

TAGAC Full Board Year-End Report 2021–2022

SUMMARY:

During the 2021–2022 school year, the Talented and Gifted Advisory Committee (TAGAC) continued its work to improve the response to academic and social-emotional needs of Talented and Gifted (TAG) students in Alexandria City Public Schools (ACPS) and focused the committee’s efforts on the following topics:

1. ACPS’s Local Plan for the Education of the Gifted
2. Continuum of Gifted and Advanced Academic Services Within ACPS
3. TAG-Related Advocacy and Communication in and out of the Classroom
4. Accountability for TAG Services

This 2021–2022 TAGAC Year-End Report covers these topics as well as notes on the overall execution of the committee over the year. We encourage you to read the report in its entirety, and we have also included a stand-alone one-page summary of the committee’s findings.

The Department of Gifted and Advanced Academic Services made significant improvements to the TAG referral process this year by switching to an electronic referral system, which will enhance ACPS’s ability to track how students are identified, are accepted, and participate in TAG services. However, further data issues need to be addressed, and ACPS must put significant emphasis on making all data easily accessible and require future data sets to be well structured so that improvements to the program and its services can be tested and analyzed. This is a critical step for achieving greater equity and student success in the program.

For the average student, the TAG academic journey begins with identification that was initiated by a parent or auto-generated by a standardized test in early elementary school. The ACPS Local Plan for the Education of the Gifted seeks to address the equity issues that are apparent in our current identification process. Techniques such as test score weighting, entry points by portfolio review, and other community-sourced advocacy for underrepresented populations should be explored via pilot programs. These additional techniques must be transparent with clearly defined success criteria. Additionally, ACPS must better train teachers to identify students with gifted attributes at all grade levels and provide these students the support they deserve independent of identification.

Once in the TAG program, a student will come in contact with a variety of delivery of services models and a significant variability of the rigor across instructional planning, delivery of services, and instructional assessments for both the student and staff member(s). The movement between service models often lacks transition support and an explanation of the new service model to students and parents. TAGAC strongly recommends that a high-quality, district-wide, pre-differentiated curriculum be employed by ACPS across all subject areas and grade levels to set a standard for TAG services by which teachers and administrators can evaluate the effectiveness of instruction. This base should also be clearly communicated to parents and students to set academic expectations.

Finally, instruction for TAG students does not begin and end with academics. All students, including TAG students, struggle with social-emotional issues as they grow and mature, but TAG students also struggle with additional issues such as managing the pressure of being asymmetric in their academic growth,

perfectionism, and performance anxiety, among other struggles as compared to their peers. Providing differentiated social-emotional support should also be a key level of support in the TAG program.

Late this spring, ACPS requested that TAGAC provide a stand-alone opinion on the delivery of services models, which will be submitted early in the 2022–2023 academic year.

BACKGROUND:

TAGAC discussed a number of potential items for its Scope of Work for the 2021–2022 school year. The committee split into several subcommittees to address each topic with small-group discussions, research, and various presentations from ACPS and external parties. Throughout the year, TAGAC held seven meetings with the full committee that included a mix of in-person and virtual Zoom formats.

This year, TAGAC again felt the continued impacts of COVID-19. While this is hardly a unique challenge, the committee did discover some advantages to virtual meetings and feels that the School Board should investigate ways to make all meetings, including School Board and Advisory Council meetings, available in a hybrid format so that in-person and virtual attendance is possible. The committee feels that this is possible with the current state of technology and that it would greatly increase the accessibility to the general public, though acknowledges that in-person TAGAC meetings occurring for two hours in the evenings are generally more accessible to more people than midday or afternoon meetings. The committee also recognizes that transportation, child care, providing meals, and general family time needs—such as helping with homework—are limiting factors to attendance for the many people and communities with whom we would like to be involved in TAGAC’s work.

1. ACPS’s Local Plan for the Education of the Gifted

ACPS’s last Local Plan for the Education of the Gifted was approved in 2011 and covered the years of 2012–2017. The school system has been operating under the approved plan for the previous 10 years. The rewrite of this plan in 2021–2022 to comply with current law, as well as to incorporate the current best practices of delivery of services with a focus on equity, was a significant task for both the ACPS TAG office and TAGAC.

