

MEMORANDUM

Date: June 10, 2005

TO: The Honorable Members of the Alexandria School Board
Superintendent Perry

From: The Talented and Gifted Advisory Committee
Sheryl Gorsuch, Chair

Subject: Talented and Gifted Advisory Committee Annual Report for 2004-2005

This report summarizes the Talented and Gifted Advisory Committee's (TAGAC) discussions with recommendations during the 2004-2005 school year.

Summary of Key Recommendations:

- Add TAG certification to the job description of middle school peer coaches (p.2).
- Vote on participation with Thomas Jefferson (p.3)
- Allow TAGAC to offer a SENG Model Parent Support Group in Fall 2005 (p.4).
- Add science specialists at each elementary school in the 2006-07 budget (p.5).
- Improve the AP testing environment and schedule the additional 1/2 credit for AP science lab courses to allow students an adequate lunch period.(p.6)

TAGAC Objectives for next Year:

- Review changes made to the AP program and evaluate whether or not the changes have been beneficial. Review AP offerings to determine whether additional AP courses should be offered at TCW (p.6).
- Monitor and evaluate curriculum changes in language arts and science (p.7).
- Provide input on the 5 year revisions to the Local Plan with particular focus on elementary science services, definition of humanities, social studies offerings and honors curriculum.(p.8).

TAGAC would like to take this opportunity to recognize some of the important accomplishments of Dr. Struck this year. 6th grade TAG language arts classes piloted a new program (Kendall Hunt) which engages students in higher level critical thinking. This program is scheduled for implementation in the fall for 7 & 8th grade. Honors Science is now offered in the middle school. An amendment to the local plan provides a new profile system along with Kingore observations to improve identification of TAG students. Additionally, her deep interest for the affective needs of the gifted is a wonderful asset to ACPS. She has made notable improvements to the overall TAG program during her 2 years in Alexandria and we look forward to many more years of collaboration.

Middle School TAG Specialists

Issue:

TAGAC has periodically discussed TAG staffing at the middle school level. Currently, all middle school core subject area teachers are required to teach a TAG section, regardless of their individual levels of training or interest in gifted education. The only formal TAG support available to these teachers is through the TAG Curriculum Specialist, who monitors TAG activities for the entire school system.

Analysis:

We would like there to be a dedicated staff member placed at both middle schools to act as TAG coordinator. The benefits of having a TAG Specialist at each middle school are numerous. He/ she could observe TAG and honors classes and offer suggestions for differentiation, provide mentorship and teacher training, and act as liaison between middle school staff and the TAG Curriculum Specialist. However, we are aware that budget constraints make it very unlikely that staff will be added in this capacity. As an alternative, we recommend that peer coaches take on this role.

The ACPS website provides the following description of peer coaches:

Each school will have two peer coaches or teacher trainers to provide on-site staff development through modeling in the classroom and small group teacher instruction. This embedded staff development eliminates taking teachers out of the classroom and will help teachers with curriculum content pacing and instructional strategies to meet the needs of every child.

The peer coach position was created to improve middle school instruction, thus it seems reasonable that instruction to TAG students should fall under the purview of these coaches.

Recommendations:

- 1 TAG support should become a formal component of the job description of middle school peer coaches.
- 2 Peer coaches should be required to have the gifted education endorsement (consisting of four graduate level classes).
- 3 Peer coaches who do not enter the job with this endorsement should be required to obtain it within three years.

Thomas Jefferson High School For Science and Technology

Issue:

The City of Alexandria School Board has annually received an invitation from the Fairfax County School Board for students living in the City of Alexandria to apply for admission to Thomas Jefferson High School for Science and Technology (TJ), the Governor's School in Northern Virginia. The Alexandria School Board has consistently declined this invitation without clearly stating their objections. Gifted students throughout the city of Alexandria are thus denied the option of applying for admission to this prestigious high school.

Analysis:

The TAGAC strongly believes that gifted learners in the city of Alexandria should have the opportunity to apply to attend TJ. The TAGAC completed a detailed report last year that was reviewed by the School Board Committee on Curriculum and Instruction. Updates have also been provided to the Board outlining changes to the admission process for TJ that were made in September 2004. The previous admission policy did not result in a diverse student population.

Community forums were held by the Curriculum Committee this past spring to discuss the pros and cons of allowing Alexandria students to apply for admission to TJ. Generally, TC Williams staff and recent students spoke against changes to the policy while parents and community members spoke in favor of participation with TJ. Anecdotal evidence was offered by a real estate agent who noted that many prospective homebuyers will not consider Alexandria due to the current policy of non-participation with TJ.

The School Board voted on April 21 to delay a decision to accept the TJ invitation. The explanation given by several members of the board for proposing the delay was because of the potential cost in light of the budget issues unresolved from the City Council cuts in school funding. The board has since made the necessary decisions to balance the budget.

