



March 10, 2015

I am writing with regard to Raised S.B. 1055, an Act Concerning Gifted and Talented Students. I understand that the bill has two parts: (a) “To require an employee of the Department of Education to be responsible for providing information and assistance to the public relating to gifted and talented students” and (b) “to require the Department of Education to conduct a study that examines the best practices in the provision of services to gifted and talented students.” I wish to express my support for this bill overall, and I will address specifics related to each part below.

I fully support the proposed requirement for an employee of the Department of Education to be responsible for information related to gifted and talented education in Connecticut, and, furthermore, strongly recommend that this person should be an educator with professional training in the area of gifted and talented education. In my role on the gifted education faculty at UConn, I have assisted for the last three cycles in the preparation of the biannual national report on the *State of the States in Gifted Education* (National Association for Gifted Children and Council of State Directors of Programs for the Gifted, 2009; 2011; 2013)¹. In the most recent report (2012-2013), Connecticut was one of only 2 reporting states with no state education agency (SEA) employees dedicated to gifted and talented education; meanwhile, 22 of 44 reporting states reported at least one full-time person in this role. In the previous report (2010-2011), no one in the Connecticut Department of Education was even available to complete the survey on the state of gifted education in Connecticut. More importantly, with no one available in the state agency to focus specifically on gifted education, there is no clear resource at the state to answer questions from teachers and parents of more than 20,000 Connecticut children currently identified² – or from more students who perhaps should be. Consistently, and fairly obviously, states with greater allocation of SEA employee time are able to provide more technical assistance to schools, guidance and information to parents, and monitoring and data collection around gifted programming. A state employee with specific expertise in gifted education is also an important resource for supporting local schools and districts in their ability to provide services and information, to collect data, and to monitor program implementation.

A designated person in the SEA who is knowledgeable about the needs of gifted and talented learners can ensure that these learners are considered in statewide initiatives and policies under the Department’s leadership. In particular, given that large achievement gaps exist at the advanced performance levels between demographic groups of students in the state, SEA involvement and technical assistance are critical in ensuring that school districts struggling with issues related to poverty and to lower achievement rates are nevertheless attending to the needs of advanced and high-potential learners. I will refer the committee to testimony from my colleague, Jonathan Plucker, who has led several studies nationwide on this issue of the “excellence gap” between groups at high levels of performance. Furthermore, specific consideration of gifted learners within the broader scope of educational services helps to reinforce an emphasis on recognizing and responding to student strengths, holding high expectations for learning, and avoiding placing limits on student progress – goals that are beneficial for all learners, not only those identified for gifted services.

¹ See <http://www.nagc.org/resources-publications/resources/gifted-education-us> for report details.

² Based on reporting for 2012-2013 State of the States.

A final point with regard to the designated employee in the SEA relates to our relationships with other states and possibilities for collaborative improvement efforts. State agency coordinators/directors in gifted education have developed a professional group, the Council of State Directors of Programs for the Gifted (CSDPG). This group partners with the National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC) in conducting the *State of the States* survey noted above. The members also collaborate regularly around issues of common interest and share expertise within and beyond the group. In my role on the NAGC Board of Directors over the last four years, I have personally observed the benefits these individuals – and by extension, the teachers and children in their states – gain from learning from one another’s activities and initiatives on behalf of gifted children.

With regard to the second part of Raised S.B. 1055, I wholeheartedly support the idea of examining best practices, especially if such attention leads to wider implementation of effective practices in school districts across Connecticut, including practices that already have a strong base of research within the field. I would also encourage a focus on ensuring a match between program models/service delivery approaches and the specific needs of the students within any context – an emphasis on best practices *for whom* and *in what circumstances*, with recognition that gifted education is not a one-size-fits-all endeavor. A strong and knowledgeable presence in the Department, again, can be a resource for school districts in matching evidence-based practices with the specific needs of a district or school to provide the most effective services for gifted learners based on their own strengths and needs.

I will also add that a large-scale study is currently underway at the University of Connecticut, funded by the Institute for Education Sciences, to examine what gifted program elements may be linked to desirable outcomes in identification and student achievement, particularly among students from traditionally underserved populations, such as children from poverty and from culturally and linguistically diverse groups. This study (see <http://ncrge.uconn.edu>) is being conducted in three states that have specific state mandates for services and for documenting the achievement of gifted learners as a specific group. Unfortunately, the current state of gifted education in Connecticut would not allow the same level of detailed analysis, but this proposed bill represents a large step forward in strengthening our state’s opportunities and services for gifted learners.

Thank you for the opportunity to respond; I encourage your support for this bill and look forward to a positive outcome.

Respectfully,

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