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Parent Advocacy for Culturally Diverse Gifted Students

To hold gifted programs accountable for promoting excellence and equity in terms of program policies and services should be a key goal of parent advocacy for culturally diverse gifted students. Further, to reverse underrepresentation among culturally diverse students in gifted education, the role of parents as advocates is critical. A Gifted Program Advocacy Model is presented to provide a foundation for understanding the advocacy process, as well as an Advocate’s Guide for Assessment of Equity in Gifted Programs. To assist parents in the beginning stages of an advocacy process, barriers for culturally diverse gifted students are discussed, and recommendations are presented to parents to help them understand and use core attributes of giftedness in the advocacy process. As parents understand advocacy efforts around issues of gifted program equity, they are better prepared to develop a plan and take action that serves the needs of their culturally diverse students.

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If you are in a situation where you believe the schools are unresponsive to the needs of your child, and if indeed you have firm evidence of your child’s exceptional characteristics beyond your own subjective prejudice, you can help the schools to make the necessary changes … School leaders and teachers need your [parents] help and companionship in serving the needs of your child. (Sidney P. Marland, Jr., 1981, Former U.S. Commissioner of Education, U.S. Office of Education, Department of Health, Education and Welfare)

In 1981, MARLAND’S charge to parents of gifted students followed the first national public pol-
Table 1
National Trends in Representation of Culturally Diverse Students in Gifted Education Programs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cultural Group</th>
<th>A. Percentages of Student Population</th>
<th>B. Percentages of Culturally Diverse Students in Gifted Programs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic Americans</td>
<td>8.6%</td>
<td>13.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Indians</td>
<td>0.5%</td>
<td>1.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian Americans</td>
<td>2.6%</td>
<td>4.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African Americans</td>
<td>25.8%</td>
<td>21.1%</td>
</tr>
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*O = margin of overrepresentation; U = margin of underrepresentation. Percentage of representation based on the following calculation with respect to corresponding year: 1 − (B/A).


policy in Education of the Gifted and Talented, Volume I: Report to the Congress of the United States (Marland, 1972). Today, his sentiments for parent advocacy resound even more for culturally diverse gifted students, so many of whom appear to lack extensive parent involvement in school settings. Yet the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) law requires schools to solicit parents to play an integral advocacy role in their children’s schooling, at home and at school (U.S. Department of Education, 2003). When a school is identified as “needing improvement, corrective action or restructuring,” NCLB requires local school agencies to provide parents with the school’s report card and up-to-date information about the school. When parents of culturally diverse gifted students are informed and actively involved in the educational policy and practices related to gifted students, they are in a better position to advocate on their children’s behalf and to proactively address issues of equity and excellence (Baldwin, 1987, Castellano, 2003; Donovan & Cross, 2002; Ford, 1998; Ford & Grantham, 2003b; Frasier, 1991, 1997). This article provides guidance for such parents and gifted program personnel or educators who wish to help parents of culturally diverse gifted students to become more effective advocates and reverse patterns of underrepresentation (Table 1) by redressing inadequacies in gifted program policy and practice.

Characteristics of Advocacy in Gifted Education

An issue of Gifted Child Quarterly representing a national study conducted by the National Association of Gifted Children Task Force on Advocacy provides a view of advocacy efforts at the local and state levels. A cross-case analysis conducted by Robinson and Moon (2003) of six case studies examined successful advocacy events on behalf of gifted and talented children, as well as factors that facilitated positive outcomes for advocacy efforts at the state and local levels. One characteristic from the case studies that was crucial to the success of the advocacy effort was leadership. The strength of leadership emerged from professional educators and advocacy organizations working with parents, as well as local parent groups. Robinson and Moon (2003) referred to leaders in these cases as “champions” who generated positive outcomes for gifted programs. Common traits of these champion parent advocates included: (a) motivation, strong persistence and commitment related to creating change; (b) self-education in pursuit of knowledge, knowledge of best practices in gifted education, tacit knowledge of the advocacy context, and practical knowledge of advocacy strategies; and (c) skills in leadership, problem-solving skills, communication, and pub-
lic relations. Four other characteristics that emerged in these case studies centered on advocacy strategies, including planning, collaboration, communication and program development. To more fully understand how some of these characteristics are situated in the advocacy process aimed to address equity among culturally diverse gifted students, Grantham’s Gifted Program Advocacy Model is described.

