**Talking points regarding the Georgia Gifted Education Crisis**

1. **Why is the gifted endorsement so important?**

The Gifted Endorsement involves a year of training that is equivalent to four graduate level college courses. Teachers may earn the gifted endorsement through approved program providers, usually universities or RESAs. Teachers attend approximately 120 hours of professional learning about the characteristics of gifted children, including those from underserved populations; assessment and identification of gifted children; instructional strategies to best meet their learning needs; and research-based models for programming for gifted students.

The gifted endorsement provides teachers with a deep understanding of the learning needs of students who are in the 90th percentile in terms of ability, achievement, creativity, and/or motivation. Because gifted students are “smart,” educators or policy makers may believe one of the myths about gifted children – that they will be fine on their own. “Gifted students need guidance from well-trained teachers who challenge and support them in order to fully develop their abilities. Many gifted students may be so far ahead of their same-age peers that they know more than half of the grade-level curriculum before the school year begins. Their resulting boredom and frustration can lead to low achievement, despondency, or unhealthy work habits. The role of the teacher is crucial for spotting and nurturing talents in school” (NAGC: *Myths about gifted students).\**

It’s an issue of equity: Gifted students, like all of our students, have the right to be challenged and to have their learning needs met by qualified teachers. For the past twenty years, Georgia has led the nation in implementing policy and training teachers to identify potential gifted students in underserved populations, such as students in poverty, twice-exceptional students, English language learners, and students from diverse populations. Before the implementation of our Georgia multiple-criteria rule, gifted students from underserved populations were often overlooked. The gifted endorsement is where teachers learn how to implement the Georgia law requiring complex multiple-criteria identification procedures, in order to find all children with high potential.

The gifted endorsement, however, does much more than empower teachers to find gifted potential in diverse populations and meet the needs of gifted and talented students. Sally Krisel has often said that gifted pedagogy is one of the best secrets of education. In our district, and I believe in our state, we purpose to do more than bring our Georgia children to some minimal level of competency; instead, we believe that ALL children should be in learning environments where they can reach their potential. The teachers who complete the gifted endorsement extend the instructional strategies to many, many more students than those in their “gifted” rosters.

Students who qualify for gifted services are not only gifted when they are in the gifted model of instruction. Gifted students receive much of their education in the regular classroom, yet the majority of teachers report that their education courses and programs focused either very little or not at all on how to teach academically advanced students (Farkas & Duffett, 2008). When more teachers have the gifted endorsement, then they are able to address the advanced learning needs of gifted students, as well as the advanced learning needs of all of their students.

We have a model of a state that chose to make gifted certification and services optional for their school districts. Ohio changed their gifted requirements, leaving it up to districts to determine training and delivery models for services. These are the results:

* Identification of gifted students has decreased by 8.5% since 2008.
* Services have plummeted to 23% of the gifted population. For reference, in 2000, the service rate was 41%.
* Licensed gifted staff levels have decreased by almost 25% since 2008.
* Over half of all districts in 2014 reported that they used some or all gifted formula funding for purposes other than to identify and serve gifted students.
* Only one-quarter of Ohio’s districts met the new gifted performance indicator in 2014, the elements of which are currently set at a very low threshold (*Getting Out of the Way: How De-regulation Has Worked for Gifted Children in Ohio,* 2015).

In the GAGC emails with the GaDOE, it was made clear that Georgia will not waive Special Education certification requirements because of the federal law. Certainly we have better reasons than that? I cannot imagine that any teacher, administrator, superintendent, or DOE policymaker would suggest that our special education students do not need teachers who have real expertise and training to meet their unique learning needs. The same is true for our gifted students, those who land on the upper (and often fragile) end of the bell curve. The gifted endorsement provides this expertise, and the brilliant result affects not only our gifted children, but all of Georgia’s students.

\*The National Association for Gifted Children has compiled a concise document that addresses these common myths from a research-based perspective: <https://www.nagc.org/resources-publications/resources/myths-about-gifted-students>

1. **What do we need to know about Georgia’s State Plan for ESSA**?

