

Advocates of Gifted Education Urge State, Local Lobbying

By Eileen White



Cambridge, Mass.--The elimination by the Reagan Administration last year of the \$6-million federal program for the gifted and talented, along with the reluctance of state legislators to appropriate funds for such programs, may hamper schools' commitment to providing special programs for gifted students, several researchers and educators told the National Commission on Excellence in Education last week.

Addressing the large audience of New England-area teachers and parent-activists attending the meeting at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, the speakers nevertheless urged advocates of education programs for the gifted to lobby local and state officials for the expansion of gifted-education programs.

The meeting marked the final public hearing on a specific area of education for the 18-member commission, which was appointed last year by President Reagan to recommend reforms for the nation's schools and colleges. After attending a meeting in November to review "25 years of change in education and society," the commissioners will begin work on a report to the President that is scheduled to be completed next March.

Criticized Administration

At the Oct. 15 hearing, Harold Raynolds Jr., Maine's commissioner of education, strongly criticized the Administration and the Congress for eliminating the federal gifted-education program.

The federal program was created as a \$200,000 pilot project in 1972 and was expanded into a national effort in 1978.

"There is no place other than at the federal level for a network for an exchange of ideas among states, educators, and parents," Mr. Raynolds said. "We need modest financial support to exert leverage on states. Because of the federal commitment, we were able to get our state legislature to pass a bill to include the gifted and talented as a categorical program.

"It was only possible because the federal government made a

statement that it was important," he said, drawing loud and sustained applause.

Educators from Connecticut, Rhode Island, and New York State also said that laws in their states had resulted from federal seed money for gifted-education programs. But Mr. Reynolds contended that in a comparatively poor state such as Maine, the federal support had "made all the difference."

"There's no other country that gives such short shrift to its gifted individuals," said June K. Goodman, chairman of the Connecticut state board of education. "It's a national concern," she added.

Successful Programs

Several speakers described successful programs for educating gifted students. Isa Kaftal Zimmerman, assistant superintendent for instruction in the Lexington, Mass., schools, said the "ideal" program would: group children by their special abilities; devote part of the day to "specialized" instruction; provide opportunities for gifted students from one school to meet with those at other schools; advance gifted students from grade to grade ahead of other students in their age groups; and involve specially trained teachers.

The "model" for a special program for gifted children "often can be drawn from extracurricular activities, especially sports programs," she said, explaining that schools should "encourage superior intellectual abilities in the same manner that they encourage superior motor abilities."

William Durden, director of the Center for the Advancement of Academically Talented Youth of The Johns Hopkins University, said that educators of gifted students "should have a sense that there is a limitation to the ability of schools to provide for" such students. "Schools cannot do it all, but that does not diminish the school's role whatsoever," he said.

Acknowledging that many gifted students succeed because of encouragement and support from their parents, Alexinia Baldwin of the State University of New York at Albany urged that educators make an extra effort to identify gifted children from disadvantaged backgrounds--in particular, children from minority groups.

"We need to accept the assumption that giftedness exists in all 'human groupings,'" she said, adding that teachers of disadvantaged students must serve as "mentors."

Sidney Rollins, a representative of the Rhode Island state education department, said that because "gifted and talented children are different from other children and from one another in many ways ..., teachers should be required to hold appropriate certification and endorsement."

"Teachers need to be able to identify a gifted child when they see or hear him," he said. "They should be familiar with how gifted children learn and with how to develop and present curriculum content" for such children.

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