An Advocacy Model for Culturally Diverse Gifted Students

Grantham’s (2003) research on effective advocacy to increase Black student enrollment in gifted programs provides a Gifted Program Advocacy Model (G-PAM) that concerned gifted program personnel or educators can use to work with parents of culturally diverse students to guide their advocacy efforts. The problems of under-representation among culturally diverse students in gifted programs require parents to coadvocate for equity and excellence. Informed by Mitchell (1981) and Dettmer (1991), the G-PAM represents a four-phase advocacy process: (a) needs assessment, (b) development of an advocacy plan, (c) action contact and follow-up, and (d) evaluation (see Figure 1).

In the G-PAM, these phases promote effective advocacy and influence positive gifted program outcomes. In Phase I, parent advocates conduct a

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<th>Components</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Understanding local level involvement</td>
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<tr>
<td>Understanding state level involvement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identifying target groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focusing on group leadership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surveying opinions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consolidating information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defining supporters/non-supporters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soliciting Advocacy member participation and commitment</td>
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<tr>
<td>Advocates self-encouraging and persevering</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Establishing priorities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defining short-term and long-term goals</td>
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<tr>
<td>Developing support-gaining strategy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developing manner of presenting requests</td>
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<tr>
<td>Taking informal actions</td>
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<tr>
<td>Taking formal actions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflecting on advocacy effort</td>
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<tr>
<td>Recognizing accomplishments</td>
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<tr>
<td>Establishing directions for next advocacy effort</td>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>Phases</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I. Needs Assessment</td>
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<tr>
<td>II. Development of Advocacy Plan</td>
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<tr>
<td>III. Implementation</td>
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<tr>
<td>IV. Follow-up and Evaluation</td>
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Positive Gifted Program Outcomes

Figure 1 Gifted Program Advocacy Model (G-PAM). Copyrighted material from the National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC), 1707 L Street, NW, Suite 550, Washington, DC 20036. This material may not be reproduced without permission from NSGC. For more information on NAGC and gifted children contact NAGC at (202) 785-4268 or visit our Web site at www.nagc.org.

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needs assessment to understand what is going on and what needs to happen in gifted education related to culturally diverse gifted students. In Phase II, parents develop an advocacy plan to address concerns identified in the needs assessment, focusing on what advocates want to accomplish on behalf of culturally diverse gifted students and how they plan to achieve it. Phase III, implementation, emphasizes the manner in which parents as advocates will take action to execute the advocacy plan. Phase IV consists of follow-up and evaluation of advocacy efforts engaged by parents. These four phases provide a framework that informs advocacy efforts and generates positive outcomes for gifted programs. Embedded within each phase are specific tasks or domains of advocacy that relate to each of the four phases of the G-PAM (see Figure 1).

Phase I: Needs Assessment

When engaging in effective needs-assessment efforts, gifted program personnel are working with parent advocates helping them to gain an understanding of local and state level involvement in gifted education. They identify target groups that can have significant influences on gifted programs and services for culturally diverse students. After target groups have been identified, advocacy members determine who the leaders are, and survey opinions relative to gifted education for culturally diverse students. An important aspect of the needs assessment for parents is to recognize who is who, what they think of equity issues in gifted education, and on what side of the fence they stand. This is the result of consolidating information and defining supporters and nonsupporters of balancing underrepresentation in gifted education. In Table 2, an Advocate’s Guide for Assessment of Equity in Gifted Programs is presented to assist parents in the needs assessment process to better understand culturally diverse students. The issues in the guide are common to practitioners and researchers who proactively address underrepresentation and underachievement among culturally diverse gifted students, yet they are not exhaustive (Ford & Grantham, 2003a). Understanding the barriers to gifted program equity is complex and requires the support of conscientious gifted program personnel to effectively collect and interpret the information.

Phase II: Development of Advocacy Plan

Once a needs assessment has been conducted and parent advocates know what is happening (and needs to happen) to address the needs of culturally diverse students, an advocacy plan is developed. Effective advocacy efforts to develop an advocacy plan occur when parents solicit increased participation and commitment from other advocates. In addition, parent advocates provide group encouragement and perseverance to strengthen their efforts within the community and school (Walker, 2002). When parents establish priorities and their short- and long-term goals related to equity and excellence are well-defined, then advocacy efforts are likely to have greater success. The parent advocacy plan also includes the development of support-gaining strategies for culturally diverse gifted students. Specifically, in a case study of advocacy to increase Black student enrollment in the gifted program, Grantham (2003) found that policy designed to desegregate the gifted program was used as part of an advocacy plan. Three goals were to: (a) monitor nominations to see that minorities are included, (b) monitor the number of students involved in the special activities of the gifted program to see that minorities are included, and (c) plan to conduct parent meetings and conferences. Goals such as this that promote equity through accountability provided a framework for the action to be taken that resulted in increased representation. Parent advocates should borrow from school districts whose advocacy plans have included initiatives that address equity and excellence.

