

# Collaborating and Advocating With Administrators: The Arkansas Gifted Education Administrators' Story

by Ann Robinson

Imagine this scene. During a stormy February, more than 800 gifted educators met in Hot Springs, AR, at the annual conference of the state gifted association. The attendees were primarily gifted and talented facilitators and classroom teachers, with a sprinkling of parents. Suddenly, a call came in from Little Rock, the state capitol. That morning, a legislator introduced a bill into a committee to change the state definition of giftedness and to prescribe the kinds of programming options possible to districts. The implications of the proposed legislation were significant. School programs, which had been vetted previously by the courts in a desegregation case, were likely to require modifi-

cation, thus opening the door for years of additional court hearings. Massive changes in the state's program approval standards would be necessary—particularly at risk were the inclusive identification standards. There was a possibility that the curriculum would be prescribed and evaluated by grade-level achievement tests.

Following the first alarming call, a second call sent more reassuring news. During the legislative committee hearing, a member of the Arkansas Association of Education Administrators was asked to comment from the audience. He rose and gave the legislative committee the views from the gifted education community. He was not a member of our community, but he represented us. He was

the assistant executive director of the state administrators association, and he knew his business: to present and defend the positions of one of his constituent associations. His comments were of great interest to the legislators on the committee. The initiating legislator withdrew his bill. The other legislators were informed by a knowledgeable spokesperson about the needs of talented learners. After the interchange, the administrator went modestly back to his job watchdogging the interests of schools in the state. A collective sigh of relief rose from the gifted education community 50 miles away. The incident was handled before any of the experienced advocates in the group could have made the drive to appear at the capitol.

This is a telling incident in a unique collaboration between gifted educators and school administrators. Without the support of the school administration community and the savvy advocacy of the assistant director, we could have found ourselves scrambling to persuade legislators to defeat a bill voted favorably out of committee. Instead, we found ourselves as partners in a powerful group of school administrators with the credibility to be *asked* for an opinion, rather than having to interject it. Could you say the same for the gifted education community in your state?

### The Importance of School Administrators

Empirical research on the philosophies, beliefs, and actions of school administrators such as principals or superintendents toward talented students is largely nonexistent in the published literature. What little is known suggests that administrators are crucial (Delcourt & Evans, 1994; Dettmer, 1991), but that advocates of services for high-ability learners need to carry the message more effectively to school leaders. While the knowledge base on the understanding and support of the school administrator for specialized services for talented youth is limited, the general literature on school leadership asserts the importance of the role of the building principal as an instructional leader. According to VanTassel-Baska (1995), the curriculum is a key feature in the development of talents. If the curriculum is the key and the school administrator is to be the instructional leader, then principals are crucial players in providing opportunities to talented youth. Landrum and Callahan (2001) noted that administrators are an important audience for our professional development efforts in gifted education. Informed administrators are more supportive of teachers engaged in differentiated instruction and are more likely to

Alabama	Council for Leaders in Alabama Schools
Alaska	Alaska Council of School Administrators
Arkansas	Arkansas Association of Educational Administrators
Arizona	Arizona School Administrators, Incorporated
California	Association of California School Administrators
Colorado	Colorado Association of School Executives
Delaware	Delaware Association of School Administrators
Florida	Florida Association of School Administrators
Idaho	Idaho Association of School Administrators
Iowa	School Administrators of Iowa
Kansas	Kansas Association of School Administrators
Kentucky	Kentucky Association of School Administrators
Missouri	Missouri Association of School Administrators
Montana	School Administrators of Montana
Nebraska	Nebraska Council of School Administrators
Nevada	Nevada Association of School Administrators
North Carolina	North Carolina Association of School Administrators
North Dakota	North Dakota Council of Educational Leaders
Oklahoma	Cooperative Council for Oklahoma School Administrators
Oregon	Oregon Association of School Executives
South Carolina	South Carolina Association of School Administrators
South Dakota	School Administrators of South Dakota

make decisions with positive outcomes for high-ability learners (Feldhusen, Haeger, & Pellegrino, 1989).

