

**Testimony for the Senate Education Committee, March 17, 2021
in support of Senate Bill 478, Senate Bill 486, and Senate Bill 487**

Dear Senator Dembrow and members of the Senate Education Committee:

This testimony is submitted on behalf of the Oregon Association for Talented and Gifted. (OATAG) 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.

SB 478-1 calls for improvements to the process of identification of TAG students with a special emphasis on under-identified and under-served students. SB 486-2 improves communication between the Department of Education, our district TAG coordinators, and our community, both students and parents. SB 487 commissions a study of TAG services. OATAG supports all three bills and urges you to pass them.

We hope this marks the moment when Oregon begins to address longstanding problems with TAG identification, funding, and services.

Our Talented and Gifted (TAG) students are students who score in the top 3% in math, language arts, or aptitude on a nationally-normed test or have the potential of reaching the top 3%. Many are four or more years beyond their grade level in reading level or math skills. We know that when their instruction is not adapted to their prior knowledge, they become frustrated and disengaged. This places them at risk for severe depression and poor outcomes.

TAG students do not teach themselves. Like all other students, whether they are musicians, athletes, or artists, they need appropriate instruction and mentorship.

Gifted education is not elitist. Most gifted students do not come from wealthy families. Encouraging children to learn does not make them feel superior to other students. They do not lose the ability to empathize with others when their instruction is adapted for their needs. Low-income students depend the most on public school services and so are the ones who are most affected by our disinvestment in TAG.

Below are notes on three problems we see every day.

Inequitable identification:

Decades of neglect are eroding the proportion of Oregon students identified for TAG

Identified in 2004-5: 39,182
Identified in 2018-19 39,097

Proportion of all students identified as TAG in 2004-5: 7.1%
Proportion of all students identified as TAG in 2018-19: 6.8%.

In addition, there are unacceptable inequities in the representation of TAG-identified students. For example:

In 2018-19:

7.5% of white students were identified
3.2% of Black students were identified

10.8% of non-economically disadvantaged students were identified
3.3% of economically disadvantaged students were identified

In 2011, the Senate Education Committee appointed a task force on the instruction of talented and gifted children. Its report, submitted to you in 2012 stated that:

“...talented and gifted children exist in all socio-economic groups, all races, all ethnicities and are in all classrooms in Oregon. However, . . . identification and required services have been stymied . . . by the lack of attention, funding and support for this population of Oregon students. This . . . includes students who have been identified and yet have been woefully underserved and those who are yet to be identified because of cultural bias and cultural perceptions (p. 23).

In 2019, The Joint Interim Committee on Student Success noted that: [TAG] “identification standards vary from district to district.”

Our identification rules need to be updated and brought into alignment with recent research findings. In particular, the well-intentioned mandate that districts identify students with the “potential” to be in the 97th. percentile has confused many districts and led to inconsistent practices. It is time to provide clearer guidance for districts on ways to identify students who have not been flagged by test scores but still need advanced instruction.

TAG identification is not a simple process, especially when it comes to underserved populations. It requires training and ongoing professional development. Oregon permits a wide range of identification instruments, but these are constantly changing. Choosing the best match for a particular student requires information about both the student and the available tests

Although Title II of the Federal ESSA act states that state education agencies must “improve the skills of teachers, principals, or other school leaders in *order to enable them to identify* students with specific learning needs, particularly children with disabilities, English learners, *students who are gifted and talented* and students with low literacy levels,” Oregon currently does not provide, require, or fund training for identifying TAG students except for the outreach carried out by our single TAG specialist.

The difficulty in locating contact information for district TAG coordinators makes the TAG specialist’s job more difficult and hinders communication with families who have questions about identification or services. This year, OATAG recruited a team to call districts one by one to collect this contact information. It took us six months.

Insufficient funding.

TAG in Oregon is an unfunded mandate. There is no Federal TAG funding. Oregon does not send any funds to districts for TAG services. District *per capita* spending on TAG services has increased slightly from a low in 2012-13 but is still well below the level reported in 2004-5.

Since the beginning of the century, the state education budget, although nearly level when adjusted for inflation, increased in real dollars. *Per capita* spending rose by about 50% from \$8,129 in 1999- 2000 to \$11,920 in 2018-19 (before the Student Success Act increased funding). Spending for other special needs students increased even faster, both overall and *per capita*.

However, spending for TAG services, initially a minuscule percentage of the state education budget, has actually fallen in real dollars.

Per capita TAG spending in 2004-5.....\$191.16
Per capita TAG spending in 2018-19\$152.35

Number of districts not reporting TAG spending in 2018-19: 85

The absence of state support has produced severe inequities among districts. The TAG task force reported to you in 2012 that: “Funding is inadequate to support implementation, monitoring, evaluation, and oversight of a large population of learners with diverse needs. The current funding structure reinforces and perpetuates the prevailing myths about Talented and Gifted learners, creating inadequate and inequitable services.”

OATAG hears often from the families of students who simply want access to more challenging classes but have been stymied. They often say they were told there was no funding for TAG.

The lack of funding permeates every aspect of TAG students’ lives. It results in a lack of training for their teachers and administrators, a lack of accountability for districts and a lack of access to opportunity for the students themselves. Students’ learning opportunities should not depend on their zip codes. We should enable every one of our students to become a contributing and successful Oregon citizen.

Inadequate, non-existent, or inappropriate services

For decades, the problem of inadequate TAG support has festered. Numerous reports in the media and within state government have documented the problem and recommended solutions, to no avail.

For example, in 2003, The Oregon Dept. of Education issued a paper on "Strategies" for TAG services. It recommended building capacity within the Department, increasing accountability, data collection and reporting, pre-service training, professional development, and improved communication including reinstatement of a TAG Advisory Committee.

That same year, the state auditors warned that "*School districts may not properly identify and provide appropriate services to talented and gifted students.... in general, schools' efforts in this regard have not been adequate. In addition, the department has devoted little in the way of resources to monitoring TAG programs....*" They recommended that the Department of Education "*Increase monitoring efforts to ensure that TAG students are identified and provided appropriate programs and services.*"

These problems were not resolved. In 2012, the TAG task force noted that: “Services do not adequately reflect the goals envisioned by the TAG mandate of 1987...Services are

inconsistently delivered across the state. The services provided do not necessarily reflect the best practice programming (instruction and services) for TAG students.”

The work group on “High Quality Classrooms” of the Joint Committee on Student Success reported in 2019 that “Oregon does not currently require districts to provide any specified interventions to students who have been identified as Talented and Gifted.”

This report recommended:

- Strengthening accountability including better reporting of student achievement growth, better and more timely communication of achievement information to teachers, and better communication between the Department of Education and school districts
- Early identification of High School students who would benefit from IB and AP classes.
- Universal TAG screening prior to 3rd grade using the potential-to-perform eligibility standard, identifying TAG students at every school with consideration of the state’s equity lens;
- Periodic ODE evaluation of TAG identification disparities in each school district with recommendations to remedy those disparities;
- TAG Program requirements for schools and districts, including teacher training requirements”

The Federal ESSA act requires that districts receiving Title II funds provide programs and activities that “address the learning needs of all students, including children with disabilities, English learners, *and gifted and talented students*.”

Oregon is not fulfilling this requirement. Many parents report to us that their students have not received any TAG services. Others comment that even when some services are offered, they are often a mismatch for their students’ learning needs.

We hope that you will help us improve the way we identify and educate this long-neglected group of children. Surely every child deserves a chance to learn.

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