

MEMORANDUM

Date: May 31, 2009

To: Honorable Members of the Alexandria School Board
Superintendent Dr. Morton Sherman

From: Talented and Gifted Advisory Committee,
Sherry Delaney, Chairman

Subject: Talented and Gifted Advisory Committee Report for 2008-2009

This report from the Talented and Gifted Advisory Committee (TAGAC) covers topics from our scope of work for the 2008-'09 year including: implementation of and review of the 2006-'11 ACPS Local Plan for Gifted Education TAG Local Plan; twice exceptional students; proposed International Baccalaureate Program; TAG Science service delivery; TAG diversity; meeting the social and emotional needs of gifted students. For each major topic, we list the issue followed by our analysis and then any recommendations.

TAG LOCAL PLAN

Issue: The 2006-'11 TAG Local Plan was adopted by the School Board, as recommended by TAGAC, and approved by the state. Many of the goals outlined in the plan had already been completed or were near completion at the time of Board adoption. The TAG Curriculum Specialist Diann Gully has completed most of the work on a goal to improve parent outreach to ACPS families and caregivers. Work to improve identification and services for twice exceptional students is ongoing.

Analysis: TAGAC notes that the coordinator has made significant and satisfactory progress in meeting the goals outlined by the Local Plan.

Parent Outreach: Ms. Gully has created an improved parent-friendly brochure explaining ACPS TAG services and the Local Plan in an accessible brochure written in commonly understood language. Ms. Gully has also improved online presentation and content, offering clearer and more useful information for those interested in learning about ACPS services as well as families/caregivers looking for additional resources outside ACPS for TAG students.

Twice Exceptional: Improved identification and services remain a major unresolved goal for ACPS, and ACPS has not completed development of a formal policy for identification and service delivery to twice exceptional students as recommended in the May 2008 TAG Annual Report. A joint subcommittee of TAGAC and the Special Education Advisory Committee continues to work toward that goal. The joint committee agreed on the following ACPS definition of twice exceptional students.

“Twice exceptional children have outstanding gifts and talents, are capable of high performance and also experience significant challenges in one or more of the following domains: learning, physical/health, emotional or social interaction. These challenges may inhibit them from reaching their full potential.”

The joint committee then began substantive discussions with specialists throughout the special services chain of identification and service delivery to determine relevant issues in creating an implementation plan for twice exceptional services. This is the first step in developing an implementation plan proposal.

Recommendations:

The TAGAC recommends that the School Board:

- Support continuation of Twice Exceptional working group and request delivery of a timeline for an implementation plan, and appropriate language for amendment of the Local Plan if needed.
- Consistent implementation of Individual Education Plans has been identified as a system-wide issue. Training and programmatic changes aimed at resolving compliance violations should explicitly include language stating that giftedness neither precludes learning disabilities, nor makes accommodations for such disabilities optional or less necessary to a student’s ability to reach his or her full potential. Teachers who teach TAG students exclusively should be included in all teacher training programs aimed at improving IEP compliance and at drafting appropriate data-based IEP goals with appropriate student accommodations.
- TAGAC notes that its recommendation to allow Ms. Gully to train more designees to conduct routine testing for TAG identifications has proceeded with positive results. The integrity of the identification system has perhaps even improved with more designees able to share the testing workload. Meanwhile, Ms. Gully has gained time to better monitor and evaluate service delivery, improve service delivery to upper grade TAG students and work on meeting the goals outlined above.
- TAGAC notes that CoGAT screening of all second graders is scheduled to begin in the 2009-'10 school year, as recommended by TAGAC.

INTERNATIONAL BACCALAUREATE PROGRAM

Issue: The Board has approved implementation of the IB Primary Years Program in at least one elementary school and has proposed implementation of the IB Middle Years Program in both middle schools. This decision potentially may have implications for TAG service delivery.

