

Public Hearing Testimony Speaker: *e-mailed*
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Testimony From: Robin Goldberg
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Dear Chairman Fleischmann, Chairman Gaffey and members of the
Education Committee:

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

Before I was a parent, I thought that "Gifted" meant that a child learned easily. Since becoming the parent of a Gifted child, I have come to understand that learning, in a school environment, can be anything but easy. Gifted children are children with special needs that are not met by the regular educational system. Although they are few in any one town, they exist in every town in Connecticut. My husband and I have come to believe that giftedness in the current school setting is a disability, both educationally and socially.

I think it's terrific that schools today care about a child's social development. Strangely enough this is often used as an argument against some of the most cost effective tools for meeting the needs of some gifted children - grade and subject acceleration, which I prefer to call, "Developmentally Appropriate Placement." One of my son's early hurdles to social development was that he naturally used an adult level vocabulary in his early elementary years. At age 7, my son asked: "Why do grown ups laugh when I talk?"

I had to explain to him that humor occurs when our expectations are not met - and that adults are surprised when they hear adult-like thoughts with adult-like vocabulary coming out of a little boy body. I asked him what the other children do when he talks. He said: "They roll their eyes."

My son's school started a "Friendship Club" for him and a few other boys to directly teach social skills. With age, maturity and instruction, I am seeing in my son the beginnings of the ability to pitch his words to his audience. This is an important skill, and I am grateful that it was provided, but I think it's a lot to ask of an elementary student. This story illustrates the need for teacher training to recognize the difficulties that some gifted kids may have, and the importance of providing several different ways to address these issues. For some children, they can best develop their social skills in the presence of older children, who can better relate to their ideas, their expectations of friendship, and their vocabulary. For other children, a gifted program might provide a place where they can best practice social

interactions. I believe that both of those approaches would have reduced, or eliminated, the need for social therapy for my son. But neither the resource nor the perspective was available to our family at that time. My son was able to make use of direct instruction in the form of a Friendship Club. And he is quite pleased with his growth in this area.

But after we have addressed the social issues, we have to face that schools are about education. Children are expected to gain knowledge in school. They are also supposed to develop study habits, and a good work ethic. How is a child supposed to develop a work ethic when the academic material is far below his readiness level? One of two things will happen - the child will find ways to embellish the assignments to make them more suitable, again, a lot to ask of an elementary student, or the child will become an underachiever. I call what happened to my son, "enforced underachievement."

This is because there was simply not enough academic content at his readiness level to keep him busy at school. He spent most of 4th grade reading a book inside his desk during group discussion, with his hand still raised to be called on whenever it was his turn. The teacher reported that he was perfectly able to read and discuss the class topic simultaneously, so she was happy to let him read. The saddest thing is that, as a parent, my reaction to all this was happiness and relief.

I knew that if he could read during school, then he was less likely to be a behavior problem. The fact that my son was losing a year of learning at school had become small in importance compared to his ability to bear being in an environment that was grossly inadequate academically. Sadly, while I focused on his behavior, he missed many opportunities to see that learning is hard work, and requires effort. He missed many opportunities to learn how to learn.

Why was I so worried about his behavior? In second grade we had meeting after meeting with the school personnel to try to "get to the bottom" of some troubling behaviors. The school suggested that he had a medical problem and that we go to our pediatrician and get to the bottom of it. This led to IQ and Achievement testing, which revealed that our son's developmental path was quite unusual. He was ready to learn things that are typical for children several years older. Yet he still had to struggle with age-normal motor skills, such as sports and handwriting. He was not found to have a medical problem, but being in a mainstream classroom was enough of a challenge to his 7-year-old coping skills to create behavior that mimicked that situation.

It seemed to me that many of the school personnel had a picture in their minds of gifted children as bright, cheerful, compliant, outgoing children, who checked their Math Sheets before handing them in. Except for bright, this was not my son. His weaknesses in written expression were actually very common in gifted children who have much more to say than their little hands could ever capture with a pencil. Thankfully my son is a touch-typist now at age 10, and at 70 words per minute can fluidly express himself in written words. A Gifted Specialist and teacher who had been provided with professional development in this area would have been a godsend. Everyone at these meetings was aware of the results of the IQ testing, but none of us understood the implications of those test results on a child's behavior or or anyone trained in how to structure an educational program that would have relieved the terrible stress of "too little" learning in a 7-year-old schoolboy. Plus, there was no one there to provide leadership in overcoming the prejudice against subject and grade acceleration as an educational option. If this bill had been in existence, Gifted Coordinators and trained teachers could have filled this role. Instead we wasted hours and years.

Without these resources, educational or fiscal, my husband and I worked with the school personnel to develop as good a program as was possible in the limited circumstances. Many good things grew out of that collaboration, but in the end, it just wasn't enough.

The end of 4th grade faced us with the very difficult decision of school placement for the next year. My son lobbied hard to be allowed to stay in the public school with his friends. We were sympathetic to his desire to be with his friends, as we believe that his social needs are equally important to his academic needs. But I asked him to imagine how 5th grade would be if he happened to have a teacher who was offended by him reading books in his desk during group work. My son turned white as a ghost, and his eyes got big. He bit his lip. "Can that really happen?"

I assured him that it was completely possible that his new teacher would not allow him to read all day. That was when our son concluded that he had better leave his friends and the public school system and see if his academic needs could be better handled in an independent school environment.

At first, it was hard to understand that there even was a problem at the public school.. Our son was getting all "A"s. But when our son went from 90 seconds of homework to 45 minutes of challenging homework, it became obvious that this bright child was at a disadvantage in the development of his work habits and study skills by only being asked to do age-level work up to this point.

I'm not saying that schools should in any way be measured by the amount of homework they intend to give, but when most children are spending $\frac{3}{4}$ of an hour each night on their homework, and one child finishes it at school, it *may* represent an underlying problem. Our schools need trained teachers and Gifted Co-coordinators to take closer looks at these situations on an individual basis. Sooner or later, every child will be faced with homework, and I believe that one of the ways that some gifted children are cheated by the regular curriculum is that they don't get chances to normally and gradually develop their study skills and time management skills.

Now that I am a parent of a gifted child, it seems perfectly natural to me that if a child is going to learn how to learn, then that child needs to be in an environment where they have an opportunity to learn material that they don't already know. Material that is "just enough" of a challenge. Each gifted child is unique and needs the help of teachers who have been trained in compacting, and differentiating the curriculum to meet the needs of high-ability learners. Each school needs Gifted Specialist who can help the school develop a full palate of flexible options for meeting the needs of this population.

I fully support CAG's recommendation:

Depending what a district currently has in place, we have asked the legislature to provide some funding and ongoing support to districts to identify gifted and talented students in grades K-12, to provide professional development for all teachers in gifted education and curriculum differentiation for high-ability learners, and to establish a Gifted Specialist at least in each district, ideally at each school.

Thank you again,
Gratefully Yours,
Robin Goldberg