In what ways can advocates for talented youth sit at the table with administrators to develop service initiatives, policies, and procedures that assure the best possible outcomes for talented learners? And in what ways can advocates for talented learners contribute to the broad-based community support for the school that school leaders—both building principals and central office administrators—must nurture every day? It is important to be in the room, so to speak, and to sit at the table where policies are made in order to be effective advocates for high-ability learners (Robinson & Moon, 2003a, 2003b). It is also important to be a collaborative supporter of the broad enterprise of

school leadership. What follows is one state's story in advocating effectively with administrators. The actions taken and the lessons learned provide a blueprint for gifted educators in other states who need to sit at the policy table.

As a part of the blueprint, a list of 22 state organizations structured in ways similar to the Arkansas context is provided in Table 1. Gifted educators are encouraged to investigate these umbrella organizations as possible collaborators, thus increasing awareness, interest, and action on behalf of talented youth.

### Professional Associations as Advocates

The key players in this story of collaboration are the umbrella organization

## Collaborating With Administrators

of school administrators and the affiliated association of gifted educators organized with guidance from the umbrella organization. Specifically, what are the Arkansas Association of Educational Administrators (AAEA) and the Arkansas Association of Gifted Education Administrators (AAGEA)?

The AAEA is an umbrella for nine constituent professional education organizations. These are associations for the following educational leaders:

- superintendents, assistant superintendents, central office administrators;
- elementary school principals;
- secondary school principals;
- school business officials;
- curriculum and instruction administrators;
- special education administrators;
- gifted education administrators;
- middle-level administrators; and
- school personnel administrators.

The AAEA employs full-time staff and is governed by a 19-member board composed of representatives of the nine constituent groups and officers elected at large. The association is assured high visibility in the state by having its headquarters in its own building within sight of the Arkansas State Capitol, the location of the state legislature and its committee meeting rooms (see Figure 1 for a graphic representation of AAEA and its constituent groups).

The specialized professional organization, the Arkansas Association of Gifted Education Administrators (AAGEA), was formed in 1992 to provide a home for gifted program administrators and to be a part of the overall umbrella association, AAEA.

### Benefits of an Association

In general, a key benefit of participating in a professional association of

administrators is the opportunity to discuss issues with school leaders. For example, three of the nine constituent groups are primarily school principals: elementary, middle, and secondary level. Gifted educators, who are often teachers, rather than administrators in terms of training and experience, find new professional roles, contacts, and concerns in such organizations.