The subcommittee assigned to report on the K–12 continuity of TAG services within ACPS has arranged this summary and analysis in three parts:

- I. Identification Process (including talent development)
- II. Rigorous Tier 1 and Advanced Curriculum
- III. A Time-Phased Approach to Implementation (ensuring an ample opportunity for teacher/staff training and continuity of services for current students)

I. Identification Process

Currently, there is some evidence of attention to identifying students from underrepresented groups, including low-income, minority, English Language Learners (ELLs), and twice-exceptional students, to the TAG program through key features of the current identification process such as utilizing a nonverbal measure and multiple criteria that examine both ability and achievement data. However, no evidence suggests that attention is given to program alteration as a result of these students being selected, except for the value-added summer experience of the Young Scholars (YS) Program at K–5. Previous observations and assessment reports suggest there is a discrepancy between the number of minority and low-income students

in the current TAG program and their presence in the ACPS population. Focus group and survey data support this fact, and many stakeholders have expressed concern about this issue.

TAGAC has generated a set of recommendations for improvement, mostly on issues of underrepresentation and communication to parents and others about student results and the overall identification process:

- Improve strategies and techniques for the identification of underrepresented groups through techniques recommended by both the evaluation team and the two multicultural consultants working with the ACPS TAG Local Plan Draft Steering Committee. These recommendations focus on the use of lower cutoff scores with more oversight of the school-based committee process.
- Incorporate the use of research-based checklist items that promote recognition of giftedness in cultural, racial minority groups; ELLs; and other underserved student groups, including dissemination through teacher materials, training, and community outreach activities.
- Continue the use of existing screening tools, as they constitute the best tests available for the purposes intended in finding students from underrepresented groups, based on research data and as noted by all five consultants who reviewed them. TAGAC recommends modifying the cutoff scores on the two standardized ability instruments by two percentile points, as it may decrease the underrepresentation of African Americans by as much as five percentage points, based on a three-year historical analysis of the Naglieri Nonverbal Ability Test[®] (NNAT) data from 2014–2016. A 2014–2015 analysis of one year of the Cognitive Abilities Test (CogAT) data showed that the identification of Hispanic students would have increased by two percentage points. Based on the analyses of historical results of both tests, the committee feels that it is prudent to lower the score cutoffs in this way in order to assist in reaching the goal of reducing disparity among minority groups in the program.
- Train teachers and principals annually on the general and specific aptitude characteristics of gifted learners and those from underrepresented groups to improve identification and assist advancing TAG students’ diversity goals.
- Develop program strategies that tailor Language Arts and Social Studies curricula for students from underrepresented groups, including the choice of reading materials and content that highlights accomplishments of minority groups and individuals as well as practice with higher-level thinking using scaffolded materials.

II. Rigorous Tier I and Advanced Curriculum

At the elementary and middle school levels, ACPS has no standardized curriculum for either general education or TAG classes. To support all students, ACPS should adopt and implement a robust Tier 1¹ curriculum for all students. A rigorous, standardized, and connected baseline curriculum—not developed in-house at ACPS from a variety of disconnected sources—supports all teachers and all students. For teachers, it provides a resource to reduce planning time and to provide an extension of lessons for those students who need additional rigor. For students, it provides equitable access to educational rigor across classrooms and schools. Moreover, in order to successfully implement a talent development approach for TAG identification, all students must have the opportunity to engage with rigorous instructional materials that allow for an extension of learning beyond core concepts.

¹ At Tier 1, all students should receive scientific, research-based core instruction implemented with integrity and emphasizing grade-level standards and school-wide behavioral expectations. Tier 1 instruction should be explicit and differentiated and include flexible grouping and active student engagement. To ensure 80% of students’ needs are met at Tier 1, high-quality instruction is essential (Chard et al., 2008).

In addition to a high-quality Tier I curriculum, ACPS should also adopt a standardized advanced curriculum to support those students who need additional rigor. The advanced curriculum could be used in a variety of delivery models, including push-in or pull-out delivery of services. Particularly if ACPS moves to push-in delivery of TAG services in the upper-elementary school grades, standardized curriculum will be critical to supporting teachers in the differentiation of services.

