

MEMORANDUM

TO: Arlington School Board
FROM: Gifted Services Advisory Committee (GSAC)
DATE: November 19, 2014
SUBJECT: 2014-15 Recommending Year Report

Introduction

GSAC is pleased to present our 2014-2015 report. Our focus is on strengthening the Gifted Services program throughout all levels of Arlington Public Schools by improving differentiated instruction. This year, we make four recommendations to improve the Gifted Services program and the educational environment for all high-potential learners in APS:

1. We recommend that middle schools provided intensified course offerings, open to all students, in all core subjects.
2. We recommend that each APS elementary school be given a full-time Resource Teacher for the Gifted ("RTG") and that the 500-student requirement for a full-time RTG be eliminated.
3. We recommend expanding and improving intensified course offerings at the high school level.
4. We recommend improved testing and assessment to measure gifted student progress.

These four recommendations address the most pressing needs of gifted and high-performing or high-potential students in APS, by ensuring that the pathways to appropriate instruction exist from elementary school onward.

In middle school, many students need and want intensified courses in all core subjects. Providing these course options will allow students to access challenging instruction and prepare them for advanced and accelerated offerings in high school.

By providing each elementary school with a full-time RTG, we facilitate improved services at the elementary level and permit continued advancements in the delivery of differentiated instruction. Unfortunately, six of our 22 elementary schools – including some of the most diverse and disadvantaged in the district -- do not have full-time RTG's in their budget due to the 500-student requirement. By eliminating this requirement, we level the playing field across all APS elementary schools and provide adequate support to all students.

We also recommend expanding and improving scheduling of advanced class options in high school. Our discussions with the community suggest that these options are tremendously important to students but that a number of students who would benefit from advanced classes cannot access them because of scheduling constraints or lack of availability.

Finally, we cannot succeed at that which we cannot measure. At all levels, the current testing and assessment models do not adequately measure gifted student growth across a study unit or school year. This report includes a recommendation to remedy this problem.

I. Recommendation #1: Reinstate intensified class options in all core subjects in all middle schools.

2011 – 2017 Strategic Plan Alignment:

Goal One: Ensure that Every Student is Challenged and Engaged

This recommendation ensures that every student has the opportunity to improve his or her level of challenge and engagement by selecting more intensified course instruction.

Goal Two: Eliminate Achievement Gaps

This recommendation allows students, with the help of their families, to select more challenging instruction in middle school. Similar to APS's goal to have all students take at least one AP class in high school to prepare for college, having intensified classes available to all middle school students will help better prepare them for the challenge of high school.

Goal Three: Recruit, Retain and Develop High-Quality Staff

Teaching intensified courses challenges staff as well as students. It provides new opportunities for professional development.

Goal Five: Meet the Needs of the Whole Child

Challenging work provides social and emotional growth, as well as academic growth. Advanced learners thrive in peer groups. Their love of learning is reinforced when the material is appropriately customized and paced. Their self-confidence and self-acceptance are enhanced by mastering challenging material.

Rationale: APS Is Not Meeting the Needs of Gifted, High Ability, or High Potential Middle School Learners

For numerous reporting cycles, we have highlighted that our middle schools are not meeting the needs of a large swath of students, because APS does not offer intensified class options to our middle school students in subjects other than math. The net effect, for example, is that students entering 6th grade are placed into the same general English class regardless of their reading or writing ability. To be clear, this concern includes a greater population than identified gifted students.

Intensified classes should—and perhaps must—be made available in order to meet the needs those students for whom the base level of instruction is inadequate. But the benefits of intensified classes go well beyond those students who are already advanced academically. For the same reasons we offer intensified classes to 9th and 10th grade students to prepare them for AP and IB courses, our middle school students should be encouraged to take intensified courses. The APS goal to have all high school students take at least one advanced-level class should extend to middle school, where all students should be encouraged to try at least one intensified class.

Our research includes staff, parent and student interviews, materials from APS, and a detailed study of the course offerings at the middle school level. Based on this research,

we have observed that the middle schools eliminated advanced content classes (such as Honors and Intensified) beginning in 2009. The removal of these intensified classes has had detrimental effects on our students' academic growth and morale. For many students the academic environment in our middle schools is bleak and is out of step with our neighboring counties' schools and current educational standards.

