

A Response to State Board Member Emails

Gifted advocates across the state are receiving an email from one or more state board member that seem to be identical or very similar. The email is thoughtful and articulate, but some of the conclusions drawn are confusing to those who have received them. I have been asked to respond to some of the issues raised. The text of the email will be in **bold quotes**. My comments will follow in *italic typeface*:

“While there are numerous quality gifted education programs in Ohio schools, the current system of regulations, whose basic tenants were reaffirmed by the gifted education advisory committee this year, are not leading to successful outcomes. Under current regulations, nearly one-third of districts are providing no services to children. Nearly one in ten districts have not even identified their gifted children. The problem is not that the current approach to gifted education needs to be more enthusiastically implemented or that regulations need to be punitively enforced; the problem is that a new approach is needed.”

The use of the term “current system of regulations” implies that gifted students are all covered by those regulations. That is incorrect. The reality that two-thirds of Ohio’s districts do not serve gifted students and only 20% of our gifted student population is served is due entirely to the fact that gifted services are completely optional. I agree that a new approach is needed; Ohio policymakers need to require districts to provide services to gifted students. Nearly 10% of Ohio’s districts do not even identify enough gifted students to be rated on the gifted value-added subgroup measure. While the law for identification has been on the books for several decades, ODE has been completely lax in enforcing the law. It took the department almost eight years to conduct the first audit of a district after state law required every district be audited once every three years. Without some regard to compliance and enforcement, no system of education will benefit gifted children.

“Some are convinced that being more prescriptive in how money is spent—through teacher ratios, directives on who must administer and coordinate services, instruction time ratios, and foreclosed alternative approaches—will improve gifted education. I view those approaches as more of the current, inadequate same.”

What is seen here as prescriptive is an infrastructure of information and expertise that doesn’t exist in general education. Unless an educator seeks out gifted training, it doesn’t happen. Maybe state board members are unaware of just how flexible gifted spending has been in the last four years. Under the gifted maintenance of effort provision, districts have been allowed to use gifted funds in almost any way imaginable. I am certain that this ultra-flexibility is in large part responsible for the abysmal failure of districts to provide appropriate services for gifted students. Districts have creatively and flexibly used gifted funding for staff, curriculum, and materials that have nothing to do with gifted services, including computers, video cameras, and OAA preparation software. For a full account of the misappropriation of gifted funding since 2009, please read my blog post, [“The Free-For-All-Funding Fallacy”](#). Ohio also has had experience in the past where instructional time ratios have been removed from the standards. The result of the previous removal was services that include, among other low-level options, swim lessons that inexplicably served as gifted social studies service, one-day annual creativity days that reportedly provided a whole year’s worth of service in just five hours, and weekly contact time with gifted intervention specialists that was as low as 20 minutes. The staff ratios and time limitations exist in the current operating standards for a reason: without them, district leadership cannot always be counted on to do the right thing for children. Moreover, without some standard definition of service, the public will have no basis to compare the quality of services between districts. The pressure for districts to “serve” all students simply by saying they do will actually dilute one of the few outputs that is already included in ORC for gifted children. It does not serve the public interest to lower the standards for service. But more importantly, it promotes the needs of administrators over the best of interests of gifted children.

The current gifted operating standards offer an incredibly wide range of options for service. The Gifted Advisory Council recommended loosening of ratios and proposing a process by which districts could waive some of the parameters of service, such as staff ratios, provided they can prove their services are still effective. But there is a vast difference between a controlled environment that allows for flexibility while ensuring children are still provided appropriate opportunities and an environment that allows for an “anything goes” approach with no defined inputs,

processes, outputs, or accountability measures. I believe the waiver approach recommended by the Gifted Advisory Council and refined by OAGC in our input document to the Ohio Department of Education represents a strong compromise that will allow districts with a proven track-record with gifted students some level of flexibility while ensuring minimal safeguards for students while appropriate outputs are developed. High quality, research-based inputs, processes, and outputs are all necessary for the successful education of Ohio's gifted students.

