

Hello and welcome to another WATG Podcast I'm your host Cory Jennerjohn and I'm joined by Sarah Prettyman. She is an opinion columnist for the Utah Statesman. That is the student newspaper for Utah State University. Sarah thanks a lot for joining the WATG podcast today. I appreciate it.

Sarah Prettyman: Thank you for having me.

Cory Jennerjohn: No problem. Hey Sarah, if you want to give a brief outline about yourself. Just tell the listeners and just kind of give them a glimpse of who exactly you are.

Sarah: Well, I'm a sophomore here at Utah State University majoring in Applied Mathematics with minors in Russian and Statistics. I'm originally from Maryland so it's a little bit of ways away but currently living here at Utah State. I work with the University on their student paper as well as their Government Relations Council and a couple of their volunteer committees.

Cory: Okay, thanks a lot, Sarah. So full disclosure on how I found Sarah was I saw an opinion piece that Sarah wrote in the Utah Statesman titled "Gifted and Talented Programs are Unjust and Essential." If you get a chance go ahead and read, it's a very good read. Sarah did a very good job vetting out every single nook and cranny of gift and talented programs and Sarah, you know after I read it, I was thinking to myself, you know, if you were, in fact, a gifted and talented student yourself coming up through high school and how, you know, how have you been infected through gifted and talented learning coming up through high school and into college would you say?

Sarah: It's had multiple different effects on me and I've seen a lot of it coming from even elementary school, like placement tests in like the second grade, where I placed in like a higher percentile and ended up staying in that percentile all the way up through my SAT scores. So it's kind of interesting to see how that's still relevant but I've seen a lot of the disadvantages to it. Being the youngest of 10, my parents didn't have a lot of resources for us growing up so like, they had like even in elementary school, they had before school programs that I couldn't go to because my mom worked as a nurse throughout the night and was too tired in the morning, of course, to take me. And I'd seen it for like the specialized STEM programs, for applying into them, I'd seen the benefits as well. The programs always allowed me to challenge myself. I felt like some of my other classes never were enough. I'd get bored, I get distracted but with like AP classes or even honor placements, they helped stimulate me and, as well as, other students.

Cory: That's interesting. So you you kind of mentioned New York City, how how they made the decision to kind of phase-out, get rid of, the gift and talented program. Are you, when that first happened, Sarah, were you upset, disappointed like what was your first reaction when you, when you heard that news?

Sarah: I was kind of shocked, especially being a city. I would have assumed that they would have been more eager for more advanced programs and such. I came from a rural area so I was surprised to hear that a city would be doing something such as that. Also, a little bit upset and then followed by some understanding. Just because when you have a city of that size and caliber there's going to be a lot of different ethnicities, different groups, different types of people to have to work with and they understand their people best.

Cory: Okay that makes sense. So in, in the article, you make a you make a really good reference to not just making sure kids start out in accelerated programs but kind of dive into accelerated programs a little bit later so that we have a really good idea, in terms of who these, who, you know, who these kids are. Do they really belong? Are the tests even fair or or right, because, like you mentioned too, like, I thought it was a really good example how, you know just because you come from a really good situation doesn't necessarily mean that you truly belong in a gift and talented program. I thought that, that was a really interesting point that you made.

Sarah: Thank you. When it came to the advantages certain students can have, I was, every time I see, like even with like universities and such, when they have, like, their college placements exams, like, I think, I think like three of the ivy league, I'm not sure exactly how many even they have like certain diversity quotas so. Because you could have a thousand or you could have like 50,000 applicants, which is around how many they have and you can have thousands of students that are very, very qualified, very like, very high SAT scores. Very highly listed extracurriculars but because they were, grew up in circumstances where they could they didn't have to work after school, they could go and play a sport or do an instrument or do a study abroad. Because they grew up in situations that were more of the majority so they had those privileges and I think it's kind of interesting to see how that applies even at the start of education with like younger children and students with disabilities and that are growing up in like more harsh environments.

Cory: Do you think, Sarah, do you think at its core, would you say gift and talented programs, the positives far outweigh the negatives or what, what would you say?

