

Public Hearing Testimony Speaker:

Katherine Bower

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Bill Number: 7358

Chairman Gaffey and members of the
on Committee:

My name is Katherine Bower. I first would like to thank you for allowing RB# 7358 :
AN ACT CONCERNING GIFTED AND TALENTED STUDENTS a public hearing.

I am the proud parent of four unique children. My two older children, aged ten and six, are "profoundly gifted," and my two year old twins are both severely "globally developmentally delayed," which means that they are not only cognitively delayed but also delayed in many other developmental areas. I think this Bill is critically important because I believe that ALL children with special needs, whether gifted needs or special education needs, deserve to have an appropriate education. I also think it's important for schools to understand that in the same way that every special education student has unique needs, every gifted child also has unique needs.

I'd like to tell you a little about my children. I had our first child when I was only 19 years old, and despite reading every parenting and child development book I could get my hands on, nothing could have prepared me for his unique development! He spoke his first words at 8 months, could logically debate with me by 18 months, began simple addition and subtraction before his second birthday, believed he had "invented" the formula for area while playing with his square blocks before his third birthday, and at the same time started taking apart and reassembling all of our household appliances and balancing our check book in crayon. He was a "math man" with no interest in reading until he realized that he needed to read in order to gain full access to all that was available to him on the computer. When he decided he wanted to read, he progressed from easy readers to reading at a college level in approximately two and a half years.

At the time he entered school we naively believed that he would have a great experience. He loved learning, *craved* learning, *lived and breathed* learning. Surely he would love school, right? Half day kindergarten wasn't a problem, because he was content to play for a few hours and go along with learning to count to 100 and color in pictures of "three frogs" as long as he got to come home and spend the rest of the day learning. It was in first grade that we realized he was terribly unhappy in school. He was an energetic six year old boy who spent his free time building complex machines, doing linear equations for entertainment, and reading advanced novels. He would finish a thirty minute school assignment in four minutes and then have to find a way to entertain himself quietly for the remainder of the time. As a result, he became disruptive, disengaged, and disheartened. He would answer his math questions in binary code just to entertain himself, interrupt a first grade science lesson with questions about the possibility of microbial life on Mars, and constantly interrupt to correct or clarify what his teacher was saying. He had a hard time making friends because the other children often didn't understand what he was talking about, and he had a hard time playing the games or having the conversations the other children his age found interesting. By the middle of first grade he had completed sixth grade math independently through Stanford's Education Program for Gifted Youth. This was the bright spot in his days, when he got to come home and actually learn! At the same time he was doing all this, he was only earning "satisfactory" grades in school, often making careless mistakes or ignoring assignments completely because his mind was somewhere else. He certainly did not fit the profile of the stereo-typical gifted child – a well behaved child who completes

all assignments eagerly and without mistakes, a child who embraces the school environment and “shines” in the classroom!

It was at this time that we had him formally evaluated and discovered that he is “twice-exceptional,” meaning that he is both gifted and disabled. It was actually a blessing that his behavior led to an evaluation, because chances are if he had never been formally evaluated he would have always been seen as a “bright” child with behavior problems, lacking the motivation to reach his full potential. His IQ was too high to be measured with current instruments, as he simply hit the ceilings on the tests, and he had to be given a supplemental, less commonly used test with a higher ceiling. At the same time, he struggled with social skills and other autistic-spectrum symptoms. What is a school district with serious budget problems in a low income town supposed to do with a child like this?

Although they have no gifted funding and no obligation to meet his gifted needs, they did the best they could, and continue to do so. They allowed him to skip second grade and begin attending the middle school part-time for math, paying for transportation even though they were not obligated to. The following year, they let him skip another grade in middle school, and allowed him to take several courses there. By this time he had updated achievement testing and we discovered that he had reached grade equivalents ranging from 12 to greater than 18, the ceiling of the achievement test, in all areas except writing, where he was at or below the grade level he was supposed to be in! Now what was the school supposed to do? We decided to homeschool Jordan for a semester and let him audit a college course. Now he is back in the public school in 5th grade while the school system is trying to arrange a part-time high school schedule that will meet his needs. They are in a difficult position. His reading comprehension and math ability are at a college level, but he writes like a typical ten year old!! And then there is the lingering question that nobody in the state has the answer to: as he is clearly ready for college in some areas, who exactly is responsible for paying the tuition of a ten year old college student?

