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For ACTION _____
For INFORMATION X
Board Agenda: Yes _____
 No _____

FROM: Lois F. Berlin, Ed.D., Interim Superintendent of Schools
THROUGH: Terri H. Mozingo, Ed.D., Chief Academic Officer
 Donna Brearley, Talented and Gifted (TAG) Coordinator
TO: The Honorable Ramee A. Gentry, Chair, and
 Members of the Alexandria City School Board
TOPIC: Responses to Concerns Expressed at Recent TAGAC Meeting

Summary

The purpose of this memorandum is to outline the concerns discussed during a recent Talented and Gifted Advisory Committee (TAGAC) meeting on May 21, 2018, and to provide background and context for a deeper understanding of the issues raised during that discussion. Proposed next steps including a timeline adjustment to the revision of the 2012-2016 Local Plan for Gifted Education are also provided.

Background

As required by the 2012-2016 Local Plan for Gifted Education, a full program evaluation by an outside, independent researcher in the field of gifted education was commissioned and executed during SY 16. The evaluators were selected through an RFP process. Their work included various methods of gathering data, i.e., school-division data, focus groups, surveys, classroom observations as well as reviews of curriculum and instructional materials. The ACPS Talented and Gifted (TAG) Program was evaluated against national and state standards, best practices in identification, and service-delivery options. The results of the evaluation were presented to the School Board on October 12, 2017. Recommendations and commendations were included within the report. Specific suggestions and resources for improvement were provided in the evaluation for each of the recommendations. A three-year implementation plan was also provided.

The scheduled revision of the local plan was delayed one year in order to use the results of the evaluation to inform the revision process. To ensure that the incoming Superintendent will have ample opportunity to review the plan and provide feedback, the timeline has recently been revised to include an in-depth period of study by stakeholder groups.

Problems Identified

1. *Differing Opinions and Philosophies About How to Best Serve Talented and Gifted Students*

There are many service-delivery options to serve gifted students. Each has its own strengths and challenges. The current model of elementary service-delivery in the ACPS Local Plan is a hybrid of both inclusion and integration into the general education classroom (Science, Social Studies, and General Intellectual Ability [GIA] services) as well as separate pull-out services for accelerated above-grade-level instruction in elementary English/Language Arts and Math in grades 4 and 5.

The services in middle school are provided in open enrollment Honors classes with differentiation provided through Differentiated Education Plans (DEPs). Developing a plan for instruction that serves both the gifted and talented as well as providing rigorous learning experiences for all students is the inherent challenge. Various approaches can meet these needs if implemented with support, training, quality curriculum, and data-driven accountability.

As a result of the feedback process which incorporated monthly meetings of stakeholder group representatives (Accountability, Administrators from both elementary and secondary, TAGAC, TAG teacher, TAG Designees, Psychologists, Student Services/Equity, English Learners, Specialized Instruction, Curriculum, FACE), school leaders expressed philosophical differences with the evaluation recommendations. Many of them expressed concerns that the

current recommendations are not up-to-date inclusionary practices and do not consider the effect upon non-TAG identified students both academically and socially.

The parent community has also been engaged in responding to the recommendations from the TAG evaluation. Many parents assumed that the evaluator's feedback would be incorporated into a three-year plan. There is some concern among parents regarding the impact of returning TAG-identified elementary ELA students to the regular classroom with differentiation support. Parents perceived this approach to be a reduction of elementary services and may work against the inherent success students have experienced within the current model.

2. Differing Opinions About Service-Delivery Recommendations

The evaluation commended the existing Specific Academic Ability (SAA) services in English/Language Arts and Math at grades 4 and 5 with a fully trained TAG-endorsed teacher. It cited the pull-out program as effective in providing an opportunity for advanced curriculum challenge. It also recommended ways to enhance the rigor and provide curriculum continuity.

In contrast, the principals at the elementary level have proposed a cluster-grouping approach that they feel would appropriately challenge all students in English/Language Arts. TAG-identified students would remain in the regular classroom to receive differentiated instruction from the regular education teacher and be supported with push-in services from the TAG-endorsed teacher. This approach would provide opportunities and access for all students in the classroom to the TAG curriculum, eliminating the effects of some students leaving the room for separate instruction. The principals also reinforced the benefits of an enriched language environment for our English Learners (EL) as well as students receiving specialized instruction services.

- At the *elementary level*, some parents view the current services as being strong and rigorous. According to these parents, moving these services into the regular classroom would limit student's exposure to the TAG teacher as well as adding to the general education teacher's load.
- At the *middle school level*, parents express concern that the rigor of Honors courses is affected when the range of learners in the class is broad. Although TAG students are clustered currently and receive Differentiated Education Plans (DEPs), the pacing, quality, and depth of instruction have been raised as areas of concern. The evaluation report did not find the current Honors classes effective for gifted learners and offered suggestions for improvement.

3. Differing Opinions About Curriculum Recommendations

According to the evaluation report, K-3 General Intellectual Ability (GIA) services lack a consistent curriculum that ensures the correct level of challenge for gifted learners. The report recommended the development and implementation of a separate K-3 curriculum, using research-based materials and resources.

In contrast, principals expressed concern about the recommendation to create a separate K-3 curriculum using research-based resources designed for students identified as General Intellectual Ability (GIA). The principals recommended the integration of these activities into the regular curriculum for all students.

4. Differing Opinions About Middle School Recommendations

The evaluation recommended a full revamp of the middle school program for TAG students. It recommended the addition of a sequence of courses beyond Honors for students demonstrating strengths in the Humanities or Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM). It also suggested adding more high-level texts to the Honors curriculum. Rather than establish new courses, the school leader at George Washington Middle School is initiating an approach to improving the instruction and rigor in open-enrollment Honors classes by restructuring the clustering of students. His approach reduces the range of abilities within the classroom and does not separate TAG students from other students. These clusters would be flexible, allowing students to move in and out as needed based upon assessment data. In addition, supplemental resources from the College Board will support students' development of pre-AP skills as part of the Honors program across all middle schools.

Here is an example of how the students might be grouped:

Class	Group 1: Gifted	Group 2: High Ability	Group 3: Average	Group 4: Below Average	Group 5: Far Below Average
A 24 students	12 students		12 students		
B 24 students	12 students		12 students		
C 26 students		12 students	6 students	8 students	
D 28 students		8 students	12 students	8 students	

Proposed Next Steps

As these dialogues and processes continue, it seems major changes should undergo additional study and consensus building before being implemented. The elementary principals have requested site visits to tour neighboring divisions (i.e., Arlington, Fairfax, etc.) to learn how they address these needs. The middle school principal is planning to visit sites within Virginia that have used the cluster grouping model in a middle school setting. These visits would take place in the Fall and then be followed by an in-depth book study, reviews of current research, and planning next steps.

This proposal suggests the revision currently underway be limited to a one-year plan. This plan will include a phased-in timeline to accommodate four months of study in the Fall of SY 19 for the elementary portion of the program, resulting in the full five-year plan being proposed in Spring of 2020. Full implementation of the plan will begin in Fall 2020.

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cc: Senior Leadership Team