

DRAFT BOARD MEMO

Date: DD June 2021

For ACTION _____

For INFORMATION _____

Board Agenda: Yes _____

No _____

FROM: Laura Rose, Chair, Talented and Gifted Advisory Committee
Megan Tempel-Milner, Ph.D. TAG Coordinator

THROUGH: Terri H. Mozingo, Ed.D., Chief of Teaching, Learning, and Leadership
Gregory C. Hutchings, Jr., Ed.D., Superintendent of Schools

TO: The Honorable Meagan Alderton, Chair, and
Members of the Alexandria City School Board

TOPIC: TAGAC Guest Speakers Report

ACPS 2025 STRATEGIC PLAN GOAL:

- Goal 1: Systemic Alignment
- Goal 2: Instructional Excellence
- Goal 3: Student Accessibility and Support
- Goal 4: Strategic Resource Allocation
- Goal 5: Family and Community Engagement

SY 2020-2021 FOCUS AREA:

- Focus Area 3: Strategic Plan Implementation
- Focus Area 5: Academic Disparities

SUMMARY:

The Talented and Gifted Advisory Committee (TAGAC) hosted four guest speakers during the 2020-2021 school year to share knowledge and experience in providing special services to talented and gifted students. The 2020-21 guest speakers all offered insight that would facilitate efforts to build a more inclusive and equitable TAG program in Alexandria City Public Schools (ACPS). With the benefit of the speakers' presentations, the subcommittee recommends that ACPS:

1. Increase communication efforts regarding TAG services. Communication should be reflective of the local language and communication style of each school. Staff should be trained to understand and communicate about TAG services to facilitate inclusive parent awareness and understanding of TAG services.
2. Implement equitable, flexible ability grouping in ACPS elementary and middle schools. Students should be grouped, and periodically regrouped, based on potential in addition to performance, using local norms to more comprehensively identify students.
3. Implement high-level curriculum across ACPS classrooms that will challenge students at all levels, both within and outside of the TAG program.

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BACKGROUND:

TAGAC hosted the following speakers during SY2020-2021:

- Ms. Dornswalo Wilkins-McCorey - President Elect, Va. Assoc. of Gifted Children, Va. Beach Schools.
- Dr. Jonathan Plucker - President of the National Association of Gifted Children
- Ms. Angela Greene- ACPS Department of Accountability
- Ms. Krishna Levya- ACPS Family and Community Engagement Center (FACE)

The TAGAC Guest Speakers Sub-Committee reviewed TAGAC minutes, committee member notes, and TAGAC meeting video to produce relevant lessons and recommendations for improving Talented and Gifted (TAG) services in Alexandria City Public Schools (ACPS).

TAGAC summarized the speaker's comments along a theme of "Equity and Access to Services". The TAGAC assessed the speakers stressed importance of effective communications and outreach, flexible grouping, identification, and local norms, improving TAG services through improved curriculum, flexibility and socialization. Some specific speaker comments are cited below:

Angela Green is a testing analyst with the ACPS Department of Accountability. Ms. Green presented information about the CogAT test and how it is used as a universal screener to identify students for TAG services in third grade. The CogAT is given to all third graders in the fall over the course of three days. Student illness and testing form completion errors can contribute to testing irregularities. One benefit of the CogAT is that it can identify students who have a high level of academic ability that may not be reflected in observed levels of achievement. A student who scores in the 95th percentile (nationally normed by age reference) will create an automatic TAG referral as follows: Verbal—referral for language arts, science, and social studies; Quantitative (alone—referral for math; Nonverbal combined with Quantitative—referral for math; Nonverbal (alone—referral for math.

Dornswalo Wilkins-McCorey has 19 years as an educator and has presented on gifted education, differentiation, and related topics locally and nationally within the National Association of Gifted Education, Virginia Association of the Gifted, Virginia Beach City School Division and Suffolk Public School Division. She described her school's program that piloted with parents from 17 Title 1 schools with the aim of helping them understand and support their children as well as develop a richly supporting community of parents of gifted learners. One takeaway from the pilot program was that parent support groups can be helpful for all parents.

Krishna Leyva is the Family and Community Engagement Manager with ACPS. The Family and Community Engagement (FACE) Center's goal is to connect families to resources to help their children succeed. Ms. Leyva emphasized the need to reach families in effective ways, noting that both the form and accessibility of the communication is critical. For example, her experience indicates that mobile phone friendly outreach often improves communication effectiveness with multilingual families. Text messaging and simple messages detailing the

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benefits of the program, followed up by contact with a trusted staff member were more effective than newsletters. TAGAC members notes that TAG links and website materials (including the Parent Referral forms) should be available in mobile-friendly formats.

