***Power in Numbers: How Gifted Advocacy Parent Groups Can Help You and Your Kids (Or How I Went from Perplexed Parent to Empowered Advocate***) October 24, 2017

As a Psychologist, I should have known better…at least that’s what I thought. I should have noticed the signs of giftedness sooner, knew how and when to intervene at school, and advocated effortlessly for my child.

***But of course, it’s wasn’t that easy.***

Both of my kids – energetic, rambunctious boys – were not the quiet, composed early readers and meticulous students who “looked gifted.” Their talents eventually emerged, but even advocating for testing was a challenge. And then a series of questions unfolded: when to request services, whether to intervene, what battles to pick, when to let things go. My children’s needs were juxtaposed against the genuine constraints their well-meaning teachers faced: a classroom full of students presenting a wide range of needs, and district policy obstructing much in the way of gifted services.

**This additional parental responsibility – advocating for a gifted child – was unexpected, isolating and unnerving**. There was no roadmap, no clear path, and certainly not a lot of support from the school.

Then I stumbled upon a parent group that was starting. An affiliate of PAGE, this local group formed to address problems within the district. Frustrated parents, discouraged after years of watered-down gifted programming, shared stories, concerns, and eventually, strategic plans for change.

The group offered support, information, validation, and shared energy, with the overriding goal of improving gifted services. We initially tackled existing policy and widespread inconsistencies in identification and service delivery across schools within the district. Through surveys, focus groups and workshops, we sought input from other parents, school personnel, and experts in the field. Persistent, yet respectful of the district’s fiscal constraints and the realistic demands facing teachers in the classroom, we gained access to gifted supervisors and administration, and were able to leverage some change in gifted education policy and procedures. We also offered workshops and guidance for other parents in the district.

**What are the benefits of gifted advocacy parents groups?**

• **Support** – Parents receive the support, validation, understanding, and camaraderie they rarely find elsewhere. It is a relief to speak freely, without feeling pressured to downplay your child’s abilities or fear that you might appear to be bragging. These are people who get it about overexcitabilities, asynchronous development, others’ misconceptions, and roadblocks in their child’s education.

• **Information** – The more you communicate, the more you learn. Participation in a parent group provides a wealth of information – about outside resources, what is really going on in the schools, how other parents are managing difficult situations, state and national trends, and even what teachers your child should avoid.

• **Creative flow of ideas** – Great minds might sometimes think alike… but they also brainstorm well together. Group participants from different backgrounds can provide a unique and innovative perspective. A collaborative, creative gathering of individuals will generate more ideas than one person in isolation. And those ideas may then serve as a springboard for planning, strategy and goal-setting.

• **Greater authority with advocacy** – It’s no picnic advocating alone. You may not be taken seriously and your message may be ignored. But when an advocacy group presents a cohesive set of ideas and plans, officials in charge are often more willing to take notice and listen. There is truly power in numbers.

• **Education of other parents** – Once you learn more about gifted children, gifted education, and services provided within your community, you can offer guidance to other families. This not only includes parents of currently identified gifted students and those embarking on the identification process, but also parents whose children are not gifted and hold misinformed and negative stereotypes. With your knowledge, you become an ambassador for the gifted, helping others understand how giftedness affects all areas of these children’s lives.

• **Influence within school system** – Parent advocacy groups can have a surprisingly powerful influence on policy and service delivery – as long as administration is open to it. Gifted services are frequently underfunded and supervisors often fight for every inch. Parents can provide information to gifted supervisors about problems within the schools and behind-the-scenes interactions. They can support gifted supervisors by advocating with administration and school boards. In return, their ideas may be recognized and included in planning. It’s a win-win situation.

Although well aware of the power of group participation, I never anticipated the many positive benefits that would result from my parent advocacy group involvement. I am grateful to have been a member and eventual co-chair of this group. I learned a lot, felt supported and understood, indirectly helped my kids, influenced school policy, and had fun with a great group of people. It also spurred further interest and study into the psychological aspects of giftedness, informing my work as a Psychologist.

Our parent group was enriched through its affiliation with PAGE. In addition to providing basic information about gifted rights and services within Pennsylvania, PAGE offered engaging conferences, newsletters, resources, and referrals for public speakers with expertise in gifted education and advocacy. And without PAGE, our affiliate – and others across the state – would not have existed. As I have learned more about the absence of both legal rights for gifted students and state-based gifted advocacy organizations in some other states, I have come to appreciate the role of PAGE even more.

**Every parent of a gifted child can benefit from the support of like-minded parents.** Finding them may be a challenge, though. If your district does not have an existing PAGE affiliate group, it may fall on you to start one. You might consider advertising through your PTA or other school organizations, seek ideas from friends, or ask your child’s gifted teacher for a list of parents. With some effort, you may be able to enlist a group of motivated parents.

The stream of creative ideas generated by the intelligent, dedicated parents in our PAGE affiliate group, their collaborative spirit and shared goal of achieving improved gifted services, and the group’s concern for the needs of all children within the district (not just their own), fueled an atmosphere of support, hope and empowerment. I hope that you can find (or start) a parent advocacy group to support your child, yourself, and gifted children within your school district.

Gail Post, Ph.D.
Licensed Psychologist