

MEMORANDUM

Date: June 12, 2006

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

From: The Talented and Gifted Advisory Committee
Maureen Leary, Chair

Subject: Talented and Gifted Advisory Committee Annual Report for 2005-2006

This report from the Talented and Gifted Advisory Committee (TAGAC) includes a review of the implementation of the local plan for gifted education, a summary of the TAGAC's activities during the 2005 – 2006 school year, and a series of recommendations for improvements to TAG services.

This first section of this report addresses the subject of the revisions to the local plan for 2006 - 2011, as the TAGAC spent a significant amount of time working on that this year. The TAGAC acknowledges that the revised local plan is still a work in progress and is subject to change.

Summary of Key Recommendations:

- The TAGAC recommends that the School Board curriculum committee place on its agenda for 2006 – 07 a review of both the Honors and AP policies and programs.
- The TAGAC recommends that the School Board ensure all elementary schools implement the same rigorous TAG science curriculum in their buildings for grades K-5 well before 2008.
- The TAGAC recommends that the School Board require full implementation of honors or TAG level social studies for the 6th and 7th grades beginning no later than fall 2008.
- The TAGAC recommends that the incoming School Board uphold the pilot program to allow Alexandria students to attend Thomas Jefferson High School for Science and Technology.

Local Plan Revisions

Issue:

The revised version of Local Plan for the Education of the Talented and Gifted is due to the Virginia Department of Education on June 30, 2006. The TAGAC has provided input to TAG Curriculum Specialist Dr. Jeanne Struck throughout the revision process.

Analysis:

The Local Plan for the Education of the Talented and Gifted is a comprehensive document that outlines the school division's mission and philosophy regarding gifted education, its process for identifying students in need of gifted services, and the specific programs and methods used for providing differentiated education to identified students. The TAGAC has spent a large portion of its meeting time this year discussing the revisions to the Local Plan. Dr. Struck has kept the committee updated on the progress of the plan and on any significant changes she is proposing to the plan that is currently in place for 2001 – 06.

The TAGAC recognizes that its role in the revision process is to provide input for the final policy decisions that are made by the School Board with staff input. The committee has been pleased by the responsiveness shown by Dr. Struck to its recommendations. At this point, the only concern the committee would like to express is regarding the timeline set by the state for the local plan revision and approval process. The TAGAC would like the timing of the plan submissions to be changed to allow for public review and comment on the plan before it is sent to the state Department of Education for approval.

Recommendations:

- The TAGAC recommends that the School Board remain open to considering amendments to the Local Plan, after its approval, as the need arises.
- The TAGAC recommends that the School Board take the appropriate measures to ensure that the timeline for submission of future Local Plan revisions (i.e. beginning in 2011) allows sufficient time for the public to have access to and opportunity to make public comment on the Local Plan before it is finalized.
- The TAGAC recommends that in fall 2006 the School Board sponsor a forum for public comment on the proposed revisions to the Local Plan for 2006 - 2011.

Current Implementation of the Local Plan for 2001 – 2006

Issue:

According to state regulations, the TAGAC is charged with considering how well the current local plan has been implemented during the previous year.

Analysis:

This section of the report offers an overview of TAG programs and policies broken down by grade level groupings.

Elementary School TAG Programs

Grades K-3

Children are found eligible for gifted services through a formal identification process in math, language arts and science. In Alexandria all curriculum delivery is left up to the classroom teacher through individualized differentiated education plans (DEPs). Consequently gifted curriculum enhancements vary dramatically between teachers and schools, which results in system wide inconsistencies. The TAGAC has heard of these inconsistencies from many parents and conveyed these comments to senior staff over the years.

Grades 4-5

TAG pull-out programs are in place for grades four and five and participation is dependent upon a formal identification process. The pull-out structure seems to work well and generally delivers a high quality classroom environment for TAG students in language arts and math. The success of this type of TAG instruction may be due in part to the presence of a consistent classroom leader (i.e. the designated TAG teacher at each elementary building) who is responsible for delivering gifted services in language arts and math. However, TAG science delivery in these grades does not approach the levels of quality and consistency found with language arts and math because of disparate science classroom recourses and the lack of a classroom leader responsible for TAG science services.

