

With the format for your meetings decided, **develop a blueprint** for your group. Decide how often it will meet and if meeting over the summer is warranted. Use meeting time to discover the type of gifted children's programs and services you can realistically provide. As advocacy group organizers, give yourself time to grow. It is perfectly okay to learn as you teach. Keep in mind that an advocacy group's foundation rests on the group's dedication to building the capacity of their members. Guide your members by sharing with them to all things related to gifted children. Regularly practice wide reading about the topics chosen for your meetings, and if you can, create a listserv for your group members so they can comment on topics right up to the meeting date. If that's not possible, bring a list of suggested articles or books to read, along with where to find them to the meetings.

Establish a collaborative approach with your school or district, and **keep the school informed** about your group's activities. The school can be your greatest ally as you learn about giftedness and gifted education. Work extra hard to build a positive rapport with teachers and gifted coordinators before problems come up, as school personnel may misunderstand your zeal for advocacy and your desire for knowledge, especially if it comes from parents who are soundly informed.

Over time, parent groups naturally expand their platform of group offerings. Take deliberate steps to evaluate your advocacy mission and your progress toward achieving those early goals. Examine what is being offered now, what you seek to offer, and explore what you hope to provide in the future. Consider as well how you might accomplish your goals. Remember above all else, to **expand gradually** and to be solution oriented.



Starting a Parent Advocacy Group

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Both parents and schools can benefit from parent advocacy groups. Parenting a gifted child can be a tiring journey if you don't reach out to others who have experienced, or are facing, similar situations. Sometimes parents need to gather together to share frustrations or celebrations. At other times, parents seek a more **long term solution** to challenges their children may be facing in the school or in their gifted classroom. Either way, if the former is the case or if the latter is true, with the support of others in your community, a flexible toolbox of engaging strategies, and a reserve of knowledge you will be more effective for your child if you become an advocate. Thus, an effective parent advocacy group is needed.

A **parent advocacy group** is a unified effort to meet the needs of parents and their gifted and talented children. The most significant people who touch the lives of gifted children are their parents. It is these special adults more than anyone else who have the opportunity and responsibility to guide and support high ability children into realizing and continually stretching to reach their full potential.

Joining with proactive parents who share your enthusiasm for gifted education can be heady; but don't let that tempt you into tackling too many issues right at the start. Think carefully about your options, plan for the long term, and make choices which will help you achieve sustainability. Considering the following suggestions may prove helpful as well.

Establish a core group of people who share your vision and enlist them to carefully develop your objectives. You may find that your group may have one definite agenda, or you may have several concerns that bubble up. Focus your intentions during these discovery meetings and realize that it is perfectly legitimate for a parent group to serve many functions. However, in the initial stages of advocacy group formation, a group identity statement can help you to establish clear expectations and a common goal. This will be key to the group's success over time. It is natural for the group's purpose to evolve as parents move through your ranks and as the group responds to specific happenings. Remember to keep your plan fluid. Once you arrive at a place of common ground, stick to it.

One crucial step to initiate early in the advocacy group formation process is to look for ways to **collaborate with others** who share your vision. One way to find other parents of gifted children in your school or community is to chat with other parents at school events. Word of mouth could be just the thing to generate interest to your cause. Consider a public advertisement as well because it provides the means to reach parents you would never reach otherwise. Choose a centralized location for meetings, but have a more permanent location in mind for your group as it grows. As your group becomes more stable, determine a regular meeting place and time to make it easy for people to find you when they are ready.

Contact your Gifted Program Coordinator, counselors, and teachers at your child(ren)'s school and let them know you are seeking other

parents of gifted children. Don't forget to let your **state gifted organization** know you want to find other parents interested in forming a parent group. They can serve as a resource for you as you formalize your parent advocacy group. Publicize through gifted teachers and your local media to get others motivated about your group. You may wish to create a simple flyer about your group and its mission. Distribute the flyer in your neighborhood library, through social network media, and by any other means.

As you plan your first parent advocacy meeting think about whether your group will have **open meetings** or structured presentations, or a combination of both. Open Meetings allow for all interested parties to meet together and discuss concerns. This type of meeting is agenda driven. Meeting items are centralized around one or maybe two inter-related hot button issues.

A **structured presentation** is a formal program with a guest speaker and an organized strategy session afterwards. If your group chooses to have structured presentation meetings you will need to secure a reputable speaker or a speaker who has educational clout in your community. Often speakers can be found from within you ranks. One thing that unites parents in an advocacy group is that they are knowledgeable about current issues in gifted programming. If your group cannot find speakers easily consider asking a school official or favorite teacher of the gifted to address issues that are of particular interest to parents of high ability kids. A good way to ensure a large attendance for these events is to join with other school districts for your first several meetings. An added bonus of this strategy is that more resources are available for compensating your speaker.

