“Learning to Exhale” at this year’s (2014) Pennsylvania Association for Gifted Education (PAGE) Conference.

Submitted by: Crisann Nine

An enlightened experience and call to action resulted from following Dr. James (Jim) Delisle, author and renowned Gifted Educator, at this year’s PAGE conference. As a parent of a recently identified gifted student, I had many questions and felt I could find answers at this venue. I discovered that I was not alone. Parents and educators alike sold out this year’s conference. Many touted that having “Jim” as the Keynote speaker, as well as preside over several sessions, was a “not-to-miss” opportunity – I headed the warning and got my spot early. On Thursday evening, Jim presented “Learning to Exhale: Meeting the Intellectual and Emotional Needs of Gifted Children.” His presentation reached a deep void within me as a parent wanting to understand my child and for him to have a momentous educational experience. Dr. Delisle spoke of giftedness as “who you are” not “what you do.” Too often we focus only on academic aptitude (test scores) in a prescribed educational curriculum, but we short change the “greater awareness, sensitivity and greater ability to understand and transform perceptions into intellectual and emotional experiences” that is the heart of giftedness (Annemarie Roeper). Learning to exhale was Dr. Delisle’s tribute to a student who stated that she was finally able to “exhale” upon arriving for her freshman year at an all-gifted school; she reasoned she had found a place where she would have peers and educators that would “get it” and she could finally let her guard down and be herself. Jim continued this rationale in his keynote address on Friday morning.

Delisle’s speech owning the same title of his upcoming book release, Dumbing Down America: The War on our Nation’s Young Minds (and what we can do to fight back) was introduced with a word of caution; Jim stated those supportive of Common Core Standards entrenched in educational benchmarks and “panaceas that aren’t” may find his presentation disturbingly uncomfortable. “No Child Left Behind forgot about gifted kids (Delisle, 2014).” The educational curriculum does little to stimulate them. Gifted education is seen as expendable; cut in favor of more resources shifted to special education programs for those with disabilities or trouble meeting the minimum criteria or benchmark standard. What can be done to allow gifted kids to “exhale”? Delisle urged the community (doctors, practitioners, NAGC) to first establish a cohesive definition of giftedness that includes “who they are” and not just “what they do” so that the intellectual as well as emotional needs of gifted children are met. Program options for gifted students should focus on the communion between gifted peers rather than curriculum; specific targeted programming does more for these students than clustering or the ever popular pull-out programs where the student may be “gifted for an hour” a week. Further, Delisle urged a national moratorium on high-stakes testing. The amount of money ($1.7 Billion) and the amount of time spent (9 ½ weeks on average) on these tests are resources that could be more wisely spent; for gifted children, the time spent prepping students how to take the test and answer questions that gauge benchmark standards is wasted and is 9 ½ weeks that a gifted child zones out. Lastly, Dr. Delisle called for an end to Educational Disarmament. “If it is true that education represents the world’s battleground of the 21st Century, then the United States, with its budget cutbacks and criticism of educators, has been committing unilateral educational disarmament compared to other nations” (Gallagher, 2013). This has
been especially noticeable in education for our brightest students who history assures us will be our future leaders in business, science, arts and politics. Investing resources into educational programs that are targeted to capture and expand upon students’ innate abilities will build a strong nation - the Gallagher Plan accomplishes this goal by investing $400 Mil over 5 years for gifted education; early testing and preschool gifted programs; school to work transition programs; and special emphasis given to prevent gifted dropouts and on gifted students with special needs.

Dr. Delisle’s Keynote Address was followed by legislators Ryan Aument, PA State Representative for the 41st District, and Lloyd Smucker, PA Senator for the 13th District, who championed House Resolution 139. HR139 was unanimously adopted into law May 13, 2013. These legislators would like to take similar legislation to Washington. They reminded conference participants this Election year (2014) was an opportune time to contact your legislators; remind them of the impact education has on the economy and jobs.

Friday afternoon Dr. Delisle hosted the session, “Gifted Kids Speak Out.” During the session a panel of middle and high school gifted students were asked questions such as “Think of a time in your educational experience you’d like to repeat,” “What is your worst nightmare of a teacher/classroom?,” “How long do you have to spend with a teacher before you think they know you?,” and “What are the advantages and disadvantages of being gifted?.” These structured questions were each met with three students’ responses. The session concluded with an open question and response forum whereby the audience, made of educators, counselors and parents, were able to expound upon the panels experiences. This was a moving testament to Jim’s great understanding of gifted students – they want to be heard and help to make a difference for other students. The conference concluded with the first lesson I learned from Dr. Delisle: Gifted students are waiting to be understood and have the resources they need to “exhale.” Gifted education is “a national treasure for the future” that must be advocated by parents, educators, counselors and politicians.