

Date: 18 December 2016
For ACTION ___
For INFORMATION X
Board Agenda: Yes ___
No ___

FROM: Alexandra Griffin, 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: 2014-2015 Talented and Gifted Advisory Committee Annual Report

Background

The Talented and Gifted Advisory Committee focused its attention last 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 recommended a number of revisions to TAG delivery of services in ACPS middle schools. In proposing the recommendations, TAGAC did not propose changes that have budgetary implications. These recommendations did 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:

Recommendation #1: 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.

Staff Response:

This recommendation is under consideration as master schedules are being built at this time. The impact on the balance of class size, demographics, and gender within the homeroom period will be reviewed to determine feasibility. Please Note: For the school year 2015-16 "advisory" has been changed to "homeroom."

Recommendation #2: 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.

Staff Response:

It is a priority for ACPS to have highly trained teachers working with all students. Our goal is to fully implement the Local Plan which calls for all teachers of middle school Honors classes to be trained in gifted education strategies by offering a variety of options.

A robust professional learning plan has been developed and will be communicated to all teachers, providing individual choice and scheduling flexibility. All Honors teachers will be expected to participate in one of the various options offered within two years, as stated in the Local Plan. Participation rates will be monitored and communicated to principals and the Talented and Gifted Advisory Committee for inclusion in their annual report.

The professional development options include:

- Gifted Endorsement –Division-sponsored cohorts or individually through online coursework offered by a variety of universities and supported through tuition reimbursement, pending budget approval;
- Local Middle School Professional Learning Series Entitled "Teaching Honors in ACPS," which includes best practices in gifted education, differentiation strategies, and techniques for implementing the ACPS Honors curriculum; and
- International Baccalaureate (IB) Middle Years Certification (Jefferson-Houston).

Recommendation #3: 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 ensure that students are able "to work with their intellectual and academic peers" and the current minimal clustering does not achieve this requirement.

Staff Response:

Clustering is a research-based practice shown to help meet the needs of gifted students by providing intellectual peers within their instructional grouping. Increasing the current cluster sizes in the Honors classes is a viable option for school year 2015-16. As scheduling of classes is completed this spring, every effort will be made to better enhance the size of TAG-identified clusters to eight (8) or more within each core Honors class.

In this context, "TAG- identified" means that any student who has TAG identification in general aptitude or any specific subject (ELA, math, science or social studies) would be included in any Honors course TAG cluster, regardless of subject. Clustering of TAG students according to their identified area is a future goal when there is sufficient enrollment in all content areas. Final results will be communicated back to TAGAC after all schedules have been built.

Recommendation #4: Require written TAG differentiation plans for each quarter for each core course.

The needs of the TAG learner cannot 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.

Staff Response:

In addition to course syllabi, plans (one plan per TAG cluster in each core Honors class) describing the differentiation for TAG students in the Honors courses will be developed in collaboration with the Honors teachers and the Middle School Resource Teacher each quarter to ensure that parents are well-informed. Training in the development of these plans will be included in the local professional development. A template will be created and teacher workdays will be utilized to write them.

Recommendation #5: 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 last year for Math. All 6th graders enrolled in Advance Math Concepts 7 took the course only with fellow 6th graders assigned to that course.

Likewise, 7th graders enrolled in Algebra I only took 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 demonstrated 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 did not seek to create a system that isolated 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 schoolwide community at our middle schools.

Staff Response:

Sample master schedules are being built and reviewed to determine possible impacts. Consideration must be given to the middle school team structure and schedule as well as the balance of class size and special course needs outside the grade level for some TAG-identified students.

Conclusion

As a final note, TAGAC recognized that the small middle school population at our K8 school, Jefferson-Houston, might prevent some or all of these recommendations from being implemented at that campus, or at a proposed K8 school at Patrick Henry. Any student deciding between a K8 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.