

**Alexandria City Public Schools  
Talented and Gifted Advisory Committee**

**Annual Report for 2006 - 2007**

**May 16, 2007**

Report submitted to: The Honorable Members of the Alexandria School Board  
Superintendent Rebecca Perry

Report submitted by: Talented and Gifted Advisory Committee  
Maureen Leary, Chair

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This report from the Talented and Gifted Advisory Committee (TAGAC) includes a review of the major topics and activities taken up by the committee during the 2006 – 2007 school year, and offers a series of recommendations for improvements to TAG services. In accordance with the School Board policy on advisory committees, this report also contains a record of committee member attendance at regularly scheduled meetings.

### **TAG Local Plan**

#### **Issue:**

The proposed Local Plan for the Education of the Talented and Gifted for 2006 – 2011 was submitted to the Virginia Department of Education on June 30, 2006. The TAGAC provided input throughout the plan's revision in 2005 - 2006, and has monitored the approval process by the state throughout the 2006 – 2007 school year.

#### **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. This document was revised last year and submitted to the State Department of Education for approval. At the time of this writing, the second version of the plan had been returned to the state after ACPS staff completed the requested revisions. Once it has been issued approval from the state, it will require final approval from the Alexandria School Board. The TAGAC has been following this process closely in order to be prepared to offer input in the event that the Board should seek to amend the Local Plan. The TAGAC has sought input from interested parties on various aspects of the Plan.

## **TAG Identification**

### *Public Forum*

In its year end report dated June 16, 2006, the TAGAC recommended that the School Board sponsor a forum for public comment on the revised Local Plan for 2006 – 2011. This forum was held on December 14, 2006. One of the primary concerns expressed by citizens at the hearing was that the identification procedures for entry into the TAG program were too stringent and should be amended. The TAGAC has carefully examined the policy as outlined in the revised plan, as compared to procedures that have been in place in the recent past. Additionally, the committee has considered how the numbers of students in the program have fluctuated over the past eleven years (see Attachment 1). Although recent years have shown a decline in the number of TAG students identified, this comes after a surge in numbers, with a peak in 2003, evidently created by the temporary use of SOL scores in the identification process. After comparing ACPS's policy to those of other local jurisdictions and taking into account the needs of Alexandria's TAG population, as well as recommendations made by an outside evaluation committee in 1996, the TAGAC has determined that it will continue to support the identification procedures as currently outlined in the Local Plan, with one important recommended change.

One issue raised by many parents during the past year has been the status of 'borderline' students, or those who are very close to attaining the criteria for TAG identification. The TAGAC would like to see one addition to the Identification section of the Local Plan on this subject. In discussions with administrative staff regarding identification procedures, it became clear that efforts have been made this school year to be as inclusive as possible for 'borderline' students. In cases where the student is a strong candidate for TAG identification, the standard error of measurement is added to standardized test scores if it results in moving the student's score into the "outstanding" range (96<sup>th</sup> percentile) on the identification criteria. The exact numerical impact on an individual student's percentile ranking will vary according to a number of factors, including the age of the student and the particular test in question, but overall this policy allows for greater flexibility in the decision-making process. It also reinforces the fact that there is no quota or cap on the number of students placed in the TAG program. Using the 96<sup>th</sup> percentile as a threshold for test scores does not mean that only the top 4% of students are identified – a common misconception repeatedly voiced at the public forum. *All* qualified students are placed in the TAG program, and a policy is in use that allows for greater inclusion, not exclusion, of highly able students. The TAGAC strongly supports this effort and finds it both useful and fair. The TAGAC recommends that the district and School Board formalize this policy in an amendment to the Local Plan. The TAGAC hopes this will provide reassurance to those parents who believe their children are able to succeed in the TAG program, but are just barely missing being identified.

### *TAG Teacher Survey*

A subcommittee of TAGAC members developed a survey regarding the TAG program and policies that was administered by the Office of Monitoring and Evaluation to all TAG teachers and a sampling of general education teachers in grades K-8. The questions focused on the effectiveness of TAG identification procedures and services as currently implemented. The survey was completed in May 2007. Of the 54 TAG Teachers

(grades K-8), 27 (50%) completed the survey. Of the 221 randomly surveyed General Education Teachers (grades K-8, no TAG Teachers included), 23 responded (10%). All responses were anonymous.

A review of the data provided by the survey indicates that two-thirds of those TAG teachers who responded believe that either too many or just the right amount of students are identified for TAG, while less than 15% of respondents believe too few students are currently identified. Over half of the TAG teachers who responded believe that the TAG identification process should be changed. The open-ended comments section of the survey provides more insight into this piece of data. Many TAG teachers would like to see specific changes such as:

“I would like to see the work sample component of the identification process more standardized across the city.”