Middle School TAG Programs

Language Arts

Gifted services in language arts are offered in grades 6-8 through a formal TAG identification process. (TAG instruction in the middle school is provided by the regular classroom teacher in separate TAG sections.) In early 2003 the TAGAC determined that there was no written curriculum or pacing guides for TAG language arts in grades 6-8. These types of guidelines seemed to be critical for improving and standardizing TAG instruction across different classrooms. After a meeting with the Superintendent in April 2003, the TAGAC was assured that written curricula for middle school TAG language arts classes would be in place by the fall of the 2003 - 04 school year.

For all sixth grade students revised curricula and pacing were made available by the beginning of the 2004 – 05 school year. In the fall of 2005 all middle school teachers were required to attend a daylong training session on the Kendall Hunt curriculum. Since September 2005, the curriculum has been in use in sixth through eighth grades. Revisions to the curriculum are expected to take place this summer.

Math

Gifted services in math are offered in grades 6-8 through a formal TAG identification process. TAG students are assigned to one of two math paths at the beginning of sixth grade. These are commonly known as TAG math and Accelerated math. Gifted services in math are generally considered to be the most successful, high quality and consistent component of the middle school TAG offerings. The TAGAC found no need to request written curriculum in April 2003 because TAG offerings in math were already well established and closely followed by the teachers.

Science

Gifted services in science are not offered through a formal identification process (i.e. TAG) but are instead offered through an Honors program in grades 6-8. The Honors title signals that students are allowed to pursue TAG-level science curricula through an open enrollment process that has neither prerequisites nor required minimum testing thresholds. Conversion from TAG science to Honors science occurred at the beginning of the 2004 – 05 school year. Gifted science curriculum and pacing was revamped as well by the 2004 - 05 school year for all three grades. However, it appears that Honors science curriculum and pacing continue to track behind TAG math in terms of rigor, consistency and satisfaction. The TAGAC is hopeful that these issues are being addressed in the quarterly meetings between the science teachers and the Science Curriculum Specialist. It is the understanding of the TAGAC that the purpose of these meetings is to discuss how to improve science instruction, and that Dr. Struck attends some of the meetings to represent TAG issues.

Social Studies

Gifted services are offered beginning in grade eight and at that point are based on a formal TAG identification process. In its April 2003 meeting with the Superintendent, the TAGAC raised the issue of a lack of defined, written curriculum for social studies. Since then the TAGAC has continued to discuss what types of advanced instruction in social studies should be available. The TAGAC's position for the past several years has been that social studies should be granted the same standing in middle school as language arts, math and science. The TAGAC understands that a senior staff discussion of this issue is underway and staff recommendations should be forthcoming.

High School TAG Programs

Formal TAG identification ceases at the end of eighth grade because all high school gifted curriculum is presented in either an open enrollment Honors or Advanced Placement (AP) environment. Students who may not have been found eligible for gifted level services in grades K-8 are able to take any level of course they choose beginning in ninth grade. Anecdotally, the TAGAC is aware that many students, who have never taken a TAG course before ninth grade, are encouraged by building level personnel to try the new open enrollment curriculum choices available in high school. Many parents and TAGAC members are

concerned that this may lead to a less rigorous classroom environment that does not meet the needs of gifted learners. To better support this structure, the TAGAC would like to see well defined, written curriculum for all Honors and AP courses at the high school that supports the gifted education standards.

TC Williams Educational Plan

Issue:

As the TC Williams Educational Plan for smaller learning communities continues to evolve, the TAGAC would like to ensure that adequate attention is being paid to all aspects of the Honors and Advanced Placement (AP) programs.

Analysis:

The TAGAC holds the position that the coming year would be the ideal time for the School Board's curriculum committee to conduct a thorough review of the Honors and AP programs at the high school level. In addition to the imminent implementation of smaller learning communities, two other factors impact the suggested timing for this review: the Office of Monitoring and Evaluation published a report in February 2006 regarding the relationship between AP test scores and course grades, and in the coming years the College Board will be conducting an audit of Alexandria's AP program. The TAGAC strongly encourages the School Board to take advantage of all available data in determining how the AP program could be improved.