We have reviewed offerings from other Virginia counties and find the data instructive because out of eight randomly chosen counties only one – the City of Roanoke – offered fewer intensive options than Arlington. Not only do the obvious districts – such as Fairfax – offer greater variety, but other districts with *dramatically lower levels of resources* have more varied offerings. Lee County, for example, which has a median household income of 30 percent below the poverty level and half the spending of Arlington per student, manages to offer intensified Science, English and Language Arts classes in middle school.

School System	Advanced English	Advanced Math	Advanced Science	Advanced LA	2011 Spending Per Student (FEBP)[1]
Virginia Beach[2]	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	\$10,813
Fairfax	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	\$13,593
Lee County[3]	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	\$8,290
City of Norfolk[4]	Yes*	Yes*	Yes*	Yes*	\$11,176
Fauquier County[5]	No	Yes	No	Yes	\$10,657
Stafford County[6]	No	Yes	No	No	\$8,467
Orange County[7]	No	Yes	No	No	\$7,544
Arlington[8]	No	Yes	No	No	\$20,162
City of Roanoke[9]	No	No	No	No	\$11,504

*via magnet school

[1] Spending data from <http://febp.newamerica.net/>

[2] <http://www.vbschools.com/curriculum/middle/>

[3] <http://curriculum.leeschools.net/Academic%20Plans/ap.htm>

- [4] <http://departments.nps.k12.va.us/oar/services/young-scholars/>
[5] <http://www.fcps1.org/education/page/download.php?fileinfo=TVNfUE9TXzlwMTQtM>
[6] <http://stafford.schoolfusion.us/modules/cms/pages.phtml?pageid=59627>
[7] <http://ocps-internet.ocss-va.org/curriculum/SitePages/Home.aspx>
[8] <http://www.apsva.us/Page/25020>
[9] <http://rcps.schoolfusion.us/>

In preparation for this year's report, we also interviewed over thirty families (parents and students), representing every middle school. These interviews reveal that students who want higher-level classes are simply not able to get them. Teachers are required to instruct the full academic range from special education to gifted learners in a single class. Teachers cannot effectively differentiate given this range of ability.

Arlington's middle school philosophy of general education for all is out of step with the recommendations of groups with significant expertise in the academic needs of children. For example, the National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC), in its Position Statement "Meeting the Needs of High Ability and High Potential Learners in the Middle Grades", finds that the age span of "10-15 is a time of exceptional intellectual ability growth for many students."ⁱ Changes can be "rapid and uneven" in students who may be awakening to their intellectual potential.ⁱⁱ This sensitive time in such students' education should not be one during which they are continually taught SOL basics until their mastery is beyond certain; these students should be allowed to reach beyond to achieve far greater intellectual challenges. This concern applies to many academically-inclined APS students and is not confined to the gifted population.

NAGC explains the reasoning for a rich and deep middle school curriculum: "Equity in the middle grades requires that all learners have an opportunity to participate in curriculum that is rich in meaning and focused on thought and application. Excellence requires support necessary to show continual growth in knowledge, understanding and skill."ⁱⁱⁱ In the best educational environment, middle school learners do not learn below their level, or at their level, but should consistently be challenged a level *beyond* their particular "readiness level."^{iv} In NAGC's "Call to Action" bullet point 6, NAGC directs district and school leaders to "ensure a continuum of services including options such as differentiation, advanced classes, acceleration, short term seminars, independent seminars, mentorships and other learning opportunities."^v

How does APS' current middle school philosophy affect our students? Our interviews of families with high-ability and high-potential learners indicate that students are bored "to tears" in science, social studies and language arts. As of February 2014, 28% of all middle school students were identified as gifted. Gifted students, who ostensibly do get services, report that they are not challenged by the core class work and generally do not get differentiated work. For more information about these interviews and direct quotes from various parents and students, please see the Appendix.