“For identification, classroom teachers need to be given more training on how to use the KOI [Kingore Observation Inventory] and learning characteristics checklists. During identification meetings, these two measures are not very insightful and are usually not an accurate account.”

“The two tests we use to determine "giftedness" are not the highest quality tests out there. Also, the classroom teacher has too much power. Most classroom teachers have no training in gifted ed and are recommending students that are high ability but not gifted.”

“The identification process should change. Too many students of one culture/ethnic background are "favored" or placed in TAG while other more deserving students are not. The criteria for placement seem to revolve around class, color, and parental involvement.”

“I am very concerned about changes being made to the TAG local plan. By lowering standards to get into the program, those who have needs that can not be met in the regular education classroom will be the ones who suffer.”

The only comment that seemed to indicate support for increasing the number of TAG-identified students is as follows:

“There needs to be a standardized test that would help identify potential TAG students in the lower grades so that there is not a rush to identify later. The Stanford 9 used to be a good indicator. Perhaps the COG\_ AT. Currently we are looking at SOL scores which are benchmarks and not nationally normed. We are also relying on teacher recommendations. We are not identifying many students.”  
*(TAGAC note: The use of SOL scores as a criterion in the TAG identification process was officially discontinued in July 2005).*

The TAGAC is pleased with the level of response by the TAG teachers, and believes that the survey provides valuable information for the committee and the School Board.

The low response rate of general education teachers limits the usefulness of that set of data; however, the survey might garner a higher response rate if re-administered next year at a time when teachers are less busy with testing and year-end activities.

### **Recommendations:**

The TAGAC recommends that the School Board:

- Maintain the TAG identification procedures as outlined in the proposed 2006 – 2011 Local Plan, with one important clarification for so-called ‘borderline’ students.
- Amend the Local Plan so that the policy used for evaluating borderline students this year becomes formalized.
- Review the results of the TAG teacher survey when considering any possible amendments to the Local Plan, with particular attention to teacher comments on work samples and training on the Kingore Observation Inventory.

## **TAG Diversity**

### **Issue:**

Included on the TAGAC’s Scope of Work for 2006 – 2007 was the item “Monitor trends in TAG identification and consider ways to encourage increased minority participation in advanced courses”. Overall, district data show that, in relation to the demographics of the ACPS total population, white students are over represented in TAG programs, while African American and Hispanic students are under represented. This disparity was repeatedly referenced in the comments the TAG teachers made on the survey administered in May 2007, and was also a significant concern reported in the TAG program evaluation conducted in 1996.

### **Analysis:**

Currently, in the ACPS TAG program there clearly persists an inequity in the type of students served. Although only 24.2% of the student population is white, 61% of the TAG population is white. In contrast, 43.7% of the student population is African American with only 22.6% of the TAG population African American, and 25.5% of the student population is Hispanic with only 9% of the TAG population Hispanic. Also, even though over 50% of the student population comes from low income or economically disadvantaged homes, less than 16% of TAG students are economically disadvantaged. Research in the field of gifted education supports the notion that children from poverty and minority cultures are under identified for TAG programs nationwide. For the child from an economically disadvantaged home, this often has to do with the impact poverty has on early childhood development. For the culturally diverse student, it is usually related to cultural beliefs and values, language barriers, or cultural behaviors that may replace, mask or inhibit demonstration of what is considered typical gifted behaviors.

To help resolve the inequities in the ACPS TAG program, staff are continually conducting training for teachers on identifying gifted children from all cultures and socio-economic levels. While staff training is vital, it cannot be the only measure in place, particularly since future staff development funds are not secure. ACPS must also provide a nurturing environment that uncovers the hidden talents of all of our students, while acknowledging that certain groups of students have historically been underserved. One way to accomplish this is to institute a program at the primary level that will aid all potentially gifted students in developing the skills they need to enter the TAG program. In such a program, teachers in grades K-3 would identify students who show potential through an informal process at each elementary school. These students would then be provided with enriching higher level thinking skill activities to draw out and nurture their talents. Students who, over time, continue to demonstrate exceptional thinking skills and academic potential would then be considered for TAG referral at the end of 3rd grade.

While a positive teacher-student relationship is critical to student success, family involvement also greatly impacts achievement. On November 15, 2006, the TAGAC held a meeting devoted to the subject of minority achievement and invited Karen Parker-Thompson, Family Involvement and Community Resources Coordinator, to attend. At that meeting, one concern the committee identified is that African American and Latino families may not have a full awareness and/or understanding of the TAG identification process and would benefit from more information delivered through a variety of outlets. The committee discussed the location, frequency and format of TAG information nights and other issues to promote outreach.