III. A Time-Phased Approach to Implementation

As the ACPS TAG Local Plan Draft Steering Committee continues its work, TAGAC recommends observing proven best practices in implementing a thoughtful, time-phased approach to implementing the new plan. TAGAC urges the Steering Committee to consider a “whole-of-system” approach to ensure meaningful change across the division, pilot programs to facilitate implementation, and incorporate metrics for accountability. Any changes to the delivery of services model must be implemented in a way that provides adequate time for acquisition of a new curriculum; for training on that curriculum; and for staff to be recommissioned, as appropriate (e.g., a grades 4 and 5 TAG teacher transitioning to an instructional specialist or co-teacher position) and consistent with the plan’s proposed delivery model(s) for advanced academic instruction. Because no plan has yet been announced, the subcommittee recommends that delivery model changes be implemented for the 2023–2024 school year at the earliest. While other changes may be possible during the upcoming school year (e.g., revisions to the identification process and the identification and acquisition of a standardized curriculum), changes to the delivery model are unlikely to be successful in the upcoming school year given the limited time remaining in this school year and the uncertainty of when the new TAG Local Plan will be adopted.

TAGAC applauds the Steering Committee for reaching out to external experts (Davis, Ford, Naglieri, and Plucker) to assist in developing the TAG Local Plan. These experts and others can counsel on academic research, best practices, and lessons learned from similar districts to craft a successful plan for ACPS.

Implementing the needed reforms in delivering TAG services will require a system-wide approach that should start with teachers. Teachers should be the key change agents to execute the new plan, as they are the on-deck professionals who will actually execute the plan. Empowering teachers early in the process should provide them with the knowledge and understanding of the supporting principles and assumptions of the Local Plan. **Training and broad acceptance of the Local Plan by all teachers, not just those accredited with delivering Advanced Academic services, should be the key to lasting success.**

Based on diversity across the division, TAGAC recommends the Steering Committee consider pilot programs in the implementation plan. Pilot programs have proven effective in providing better understanding to teachers, parents, and administrators in ACPS,² and they could foster teacher training and empowerment with opportunities for teachers sharing experiences as well as providing valuable data to administrators on what does and does not work in the new Local Plan at ACPS.

Lastly, TAGAC recommends the Steering Committee determine measures of performance and effectiveness early in the Local Plan’s development. Knowing how the Local Plan’s success will be evaluated is essential to the broad understanding and commitment needed in implementing the plan. The right metrics should incentivize both teachers and administrators to focus on the results of improving the delivery of Advanced Academic Services to ACPS students.

² Health/PE Initiatives Using ESSA Funds (Heart Rate Monitors); Virginia “Test to Stay” Pilot Program; Alexandria City Public Schools and Virginia Tech Launch Pilot Program in Partnership to Strengthen STEM Opportunities for Students.

2. Continuum of Gifted and Advanced Academic Services Within ACPS

The subcommittee assigned to report on the K–12 continuity of TAG services within ACPS focused its efforts in three main areas, starting with a summary of entry points to the TAG program, the services delivered at each grade level, and a list of recommendations to improve on the current practices.

I. Summary of Existing TAG Services and Entry Points to TAG Eligibility in Grades K–12

➤ Early Elementary, Grades K–2

Entry/identification: ACPS conducts a universal screening for TAG eligibility in grade 1 using the NNAT. **This is the first of ACPS’s two primary entry points to TAG-specific services.** All grade 1 students who score above the nationally normed cutoff score are automatically entered into the division’s pool of TAG referrals, and determining TAG eligibility takes into consideration performance on other tests and class assignments as well as teacher and parent feedback. Parents/guardians must approve the full review process, and they may appeal the initial decision. Students in Kindergarten or grade 2 may be referred for a full review by teachers, parents, or others; in most cases, the first step following a referral in Kindergarten or grade 2 is to take or retake the NNAT.

Delivery of services: For TAG-eligible students in grades K–3, ACPS only delivers General Intellectual Aptitude (GIA) service, not subject-specific services, in the form of differentiated instruction in the general education classroom. The depth and impact of these services vary from school to school and from classroom to classroom. When possible, the TAG teachers at elementary schools assist the general education teachers with developing and delivering a Differentiated Education Plan (DEP) for each TAG-eligible student. In some schools, TAG teachers deliver these services to a group of TAG students outside the regular classroom on a weekly basis. Some TAG-eligible students receive additional counseling and support on a case-by-case basis.

