

Date: September 12, 2019

For ACTION ___

For INFORMATION X

Board Agenda: Yes X

No ___

FROM: K. Nicholas Miller, Talented and Gifted Advisory Committee (TAGAC) Chair

THROUGH: Gregory C. Hutchings, Jr., Ed.D, Superintendent of Schools
Terri H. Mazingo, Ed.D, Chief Academic Officer
Gerald R. Mann, Jr., Ed.D, Executive Director of Secondary Instruction
Frances Donna Brearley, Talented and Gifted (TAG) Coordinator

TO: The Honorable Cindy M. Anderson, Chair, and
Members of the Alexandria City School Board

TOPIC: Talented and Gifted Advisory Committee (TAGAC) Elementary School Response to
Proposed Local Plan

SUMMARY

The Talented and Gifted Advisory Committee (TAGAC) has reviewed the June 20, 2018, *Gifted Program Recommendations* document put forth by the Elementary School principals as a part of the work of the Steering Committee that will review and update the Local Plan. There are several aspects of the *Gifted Program Recommendations* with which TAGAC agrees. In response to the *Gifted Program Recommendations* document and as informed by results of the October 2017 TAG Program audit as presented in the *Evaluation Report on TAG Program*, TAGAC recommends the following:

- 1) Maintain the current delivery method of pull-out/self-contained services for 4th and 5th grade TAG ELA. ACPS will not otherwise be able to continue to meet the significant learning needs and differences of TAG ELA students.
- 2) To supplement recommendation #1, but not substitute it, with the following:
 - a. Move Young Scholars (YS) into the ACPS TAG program;
 - b. Improve training for general education teachers, specifically on identifying and working with TAG students and YS, and in differentiating for all students; and
 - c. Maintain a critical mass cluster of six to eight students in designated classrooms at each grade level.

BACKGROUND

Maintain the current delivery method of pull-out services for 4th and 5th grade TAG ELA.

TAGAC agrees with the authors of the 2016-2017 TAG Evaluation (“the Report”) that the current delivery model of 4th and 5th grade English Language Arts (ELA) is a strength of ACPS’ TAG program. Specifically, the Report stated that “the pullout program at grades 4 and 5

(replacement curriculum) in both language arts and math provides the opportunity for advanced curriculum challenge in these two key areas of the curriculum. It is perceived by students, staff, and parents to be an effective intervention at those levels of learning as revealed in survey and focus group findings. Classroom observation data also confirm its effectiveness, with TAG teachers showing high frequency and effectiveness ratings in most observed settings.” Furthermore, the report also suggested that ACPS model the K-3 General Intellectual Aptitude (GIA) program after the current 4th and 5th grade delivery model.

TAGAC strongly believes that the current rigor of the coursework and achievement of the students cannot be maintained with a co-taught/push-in delivery model. The Report included a finding that there is a “[l]ack of differentiation in the division curriculum materials...suggest[ing] that there has been limited attention to TAG curriculum development” and that classroom observations revealed “differentiation is not frequently employed beyond the grade 4-5 pullout program and AP courses.” The Report further found that elements of the TAG program “[are] being implemented unevenly” across school sites, which goes against ACPS’ goal of equity. A balanced literacy approach, (with read-aloud, shared-reading, word study, writers’ workshop, and strategy groups) in a co-taught setting would dilute the current program, reduce the distinct benefits, and undermine ACPS’ ability to meet the learning needs of this group of students who learn best when grouped with similar-ability peers. In such a model, TAG students would no longer have access to the rigorous curriculum with the depth and complexity that is currently offered. Although we support making changes to the curriculum to improve the rigor overall and make the curriculum more challenging for all students while promoting ACPS’ goal of achieving equity, realistically, as stated by Dr. Richard M. Cash during his most recent visit, it would take around three to five years to implement the changes. In the meantime, the current TAG ELA curriculum couldn’t be delivered, and the general education ELA curriculum cannot meet the needs of TAG students. TAGAC believes changes to the general education curriculum should be implemented and evaluated before determining whether it is necessary or appropriate to make changes to the current delivery method of pull-out services for 4th and 5th grade TAG ELA.

The Best Practices in Gifted and Talented Education published by Hanover Research states the “benefits of effective pull-out/resource room programs include better/more focus on in-depth study or a particular subject, and the need for only one instructional plan. In addition to the academic and curricular benefits, pull-out programs also improve social skills and motivation. Several studies conducted with gifted students in pull out programs have reported increased peer to peer interactions, motivation, interest, and enjoyment.”¹

Significant changes to the 4th and 5th grade delivery model without improvement to K-3 and middle school TAG services would greatly erode the trust of ACPS families. TAGAC has had many families over the last year come to our meetings to testify to the benefits students received from the current delivery model of 4th and 5th grade TAG services. The current service model of rigorous instruction in 4th and 5th grade is the standard they wish to see for K-

¹ Hanover Research, February 2017. *Best Practices in Gifted and Talented Education*.

3 and middle school TAG services. The Evaluation Report also received similar feedback, “Positive parental responses from both surveys and focus groups were almost universal for the pullout program at grades 4 and 5 in language arts and math, commenting that the programs were challenging and rigorous for their children while the DEP approach was not fully understood or appreciated as a way to serve TAG students at K-3 or grades 4-5 in science or social studies.”