The committee also discussed the initiative of holding workshops on minority achievement. Diann Gully, TAG Curriculum Specialist, made arrangements for Donna Ford and Gilmore Whiting to do a multi-session seminar on supporting minority higher achievement. The sessions were held in March 2007, and reached about 75 community members as well as over 100 school staff and administrators from every elementary and secondary school. As a follow up to this event, Diann Gully contacted parents who attended the community meeting to encourage them, on behalf of the committee chair, to consider membership on the TAG Advisory Committee. Ms. Gully has also arranged for Donna Ford and Gil Whiting to return to ACPS for further training with middle school Social Studies teachers.

The TAGAC was encouraged by the Superintendent's creation of two new advisory committees, one to focus on African American achievement and one to focus on Latin American achievement. TAGAC member Janice Howard has joined the African American achievement advisory committee, and the TAGAC is hopeful that she can serve as a liaison between the achievement committee and the TAGAC. Similarly, the TAGAC hopes to increase its communication and collaboration with other local groups with similar goals, such as the Urban League, the Higher Achievement Program, and Tenants and Workers United. In the 2007 – 2008 school year, the TAGAC may explore the idea of creating a subcommittee on minority achievement that may bring in representatives from a number of organizations, in order to provide concrete suggestions and/or assistance to the school system on affecting positive change in this area.

### **Recommendations:**

The TAGAC recommends that the School Board:

- Offer support to the school system in continuing to provide staff development opportunities and community forums on the subject of minority achievement.
- Consider implementing enrichment programs that will nurture talent in young minority students, in an effort to mitigate the current imbalances in TAG demographics.
- Request the central office staff to provide an updated brochure describing TAG identification and services, to be made available in English and Spanish.

### **Middle School TAG Services**

#### **Issue:**

As Alexandria creates new open enrollment honors courses at the middle school level, the district should ensure that TAG-identified students continue to receive rigorous instruction.

#### **Analysis:**

The TAGAC strongly supports the expansion of honors courses at the middle school level. During the past three years, the committee has been a steady advocate for creation of honors social studies in grades six and seven. Since ACPS lacks any advanced social studies instruction until eighth grade, the creation of these courses by fall 2008 should have many beneficial effects. During the 2005 - 2006 school year, the TAGAC strongly supported the inclusion of honors social studies in the proposed TAG Local Plan for 2006 - 2011. The TAGAC is committed to ensuring that these courses are challenging and meet the needs of TAG students.

While honors social studies will increase rigor for *any* student who wants to enroll, honors language arts as endorsed by the central office staff and the School Board is another issue. By eliminating dedicated TAG language arts classes, the district is faced with the task of ensuring that TAG-identified students receive a curriculum of depth, rigor and challenge that best addresses their needs in an open enrollment honors class.

Current plans call for honors language arts classes to use the Kendall-Hunt (also called William and Mary) curriculum that has been offered in dedicated TAG classes. However, discussions before the TAGAC this year have shown both successes and challenges with this curriculum. Individual teachers use the curriculum to varying degrees. In addition, all components of Kendall-Hunt – even if used by teachers – generally do not provide a year's worth of advanced language arts instruction. It is clear that the district must do more than simply expand access to an advanced language arts

course; it also must take steps to ensure quality and consistency within a tight time frame.

Diann Gully and Language Arts Curriculum Specialist Liz Simons have already planned some staff development opportunities to aid in preparing teachers for the implementation of open enrollment honors. Language Arts and Social Studies teachers will participate in a one day workshop with Joyce Van Tassel-Baska on infusing rigor in courses (June 21) and a one day workshop with Donna Ford and Gil Whiting on how to develop relevance in honors course for culturally diverse populations (June 22). Teachers will also attend the Summer Institute at William and Mary for three days, covering the Kendall Hunt curriculum and several other subjects. A number of these teachers will then come together to write the Social Studies pacing guide and exemplary high-level lessons. They will also revise the Language Arts curriculum in the same way while retaining the Kendall Hunt units for the one - two quarters they are now used in.

The TAGAC believes the School Board should support and encourage all staff development opportunities that will improve the implementation of open enrollment honors. Also, despite budget challenges, the Board should consider setting aside funds for the addition of Academic Specialists for Differentiation (section D-16 of FY 2008 budget). The addition of this position is likely to improve TAG delivery, but also has the potential to positively impact instruction across all schools and grades. Finally, the Board should ensure that any new policies also apply to existing middle school honors science courses, where quality and differentiation may be uneven.

