

Information for the House Education Committee concerning
HB 2877 and Talented and Gifted Education in Oregon:

Who are our TAG students?

Oregon identifies students in grades k-12 for Talented and Gifted services when they are in the top 3% in any nationally-normed test of reading, mathematics or aptitude. About 42,000 Oregon students are identified in one or more of these categories. In addition, districts identify students who have the potential to meet this criterion.

What is OATAG?

The Oregon Association for Talented and Gifted is a non-profit, non-discriminatory, state-wide membership organization that promotes opportunities for talented and gifted children throughout Oregon. OATAG is the state affiliate of the National Organization for Gifted Children.

What we need

Information and accountability: Right now we don't know what our districts are doing to serve TAG students or how well it is working.

Planning: We need to plan for staff education and professional development, carry out a needs assessment with our districts and develop a funding plan that meets those needs.

Professional Development: The most effective and cost-effective services are provided by trained staff who know how to identify and plan for gifted students, what interventions are effective and where they can find resources.

Assessment, Curriculum and Instruction: We need to find out what students are ready to learn and then provide them with appropriate placements, curriculum and instruction.

What do we know about Talented and Gifted education?

Below is research-based information about gifted and very high-achieving students (the Oregon TAG mandate includes both groups):

Gifted education is not elitist. Most gifted students do not come from wealthy families. Giving children a chance to learn does not make them feel superior to other students. They do not lose the ability to feel concern for others when their own needs are met. The students most harmed by disinvestment in TAG services are minority and low income students because low-income students depend most heavily on the instruction provided by public schools.

Gifted students don't teach themselves. They do not succeed on their own. They need instruction that is adapted to their level of mastery. When gifted students are sprinkled evenly across many classrooms, they make lower learning gains than classmates who are not gifted, because the instruction is not appropriate for their needs. Low-income and minority gifted students make even lower gains in such classes than other gifted students.

Gifted students benefit from options such as acceleration and advanced classes. Providing these services does not harm other students in a school or community and in fact can benefit them.

A lack of these options can cause serious social and emotional problems including severe depression. The risk seems to rise with the aptitude of the student. This is because the more gifted students find it more difficult to make friends who share their interests in a regular classroom.

Services to high-achieving students are an essential component of economic development in Oregon. The Oregon Economic and Community Development Department stated in 2002 that “the effectiveness of our k-12 schools will, in the long run, have more positive economic benefit than any other state action.” The Oregon Progress Board has reported that “Oregon needs a truly “world class” workforce to compete effectively in today’s global economy. The modest improvements that Oregon has made in education are inadequate.”

A report in 2010 by the Center for Evaluation & Education Policy warned that “the comparatively small percentage of students scoring at the highest level on achievement tests suggests that children with advanced academic potential are being under-served, with potentially serious consequences for the long-term economic competitiveness of the U.S...”

Services to gifted students are as important in rural districts as in urban areas. A report from the U.S. Department of Agriculture in 2005 commented that in rural areas, “the higher the level of educational attainment, the faster the growth rates in both per capita income and employment.”

Gifted students need well-trained teachers to thrive. Yet most Oregon teachers have no pre-licensure training on effective, research-based ways to meet the instructional needs of TAG students

Oregon’s TAG programs lag behind those provided by other states and are not consistent across Oregon..

There is great variation among districts in their provision of services. About one-third of all Oregon districts are under-identifying or not identifying students for TAG. Spending on TAG in both dollars and per-capita has been falling.

And now the good news.....

TAG services do not need to be burdensome for districts. Acceleration, advanced classes and ability grouping are all considered “best practices.” None of them is expensive. However, we do need to provide support and training for administrators and staff to help them understand why these interventions are important for our children

Margaret DeLacy
Oregon Association for Talented and Gifted
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MYTHS OF TAG (TALENTED AND GIFTED)

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Oprah was one of the first to share the astounding talents and accomplishments of Gregory R. Smith: he memorized and recited books at age 14 months, added numbers at 18 months, took one year to advance from second to eighth grade, began high school at age 7, began college at age 9, was a PhD candidate in mathematics at age 16, but also was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in 2004 at age 12 and three additional times for his international humanitarian work on behalf of children. This is who the media and others would have us believe is a prime example of someone who is Talented and Gifted (TAG). But, Gregory is actually part of a very small—perhaps one in two million—group of individuals who can justifiably be called genius.

Instead, consider the wide range of children and youth you may know who exhibit potential for advanced performance in some arena when compared to kids of the same age. They may be talented in art, math, drama, sports, language, street smarts, leadership or any number of other areas. They come from all economic levels of society, all ethnic groups and cultures, are both able and disabled. Everyone has areas of strengths and areas of challenge. This is also true for kids identified as TAG.

First, let's consider the term "gifted." I think Oregonians have historically been a fiercely independent lot with a strong work ethic and dislike of reliance on hand-outs or "gifts." Consequently, I suspect the term "gifted" is often interpreted as meaning that someone has wrongly gotten something for free. The term is confusing and misleading everywhere. Although it is not a child's fault that he or she has high potential in some areas, applying the term gifted makes it seem as though it is the consequence of somehow having an unfair advantage over other "non-gifted." I prefer to focus not on a "yes/no" or "gifted/not gifted" dichotomy but to think of children in terms of what they actually need to grow and learn new things every day. I refer to these children as advanced learners in certain areas, those with high potential, even special needs kids. Given widespread usage, I will use the term Talented and Gifted or TAG here, but please keep in mind I am basically referring to students who need more sooner than others in order to be challenged in the school setting.

