

## Parent Groups: Getting Started and Staying Strong

Lori Lewis  
January, 2006

Parent's groups for the gifted fill many needs. For anyone who is in a group or thinking about beginning a group, this article will answer some of those tough questions that address how to get started and how to stay strong.

*Get the word out!* A great start begins with a little help. Ask your gifted coordinator, superintendent's office or school board about your district's interest in starting a parent group. Ask them for a contact person whom can give permission to send home a meeting notice for an organizational meeting.

Your local newspaper will also publish meeting notices at no cost or could do a story for you. Smaller papers are always looking for the latest and greatest to write about. You may consider writing an article and submitting it for publication. Small papers have a limited staff and they appreciate an article that doesn't need to be assigned.

If you have trouble finding a meeting place, check on the availability of your local library's meeting room. The rooms are usually available at no cost and a reservation must be made. This is also a terrific place to place a notice on their community bulletin board.

Keep your information basic and stress that it is an organizational meeting. This will open the interest to many parents who will understand the group is a blank slate and may be able to address their own personal needs. When planning this first meeting, be mindful of working parent's schedules. Also, deal breakers for parents can be mid-week church meeting nights, standing PTA nights and the sport of the season.

*Getting Organized!* To get ready for your meeting, prepare an agenda to facilitate on-topic discussion. If you have already discussed a parent group with the district or other parents, try to include known basic needs.

Plan to get people involved right away. Ask several people to welcome parents, take notes, or pass around a clipboard for people to include their

contact information. Don't forget to get e-mail addresses. Ask people to introduce themselves and tell one sentence about why they are there. You will want to get a feel for the group and give parents the opportunity to express their interests without opening the floor to a lengthy discussion from each contributor.

Items to consider for your agenda include several key items. Discuss and decide whether you will be a support group, advocacy group or a blend of both. A support group will focus on providing activities for gifted kids. An advocacy group will focus primarily on advancing the interests of the gifted population.

Brainstorm a name for your group. You may want it to reflect a particular district, region, grades or other group. For example, you may only want to support elementary programs or perhaps a specific magnet school.

Ask for people to volunteer to take roles. The best success will result from asking volunteers to be the temporary person. Give some duration of time such as for two months or until the end of the semester. Most parents are willing to try something new and step up if they know it is a "try it" and/or "temporary" situation.

Discuss where and how often you would like to meet to plan your group's structure. Give examples or a "how to find examples" hand out of resources. The Indiana Association for the Gifted's (IAG) website is a great resource. Check them out at [www.iag-online.org](http://www.iag-online.org).

Invite district representatives to work with you in this process. It will be important for them to become a part of your team. Depending on their responsibilities, they may not be able to make meetings when it is convenient to your temporary board and parents. Try to accommodate their schedule by have a meeting with them with one or two parents from your board.

Plan a second meeting to specifically work on how you want your group organized and what it will do. Research other parent groups or the links through IAG to find resources for creating the structure of your group. The by-laws of existing organizations are a great place to start. Bring copies of information from the Indiana Department of Education's website.

This can be found at [www.doe.state.in.us](http://www.doe.state.in.us). This information addresses things the district can or should be doing. Here or in your district plan, You may find ideas of items your group would like to help achieve.

As an example, our by laws includes the following: Name of Group, Articles of Organization, Basic Policies, Membership & Dues, Officers an their Election, Duties of Officers, Executive Committee, Meetings, Standing and Ad Hoc Committees, Fiscal and Auditing Committee, & Parliamentary Authority. Membership is solicited from flyers that go home to all the gifted students and newspaper notices. Our dues are ten dollars a school year per family.

If possible, invite an IAG representative or a near-by parent group leader to help you work through your meetings. These contacts can be found on the IAG website. IAG is devoted to supporting parent groups and is eager to help with connecting you to resources.

Stay Strong! Join IAG. Once you are a member your group will be in the parent group network and will be targeted for getting lots of information about opportunities and needs in the Indiana area. Use your list of member's e-mails for sharing these resources in a timely manner.

Communication is key! Consider an e-mail address, website, discussion group or an e-mail distribution list. I simply added a free account onto my personal contract. I edit down everything I get to only items that address our particular membership and send it on to all of our members. An e-mail account also gives members a way to send communications to you. You then can route them to the person with the right answer in a timely manner or in confidence.

Write an electronic newsletter several times a year. People still love paper so give an effort to putting out a paper newsletter at least once a year. Make sure everyone has your board member's contact information.

Continually research what the needs of your group are. Survey your members to see what is most important to them. Call members to discuss their needs. If possible, survey your teachers or district representatives to get feedback on where your group can best help.

Build relationships in the community. Ours include the district, libraries, churches, private businesses, professional people such as artists or drama coaches, and state or national programs.

You will soon find that by following these suggestions your group will fall together and become stronger in numbers and efforts. Many parent groups do very well when there is an identified concern. However, ours is doing very well just by being a support entity for parents and the district. We hope that this also decreases the likelihood of future concerns. By following the recommendations in this article, your group will grow and stay strong.

---

The following is my current contact information and a short bio:

1527 S. Meadow Drive  
Warsaw, IN 46580  
(574) 269-5432  
LoriLewis@ev1.net

Lori Lewis is an elementary teacher and parent of a gifted child. Lori received her teaching certificate and BA in Sociology from Virginia Wesleyan College in 1995. She has combined her passion for advocating for students and serving her community into a successful role as president of her local parent group. Her latest efforts have been focused on advising, speaking and writing about organizing and maintaining successful parent groups.