

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR'S MESSAGE

By Abbie Sigmon, OAGC Executive Director

As I unpack and review my notes from my first-ever National Association for Gifted Children Annual Conference, I am reminded why I chose to apply for this job: I wanted a challenge. While I never expected my first few months to be full of such change and challenge at the Statehouse and with the State Board of Education, I am excited for the future. I am excited for the future of the OAGC.

The NAGC provided me the chance to meet with other state affiliate executive directors and to discuss what we see as opportunities for our future. In some states, with no rules or laws around gifted identification, advocates for gifted education hope to bring legislation to their state officials. In other states, they are celebrating the recent passage of universal screening legislation. As I focus on future goals for the OAGC, I am excited by the challenge.

I want to thank our OAGC board for their support during my first few months as executive director. Countless e-mails, phone calls, Zooms, Google Meets, and text messages over the past few months have helped me become stronger and more confident in this role. There's no better example of their support than the success of our 71st Annual Fall Conference. With well over 600 people in attendance, this conference was a complete triumph.

Let's do it again in 2024!



OAGC Executive Director, Abbie Sigmon

“THEY’LL TURN OUT FINE” – AND OTHER LIES WE’VE HEARD

By Caitlin Wood, *Coordinator Division Chair*

“Gifted students are smart; they’ll turn out fine no matter what.”

“I’ve got to worry about my lowest kids; they’ve got the biggest needs.”

“I don’t have time to plan for everyone, so they can just read if they finish early.”

“Let’s keep them spread out between classes so they can be examples of good students for other kids.”

“Can’t we just use them as peer tutors?”

“They’re gifted, so they can’t be on an IEP.”

In working with districts and educators across the state, I have heard various versions of a similar sentiment time and again, from administrators, teachers, or other personnel connected to education: the assumption that gifted students are “smart” and should be able to make it through without significant consideration or accommodation. In response, I challenge you to find sessions on gifted students or services at statewide conferences for teachers, administrators, or school board members. Rarely are there gifted-specific sessions, and at best we see casual mention in a description under “special populations” or something related to report-card indicators. The current approach, in general, is often to rely on their innate abilities to get them to good enough.

But what is good enough? Is it measured by passing Ohio’s state tests? Passing a class? Graduating? Where do we set the bar for affording these students their right to learn and grow, the same as we do for other populations?

In reality, we know this population is as far from average as many of our students in special education with regard to academic performance, social-emotional needs, and asynchronous development. Often their needs are ignored until there is a plateau in performance, at which point the consensus unfortunately can be that they were misidentified initially. In reality, perhaps years of failing to support their very real needs have culminated in a student now falling short of his or her potential.

In an era of limited gifted funding and numerous other state mandates seemingly pulling attention

away from our gifted population, it is more important than ever to acknowledge and advocate for the unique needs of gifted students. Our brightest students are buried under the weight of the increasingly overflowing plates of classroom teachers, and we can no longer afford to let them fade into the corners of our classrooms.

So what *do* they need?

ACADEMIC SUPPORT.

Many conversations surrounding gifted services focus on what can be fit into preexisting structures and schedules, instead of analyzing what service options and resources will best serve gifted students. Staffing, curriculum, scheduling, progress monitoring, and instructional decisions should be made with gifted students in mind. Staff assigned as gifted service providers, if not gifted intervention specialists, should be selected for their ability (and willingness) to effectively differentiate their curriculum. They should be open to ongoing professional development in instructional strategies that allow for individualization, compacting, and creativity. Curricula and assessments should be analyzed for ceiling height and student population alignment. Schedules should be structured to allow flexibility, especially for accelerated students or those who will participate in pull-out gifted programming. Instructional decisions or mandates should focus on providing opportunities for gifted students to be appropriately challenged and appropriately supported in meeting those challenges. Students need frequent opportunities to take academic risks with rigorous content, instead of simply being given extra work when they finish before their peers. In short, all academic decisions should be made with consideration for gifted students just as they are for other student populations, instead of making gifted service work once all else has been decided.

SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL SUPPORT.

At a state level, there has been a push in recent years toward providing social-emotional support in schools, but gifted students are often overlooked in this area. Many educators equate high achievement with high functioning in all areas, and that often is not true. Like many students in this post-Covid era, gifted students

are struggling with anxiety and stress at increasing levels. Add to that some of the typical struggles of gifted students, such as imposter syndrome, perfectionism, ADHD, increased sensitivity, self-criticism, and overexcitabilities; these factors can quickly curb a gifted student's potential. These effects can show up as off-task behavior, boredom, or even executive functioning struggles. Gifted students can benefit from direct instruction in coping and self-regulation strategies, frequent metacognitive and reflective activities, goal setting and future planning, conferencing with a trusted adult or peer, access to guidance counselors, and potentially other wraparound services. Helping students overcome these mental barriers can help clear the path toward greater academic growth.