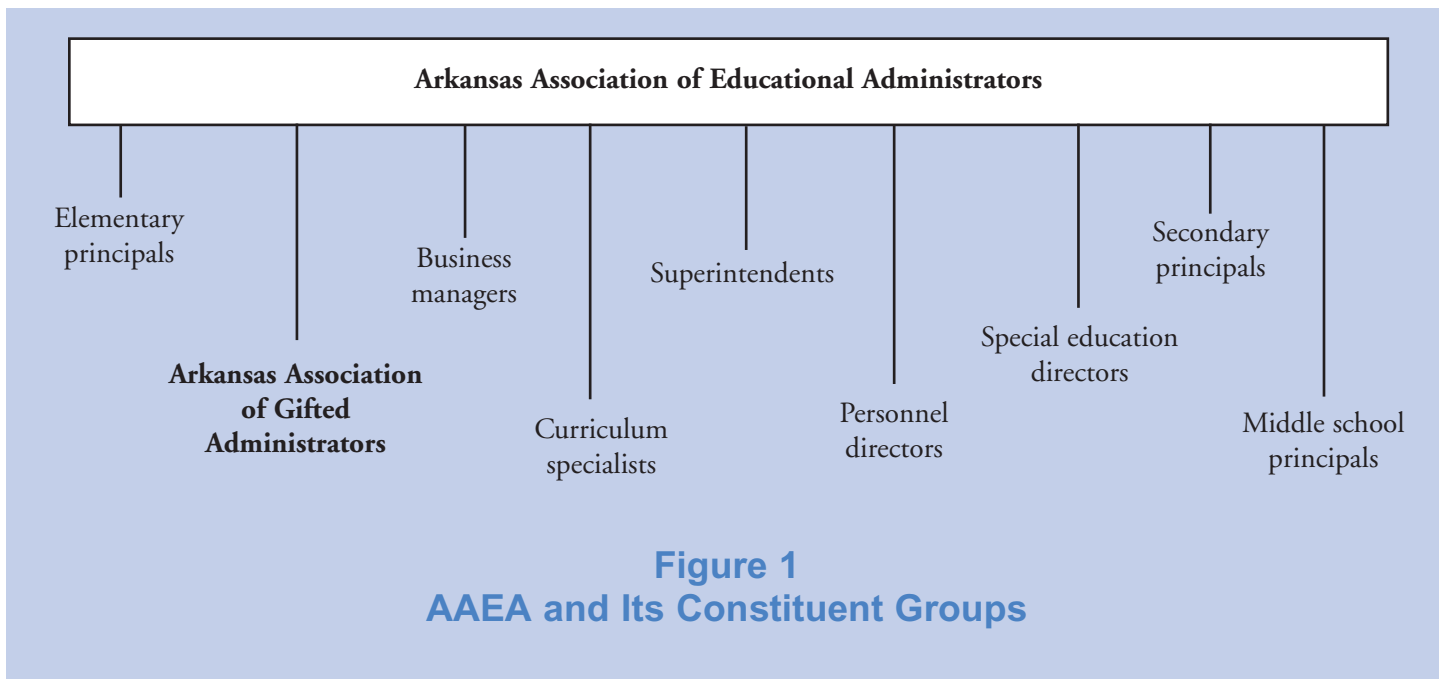
One of the most important benefits is the opportunity to sit on the board of directors of the Arkansas Association of Education Administrators (AAEA). The Arkansas Association allocates a board seat to the president of each of the nine constituent groups and additional seats to the constituent groups with the largest membership. The 19-member board meets regularly and has the responsibility for the overall business of the organization. It is important to note that the president of AAGEA has a vote as do the presidents of the groups representing the elementary school principals, the secondary school principals, and the school superintendents. All 19 members have a vote in the deliberations.

In addition to the board of directors, the AAEA also has a legislative committee made up of presidential appointees from the nine constituent groups. During legislative sessions, the legislative committee meets each week to discuss the pending legislation and to vote on the association's position on education bills, which come before the state house and senate. If a member group is in favor of or opposed to a bill being drafted or pending in the legislature, its voice is heard. In general, the overall association does not support legislation to which a constituent group is opposed. If there are differing opinions among the nine constituent groups on any piece of legislation, the association takes no formal stand. Thus, gifted educators might find themselves in the enviable position of receiving open support

for their legislative issues in the best case; in the worst case, the other constituent groups agree not to oppose an issue that AAGEA supports.

Finally, crucial briefings are held each Wednesday evening during the legislative sessions. These sessions are open to all association members, but are organized and heavily attended by superintendents who constitute the membership of four committees that report each week on legislative issues and concerns. The four superintendents' committees are curriculum and instruction, finance, governance and administration, and employee benefits. In the last legislative session, for example, one of the superintendents' committees reviewed a bill to allow advanced kindergartners to begin school at age 4. The bill had the interest of the gifted educators in the state, and, through AAGEA's participation in the legislative committee and the Wednesday evening briefings, the field was able to have input on these bills or to recommend a position for the overall association.

The legislative briefings provide the opportunity to speak with school leaders in an informal setting about issues of mutual concern. It is easy to meet and exchange views with school principals and central office administrators. Superintendents are accessible. The visibility of the legislative briefings organized by the superintendents is reflected in the roll call of guest speakers who appear at the Wednesday night briefings. In any given session, the speaker may be a legislator explaining his or her bill to the group or sending up a trial balloon for comment. The Wednesday speaker is often the director of the Department of Education, who explains the implications of various legislative bills to school leaders and answers questions from the floor. On occasion, the governor's office also sends staffers and



**Figure 1**  
**AAEA and Its Constituent Groups**

educational liaisons to speak to the group. The executive director and assistant directors of AAEA, who track bills, study the impact of legislation, policies, and procedures on the schools, and keep in contact with legislators and the governor's office, are also available weekly to brief the association members. Conversely, these knowledgeable professionals are interested in hearing from individual members of the nine constituent groups. Armed with information, they can better represent the interests of the schools. Recall that the assistant executive director who rose to respond to legislators' questions concerning the surprise bill on gifted education had worked with the president and the legislative liaison of AAGEA to inform himself about the issues and concerns of the group. He was armed with good information before he found himself the lone representative in the legislative committee hearings. Had the opportunity to discuss policies, bills, and issues in a collegial setting not been available to the gifted education community, the outcome very likely would have been different.

