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April 26, 2015

To: School Budget Committee

Re: Gifted Education included in the State Budget

PAGE thanks the School Budget Committee for allowing gifted education to be presented and respectfully submits the testimony outlined below.

In our state regulations, gifted is Special Education for Gifted Students (Chapter 16) and is not under the umbrella of special education (Chapter 14). To assume that funding for gifted is going to be included under Chapter 14 funding does not clearly define and articulate that this regulatory mandate has the support of legislative representatives. The on-going message you will send to districts, the public, and to your constituents is that gifted students are important by the mandate – but not important enough to be considered as a budgetary line item.

It is imperative that Gifted Education be funded as a separate, clearly identified line item.

When this message is shared with the public and with school officials, those in the power structure of our schools will treat gifted education as a sub-category – just as you are doing by not delineating gifted education as its own line item on the State budget. Our gifted students are not a sub-category. Even in the regulations they are separated as an exceptionality with their own distinct curricular needs and are not classified under special education. Indeed, federal funds are specifically earmarked for special education - which does not include gifted - leaving this section of our state mandate unrecognized financially by both the federal government and by you, our state government. Gifted children and their appropriate education is your responsibility.

Confusion over funding has arisen because historically, prior to 2000, gifted education was part of Chapter 14 and received funding through that line item. When gifted education was separated from Chapter 14 and defined in its own regulation, Chapter 16, it was no longer calculated into the Basic Education Subsidy funding formula, leaving gifted education penniless in the eyes of our state government – and therefore in the eyes of school districts.

It is imperative to clearly define that gifted education is significant and needs funds.

PAGE supports the many items within Chapter 16 that have provided rights for the 68,000+ identified gifted students across our state. Data indicate, however, that there are areas where current research indicates that our support of gifted students has fallen short in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania.

- On the SAT assessments in 2013, Pennsylvania was ranked 37th out of the 50 states in average scores.
- According to NAEP (National Assessment of Educational Progress) analysis, Pennsylvania also has a large and growing Excellence Gap between the percentage of white students scoring at the advanced level on the State PSSA and the percentage of minority or low SES students.
- According to the new national report from the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation, *Equal Talents, Unequal Opportunities: A Report Card on State Support for Academically Talented Low-Income Students*, Pennsylvania earned a meager C+.

These data indicate that our gifted and advanced students are not making the progress and growth that is expected. We must begin to reverse the minimal support provided to our brightest students by providing districts with financial support designated in this arena. The data also indicate that we are failing the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act which includes the Child Find mandate that requires districts to identify all children who may need special education services. Districts have a responsibility to locate and identify students suspected of being gifted as is also mandated in Chapter § 16.21. General.

“(a) Each school district shall adopt and use a system to locate and identify all students within that district who are thought to be gifted and in need of specially designed instruction.”

The lack of funding for Child Find in gifted education impacts the low income students and low income districts the most. PA’s Excellence Gap - that achievement gap between advanced high SES students and advanced low SES students - cannot be closed without targeted funding and attention to the intellectual growth of students in this cohort.

In 2013, House Resolution 139 called for a study to be conducted to determine the status of special education for gifted students in Pennsylvania public school districts and outlined their findings and recommendations in its report. Three of the six recommendations of that study relate to training of our teachers. Gifted students spend the majority of their educational time (85%) in the regular educational setting with teachers who have had little to no training. With specific dollars allocated to gifted education, districts will have the funds to provide for regular education teachers to get this required training.

An expectation outlined in the current teacher evaluation form is the teacher’s ability to address individual student needs and provide the appropriate differentiated curriculum and instruction for gifted students. This obligation is also mandated under Chapters 4 and 16. It is imperative to meet not only students’ cognitive needs, but social/emotional needs as well

through enrichment, acceleration, or a combination of both. Once again, districts need designated financial support to provide the ongoing staff development needed, through time, speakers, curriculum materials, and other resources as necessary. It is imperative that the money be made available so that all teachers receive the ongoing training that includes how to differentiate instruction for all learners, including those that are identified as gifted.

School districts incur significant costs to conduct evaluations to identify gifted students and implement appropriate gifted services like acceleration, specialized grouping, Socratic Seminars, and other specialized materials provided by trained staff. This professional development goes beyond the regular education program. It is important that districts receive financial support so that they can fulfill this obligation.

If you set a separate budget line for gifted, you will help alleviate expenses that districts incur for identification, teacher training, and curricular materials and clarify that gifted education is a priority in our state.

If you set a budget line for gifted funding separate from special education for school districts, it will be established by the Department of Education that Chapter 16 is relevant to the legislators, to our schools, to the future of our state and that designation of funds on **all** levels needs to be re-aligned within every budget.

By creating a separate line item for gifted education, you will send an important message to the educational structure of our state. Gifted education will be recognized – and gifted children – as a separate group with their own financial needs. School districts are well aware of this need, but in order to fully meet their obligation, they need your financial support.

You, the legislature, have mandated the need for gifted education through Chapter 16. Now, you not only have an opportunity – you have a responsibility to recognize and designate a line item specific to fund gifted education in the budget.

Respectfully Submitted on behalf of the PAGE Board,

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