“One of the most important state-policy changes that can be made in Ohio is to simultaneously hold principals and superintendents accountable for the performance of their students using multiple measurements while simultaneously giving them greater flexibility in how they spend money, how they organize teachers and staff, and how they approach education. This will mean that some requirements, like the new Third Grade reading guarantee and end-of-course exams for high school students, have clear, specific, and sometimes increased outcome requirements set by the state. In other cases, like the proposed gifted education regulations, it means eliminating the input-based micromanagement of staffing and service delivery that exists currently.”

*Why is it important for underperforming 3rd graders to have set time instruction ratios and qualified staff to provide services? It is important because research indicates these inputs are effective. Likewise, there is huge body of research that supports trained staff and instruction time ratios for gifted students. So why would we ignore that research and eliminate any standards for gifted students who are underperforming? This highly disparate treatment is bewildering and guaranteed to lower the achievement level of gifted students. Ohio Revised Code was amended in HB 59 to require that operating standards would not be implemented to close the achievement gap by suppressing the growth of the higher achieving students. The new draft standards will do just that if left unaltered. The problem faced by gifted students isn't micromanagement; the problem is that there has been **no** management (oversight) of staffing and service delivery for years.*

“In the case of gifted education, this will mean maintaining and strengthening Written Education Plan; continuing to require differentiated instruction; and establishing specific screening and assessment requirements. It will not mean micromanagement of practices by the Ohio Department of Education in a host of areas that are currently addressed.”

We do need to strengthen the Written Education Plan (WEP) because these plans are currently little more than a checklist in many districts. The proposal from the Gifted Advisory Committee did include elements of strengthening the Written Education Plan, suggestions for ensuring the use of differentiated instruction in accordance with research outcomes, and specific screening and assessment requirements, all of which were removed in the posted draft. Perhaps it is time to discuss infusing WEPs with some of the safeguards and due process measures that are provided to students with disabilities.

*With regard to differentiation, let me be very clear. There is no requirement to differentiate instruction for gifted students in the classroom, **and the research shows that very few gifted students will receive adequate differentiated instruction without the support of a trained gifted professional.** If we are guided by research, the option of serving gifted students in a regular classroom by untrained staff should be removed from the draft standards as recommended by OAGC. Research shows this model is only effective if classroom teachers are provided deep levels of profession development related to gifted education (ie. 30 clock hours per year) and if there are high levels of weekly support from trained gifted professionals. Without this level of training and support, this model inevitably fails, and few gifted children show the growth gains of which they are capable. This can be seen in a recent email I received from a gifted intervention specialist. He writes, “In the district where I serve as a gifted specialist, we have built a robust program for gifted students in our intermediate school. In grades 3 through 6, identified students are grouped in a stand-alone classroom with a certified gifted specialist as the teacher of record for language arts and math. Last year our students in this school achieved a Gifted Value Added grade of A. Students move on from this program to the junior high school in the district. The 7th and 8th grade gifted students are placed in “honors” classes mixed with non-identified students to be served with “differentiated” lessons. This is virtually the same model described in the proposed Operating Standards. Last year those students achieved a Gifted Value Added grade of F. This is a small but perfect example of the outcomes that can be expected when gifted students are not*

served by qualified teachers in a rigorous, engaging program.” This is not the only feedback from gifted staff I have received about the inadequacies of general classroom service.

“The inputs based approach of current law is not working, and keeping it will not improve student success. Will requiring a building principal to spend more money on administrative staff instead of services really help students? That is what the current regulations can require. Does pretending that existing specific requirements are leading to quality services today? Based on the dozens of letters have received over the last several days, I believe the answer is no.”

