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How We Formed a Parent Advocacy Group and What We’ve Learned in the Process

Michael S. Matthews¹, Stephanie D. Georgiades², and Linda F. Smith³

Abstract: Advocacy is of central importance in the education of students with gifts and talents due to the great variation in legislated policies protecting the provision of educational services for these learners. The authors present here a descriptive study based on their experiences founding a successful parent advocacy organization in one large school district in Florida. The Gifted Advocacy Council of Hillsborough, Inc. grew to over 100 members within its first year, and it has become an important contributor to the local educational scene during its 3 years in existence. The authors’ experiences support the value of developing a collaborative and proactive approach that is inclusive of teachers and administrators, rather than one that is adversarial or primarily reactive in nature. Findings highlight the importance of an effective web presence in building an advocacy organization, the benefits of consistency in key leadership roles within the organization, the relevance of the diverse professional skills that our members bring to the organization, and other selected points that the authors believe have been keys to their organization’s success. The authors hope that their experiences may inform others who wish to found similar organizations to support the education of students with gifts and talents in their local schools.

Keywords: advocacy, parents of gifted children, collaboration

In this article we explain the process we used in forming a local gifted advocacy group that has grown to a membership of over 100 parents and teachers from our district. This process involved quite a bit of work, but we believe our efforts have helped improve the education that thousands of gifted children receive in our district. By sharing our experience, we hope to make the daunting prospect of forming an advocacy group into a more manageable idea for parents and other readers who may be thinking of forming a similar organization in their local area. While advocacy efforts sometimes have focused on teachers as advocates (e.g., Besnoy, 2005) or on statewide efforts (Roberts, 2010), our experience focuses on advocacy efforts that are conducted primarily by parents seeking to work at the local district level in collaboration with teachers and schools. The informative article by Hertzog (2003) is the publication perhaps most closely related to our story, though Hertzog’s article focuses on policy change spearheaded by an advocacy group, whereas our article focuses on the how-to details of establishing an advocacy group.

Advocacy is very important in supporting the success of gifted education programming for three related reasons. First, the lack of a federal mandate for services in this area renders programming and budgets especially susceptible to cuts when finances become strained (see Starko, 1990). Public perceptions that gifted programming is elitist and therefore inequitable or simply public suspicions that arise from a lack of knowledge about what gifted programming involves can contribute to...
Our First Steps

With several e-mails and phone calls, we organized an initial meeting in May 2007 to discuss forming such a group. We brought diverse ideas and goals to the table; some parents focused on learning more about meeting the needs of their gifted children and networking with other parents in similar situations, while other parents who attended the initial gathering were equally as interested in educating parents about gifted education rules, policies, and best practices in the classroom.

At the initial meeting, through collaborative discussion led by Linda Smith, we reconciled these diverse goals into this mission statement for the group:

Our mission is to promote and support a high quality education for gifted students, to inform and unite parents of gifted students in Hillsborough County, and to advocate on behalf of gifted students.

Identifying a goal and planning a message are a key step in advocacy, as identified by Roberts (2010) in her discussion of the founding of a statewide residential school of science and mathematics in Kentucky.

At our first meeting we also identified a name for the group, the Gifted Advocacy Council of Hillsborough, Inc. (GACHI, Inc.). We decided to hold a meeting every 2 weeks over the remainder of the summer. In addition to the names collected by the district coordinator, we each individually recruited new members by word of mouth. We held planning meetings on alternate Monday evenings at a centrally located coffee house. These meetings lasted approximately 2 to 2 1/2 hours. We always had a formal agenda and we followed Robert’s Rules of Order, taking written minutes to record group decisions and outcomes. At the first meeting, we also made a timeline showing what tasks needed to be accomplished in order for the group to go public in August.

By our August deadline we had formulated an organizational structure based on the structure of the established group in our neighboring district, and we had elected officers to fill the necessary leadership positions. We also began drafting our articles of incorporation and bylaws for the organization. We found ourselves in the fortunate position at the beginning of the process of having two group members who are attorneys, and one of them was willing to provide pro bono legal services to the group in drafting and filing our official incorporation documents with the State of Florida. Roberts (2010) stressed the importance of how drawing upon expertise builds support and lends credibility to advocacy efforts.