Because many members of the Alexandria School Board were concerned about financial implications, TAGAC continues to recommend limiting admission to 2 students per year at an approximate cost of \$25,000 the first year. In year 4 the cost would cap at about \$100,000. per year with a total of 8 Alexandria students in attendance.

Recommendation:

TAGAC respectfully requests a vote on this important issue. A timely decision to this summer's invitation would allow rising 8th graders to apply in the fall with our first students from Alexandria attending TJ in the fall of 2006.

Parent Support Groups

Issue:

Parents of talented and gifted children often lack access to information about the characteristics, behaviors, problems and resources for gifted children.

Analysis:

TAGAC discussed the need to develop additional resources for the parents of talented and gifted children within the community. The research suggests that there are behaviors and characteristics that are specific to high potential children and that parents benefit from sharing their experiences with other parents. Supporting the Emotional Needs of the Gifted (SENG), a national organization, has developed a parent support group model which invites parents of gifted children to participate in a ten-week series to discuss the social and emotional needs of their children, and the parenting issues related to those needs. The emphasis is on positive aspects of parenting, avoiding power struggles, and helping gifted children learn appropriate life skills while enhancing the parent/child relationship and parent self-esteem. The group is led by a SENEG trained facilitator using the reference book, *Guiding the Gifted Child: A Practical Source for Parents and Teachers*, by Webb, Meckstroth and Tolan, Great Potential Press, 1989. TAGAC has located a trained facilitator in Annandale, VA who will ensure that issues regarding school policy or ACPS teachers will not be discussed in these groups.

Further information regarding SENEG parent groups can be found at:
http://www.sengifted.org/parents_groups.shtml

A TAGAC subcommittee discussed this idea with teachers who agreed there is a need for this type of parent support. Parents often feel isolated and uncomfortable discussing their child's aptitude and the parenting issues that arise with a gifted child. Families from every income level and demographic have common concerns. The subcommittee is committed to finding potential sources for financial support to fund the specially trained facilitator and the purchase of the accompanying book, to offer the program at low or no cost to interested parents.

Recommendations:

1. TAGAC recommends offering a SENEG Model Parent Support Group beginning in the fall of 2005 with an introductory meeting where elementary school parents could sign up for a condensed 5 week program of 2 hour sessions.
2. Our committee is requesting the opportunity to disseminate information about the Group through the Elementary School TAG teachers throughout the Alexandria Public Schools.

Science Specialists

Issue:

Alexandria K-5 teachers do not have the adequate support required to implement a rigorous science curriculum.

Analysis:

Currently, Alexandria elementary schools offer a TAG science program only for 5th grade students. Elementary TAG specialists are currently over scheduled with math and language arts instruction in most elementary schools and further strained in some schools with large numbers of TAG identified students. This creates inconsistencies in the delivery of science education across elementary schools in the city, and limits TAG science services which can be provided.

The School Board in May 2005 approved changes to Alexandria's *Local Plan for the Education of the Talented and Gifted* that will impact elementary-level science. More K-4 students are expected to be identified for science TAG services. Our committee believes implementation of this change will require additional teacher support.

Elementary teachers, both TAG and non-TAG alike, would benefit from the services of a science specialist or coach in the delivery of quality science instruction. Such a policy has proven effective in promoting rigorous math coursework at the elementary school level.

Recommendation:

TAGAC recommends that science specialists be placed at each elementary school in the city beginning in the 2006-07 school year. These specialists would assist in the delivery of the TAG science curriculum and promote quality instruction at each grade level. These specialists would provide the following benefits:

- Enhance science curriculum with hands on activities
- Coach teachers on content
- Improve SOL test scores
- Support TAG teachers overburdened with language arts and math instruction
- Support new teachers in providing quality science instruction

Advanced Placement Courses

Issue:

Are the changes made to the Advanced Placement (AP) program improving the program and are there additional changes that need to be implemented?

Analysis:

This year, ACPS began requiring students in AP classes to take the AP tests at no cost to students. In addition, ACPS increased the credit given for three AP lab science courses: Biology, Chemistry, and Physics, from 1 to 1 ½ credit hours. Next year, two additional AP courses will be offered, AP Psychology and AP Environmental Science. TAGAC strongly supported these changes, but believes it is critically important to study the effect of the changes on the program overall, once the first year data is available.

The decision within the high school to require a second, teacher drafted final exam on top of the test prescribed by the College Board concerns committee members. TAGAC strongly encourages the Board to review this decision and to direct staff to develop an alternative method to keep students engaged and in class following the AP tests. Possible alternatives might include projects (individual, group, or class-wide), guest speakers and internships.

