

Annual Report to the School Board of the Talented and Gifted Advisory Committee

July 1, 2004

Introduction

The Talented and Gifted Advisory Committee (TAGAC or the Committee) is pleased to submit this year-end report detailing its activities for the 2003-04 school year. This report will outline significant issues addressed during the year, an analysis of each issue, and recommendations for improving programs for TAG students within the Alexandria City Public Schools (ACPS).

TAGAC set an aggressive agenda for the 2003-04 school year, with particular emphasis on: the identification of gifted learners across the district's diverse cultural and socio-economic populations; continued examination of the middle school TAG program with a goal of increased rigor in TAG coursework; and a new focus on high school-level honors and AP programs. Individual members also undertook efforts to examine other issues, including elementary TAG science. Spurred in part by the arrival of Dr. Jeanne Struck, ACPS's capable new TAG curriculum specialist, the Committee expanded its focus to include broader issues at the elementary level. The panel has focused this report on eight core issues, and it is our hope that ACPS leaders will act on these detailed recommendations.

1. Identification of Gifted and Talented Students

Issue:

ACPS does not screen all students, starting in kindergarten, for giftedness in each of the four subjects: math, English/language arts, science and social studies. There is overall inconsistency among schools in the identification of talented and gifted learners.

Analysis:

The Committee reviewed various documents related to TAG within the Commonwealth of Virginia, including the Virginia Administrative Code and *The Virginia Plan for the Gifted*. The Virginia Administrative Code requires each school division to establish a uniform procedure with common criteria to screen and identify gifted students. If a school division elects to use specific academic aptitude as an area of giftedness (which Alexandria does), then the district must include in its local plan procedures for identification and service in mathematics, science, English and social studies for all students in grades K-12.

The current "Nomination of Student for the Talented and Gifted Program" form does not allow nominations in each specific academic area. For example, students in grades K-4 cannot be nominated in science since there is no provision for TAG Science instruction until fifth grade. Students in grades K-7 cannot be nominated in social studies.

In studying the identification process, the Committee focused primarily on the elementary level as it believes gifted students are best served when they are identified early. With many years of TAG experience, students are well prepared for the rigors of upper level high school courses. TAG Curriculum Specialist Jeanne Struck has a strong background in TAG identification in the elementary grades, and her expertise has been invaluable in our study. Since arriving last fall and evaluating current identification practice within ACPS, Dr. Struck has developed a specific plan for revisions (presented in a memo to the School Board's Curriculum Committee in March 2004).

Identification issues also have become a larger concern since ACPS discontinued use of the Stanford 9 testing program.

Recommendations:

- ❑ The Committee recommends the School Board immediately act on the revised identification program as outlined by Dr. Struck. This is a critical issue that should be on the agenda for a meeting early in the 2004 – 2005 school year.
- ❑ Per Dr. Struck's revised identification plan, TAGAC recommends that ACPS immediately begin to screen all students, starting in Kindergarten, for giftedness in each of the four subject areas. The revised plan would use a profile, rather than the current matrix, to assess students and would revise current assessment methods to focus more on reasoning skills, one of the best indicators of giftedness. Additionally, the plan discontinues the use of checklists in favor of a system where teachers monitor gifted behaviors in all students for two six-week periods each year, one in the fall and one in the spring. This is a component of the Kingore identification system, to be piloted at John Adams and Mount Vernon next year as part of Dr. Struck's TAG identification initiative.
- ❑ The Committee supports Dr. Struck's recommendations for re-implementing the administration of nationally-normed tests. Dr. Struck recommends census testing, where all students receive an assessment, in at least one elementary grade to help ensure no gifted students miss being identified. Second grade is one persuasive option for this assessment since children in this grade level do not take SOLs. Dr Struck also recommends testing all 9th grade students, since such results are required for application to summer Governor's School programs. The Stanford 10 is the most logical choice for these purposes.
- ❑ The School Board should approve revisions to the TAG nomination forms to reflect all content areas for TAG identification.

2. Diversity in TAG Programs

Issue:

Students of color are underrepresented in ACPS TAG programs, even at the higher grade levels where enrollment in honors and AP courses is open to all students. Many teachers lack the tools to uncover characteristics of giftedness in diverse populations.

Analysis:

Dr. Struck presented information on ways to increase diversity in TAG programs, and TAGAC also participated in meetings with the TCW Honors and AP Diversity Committee. The Commit-

tee invited the AP/Honors and AP Diversity Committee to participate in TAGAC meetings, and a representative from TC Williams attended some TAGAC meetings last fall.

