



Higher Education and Employment Advancement Committee

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Public Hearing

Testimony

By

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Co-Chairs, Ranking Members, and Members of the Higher Education and Employment Advancement Committee, thank you for allowing me to testify on Proposed Bill 5911, *An Act Concerning the Teaching of Gifted and Talented Children* which addresses the needs of the state's gifted and talented students and the importance of cultivating talent among all students.

My name is Dr. E. Jean Gubbins. I am a Professor in Residence in the Department of Educational Psychology at the Neag School of Education, University of Connecticut, and an expert in gifted education and talent development. This testimony represents the collective views of Professors Joseph Renzulli, the world's most recognized expert in gifted education and talent development, and Sally Reis, and Del Siegle, who both served as the President of the National Association for Gifted Children, the nation's largest organization of parents, educators, and community leaders working together to address the needs of gifted and talented students. We all have spent a significant number of years as classroom teachers and gifted education coordinators and specialists. We are also pleased to say that some of us are the parents of children, identified as either gifted and/or twice exceptional, that is having both academic talents and learning disabilities.

We urge the members of the Connecticut General Assembly to pass a bill that addresses the needs of the state's gifted and talented students as well as ensure that teachers are equipped with knowledge and skills in cultivating talents among all students.

Gifted and talented students make up approximately 5 to 7% of the total student population in this

country and there are approximately 3 million gifted students nationwide. Gifted students come from all socioeconomic and culturally diverse groups; some also have disabilities and for others, English is not their first language. These students are not simply "super smart" and contrary to popular myth, they do not always "succeed" without programs that challenge them and meet their educational needs. These students differ from "average" achieving students in terms of the pace at which they learn, their depth and complexity of understanding, and their social and emotional needs. The fact that they differ from the norm for their age group means that the regular education program for gifted students must be modified to meet their learning and social and emotional needs.

However, the majority of gifted students receive most of their K-12 education in a "regular" classroom where a "one-size-fits-all" environment predominates. Many teachers have not been specially trained to teach high-ability students. In fact, a recent study conducted by our National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented found that 61% of a national random sample of third and fourth grade classroom teachers had never received any training whatsoever about teaching gifted students.

Unfortunately, gifted students waste a great deal of the time they spend in school. A recent national study found that a large percentage of these students have already mastered between 40 and 50% of curricular material before the school year even begins, and often spend large amounts of time being asked to do work they already know, or waiting for some accommodations to be made. Indeed, the federal definition of gifted and talented student, first adopted in 1972, recognizes that these students need different educational services that are often not provided in our schools. As a result, our "advanced" students in twelfth-grade fared poorly compared to other advanced students from around the world on the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study. Our brightest students are not less smart than their peers in other nations; rather, many are not exposed to challenging, high-level curriculum by teachers who are prepared to meet needs of gifted and talented students.

Special consideration also needs to be devoted to a group of students in Connecticut's schools who have, perhaps more than any other group, been overlooked and underserved despite massive federal expenditures to turn around low performing schools. We define this group as High Potential/Low Income students (HP/LI), and they consist of young people from low-income, minority, and bilingual families who score in the top quartile on their earliest achievement tests, but who also show a steady decline in subsequent year scores because of an under-challenging school experience. In other words, the longer they stay in school the less likely it becomes that they will continue to show the level of progress clearly deemed possible by early aptitude assessments. These HP/LI students have the potential to pursue higher education at the best four year colleges and universities in our state and elsewhere, and provisions for their continuous matriculation should be a part of our state's efforts to provide equitable opportunities for this largely ignored group.

When we worked as gifted program educators in Connecticut, many of our efforts were directed at helping teachers learn how to provide different types of instruction for gifted students. Some teachers were willing and able to learn to do this, while others were not. It was difficult to see some students placed in classrooms where they already knew the content in reading and math with teachers who were neither willing nor able to provide for their special learning needs. After several years of professional development, most of the teachers in our districts learned how to provide services for gifted students. In many other districts, this type of coaching is not available and gifted students continue to be given work they already know. The greatest tragedy is that they learn how to

expend minimum effort for top grades. Some of these students learn to underachieve in school, and others drop out, or have other problems, such as low motivation and poor work habits.