TAGAC received numerous reports of inadequate and difficult AP testing environments which may impede students' ability to do well on the AP tests. Courses with particularly large enrollments experienced logistical challenges in the gym and cafeteria that included overcrowding at tables, frequent noise interruptions and disrupting announcements.

TAGAC has followed the debate, both within our schools and within the greater educational community, of the tension created by the desire to expose more students to college-level class work and the need to ensure that the work in the classes remains at college level when classes are populated with students who either do not want to perform at the level required by the course or who do not have the academic background that allows them to perform at the level required by rigorous AP classes. While the Committee supports the open enrollment policy for AP courses, the committee will review existing prerequisites and discuss possible improvements and recommendations in the coming year.

Recommendations:

1. Data should be reviewed on the effects of required AP testing on enrollment patterns next year. Also data on the AP tutoring/homework assistance offered should be reviewed to help determine whether the current supports are adequate.
2. TAGAC strongly encourages the administration to find another way to schedule the additional 1/2 credit for AP science lab courses, so that students will not be required to give up their lunch period for these classes.
3. TAGAC recommends a continued review of the AP offerings to determine whether additional AP courses should be offered at TCW.
4. Testing environment improvements should be identified and implemented next year.

Middle School Language Arts Curricula

Issue:

An ongoing priority of TAGAC has been development of “appropriately differentiated” curricula for the Middle School TAG courses. Such curricula for Middle School Language Arts classes, while in development, still have not been finalized and fully implemented.

Analysis:

The 2001-06 *Local Plan for the Education of the Gifted and Talented* spelled out a timetable for the development of pacing guides for a number of Middle School TAG courses, including TAG Language Arts for grades 6 – 8, which were to be developed during the 2002-03 school year. Committee members emphasized the need for documents detailing a specific program for the Middle School TAG Language Arts classes at its first meeting with Dr. Struck in September 2003.

Since that meeting Dr. Struck has worked to identify and implement a suitable program for the Middle School TAG Language Arts classes. This year, a new language arts textbook published by *Kendall-Hunt* was piloted in 6th grade TAG classes. This summer, 6th grade teachers will help develop a full-year curriculum based on *Kendall-Hunt*. The TAGAC is pleased to learn that the decision was just made to begin implementation of *Kendall-Hunt* this Fall for grades 7 and 8, with development of the full-year curricula for those grades slated for Summer 2006.

While we appear to be on the path to full implementation of appropriately differentiated curricula for the Middle School TAG Language Arts classes, the alignment of textbook content, written curricula and pacing guides should be reviewed when completed by ACPS staff.

Recommendation:

- 1 TAGAC recommends the Board monitor the implementation of 6-8th grade TAG language arts and ensure written differentiated curricula is completed and utilized for the 2006-7 school year.

Local Plan for the Education of the Talented and Gifted

Five year revisions of Alexandria's local plan are due in June 2006. Over the past several years, our committee has noted areas where the local plan can be improved to closely align with the state plan and raise the quality of the overall program. Further discussion and careful consideration of several topics is needed during the review process next year.

Background:

An amendment to the current local plan was approved by the School Board in May which changes the process of identification for TAG students from a matrix to a profile system. VA SOL test results have been replaced with the Sages tests, which evaluates student academic aptitude in language arts, social studies, math and science.

ACPS provides TAG services through the "specific academic aptitude" election, as defined in the Regulations by the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE). This means our TAG services are course-work focused rather than "general intellectual aptitude" focused. A requirement under the Regulations is that a school system electing to identify students under the "specific academic aptitude" category must provide TAG services in math, science and the humanities in all grade levels (K-12).

Issues:

Elementary Science: Currently TAG Science services are offered in grade 5 as either a pull-out option or through differentiation in the regular classroom. The recently approved amendment specifically includes early identification of students gifted in science. This raises questions about how services will evolve in subsequent years to address the needs of TAG students in grades K-4 along with options to improve 5th grade science services. For secondary students, TAG science is provided through honors courses in the middle school and honors/AP at the high school.

Humanities / Social Studies: During discussion of the amendment to the local plan, the School Board requested a definition of the term humanities from VDOE. Their response indicated that it was left up to the local division to define the term. Dr. Struck recommended continuing to define humanities as Language Arts for now and that we review our present definition when revising the local plan next year. Whether social studies should be a separate identification category or combined with language arts identification needs to be examined more thoroughly with discussion of identification tools and the implications for K- 12 curriculum and services. A TAG social studies course is offered in 8th grade with related honors and AP courses offered in high school.

Honors Course Curriculum: Our committee has not seen written curriculum for honors classes at the high school level. This raises continuity concerns in the progression of courses preparing students for AP courses. Some standardization is needed to effectively communicate minimum goals for the various course offerings and accurately describe the difference between honors courses and regular courses offered by ACPS. We also plan to review the feasibility of adding 12th grade honors classes in English and Social Studies.