In its 2004 – 05 Year End Report, the TAGAC identified various aspects of the AP program that seemed to need attention. Several of these issues remain unresolved, including: the requirement for students to take a second, teacher drafted final exam on top of the test prescribed by the College Board; the scheduling of the additional half credit for AP science lab courses; the possible need for pre-requisites for some AP courses in order to ensure that all enrolled students are capable of performing at an AP level; and a review of the classroom activities that are planned for the time period between the AP test and the conclusion of the school year.

In addition to focusing on AP courses and policies, the TAGAC has also discussed the need for additional levels of courses at both the high school and middle school in order to appropriately challenge students of varying abilities. The TAGAC's position is that the current policy of offering only two levels for many subjects, including language arts and social studies in grades 6 – 12 and science in grades 6 – 8, does not allow for true implementation of the ACPS policy of differentiation of instruction. While recognizing concerns of the central administrative staff regarding tracking, the TAGAC holds the position that the School Board should consider implementing curriculum changes that address this lack of course options; specifically that in core subject areas there should be at least three levels available: regular, honors, and AP. This position has been reinforced by anecdotal evidence from current TC Williams students, who have made statements regarding the lack of challenge offered in some courses. The TAGAC is confident that ACPS can design a program that addresses this issue that does not constitute tracking.

Recommendations:

- The TAGAC recommends that the School Board curriculum committee place on its agenda for 2006 – 07 a review of both the Honors and AP policies and programs. To be meaningful, such a review must include an analysis of the regular curriculum, to ascertain who is being served by those classes and how well those students' needs are being met under the current course offerings in grades 6-12.
- The TAGAC recommends that the School Board take full advantage of all available AP data in order to determine what improvements should be made to the AP program. The TAGAC specifically recommends using test score data to review how teaching assignments are made, in order to ensure that students in different classes are receiving consistent quality of instruction and adequate preparation to earn qualifying scores on the College Board exams.
- The TAGAC recommends that the School Board and the administration keep the committee informed of the progress of the AP audit by the College Board, and allow for committee involvement in the process where appropriate.
- The TAGAC recommends the School Board review whether or not the supports that were in place for AP students during the 2005 –06 school year, such as tutoring and homework assistance, were adequate.
- The TAGAC continues to encourage the School Board and the administration to be mindful of the scheduling issues caused by increases in the course credits for some AP science classes. The TAGAC understands that the current credits may change as a result of the AP audit, but it remains concerned that ACPS continues to require students to give up lunch periods in order to take some of these classes.
- The TAGAC recommends that a review of post-AP test curricula be conducted with a goal of ensuring that all AP students are engaged in worthwhile activities through the end of the school year. The TAGAC suggests consulting neighboring jurisdictions to determine what practices have been successful in this regard.

TAG Science Implementation in Grades K - 8

Issue:

TAG science offerings at both the elementary and the middle school levels have been inconsistent for many years. The issues of TAG level science curriculum and pacing (as defined in the Gifted Regulations) and TAG science availability and implementation in grades K-5 should be thoroughly reviewed in order to ensure a high quality experience for TAG-identified science students in grades K – 8.

Analysis:

The TAGAC's general concern is that elementary TAG science and middle school honors science offerings have not been as fully implemented as TAG offerings in math and language arts in terms of resource allocation and attention to curriculum. Additionally, the TAGAC has on several occasions this year and last reported to senior

staff parental concerns about the lack of rigor and slow pace of the new Honors science curriculum.

In May 2005, ACPS staff proposed that the School Board modify the current Local Plan to allow TAG science nominations and services in grades K-4 consistent with the Gifted Regulations. These new services were then initiated in September 2005 so that all elementary students would be served in grades K-5. The TAGAC is encouraged that identification is now offered in science beginning in kindergarten, but is concerned by a lack of consistency in how these services are administered and a lack of a clear method of addressing problems that arise, both in general and on a case-by-case basis. Anecdotal evidence suggests that many parents of elementary and middle school students share this concern. For these reasons, the TAGAC urges the School Board to consider providing additional resources to support TAG science identification and to ensure science services are appropriately delivered at all grade levels.