**Recommendations:**

The TAGAC believes there are several principles that should apply to serving TAG-identified students in an open enrollment honors environment. The committee recommends that the School Board:

- Require a set of documents detailing how honors curricula will be structured, including pacing guides, specific written curricula, and an indication of how the honors curricula will meet the needs of TAG students.
- Require all teachers of open enrollment honors courses to complete a minimum training requirement in the areas of gifted education and differentiation.
- Monitor instruction to ensure that individual student needs for TAG services are effectively met, as required by state regulation.
- Conduct a timely review of honors curriculum and implementation in order to assess its success in meeting the needs of TAG students.

## **Parent Outreach**

### **Issue:**

The TAGAC followed through on a goal established in the 2005 - 2006 school year for implementation in the 2006 - 2007 school year to examine issues surrounding twice exceptional (2E) students and the delivery of services to these students by ACPS. Twice exceptional students are those in need of both special education and TAG services.

### **Analysis:**

The TAGAC's Scope of Work for 2006 – 2007 includes the item, "Increase parent outreach on TAG topics such as twice-exceptional students and characteristics of gifted learners." Accordingly, a working group including members of TAGAC and the Special Education Advisory Committee (SEAC), as well as ACPS TAG and Special Education staff, was formed to plan a public informational workshop for parents and other interested community members. The workshop scheduled for May 20, will feature an expert keynote speaker, an ACPS presentation and a parent/student panel.

The 2E working group has been extended and will continue working toward a widespread understanding of the needs of 2E students and improvement in services to and identification of 2E students. The goals of this working group for the 2007 – 2008 school year are endorsed by the TAGAC and include the following:

- Hold another informational workshop in the fall looking in more detail at the challenges in identifying and serving 2E students.
- Offer support and advice to ACPS staff on the implementation of best practices in the field.
- Increase the membership of the working group to include others who work with 2E students and begin drafting recommendations for creating a policy on identification and services for 2E students.

### **Recommendations:**

The 2E working group, with the endorsement of the full TAG Advisory Committee, recommends that the School Board:

- Support broader training in the identification of potential TAG students among special education teachers, and broader training in the identification of learning disabilities among TAG teachers.
- Extend identification training to all ACPS teachers, as also recommended by the Special Education Advisory Committee.



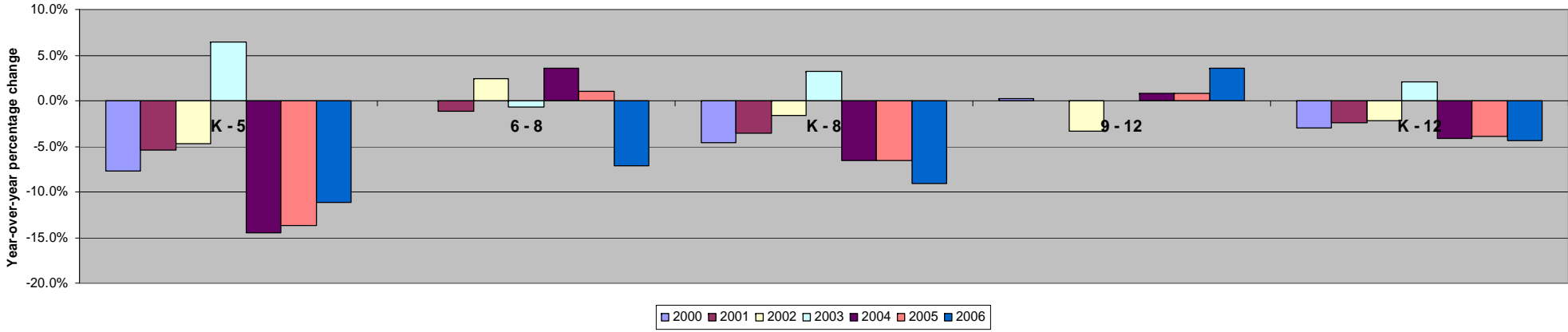
- Support the extension of training in the identification of students with TAG needs and special education needs to all ACPS principals, so they may offer assistance to staff as required.

### **Attendance Report**

The TAGAC membership has fluctuated throughout the 2006 – 07 school year. The TAGAC held eight regular meetings, but new members appointments commenced at different points throughout the year. This attendance report indicates how many meetings each current member attended of the total held since the beginning of his or her active membership this year. This report does not include ex-officio members. The committee chair excused all absences.