Dr Struck also led a presentation for Mount Vernon Elementary teachers on diverse populations of gifted learners. This presentation focused on how teachers can provide opportunities for students of color to demonstrate giftedness. Nationally, for example, it has been found that many minority students exhibit characteristics of giftedness in social studies.

Consistent with TAGAC's goal to increase rigor and consistency in TAG programs, the Committee believes the best way to increase diversity is a long-term strategy that starts in elementary school with the identification strategies recommended by Dr. Struck. Her plan will yield greater numbers of minority children placed in TAG early in their school careers.

Recommendations:

- ❑ TAGAC supports continued professional development to help teachers identify traits of giftedness in diverse populations. Dr. Struck is encouraged to present this valuable information to **all** ACPS elementary schools within the next year.
- ❑ TAGAC recommends implementation of academic supports including, but not limited to, after school and weekend homework clubs and tutoring sessions, supplemental study skills programs, in-service for teachers focusing on diverse learners, and support programs for parents of TAG students.

3. Elementary School TAG Implementation

Issue:

Elementary schools have different policies on TAG, particularly fifth grade science, that may reflect incorrect understanding of rules and requirements.

Analysis:

According to ACPS's current *Local Plan for the Education of the Talented and Gifted (Local Plan)*, all ACPS Elementary Schools are to offer TAG science in Fifth Grade to eligible students. Although the "Standard Service" for fifth grade TAG science is a separate (*i.e.*, pull-out) advanced class, the *Local Plan* also authorizes in-class differentiation by the regular classroom teacher. In either case, each elementary school is to offer TAG science if it has eligible students. Included in this policy must be a process to screen students for eligibility.

A member of the Committee surveyed all 13 of the system's elementary schools and found that six do not offer TAG science, making them noncompliant with the *Local Plan*. There also appears to be some lack of understanding among elementary school representatives (principals or their designee) about how to comply with the state and local TAG plans. Another challenge is lack of a system-wide fifth grade TAG science curriculum or pacing guides for teacher use.

Recommendations:

- ❑ ACPS must implement identification procedures in its *Local Plan* to screen and identify all students at all schools for fifth grade TAG science services.
- ❑ ACPS must provide consistent “appropriately differentiated curriculum” for all fifth grade TAG science classes.
- ❑ To ensure all Elementary Schools comply with the *Local Plan*, TAGAC recommends that all elementary principals be advised of requirements for fifth grade TAG science and submit to the Curriculum Office a statement of how their school complies with the requirements for the 2004-2005 school year. With the roll-out of the new Honors science curriculum in the middle schools this fall, it is essential that elementary schools adequately screen students for TAG science eligibility and provide TAG-level science instruction.

4. Management of the TAG Waiver Process

Issue:

Many schools inconsistently and improperly use the waiver process within ACPS TAG.

Analysis:

Under the *Local Plan*, individual schools can seek waivers of the standard delivery system for TAG-level instruction from the TAG program administrator, when approved by the assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction. Waivers are allowed when they help schools better manage their talent pool and teaching resources. The *Local Plan* requires that waivers be “developed with participation from members of the school community, including both parents and staff members. The school community must be informed of the waiver plan through such avenues as personal letters, flyers, called meetings, and/or Back to School Night.”

The Committee examined the waivers on file for the 2003-2004 academic year and found them to be inconsistent and perfunctory. There was no indication that they were developed with parent or staff participation. Most were mere photocopies of a previous year’s letter with only date changes. There also was no evidence that the ACPS curriculum office had examined the documents to compare against Local Plan requirements or to assess potential effects on students.

Recommendations:

- ❑ TAGAC recommends tightening the waiver process to ensure that all requirements of the *Local Plan* are met, especially the requirement for staff and parent input and the requirement for articulating how the waiver will better serve gifted students in the school.
- ❑ The district should revise and standardize all forms used in the waiver process.
- ❑ The Committee recommends that the waiver process and its requirements be brought to the attention of each principal in ACPS.

5. Middle School TAG Quality

Issue:

Historically, the middle school TAG program has been a major source of concern for the Committee and for parents. Specifically, lack of “appropriately differentiated curriculum,” TAG trained and certified teachers, and enforcement of high standards have plagued the middle school TAG program, particularly in English/language arts, science, and social studies.

Analysis:

During the 2002-2003 school year the Committee spent the bulk of its time studying the middle school TAG program. At that time the Committee concluded the lack of specific, written curricula for middle school TAG courses other than math was a major cause for concern. After bringing this issue to the attention of school district leaders, the Committee was informed that such written curricula for middle school science and language arts classes were a priority for the 2003-04 year.