*There is wide body of research that demonstrates that the inputs and processes that are in the current standards do lead to gifted success. There has always been a marked difference in the performance on the OAAs between those students who receive services and those who do not. ([Please view the 2012 State of the State in Gifted Education presentation prepared by the ODE gifted consultants](#)). Now, there is compelling evidence based on the value-added output that the optional regulations or standards do indeed lead to quality services. In looking at the districts receiving an “A” in their value-added subgroup measure versus those receiving an “F,” there is a distinct gap between the identification and service levels in the two groups. In “A” districts, almost **72%** more gifted students are identified than those in “F” districts, and almost **65%** more students are served in the “A” subgroups as those in the “F” groups. When one drills down to the grade bands where value-added is calculated, the difference becomes even more remarkable. In the “A” district group, **64%** more gifted students are identified than those in the “F” groups, and **over double (122%)** the number of students are served in the “A” subgroups as those in the “F” groups. These figures strongly suggest there is much more than a coincidental relationship between the identification and service of gifted students based on the current standards (regulations). These statistics should give state board of education members pause before they eliminate the standards of time, staff, and training. Existing specific requirements that have led to great success when followed in districts, and they, therefore, should be required in all districts. Pretending that the elimination of all quality standards when the evidence shows they the lead to high quality outputs is not in the best interest of gifted children.*

It should be noted that the current system does not require the principal to spend any money on administrative services for gifted students. Districts are not required to serve gifted children at all. What the law currently says is that district personnel without appropriate training cannot represent themselves as being a trained gifted professional. To allow this misrepresentation of knowledge does a disservice to parents and the public-at-large.

“While I understand that you are concerned about the proposed gifted education standards, I believe that keeping the same system that we have used for a number of years will not lead to improvement of gifted education. Instead, it will maintain a status quo that all agree is unacceptable.”

Eliminating all quality standards is not going to solve the problem in districts where they have never been implemented in the first place. If that logic worked, why did we adopt the Ohio New Learning Standards when we determined that the previous set of standards wasn’t rigorous enough? Aren’t they more of the same and then some when it comes to curriculum for our students? We adopted those standards because we thought the increased rigor and specificity would benefit our students. The same is true of the operating standards as proposed by the Gifted Advisory Committee and endorsed by OAGC. Gifted students need better quality inputs, processes, and outputs. That should be our shared goal.

“I believe that we can help gifted students more by holding districts accountable for student success. This can be achieved by incorporating gifted-specific metrics into district and school accountability systems and report cards. These measures tell school leaders where they need to focus their work, and allow the public to hold those leaders accountable through our democratic processes.”

While I agree we should develop better gifted metrics for the report card, there are some major limitations that we need to face. First, outcome measures for the full range of gifted students, even if outlined and ready to go, cannot be implemented before the end of 2014/2015. Second, if we are realistic, outcome measures for gifted students will

take much time, research, and money to develop. In order to truly measure the effectiveness of academic growth, the state will need to explore the use of above-grade level test measures both in the currently tested areas of math and reading in grades 3 – 8 and in all subject areas at all grade levels. Is the state board prepared to fund and implement this? Third, even if the most perfect set of outcomes were to be devised, the only measure currently on the state report for gifted beyond the value-added subgroup measure is the gifted performance indicator. This measure does not have the same level of accountability as the early literacy measure. It is merely a subset of a number of other indicators and can be easily lost in a composite grade. Will ODE and State Board members lobby the General Assembly to increase the value of the gifted performance indicator? Without increased importance on the reports card, all the gifted outputs in the world will not matter to districts. Finally, ODE has shown little desire or level of seriousness in developing appropriate outcome measures for gifted students. Will this suddenly change once all inputs are removed? It does not seem likely.

“Unfortunately for this rule making review, the metrics-development process is separate from reviewing operating standards. But the fact that standards are created through a different rule making mechanism does not diminish their important or necessitate changes to the proposed gifted education operating standards regulations.”