**ESSA Language:** From *Sec. 2101 Formula Grants to States:*

*(d)(2) State Application Contents: Each application described under paragraph (1)****shall include****the following:*

*(J) A description of* ***how the State educational agency will improve******the skills of teachers****, principals, or other school leaders in order* ***to******enable them to identify****students with specific learning needs, particularly children with disabilities, English learners,****students who are gifted and talented****, and students with low literacy levels,****and provide instruction based on the needs of such students****.*

The ESSA State Application Draft contains the following information to address how the state will improve the skills of teachers of gifted students:

* *The Georgia Department of Education implements a multi-dimensional approach to identification of gifted students. LEAs must assess in the areas of mental ability, achievement, motivation and creativity. This creates a broad approach to identification of talents in many areas. A comprehensive list of assessments is provided that includes non-verbal measures.*
* *The GaDOE provides professional development regional workshops in the areas of identification guidelines, development of talent for all students using gifted education strategies and research in talent development for all cultural groups. Other topics include working with twice-exceptional students and development of creativity. An annual meeting is held with LEA coordinators of gifted programs to develop an awareness of current research and national trends as well as to develop the state's focus.*
* *The Georgia Department of Education will continue to engage in continuous improvement in order to evaluate and enhance the effectiveness of such programs and initiatives.*

**Clearly the plan does not offer any way of improving gifted education in Georgia; instead, the draft briefly describes meetings that have been going on for years. The draft does not address any type of improvement and fails to mention that in June 2017 all requirements regarding gifted education (with the exception of multiple criteria for identification) have been made completely optional.**

**We need an ESSA Plan that outlines how we will IMPROVE gifted education: The gifted endorsement to enable qualified teachers to meet the learning needs of our gifted and talented students and the approved delivery models for excellence in the learning environment.**

1. **What does Georgia Law say about gifted education in our state?**

**Requirements in State Law:** State law (*O.C.G.A. 20-2-152 Special education services*) includes specific requirements related to **identification** of gifted students. If training teachers of the gifted is waived, however, the ability of gifted program teachers to use multiple criteria to identify potentially gifted students effectively would become increasingly questionable. Additionally, the law not only addresses identification procedures; but, also, in language that is similar to ESSA requirements for the SEA application, **state law requires the provision of teachers who are professionally trained to meet the needs of gifted students**. Relevant passages from *O.C.G.A. 20-2-152. Special education services* are highlighted below:

*(a) All children and youth who are eligible for a general and career education program under Code Section 20-2-151 and who have special educational needs shall also be eligible for special education services. . . .* ***Special education shall include children who are classified as intellectually gifted****, mentally disabled. . . .* ***The state board shall adopt the criteria used to determine eligibility of students for state funded special education programs. . . .***

*(a.1)* ***The criteria adopted by the state board to determine the eligibility of students for state funded special education programs for the intellectually gifted, Category VI pursuant to paragraph (6) of subsection (d) of this Code section, shall authorize local boards of education to use:***

*1.      The criteria used on July 1, 1993, as amended by state board or state department regulation from time to time; and
2.      Multiple eligibility criteria which include:
     a)    Evidence of student work product or performance;
     b)    Data from teacher, parent, or peer observation; and
     c)    Evidence of student performance on nationally normed standardized tests of mental ability, achievement, and creativity.*

 *(b)* ***Local school systems shall, subject to any limitations specified in this Code section, provide special education programs for all eligible students with special needs who are residents of their local school systems, either by establishing and maintaining such educational facilities and******employing such professional workers as are needed by these******students*** *or by contracting with other local school systems, regional educational service agencies, or other qualified public or private institutions for such services.*

Under Georgia law gifted students are Category VI of Special Education. Even in this era of flexibility for districts, the law cannot be waived. The decision to waive the need for specialized training for teachers of the gifted suggests that only this type of exceptionality does not require specially trained teachers to make sure students are challenged appropriately.

Furthermore, the gifted endorsement is the way we ensure fidelity to the law in the identification process, also required by Georgia law.