Sarah: I would definitely say the positives outweigh the negative. I think the problem with gifted and talented programs aren't the programs. I don't think it's the intent behind the program. I think it is an institutional thing. I think it is the test and I do not believe that the intent behind gifted and talented is to discriminate. I think it is to uplift and give those with those innate talents the ability to express them and figure out what, like, their true capabilities are

Cory: Okay, alright, so what do you think the future holds for gift and talented programs, and where, where do you think we go from here? Do you think this is going to be a, like, kind of a starting off point the New York City decision is going to be? A starting off point for other cities, towns and school districts to phase out their gifted and talented programs? Do you think they're kind of going to follow suit?

Sarah: in some ways, yes, I could see the public school education going more towards what was introduced. When I was in, like when I was in my earlier education, like Common Core, I think that, in the most blunt way, Common Core, from my experience with it, was horrible. I think the not, just not the intent behind it, but the execution of it, at least in my school district, was abysmal. It was the textbook that they had us use where they would pay thousands of dollars on textbooks and give them to sixth graders and seventh graders. We wouldn't even touch them because, on a higher level, these decisions are being made, like by a politician, by a governor of a city is making this decision, that is in fact, like affecting all of these individuals. But that doesn't mean they truly comprehend the impact that they're having. But, yeah, I think this, I think it's going to be in public school education. At the very least, it is going to be more gifted programs will be phased out and altered.

Cory: An idea that I that I've had, I don't know what you think about this, but an idea that I, I've had was maybe gifted and talented needs to be more fluid. Maybe in a rural area the test acceptance rate or application rate is different than another city or suburban community, yet, because I, I don't know, because one, because when you say gift and talented programs, it's not, I feel like it's not a one size fits all. It's a, there's so many, like you mentioned in your article, there's so many different factors leading into gifted and talented education for kids. You know whether it be in their environment or so many other different factors I, I think we have to start taking all those things into account. Would, you know, would you agree with that?

Sarah: Yes 100 percent. Like I think I even mentioned in my article like the hierarchy of like public school education, when you think of like a principal or the board of education

for it or even like the lawmakers and legislators on a higher level. It's different on every state level. This is why we have state governments and this is why we have local governments and this is why we have all of those people putting those policies into place is because gifted and talented programs or just education programs, in general, are supposed to be like specified to the area. Like my area growing up versus the high school in Cache County, or like Logan is very different, and it should be because they are two different parts of the country. They have very different demographics, very different people they're working with, and as such, the program should be shifted so that it works with those different groups of people.

Cory: You mentioned, too, at Utah state, that it's more of an application process for, for the quote unquote gift and talented program, which, which it's not called that. I, I think that's really interesting. Do you think that, you know the application process itself, like making kids be more assertive for them wanting to be part of an organization like that, do you think that kind of, you know, I don't want to say limits, limits the enrollment or number of people, but do you think that kind of makes it a little bit smaller than it normally would be?

Sarah: Oh most definitely. In my application process for Utah State, it was not initially my first choice school or even one of my top choices so I didn't apply for the honors college. And I know, I just know I would have gotten in based off of my qualifications. But even once I got here, I still didn't apply to it just because I realized it was just, wasn't what I wanted but if I had been immediately enrolled in it I would have stayed in it. It's one of those situations where if you have to go out of your way and put incentive to do it, it's different than having it be automatically placed like placement tests in schools versus like when you get into high school you can start picking out what classes you want to take. That's the initiative so you're going to have less students choose to do that.

Cory: Okay, do you think this is going to lead to, I don't know, I'm just, I'm just, you know thinking way down the road here, do you think this is going to have like a tidal wave effect where we could even have changes to, you know like the ACT SAT, in terms of entrance into colleges altogether?