Some gifted students from families who can afford it attend private schools or are able to enroll in weekend and/or summer enrichment or acceleration programs. We believe that public schools should be meeting the needs of all students, including those who need high-end learning experiences. By not challenging gifted students to achieve beyond even the highest standards set in some school districts, we do them a disservice. We also fall far short of delivering the preparation necessary for those students who are our future leaders in virtually every field and profession. We need strong gifted education programs in our public schools. Without them, we fail to meet the needs of gifted students who depend on public schools for appropriate education, and in so doing, we fail to prepare the human capital that will help our nation maintain its economic and cultural advantage in the world.

Gifted and talented programs serve another major purpose. Gifted education programs can increase challenge levels for all students, or as Joseph Renzulli, the Director of The National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented has stated, "A rising tide lifts all ships." Selected elements of effective programs for gifted and talented students can be used with other student populations. However, many of them have not been implemented in general education because educators have not realized their potential for other groups of learners, or have been resistant to change. Now, however, many educators are realizing that the knowledge and experience that gifted education has gained from these programs can be used to upgrade the challenge level of general education. As gifted program educators, we have brought at least a dozen programs and strategies to our districts, which were then adopted by classroom teachers to challenge both gifted and average achieving students in the classroom such as: Talents Unlimited, Future Problem Solving, Young Inventors, and Odyssey of the Mind. Without such positions in the district, most classroom teachers would not have known about these programs or had the opportunity to implement them. Yet, much more remains to be done.

Connecticut, where there is no state-level financial support for gifted education, might choose to use federal funds to offer training for general education classroom teachers in how to differentiate instruction, rather than distributing small grants to a few school districts across the state. Currently, the Connecticut State Department of Education does not actually even have a specialist to answer calls from parents or districts about how to meet the needs of our gifted and talented students.

Further, unlike the majority of the states, Connecticut does not have a mechanism to track the services available in our 169 school districts for gifted education and talent development. In addition, State does not have any mechanism to recognize teachers who have the expertise in GT education.

We would like to make the following recommendations:

During the past 10 years we have developed solid information about what does work, and what can work with gifted students from all populations and backgrounds. What we need to do now is to take advantage of this growing knowledge base by implementing the following recommendations:

1. The State should provide the support to continue research into ways to identify and serve the diverse population of gifted students who are difficult to identify using traditional

- assessment measures and are therefore frequently underserved.
2. The State should encourage the dissemination of information on innovative programs for gifted students.
 3. The State should support the creation of a Governor's Summer School in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics for students entering 9th and 10th grades.
 4. The State should provide precious seed money to districts to train teachers and to implement innovative programs, including advances in technology.
 5. The State should include the ability of "talent development" for all students in its soon-to-be released teacher competencies, thus teacher preparation programs and school districts shall consider such competencies in pre-service training and in-service teacher evaluation, as we know that schools are critical in the talent development process.
 6. The State should require each district to report annually available services and plans for services for gifted education and talent development, which will assist education leaders in developing a statewide strategy to successfully address and meet the needs of this student population.
 7. The State Board of Education should reinforce its requirement to establish criteria for a new endorsement of GT for certified teachers, effective July 1, 2013.

We believe that the above could be achieved with minimum state resources, and this is a critical area that we must address if Connecticut wishes to move forward and lead the nation.

Thank you so much for the opportunity to present our views.

As one of the most prosperous states in the nation, we must invest in our economic and cultural future by supporting high potential young people who will become the scientists, inventors, designers, entrepreneurs, and innovative leaders in business and industry, the young people who will contribute to Connecticut's and the Nation's productivity in the years ahead. Our state has many future Samuel Colts, Katherine Hepburns, Mark Twains, Charles Goodyears, Harriet Beecher Stowes, Benjamin Spocks, and Annie Leibovitzs sitting in our classrooms today. How can today's public schools in Connecticut capitalize on this great reservoir of talent potential that in the past has contributed to our state's greatness?

Respectfully submitted on February 14, 2013,
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