The Committee is pleased that a new honors science curriculum is being implemented in grades six through eight for the 2004-05 school year but is disappointed that written TAG language arts curricula are still not ready for implementation in all three middle school grades two school years after they were promised. Despite many meetings and discussions with Central Office, only the sixth grade language arts curriculum is complete and ready for implementation in Fall 2004. The explanation provided to the Committee for the delay in reaching other grades is the need for curriculum review and buy-in from seventh and eighth grade teachers. The Committee recognizes the importance of teacher buy-in to ensure a successful program but is very concerned that another group of seventh and eighth grade students will be denied *bona fide* TAG-level language arts instruction.

As noted earlier, in the discussion of the TAG identification process, the state requires TAG-level social studies instruction be offered in all grades, yet, ACPS only offers TAG social studies in grades eight and up. This is contrary to the state requirements and counterproductive in light of evidence showing that minority students tend to demonstrate giftedness in this subject more frequently than some others. There is no specific, written curriculum or pacing guide for the eighth grade TAG social studies course ACPS does offer.

The fact that every teacher is a TAG teacher in the middle schools also poses significant concerns for the Committee. Most honors and TAG teachers at the middle and high schools do not have TAG certification or other training to identify and teach gifted children. Without such training, it is difficult for teachers to ensure differentiation and appropriate challenges for each student.

These teachers work with students of extremely diverse academic abilities, and they are under considerable pressure to ensure that their students meet SOL standards. With these challenges, some teachers find it difficult also to support the needs of TAG students. Parent involvement issues exist at both the middle and the high schools due to language difficulties, cultural differences, work schedules, etc. At middle schools, these difficulties impair the TAG identification process. At the high school level, these difficulties make it hard to engage parents in the course selection process, thereby impeding efforts to diversify the honors and AP classes.

One bright spot in spring 2004 was the start of online classes in TAG certification offered to ACPS staff. The ACPS school division is fully funding this effort, which can help teachers attain a Virginia TAG endorsement. During the 2004-05 school years, staff development for division counselors will focus on the affective needs of talented and gifted learners.

Recommendations:

- ❑ The district should support Dr. Struck's plan for properly differentiated sixth, seventh, and eighth grade TAG level language arts curriculum and pacing guides. This Committee has reiterated the need for specific, system-wide curriculum for use by all middle school teachers, and this effort must be a priority. Without written curricula, consistency and compliance with mandates is impossible.
- ❑ TAG instruction in social studies should be expanded to include all middle school grades, sixth through eighth, and written curricula and pacing guides need to be developed for those classes.
- ❑ TAGAC strongly supports placing TAG coordinators in secondary schools. Through this investment ACPS will strengthen curriculum, parent outreach, student identification, and the overall effectiveness of TAG/Honors programs. Only with such professionals in each of our schools will the district be able to ensure that teachers have the support to implement TAG curricula. *(The Committee presented a comprehensive proposal to the School Board at the October 2003 public hearing on the FY2005 operating budget. We further outlined our arguments in a December memorandum to the Superintendent and the School Board and at a June 2004 hearing on the 2006 operating budget).*
- ❑ In fall 2004, the Curriculum Specialist for TAG should continue to work with middle school parents on issues facing the gifted adolescent.
- ❑ TAGAC commends Dr. Struck for preparing the sixth grade language arts teachers to begin teaching the College of William and Mary curriculum in fall 2004. Teachers will be encouraged to use the higher-level critical thinking strategies outlined in these units in all their classes, regular and TAG. During the fall of 2004, seventh and eighth grade teachers will participate in staff development designed to introduce the use of the curriculum.

6. High School TAG Program

Issue:

There is evidence of questionable consistency and quality at TCW in providing AP and honors courses to its diverse population.

Analysis:

The Committee reviewed the issue of requiring AP testing, the scheduling of AP science lab courses and whether there is a sufficient breadth of honors and AP course offerings at TCW.

A more general concern is a seeming lack of consistency (and in some cases rigor) in honors classes. Unlike AP classes, which have specific curricula from the College Board, there are no written curricula for Honors classes outside algebra II with trigonometry, the only "honors" math course. Each teacher must determine what to teach beyond the skill set required for SOL proficiency. Another concern is the current "two-levels-fit-all" approach to teaching English and social studies. Both subjects are mandatory annually for all students, but are offered only as "regu-

lar” or honors/AP classes, with none of the additional gradations available in math and science courses.

