February 28, 2019

Members of the Senate Ways & Means Committee:

I’m asking your support for SB 5354: Concerning Programs for Highly Capable Students. SB 5354 makes several targeted adjustments to existing law to correct problems that make Washington’s current highly capable program inequitable. A small additional investment in this program has the potential to make an immense difference for students our existing system is missing.

In recent years, Washington State has taken tremendous strides towards making access to highly capable services more equitable. Highly capable services are now recognized as basic education. A program that once was offered in only about two-thirds of school districts and primarily to students in grades 3 – 6, now seeks to serve highly capable learners in every district, and throughout their school lives. Funding for the program has also increased, properly asking that the state pay the tab, and not asking districts to rely primarily on levy enhancement funds as had been widespread practice for years. Last year, the legislature explicitly required districts to prioritize the identification of low-income students. It’s now time to take the next step.

The changes made by SB 5354 reflect a comprehensive set of reforms. In part, it would:

- Add a professional development requirement for principals, counselors, and teachers. While it seems obvious that those designing a district’s highly capable program and teaching its students be trained to recognize the unique needs of this student population, we currently have no such requirement in state law. Professional development has been a point of emphasis and can have a significant return on investment.

- Require districts use universal screenings to ensure no student slips through cracks in the system, and that assessments be given during the school day and at the school the student attends. The existing referral system misses too many students. Making assessments more easily accessible than a system that allows testing after school or on weekends, often in an unfamiliar location that places additional burdens on students to attend, is an important step towards removing artificial barriers to participation. This is estimated to be the largest known single cost to this bill, but also the one most likely to make an immediate improvement in equity.

- Specify that students be provided transportation to programs when necessary. My youngest son didn’t have the option to use district transportation to school until he entered the 7th grade. Students in our district’s elementary highly capable program start the school day 20 minutes earlier than the general education students, requiring most parents to arrange alternative methods of transportation, or choosing for their students not to participate if private transportation to school each morning cannot be provided. In other districts, parents might be required to transport their student across town to access services or have them stay at their neighborhood school and miss out on the education they need to grow and develop.

- Fund additional staffing dedicated to highly capable services at OSPI. The current single half-time position is not adequate to answer questions from districts, monitor compliance, support the professional development system created by OSPI with initial funding from the Federal Javits program, and collect and report data on the services provided by districts and the students receiving those services. The most recent enrollment data on the OSPI website is from 2013-2014. The most recent data on
identification measures, program options, and program evaluations are from 2012-2013. There have been significant changes to basic education since then, with the most significant of those changes beginning in 2014-2015. To monitor progress towards making our highly capable programs more equitable, we need accurate and timely statewide data. While it’s generally preferable to spend money as close to the student as possible, this is another investment that has the potential to have far reaching impacts.

These elements all work together to ensure that our investment in highly capable services is money well spent. It makes sense that we have staff at OSPI to help districts as they change their programs to make access more equitable. It makes sense to have staff at OSPI who can report what districts are doing in a timely fashion so we can build on what works, and change that which doesn’t. It makes sense to have trained administrators and trained staff making the decisions about what needs to happen in their district. It makes sense to look at a broad pool of potential students, and to stop relying on a referral system that excludes some students for reasons other than need. It makes sense that we take down artificial barriers to participation, whether those barriers are thrown up during the assessment process, or once a student is identified.

To exclude any of these reforms risks perpetuating a point of failure. Together, these adjustments will make access to highly capable services more equitable. We hope we can count on you to help us ensure every student who needs highly capable services is identified and served with the education they need.

Sincerely,

David Berg
President
Washington Coalition for Gifted Education