It is thus clear that current methods of differentiation do not provide sufficient challenge for a large number of APS students. This problem was identified in The 2008 Gifted Services Evaluation Report* p. 121 as "*An Area For Improvement.*" That report

succinctly summarizes the difference between how differentiated instruction is supposed to look and what actually happens in many APS classrooms. “Differentiation is the responsibility of all APS teachers, and the results from this evaluation suggest a disconnect between the strategic goals for differentiation and what that looks like across classrooms.”^{vi}

This same report noted that there was only “moderate” differentiation in classrooms for advanced achievers and there was even less appropriate differentiation for gifted learners,^{vii} which was rated as being “somewhat effective to ineffective.”^{viii}

That report made the following recommendation in 2008. “Department of content and program Staff will work collaboratively across offices and with principals to identify reasons why differentiation was not evident in classroom observations that were part of the evaluation. In response to those reasons staff will clarify the components of differentiated instruction and identify specific instructional strategy expectations which would be incorporated into centrally provided and school based professional development offerings.”^{ix} This committee would like to know the extent to which this recommendation has been implemented in all levels of schools from elementary through high school.

Returning to the NAGC Middle School Report, which recommends that students work beyond their ability level, it is evident that Arlington’s middle school format does not fit current research on middle school. Middle school is the bridge to high school, and it is difficult for many parents, students, and this committee to understand why APS has implemented a system that provides so few educational choices to our middle school students. Why aren’t we preparing students for the advanced rigors they will shortly face in high school with honors, intensified, AP and IB classes? As one parent said, “The high schools have to undo the damage done in middle school.”

Budgetary Implications: None

Adjust existing schedule to swap intensified classes for general education classes, as dictated by student demand.

Committee vote: Unanimous

II. Recommendation #2: Provide Full-time RTGs In Each Elementary School
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2011 – 2017 Strategic Plan Alignment:

Goal One: Ensure that Every Student is Challenged and Engaged

This recommendation ensures that each student has the opportunity to improve his or her level of challenge and engagement by having access to a full-time RTG.

Goal Two: Eliminate Achievement Gaps

The schools that are currently without a full-time RTG include some of the most culturally diverse and economically disadvantaged in the county. Our expectations of and commitment to the students at these schools should be the same as the rest of the schools in APS. Placing RTGs at all elementary schools would support students of widely varying backgrounds in obtaining the support they need to reach their full potential.

Goal Three: Recruit, Retain and Develop High-Quality Staff

Working with a full time RTG provides new opportunities for professional development for rest of the teaching staff.

Goal Five: Meet the Needs of the Whole Child

Challenging work provides social and emotional growth, as well as academic growth. Self-confidence and self-acceptance are enhanced by mastering challenging material.

Rationale:

Last year, Arlington County changed the manner in which full-time RTGs are allocated at the elementary school level. Previously, full-time positions were given to each school with a total enrollment of more than 500 students (including preschool). Schools with a total enrollment of fewer than 500 students received only a half-time position.

Following the change, enrollment in preschool has been excluded from consideration, and the planning factor is applied only against the enrollment of Kindergarten through 5th Grade. Table 1 shows the schools with a total K-12 enrollment over 500. Table 2 shows the schools with a K-12 enrollment of less than 500. For each school, the tables also break out the number of preschool students and the total enrollment including the preschool students.

Table 1: Schools Over 500 K-12

School	K-5 Total	Preschool	Overall Total
Abingdon	582	46	628
Arl. Sci. Focus	615	18	633
Ashlawn	609	42	651
Barrett	500	54	554
Carlin Springs	501	68	569
Claremont	692	36	728
Drew	504	142	646
Glebe	574	39	613
Jamestown	600	36	636
Key	660	54	714
Long Branch	510	26	536
McKinley	563	23	586
Nottingham	713	14	727
Oakridge	740	27	767
Taylor	777	11	788
Tuckahoe	687	15	702

Table 2: Schools Under 500 K-12

School	K-5 Total	Preschool	Overall Total
Arl. Trad. Sch.	481*	20	501
Barcroft	494*	54	548
Campbell	351*	65	416
Hoffman-Boston	331	169	500
Patrick Henry	469	50	519
Randolph	417	62	479

*Dedicated RTG because principal made additional 0.5 position available

The data show that this year 16 of the 22 Arlington elementary schools were eligible for a full-time RTG position. Of those 16, four were close to the line, with K-12 enrollment within 10 percent of 500.

Conversely, six of the 22 Arlington elementary schools had a K-12 enrollment lower than 500, and thus were not eligible for a full-time RTG. Of the six schools with lower than 500 K-12 enrollment, three are within ten percent of 500. Moreover, a number of principals at these schools managed to keep a dedicated RTG, by finding other half-time work (such as reading teacher or math coach) to supplement the half-time position for which they were eligible.