To better understand this term Talented and Gifted as it is used in our local educational systems, it is helpful to review how the State of Oregon defines Talented and Gifted. In 1987, the Oregon State Legislature passed the Talented and Gifted Education Act (OAR 581-02201510) a bill requiring that school districts in the state identify and provide services for students in Kindergarten through Grade 12 who are deemed in need of more challenging instruction than that typically offered at their grade level. Oregon's current focus is limited to addressing the learning needs of those who exhibit a high level of abstract thinking and problem-solving ability or show need for advanced instruction in the areas reading or mathematics. Please visit www.ode.state.or.us and use the search term "TAG Home" for full description of Oregon's legal requirements relating to gifted education and other helpful information.

Despite the legal requirements, progress in implementing appropriate learning opportunities for our children at the upper end of the spectrum have been uneven, stalled and even non-existent in many Oregon districts. In fact, the Wall Street Journal reported in November, 2011, that nationally the important focus on assisting low achievers has had the unexpected effect of short-changing our brightest learners, denying those students the resources, well-trained teachers and curriculum needed for optimal development. The article states, "Recent data, including results from...national math and reading exams, show high achievers are stagnating and falling behind their international counterparts."

I believe the existence of some widespread misconceptions about advanced learners has helped create the current state of neglect many bright young people are experiencing. I have discovered

in my many years in this field, working with students and teachers at all levels, that many initially express common "myths" about gifted children and gifted education. Let's explore a few of them:

Myth: All children are gifted.

Reality: All children are gifts and possess aspects and qualities that make them special, unique and deserving of our love and support. However, when we use the term "gifted" as it is employed in educational settings, not all children are gifted. The majority of our students perform very successfully and are challenged by the learning experiences provided in the regular classroom. Identified gifted students usually need harder work and added complexity to ensure they are learning new things. Oregon has approximately 42,000 identified gifted students in grades K-12. There are undoubtedly more who have not yet been discovered but this number falls within the national average of 7-10%.

Myth: Gifted Programs are elitist.

Reality: Gifted programs are designed to provide an appropriate education to all gifted students regardless of background. Over the years, lack of federal funding for gifted education and very limited funding in many states like Oregon have led to financial support for these students being concentrated in wealthy districts or more well-to-do families. Support from states varies radically (See davidsongifted.org.) In 2010-11, Georgia spent \$1512 per student while Oregon spent just \$7.85. Giftedness runs wide and deep in all populations in all countries around the world. Representatives come from poor, disabled, and cultural and ethnic minorities, not just from the upper middle classes. When we find and support all gifted students we will recover the richness that is lost when they are overlooked.

Myth: Gifted children don't need our help and will make it on their own.

Imagine you are a great basketball player. You join a team to improve your game only to discover there is no coach or trainer. You might demonstrate and make demands, show off, get angry and quit, or simply try to make the best of the situation by doing what others who are less interested in the game are doing. Gifted children may enter the classroom in the fall knowing more than half of what is going to be taught for the year. They often have not learned the research and time management skills that would at least allow them to pursue some learning on their own. They need time with intellectual peers as well as age-peers and, especially, instruction from a teacher who understands and challenges them. Left unchallenged, many gifted students become problems in the classroom and slide into mediocrity, even at a very young age.

Myth: Gifted students are a homogeneous group.

George Betts is a well-known gifted education specialist from Colorado. He and a colleague developed six general categories of gifted students. They include

The Successful or School Smart Gifted: Knows how to "do" school.

The Challenging: The high creative individual, often hard on teachers.

The Underground: Doesn't want to stand out as bright, hides abilities.

The Dropout: Totally disillusioned with school as a place to learn, may be failing.

Twice exceptional: Dual identified as TAG and hearing impaired, dyslexic, autistic, second language learner, etc.

Autonomous Learner: The highly functioning individual who exemplifies the goal of our educational system.

These categories demonstrate that we find as much variation in the population of gifted students as we find elsewhere.

Myth: Gifted students develop very evenly, making them sophisticated adults at a young age.

Reality: Gifted students often develop very unevenly. Their chronological age, physical, social, emotional and intellectual development may be at very different levels. This can be frustrating for the child as they read at the level of much older kids but can't cut well with scissors. Although they can fool adults into thinking they are very mature because their vocabulary is so well-developed, they may not understand all of what they say. Many are more like age mates than otherwise.

Myth: Gifted students are nerds or social isolates.

Forget the stereotype. There's no rule about social development. A high percentage of individuals in the gifted population are introverts. They may recharge when alone and do their best thinking at those times, too. However, others may have more than one set of peers—those they hang out with socially and those with whom they share a passion for learning and exploration. Some gifted in leadership devote their skills and talents by being highly engaged with others.

Myth: Acceleration of gifted learners will leave gaps or holes in their learning.

Gifted kids often gravitate toward older students. In addition, recent research has countered the prevailing belief that acceleration, including grade skipping, will automatically have detrimental effects on a child. Each case should be considered individually and the question asked: What will happen to this child if we put a ceiling on his or her learning and don't accelerate?

Myth: The gifted learner's family always values his or her abilities.

While gifted children can be incredibly delightful and entertaining, they are not typically easy to raise. Parents may find themselves dealing with their child's insatiable curiosity and unending questions, lack of need for sleep, hypersensitivity, perfectionism, self-esteem issues, frustration due to lack of responsiveness in educational settings, stimulation-seeking in inappropriate ways...the list goes on. Envy of these parents may be misplaced.

This introduction to the nature of giftedness is only a starting point for understanding what these potential future leaders in our society need as they grow up. Just as the talented athlete and musician need attention and careful training long before they play in the NBA or onstage at Carnegie Hall, our intellectual stars need your understanding and support while they are children as well. With concentrated attention we can develop the full potential of all children, leaving none behind.

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<http://www.oregonfamily.com/2013/01/06/uncovering-myths-of-tag-talented-and-gifted>

