

Testimony given in Harrisburg on 11 April, 2007

## No Gifted Child Left Behind

I would like to thank organizations like PAGE and PEGS for giving this fish a school to swim in. Good morning and thank-you to the members of the Pennsylvania School Board. In front of you is a picture of my son. I provided his picture because I want to put a name and face to this issue. If you really knew my son, you would know that he is a passionate and caring child. Among his current passions is a project to create an illustrated encyclopedia of all of the Star Wars clones. He is intense, funny, creative and herein lies the problem; he is disengaging from school.

What kind of system sets the tone for a boy as young as my eleven year old son to become disengaged?

What is the issue? Is the issue one of indifference?

Is it indifference that so many school districts, despite having laws that say otherwise, are still not in compliance with Chapter 16?

Is it indifference that parents are the first line of defense in getting services for their children?

Is it indifference that the PDE does not have a special committee nor a dedicated parent advisory board devoted to gifted education?

Is it indifference that you have but a handful of parents testifying here today?

Elie Weisel says that the opposite of love is not hate it is indifference. The indifference I am referring to has a much broader scope than simply not caring. I would rather you view it in the way major theologians, like Niebuhr and Martin Luther King do “a lack of knowledge, a failure of will, and a poverty of the imagination.”

To understand this indifference, one must first understand that at the root of this of this problem for parents is fear. I know there is fear because I have cofounded a pre-affiliate of PAGE and have spoken to many parents within our school district. There is a...

Fear of our children's social and emotional welfare

Fear of our children being isolated and perceived as outcast

Fear of our children being set apart and then targeted by bullies

Fear of being too pushy

Fear of retribution

Fear of our own lack of knowledge.

Fear of due process

Fear of monetary loss

It is an isolating battle. These fears may sound irrational, but the school district plays on these fears. I do not share all of these fears. But these fears stand in the way of effective

advocacy. What my parent counterparts don't understand and don't yet realize is that their fears may contribute to an even greater set of issues in the future: underachievement; an inability to fail gracefully and bounce back; and a lack of establishing the requisite study skills that will make our children successful in their future endeavors. Some parents have simply given up.

We have to make discussions about gifted education with school districts safe for the parents.

To make this discussion safe the language of the law needs to be strong and compliance needs to be even stronger. The language of the law should not be ambiguous so as to open the regulation up to interpretation. School districts will comply with what is being inspected. Compliance should include parent input. Compliance monitoring will make gifted education a priority.

There is a pervasive lack of knowledge on the subject of giftedness within our community. Parents don't understand their rights. Teachers don't understand their roles in the identification process and their role in the formulation and implementation of a GIEP. The school district doesn't understand that their non-compliance is creating a new category of children who are being left behind.

As you go through Chapter 16, our school district is non-compliant in practically every way.

Identification does not take place until the end of 2<sup>nd</sup> grade.

The screening that is performed as a part of identification has been in many cases been too restrictive. Had I not educated myself, I would have not known to request in writing a GMDE.

Parents are not offered an explanation of the screening process and have been led to believe that the screening is in fact the Gifted Multidisciplinary Evaluation.

The gifted “program” is an enrichment program called LEAP.

The gifted “program” begins in third grade.

PLEP is not established. My son’s initial PLEP read, “Student is a fifth grader.” His current PLEP does not define his instructional levels.

The GIEP is LEAP, unless you as a parent know to ask for something more than LEAP. However, in our case, without a proper PLEP we can not establish an effective GIEP.

The only short term learning outcome on my son’s GIEP is a self paced, self taught math contract.

There is no concept of differentiation. He gets done with the required regular work then he draws. This situation is not affording him an education of meaningful benefit.

There are no posted policies regarding gifted education and there is no mention of the procedures for identification in the student handbook.

My school district is very good at being passively aggressive. They have taken six months and accomplished nothing more than to identify him as a gifted student. However, just last week at our request, it was determined that he would be accelerated to seventh grade. They have not yet established a PLEP.

I would like to end my testimony by sharing a few quotes with you. The incoming superintendent spoke at our PTO meeting. He asked each of us what we would like him to know. My husband asked him to keep an open mind. He probed my husband for more information. My husband told the superintendent that our issues are related to individualizing a plan for our gifted son. The superintendent proceeded to tell my husband and me that he believes that all children are gifted. I have to say, that in the biblical sense, I too believe that all children have gifts and talents. In the academic sense, however, all children are not gifted. When the differences of these children are downplayed, the whole manner in which a school district approaches the needs of these children is in turn downplayed.

The second quote was from a discussion the assistant superintendent was having with my son at the beginning of one of our many GIEP meetings. My son had just got done explaining that he would just like to be more challenged in

math and be able to move more quickly through the material. The good doctor of education said, "I am 52 years old, and I am here to tell you that life is mundane. You just have to get used to it." When the leadership espouses this type of rhetoric, it goes to the heart of the issue. We as parents are not ONLY being asked to lead the leadership, but we are facing an unspoken uphill battle. When a school district is not in compliance, what we are really faced with is trying to change the way the administration, the teachers and the parents think. It is kind of funny. It does not require a single resource to change your thought process. However, the reality is that the mindset is an obstacle, one so big that it will not change unless the laws pertaining to compliance have teeth. Due process is not a reasonable way to enforce compliance. Parents are not protected. We do not have the protection of recouping lawyers' fees. Nor do we have the technical expertise to represent ourselves. And if a due process case is won, the parents are made to deal with the non-compliant school district that put them there in the first place. Parents should not be the ones who enforce compliance with the law.

I thank you for your thoughtful consideration of this testimony.