Standardization of TAG delivery services across the district has been a focus of this committee’s work over the past few years. The current service delivery model, where elementary TAG teachers meet, coordinate, and share ideas and plans on a monthly basis, ensures consistency in TAG services across the district. That consistency and quality will decline if TAG-certified teachers no longer teach the ELA curriculum, but rather co-teach a portion of the curriculum with the general education teacher.

Move Young Scholars into the ACPS TAG Program

TAGAC agrees with the elementary school principals’ recommendation to move the Young Scholars program under the umbrella of the ACPS TAG Program to better facilitate the integration of TAG services across the two programs.

To increase equity and minimize the lag time to provide services to students in the Young Scholars and the TAG GIA program, the committee recommends training all teachers on indicators to help identify potential candidates for both programs during the initial Kindergarten registration meeting and Kindergarten Prep week, in addition to regular instruction in the classroom. Once identified as a Young Scholar students should be included in the general TAG classroom clustering population.

The committee also recommends using the Young Scholars program participants as the pool for principals to make additional class placements to help round out any below-capacity grade 4 or 5 pull-out ELA or Math classes. Parents of all Young Scholars participants should also receive a preview of the Young Scholars curriculum for the year, as well as a plan equivalent to the Differentiated Education Plan currently provided to General Intellectual Aptitude (GIA) students.

Improve Training for General Education Teachers

TAGAC agrees with the elementary school principals’ recommendation to improve teacher training. TAGAC recommends that general education teachers be encouraged to seek gifted endorsements if interested, but that all general education teachers be trained on how to identify and work with gifted students. General education teachers should also be trained on how to differentiate to the needs of all students in the classroom and have collaborative planning time with gifted endorsed teachers and other teachers in their grade to discuss teaching strategies that will promote higher level critical thinking and problem solving for all students.

Maintain a critical mass cluster of 6-8 students in designated classrooms at each grade level

In accordance with *The Report*, the committee recommends clustering TAG students in a critical mass cluster of 6-8 students in designated classrooms at each grade level. Clustering will benefit all students and help promote equity by narrowing the range of learners in a classroom and allowing teachers to better differentiate the curriculum to meet the needs of each group of learners in the classroom.² These clusters should include Young Scholars students as TAG students as identified in recommendations 2a.

The article, *Why Separate Classes for Gifted Students Boost All Kids*, points out a key benefit of clustering. "When the high-achieving students are clustered together in one class, students in the other classes grow academically- gaining confidence, receiving more teacher attention and participating more frequently in class...the result: more students from underrepresented populations- such as students from culturally and linguistically diverse background or students from low-income families- may be identified as gifted."³

As shared in the *Grouping Position Statement* by the National Association for Gifted Children, "The purposes of grouping are fourfold: (1) to ease the delivery of appropriately differentiated curriculum to learners with similar educational needs; (2) to facilitate the use of appropriately differentiated instructional strategies to learners with similar educational needs; (3) to facilitate addressing the differential affective needs of these children in the most conducive manner; and (4) to allow for learners of similar abilities or performance levels to learn from each other. In general, grouping gifted learners tends to be the 'least restrictive environment' in which their learning can take place, and the most effective and efficient means for schools to provide more challenging coursework, thereby giving these children access to advanced content and providing them with a peer group (Brody, 2004)."⁴

Furthermore, the Position Statement also defines *cluster grouping* as "the top 5-8 gifted students at a grade level placed in a mixed ability classroom as a small group and are provided proportionate differentiated curriculum and instruction by a teacher with gifted training (e.g., 8 children in a class of 24 would receive $\frac{1}{3}$ of the teacher's time and instruction)."⁵ Narrowing the range of learners in a classroom will give teachers more flexibility and allow for regrouping based on interest or learning rates. It will also allow ACPS to better match students' instruction to their level of readiness.

² <http://www.nagc.org/resources-publications/gifted-education-practices/grouping>

³ Wang, Stephanie. (2014, October 6) *Why Separate Classes for Gifted Students Boost All Kids*

⁴ National Association for Gifted Children (Approved March 2009). *Grouping Position Statement*.

⁵ National Association for Gifted Children (Approved March 2009). *Grouping Position Statement*.

RECOMMENDATION

In conclusion, TAGAC recommends the following actions:

- 1) Maintain the current delivery method of pull-out/self-contained services for 4th and 5th grade TAG ELA. ACPS will not otherwise be able to continue to meet the significant learning needs and differences of TAG ELA students.
- 2) To supplement recommendation #1, but not substitute it, with the following:
 - a. Move Young Scholars into the ACPS TAG program;
 - b. Improve training for general education teachers, specifically on identifying and working with TAG students and Young Scholars, and in differentiating for all students; and
 - c. Maintain a critical mass cluster of six to eight students in designated classrooms at each grade level.

IMPACT

Our goals include participating in the on-going evaluation of the delivery of the **TAG Local Plan** and recommending appropriate revisions to ensure implementation of the recommendations from the external audit obtained by the School Board and the assessments from TAGAC's internal examination of the TAG programs throughout the school system.

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