YS: YS identification and programming begins in Kindergarten, grade 1, or grade 2 depending on the school. ACPS has now rolled out YS to all elementary schools.

➤ Later Elementary, Grades 3–5

Entry/identification: ACPS conducts a universal screening for TAG eligibility in grade 3 using the CogAT. **This is the second of ACPS’s two primary entry points to TAG-specific services.** All grade 3 students who score above the nationally normed cutoff score in either **Language Arts** or **Math** are automatically entered into the division’s pool of TAG referrals, and determining subject-specific TAG eligibility takes into consideration performance on other tests, class assignments, and teacher and parent feedback. Students in grades 3–5 are not automatically screened for subject-specific TAG eligibility in **Science** or **Social Studies** or for GIA; a teacher or another individual, including the student, must refer the student for review in order to determine eligibility.

Delivery of services: TAG-eligible students in grade 3 may receive differentiated instruction in the general education classroom or through a TAG teacher on a weekly basis. Students in grades 4 and 5 who are eligible for subject-specific TAG services in **Language Arts** or **Math** receive advanced instruction in Language Arts and accelerated instruction in Math in a separate class environment from their homeroom class. Subject-specific TAG services in **Science** or **Social Studies**, as well as GIA

services, are delivered through differentiated instruction in the general education classroom. The TAG classroom curriculum for Language Arts and Math is somewhat standardized across ACPS, but the depth and impact of differentiated instruction for GIA, Social Studies, and Science varies widely. Some TAG-eligible students receive additional counseling and support on a case-by-case basis.

All students in grade 5 receive academic counseling to assist them with their class choices at the middle school level. Since all TAG services in middle school are provided through the open-enrollment Honors classes, TAG-eligible students are generally advised to choose honor classes.

YS: YS programming continues through elementary school.

➤ **Middle School, Grades 6–8**

Entry/identification: ACPS does not conduct any universal screening for TAG eligibility at the middle school level. Teachers are asked to look for “outliers” in their review of other tests and/or competitions. Students identified by teachers in this manner are entered into the division’s pool of TAG referrals, and final determination of TAG eligibility would take into consideration the teacher’s report as well as other available data.

Delivery of services: Differentiated classroom instruction is available in all content areas in which students were identified while enrolled in ACPS. TAG services at the middle school level have been previously evaluated by the outside consultant and found lacking on the grounds that DEPs are not rigorous, nor is the general Honors curriculum.

The middle schools deliver two different types of curriculum: an Honors curriculum and a general education curriculum. For **Language Arts, Social Studies, and Science**, TAG-eligible students are clustered in open-enrollment Honors classes. A “cluster” is generally more than three students but may be fewer depending on the number of TAG-eligible students and scheduling conflicts. TAG clustering is done after schedules are created, which can make it hard to cluster students in classes such as Science and Social Studies because ACPS does not universally screen for TAG eligibility in those classes. Depending on the teacher, students may not be aware that other TAG students are in the class. The Honors curriculum is intended to ensure that there is more in-depth work than what is provided by the general education curriculum, but students do not necessarily have more work than other students. Overall, due to the open-enrollment nature of Honors classes at the middle school level and the percentage of students who take advantage of the Honors classes, it is questionable that the differentiation is achievable. **Math** for TAG students is an entirely separate class because students in grades 4 and 5 identified for Specific Academic Aptitude (SAA) in Math are accelerated and have completed the grade 6 curriculum when they reach middle school. There are a small number of students accelerated beyond the normal TAG designation: For example, a student may be accelerated two grade levels in Math, so a grade 7 TAG student might take a grade 9 Math class.

YS: A YS program is still in development at the middle school level. Currently, ACPS suggests that YS students take at least one to two Honors-level classes.

Continuity: All students in grade 8 receive academic counseling to assist them with class choices in high school. This counseling is not TAG specific, and there is apparently little coordination between

counseling at the middle and high school levels. All Advanced Placement (AP) and advanced classes at the high school level are open enrollment. TAG-eligible students typically indicate a desire to take as many AP classes as they can and sign up for everything. Math-accelerated students can take Math beyond the graduation requirements; under the current curriculum, the only class that is exclusively available to TAG students is grade 12 “Differential Equations.”