Challenges for Part-time RTGs

The Arlington gifted program has shifted its elementary instructional paradigm in recent years, moving from a “pull out” model (where identified students are pulled from the classroom and given additional instruction by the RTG) to a “push in” model. In the “push in” model, the RTG may still provide additional direct instruction to identified gifted students in their classrooms, but also may teach a lesson to the entire class. Each month, most RTGs teach at least one lesson to each class in the school.

The “push in” model has significant benefits. Under the “pull out” model, identified students receive a limited amount of additional direct instruction, but spend the majority of their time in a classroom setting that does not always offer appropriate challenge. Moreover, in the “pull out” model, the rest of the students receive little or no advantage from the program.

In contrast, the “push in” model allows the RTG to work collaboratively with the children’s day-to-day instructor to assist in designing coursework that provides additional depth and complexity for the gifted students and for the entire class. In this way, the RTG becomes an asset not just for the gifted children, but for the entire student body, and can help play a role in closing the achievement gap.

While extremely beneficial, the “push in” model is also more labor intensive. Because it combines direct instruction and staff collaboration, this model puts additional demands on the RTG. The RTG is also responsible for identifying potentially gifted children and managing the identification process. Accomplishing all of this can be difficult for a full-

time RTG, but for a part-time RTG it is essentially impossible. Providing direct instruction, working with individual teachers, attending staff strategy sessions, managing the gifted identification process, and so forth simply does not fit into a half-time schedule.

At the Arlington elementary schools that do not have a full-time RTG, the ability of the RTG to meaningfully participate in collaboration with day-to-day teachers is limited. Students receive limited benefit from the “push in” model, because the RTG does not have the time to coordinate and work with the individual teachers on a consistent basis. We do not know for certain, but we suspect that fewer gifted students are identified at these schools, which would, in some cases, directly contribute to the achievement gap. Finally, we are concerned that the complexity of managing curriculum for twice-exceptional children (2E) children might not be addressed adequately.

Summary

- Effective “push in” services cannot be provided by a half-time RTG to student bodies numbering in the hundreds.
- The current method of applying the student planning factor of 500 to K-5 student populations results in 16 schools with full-time RTG slots and six schools with part-time positions; however, a number of schools are close to the boundary on either side.
- This can lead to difficulty in planning and to arbitrary results, because small swings year-over-year in student population can result in significant changes to the RTG program.

Budgetary Implications: \$273,390 (\$91,130 x 3)

The six schools that do not have a full-time RTG already have a half-time RTG; as a result, the effect of this recommendation would be to add three FTE positions. We are assuming that benefits and salary for a full-time RTG would average \$91,130.

Committee vote: Unanimous

III. Recommendation #3: Augment and improve scheduling of advanced class options in all high schools.
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2011 – 2017 Strategic Plan Alignment:

Goal One: Ensure that Every Student is Challenged and Engaged

This recommendation ensures that each student has the opportunity to increase his or her level of challenge and engagement by selecting more intensified course instruction.

Goal Three: Recruit, Retain and Develop High-Quality Staff

Teaching advanced courses challenges staff as well as students. It provides new opportunities for professional development.

Goal Five: Meet the Needs of the Whole Child

Challenging work provides social and emotional growth, as well as academic growth. Advanced learners thrive in peer groups. Students’ love of learning is reinforced when the material is appropriately

customized and paced. Students' self-confidence and self-acceptance are enhanced by mastering challenging material.

Rationale: *Our High School Students Ask for More Intensified Classes and Support So They Can Access the Classes Offered*

Our high schools offer various advanced options to students ranging from intensified to AP and IB (the latter of which are taught at standard and/or high level). Our interviews with students and their families tell us that these advanced classes are tremendously important. Sometimes students are not able to take an AP or IB class because of a scheduling issue. Some students prefer not to take a particular AP course because it is not one of their strongest subjects or because they do not want more than 3 AP or 3 high-level IB classes in a single semester. In these circumstances, students have told us they would like to have the option to take intensified courses rather than having to choose between AP/IB and general education classes. For years, students have asked us to have more choices for intensified classes and improved scheduling of advanced classes.