Building Involvement

Our primary goal at the beginning was to increase the group’s membership, as we recognized that an increase in numbers would help us be more effective in conveying our message to parents, teachers, and administrators. To help
Because not all members are able to attend our quarterly events or board meetings, we communicate primarily via e-mail. In addition to officers’ e-mail accounts, members also can reach us through contact forms on our web page. We also have used Constant Contact (http://www.constantcontact.com/index.jsp) to help keep track of outreach efforts to our membership, send press releases to local news outlets, and maintain a presence among school administrators. With proof of our group’s 501c (3) status, we qualified for a 20% discount. The website has been the most visible, public face of our organization over the course of its existence. One author of this article initially developed the webpage, and another author subsequently refined it. We have found that the Webmaster is one of the most important positions in the organization; this person must be willing to keep the website up to date, have sufficient time to commit to this task, and possess the necessary web editing and writing skills to promote the organization’s mission effectively in the online environment. Having the wrong person in this position clearly could be a detriment to the organization, so it’s especially important to make a good choice here. Because of the prominence of our website in our efforts, we decided to budget funds and contracted with a professional web design company to give our site a makeover at the conclusion of our third membership year. We also added PayPal to our site in an effort to streamline our application process and expedite member benefits and services.

**What We’ve Learned So Far**

Listed next are some of the specific things we’ve learned in the 3 years since we formed GACH, Inc. and some of the challenges we have faced in the process. We share these in the belief that by being aware of these issues, readers will be prepared to address them effectively in other advocacy settings. Based on our experiences, we conclude with a few more general recommendations that are consistent with the research literature on gifted advocacy.

1. E-mail can be an effective way to communicate with members; our website (www.gachflorida.org) is also an invaluable asset to our organization. Hot links placed in the electronic newsletters of related organizations also help in steering traffic to our webpage.

2. Web hosting and domain name registration costs should be factored into the organization’s budget and must be renewed annually. Sharing web hosting with another organization can reduce costs. Having an effective website is vital because of the ongoing and timely information it allows us to share with our members (Roberts, 2010).

3. That said, others need to understand the time commitment that a webpage and blog require before committing to run these for their organization. It is extremely important to choose carefully in selecting a webmaster for the organization.

4. We learned that our district has a committee that can approve or deny materials submitted for dissemination.

**Paperwork and Budget**

During our first year we had to file papers of incorporation, and then filed for an Employee Identification Number (EIN) for IRS purposes. Due to having an EIN number, we also have been required to file annually with the IRS. We filed additional paperwork to register as a nonprofit organization. Some parts of the paperwork seemed relatively quick and painless, while we found that others, notably trying to obtain 501c (3) status as a nonprofit organization, took more than a year following the initial filing of our application with the IRS. None of these official papers are something we would recommend a person or group should undertake without prior experience; consult with a tax attorney if you don’t have one in your group.

**Electronic Contact With Members**

To work effectively within our limited operational budget, we decided to take full advantage of electronic communications to minimize printing and mailing costs. We purchased a web domain name (http://www.gachflorida.org) to ensure continuity over time and to make our website easy to locate and to remember. The .org ending helps reassure people that we are not a commercial entity. The web hosting service we chose also includes associated e-mail accounts that allow us to make available dedicated e-mail addresses for GACH officers. This minimizes spam in their personal e-mail accounts, and more importantly, it also allows the officers’ contact information to remain the same when new people are elected to these positions.
through the district; however, in addition, schools in our district maintain a parent resource book in the front office in which such materials may be placed on file. With nearly 200 elementary schools in the district, it is difficult for a small organization to reach every school. The involvement of committed parent volunteers from a broad cross-section of district schools helps in reaching a variety of constituencies both within and outside of the school system (Cotabish, 2006; Roberts, 2010).

5. Parents from low- or moderate-income households may be interested in participating but unable to afford even modest membership fees (our base family membership rate...
is currently $25 per year). We decided to offer membership fee waivers to parents whose children are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch services. We also offer discounted membership rates ($10 per year) to teachers and college students.

6. Talk to other established groups to see what approaches they have found to be successful (Roberts, 2010). Attend meetings of other nearby groups and invite them to attend yours. Some common themes are articulated in the research literature on advocacy and public relations, and the experiences of other groups often can be generalized to gifted advocacy settings.

7. Solicit professional advice about tax and incorporation requirements in your state. Casting a wide net in recruiting potential members can be very effective in accessing the specialized expertise necessary to help found a nonprofit organization.