Recommendations:

- The TAGAC recommends that the School Board ensure all elementary schools implement the same rigorous TAG science curriculum in their buildings for grades K-5 well before 2008.
- The TAGAC recommends that the School Board expand the commitment to high quality TAG science services in the elementary schools by ensuring that TAG science in fourth and fifth grades is taught as a pull-out by qualified science instructors.
- The TAGAC recommends that the School Board ensure that elementary school buildings without science labs are equipped with adequate resources to provide students with a rigorous science offering.
- The TAGAC recommends that the School Board review the implementation of middle school Honors science with the goal of ensuring that it is appropriately challenging for TAG students being served in an Honors environment.

Social Studies

Issue:

While Alexandria supports advanced studies K-12 in other major subject areas, the district offers only limited TAG and Honors instruction in social studies, and these programs do not begin until eighth grade.

Analysis:

After periodically reviewing the issue of social studies for the past several years, the committee remains concerned that this is an underdeveloped area of the advanced studies program. Given the large number of Alexandria families that work in public affairs and government, as well as the many different cultures represented in city public schools, social studies should be an area where the district excels in instruction. But

while the city offers K-12 honors or TAG studies in all other major subjects, there is no TAG-level instruction in social studies until eighth grade. During committee discussions, the opinion has been put forth that students of color may be more likely to be identified for TAG in social studies than in other subjects. The view of the committee is that offering advanced social studies instruction could support the ACPS goal of increasing diversity in the TAG program.

In March 2006, the committee approved a motion asking the School Board to act by this summer on a timeline so the district can offer TAG or Honors social studies in sixth and seventh grades by fall 2008. Mindful of the other priorities for the district's TAG staff, the committee believes that focusing on the sixth and seventh grades is a reasonable first step in further developing the advanced social studies program.

Enhancing the social studies curricula also may prove a long-term benefit in the event of any future state clarifications of the term "humanities" as it relates to TAG. Under state regulation, Alexandria's current TAG approach requires it to offer advanced instruction in "humanities" throughout the K-12 spectrum. For several years, the district has defined humanities to include language arts and not social studies, a definition that has met with state approval. However, a recent memorandum from the state's acting superintendent of public instruction appears to suggest that the definition of "humanities" includes both language arts and history/social sciences. In May 2006, the TAGAC referenced this memorandum in a letter to the School Board seeking its attention to this issue.

Recommendations:

- The TAGAC recommends that the School Board require full implementation of honors or TAG level social studies for the sixth and seventh grades beginning no later than fall 2008.
- The TAGAC recommends that this effort begin with a pilot program in fall 2007.

TAG Identification

Issue:

In keeping with the TAGAC's mandate to "monitor identification criteria", the committee continues on an on-going basis to monitor revisions to the TAG identification procedures. The latest revisions were approved by the School Board May 19, 2005 by an amendment to the Local Plan and put into effect July 1, 2005.

Analysis:

By recommendation of Dr. Jeanne Struck, the TAG Curriculum Specialist, the School Board approved revisions to the local plan allowing updated identification procedures to be implemented in the 2005-2006 academic year. Dr. Struck reports being satisfied with the results of these changes. At the May 2006 TAGAC meeting, Dr. Struck shared current identification data with the committee. The data showed the numbers of students in various ethnic groups who had been both referred and identified for TAG services during the current identification process. The numbers were subject to change,

as the identification process continues into June, but Dr. Struck believes they demonstrate a trend toward an increase in diversity in the TAG programs.

Recommendation:

- The TAGAC recommends that the School Board request all available data from the central office on both numbers of TAG referrals and numbers of students identified for the past several years, so that the TAGAC may effectively undertake a review of trends in TAG identification.

SENG/Parent Outreach

Issue:

Parents of talented and gifted children often lack access to information about the characteristics, behaviors, problems and resources for gifted children. Additionally, parents may be seeking help in supporting the emotional needs of gifted children.