This problem has two components. One is scheduling and the other is that too many students are interested in the limited number of advanced classes offered. For example, World History Intensified and English 9 Intensified (which is the only English 9 Intensified option) are taught together in one two-hour block and many students cannot be in this class due to scheduling conflicts. What we have learned from interviewing our high school students is that advanced courses are highly valued, and we don't have enough of them in our high schools.

Some students also report that when not enough students sign up for classes, the class is not offered. This can happen with various AP classes at Washington-Lee and Wakefield. It would be helpful if, in such instances, as a last resort, classes could be remotely broadcast from one high school to be viewed in other schools.

In Washington-Lee's IB program, certain classes are only offered at a Standard Level. Students who need the High Level versions are sometimes forced to leave the IB program in order to take the equivalent AP class. A listing of the classes and the levels can be found at <http://www.apsva.us/domain/2179>. This problem appears more acute in the math and science areas with repeated complaints about Physics in particular. While students might not need all classes offered with a High Level option, it would be helpful if students could be interviewed so that the classes that are causing them to leave the IB program could be offered at the right level. Some areas of concern are Standard Level Business Management, Economics, Physics, and Math Studies.

In addition, for a 2008 Gifted Services Evaluation Report* the authors conducted a focus group with high school teachers. The teachers, who already had multiple levels, noted that a barrier to providing gifted education services was the *need for more* multiple levels of each subject for grades 9-12"^x

Budgetary Implications: None

Adjust existing schedule to swap intensified classes for general education classes, as dictated by student demand.

Committee vote: Unanimous

IV. Recommendation #4: Accurately Measure Gifted Student Progress

2011 – 2017 Strategic Plan Alignment:

Goal One: Ensure that Every Student is Challenged and Engaged

To understand the extent of student progress, it is essential to accurately assess student knowledge at the beginning and end of the school year. We cannot challenge and engage students if we are teaching them what they already know.

Goal Five: Meet the Needs of the Whole Child

Challenging work provides social and emotional growth, as well as academic growth. Self-confidence and self-acceptance are enhanced by mastering challenging material.

Rationale:

For many years, GSAC has reported on the failure of APS to accurately and objectively measure student progress. Because the Standards of Learning and similar tests are often capped far below the level at which gifted and highly able students are functioning, they are not useful for assessing the progress of those students.

But our underlying concern is not about testing. Testing is merely a symptom of a much more significant problem, which is that gifted and highly able students in APS are not challenged consistently. In an environment of high-stakes testing, the incentive is to focus on the students who are at or slightly below grade level. In a heterogeneous classroom, few resources are available for students who may begin the year understanding much of that year's curriculum.

Over the last several years, GSAC has made a series of recommendations related to improving assessments of student progress. For example, in 2007, we recommended that APS investigate the adoption of "value-added" or "adaptive" testing to measure whether each student is making at least one year of progress in each academic subject each year. (2007 GSAC Rec #2)

In 2011, we recommended that APS base instructional and placement decisions for students on objective measures of individual student progress in order to close individual achievement gaps. (2011 Rec #2) In 2010, we recommended requiring data-driven determination of appropriate instructional levels. (2010 Rec #2) This would support our recommendation from 2009 to encourage subject-specific and whole-grade acceleration. (2009 Rec #5) We focused on objective measures in order to try to get reliable data on student starting points and progress over the course of the school year.

Unfortunately, these recommendations have not been implemented. Grade-level assessments are inadequate to measure gifted students' starting points, let alone their progress. As mentioned above, the standard assessment tools tend to be capped well below the performance levels of gifted students. As the Council of Exceptional Children-The Association for the Gifted (CEC-TAG) stated in its position paper on "Growth in Achievement of Advanced Students": "Schools need to measure above grade-level achievement in order to document advanced student growth." ^{xi}

The first goal of the 2011-2017 APS strategic plan is to "Ensure that every student is challenged and engaged." Sub-goal 1C is:

Create an environment where all students feel challenged, supported, and accepted as they learn. Such an environment puts students first: their needs, abilities, interests, and learning styles are central when making decisions about what to learn and how to learn it. Students are active and responsible participants in their own learning.