ASYNCHRONOUS DEVELOPMENT SUPPORT.

While gifted students can be so far ahead of their peers in some ways, they often lag behind in other ways, especially with regard to social interactions and executive functioning. Asynchronous development might give them huge vocabularies, but they might lack the words to make a friend. They might be able to grasp concepts on global relations, but struggle to grasp how to work effectively in a group. And they might be able to write computer code but struggle to write their name legibly. It is important to remember that these students might not have high achievement or ability in all academic areas. It is very possible to have a student gifted in one area but with a disability in another area. Careful consideration of quantitative and qualitative data can help teachers and administrators ensure that they are not overlooking these students with split academic profiles or distinct needs in peer relations or executive functioning. Perhaps behavioral coaching for social interactions, personalized trackers or explicit routines for classroom functions, or more structured supports laid out in an IEP or 504 are necessary. It is important for teachers to be cognizant of these possibilities and to advocate for their gifted students to receive the support they need.

These students need us to be their advocates and to empower them to advocate for themselves. Let's make it a priority to consider these students in educational programming decisions and to have their needs acknowledged, supported, and taken seriously to help them reach their full potential. We simply cannot afford to let our brightest students be an afterthought.

ADVOCACY CORNER

By Abbie Sigmon

Nothing has made bigger education news this year in Ohio than the passage of Senate Bill 1 (Reform the Department of Education). Citing a lack of oversight and accountability within the Ohio Department of Education and the State Board of Education, proponents of this legislation pushed to shift control of K–12 public education from democratically elected officials to a cabinet position within Governor DeWine's office. The nationwide trend of shifting power from public-facing elected officials to executive appointees has reached Ohio's public education.

This trend, as outlined by author Daniel Hopkins in his book *The Increasingly United States: How and Why American Political Behavior Nationalized*, is likely born out of a decrease in community involvement, an increase in political party attachment, and a shift away from printed news outlets. As school boards became a prominent locus for democratic public discourse, so criticism of the institutions grew. State and local school boards have long been among the last bastions of public discourse in the United States. Most boards meet monthly, during evening hours, and allow for public comment: a great way to be a part of the democratic process. As public discord around COVID masking and vaccines, critical race theory, parental rights, low test scores, low staffing levels, and so on has grown, the elected board of education officials holding these meetings often became the source and object of the public's anger.

Citing a need for accountability and a stronger workforce, Statehouse Republicans championed SB1. Senate president Matt Huffman (R-Lima) said that SB1 would allow for a quicker and more responsive department with the "ability to act on specific problems." As hearings continued, most legislators focused on the problem of low test scores (specifically 3rd-grade reading scores). Charitably, SB1 will streamline communication and effective education policies throughout the state, which could lead to an increase in testing scores.

With all these efforts to increase student testing scores, inclusion and equity in education remain high priorities across the nation. The National Working Group on Advanced Education, created by the Fordham Institute, released the report "Building a Wider, More Diverse Pipeline of Advanced Learners (<https://fordhaminstitute.org/national/research/building-wider-more-diverse-pipeline-advanced-learners#appendix-a-research-gaps>) This report outlines 36 recommendations to build a network of opportunities for advanced learners throughout K–12 education.

These recommendations span identification strategies (local norms, universal screening), acceleration (early kindergarten, advanced courses, grade skipping), social and emotional learning supports (cultural relevance, positive school culture), and state and local policies (public reporting, mandate acceleration, and expanding funding). To that end, NAGC officials hinted at a possible reintroduction of the Advanced Coursework Equity Act, sponsored by Senator Cory Booker (D-NJ) and Representative Joaquin Castro (D-TX). This bill

would attempt to “increase the enrollment and performance of underrepresented students in advanced courses and programs” by creating a competitive grant program worth a total of \$800 million. States and school districts could apply for up to \$60 million to cover the cost of often prohibitively expensive examination fees, to expand advanced coursework enrollment, and to train or hire new teachers to teach advanced coursework.

Zooming back into Ohio-specific politics, this Advocacy Corner will provide a play-by-play of the passage and implementation of SB1, inform you of changes to gifted education in the state, and outline current Ohio bills affecting gifted children.

The Creation of the Ohio Department of Education and Workforce

The Ohio Department of Education has been reshaped, renamed, -relitigated, and rearranged. The State Board of Education has had most of its power stripped away. As of the writing of this article, Governor Mike DeWine has appointed Steve Dackin as the director of the Ohio Department of Education and Workforce. The gifted education department has moved from the Office for Exceptional Children to the Office of Learning and Instructional Strategies located in the Center for Teaching. How did we get here? Who has been involved? And what can we expect from this new department for the future of gifted children in the state of Ohio?

