

Willow Darsie, ACPS Parent
Comments delivered at AASAC meeting
October 17, 2023, Alexandria City High School

These past few weeks I have been trying to wrap my head around this new Local Plan, and considering the speed with which it was passed and implemented I have to imagine that for its champions, it must have delivered some huge wins. Putting myself in their shoes, I have distilled four main wins that I'd like to share with you and then explain how with a closer look it is clear they are not actually wins but fallacies and red herrings.

The first ostensible gain is the Local Plan puts in writing a commitment to family and community involvement, as you can see noted on page 14 of the Plan.

Second, the Local Plan allows ACPS to join a national trend moving away from gifted education, thus handing a big win to those on the School Board and in ACPS who categorically question that giftedness is real. Their perspective shows up in the Local Plan's policies and its verbiage, such as giftedness is not an "absolute or fixed state of being." It is confusing to parents because the Local Plan and its proponents engage in double speak that gives lip service to gifted learners. However, signs of their fundamental distrust and even disdain for gifted services are everywhere, such as Slide 5 of the presentation to the February 2023 Advisory Committee pushing the need to "dismantle inequitable structures" by removing accelerated math tracks.

Third, I imagine an upside of the Local Plan for in-house champions is its new approach of ceasing regular K to 3 identification, which dramatically changes the composition of the AAS office workload. Based on what I have learned as an attendee of past years' TAGAC meetings, it seems that activities around identification may have felt like a heavy lift, annually repetitive, and perhaps not compelling or cutting edge for those wishing to build careers in this field. Under the new Local Plan their efforts can be more varied, as you can see in Slide 3 of the AAS Office presentation to the September 2023 Advisory Committee, which shows identification now as one small bubble among many.

And the final category of "win" is public relations. We need look no further than the press release announcing the Local Plan, which was a gentle good news story on making schools more welcoming by changing the title from Talented and Gifted to Advanced Academic Services. Another example is the August 2023 email from the AAS Director to parents of incoming 4th grade students enrolled in SAA math essentially selling them the Local Plan changes. The description of the slowed-down curriculum is so sunnily superlative that it is almost Orwellian. It reads, "The curriculum is aligned to a division-wide instructional framework; infuses high-quality, gifted curricula as the primary source of instructional resources and strategies; deepens mathematical understanding through problem-solving, forming connections, communication, representation, and reasoning; is engaging, rigorous, and culturally relevant; meets students' strengths and areas of growth; and is responsive to students' social, emotional, and academic needs."

So, let's check in. Is this progress, are these really "wins"? No, they are not, and many of us are waking up and seeing right through them. All across different neighborhoods of the city, parents, community members – and, more mutedly, school administrators and teachers, I would add – are

coming out of the woodwork and crying foul. Here is the reality behind each of the four so-called “wins”:

First, the Local Plan’s stated commitment to family and community involvement is simply false. The Local Plan was written behind closed doors without ACPS parent involvement and then posted as a finished product on the School Board website just a couple of weeks before the School Board approved it and ACPS hit “go.” The few parents who caught wind of what was happening and spoke up were ignored or shut down. They literally pleaded for more time and parent engagement.

Second, I mentioned the national trend. This movement toward “de-tracking,” especially math, has a lot of momentum. Unfortunately, the actual results for students show that removing advanced courses has not improved the outcomes for underrepresented groups and, in fact, creates a lot of unfair advantages to kids whose parents can resort to outside tutoring, enrichment and summer studies. The idea that gifted services and accelerated classes are in themselves somehow fundamentally inequitable is false and has been debunked by experts. Just earlier this month *The Atlantic* published an article on this problem entitled, “California’s Math Misadventure Is About to Go National,” and I recommend you read the piece. Curricular changes that narrow down Alexandria students’ choices are sadly going to fail to deliver opportunities for those who most need them. And if we consider the larger Alexandria audience, we might wonder if this new ACPS approach damages our city’s reputation and paints us as retrograde. What a disappointment in a town adjacent to the new VA Tech campus, the new Amazon HQ2 and so many employers hungry for qualified, diverse talent.

On the third point, identification, the changes that are a boon to rejiggering the AAS office’s activities actually translate to a dead end for students who need specialized help and, consequentially, for our city’s compliance with state law mandating provision of gifted education. Does the identification process constitute a slog of paperwork, deadlines and communications? Yes. Are more bodies needed in the AAS office to help with this big lift? Possibly. Should those challenges be a reason to cut identification? Not at all.

The fourth and final point about messaging really upsets me. Parents naturally feel talked down to when they receive communications on the new Local Plan laden with educational word salad and deliberately cherry picked information and data. For example, I have heard so many different justifications for the math change (literally over a dozen) that I don’t know what to think. What is the real Local Plan when you peel back the spin? I can tell you the real Local Plan can be found in the lived experience of gifted students. Many parents here today will tell you the reality that their kids have come know since the Local Plan was thrust upon their schools this August is not pretty. Instead of “enhancements” and “new rigor,” the gifted services have dwindled so greatly that it is as if there are none, which is not only demoralizing to kids but is also in non-compliance with state law. And, in all of ACPS’s sunny announcements, they buried the lead, which seems: they have de-tracked math in Alexandria public schools.

So when we look closely, we see that the realities behind the Local Plan delegitimize it. Our school district has no choice but to suspend or retract this Local Plan and create something new.