



# Katy Parents of Gifted and Talented

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Dear School Board Candidate:

Thank you for accepting our invitation to our annual School Board Candidate Forum. All four candidates will be participating. Enclosed, please find our information packet for your preparation. Before you pour through the contents, please allow me to provide some important context.

KPGT has been a partner with Katy ISD for more than 20 years. I often tell audiences that sometimes we are the squeaky wheel and sometimes we are the grease. We provide support for GT teachers, grants for instructional materials, speakers, quarterly newsletters, family events, the Super Saturday enrichment event, and email notices of community events but we also provide feedback to the GT and Advanced Academic Studies department.

One misconception about our children is that they have been drilled with flash cards and smart baby videos from infancy. In fact, most of our parents struggle to keep up with the driven, inquiring minds that their children have shown from an early age. Our children have many interests and can be as emotionally intense as they are intellectually intense. They are not just eager learners, they think differently.

Parents of gifted children can also be intense. Our advocacy often centers around one frustration: achievement should not come without effort. If our kids constantly achieve top grades without effort, they do not learn the skills and motivation needed to succeed in life. If they no longer find joy in learning, they may disengage from school. If our students are to become National Merit Scholars, earn college credit on AP exams, and be internationally competitive, we must provide an environment in all grade levels that expects and offers more than the minimum academic standards.

The current state accountability system does not monitor the growth of our most academically talented students, so it is crucial that decision-makers at all levels of our district understand the nature and needs of the gifted. One of those needs is advanced pace, relevance and rigor in their academic classrooms. We are optimistic about current conversations in Austin about changing the accountability system to measure individual student growth. We hope this will provide an incentive for schools to provide each child what he needs.

Katy ISD has made recent progress in addressing the needs of elementary-level high achievers outside of *Challenge* (the one day per week GT pull-out program). This year,

KISD replaced “E-classes” in 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grade with *Math Investigators* and *Science Investigators*. I have enclosed a pamphlet describing the program. It benefits any child who demonstrates mastery of an upcoming unit – not just identified GT students. You will see reference made in the enclosed documents to the need for curriculum compacting. *Investigators* is a form of curriculum compacting with enrichment and extension activities. We are grateful for the efforts of the GT/Advanced Academics department and the teachers involved in creating this new program. With the refinements coming this summer, the implementation will be improved across the district.

The GT and Advanced Academic Studies department has also been expanding curriculum compacting in junior highs and high schools. It is a teacher-by-teacher effort and depends greatly upon teacher awareness and commitment. To magnify the benefits of this initiative, principals were asked to assign classes so that the students most likely to benefit from compacting would be concentrated in fewer sections. We do not have data to confirm how successful they were in making these workable clusters. In addition, multi-disciplinary collaborations would be easier to do if teachers had planning time with the appropriate peers. We have recently seen a decrease in enrollment in Independent Study. That valuable option needs to be promoted and more widely available.

With all these recent initiatives aimed at addressing academic rigor, you might be wondering why there is still such a large packet of information enclosed. The above curriculum compacting efforts are significant, but they do not allow elementary teachers to introduce content above grade level. Scholars are beginning to question the tradition of grouping children by chronological age instead of by learning readiness. The enclosed “A Nation Deceived” report summarizes the body of research leaving no doubt that acceleration beyond traditional age-based curriculum is extremely important to gifted children. KPGT distributed this report to every principal, trustee and other key decision-makers in KISD this year in hopes of changing the prevailing misconceptions about acceleration.

Whole-grade skipping is just one of the 18 forms of acceleration, yet it is the only one available to KISD elementary students. An elementary student who demonstrates a gift for one subject-area (i.e. math) has always been required to listen to whole class instruction, do all daily worksheets, homework, quizzes and tests. If that child is not equally strong in language arts, social studies and science, whole-grade skipping is not an option. “A Nation Deceived” says that curriculum compacting with enrichment (*Investigators*) does not have the demonstrated benefit that subject-based acceleration does. Subject-based acceleration is permitted in KISD for secondary students through credit-by-exam. Why must acceleration be an all or nothing bargain for our elementary students?

While whole-grade skipping is available, it is not uniformly supported, understood or applied in KISD. This is primarily due to different educational philosophies and levels of awareness of teachers, counselors and administrators. If it is KISD policy to allow

whole-grade skipping, an effort should be made to make sure that everyone involved in the process is well-informed and parents have clear and consistent information available about the process.

Similarly, credit-by-exam is one of the best-kept secrets in KISD secondary education. This program allows students who are advanced in one subject area to test out of a year of instruction in that area. Students would benefit from greater awareness and clear, consistent information about it. Improved printed publications, web site explanations and inclusion in curriculum nights and other parent forums would help.

You will see reference to the benefits of ability grouping in the enclosed materials. The current reality is that there is no consistent approach to clustering GT students across our campuses – secondary or elementary. The decision is left to each principal with a predictably uneven result across the district. Elementary campuses were asked to follow a clustering model with 4-8 students per class this year. Secondary campuses were asked to apply a similar standard to Pre-AP/GT and AP/GT classes. We have not yet seen an analysis of whether this was accomplished. We hope the enclosed materials will help you appreciate the benefits of clustering for all students and understand the differences between it and the tracking practices that were correctly eliminated in the past.

In Texas, gifted education is required by law (the Texas State Plan for the Education of Gifted/Talented Students). GT parents have sometimes been concerned that KISD may be content with a minimum level of GT program services. We have seen great strides toward growth and innovation in KISD as a whole. We commend the GT and Advanced Academic Studies department for its efforts to be more transparent and to engage parents in more dialogue about enhancing our program. We look forward to continuing to work toward greater awareness, understanding and cost-effective services.

Sincerely,

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