

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) Middle School Response to
Proposed Local Plan

SUMMARY

The Talented and Gifted Advisory Committee (TAGAC) has reviewed conversations with and presentations from the principals at George Washington and Frances C. Hammond Middle Schools that have taken place over the last year and results of the October 2017 TAG Program audit. Based on these inputs, TAGAC wishes to respond with the following recommendations to improve the 6th-8th grade TAG experience at all middle schools:

- 1) Identify a screening method for all students prior to entry into middle school to identify TAG students for all core subjects, including science and social studies;
- 2) In all SAA academic subjects, English Language Arts (ELA), Math, Science and Social Studies, Honors Classes, guarantee a critical mass cluster of 8-10 TAG students per class;
 - a. Prioritize placement of teachers with TAG endorsements and differentiation training to these TAG clustered classrooms.
- 3) Create an accelerated/intensive Honors Language Arts Class for the highest performing and gifted ELA students as a logical follow on to the intensive 4th and 5th grade ELA program; and
- 4) Continue to support and monitor Young Scholars (YS) in the middle school through the ACPS TAG program.

BACKGROUND

TAGAC acknowledges that ACPS middle school administrators, including those in Central Office have read and digested the findings in the 2017 *Alexandria City Public Schools Evaluation Report on Talented and Gifted (TAG) Program* (TAG Report), however, we are concerned that some solutions under consideration do not go far enough to resolve the problems identified in the study. Failure to fully and completely resolve these issues means that TAG students are not

being given all the opportunities to achieve excellence and develop their abilities to the fullest. We additionally recommend the district also provide staff training specific to develop a counseling component to assist middle school TAG students with their social and emotional development.

The Committee believes that ACPS would benefit from moving Young Scholars program participants under the TAG umbrella. The Committee also recommends using the Young Scholars program participants as the pool for principals to make additional class placements to help round out clustering groups in all subject areas. Parents of all Young Scholars participants should also receive a plan equivalent to the Differentiated Education Plan currently provided to General Intellectual Aptitude (GIA) and SIA students.

The Committee believes that ACPS would benefit from the employment of universal testing for TAG-services to assist the district's ability to recognize 6th grade students not identified in elementary school. This must include testing for science and social studies areas since there is no current universal screening in these subject areas.

We stress the improvement of communication for all TAG services and specifically recommend that ACPS provide formal opportunities for DEP-related deliverables (student presentations, projects, papers, etc.) to be communicated to both parents and students.¹ Finally, as discussed in the TAG Report at p132, we recommend that the district create a formal communication/coordination system between elementary school TAG teachers and middle school TAG staff to ensure the state requirement of continuous delivery of services as well as providing a continuity of challenge and avoid unnecessary overlap. While there is ample evidence this happens in math there is also ample evidence that ELA has a significant disconnect to the detriment of TAG students as they move from 5th to 6th grade.

Furthermore, because there has been a poor transfer of training skills with some teachers assigned TAG students, we recommend that ACPS remove the requirement for all middle school teachers to teach an Honors class.² Instead, we recommend that ACPS allow a select number of teachers to opt-in, and then provide those teachers with sufficient training for differentiation in the near term. Within these Honors classes, per Recommendation #2, would be significant clusters of TAG students and those teachers should be certified or have a goal of and active progress towards TAG certification. This would enable to district assign teachers to TAG-related classes who are well trained to teaching assignments with gifted learners at all levels.

¹ The TAG Report recommends, at p31, that the district provide a structure for specific group or individual opportunities for acceleration and/or enrichment for TAG students at the middle school level. TAG students would complete work within unit or project guidelines developed; and parents of TAG students would receive the plan as a means of communicating about the specific opportunities for acceleration and/or enrichment offered for their child or children.

² "The APCS decision to have all middle school teachers in the core curriculum teach at least one honors section renders all of them teachers of the gifted and therefore needing appropriate training and preparation (Conversations with building administrators and TAG Coordinator). This forced choice for professional development may be partially at work in the low ratings given for the professional development services." TAG Report p57.

Furthermore, it would enable the district to focus its TAG-related training resources on a smaller group of educators, providing a more cost-effective training solution.

TAGAC confirms its findings and recommendations from its 2017-2018 report. While flexible grouping, also known as clustering, can be effective, it can also be ineffectual if clusters are of insufficient size. For example, at George Washington Middle School, TAG clusters of 5 out of 30 students are too small and the diversity of skills in those classrooms is too great. As discussed in the TAG Report at p24,

“[b]ecause the middle school program is an open enrollment one, often more than 50%-75% of the students enrolled are non-TAG. Consequently, it is critical that teachers provide differentiated reading texts for use in the class that will challenge TAG learners sufficiently.”

Nevertheless, although promised, a separate language arts TAG curriculum has never been implemented, despite the fact that the middle school has been noted as an area for improvement since 2004.

Additionally as discussed in the TAG Report, the

“texts reviewed that are used at grade 6 are at too low a reading level for gifted students at that grade placement. All of the texts are at the fifth-grade reading level, well below advanced readers and their levels that would range from grades 7-10. Thus, both language and vocabulary would not be challenging enough either.”³

ACPS must address improvements to the middle school honors program by creating an accelerated TAG-based language arts class beyond the current honors program to receive students who have completed intensive/accelerated instruction in 4th and 5th grades.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In conclusion, TAGAC recommends the following actions:

- 1) Identify a screening method for all students prior to entry into middle school to identify TAG students for all core subjects, including science and social studies;
- 2) In all SAA academic subjects, ELA, Math, Science and Social Studies, Honors Classes, guarantee a critical mass cluster of 8-10 TAG students per class;⁴
 - a) Prioritize placement of teachers with TAG endorsements and/or differentiation training to these TAG clustered classrooms.

³ Alexandria City Public Schools Evaluation Report on Talented and Gifted (TAG) Program aka The TAG Report p24

⁴ Recognizing that until universal screening is in place for Science and Social Studies 8-10 students may not be available; in which case all students in a given subject should be placed together.

- 3) Create an accelerated/intensive Honors Language Arts Class for the highest performing and gifted ELA students as a logical follow on to the intensive/accelerated 4th and 5th grade ELA program; and
- 4) Continue to support and monitor Young Scholars in the middle school through the ACPS TAG program.

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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