1. **How do current gifted regulations allow for needed flexibility?**

The **Georgia Resource Manual for Gifted Education Services** already allows for monitored flexibility and creativity in options for delivery models, in the non-renewable endorsement, and in flexibility with class size. We as a field make it our goal to address exceptionalities. There is no need to waive the endorsement and/or delivery models to address exceptionalities. Nothing about our current regulations limit districts. We as a state must hold on to our foundation of Georgia’s longtime commitment to addressing the needs of gifted students.

1. **What about Funding and Accountability for Gifted Education?**

The current GaDOE guidelines regarding gifted certification and services act as safeguards for gifted education identification and services. We must continue our commitment to excellence in gifted education, and we can use the opportunity of new language in ESSA to find the next levels of excellence, including program accountability. Unfortunately, the GaDOE has instead chosen to explicitly waive any requirements regarding gifted education besides identification (which ironically requires gifted endorsement training to complete with fidelity).

Further, with the most recently published guidelines, local districts may waive the gifted endorsement for teachers, as well as the approved gifted delivery models, and still receive funding for whatever they decide to call gifted education. That means that districts can earn funds for gifted students for every hour of the day, while not being required to provide any approved services to meet their learning needs. The state stands to double the funding for gifted education while having no requirement to monitor the types of services offered to gifted and talented students.

1. **What is the history of Gifted Education in Georgia?**

Georgia has been one of the top states in the nation in gifted education since 1958:

* **February 1958** – GA House of Representatives passed HR-246, recognizing gifted students as a special-needs population and providing funds and technical assistance for programs to increase “educational advantages for gifted children in the public schools of Georgia.” **With this legislation Georgia became the first state to provide funding and systematic support for its most capable students.**
* **1994** – Georgia legislators passed the bill requiring multiple criteria identification of gifted students, a courageous commitment to equity that has been applauded by the National Research Center for the Gifted and Talented and the Office for Civil Rights.
* **December 14, 1995 –** Rule 160-4-2-.38 EDUCATION PROGRAM FOR GIFTED STUDENTS, our multiple-criteria rule for identification of gifted children, was passed by the SBOE. Recognizing that excellence in services is as important as excellence in identification procedures, the SBOE also passed the state’s first regulations of gifted education delivery models (March 1997). These regulations have provided guidance for LEAs in the development of quality programs for gifted learners for 20 years.
* **1995 – 2017:** For over twenty years, our state has continued to be at the forefront of gifted education. *The Georgia Resource Manual for Gifted Education Services* has served as a guide for districts, outlining the many options for approved delivery models. The Georgia Gifted Endorsement requires specific training for teachers regarding the characteristics of gifted and talented students; grants valuable training and experience in assessment and identification using multiple criteria; and offers instructional strategies and programming options to meet the advanced learning needs of ALL students. In 2015, the Georgia Professional Standards Commission enlisted a Gifted Education Task Force to update the Georgia gifted endorsement with the [NAGC Programming Standards](https://www.nagc.org/resources-publications/resources/national-standards-gifted-and-talented-education/pre-k-grade-12-6) AND to keep the gifted endorsement as a requirement for instructors, reinforcing the value of the gifted endorsement for teachers. In 2015, the Education Reform Commission reaffirmed Georgia’s commitment to gifted education by supporting continued funding.
* **May 3, 2017:** The GaDOE published the Georgia Department of Education Instructional Service Model Professional Qualification Requirements Under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), upholding the requirement for the gifted endorsement and the use of the approved gifted delivery models.
* **June 1, 2017:** The GaDOE drops the requirements and explicitly states that LEAs may waive any gifted training for teachers. Under Georgia law gifted students are Category VI of Special Education. **The decision to waive the need for specialized training for teachers of the gifted suggests that only this type of exceptionality does not require specially trained teachers to ensure understanding and implementation of identification procedures and that gifted and talented students are challenged appropriately.**
1. **What is the intent of the gifted program in Georgia?**

From the GaDOE Gifted Education website: The Georgia Department of Education’s Gifted Program is funded by the State of Georgia. In Georgia, a gifted education student is defined as one who demonstrates a high degree of intellectual and/or creative ability(ies), exhibits an exceptionally high degree of motivation, and/or excels in specific academic fields, and **who needs special instruction and/or special ancillary services to achieve at levels commensurate with his or her ability(ies).**