Maureen Leary: attended 8 of 8 meetings  
 Charles Dervarics: attended 8 of 8 meetings  
 Sherry Delaney: attended 6 of 8 meetings  
 Janice Howard: attended 6 of 8 meetings  
 Susan Hyre: attended 4 of 5 meetings  
 Joni Finegold: attended 4 of 5 meetings  
 Kelly Cox: attended 3 of 5 meetings  
 Debra Sandler: attended 4 of 5 meetings  
 Joseph Sanford: attended 6 of 6 meetings  
 Emma Grimes: attended 4 of 5 meetings  
 Rachel Thomas: attended 1 of 8 meetings  
 Ashley McNeil: attended 3 of 3 meetings  
 Nancy Carver: attended 1 of 1 meeting  
 Anne Marie Ardura: attended 1 of 1 meeting  
 Mpho Tutu: attended 0 of 1 meeting  
 Gretchen Colon Miranda: attended 0 of 1 meeting

ACPS - TAG Enrollment  
2000 - 2006 Annual Change



ACPS – TAG Enrollment  
Annual Percentage Change

|               | 1995   | 1996  | 1997  | 1998  | 1999  | 2000  | 2001  | 2002  | 2003  | 2004   | 2005   | 2006   |
|---------------|--------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|--------|--------|--------|
| <b>K - 5</b>  | -4.6%  | -8.6% | -8.6% | 11.8% | 6.6%  | -7.8% | -5.4% | -4.7% | 6.4%  | -14.4% | -13.7% | -11.2% |
| <b>6 - 8</b>  | -6.6%  | 12.4% | 1.8%  | -7.8% | -4.8% | 0.0%  | -1.1% | 2.5%  | -0.7% | 3.5%   | 1.1%   | -7.1%  |
| <b>K - 8</b>  | -5.4%  | -0.1% | -3.9% | 2.3%  | 1.6%  | -4.6% | -3.6% | -1.6% | 3.2%  | -6.6%  | -6.5%  | -9.1%  |
| <b>9 - 12</b> | -18.2% | -9.9% | -3.8% | 1.0%  | 4.7%  | 0.2%  | 0.0%  | -3.4% | 0.0%  | 0.8%   | 0.8%   | 3.6%   |
| <b>K - 12</b> | -10.3% | -3.5% | -3.8% | 1.9%  | 2.6%  | -3.0% | -2.4% | -2.2% | 2.1%  | -4.1%  | -4.0%  | -4.4%  |

## Historical Analysis of ACPS TAG Enrollment

The attached chart depicts the year-over-year change in TAG student enrollment by elementary school, middle school and high school grade groupings and for all students, students K – 8 and students K – 12 in the school years ending 2000 to 2006. Data on which the chart is based are provided in the attached table.

That data clearly show that ACPS TAG enrollment has trended down since at least 1995, with the exception of the years 1998, 1999 and 2003 when isolated jumps in elementary level TAG enrollment primarily drove isolated increases in enrollment growth. These data do not control for demographic changes. Total K - 12 enrollment peaked in the 2000/01 school year and has declined in each year since. The percentage of all ACPS students enrolled in TAG has averaged 13.8% over that period

New TAG identification criteria were adopted and implemented in July 2005 and are reflected in data for the 2005/06 school year (2006). The long-term decline in TAG enrollment appears to have accelerated beginning in the 2003/04 school year. K - 5 TAG enrollment jumped sharply in 2003 and has declined since. The largest of the declines over the subsequent three years occurred in 2004. In 2006, the year the change in TAG identification criteria was activated, the decline in elementary level enrollment slowed to 11% from 14% in the two prior years. This suggests that recently falling elementary level enrollment is unrelated to the change in identification criteria.

The most notable shift from prior year in 2006 enrollment is a drop in enrollment in grades 6 – 9 of 7.1%, matched by a jump in high school enrollment of 3.6%. Data show that an unusually small 2005 5<sup>th</sup> grade TAG class moved up to 6<sup>th</sup> grade in 2006, pulling down the 2006 middle school total. At the same time, an unusually small 2005 12<sup>th</sup> grade TAG group graduated while an average sized 9<sup>th</sup> grade group entered, boosting the 2006 high school total. Because these unusually small TAG classes originated before 2006, the growth rate changes linked to the flow of classes between grades appears unrelated to changes in the identification process.

When the numbers are aggregated into a total K – 12 TAG enrollment figure, the recent trend is a steady decline over three years at an average annual rate just above 4% that does not appear to be markedly changed with the new identification criteria.

– *Sherry Delaney, Member, TAGAC  
April 15, 2007*