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# FROM THE PRESIDENT: COLUMN FOR THE ADVOCACY IN GIFTED EDUCATION ISSUE

by Raymond F. “Rick” Peters



**I**f there is one word that describes TAGT members, it is *passionate*. It is a passion born of the realization that there is a whole population of students that can be left out unless we advocate for their moral right to “a year’s growth for a year in school.” If students test above ability relative to their age as they enter public schools and fall to proficiency as they leave, as a society, we have not only failed them but have squandered a national resource critical to our future. As your new president, I implore you to turn your intellectual passion into advocacy.

As an engineer at Lockheed Martin Aeronautics, I feel strongly that our state and nation should develop its own talent in order to successfully compete in the global economy. Our lead in technology is at risk as India and China educate many, many more engineers than we do. This is not a problem that can be easily fixed. Our youngest students from all socioeconomic groups are encouraged to develop their talents or they will become one of our most under recognized groups of at-risk stu-

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dents. Over the past 2 years I have heard calls from several quarters to implement a sequel to the National Defense Education Act which was implemented after the Soviets launched

Sputnik. The result then was an emphasis on gifted education which supported technological growth that created jobs that in turn created more jobs. Unfortunately, current initiatives which concentrate exclusively on a minimum competency level can create an environment where development at more advanced levels can actually be discouraged as teachers

respond to the high-stakes testing environment. TAGT is in a unique position to play a part in a potential awakening among the larger population. Advocacy is turning passion into action much as engineering is turning science into practical applications.

As a father, I feel that all public schools in Texas should offer gifted children the opportunity to develop their potential. Educators have my utmost appreciation for their selfless dedication to a higher ideal. Gifted educators in particular are often swimming against the current

to help students realize their potential. TAGT must continue to work to make your teaching environment friendlier to both excellence and equity. Parents also sometimes feel as if they are swimming upstream if they see that their children's needs are not being met. Parents and educators can be effective partners in the political arena as well as in the schools.

As a parent who worked with other parents to build a successful TAGT parent affiliate, I appreciate the importance of the local parent groups all across our state. My wife, Mary, and I have always been interested in the education of our

## Put your passion into action by advocating for the gifted students of Texas.

children and believe that public schools are critical to our future. We were encouraged to revive our local parent group by two educators, Dr. Bennie Hickerson, TAGT Past-President, and Ms. Nancy Nicks, our sons' G/T teacher for several years. We all know that parents can be the most effective advocates but sometimes they might need a little encouragement to get started. Linda Foster, HEBISD G/T teacher, has done a great job of encouraging her parents to get involved in our local parent group. TAGT conferences are a great place for budding advocates to network and gather information and were instrumental to my development as an advocate.

Here are some key elements for parents to remember as they advocate locally for their gifted children:

- Establish positive communication with your child's teacher. Help the teacher to understand your child by sharing stories about their development.
- Become active in TAGT and your local parent affiliate. Your voice will be stronger as a member of these groups that are dedicated to the development of gifted children.
- Become active in your child's education. Volunteer to help your child's teacher during school or after depending on your own work responsibilities. Volunteer to serve on school district committees. Time spent in this way not only develops a relationship with your child's school, but serves as a shining example to your child as to the value you place on their education.

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- Always remember that giftedness is not a status symbol but a real learning difference that must be addressed. Gifted children have a diversity of backgrounds and needs. The payoff if these needs are addressed can be great for both our society as well as for the child.
- If ever a need exists to elevate a concern, always start with the teacher and never skip a step in the "chain of command."
- Get the facts about gifted education. Texas has a funded mandate for gifted education. *The Texas State Plan for the Education of Gifted and Talented Students* provides what Texas law requires in the way of gifted services. The acceptable category is required by law. While the higher levels are optional, several school districts across the state have achieved the recognized level.

Thanks in large part to the advocacy efforts of TAGT members and the far-sightedness of some Texas legislators, Texas was one of the first states to implement a mandate that gifted and talented students be served in our public schools. Texas lawmakers created a model that other states have followed. We still have much to do to ensure that all Texas students are given the opportunity to develop their potential.

Get to know your legislators. The new year [in 2006] will bring a special session on school finance, and your help might be needed to give gifted children a voice. Without grassroots support, we could lose much that has been gained. Our local legislators appreciate information from their constituents about issues before them. It is better to develop a relationship early so that they know you as a valued source of reliable information and support for gifted education. Changes to legislation can occur at a fast pace so stay informed through TAGT.

I believe that because of the political situation in Texas with respect to school funding, even our initial gains could be at risk if lawmakers were to accept a shortsighted solution. Now that the Texas Supreme Court has ruled on the Texas school finance system, lawmakers will be working hard to come up with a solution to our school finance problems. The passion of those who understand the inequity of allowing tomorrow's talent to vegetate can ignite those in power if we connect this injustice to the effect that it will certainly have on the economic future of Texas and the United States.

In the grand scheme, our state and our nation must be able to compete in the global economy of the 21st century by allowing these children to become the creative forces and leaders that they are meant to be. Put your passion into action by advocating for the gifted students of Texas.