### Steps to Participate in Your State

What are the steps to participate in a similar administrators' association in your state? Where can you join a collaborative forum to advance the cause of all education and exchange ideas with the school administrators who are crucial to advocacy for gifted students?

First, a key group of gifted educators in the state must think of themselves as administrators, and they need to see school administrators as partners, rather than adversaries. In many states, the gifted and talented coordinator is a hybrid position, which includes both teaching responsibilities and the mid-management responsibilities of an administrator. Whether part-time or full-time, the first step in establishing a link with the umbrella administrators' organization in your state is to find a core group of gifted educators who see themselves as administrators. They work with budgets, organize and provide professional development, supervise staff, collaborate with building principals, and engage in long-range planning. These

are administrative tasks, and many gifted educators do them, but the key is to understand that the position held by such coordinators is an administrative one. Second, the core group should investigate the context—both formal and informal—to learn more about the umbrella organization available or to determine if one can be established where none exists.

The beginnings of the organization were made possible with the advice and direction of the AAEA executive director, who explained to a small group of gifted coordinators that they needed an organization focused on administrators within their field. They needed a constitution, bylaws, policies, officers, and a membership. When the group accomplished all of these things, they could petition the board of directors of the Association for membership in the umbrella administrators' organization. Within a year, the newly elected officers petitioned the board and were granted membership. In 1992, AAGEA became an official constituent group of AAEA. We had established a lasting avenue for communicating, collaborating, and advocating with administrators.

### Lessons Learned

How did the collaboration with school administrators help the gifted education community? First, gifted educators learned the lessons of taking the broad view and understanding the way policy is made. Administration is a difficult balancing act. Constituents, advocates, and stakeholders all vie for the attention of school administrators daily. Gifted educators need to develop an appreciation for the varied voices that a principal hears each day, sometimes each hour. To be more effective collaborators, we learned to present solutions, rather than problems. To understand the power of forming alliances with other stakeholder groups, we learned to explain clearly how the needs of several stakeholders can be met with a single administrative decision. We learned to appreciate the difficult job of a principal or a superintendent who wants to listen and then must act.

Gifted educators learned the lessons of timely information presented in a succinct written form for a principal or superintendent's consideration. Hundreds of pieces of paper pass across the desk of a school administrator every day. There are directives from the central office, directives from the state department of education, school notices, and countless telephone message slips. E-mail has not diminished the paperwork; it has simply given constituents another medium to vie for the administrators' attention. We learned to make an appointment with an administrator, present our point of view, and hand over a single page with bullets summarizing the concerns, implications, and recommendations.

Gifted educators learned to step forward with expertise when the principal or superintendent needed help with school initiatives. For example, two areas have been of consistent interest to school leaders for many years, and gifted educa-

tors have knowledge and skills to offer assistance in those areas: locating and nurturing talents in culturally diverse and low-income youth and developing rigorous and challenging curricula. We learned to weigh in, especially with principals, when schoolwide efforts in diversity and curricula were discussed in the context of general education. We weighed in by offering to get information for a busy principal, by serving on a curriculum committee, by providing an in-service session on a particular instructional strategy, or by speaking to the faculty or school board on the importance of talent development in culturally diverse and low-income learners.

Gifted educators learned to be visible in the home haunts of the school administrator. Each year, the umbrella association organizes a summer conference with each constituent group, providing a program strand for their members. We made certain that a healthy contingent of gifted education administrators were in attendance at the sessions and participated in the coffee breaks. When AAGEA acquires sufficient funds in its coffers, we will sponsor one of those breaks.

