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**David Laughton
President, Alberta Associations for Bright Children (AABC)**

**11006 - 125 St. Edmonton, Alberta CANADA T5M 0M1
1-780-454-8846 (voice) david.laughton@ualberta.ca**

About AABC

AABC and its affiliates consist of families who are raising gifted children in Alberta. We also have some institutional and individual members (including schools, school councils, educators, physicians, and psychologists).

We provide social and educational programmes for gifted children of various ages, and frequent information and networking sessions for our adult members. We also have a library of materials about raising and educating gifted children that is available to the public. We have worked with the Ministry, and some school boards and schools in the design of their activities in gifted education, and participate with the Gifted and Talented Education Council of the ATA and the Centre for Gifted Education at the University of Calgary in the Society for the Advancement of Gifted Education (SAGE), which organises an annual conference on gifted education. Finally, we assist members of the public who have questions about raising or educating gifted children. I personally field about 150 calls a year, some from schools seeking advice, but mostly from people who are having problems with the treatment of their gifted children in the education system of this province.

Comments and recommendations

**1. The gifted have special needs, only partially recognised
in legislation**

The gifted and talented can have a major positive impact on our society if they are educated properly. Moreover, a high quality of gifted education would make the province more attractive for families with gifted children, which will help in the recruitment to our province of at least some skilled people in short supply.

Unfortunately, all too often, because many schools in this province are not prepared or willing to recognise giftedness or to deal with it, these precious human resources are wasted, and occasionally lives are destroyed. Many gifted children become bored, and disillusioned with school, or, worse, with education itself. Some develop behaviour problems as a result of their boredom or

frustration at being pigeon-holed into a classroom setting, for which they are not suited. Contrary to myth that gifted students can survive anything because they are smart, the drop-out rates for gifted students are at least comparable to the rates for the general population of students.

Therefore, while it is good that legislation in this province recognises that the gifted and talented have special needs, all too often the gifted go to the end of the special needs queue: their issues are seen as less pressing. Unless a gifted child develops behaviour problems, in which case it is usually the behaviour that is managed, not the root cause of the problem, he or she will not be a squeaky wheel demanding grease. A lack of resources for education in general, and for special needs students in particular, makes a low priority for gifted education a real problem that needs to be rectified.

Moreover, there is no funding category for gifted and talented children with severe special needs, as there is for other special needs populations. There should be, because research has shown that severely gifted children do indeed have severe special needs.

Finally, gifted children with other special needs are particularly at risk for being lost in the shuffle of our stretched school system. Their giftedness is usually masked by other issues. As a result, frequently, they are either not noticed or are misdiagnosed. The identification and programming needs of the gifted with other special needs should be examined more closely than they have in the past, and policy developed to deal with the issues identified..

2. Developmentally appropriate school entry, acceleration, and clustering all work and should be used

If you talk with any competent researcher in gifted education, such as Carolyn Yewchuk, Associate Dean of Education here in Edmonton, or Michael Pyryt, Director of the Centre for Gifted Education in Calgary, he or she will tell you that a review of the research literature shows strongly that developmentally appropriate school entry, acceleration (particularly group acceleration) and clustering all work for improving the education of gifted children. Use of all of these tools will improve the education of the gifted and thus confer benefits on society as a whole. The province should facilitate their use, including the possibility of tele-learning for clustering in rural areas.

Appropriate school entry and acceleration have the extra bonus of reducing costs to the system and providing fiscal benefits to the province. A child, who is with his or her developmental peers, even if he or she is younger than the rest of the class, is likely to need fewer more costly educational interventions. Moreover, he or she will be more productive in society and begin at being so earlier than he or she otherwise would have, paying more taxes sooner. The province is shooting itself in the foot from a purely fiscal point of

view by not having programmes for developmentally appropriate school entry or for individual or group acceleration.

3. There is a provincial role in setting standards for identification, and monitoring programming

The province has role in monitoring the identification processes that are used locally. These need to be more uniform. Right now we have a crazy quilt of processes, including none at all in some districts, for identifying children for the provincial code for giftedness.

Moreover, the identification process should also be more flexible so that obvious identifications can be done at less expense. We do not need an expensive psychologist report to determine that some children have special needs. When a six or seven year old is discussing the intricacies of Dante's Divine Comedy or the relative effects of solar activity and fossil fuel emissions on climate change, that should be clue enough that he or she should have an individual programme plan.

The province also has a role for knowing what programmes different school boards have for gifted education, and at least qualitative indicators of how well those programmes are working, if for no other reason that to facilitate the sharing of best practice.

4. The mandating of local resources and accountability for their use

Each school board should be required to have at least a part-time coordinator of gifted education who develops or maintains procedures and programmes through which gifted and talented students are identified and given appropriate educational opportunities. Their funding should reflect this need. The Edmonton Catholic board has recently done very well on this front, and the Edmonton public board is playing catch up. Many other boards are way behind.

Moreover, each school with gifted students should have a lead gifted educator, at least partially on site, with appropriate training, as a resource person for other teachers, and for parents, in educating gifted children. Most schools do not have such a person, while in-service courses on gifted education are undersubscribed. This needs to be changed.

Principals should be given appropriate resources for gifted education and held accountable for how well they do with those resources, including the hiring and development of appropriate teaching capabilities, and the identification and appropriate placement of gifted children.

In particular, the incentives against appropriate identification and placement should be mitigated by schools boards. Gifted children and our society should

not be short-changed because they are thought to be too costly to identify and educate, or because an educator is worried about the average test scores for their class or school

Conclusion

To conclude, if we really want to create an advantage in this province in the area of gifted education, which we would be wise to do, we need some changes to build on some of the good things that have been done already. We need a change in attitudes and accountability, in programmes and funding.