

**MEMO**

27 April 2015

**FROM:** Ramee Gentry, Chair, Talented and Gifted Advisory Committee (TAGAC)

**THROUGH:** Frances Donna Brearley, Talented and Gifted Coordinator

**THROUGH:** Alvin L. Crawley, Ed.D, Superintendent of Schools

**TO:** The Honorable Karen Graf, Chairman, and Members of the Alexandria City School Board

**TOPIC: Recommendations for improving delivery of TAG services at the Middle School level**

The Talented and Gifted Advisory Committee has focused its attention this year on the delivery of services for students in middle school. Members of TAGAC participated in the Honors Review Committee and also reviewed that committee's final report. The recommendations from that report, if effectively implemented, should improve the rigor of honors courses for all students wishing to take on more advanced academic work in middle school. However, TAGAC believes strongly that these improvements will still not address the very specific academic, social, and emotional needs of our TAG-identified population while they are in middle school. We need to build a strong bridge from the elementary level to the high school level that currently does not exist for our TAG students in middle school.

After reviewing the TAG services offered in ACPS as well as in neighboring jurisdictions, TAGAC recommends a number of revisions to TAG delivery of services in ACPS middle schools. In proposing the recommendations, TAGAC does not propose changes that have budgetary implications. These recommendations do not require the hiring of additional teachers, only adjustments to the current classroom assignments of the existing teaching staff and student population. These first steps would include the following adjustments:

- **Cluster TAG-identified students into TAG-only sections during the advisory period.** This grouping of peers is done for TAG students in most neighboring jurisdictions. ACPS already groups its Special Education students together in this way for the Advisory periods. This type of grouping is done both here and in neighboring jurisdictions because there is recognition in the value of giving peers the opportunity to meet together as a peer group, to help address the needs of the whole student: academic, social, and emotional.
- **Assign TAG-identified students to teachers who have completed (or are currently obtaining) a Gifted Endorsement qualification.** The addition of a TAG resource teacher at each school is a welcome improvement, but this staff person's effectiveness is severely compromised under the current system which requires the TAG resource teacher to essentially liaise with every single teacher in the school, based on the current diffusion of TAG-identified students. ACPS is to be commended for supporting the professional development of its teachers, including the Gifted Endorsement. However, we risk not utilizing that professional development if we do not intentionally arrange schedules so that teachers with this training are working with our students who are TAG-identified. The ACPS *Local Plan*

*for the Education of the Gifted* requires that teachers of TAG students in grades 6-8 must have completed: Gifted Endorsement, International Baccalaureate certification, or locally provided professional development. At this time, TAG students are assigned to teachers who have not completed any of these required trainings. Our TAG-identified learners need access to teachers who have gone through the appropriate training in order to meet the gifted student's unique learning needs.

- **Increase clustering minimums for TAG-identified students in core courses.** The current minimum is 5 students. With the competing needs of the approximately 20 other students in a given class, it is not surprising that TAG-identified students and their parents report little to no differentiation or specific curriculum adjustments for the TAG clusters in their courses. In the current classroom structure, there is also no consistent clustering of the TAG students working with each other as a small group at their higher academic level. TAGAC urges adjustments to the current team structure that will allow for greater concentrations of TAG students into individual sections of core courses. As part of the state's *Regulations Governing Educational Services for Gifted Students*, school divisions must insure that students are able "to work with their intellectual and academic peers" and the current minimal clustering does not achieve this requirement.
- **Require written TAG differentiation plans for each quarter for each core course.** The needs of the TAG learner can not be completely addressed by the honors curriculum alone. The *Regulations* require that a division "foster the intellectual and academic growth" of the TAG student, and that they further be able to "assess the academic growth of gifted learners." Teachers who have been assigned TAG-identified students must (with the assistance and input of the Curriculum Services department, the TAG Resource Teacher, and the TAG Coordinator) have a written Differentiation Plan that will be shared with students and parents that clearly articulates how assignments and expectations for the course will be adjusted and tailored to meet the needs of the TAG-identified students.
- **Create sections of Language Arts 6, 7, 8 that are reserved for TAG-identified students.** ACPS students identified for Specific Academic Aptitude in Language Arts in elementary school receive daily classes in Language Arts instruction from their school's TAG teacher in 4th and 5th grade. Families with TAG-identified students report high satisfaction with this program. Unfortunately, these families experience a significant drop in services for their TAG students upon reaching middle school. ACPS should provide a consistent vertical articulation of services for its TAG population. The state's *Regulations* require that school division provide "service options that are continuous and sequential." In order to do this, ACPS should create TAG-only sections of Language Arts in grades 6-8. Arranging TAG students in these types of sections was successfully implemented this year for Math. All 6th graders enrolled in Advance Math Concepts 7 take the course only with fellow 6th graders assigned to that course. Likewise 7th graders enrolled in Algebra I only take the course with 7th graders, continuing together into 8th grade with Geometry. The fact that the schedules were successfully arranged to create these sections for advanced math students demonstrates that the same sections can be created for Language Arts.

This can be accomplished in a budget-neutral way, through cross-team placement of students, or adjustments to initial team composition. This adjustment also aligns closely with all of the other recommendations listed above. If this change is done, it will make it easier to:

- Increase clustering of TAG-identified students
- Assign TAG-identified students to teachers that have the Gifted Endorsement
- Make it easier to implement a TAG Differentiated Plan of Instruction

TAGAC's recommendations do not seek to create a system that isolates the TAG-identified students from the overall student population. *If every one of the recommendations listed above were to be implemented, TAG-identified students would still be in classes with the rest of the student population during:*

- Science
- Social Studies
- Foreign Language
- Other electives
- Physical Education
- Lunch
- Any extra curricular activities

The goal is not to isolate TAG learners from their fellow students, but to strike an appropriate balance between meeting the specific needs of the TAG learner while also fostering and strengthening the sense of school-wide community at our middle schools.

As a final note, TAGAC recognizes that the small middle school population at our K-8 school, Jefferson-Houston, might prevent some or all of these recommendations from being implemented at that campus, or at a proposed K-8 school at Patrick Henry. Any TAG-identified student deciding between a K-8 experience or enrollment at one of our traditional middle schools would need to work with their families and school counselor to determine what would be the most appropriate placement for their individual needs.

TAGAC also takes this opportunity to reiterate its strong support for current delivery of services for elementary TAG students, including (but not limited to) the TAG classes for Language Arts and Math for 4th and 5th grade students. Our TAG students thrive in these classes, and it is our hope that implementation of the recommendations above will help maintain this high level of quality instruction for our TAG learners as they move into middle school.