Senate Bill 1 (Reform the Department of Education) was formally introduced in early January of this year by Senator Reineke (R-Tiffin). With a complete majority in both the Ohio House and Ohio Senate, a bill with such priority to be named SB1 was assured passage during this General Assembly. Contentious hearings brought about opponent testimony from organizations like the ACLU, Ohio Education Association, and Honesty for Ohio Education. Opponent testimony focused on the unconstitutionality of current public funding and called the transfer of power from elected school board officials to governor-appointed positions “antidemocratic.” If control of public education in Ohio shifts from non-partisan elected school board officials to a governor-appointed cabinet position, what does accountability look like? What happens when we elect a new governor? How does this unelected cabinet director effectively address the needs of Ohio students?

Senate president Matt Huffman (R-Lima) stated, “For too long, the Department of Education has operated free from effective oversight and accountability.” Citing the apparent free will of the then ODE and the State Board of Education, SB1 was hurried through the Senate and added to House Bill 33 (Operating Budget), which guaranteed its already inevitable passage. Proponent testimony from organizations such as Ohio Excels, Fordham, and the Ohio Chamber of Commerce cited poor test scores, the slow-moving nature of the State Board of Education, and their apparent lack of accountability as reasons for this monumental change in public education in Ohio. Moreso, proponents of this legislation focused on the workforce and on preparing Ohio’s students for jobs (*cough* Intel *cough*).

On October 3, 2023, 90 days after the signing of HB33/SB1 into law, the Department of Education and Workforce was officially established. Or was it? On September 22, 2023, seven members of the Ohio State Board of Education filed a lawsuit to stop the transfer to the governor’s office. This lawsuit asserted that SB1 is an “unconstitutional power grab,” citing the 1953 constitutional amendment that created the State Board of Education and granted it the power to appoint a Superintendent of Public Instruction. Without a repeal of this amendment, they contended, SB1 was unconstitutional. Additionally, the Ohio

constitution has a “three-reading rule,” which requires that a bill be read in each house of the General Assembly on three different days—something that the sponsors of SB1 failed to do. A Franklin County judge granted a temporary restraining order that halted any changes to K–12 education governance. October 2, one day before the official creation of ODEW, a hearing was held on a request for a preliminary injunction. As the creation of the ODEW continued, control of K–12 education was left in legal limbo. Finally, on October 20, a Franklin County Common Pleas Court judge denied the preliminary injunction. This dissolved the temporary restraining order and officially allowed the transfer of power from the State Board of Education to the newly created Ohio Department of Education and Workforce.

After the passage of HB33/SB1 on July 3, 2023, DeWine had 90 days to appoint the director of ODEW. The governor’s office held stakeholder meetings, interviewed multiple candidates, and (after a few extensions) named Steve Dackin as the new director on November 9. Once confirmed by the Senate, Dackin will appoint a director of the Division of Primary and Secondary Education and a director of the Division of Career-Technical Education. Dackin was superintendent of Reynoldsburg City Schools from 2007 to 2014, after which he became the superintendent of school and community partnerships for Columbus State Community College through the end of 2021.

This appointment is not without some controversy. In early 2022, Dackin served as the vice president of the Ohio State Board of Education, which gave him access to all job applications for the vacant state superintendent position. Just before the deadline for applications for the state superintendent position, Dackin resigned from his position. Dackin was elected as the superintendent of the State Board of Education on May 10, 2022, and officially began his role on May 23, 2022. Between his election and official start, an ethics investigation was opened into Dackin because of his ability to review and read all other applicant information. On June 3, 2022, Dackin resigned from his position as superintendent, taking no compensation for his 11 days in office. As of the writing of this article, Dackin has not yet been confirmed by the Ohio Senate, but no concrete opposition has surfaced, and he will serve as the first director of the Ohio Department of Education and Workforce.

The State Board of Education is not completely powerless. It still will oversee the hiring of a state superintendent of public instruction (currently the interim is Chris Woolard). The State Board of education will also continue to issue educator licenses; evaluate background checks; investigate and resolve educator misconduct; administer school counselor and teacher evaluation systems; oversee the Ohio Teacher of the Year program; and provide staff support to the Educator Standards Board. Their meetings will continue to be broadcast on <https://ohiochannel.org>.

According to the National Association of State Boards of Education, Ohio has joined states such as Delaware, Indiana, New Jersey, and Texas that have a governor-appointed education department head. Throughout the hearings surrounding SB1, the OAGC focused on accountability. Who will be held accountable? Who will answer when (not if!) something goes wrong? Will this massive structural change actually help with responsibility?