Although much of our attention in the past focused on quantitative testing, we would also welcome qualitative assessments of student progress. We note some recent progress in this regard at the elementary level, under the leadership of APS Supervisor of Gifted Resources, Cheryl McCullough. APS is beginning to use the Interactive Achievement (IA) program in elementary schools. This program is not designed to measure the progress of gifted and highly able students. However, in some cases, it could be used to help identify students in need of additional challenge. When students demonstrate on pre-tests that they already understand a significant amount of the material in an upcoming unit, for example, teachers could - and should - substitute curriculum written for gifted or advanced learners that would show academic growth.

The key is to develop a set of measures for different subjects and grades that together allow teachers to quickly determine students' starting point and then help teachers develop strategies for consistently challenging each student. If we can't effectively measure student progress, we simply have no way to determine whether the strategic plan's goal of challenging all students is being met.

Budgetary Implications: To be determined. Interim using IA - None
Committee vote: Unanimous

Past Recommendation #3: APS will provide intensified class options in all core subjects at the middle and high school levels.

Status: Current (2014-15) Recommendation #1
2011 – 2017 Strategic Plan Alignment: see Recommendation #1 above
Budgetary Implications: none
ACI Vote: Ranked 4 of 24

Past Recommendation #4: In order to evaluate the implementation of the Gifted Services program across the school system, APS will report annually to the

School Board on the implementation of the Local Plan for the Education of the Gifted.

Status: Deferred due to lack of staff and data
2011 – 2017 Strategic Plan Alignment: Goals one and two
Budgetary Implications: none
ACI Vote: Ranked 11 of 24

The goal of this recommendation was to get APS to look at how the Gifted Services program was being implemented and the extent to which it was aligned with its guiding document, APS Local Plan for the Education of the Gifted (Local Plan)^{xii}. We frequently find that aspects of the Local Plan are not implemented fully. There is significant variation from school to school in the identification process and the delivery of services.

We still believe that it is important that APS monitors and measures its adherence to its Local Plan. However, Ms. McCullough is the only staff member. GSAC believes that Ms. McCullough's time is better spent implementing effective changes, such as the gifted services contract with each school principal, and the individual student differentiation report based on services provided (not just planned). In addition, the data required to prepare an effective report is often inaccessible or unavailable. The State of Virginia requires that the Local Plan be updated every five years. Ms. McCullough will lead a committee to update the Local Plan to reflect program changes in 2017.

Past Recommendation #2: APS will place elementary students identified for gifted services in cluster groups of at least five students (where this number of identified students exists in a subject area).

Status: Implementation began in 2013-14.

2011 – 2017 Strategic Plan Alignment:

Goal One: Ensure that Every Student is Challenged and Engaged

This recommendation ensures that each student has the opportunity to improve his or her level of challenge and engagement by providing a peer group that spurs her/him to greater achievement and understanding.

Goal Three: Recruit, Retain and Develop High-Quality Staff

Ideally, only those teachers who have all of their gifted points should be teaching clusters of gifted students. Clustering students with teachers who have their gifted points will encourage staff to pursue additional professional development to acquire their gifted points.

Goal Five: Meet the Needs of the Whole Child

Advanced learners thrive in peer groups, attaining social acceptance and reducing isolation.

Budgetary Implications: None
ACI Vote: Ranked 19 of 24

As we have described in our previous Reports, educational research demonstrates that cluster grouping is critical to ensuring that each student is challenged and engaged. Moreover, clustering is the model APS has selected to serve gifted students.

Although APS is still in the early stages of gathering data on how well cluster grouping is being implemented, we know from parent and teacher reports that cluster grouping has not been uniformly and consistently implemented in each of the county's elementary schools. We believe, however, that APS is making progress towards the goal of cluster grouping in elementary schools, due in large part to the outreach efforts and expertise of Ms. McCullough.

Past Recommendation #1: Implement Naglieri Non-Verbal Aptitude Test (NNAT-2) for all students in Grade 2, in order to reduce bias and increase the effectiveness of gifted identification for all students (including those whose first language is not English).

Status: Implemented, Fall 2013

2011 – 2017 Strategic Plan Alignment:

Goal One: Ensure that Every Student is Challenged and Engaged

This recommendation ensures that every student who could benefit from gifted services has the potential to be flagged by taking a thirty-minute test. Gifted services improve the level of challenge and engagement for these students.