Dr. Jonathan Plucker is the Julian C. Stanley Endowed Professor of Talent Development at Johns Hopkins University, and the current President of the National Association of Gifted Children. His research focuses on education policy and talent development. Dr. Plucker's presentation to the committee focused on the successful outcomes that have been observed with ability grouping when implemented flexibly and equitably as one means to promote advanced achievement. He noted recent studies have considered the benefits of ability grouping when incorporating flexibility. Flexible grouping, where students are frequently evaluated and often re-assigned during the school year, provides the benefits of ability grouping (e.g., easier teaching, focused learning) without the negative social impacts or inability to break out of a group once assigned. Flexible ability grouping could be determined in a variety of ways such as course subject, reading, or cognitive skills or most importantly by potential vs performance. Training for teachers and staff would assist in grouping for potential disposing of stereotypes of gifted students. Teachers could use flexible ability groups to assist in providing "personalized" (not individualized) teaching to their students as well as re-grouping when appropriate when a student's needs evolve.

Dr. Plucker also stressed that any ability grouping must be equitable. He acknowledged the concerns with equity that have been expressed with ability grouping. But in his view, flexible grouping with universal and frequent assessment, has the potential for the most equitable outcomes. He also stressed that it is critical to assess equity holistically, looking not just at the public school system, but to private educational opportunities as well. Citing San Francisco schools as a cautionary example, Dr. Plucker strongly advised against discontinuing advanced programs such as TAG.

He elaborated that selection for flexible grouping must be universal (e.g., testing in 2 and 4th grades) but must also look for student potential not only performance or achievement. Often gifted students in early elementary may not necessarily be "high achieving" but do demonstrate "strong potential" through their classroom behavior and personality (e.g., asking questions, curiosity, ability to concentrate). Moreover, he stressed that due to differences between schools or neighborhoods, he advocated adopting "local norms" for identifying students since central criteria might not apply to all situations.

Dr. Plucker's local norms observation directly applies to ACPS. ACPS has four major language groups. While translation services are present, this may not be sufficient to capture the diversity, school culture or atmosphere, and identifying more effective ways to engage local communities and connect with parents. TAGAC feels that ACPS could benefit from including parent support groups and parent resources from for every school in developing local norms. Once established, dedicated training for parent liaisons and front office personnel (first people to see and connect with the parents) on differences between Specific Academic Aptitude (SAA) (in language arts, math, science or social studies), General Intellectual Aptitude (GIA), and

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Young Scholars services using local norms.

Critical to a successful educational program that serves all ability levels, in Dr. Plucker's view, is high level curriculum that appropriately challenges all students. When coupled with flexible grouping, high level curriculum serves to engage all students by meeting them at their level.

The TAGAC believes there is merit in considering equitable flexible ability grouping in ACPS for the elementary and middle school levels. This model provides useful tools to provide personalized instruction to the widely diversified student bodies in the ACPS elementary and middle schools. The TAGAC feels that due to the vast array of courses offered at the high school level that the benefits of flexible grouping would be less effective. Flexible ability grouping could permit teachers and administrators to tailor services to the specific needs of their classrooms and neighborhood schools. Then with regrouping, there are additional opportunities for students to move to new groups that suit individual needs avoiding labels or stereotypes. However, selection must be equitable by looking for potential in addition to performance using local norms. Looking for potential and using local norms in student selection should be especially considered at the middle school level where the ability diversity within classrooms tends to be greater than elementary schools.

RECOMMENDATION:

The Superintendent recommends that the School Board review the TAGAC report TAGAC Guest Speakers Report and consider that ACPS take the following actions:

1. Increase communication efforts regarding TAG services. Communication should be reflective of the local language and communication style of each school. Staff should be trained to understand and communicate about TAG services to facilitate inclusive parent awareness and understanding of TAG services.
2. Implement equitable, flexible ability grouping in ACPS elementary and middle schools. Students should be grouped, and periodically regrouped, based on potential in addition to performance, using local norms to more comprehensively identify students.
3. Implement high-level curriculum across ACPS classrooms that will challenge students at all levels, both within and outside of the TAG program.

IMPACT:

TAGAC feels implementing the above recommendations would advance efforts to provide superior TAG services that are equitable and meet the needs of the diverse ACPS student body.

CONTACT:

Dr. Megan Tempel-Milner, megan.tempel-milner@acps.k12.va.us