I look forward to supporting you in your efforts to provide the Washington State Constitutional benefit of education to children in the state. Your active leadership will shine as a beacon of excellence across our nation.