8. Check with local universities to see who may be teaching gifted education coursework; these people may be helpful to know. In the case of GACH, one of our founding members (Dr. Michael Matthews) was a parent of gifted learners but was also a faculty member in gifted education. Another local faculty member (Dr. Elizabeth Shaunessey) has been a great guest speaker for our group. Roberts (2010) noted that obtaining the support of specialists in relevant disciplines can go far toward garnering support for an advocacy organization’s goals.

Challenges

As with any small organization, turnover at times has been a problem. Today, 3 years later, we are fortunate to have had consistent leadership in the position of President (Stephanie Georgiades) since the organization’s founding. Having a single person consistent with successful advocacy efforts (Roberts, 2010). Several other founding members also have remained with our organization in various capacities, joined by new members and officers whose energy and commitment contribute greatly to the organization’s ongoing success. When an officer or committee member has difficulty fulfilling the expectations of their position, often due to job changes, family factors, or other issues beyond their control, it is crucial that someone else be available to take over their duties in a controlled and orderly fashion.

Disseminating information and materials to parents of gifted children through the schools can be difficult, as it relies on the cooperation of individual teachers to send things home to parents. Due to privacy concerns, we were not able to access names or contact information for parents of identified gifted students. Publicizing the organization and our website, both online and in the more traditional media, is vital to getting the word out to our stakeholders.

Contacting teachers of the gifted through the district also can be difficult; in our case, district policy prohibited dissemination of materials carrying a cost to participants.

Additional Recommendations

We hope by sharing our experiences that some readers may be interested in forming local parent advocacy groups in their own area. If you are one of those readers, here are some additional recommendations we would offer:

1. Utilize the talents and experience of your members by involving them in the organization in their areas of expertise. Spreading out the work can help minimize the chances that one or two people will burn out quickly from being overworked. Don’t despair if you only have a small number of committed members to work with; Robinson and Moon (2003) found that “advocacy can be initiated and sustained by a small group of people even at the state level” (p. 23).

2. Remain diplomatic and professional in your interactions, especially with school and district staff. This too is a key finding echoed by Robinson and Moon (2003), Cotabish (2006), and other authors whose work we consulted. Few things could damage this type of organization more quickly than disparaging or otherwise irritating the teachers and other district personnel who are in charge of educating gifted children in your area!

3. Look to your local community for relevant guest speakers who can be recruited at minimal expense. As your organization grows, consider partnering with other organizations that share similar goals to bring in guest speakers from farther away on topics of mutual interest.

4. Provide coffee and snacks for group activities, especially those scheduled for Saturday mornings. Local coffee shops or bakeries may be willing to sell you refreshments at cost if you are a small nonprofit organization, and this is especially true if the owners know you as a regular customer outside of your organization.

5. Develop contacts, or recruit members who have contacts, with media organizations, schools, and other state and national gifted education organizations. As Besnoy (2005) has noted, effective public relations campaigns take time to develop and they ultimately may require the efforts of many people; we concur with his advice to start small and build your group over time.

6. Be creative and diligent in publicizing your group’s activities. Take lots of photos, and some will turn out well. Although they are only rarely published, our group consistently sends out press releases to local media as a part of our outreach efforts. Most of the sources we have cited have pointed to the importance of effective publicity in furthering advocacy efforts.

7. Keep track of web hosting policies; domain name registrations have to be renewed on an annual basis. If a renewal is late, you may find that someone else has bought your domain name as soon as your registration expired. Don’t let this happen.

8. Set up and staff a table at your state gifted affiliate organization’s meeting, especially in years when it is held.
in or near your district. Offer to volunteer at the meeting in lieu of paying a table fee. Encourage your members to also join the state and national organizations and to become active in them, as these experiences also will strengthen your local group.

9. Keep dues reasonable to attract paying members. Then when you do have members, use membership dollars wisely, transparently, and in such a way that your members perceive clearly the organization’s benefits for the gifted children in your community.

Conclusion

While it does require a substantial amount of time and consistent long-term effort, we have found creating and maintaining a gifted advocacy organization to be a rewarding experience. Our organization has helped to inform parents and other stakeholders about gifted children and the educational services that benefit them and also has organized and mobilized support effectively when legislative changes unfavorable to gifted learners have been proposed. We encourage interested readers to read the articles we have cited: Robinson and Moon (2003) offers additional detail and Roberts (2010) offers 11 recommendations. We would encourage other parents to consider forming similar advocacy organizations to support gifted children and their education in your local area.

Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declare no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the authorship and/or publication of this article.

References


Bios

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