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# The Time is Now to Stand Up for Gifted Education: 2007 NAGC Presidential Address

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I am humbled and honored to be the 28th president of the National Association for Gifted Children. To be included in a list with the previous presidents is truly an honor. As I begin this presidency, I would like to take a moment to thank some individuals. First, I would like to thank Dr. Joseph Renzulli, Dr. Sally Reis, Dr. E. Jean Gubbins, Dr. Karen Westberg, and Dr. Deborah Burns for accepting me into the doctoral program at the University of Connecticut. I do not think Joe, Sally, and Jean realized what a long-term mentoring commitment they were making. I would also like to thank Dr. Joyce VanTassel-Baska, who has been a wonderful mentor over the past 2 years, as she served as President and I served as President-Elect. Finally, I would like to thank the faculty, staff, and graduate students at the University of Connecticut. Without their assistance, I would not be able to devote the time necessary to serve as your president.

## We Need to Do a Better Job of Defining Giftedness

Tonight, I wish to share three recommendations for the field of gifted and talented education. First, in order to stand up for gifted, we need to do a better job of defining it. Some of you know that our convention city of Minneapolis was home to Charles Schultz. One of his *Peanuts* comic strips featured someone asking Peppermint Patty whether she was gifted. She replied, "I think I'm gifted. I receive a lot of presents at Christmas!" As this example shows, there is much confusion over the term *gifted*. It means different things to different people. To clarify the term, some among us have added adjectives. We often hear the term "profoundly gifted." What does it mean to be profoundly gifted? Is Schroeder, the precocious

pianist in the *Peanuts* comic strip, profoundly gifted? To most, the term probably means something else: someone who scores extremely high on an IQ test.

Our failure to adequately develop the terminology of our field has led to numerous problems. First, it is difficult to lobby for support for a group that cannot be defined or counted. Legislatures are reluctant to fund gifted education when the response to the question about the number of gifted children is "We do not know," which is followed by another "We do not know" when we are asked which children are gifted.

Fears of being more specific about the term *gifted* are based on two beliefs. First, we are afraid that we will appear elitist. Second, we are afraid that we will miss some gifted children if we clearly define the term *gifted*. I have some news. With our generic definition, both of these problems already exist. Which is more elitist—an environment in which every child is learning something new every day or a system in which only some children are learning something new every day? I suggest that the latter is more elitist, and that school systems are, in fact, less elitist when they work to provide services that ensure that gifted children have an opportunity to learn something new every day.

I am not opposed to the word *gifted*. What I am proposing is that we follow the actions of our friends in Special Education and periodically refine and update the terminology of our field. Perhaps we should be using terms such as "academically advanced in mathematics" or "early reader." Few people object to providing services to students labeled for their advanced skills. A ramification of unclear terms may be that those

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who actually believe in supporting excellence and talent development are not coming forward to support it. Many people in this country support our ideals but are uncomfortable with the generic terminology we use.

### **We Need to Talk With Children About Their Giftedness**

Second, standing up for gifted also includes talking with children about their giftedness. That is why I listed the right to know about their giftedness as the first right in the Gifted Children's Bill of Rights (Siegle, 2007). Parents and teachers are often reluctant to talk with children about their giftedness. It is important for gifted children to recognize that the talents they possess are acquired, that they have something to do with acquiring them, and that they are capable of further developing these talents and even acquiring new ones. Gifted children need to learn to take an active role in developing their gifts. The definitions of Gagné (2005) and Renzulli (2005) include components focusing on developing giftedness. Gagné wrote about individuals having gifts and turning them into talents through a developmental process of learning, training, and practicing. Renzulli noted that giftedness occurs when individuals are motivated to creatively apply their above-average ability. In both conceptions, some responsibility for talent development rests with the individual.

### **We Waste Valuable Resources and Credibility When We Try to Predict Future Giftedness**

Third, we lose our way and waste valuable resources and credibility when we try to predict future giftedness. Talent development is a two-step process. First, we must provide opportunities for talent to surface, and then we must recognize that talent and help to move it to exceptional levels. Giftedness exists in all ethnic groups. It exists across all socioeconomic levels. It exists in rural America as well as urban America. Predicting who will achieve future eminence is difficult. Identifying students with exceptional skills and talents and providing learning opportunities for them is less difficult.

I recently reviewed some photographs of young people I had taught in rural eastern Montana. From

this small group of children in a rural community on the prairies of Montana emerged an international journalist, a vocal coach at Juilliard, an educator who is studying to be a school administrator and wants to change the world through education, a petroleum engineer, a medical doctor, a Hollywood screenwriter, a college registrar, and a civil engineer. Talent exists across all strata of humanity, and we must provide opportunities for it to surface and flourish. Just as it is unconscionable to fail to provide opportunities for talent to develop, it is equally unconscionable to ignore talent that has surfaced. We must ensure that every child has an opportunity to learn something new every day.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said, "Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter." Gifted education matters. Recognizing talent and developing it matters. As in the time of Sputnik, we have a message that is pertinent for our times. If we want to make a difference, if we want a better world, we must stand up and support gifted education. We must stand up for every child learning something new every day.

When Mother Teresa received her Nobel Peace Prize, someone asked her about her mission. She reported that her mission was not to save the world. First, she saw a man suffering in the street and helped him. Then she found another. Soon other sisters were helping her. Over the course of her lifetime, Mother Teresa eased the suffering of millions of the poorest of the poor. She accomplished this one person at a time. As teachers and parents, we make a difference one person and one action at a time. When we return home, we may find a young person in front of us who may need a little special attention. We can provide it, and then there will be another. Over the course of our lives, we, like Mother Teresa, can make a difference in hundreds, maybe thousands of lives, one person at a time. Edward E. Hale, who was chaplain of the Senate during the turn of the 19th to 20th century, wrote, "I am only one, but still I am one. I cannot do everything, but still I can do something; and because I cannot do everything I will not refuse to do the something that I can do."

We can and must do something. We must share our knowledge of gifted education with others in our communities. We must lead with our voices and teach others about the importance of every child learning something new every day. We must stand up for gifted education.

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