Unfortunately, without such metrics in place, gifted children will be left with no accountability mechanism to protect them and no parameters for service either. Services will be watered down to the point where anything will count. We will effectively eviscerate the one outcome that could have helped in the future: the gifted performance indicator. The indicator is based partially on performance on state test scores (meaningless for this population as the cut scores are so low) and partially on the numbers of gifted students served. By allowing an anything-goes approach to service, the state will pull off a major deception on the public. All gifted students will soon be reported as served merely because they are sitting in a classroom. It is a cynical solution to a problem that has far-reaching consequences. Minimum standards (ie. regulations) ensure that the definition of service means something. The standards are there to safeguard children and the public trust in what the state is allowing to happen in school districts.

“Last week, I met with representatives of the gifted education community, and I will do so again on September 23. At those meetings, I have reaffirmed (and plan to reaffirm) that the state is making this inputs-to-outcomes shift across the entirety of education. To the extent that they are concerned that the current outcome measures to not adequately address gifted-education issues, I have encouraged them to recommend new or different measures.”

The gifted community has been talking about developing outcome measures since 2009. I personally have met with ODE personnel multiple times to discuss how best to implement some of our ideas. But I cannot nor can any gifted advocate do the work of the department and the state board. Why wasn't the gifted performance indicator implemented in 2012 as ORC (Ohio Revised Code) required it to be? Why did ODE fail to develop a gifted dashboard? To be frank, the only outcome measure that is currently useful is the gifted value-added subgroup measure. This measure only exists because the gifted community worked with the Ohio General Assembly to mandate it. ODE refused to consider the idea. This new emphasis on outputs is welcome, but it is by no means certain that it will actually be implemented with any kind of integrity. Given the history of our advocacy with the department to create such outputs and their inexistence to date, I remain hopeful but a bit skeptical about the future implementation of outputs. Gifted advocates should be wary about allowing quality of standards of service to be eliminated before these output measures are in place and evaluated as to their effectiveness.

“To date, I have received no recommendations for new measures from gifted advocates. However, I have been told that creating such metrics will be difficult, and that time will be necessary to identify and craft them. I disagree. Advocates have been very quick to assert that a wealth of research supports the value of gifted services. (I agree.) Turning that research and those identified outcomes into performance measures is not as difficult as asserted.”

As I have stated, OAGC is happy to work with the appropriate people on the board and within the department to develop outputs, and we are working with the appropriate individuals to provide input. However, that is a process that is separate from the development of gifted operating standards. The Gifted Advisory Council spent hours working on research-based standards. Research says trained staff matters. Research says quality processes matter. As Chester Finn of the Fordham Foundation says, "It is like having a good cook versus a bad one: the ingredients might be identical, but one produces something worth eating." In Ohio, we can show that trained gifted staff are those good cooks. We can show that the current inputs produce results for gifted children that are meaningful. Why would we throw the cook and the recipe for success out before we have any other system in place that has any proven level of effectiveness?

"I encourage you, as someone interested in gifted education, to work with others in the gifted-education advocacy community to identify and craft new measures for incorporation into state accountability systems. Your work will improve education for gifted students, and more effectively ensure that resources and effort are placed on gifted education in every district than the current input-focused operating regulations could ever do."

At least until such time as gifted outputs are implemented, it is critically important to maintain safeguards for the gifted students in Ohio who are lucky enough to live in a district that does see the value of gifted services. OAGC stands ready to offer, as we have in the past, research, input, and advice in the development of more coherent output measures for gifted students, but gifted advocates cannot develop or implement these measures. That is up to the Ohio Department of Education under the direction of the State Board of Education. And, thus far, there has been a distinct lack of progress over the past 4 years to move forward in this area.

I hope that through continued discussion with members of the State Board of Education we can reach a compromise position with the gifted community that will allow us to move forward to create better output measures for gifted children, as we all desire, while protecting the services to gifted children currently served, which we should all desire to do as well.

Respectfully,

Ann Sheldon

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