➤ **High School, Grades 9–12**

Entry/identification: ACPS does not conduct any universal screening for TAG eligibility at the high school level. In grades 9–12, teachers and counselors review past performance in the classroom, scores on standardized tests, and advanced scores on Standards of Learning (SOL) tests to identify a pool of candidates who would benefit from gifted services in SAA such as instruction in the Honors and AP classes.

Delivery of services: By policy, TAG-eligible students in grades 9–12 are to receive both differentiated instruction in the general education classroom and individualized opportunities. Differentiated instruction in grades 6–12 is monitored by the school division. The TAG Coordinator utilizes the TAG Observation Form and Program Monitoring Form to ensure the appropriate implementation of differentiated curriculum and instruction for TAG-identified students.

Students may also be offered opportunities to foster the development of their interests and abilities. Administrative and guidance department staff work cooperatively to design appropriate educational experiences and to inform parents and students about courses as well as cocurricular and extracurricular enrichment opportunities that are particularly suitable to the students’ needs.

Counselors assist students in academic planning, including scholarship opportunities, and provide one-on-one counseling with students, as appropriate. Honors, AP, and Dual Enrollment (DE) courses are offered in numerous academic areas at the high school level.

II. Strengths, Weaknesses, and Concerns About Entry Points, Delivery, and Continuity of TAG Services K–12 Continuity/K–12

- There is a lack of coordination between the three major levels of education (elementary/middle/high) that negatively impacts TAG-eligible students proceeding through ACPS with the appropriate levels of support.
- A lack of vertical alignment from elementary to middle school to high school reduces the potential impact of an ACPS education, particularly for TAG-eligible students.
- TAG-related support outside of the classroom and nonacademic counseling tailored to TAG-eligible students are lacking in K–12. (Some areas might include social skills, executive skills/organization, processing failure, managing perfectionism, project management [long-term projects], group skills, “boredom,” and disengagement.)

Elementary School

- Concern continues among parents, teachers, administrations, the School Board, and TAGAC that TAG referrals and eligibility identification are inequitable across demographic groups and schools.

- School-to-school variation in the depth and impact of differentiated instruction due to a lack of a baseline curriculum makes it difficult to provide continuity and progressive instruction as students move between grades and educational tiers.
- The interaction between the YS program and TAG services is unclear.

Middle School

- The overall state of TAG services at the middle school level has been previously identified by TAGAC as an area of concern. The recognition that change is needed is a positive improvement.
- There are discussions about improving the rigor of the middle school curriculum for all classes, which is a critical first step to providing meaningful differentiation opportunities in the curriculum for TAG students.
- TAG clustering at the middle school level and the delivery of TAG services via the Honors program at the middle school level (outside of Math) is sporadic and doesn't seem to provide significant, if any, differentiation.
 - The original intent of clustering in order to provide social-emotional support and to allow for placement with TAG-certified teachers in a small group to facilitate in-class differentiation seems to have failed.
- Since there is no universal screening process for TAG identification at the middle school level, students who are new to the school system or who were not identified in elementary school might benefit from TAG-specific services, but they do not have access to them.

High School

- TAG services at the high school level are limited to in-class differentiated instruction; however, teachers and counselors are not equipped to provide TAG-specific supports, and TAG-eligible students are unaware of TAG-specific supports they could access.
- Honors curricula should be revised in order to identify clear objectives and expected outcomes for advanced learners. Research-based curricula should be used to determine objectives and ensure consistent levels of rigor.
- TAG students are generally expected to be self-directed learners by this point, taking classes (Honors, AP, DE) that fulfill their needs.

III. Recommendations From the TAGAC Subcommittee on Continuity of Services K–12

- Improve the rigor of the curriculum across all grades and all schools through the adoption and implementation of a high-quality, pre-differentiated Tier 1 curricula.
- Promote and implement project-based learning across the school division.
- Develop and provide consistent division-wide training for teachers and staff in:
 - Identifying students across all grade levels who show the characteristics of TAG students, particularly students from underrepresented groups
 - Facilitating differentiated instruction in all subject areas
 - Identifying and supporting specific academic and social-emotional needs of TAG-eligible students
- Prioritize a vertically aligning curriculum and support services for K–12.
- Hire TAG specialists for high schools who can:
 - Provide instruction and support for teachers and counselors to address the needs of TAG-eligible students

- Offer information sessions about Honors classes
- Train AP and DE teachers on TAG-eligible learners
- Support high school teachers and staff in identifying TAG-eligible students in underrepresented populations
- Lead Professional Development in gifted education for high school teachers
- Build partnerships with groups (colleges/organizations) that can support advanced courses for students identified as gifted learners.
- Support high school students and teachers with the application process for the Virginia Governor's School
- Institute community outreach procedures to tap into underrepresented groups within the community, including minority, low-income, and ELL groups.