Phase III: Implementation

This phase consists primarily of two components: parent advocates taking action in an informal or formal manner. Informal actions may occur when, for example, in passing conversation with teachers in the school or community, parents express their interest in seeing more cultur-
Table 2
Advocate's Guide for Assessment of Equity in Gifted Program

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Equity Domain to Assess</th>
<th>Questions to Pursue by Advocates</th>
</tr>
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</table>
| Statistical analysis of district and gifted enrollment by demographic variables | • What is the composition of the district’s student enrollment by demographic variables, including race or ethnicity, language, gender, and socioeconomic status?  
• What is the composition of the student population receiving gifted services by demographic variables, including race or ethnicity, language, gender, and socioeconomic status?  
• Determine if culturally diverse students are statistically underrepresented in gifted programs. A statistically significant underrepresentation of culturally diverse students warrants a further, school-by-school inquiry including statistical data and analyses regarding  
  o Number (%) of students by demographic variable referred for evaluation of gifted eligibility;  
  o Number (%) of students by demographic variable determined eligible for gifted services;  
  o Number (%) of students by demographic variable withdrawing from, or otherwise discontinuing participation in, gifted programs or services. |
| Gifted program notice | • Is the notice of the gifted program, with respect to both content and method of dissemination, effective?  
• Does the notice clearly explain the purpose of the program, referral and screening procedures, eligibility criteria, and identify the district’s contact person?  
• Is the notice provided annually to students, parents, and guardians, in a manner designed to reach all segments of the school community? |
| Gifted program referral and screening of students | • Are multiple referral sources (e.g., teachers, parents, etc.,) used and accessible to and utilized by all segments of the school community?  
• Have teachers and other district staff involved in the referral process been trained or provided guidance regarding the characteristics of giftedness in general, and their manifestation giftedness students from culturally diverse backgrounds?  
• Are the referral and screening criteria applied in a nondiscriminatory manner?  
• Are all referral and screening criteria or guidelines directly related to the purpose of the gifted program?  
• Are the standardized tests and cut-off scores appropriate (valid and reliable) for the purpose of screening culturally diverse students for the gifted program? |
| Evaluation and placement of students in the gifted program | • Are the eligibility criteria applied in a nondiscriminatory manner?  
• Are the eligibility criteria consistent with the purpose and implementation of the gifted program?  
• Are assessment instruments and measures and cut-off scores appropriate (valid and reliable) for the purpose of identifying students for gifted services?  
• To the extent that subjective assessment criteria are utilized, have those individuals conducting the assessments been provided guidelines and training to ensure proper evaluations? |
| Gifted program student participation | • Are alternative assessment instruments utilized in appropriate circumstances?  
• Are continued eligibility standards or criteria and procedures applied in a nondiscriminatory manner and do they ensure equal access for all qualified students?  
• Are continued eligibility standards or criteria applied in a nondiscriminatory manner?  
• Are continued eligibility standards or criteria consistent with the purpose and implementation of the gifted program? |
ally diverse students in gifted programs. Formal actions may relate to parent advocates organizing (or collaborating with school administrators to organize) a presentation by an expert in gifted education on characteristics of gifted students and barriers to equitable representation among culturally diverse students in gifted programs. The underlying goal of the parent advocacy plan that warrants this type of action may be to change the local gifted program identification policies and procedures. According to Grantham (2003), these types of informal and formal actions taken by parents who worked with a gifted program coordinator generated positive outcomes in the representation of gifted program. For starters, parents can address the following three action areas prior to taking other formal actions.

1. Gifted program timelines: Contact the school to find out when and how they assess students for the gifted program and when forms are due, and so on.

2. General testing issues: Go to the city or county library or the library of a local college or university to consult sources on testing, interpreting test scores, and so on.

3. Gifted program policies and procedures: Contact the gifted program coordinator or the state department for information on the identification procedure for gifted programs, the appeals process, and general information on the type of program experiences parents should expect for children should they be eligible for services.

Phase IV: Follow-up and Evaluation

Once action has been taken to advance an advocacy plan, efforts to follow-up and evaluate the outcomes are necessary. In this phase, advocacy members reflect on their efforts to determine level of effectiveness in various areas, such as recognizing accomplishments related to culturally diverse gifted students’ progress (e.g., achievement, gifted education participation, etc.), and establishing new directions to work toward other goals that promote equity and excellence in gifted education. It is noteworthy that the National Parent Teacher Association (National PTA Web site, 2004), promotes six national standards that are indicators of a quality parent and family involvement program. These standards inform the G-PAM and can be used to guide areas of evaluation related to the parent advocacy group functionality. Standards associated with effective school-initiated gifted program parent advocacy, with the goal of promoting equity and excellence, may be characterized by the following:

1. Effective communication about diversity issues is the foundation for a solid partnership between home and school, where two-way communication is regularly and meaningfully related to the needs and experiences of culturally diverse students in gifted programs.

