



March 7, 2017

To: State Board of Education and Commissioner Katy Anthes

From:

Susan Miller, President, Jefferson County Association for Gifted Children

Michelle Stone, Board Member/Legislative, Jefferson County Association for Gifted Children

RE: Inclusion of Gifted and Talented Categorical in School Performance Framework and Colorado's State Plan for Every Student Succeeds Act

Dear Members of the State Board of Education and Commissioner Anthes:

We are writing to you today in preparation for your discussion, tomorrow, March 8th regarding Colorado's Plan to comply with Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA).

Under Colorado's Exceptional Children's Education Act (ECEA), special education and gifted and talented students are provided for as a categorical under the state education funding formula. Under the ECEA, "Gifted and Talented Children means those persons between the ages of five and twenty one whose abilities, talents, and potential for accomplishments are so exceptional or developmentally advanced they require special provisions to meet their educational programming needs."

What does this have to do with Colorado's Draft ESSA Plan?

Today an increasing number of Colorado companies face "winner take all" markets, that are dominated by a few very successful competitors like Amazon, Apple, Facebook and Google. The structure of these markets magnifies the impact of even small differences in an organization's level of talent.

For example, according to a recent study by the Boston Consulting Group companies that are "talent magnets" increased their revenues 2.2 times faster, and their profits 1.8 times faster than "talent laggards" (see, "*The Global Leadership and Talent Index*" by BCG, March, 2015).

There is also evidence that even within companies the most talented individuals make a disproportionate contribution to an organization's success (see, "*The Best and The Rest: Revisiting the Norm of Normality of Individual Performance*" by O'Boyle and Aguinis, March 2012).

In short, when it comes to the success of Colorado companies, the quality of the education we provide our gifted students is critical.

While the guiding Federal ESSA specifically calls out gifted learners' needs eight times in their plan, Colorado's state draft plan under the federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) is strangely – and dangerously – silent on this issue.

There are two glaring omissions that need to be corrected in Colorado's ESSA Plan:

First, Colorado's methodology for evaluating school and district performance should provide an incentive for helping as many students as possible reach the advanced level on state academic



standards, (“Exceeds Expectations”), rather than solely focusing on the percent of students who achieve basic proficiency (“Meets Expectations”).

Second, the ESSA plan should explicitly take into consideration the achievement growth of gifted students, to reach their full potential and to move beyond their present flat lined statistical results.

The most recent data show that Colorado has identified about 69,000 K-12 students as gifted. Following the passage of former Representative Cherilyn Peniston’s landmark legislation, HB14-1102, that requires the testing of **all** second graders for giftedness, this number should significantly increase in the years ahead, regardless of their socio-economic standing, where they live, or the box they check to indicate their ethnic background.

In 2017, the taxpayers of Colorado will spend almost half a billion dollars in *base level* funding for our gifted students – but if we don’t modify the state’s draft ESSA plan to allow for tracking growth of identified gifted children, we will have no way to measure the return on this investment. Does that make sense?

As Norman Augustine, former CEO of Lockheed Martin, has noted, “one of the many reasons that America should care about the education of our most talented students is that these individuals will, in their lifetimes, disproportionately create jobs for others, and jobs are the basis of an individual’s standard of living and to a not inconsiderable degree to our national quality of life.”

Judging from our collective behavior, Coloradans strongly support excellence across the spectrum of our community’s activities. We should also demand that our state ESSA plan does the same for our most academically talented children.

Therefore, we would like to highlight those areas in ESSA and the School Performance Framework that need to incorporate the GT categorical, to ensure accountability of our advanced learners for our taxpayers.

The following areas need to include Gifted and Talented categories for measurement and / or inclusion in program curriculum options (ESSA):

Section 1: Achievement

A. Academic Achievement

- i. Provide the baseline and long-term goals in the table below. Subgroups ~ to include Gifted and Talented, in alignment with Colorado’s Exceptional Children’s Education Act, (ECEA) and GT as a Categorical in the State’s education finance formula. We should expect our advanced learners with Advanced Learning Plans to exceed in their area of strength as well as grow. Too often, these students are “exceeding” in a subject area, but their growth is stagnant (see 10 years CSAP, TCAP data for ALP students)

B. Graduation Rate

- i. Description
- ii. Provide baseline and long-term goals for the four-year adjusted cohort graduation rate in the table below. Subgroups ~ to include Gifted and Talented (once again, in alignment with the ECEA and Colorado’s Categoricals, if we are tracking our children with disabilities and English language Learners, both are categoricals, so too should we not be accountable to our advanced learners under the ECEA and categorical funding?)



Section 2: Outreach

Meeting with Stakeholder Groups. While we appreciate the efforts to reach out to stakeholder groups, neither the Colorado Association for Gifted and Talented (CAGT) leadership nor state affiliate parent groups' input were acknowledged or included. In stark comparison, the federal guidelines highlight gifted students' academic needs eight times. And while the Gifted Education State Advisory Committee (GE/SAC) proposed numerous recommendations and suggestions to align with the federal guidelines, only one was granted in the state ESSA draft plan.

"The central Hub and topical Spoke Committees would draw membership primarily from the public and critical education partners." Gifted and Talented, which represents approximately 10 % of the student population across the state, was not party to these conversations, either through CAGT or their affiliates. GT parents are advocates for their children and are critical education partners. Our voice was not incorporated in this process as evident by the lack of accountability in Colorado's ESSA guidelines for advanced learners.