3. TAG-Related Advocacy and Communications in and out of the Classroom

The subcommittee assigned to report on the K–12 continuity of TAG services within ACPS provides this summary of advocacy and communications issues and a list of recommendations on how to address them effectively.

1. Advocacy and Communication Issues

TAGAC is highly concerned about how a strong parental advocate, or the lack thereof, impacts the access to the ACPS TAG program. Such advocacy specifically has an impact on equity and access to TAG services and also has social-emotional impacts on students during the application, evaluation, and delivery of academic portions of the TAG program.

There is a perception across ACPS stakeholders that strong parent advocacy can drive access to the TAG program and that this drives some of the inequities in the program. This is not unique to ACPS and is supported by peer-reviewed research: “Family income, parental education, and cultural capital also play more direct roles in the gifted identification process. The 2014–2015 State of the States Report (National Association for Gifted Children, 2015) indicated that the most common time for gifted identification to occur was following a parent or teacher referral. This point means that parents with the cultural capital to advocate for their child’s identification are more likely to have a student who is identified as gifted...the parents with the most social capital are likely the ones most involved with school policy decisions and also the ones most likely to have their students identified under the current paradigm...Allowing parents to obtain outside testing or putting in place policies that allow parents to override universal consideration data to place their child in the talent pool only serve to make inequity worse. Families should not be able to access a back door to gifted identification by virtue of their cultural or socioeconomic capital.”³

These access gaps should not be the case, as there are specific academic milestones that need to be met to qualify for TAG services, but such strong parent support can provide access to experiences, access to resources, social and emotional support driven by an understanding of the TAG program, access to school staff, and the cultural capital for parents to feel empowered to advocate for their child. These issues with access to TAG services are compounded when cultural and/or language barriers are at play.

³ Peters, S.J. (2022). “The Challenges of Achieving Equity Within Public School Gifted and Talented Programs.” *Gifted Child Quarterly*, 66(2), 82–94.

Additionally, some parents have the means to research TAG services and build understanding of the identification process, while others do not. Currently, building this understanding requires parents to take the initiative to do additional work and research—difficult for all parents to do but especially so when cultural and/or language barriers are involved. Family work schedules and access to the school building can also present barriers to activities such as explaining the TAG program and getting permission for participation in the program.

ACPS is working to address the experience and support aspects of this issue with access to the YS program. However, the YS program by itself does not directly address communicating effectively to parents about the TAG program, the identification process, and the benefits of enrolling in the program.

II. Recommendations From the TAGAC Subcommittee on Advocacy and Communication

In order to overcome the equity issues inherent in the access gap, ACPS must engage in a strong and coherent communication plan about the TAG services available to students that aims to reduce the access gaps by providing access to all. TAGAC recommends that the following be considered in developing such a plan:

- All stakeholders involved in TAG services must be considered in this communication plan, including administrators, School Board members, staff members, teachers, students, parents, and the general public.
- ACPS should expand its translation services to focus on communicating about the benefits of and the process for TAG services as well as by making translation services more accessible for one-on-one conversations between the TAG designee at each school and prospective parents.
- ACPS should recruit and train advocates across all subgroups who can speak about the benefits of the TAG program and the identification process. These advocates can be recruited from the teacher, parents, TAG-alumni community, and even from TAG students currently enrolled at the high school. Advocates could be formally equipped with information about the TAG program and their contact information shared with TAG designees at each school. They could act as a vital bridge between ACPS TAG staff and the varied communities that potential TAG students can and do come from. In particular, these advocates could speak to how students who are intellectually advanced can benefit from additional support at school with no cost to the parents.
- The plan should take advantage of the creative communication methods ACPS utilized to overcome the limitations placed on communication by COVID-19. For example, relying on text-based communications as the norm and making sure that information is available via mobile devices in multiple languages have been key enablers in improving communication, and they should be used by the TAG program as well.