2. Effective parenting related to diverse students emphasizes the reality that parents are the most important support system in the lives of culturally diverse gifted students, and that gifted program personnel value parental advocacy, and promote and support culturally relevant parenting skills and practices.

3. Promotion of learning among culturally diverse students speaks to parents’ role in the process of helping culturally diverse gifted students at home and valuing their children’s achievement.

4. Consistent volunteering from diverse parents undergirds a welcoming environment in the gifted program, where parental support and assistance for culturally diverse gifted students are sought.

5. Equity- and excellence-oriented school decision making and advocacy relates to parents being full partners in gifted program decisions that affect culturally diverse gifted children and their families; ideally, there is an interdependence between parents and educators where shared authority in decision-making will promote balanced quality programs, parental trust, public confidence, and mutual support of each other’s efforts in helping culturally diverse gifted students succeed.

6. Effective collaborating within diverse community stresses utilization of resources within and beyond the community of culturally diverse students to strengthen their schools, families, and student learning.
Getting Parents Started in the Advocacy Process: Providing a Knowledge Base

To fully understand their role as advocates, culturally diverse families must be knowledgeable and informed. Secured or armed with data, families of culturally diverse students can better appreciate the magnitude of the issues surrounding equity and excellence in school settings and gifted and talented programs. At least three types of information are foundational for families of culturally diverse students as they seek to address and redress concerns: (a) identification barriers, (b) underachievement, and (c) core attributes of giftedness.

Awareness of Underrepresentation Among Culturally Diverse Gifted Students

One of the first steps for parent advocates is to understand inhibiting barriers to the identification of culturally diverse gifted students. The use of ineffective and inappropriate traditional definitions of giftedness and inhibiting identification policies and procedures is historically cited as one of the most egregious barriers (Castellano, 2003; Ford, 1996; Frasier et al., 1995; Frasier & Passow, 1994; Hilliard, 1987). Parents should be aware that federal policy outlined in the 1993 U.S. Department of Education report, National Excellence: A Case for Developing America’s Talent, argues against barriers posed by traditional approaches in gifted education. “Schools must eliminate barriers to participation of economically disadvantaged and minority students with outstanding talents,” and “must develop strategies to serve students from under-represented groups” (U.S. Department of Education, 1993, p. 28). Along these lines, the 1993 federal definition of “gifted” has evolved to reflect current knowledge and thinking in the area of gifted education with a definition of “children with outstanding talent.” This nontraditional definition offers parents of culturally diverse students some policy assurance to reduce barriers in the identification process. According to the federal definition

Children and youth with outstanding talent perform or show the potential for performing at remarkably high levels of accomplishment when compared with others of their age, experience, or environment. These children and youth exhibit high performance capability in intellectual, creative, and/or artistic areas, possess an unusual leadership capacity, or excel in specific academic fields. They require services or activities not ordinarily provided by the schools. Outstanding talents are present in children and youth from all cultural groups, across all economic strata, and in all areas of human endeavor. (p. 27; italics added)

Recognizing Patterns of Underachievement

Parents should realize that, historically, many educators in mainstream society have perceived underachievement among culturally diverse students as the result of intellectual inferiority (Herrnstein & Murray, 1994; Jensen, 1980). Parents must also realize that they are key persons who can raise issues to change misconceptions of how underachievement manifests itself in school contexts. For example, a grandparent of a Head Start student in rural Louisiana raised an underachievement-related issue in this way: “If the corn doesn’t grow, nobody asks what’s wrong with the corn” (Perry, Steele, & Hilliard, 2003). The implication here is that the larger contexts of schools and society influence underachievement among culturally diverse students, yet more often when culturally diverse children underachieve, it is perceived to be due to their intellectual inferiority. Although research does indicate that reasons for underachievement can be student-related (e.g., negative attitude, perfectionism, low academic self-esteem; Ford, 1996), parents of culturally diverse students must also understand how systemic issues influence underachievement.

