



Invited Testimony for the Senate Education Committee, January 22, 2025

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Chair Frederick, vice-chair Weber, and members of the committee, I am honored to be here today at the very beginning of this session to discuss the needs of Oregon's Talented and Gifted (TAG) and other high-achieving students on behalf of the Oregon Association for Talented and Gifted (OATAG), a statewide non-profit membership association supporting equity and excellence in education. We believe that all students deserve instruction that will enable them to reach their potential.

The topic for today's session was ongoing challenges for TAG education.

The greatest challenge by far is the persistent myth that TAG students will thrive without intervention. I was at a town hall with Senator Frederick about a month ago, when a teacher said just that. I have heard the same thing from other educators and policy makers. This is simply not true but despite a

strong state mandate, the belief that TAG students can safely be neglected has often prevented schools from providing or even permitting the advanced instruction they need. We do not expect our athletes to excel without adult coaching, or even very talented musicians to succeed without guidance, but we often expect academically gifted students to teach themselves, and sometimes even to coach other students.

Although they may read at an adult level, TAG students are not little adults. They are neuro-diverse children, defined by Oregon law as students with special instructional needs. School committees assess and identify students accordingly but then may fail to provide appropriate services. TAG students also face social and emotional challenges. They may not be well-adjusted, well-behaved, or high achieving. Asynchronous brain development creates anxiety and frustration when their emotional and physical development doesn't keep pace with their intellectual ability, or their learning needs are not met. They may find it difficult to fit into school and struggle to find friends. To understand and address these complex challenges, teachers need both pre-service training and professional development. Although the identification team must have some training, most teachers and administrators lack adequate training, perpetuating myths and inequities. We often hear "All my

students are gifted,” However, every child is different and some students still need accommodations both below or beyond grade level.

The lack of state funding for our TAG mandate leaves it up districts to fund and maintain them. This produces huge inequities. Students in a few districts enjoy well-designed programs; students in other districts receive nothing at all and many students are overlooked. Some districts have been evading accountability for implementing the law.

The number of TAG-identified students has been falling for two decades and is now about 15 percent lower than it was twenty years ago. In 2022/3, more than half of all Oregon districts either did not identify any TAG students or did not report any TAG spending. The lack of training for teachers also contributes to serious disparities among our student groups. Rural, low income, culturally and racially diverse students are most likely to be overlooked or short-changed together with students who are learning English and gifted students with disabilities; that is, twice exceptional or multi-exceptional students.

Funding trends mirror this neglect. Over the past 20 years, as investment in other education programs has grown, total TAG spending has dropped in real

dollars from eight million to less than six and a half million dollars a year. At the beginning of the century, TAG funding was just one-third of one percent of Oregon's education budget; it has fallen to about one-tenth of one percent. It is literally not even a rounding error in the state budget. *Per capita* funding has just recovered to the level it reached in 2004 but only because it is divided among fewer students.

Numerous reports have highlighted this problem, but no action has followed. For example, the recommendations of a TAG task force in 2011 were never implemented.¹ In 2018, the Joint Legislative Committee on Student Success recommended categorical TAG funding together with improvements to data reporting, but these were ignored. More recently, the State Board of Education even resolved to exclude gifted and high-achieving students as a group from the list of student groups experiencing "academic disparities" under in the Student Success Act. This has further erased them from consideration in many other reports and policy initiatives.

Some argue that other Oregon students have greater needs. As the parent of three twice-exceptional students and the grandparent of at least two others, I

have seen how a deficiency-based approach can fail both struggling and advanced learners. When one of my own children had a learning difference, we were not offered any support for their above-level achievement but only for the areas where they were below grade level. I objected to this approach for my own child, and it is equally misguided at a state level. We must move beyond minimum standards to help all students reach their potential.

Overlooking high-potential students isn't just an educational mistake, it's an economic one. It benefits both our overall prosperity and the students themselves. Advanced academic attainment is directly tied to economic growth, but fewer Oregon students are at the "advanced" level than the already low proportion elsewhere in the US. Research has also shown that increasing students' math achievement increases their income into adulthood and yields other significant benefits. One new study finds that the greatest impact is for Hispanic students.²

Leaving students to their own devices no matter how bright they may be is dangerous. Neglect and indifference have corrosive effects on the social and emotional development of all children. Denying talented and gifted students

the opportunity to grow frustrates them and makes them feel unseen. Some of them look for attention by engaging in risky behaviors. Others lose interest in learning, grow depressed, and just go through the motions of attending school while becoming more and more disengaged.

Fortunately, there are proven, cost-effective ways to address these challenges. We can simultaneously reduce the burdens we place on classroom teachers and improve instruction for all students. Better data reports can also help districts identify and support every student to ensure that every child makes growth every year including those who exceed state benchmarks. However, although they are cost-effective, these steps do require a real state-level investment in TAG services and training.

Every child deserves access to an appropriate education. We look forward to working with you to make our education system more effective, more equitable, and more relevant for everyone. Let's unleash the talents of our students who are just waiting for us to act.

¹ "The Quiet Crisis in Talented and Gifted Education in the State of Oregon: Report to the Interim Legislative Education Committees October 1, 2012," Submitted by the Task Force on the Instruction of Talented and Gifted Children as required by Senate Bill 330 (2011) <https://digitalcollections.library.oregon.gov/nodes/view/192023>

² Kevin Werner, Gregory Acs, and Kristin Blagg, “Comparing the Long-Term Impacts of Different Child Well-Being Improvements,” Urban Institute, March 2024.