Gifted educators learned to see issues from an administrator's point of view. At the summer conference, we used our eyes and ears. By looking at the titles of the presentations offered by the school principals' groups and the superintendents' group, we began to understand what issues these administrators considered important. For example, Arkansas has many small school districts, and sessions addressing the challenges of leading a small school were always well attended. During a recent summer conference, a panel of educators discussed the services available through distance learning for small schools. If the administrator has one or two students ready for calculus, but no calculus teacher, the session provides an immedi-

ately available option for the school to implement. Sessions that present useful information on new legislation or policies relevant to talented youth are also of interest to administrators, particularly if the policies carry funds with them. School administrators want to know what opportunities are opened up for their schools by new legislation and policies. Succinct presentations on legislation and their accompanying allocations are important. For example, Arkansas passed incentive legislation to encourage schools to implement Advanced Placement programs. AAGEA provided sessions featuring principals and superintendents who made this initiative work in their schools. Figure 2 is a sampling of sessions available to administrators at a recent summer conference.

To summarize, the goal is to meet the needs of high-ability youth through the development of enlightened policies and the wise allocation of resources. The means to that end is advocacy. The field of gifted education has traditionally relied on parents and teachers as the key advocates for talented children. However, we should work to include another key group of advocates: administrators. The following suggestions are offered as ways to collaborate effectively with school administrators:

- Examine your state for the existence of an administrators umbrella group.
- If an umbrella group exists, establish a committee of gifted educators to visit with the association leadership about becoming a constituent group.
- If no umbrella group exists, consider working with other administrator groups to establish one.
- If no umbrella group exists and cannot be established, use strategies like those effective in the Arkansas story. For example,
  - Provide speakers on topics important to administrators at

10:00–11:45 a.m.

**Arkansas Association of Gifted Education Administrators (AAGEA)**

*Topic:* “The Road Less Traveled . . . Guiding Students To Choose Rigorous Curriculum”

*Presenter:* Dr. Nicholas Colangelo, Professor of Gifted Education, University of Iowa and Director of the Connie Belin & Jacqueline N. Blank International Center for Gifted Education and Talent Development

*Presider:* Davis Hendricks, AAGEA President and Director of the Talented and Gifted Program, Pulaski County Special School District

**Arkansas Association of Curriculum and Instruction Administrators (AACIA)**

*Topic:* “An Overview of the Minimum Performance Honors Program and the Grade Inflation Formula”

*Presenter:* Kathy Morledge, Director of Communications and Training, Arkansas School Boards Association and Diana Gray, Secondary Curriculum Coordinator, Siloam Springs School District

*Presider:* Dr. Merle Dickerson, Superintendent, Van Buren

3:00–4:30 p.m.

**Arkansas Association of Gifted Education Administrators (AAGEA)**

*Topic:* “Advanced Placement and Technology”

*Presenters:* Dr. Nicholas Colangelo, Professor of Gifted Education, University of Iowa and Director of the Connie Belin & Jacqueline N. Blank International Center for Gifted Education and Talent Development; Dr. John Measle, Superintendent, Arkansas School for Mathematics and Science; Cheryl Caldwell, Director of Web Based Pre-Calculus Project, Cybercollege, University of Arkansas at Little Rock; and Mary Lester, Math Instructor, Arkansas Department of Education Distance Learning Center

*Presider:* Dr. Ann Robinson, President-Elect, AAGEA and Director, Center for Gifted Education, University of Arkansas at Little Rock

**Arkansas Association of School Administrators (AASA)**

*Topic:* “A Review of National Educational Issues”

*Presenter:* Dr. Jim Clark, President, The Audio Journal, Chicago

*Presider:* Albert Brown, AASA President and Superintendent, Corning

**Figure 2**  
**Example Sessions from Administrators’ Summer Conference**

- their annual state conference.
- Sponsor a refreshment break at an administrators’ conference.
- Meet with the administrators’ legislative watchdog to offer information and support *before, during, and after* legislative sessions.
- Hone your message to a single page with bullets and white space.
- Learn the ins and outs of suc-

cessful advocacy at the state level.

- Be present, knowledgeable, and cordial.

In the end, the collaborative bond forged through the structure of an umbrella association and its constituent group provides a powerful vehicle for advocacy. The Arkansas experience could be replicated in at least 21 additional states to give the field of gifted education a new network of partners.

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