Hilliard (1991) questioned teachers: “Do we have the will to educate all children?” Underachievement of culturally diverse gifted children may be due to the negative beliefs that teachers have of these youths’ ability to achieve and learn, and their accompanying motivation to educate such students. As advocates, parents of culturally diverse gifted students need to recognize when
some teachers may have these beliefs. In such cases, parents should feel empowered to challenge negative beliefs and assumptions through discussion with their child’s teacher, and if necessary, the administration. Because many gifted classes tend to be overrepresented with gifted students who are White and middle class, parents of culturally diverse students should not overlook the direct or indirect negative expectations that they inherently know exist. Early in their children’s education, parents can start to work with educators to recognize negative systemic patterns as well as proactively address underachievement before it becomes a debilitating issue among culturally diverse gifted students.

Understanding Core Attributes of Giftedness

To more fully understand and appreciate a construct of giftedness and children with outstanding talent, parents of culturally diverse students must be aware of core attributes of giftedness (Frasier et al. 1995). Frasier’s Talent Assessment Profile (F–TAP, Frasier, 1994) is an assessment system that facilitates the collection and display of data from multiple test and nontest sources so that teams of educators, including parent advocates, have information easily available to make recommendations about a student’s needs for gifted program services. Ten core attributes of giftedness provide the foundation for the F–TAP model and for parents to make a referral based on Traits, Attitudes, and Behaviors (TABs) associated with giftedness or children with outstanding talent. Frasier’s TABs and their definitions are:

1. Motivation: Evidence of desire to learn.
2. Interests: A feeling of intentness, passion, concern, or curiosity about something.
3. Communication skills: Highly expressive and effective use of words, numbers, symbols, and so forth.
4. Problem-solving ability: Effective, often inventive, strategies for recognizing and solving problems.
5. Memory: Large storehouse of information on school or nonschool topics.
8. Reasoning: Logical approaches to figuring out solutions.
9. Imagination and creativity: Produces many ideas, highly original.
10. Humor: Bringing two or more heretofore unrelated ideas or planes of thought together in a recognized relationship.

Parent advocates of culturally diverse students need to carefully study the TABs and observe for behaviors in the child’s performance that indicate unusual potential. Using the TABs, parents can develop and maintain a record keeping system for future referral purposes. Frasier recommends that this system does not have to be elaborate but may be initiated by simply designating a box, file or drawer where parents will retain work samples. By keeping records of things that children do at home and by initiating or responding to requests for referrals, parents can effectively participate in advocating for their culturally diverse children.

Benefits of Parental Advocacy to Schools

It is important to acknowledge that although culturally diverse gifted students and their families appear to be the ones who most profit from parental advocacy efforts, schools receive substantial benefits when culturally diverse parents become involved in their children’s education (Friesen & Huff, 1990). Four of such benefits are highlighted here.

Helping Teachers to Understand the Diversity of Student Needs

Educators struggle to know how they can best meet the social and cultural needs of diverse groups of students, particularly when their backgrounds differ from those of their students. Teachers can successfully use parent advocates as resources to help them to discover creative ways of addressing and including a variety of cultural
perspectives within the curriculum and program planning.

Consistency of Expectations

Cooperation and collaboration between parents and school personnel increases the likelihood that there will be consistency of academic and social expectations between home and school settings. When values are shared and reinforced by home and school, culturally diverse gifted students are more likely to display achievement-oriented attitudes and behaviors across contexts. In addition, they will be more strongly encouraged to reach their full potential.

More Complete Understanding of Gifted Behaviors

When schools include parents of culturally diverse students in the gifted program identification and placement decision-making processes, they stand a greater chance of not being overlooked. Educators will be led by and with parents to gain a more complete understanding of the gifted behaviors that culturally diverse students manifest inside and outside of school. Parents may help to raise important questions regarding how culturally diverse gifted students think, feel and behave, particularly when noticing or anticipating a pattern of underachievement.

Parents as Nonpartisan Stakeholders

Parental efforts are more likely to be viewed as purely seeking the benefit of students, in contrast to other educational stakeholders (e.g., elected educational officials, educational consultants) who may, by their efforts, be viewed as acting in their own political or professional interests. Along this line, parents are often free of the institutional and legal constraints that may limit the ability of other stakeholders to advocate for causes that would most benefit culturally diverse gifted students. As nonpartisan advocates, parents’ role in school initiatives to address the needs of culturally diverse gifted students (e.g., policy development, curriculum design and implementation, and program evaluation) can provide the support to make grassroots, as well as large scale school improvements.

Summary

To reverse underrepresentation among culturally diverse gifted students, the role of parents as advocates is critical. To hold schools accountable for administering gifted program policies and services that promote excellence and equity is a key goal of advocacy for the needs of culturally diverse gifted students. This article presented a Gifted Program Advocacy Model with recommendations for parents to engage in different phases of advocacy. When families take an active role in their children’s schooling, everyone benefits.

References