Analysis: The structure of the IB framework allows for a variety of options in implementation, which do not necessarily require altering TAG service delivery. The district thus far has not introduced plans to alter TAG service delivery with the implementation of IB. TAGAC will continue monitoring IB implementation and evaluate any impact on TAG service delivery. Such an impact could necessitate amendment to the Local Plan.

Recommendations: none

TAG SCIENCE SERVICE DELIVERY

Issue: Consistent with the Board's goal to improve rigor in the ACPS science program, the TAGAC investigated for possible implementation opportunities for advanced scientific and technical learning opportunities for ACPS students.

Mentoring Program: Ms. Gully is piloting a mentoring program capitalizing on local resources to offer high school students access to advanced scientific and technical opportunities.

The TAGAC discussed the need for highly motivated students with special research interests to be paired with appropriate mentors who could offer mentoring and hands-on experience. The goal of the program would be to develop the talent of highly gifted Alexandria City Public School students through guidance by a mentor in their field of interest. This program would serve students whose skills and abilities are above the level of the Internship Program and the proposed Independent Science Research Course. Students would need to have extremely high levels of knowledge, skills, reasoning ability, commitment, interest, independence, and discipline to be a successful mentee and carry a quality research project through to fruition.

TAG Curriculum Specialist Ms. Gully presented a proposed plan to the TAGAC in January '09, which would provide an in depth year-long experience for highly gifted students in several subject areas: the sciences, technology, social sciences, and humanities. Students would apply for the program and their applications would be forwarded to the mentors for each discipline, who would then choose the students they wish to mentor for the year. Students would meet with their mentors to build a rapport, discuss goals, and design a project for the coming year. Mentors would meet with their mentees throughout the year to guide the project and provide support for the completion of the project. Students would then present their products to the new incoming student mentees and mentors as well as an audience of professionals relative to their project.

On the advice of the founder and coordinator of the Stoughton High School (WI) mentoring program, the pilot ACPS Mentorship Program for 2009-'10 has been limited to a small number of mentees in order to allow for close evaluation of the mentors and mentees as well as the guidelines, working conditions, and overall plan of the project. Three very high functioning science students at TC Williams High School, who have already been identified as excelling in research, have been approached about a possible

mentorship and all have indicated an interest. At Ms. Gully's request, a local research company is now in the process of recruiting possible mentors for the students. Once this process has been completed, there may be an application process or all three students may participate in the mentorship.

Odyssey of the Mind: TAGAC began exploring the feasibility of introducing the Odyssey of the Mind Program into ACPS as a parent driven initiative. OM is a team-based competitive program aimed at teaching and enhancing higher order problem solving skills. The program philosophy stresses that all children can learn to become strong problem solvers. The program is inclusive of all interested students K-12, although the problem solving structure is appropriate for and stimulating to gifted students.

Parents from Maury Elementary School started an OM Program in Fall 2008, and one parent was invited to a TAGAC meeting to offer an overview of the Program and to share his advice and challenges to getting his program off the ground. Maury PTA and Maury's principal declined to formally support the program for a number of reasons including insurance concerns. This hindered communications to other interested parents, since communication channels at the school are controlled by either PTA or ACPS. Still Maury fielded a number of teams, with one team placing 4th at the regional competition.

To better evaluate the feasibility of introducing the program at schools with higher low-SES populations, a TAGAC subcommittee met with the John Adams PTA Executive Committee. JAPTA is interested in the program and will seek volunteers from the community and the school's volunteer partnership to coach one or more teams. The strict guidelines of the OM program allow most teams to participate at a low cost and permit "yard sale" cost reporting for items already owned or borrowed by teams. The types of items frequently used by participants include scrap wood, cardboard boxes, restyled clothing for costumes, paint and other basic craft supplies. Parent or community volunteers with the time to coach teams will pose the primary obstacle in low-SES schools. TAGAC, parents and school staff could offer help recruit volunteers.