Recommendations:

- ❑ TAGAC commends the school board for amending the AP testing policy. This decision acknowledges the value of AP courses as college-level work following a specific curriculum. Requiring end-of-course testing should ensure all teachers are delivering the prescribed rigorous curriculum and that students are to perform at a high level to score well on the test and merit the extra bonus to their GPAs.
- ❑ The Committee encourages the School Board to gather data on effects of the AP testing requirement on minority students and asks that it provide such data to TAGAC. The Committee also strongly recommends use of supplemental tutoring or other homework assistance to support students willing to tackle AP courses. This assistance needs to be supplemental, however. It should not impact the rigor of classroom instruction, and responsibility for this assistance should not fall solely on the classroom teacher.
- ❑ The Committee also supports the decision to increase the credit given for the three AP lab science courses from 1 to 1 1/2 credit hours. However, we encourage data gathering on the impact, if any, of the change. TAGAC strongly encourages the administration to find another way to schedule the additional 1/2 credit so that students will not be required to give up their lunch period for these classes.
- ❑ TAGAC supports a review of the AP offerings to determine whether additional AP courses should be offered at TCW.
- ❑ The Committee plans to review further the rigor of honors/AP classes next year and the feasibility of adding additional levels of English and social studies instruction, especially as specific academic plans for the “new” high school come into sharper focus.

7. Access to Thomas Jefferson High School for Science and Technology

Issue:

TAGAC examined whether ACPS should accept the annual invitation for Alexandria students to apply for admission to Thomas Jefferson High School for Science and Technology (TJ).

Analysis:

Thomas Jefferson is a specialized school with admittance based on merit. It nurtures students with a passion for science and technology and proven academic aptitude. As such, TJ supports the fundamental principles of gifted education – that gifted students both desire and require a peer group that challenges and stimulates them. These principles are supported by information found on websites for the Council for Exceptional Children, www.cec.sped.org and the National Association for Gifted Children, www.nagc.org. With course offerings such as Supercomputer Applications, DNA Science, and Quantum Mechanics, along with specialized equipment and highly trained faculty, Thomas Jefferson stands alone in its field. Indeed, it has earned a reputation as one the best secondary schools in the nation.

Rather than competing with TC for the brightest students, TJ should be viewed as an enhancement of the already strong secondary program available in Alexandria. As the No Child Left Behind legislation brings increased emphasis on remediation, many TAG programs nationwide are

losing resources. Alexandria's participation in TJ is one way to demonstrate support for our TAG program and ensure that our schools can attract families with high-achieving children who otherwise may choose private schools or relocate to neighboring jurisdictions. TJ also raises a more fundamental question of access to an available public resource and who should decide the best interests of a specific student.

Recommendations:

- The Committee recommended to the School Board at its June 3, 2004 meeting that the City of Alexandria begin participation in TJ in the next school year. TAGAC recommended a trial program with two students selected each year for four years. (For more information, please see the remarks and presentation from that meeting).

8. TAGAC By-laws Revision

Issue:

The bylaws for the TAGAC Committee were outdated, with no revisions in more than a decade.

Analysis:

TAGAC completed a major revision of its by-laws in spring 2004. It approved more detailed language outlining its role in providing input on the *Local Plan for the Talented and Gifted* and added to its responsibilities the task of reviewing the appropriate academic and affective (*i.e.*, social and emotional) needs of Alexandria's TAG children. Another provision outlined responsibilities to disseminate information to parents about the Committee and TAG activities.

The new by-laws state the Committee is to have 7 to 15 voting members, including one member who is a full or part-time teacher of TAG students. The panel also is to include a non-voting student representative and two ex-officio members; the Curriculum Specialist for the Talented and Gifted Program and a School Board member. The Committee also agreed, to the maximum extent possible, to work toward a membership that reflects the geographic and racial make-up of the system and the three grade levels: elementary, middle and high school. The by-laws state that the school board should publicly advertise committee vacancies.

Recommendations/Action:

- The Committee unanimously approved the revisions at its May 2004 meeting.

Conclusion

Based on the recommendations of this report, it is clear the time has come for ACPS to place a higher priority on the needs of its Talented and Gifted learners. In recent years, the district has invested considerable resources to improve ACPS school facilities, and now part of this focus should shift to strategies that improve academic rigor within the schools. The issues outlined here contain specific recommendations, and we will continue to focus on many of these topics in the year ahead.

The timing for action is ideal, since ACPS soon must craft a new local TAG plan as required by the state. This process presents a significant opportunity to act on these recommendations and undertake new initiatives for the district's gifted students. With the superb addition of Dr. Jeanne Struck as TAG program coordinator, we have the capacity to elevate our TAG program to a greater level of excellence for our students. The Committee looks forward to working with the ACPS Administration and the School Board toward that end.

Respectfully submitted,

Margaret H. Fitzsimmons, Chairman,
for the Talented and Gifted Advisory Committee