4. Accountability for TAG Services

TAGAC believes that ACPS must also be accountable for executing the plan developed and communicated by the committee in an effective manner. The committee has studied and codified recommendations on ways to assess the effectiveness of the TAG program and its delivery to ensure that ACPS provides students with the services they deserve. The subcommittee assigned to report on the K–12 continuity of TAG services within ACPS has arranged this summary and analysis in one part:

I. Recommendations to Improve Accountability

Adding a TAG Data Liaison

TAGAC commends the transformation from a paper screening and referral process to an electronic screening process this past school year, which has resulted in 85%–90% of parents being able to follow and participate in the referral process via Powerschool. It also enables ACPS to provide automatic triggers for referrals based on test scores (e.g., CogAT, NNAT, Measure of Academic Progress [MAP], etc.) and will allow for further analysis of referral origin.

While great strides have been made over the last several years to properly identify and track informative data points to assess all TAG programs (YS, GIA, SAA, DE, etc.), as well as move to electronic screening, there is still a need for improvement. Current challenges include:

- Data is housed in disparate data systems (e.g., in some cases, there are paper files for students, while in other cases, the files are kept electronically).⁴
- Schools define data points differently (e.g., one school removes a student’s YS marker when that student enters the GIA program, while another school does not remove the marker).
- Some data, while captured, is not easily reportable, thereby requiring additional work to access and, oftentimes, facing competition for prioritization (e.g., deep dives on underrepresented groups for program participation, continuation, and success).
- Systemic practices and support for analyzing the data to make programmatic tweaks must be improved upon in order to encourage greater success.

TAGAC believes none of these gaps in data are intentional; they serve to illustrate that the Department of Gifted and Advanced Academic Services would be better positioned to meet its objectives to identify, deliver, and improve services for its students with more technical and data-driven support.

Including Effectiveness of Differentiation in Measures of Staff Effectiveness

From an equity standpoint, the YS and SAA programs currently exhibit the capability of having a standardized teaching approach, primarily due to having an expected teaching structure (defined student group receiving the same service at the same time). It should be noted, however, that not every school is using and implementing the program as intended, and the lack of strong ACPS-wide high-quality curricula presents a barrier to having a written guide to assess staff effectiveness. Even with these challenges, principals and other administrators could observe teachers of these programs in their classrooms and make recommendations based on a set of centralized expectations.

GIA services delivered primarily at the elementary level and in-classroom differentiated instruction primarily used at the middle school level are the most challenging services to observe and assess for effectiveness.

These programs, in particular, would benefit from the development of a centralized set of expectations that are created and applicable to all schools. These expectations should include indicators in areas such as:

- Using a standard curriculum that has been identified for gifted students and/or pre-differentiated materials from a standard Tier 1 curriculum
- Using lessons plans demonstrating a tiered teaching approach (i.e., layered content, advanced questions, etc. for TAG students)

⁴ ACPS began the process of moving to electronic screening during the 2021–2022 school year.

In addition, coaching should be provided by a group of trained administrators to assist teachers in providing differentiated instruction and aligning to the centralized set of expectations. TAGAC encourages ACPS to find creative ways to recognize and reward teachers who excel at differentiation so as to encourage modeling and mentoring amongst teaching staff, including an HR designation on their employee record, district awards, spot bonuses, and a paid day off.

Continued Improvements to the DEP to Better Track Student Success

Clearly, one way to measure a student's success is by grades; however, ACPS aims to measure whether students are maximizing their potential. TAGAC believes that the DEP is the best mechanism for setting and measuring goals for TAG students.

TAGAC applauds the significant changes made to the DEP this year, which include grade level, subject focus, service type, a checklist for how differentiation was delivered via independent study, tiered assignments, critical and creative thinking, and opportunities for students to write a reflection based on their work. The committee recommends that the DEP be further revised to include YS students and to capture long-term growth expectations for the student throughout their career at ACPS.

The execution of differentiated services relies completely on the teacher to help structure an appropriate experience and support the students so that their classwork is enriching and not just "more work." This requires that teachers and principals be fully supported in this endeavor, including receiving coaching, preparation time, an easily accessible curriculum, training on how to personalize the DEP for each student, and how to write in plain language that parents and students can easily understand.

RECOMMENDATION:

The Superintendent recommends that the School Board approve the 2021–2022 TAGAC End-of-Year Report.

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