Our six year old daughter, who is also profoundly gifted, is much different than our son. She fits the “gifted stereotype” to a certain extent. She happily completed all of her kindergarten assignments perfectly without complaint, was always described by her teacher as “bright and bubbly,” sat quietly through class, and was well liked by her peers. It wasn't until we had her tested that we realized the true extent of her gifts. She appeared smart in class, but not amazing. When she took an IQ test designed for six to 17 year olds only a month after her sixth birthday, she hit the ceilings by answering many of the questions designed for 17 year olds correctly. She also had to be given a supplemental test to accurately measure her ability. It was at that point when we realized the full extent of her ability. She presented as the polar opposite of our son in school. Rather than acting out and underachieving, she paid careful attention to social norms and made an effort to “dumb herself down” in an attempt to fit in. She didn't stand out as brilliant or as a behavior problem. Rather, she made every effort to achieve at just the right level so she would fit in. Unfortunately, this took a toll on her and caused her a lot of stress. Trying to contain her boredom and change herself to fit in with the other kindergarteners led to some concerning symptoms. She spent her lengthy amounts of free time in class twisting her hair to entertain herself, resulting in a bald spot on her head! She also began to show symptoms of depression and low self-esteem, which her

evaluators suspected were due to her feeling so different from her peers and trying so hard to “be” something she wasn’t – “average” and “normal”. Luckily, her school allowed her to skip first grade and begin attending second grade and third grade for math, and she is now much happier!

I tell you the story of my two gifted children in an attempt to dispel three common myths about gifted children and gifted education. The first myth is that gifted children are easily identified, because they will perform or act a certain way in the school environment. Each gifted child is unique, has unique coping strategies, and will deal with their “differences” in their own way. Some will “shine” making it easy to identify them as gifted, others will change themselves and underachieve in an attempt to fit in with their peers, and still others will act out and rebel in an environment where their needs are not being met. The second myth is that gifted children “have it easy” are just extremely lucky, and need no special services. Instead, all funding and services should be directed to children who are delayed and seem to need help the most. As a parent of both gifted children and delayed children, I am certainly not callous to the plight of special education students. I view myself as the parent of four special needs children, because my gifted children AND my delayed children all have needs that are much different from average children. They have needs that can’t possibly be met in a “one size fits all” classroom. My gifted children have struggled in countless ways in the educational system, and if it hadn’t been for a wonderfully kind and caring principal, and open-minded administrators who were willing to be flexible and provide services they were not obligated to provide, despite our district’s very low budget, I can’t even imagine where my two gifted children would be right now, or how they would have been affected emotionally or academically. Our state does not currently spend a single dollar on gifted education. Surely there is room in the state budget to take this small step towards meeting the needs of Connecticut’s gifted children. Finally, the last myth I hope to address is two-fold. People often assume that gifted programming is elitist and that gifted children are simply the product of pushy parents. First of all, gifted programming is only elitist when it is not offered to all public school students for free. Parents with enough money have the option of taking their children out of public schools and either putting them in private schools or homeschooling them. This is not only a great loss to our public schools, but it is what makes gifted programming elitist. Parents who can afford to meet their gifted children’s needs are doing the right thing for their children by taking them out of our public schools right now, because public schools truly are not meeting their needs. Giftedness occurs in all races, all cultures, and all socio-economic levels. The only way to make gifted education equitable is to fund it in public schools and make it accessible to children at all income levels and in all districts! Otherwise, towns like Greenwich and Avon will be able to fund gifted education while Hartford and other poorer districts will not! Finally, it may seem like gifted children are merely the product of pushy parents because pushy parents do exist, but I believe there are fewer pushy parents than un-identified gifted children in our state!! There are also parents of genuinely gifted children who can afford private testing, and have the education and resources to advocate for their children. Finally, there are parents who do not have the means to have their children tested, don’t recognize the signs of giftedness, do not have the resources to advocate for their children, or live in districts that simply can’t afford to meet their children’s needs. These are the children who go unidentified and un-served

most often. Parents of extremely gifted children aren't pushing their children! We are the ones who get pushed and dragged by our children, who ask questions we can't answer, demand more information constantly, and race ahead at a pace that is difficult to keep up with. While there are pushy parents of average children with Harvard on their mind when their kids are 3, there are many more parents of truly gifted children who struggle on a daily basis to find ways to meet their children's complex needs.

Simply put, as a family, we got lucky. Even though we are a low income, reduced-priced lunch, public school family living in an under-funded school district, we happened to get blessed. We live in a district that was willing to go above and beyond to meet our children's needs, to do research even though our town does not have a district gifted coordinator, to be flexible, and to spend dollars the district probably can't afford. But I wonder what my children would be going through right now if we lived one town over, or in Hartford or Bridgeport! This Bill is an essential first step toward meeting the needs of Connecticut's many gifted children, and making gifted services more equitable by providing access to services for ALL of Connecticut's public school students in every district. Finally, the President has called for raising standards for all children in this country and increasing achievement in many areas we are lagging behind in. Now is the time to act! In a country that has embraced the idea of "leaving no child behind," let's not continue to leave behind and hold back Connecticut's gifted students!!

Sincerely,

Katherine Bower
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