While it is hard to know exactly what to expect from the Ohio Department of Education and Workforce, I have spent time researching states with similar state-level education department structures. Many of these state departments have dedicated offices of accountability with extensive data reports available to the public. Specifically, in New Jersey,

this accountability data is broken down into academic achievement, academic progress, graduation rate, English language proficiency, and school quality (absenteeism) indicators. Is this something to expect in Ohio? Let's all cross our fingers.

Restructuring in the Ohio Department of Education and Workforce (or as they often refer to it, "DEW") has placed the Gifted Team under the purview of the Office of Learning and Instructional Strategies instead of the Office for Exceptional Children. The director of this office is Sherry Birchem, who graciously introduced herself during morning announcements at the OAGC Annual Fall Conference. The Gifted Advisory Council (GAC) is now also led by Sherry Birchem (formerly Joe Petrarca).

We are encouraged by our brief meetings with Sherry Birchem and are excited to grow this relationship. Sherry once served as a middle school English language arts teacher, a science teacher, a grade 6–12 curriculum specialist and as a principal at both an elementary and middle school.

The Gifted Advisory Council

The Gifted Advisory Council provided legislative updates during its September meeting. Funding for gifted students has been mostly maintained. Funding formula calculations for identification, referral, gifted intervention specialists, and gifted coordinators remained unchanged. The professional development formulas for the next two fiscal years are as follows:

FY2024 = \$21 x the greater of 10 percent of ADM or percentage of gifted out of ADM (whichever is greater) x State Share Percentage

FY2024 = \$28 x the greater of 10 percent of ADM or percentage of gifted out of ADM (whichever is greater) x State Share Percentage

Gifted funding at educational service centers increased to \$5,357,606, which will be distributed through the unit-based funding methodology in place prior to FY2010.

Gifted Rule Process

The Gifted Rule was slated for completed review by mid-2023. Without a completed 2023 rule review, the current rule is still law. We are in the first six-month timeline extension for the Gifted Rule review, set to expire in January of 2024. A second six-month (until July 2024) timeline extension is likely. The State Board of Education had the responsibility to review all rules created by the Ohio Department of Education. However, with the passage of SB1, this authority is being passed to DEW. So we expect to have a new gifted rule by July of 2024.

The GAC is divided into three workgroups: Equitable Identification Practices, Highly Effective Student Supports and Services, and Job-Embedded Professional Development. Each of these workgroups aims to create a list of draft recommendations to send to DEW for the Gifted Rule revision. Again, we are not completely certain what the Gifted Rule revision process will look like in the newly created DEW, but rest assured that updates will be posted to <https://oagc.com/advocacy/advocacy-alerts/>.

Report Card Info

The 2022–2023 school year report card rankings were released in early October. New for this year is a five-star rating system based on performance in the six following report card components:

Achievement, Progress, Early Literacy, Gap Closing, Graduation, and College, Career, Workforce, and Military Readiness. This is the first time that districts will receive overall ratings; a rating of 3 stars or above means that a school has met standards.

Previously located within the Achievement component, the Gifted Performance Indicator is now included in the Gap Closing component. It measures the performance of gifted-identified student with the three following components: Gifted Performance Index, Gifted Progress (Growth), and a school/districts' performance with both gifted identification and gifted services provided to those identified. To view report cards, visit this website: <https://education.ohio.gov/Topics/Data/Report-Card-Resources>.

Additionally, the latest gifted ranking data have been released for the 2022–2023 school year. The gifted ranking calculation includes the following:

- The percentage of all students identified as gifted in a school district
- The percentage of all students identified and receiving gifted services within a district
- The percentage of all students in a district that receive gifted services
- The Performance Index for all gifted students
- The Value-Added Gifted measure from the district report cards

More information and raw data can be found here: https://education.ohio.gov/lists_and_rankings.

Bills We Are Watching

SB162 (Academic Intervention Services)

This bill would require schools to provide intervention services to any student who scores at or below the "limited" level on the English language arts or math assessments. These interventions could range from tutoring, additional instruction time, extending the school calendar, or additional supports as identified by schools. If passed, this bill would require DEW to audit 5 percent of public schools each year.

SB104 (College Credit Plus Program)

This bill would change the College Credit Plus program by allowing students to sign up for CCP classes each semester instead of following the current April 1 deadline. This bill would also increase the credentialing of high school teachers teaching CCP courses. Additionally, this bill would require open-source materials to be used when available. Lowering book and material costs would reduce barriers for lower-income students interested in taking CCP courses.

To keep abreast of all advocacy news, please check the OAGC website frequently for new policy and advocacy items: <https://oagc.com/advocacy/advocacy-alerts/>.

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