Recommendations:

- Expand the mentoring program to include a larger number of students in both science and technical fields. This effort could be expanded to meet the needs of gifted students in Career and Technical Education as well.
- Formalize ACPS recognition of OM as a valued academic extension program and allow the use of internal ACPS communications to promote the program. The program can be parent-run, and therefore cost neutral to ACPS, but successful participation among all ACPS schools will require communications support and assistance recruiting volunteer team coaches. Neighboring school systems, such as Fairfax or Arlington, may provide a model for ACPS.

TAG DIVERSITY

Issue: The TAGAC included on its current scope of work the goal of encouraging increased minority participation in advanced courses. This includes participation in the TAG pullout program, as well as honors and Advanced Placement courses in middle and high school. This goal was carried over from the 2006-07 school year, and has been an area of concern for the committee for many years.

Analysis: In the TAGAC 2006-'07 Year-End report, the committee offered detailed data outlining the ethnic breakdown of the TAG population. Ms. Gully provided updated data for the 2008-'09 academic year. Although current numbers show a modest increase in identification of minority students, overall trends for the current year have not changed significantly. Considering the demographics of the ACPS total population, African American and Hispanics are underrepresented.

The Board and Superintendent have made closing the achievement gap a high priority. ACPS joined the Minority Student Achievement Network, a national coalition of multiracial, suburban and urban school districts that have come together to study achievement gaps in their districts and collaborate on models of success in closing these gaps.

ACPS will launch the Advancement Via Individual Determination program beginning in September '09. AVID is a program designed to help underachieving middle school and high school students prepare for and succeed in colleges and universities. (Information and resources at avidonline.org.) TAGAC is hopeful that this individualized approach will result in the discovery of unidentified or underachieving gifted students.

Recommendations:

- Support data-driven models of success in raising minority participation in advanced classes and the TAG program. TAGAC is optimistic that ACPS participation in the Minority Student Achievement Network will place ACPS on the cutting edge of successful strategies to close the minority achievement gap.
- Low-SES and poor preschool preparation have been identified in the literature as primary components of the minority achievement gap in urban and suburban populations. TAGAC endorses increased ACPS participation in early years education and ACPS collaboration with The City of Alexandria to give every child access to a quality pre-K experience.
- Monitor progress in the area of TAG diversity and evaluate the impact of program changes on this issue, including monitoring of the AVID program's impact on student outcomes. New programs such as AVID should include specific staff training for recognizing giftedness among underachieving minority and low-SES students. Also, monitor impact of CoGAT on diversifying identification.
- Introduce young scholar programs K-3.

SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL NEEDS OF GIFTED STUDENTS

Issue: Misconceptions about the social and emotional needs of gifted students are common among parents and educators. Successfully addressing these needs requires a concerted and organized effort to educate parents, teachers, administrators and counselors.

Analysis: Ms. Gully reported that through participation in the TAG meetings, the TAG designees at each school have come to recognize some of the vulnerabilities of gifted children. The designees at many schools have expressed an interest in providing services to meet these needs.

In particular some of the elementary schools have formed groups to address the problems of perfectionism, social skills issues, and the high expectations that children have of themselves. At schools where the TAG population is too small to accommodate group work, individual counseling is offered. The designees, usually Guidance Counselors, are using Managing the Social and Emotional Needs of the Gifted: A Teacher's Survival Guide by Connie Schmitz and Judy Galbraith and The Gifted Kid's Survival Guide: A Teen Handbook by Judy Galbraith and Jim Delisle to guide their responses. It is hoped that the materials will be available at all elementary schools next year. Ms. Gully hopes to initiate some groups at the middle and high schools where there is a great need. Ms. Gully also provides guidance to parents and students on a one on one basis, through email and telephone conversations and occasional meetings.

Recommendations:

- Continue training of counselors at all grade levels and initiate formalized delivery of interventions for gifted students with atypical social and emotional needs by drafting appropriate amendment language for the Local Plan.
- Provide equal access to relevant age-appropriate counseling services for gifted students with atypical social and emotional needs at all ACPS schools.