Analysis:

In February 2006, The TAGAC, in partnership with Dr. Struck, held a community meeting about the ACPS Talented and Gifted Program and the formation of a Supporting Emotional Needs of the Gifted (SENG) Model Parent Support Group. In forming the support group, Alexandria became the first jurisdiction in Northern Virginia to offer such a service. The group's first meeting was held in March 2006, and the TAGAC hopes to offer a new session at the beginning of the 2006 - 07 school year. The SEN-Model Parent Support Group has been effective in supporting parents through focused discussions with a trained facilitator on the social and emotional needs of gifted children. The TAGAC members received strong positive feedback about both the informational meeting and the support group. The only concern that arose from this venture was one of funding. Since the facilitator is a trained professional who charges a fee for her time, participants are asked to pay a fee to join the group. The TAGAC would like to be able to both offer financial assistance for families in need and make up any shortfall that may occur if any participants drop out of the group. When faced with this issue last spring, the TAGAC requested funding from the PTA Council, but funding was denied. The TAGAC would like support from the School Board in its efforts to find an alternate source of funding should it be needed. The TAGAC estimates that the funds needed, if any, would range from about \$75 - \$250 per session, depending on the particular makeup of the group.

Recommendations:

- The TAGAC recommends that the School Board support the initiative by the committee to work in partnership with the TAG curriculum specialist to hold an annual community meeting to disseminate information about the Talent and Gifted Program.
- The TAGAC recommends that the School Board support the committee in offering and seeking funding for another SEN-Model Parent Support Group beginning in the fall of 2006 for families in the Alexandria community.

Thomas Jefferson High School for Science and Technology

Issue:

On March 16, 2006, the Alexandria School Board voted to accept the annual invitation to participate with the Thomas Jefferson School for Science and Technology (TJ). This participation will be considered a pilot program, offering funding for two students beginning in the fall of 2007.

Analysis:

The City of Alexandria School Board annually receives an invitation from the Fairfax County School Board to allow students living in the city of Alexandria to apply for admission to Thomas Jefferson High School for Science and Technology, a Northern Virginia's Governor's School. Previously, the Alexandria School Board has always voted to decline the invitation. Concerns about TJ expressed by School Board members included a lack of diversity at TJ, a loss of high-achieving students from TC Williams, and a potential strain on the ACPS budget.

The Alexandria TAGAC recommended in the spring of 2005 that the Board accept the invitation, and informed the School Board at that time that revisions to the TJ admission process had been made to provide for a more equitable review of applications and an increase in diversity in the school's population. The TAGAC recommended initiating a pilot program of two students per year (well below the number potentially eligible) as a way to both control costs and lessen the perceived risk of "brain drain" from TC Williams. After holding a community forum and discussing the issue at a School Board meeting, the Board voted on April 21, 2005 to indefinitely postpone the vote on Fairfax County's invitation to participate with TJ.

During the fall of 2005, the TAGAC again asked the School Board to consider allowing Alexandria residents to apply for admission to Thomas Jefferson. The Alexandria City School Board, at its regular meeting on March 16, 2006, voted to accept the invitation to participate in Thomas Jefferson High School for Science and Technology. The School Board agreed to a pilot program that would fund admission for two students in the 2007-08 school year. The invitation applies to all students entering ninth grade who reside in the city of Alexandria. Students will apply directly to Thomas Jefferson and the top two applicants from Alexandria will be eligible for admission. Other specifics in the Board's decision included:

- ◆ Students in eighth grade during the 2006-2007 school year will be eligible to apply to TJ under this pilot program.
- ◆ Those students will be evaluated for admission to the ninth grade class for the 2007-2008 school year.
- ◆ The pilot program is contingent upon final contractual agreement in August between ACPS and Fairfax County Public Schools.

The Talented and Gifted Advisory Committee is pleased with the Board's decision to begin this pilot program. The committee continues to unanimously support participation with TJ for many reasons, including that it offers Alexandria families greater school

choice, it provides ACPS with an opportunity to collect valuable data on the relative strengths and weaknesses of our own science programs, and it demonstrates an understanding that gifted students may have both academic and affective needs that can only be truly met in a specialized environment such as the one offered by TJ. The committee looks forward to working with the School Board to monitor the pilot program in the coming years and report back to the community on its progress.

Recommendations:

- The TAGAC recommends that the incoming School Board uphold the decision of the outgoing Board to initiate a pilot program to allow Alexandria students to attend Thomas Jefferson High School for Science and Technology.
- The TAGAC recommends that the School Board monitor any necessary negotiations with Fairfax County to ensure that they proceed on schedule to allow eighth grade students to begin the application process to Thomas Jefferson in the fall of 2006.