

Lindsay Clarke
Public Comments
June 6, 2019
School Board Meeting

Dear School Board Members-

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you tonight. My name is Lindsay Clarke, and I'm the mother of a 4th grade student in the TAG Language Arts and Math programs, and a rising 1st grade student at Douglas MacArthur. I am here tonight because I am very concerned about the current state and direction of the TAG program, and the lack of momentum in implementing changes that were recommended by the study commissioned by ACPS, and that are long overdue.

My 4th grader's experience with the TAG program is a good example of why TAG students need differentiated services, and how many aspects of the current program aren't working for our students:

- In Kindergarten, after many conversations about my daughter's behavior in class, her teacher recommended that she be referred for TAG services. She felt that many of her challenges were classic behaviors of a TAG child who learns differently and that the TAG program could help her with her learning style and needs.
- We referred her for services early in first grade, but she was not placed until late in the school year. In the meantime, another year went by where she was bored, had trouble staying engaged, and rarely felt stimulated.
- In 2nd grade, she was placed in a classroom with one other TAG identified student, and the two of them were instructed to spend time working in the hallway on a self-guided project for their DEP. She also spent a lot of time with the school nurse—because she enjoyed her, and she taught her cool things.
- In 3rd grade, a TAG teacher brought the TAG students to her classroom for an hour or two a week (for part of the year), but my daughter largely spent extra time in the library, doing self-guided research.
- It wasn't until 4th grade when she finally started being challenged. She found Ms. Leigh Dugan, who understands that my daughter and other TAG students learn differently, and leans into those differences, instead of penalizing them for them. My daughter finally started coming home and answering my question of "What did you learn today?" with tons of examples, instead of "nothing—we just reviewed things." She is pushed by the kids around her, encouraged to think and learn differently, and not told to go in the hallway or to the nurse because there's nothing else for her to work on. She is excited about learning and it has been thrilling to see as a parent.

But now we are hearing that instead of shoring up the rest of the program, this shining star in her TAG experience could be in jeopardy.

I am troubled by the Principals' plan which contradicts recommendations from the TAG evaluation and the TAG Advisory Committee. While it has been emphasized that no decisions have been made, the answers to the parent questions from the Superintendent's Roundtable seemed crafted to support anticipated changes—specifically with regards to changing the 4th/5th grade Language Arts curriculum to

a push-in model. Based on everything I have heard, seen, and experienced over the years, I don't believe that the majority of our teachers are able to support a push-in model for TAG.

I'm concerned that this proposed change is being driven by a perception of unfairness, and the idea that TAG students in the classroom will be a resource to teach other students and raise all boats.

On the unfairness issue, we have a genuine problem with perception. TAG services are not designed to be a privilege but a right. All students deserve to receive services based on their needs. Attitudes about TAG as an exclusive program harm ALL students.

As for the idea that TAG students could be a resource in the classroom—teaching others and raising test scores—this is outrageous. My daughter has the same right to learn as every other student.

I urge the board to move forward with the TAG evaluation recommendations. Specifically, I would like to see:

- Withdrawal of the proposal for changes to the 4th and 5th grade Language Arts services.
- A focus on changes for the middle school services. Students who are pushed and engaged in 4th and 5th grade go on to repeat the curriculum in 6th grade and lose critical momentum. We can't lose sight of these students in middle school.
- A focus on changes to the identification process and the Young Scholars program which will help to create equity within the program and address significant delays in placement. To be clear, elimination of effective services will hurt all students who are TAG identified.
- Continuation of changes for 1st – 3rd services, including minimum clustering and increased support.
- Education of administrators, teachers, and the community about what a TAG designation means, and the services provided.
- A faster timeline for changes. While I appreciate that ACPS plans to back all changes to the program with research and evidence, I'd like to remind the board that we already have research and evidence. ACPS undertook—with considerable expense and effort—an extensive evaluation of the TAG program more than two years ago. That evaluation got feedback from more than 1,000 administrators, teachers, and parents. The recommendations were clear, but now ACPS appears to be pushing those aside and delaying changes in the pursuit of different answers.

I am not alone in my concerns, as you can see from tonight's board meeting. I also helped to spearhead a letter from Douglas MacArthur parents that was signed by more than 35 families and sent to the board in April.

I am worried for my daughter's future in ACPS and hope that my son, if TAG identified, will have a better experience than she has had. They cannot advocate for themselves to ensure ACPS is meeting their needs—and let's all be honest—we are the only ones that are going to advocate for them because of the optics that have been created and nurtured by conversations about the program. We need you to advocate for them too.

Thank you for your time.