Sarah: Yes, it's been happening a lot in the result of Covid-19, how it's just been altered. I know that in some circum--, like I know the SAT is like, examinations like that, have been ruled or have been claimed to have been, like, biased or discriminatory. Personally, in my experience with the SAT, I feel like some people may put it into a light of being

something that's very dark and ominous but at the end of the day, it is an exam. The prep is, all the answers to everything essentially are in the prep books or in the practice exams. So I personally don't think they should be altered because, while some of the questions may be considered ridiculous, at the end of the day it's something you can study for. Me, personally, when I studied for the SAT, I did all 10 practice exams on the SAT website. I did every practice I could and it worked out for me in the end but it wasn't easy but it's not supposed to be, like yeah.

Cory: I agree a thousand percent. Some questions are, in fact, ridiculous. I can't, I can't remember any of them offhand but I just, I still remember, I'm just like, what in the world? Like it was just, it was completely random. I was like what,

Sarah: Yeah.

Cory: I thought that was very strange.

Sarah: Very, very left-field questions.

Cory: Yeah, yeah for sure.

Cory: So let's say, on how many people, like how many people do you think you, you know, would like to be part of a gifted and talented type program? Do you think, but just don't have the means or don't have the accessibility or even in their school district, it's just not, it's just not feasible? Do you think that's, do you think that's a big problem in the United States, too?

Sarah: Yes it is. I realize, especially coming to college, I thought my high school didn't have a lot of AP classes and I had a roommate last year who was from Alaska and her high school had one AP class. And I knew somebody else's high school with three and somebody else who had none, and that's also just, how it works on a local level. Like operating and working around what's feasible, what's practical but it's definitely, definitely makes the selection process for, like, universities very complicated.

Cory: Okay that's interesting, that's interesting. So do you think, I mean obviously, this has kind of been talked about before when I've had other guests on, do you think gift and talented programs, is, is it fair to label gifted and talented programs as the opposite spectrum of, of Special Ed or do you think that, that's not fair?

Sarah: I think that's not fair because gifted and talented means that you have something extra. You have this uplifted skill but saying it's the opposite makes it sound as though Special Ed is something less but it's not. They're both different things, and I don't think they should be compared or leveled up in a level like that.

Cory: Okay that's, I like that answer because, because what I've, what I've heard from several educators is they say, if they if they have to make a choice they're always going to choose Special Education because, you know, their argument is, 'well we can always assign more to gift and talented kids and I think that's kind of, I think that's kind of lazy because I, I'm not exactly sure that's, you know, that's exactly, just because you assign more to a certain student doesn't exactly mean that that's, that student is being challenged. Would you agree with that or not?

Sarah: Yes, just by adding, I think the gifted and talented program isn't simply just giving a student a pile of homework and telling them to solve it and adding to the stack. This past summer I was a STEM mentor for a STEM camp. I actually wrote about an article UVU Prep which is a pre-freshman engineering program and that program, I think delivered one of the best methods of keeping a gifted and talented program without discriminating against other individuals. We had students there that were of, like, we had, I remember one student who was from, who just came from Guatemala the previous year and was having difficulties with school. And something that hadn't even occurred to me was when I met her parents, I realized why it was so hard for her to do her homework. Her parents weren't English speaking and she was coming with these homework assignments home that were in English and I hadn't even thought of, like the language barrier that comes with those sort of things, and I think the mis--, like a misconception with gifted and talented programs is, well that's just like belittling the child or like putting them down and I was like, well if anything, the fact that it makes me like, are like in that sense, as their like, educator, that it made me aware of that issue. That's the problem with the gifted and talented programs. It's not the gifted and talented part, it's just the individuals that don't have the right resources and need them

Cory: Okay that's a good point. So it's not exactly, it's not, it's not, it's not just the fact that, you know, yes and no, we need this program. It's more about prioritization and just, you know, allocating the right resources and feasibility that's, that's, that's smart. Just, it's mainly just, kind of just, being smart with, you know money and time just to make it work.

All right, Sarah, I appreciate your time. I really appreciate it and I, li know that this is a crunch, crunch time for finals so good luck the rest of the way and, like I said, I really appreciate you hopping aboard the WATG Podcast and kind of just giving your thoughts about gift and talented education.

Sarah: Yeah, thank you so much for having me.

Cory: No problem. Take care.

Sarah: You, too.