And of the representatives who have a vested interest in the success of ESSA implementation, (page 19, Colorado Draft ESSA state plan):

- Parents
- Taxpayers
- Business Community
- Child Advocacy
- Rural Educator
- Charter Schools
- Alternative Education
- Urban League of Metropolitan Denver
- Colorado Commission on Indian Affairs

Which one of the above spoke for our advanced learners? And of the Spoke Committees, who lifted their concern for accountability for advanced learners?

Perhaps we can hold onto this statement on page 25 of Colorado's ESSA plan

"Additional Groups"

As CDE closes the loop with other critical partners, the department will add into the final plan a description of those interactions that are not yet listed in this draft plan."

GT parents and educators are critical partners and we look forward to interacting with CDE to ensure accountability for GT students is incorporated into this plan.

The following are highlights where Colorado's ESSA plan may be strengthened for our GT students.

Title 1 - Universal

Page 31, ESSA Colorado: *Title I program quality and the differentiation of Title I services and other ESEA program services for subgroups, particularly English Learners. Future Regional Networking Meetings will continue to provide programming guidance and support for serving all subgroups including, but not limited to, economically disadvantaged students, English Learners, and students with disabilities.* Please note, GT was not included in the Subgroups, despite ECEA



and GT's status as a Categorical. GT students are at risk along with those listed and should not be excluded from programming guidance.

Title I does permit local districts to utilize funds for gifted students, but if we are not taking the categorical into account, we may not leverage the funds to realize the goal of "...provid(ing) all children a significant opportunity to receive a fair, equitable, and high-quality education" (page 30, Colorado ESSA). For example, how can we leverage funds to implement strategies, like acceleration, to strengthen academic outcomes for our disadvantage GT students?

Our accountability system empowers us to be accountable to **all** students, including our Gifted and Talented students. We need to ensure Colorado's ESSA plan honors those students, regardless of what school they attend or their socio-economic background.

Title II / III– School Leaders and Teachers

As in prior sections, targets for improvement are set by the state. In Title II, the state sets targets to reduce the number of ineffective teachers that impact various subgroups. Once again GT is not included. We need to ensure that teachers are able to educate **all** students, including gifted students. Funds made available through Title II can be used to build stronger educators that are able to cross socio-economic and cognitive boundaries.

Title IV – Supporting All Students

On page 81 of Colorado's ESSA State Plan, the SEA considers the "academic and non-academic needs of the following subgroups:

- *Low-income students;*
- *Lowest-achieving students;*
- *English learners;*
- *Children with disabilities;*
- *Children and youth in foster care;*
- *Migratory children, including preschool migratory children and migratory children who have dropped out of school;*
- *Homeless children and youths;*
- *Neglected, delinquent, and at-risk students identified under Title I, Part D of the ESEA, including students in juvenile justice facilities;*
- *Immigrant children and youth;*
- *Students in LEAs eligible for grants under the Rural and Low-Income School program under section 5221 of the ESEA; and*
- *American Indian and Alaska Native students*

Please note that GT is not listed in these subgroups. And although GT is not included in the Federal "specifics", we are under the umbrella of Colorado's ECEA. Just as Low-income kids can be English learners, they can also be GT students. Just as Homeless children and youth can be the lowest-achieving students, they can also be GT students. Just as children can be children with disabilities, they can also be GT students, they are known as twice-exceptional students. Our advanced learners have academic needs as well, regardless of what other subgroup may define them as a student. All means all.



The following outlines how we may leverage the Colorado accountability system to implement ESSA and honor **all** students, including GT students.

School Performance Framework Requests:

A) Disaggregation of data for each subgroup and include in the School Performance Framework: While Colorado does disaggregate data for each subgroup by achievement levels, including our advanced learners, we are only able to determine whether or not ALP students “meet or exceed” expectation. Not whether they are growing or not in their identified area of strength or other areas of aptitude.

Further, there is a disconnect between the state’s School Performance Framework that breaks out the growth and achievement by other categoricals, but does not incorporate gifted and talented students. The School Performance Framework is utilized by school districts to build their Unified Improvement Plans, and although you have a GT Addendum for each of these districts, if the School Performance Framework fails to identify the GT categorical as an area of focus and growth consideration, then the GT Addendum is superfluous for there is no accountability tied to its implementation.

Three years ago the State Board of Education affirmed HB14-1102, which required districts to assess all students to determine their need for an Advanced Learning Plan (ALP). This legislation ensured that all students, regardless of race or socio-economic standing, would be assessed for areas of cognitive strength and an ALP would be provided to ensure that students would have access to programming that would feed their area of academic strength. Jefferson County has had universal screening for eight or more years and during that time period; we have seen an increase in the identification of GT students in underserved populations. For example, from 2010 to 2015, the number of GT students of Hispanic descent has grown from 6.6% of GT student population to 11%. Of the GT students that qualify for Free and Reduce Meals, that population has grown from 8.9% to 11.7% of the GT student population. And although these students may show up in the other Categoricals depicted in the School Performance Framework, their growth in an area of academic strength is not accounted for in the Framework.

We look forward to working with Colorado Department of Education as it seeks to finalize Colorado’s ESSA Plan, and incorporate its guidelines with the School Performance Framework. These efforts will ensure that our gifted and talented students are integrated into the Plan, which will then truly include, support and enhance learning for all Colorado students. This work will align with the intent of the Federal ESSA Guidelines where **every** student succeeds and grows.