

Hello Mr/Mrs. Chairperson, Members of the Committee, my name is Julie Merritt and I represent a group called POINTS (Parents and Others Invested in Nurturing Talented Students). POINTS is organized for the purpose of advocating for gifted learners in grades Kindergarten – 12 in the Missoula County Public School District (MCPS) and surrounding area. I come to you today to bring your attention to the need to increase funding for our gifted learners across the state. I first want to thank each and every one of the members of this commission for participating in this critical process. I hope that you will bring all of your experience and hard work to bear so that we can have a positive impact on thousands of students in the coming years.

All of our students have the right to a Free and Appropriate Public Education. I ask you to consider the following. Let's take the example of a third grade student who is doing math at a first grade level. Is it appropriate to give this child grade-level work and expect that he will eventually catch up and live up to his full potential without any additional support or accommodations? Given the amount of time and money that has been spent under No Child Left Behind on students who are performing below grade-level, I would say that the message is clear. No, this is not appropriate. We, as a society, do not accept that it is OK to simply give the below-grade-level learner grade-level material and expect that he will come up to grade level without any additional support.

Now let's take the example of the third grade student who is doing math at a fifth grade level. Is it appropriate to give this child grade-level work and expect that she will do what amounts to mundane work without complaint, sit quietly when finished well ahead of the other students and, most importantly, expect this child reach her potential without additional support or accommodations? Given the utter lack of funding that gifted education receives on all levels, federal, state and local, I would say that the message is a clear "Yes". Yes, we think it is appropriate to give third grade level work to a student who is performing at the fifth grade level.

I cannot help but ask, "Why?" Why is it appropriate to provide support and services to those students who are on the left-hand side of the bell curve but not to those who are on the right-hand side?

A comparison is often made between the athletically gifted and the academically gifted. It is socially acceptable, encouraged even, for teachers and coaches to put extra effort into a promising athlete. Very few roll their eyes when the parents of the talented athlete share stories of games or races won, records broken, athletic scholarships awarded. On the other hand, I, as a parent of academically gifted students, am loath to talk about my sons' gifts for fear that people will say that I am bragging. I have been told that there are no additional resources or time for my student. It doesn't matter that he is multiple grade levels ahead in math and reading and very curious about science. There simply isn't time or money to provide him with work that matches his ability level. I have volunteered my own time to provide enrichment activities for my son and other gifted students in his classes.

According to the numbers from Office of Public Instruction (OPI) and the State Budget, the State of Montana spends approximately \$0.20 per day per gifted student. This is based on data from OPI which shows that in the 2013-14 school year, there were about 6,900 students identified as gifted and in the

2014-15 school year, the preliminary numbers show that there were approximately 7,100 identified students. The State budget allocates \$250,000 of general fund money to Gifted Ed.

We are short-changing all of our futures by allowing gifted learners to fall through the cracks. We need the innovators and leaders that many gifted students have the potential to become. We need a well-educated work force so that Montana can attract good businesses to our state. The benefits to investment in our gifted learners are enormous. I hope you will consider this as you move forward with the difficult work this commission has before it. Thank you for your time.

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