Goal Two: Eliminate Achievement Gaps

This recommendation was specifically designed to help reduce the "opportunity gap" for identification for gifted services among diverse APS students by incorporating a language-neutral test.

Goal Three: Recruit, Retain and Develop High-Quality Staff

Flagging students with high test scores who do not necessarily perform at an advanced level in the classroom gives teachers a unique opportunity to uncover and nurture the potential in these students. Learning how to appropriately challenge these students can provide additional professional development for teachers.

Goal Five: Meet the Needs of the Whole Child

Challenging work provides social and emotional growth, as well as academic growth. Advanced learners thrive in peer groups. Love of learning is reinforced when the material is appropriately curated and paced. Self-confidence and self-acceptance are enhanced by mastering challenging material.

Budgetary Implications: \$19,000 annually

ACI Vote: Ranked 2 of 24

The NNAT-2 flagged a large number of students who had not yet been identified as gifted, and the cohort of flagged students appears to be generally more diverse than the previously identified students. A single test cannot be the sole basis of gifted identification, but it can start conversations in the classroom about children whose performance may not accurately reflect their ability levels. Currently, children who took the test in the fall are being considered for identification in the spring screening. The RTGs at each school are working with the second grade classroom teachers regarding potential referrals for those children who scored 120 or above, while also seeking immediate opportunities to nurture the potential in these children.

Committee members:

Joshua Turner, JD, Co-Chair

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We remain grateful to Cheryl McCullough, APS Supervisor of Gifted Services and the Committee's staff liaison, for her assistance with our efforts in support of APS Gifted Services.

Appendix – Comments from Parents Interviewed about Gifted Services in Elementary School

Overall, parents report that some years things work well and some years they don't. The variation in services between and within APS schools is also significant.

A Jamestown family (whose children are now in Middle and High School) reported that, as hoped, their students received pretests, and if they passed them, they received different work. A Barcroft family (now in middle school) was thrilled with its experience. The RTG had one to one meetings with the student and her 5th grade classroom teacher provided differentiated materials.

These two stories, however, are not the norm. No other interviewed parents in APS elementary schools said that their students received one to one instruction, pre-tests, or work that reflected the results of pretests.

Parents say that classroom teachers seem at a loss as to how to provide services in the areas of science and social studies. Science and social studies services were also highlighted in the 2008 Program Evaluation as areas that needed much more support in the APS gifted system. (See report generally and pages iv, 36 specifically) Provision of services in science and social studies continues to be a concern of parents six years later.

Parents also complain that the math program moves too slowly for many students -- not only gifted students. This can be very frustrating and disheartening for students who would like more challenge to feel their math exposure and mastery are increasing. One Taylor parent of a high achieving but not identified gifted math student said, "I'm going to have to hire a tutor just to keep my son interested in math; he's so bored at school."

Another Nottingham family hires a tutor to teach multiple children math and critical thinking skills because they are “so bored” at school.

Many families find the language arts textbook lacks appropriate breadth to differentiate. A reading specialist who is a parent of a student at Campbell was thrilled that that school used class sets of novels instead of a textbook. Other parents in different schools report that their teachers say they must use the county-provided texts even when the texts do not match the students’ ability levels. One RTG even stated that, “In class, Storytown is an easy read” for gifted kids. She said it was still helpful because the text is used in an advanced way. Parents and students disagree. Because this text is the main or only source of vocabulary lists and literature discussions, the instructional level is not appropriate. Even when there is specialized literature instruction for gifted identified students, parents state that the books are still at or near grade level (and not the advanced level these gifted students need). One parent said, “The literature study unit with the RTG would be great for most of the kids at our school. It’s a shame they aren’t getting that in most classrooms, but it’s still not the right material for the limited number of identified students.”

Many elementary parents echo these statements. They say that gifted services are so insufficient that to appease their children they hire tutors or seek out other opportunities and camps. Some parents say they give their children a second shift of school at home.

Middle School

A gifted parent at Williamsburg said “there is not much” except an option to participate in a science fair in 7th grade, “some differentiated homework in 8th grade and some differentiation in English in 8th grade.” Other Williamsburg parents stated that the science fair is not encouraged and not targeted to gifted children. One parent said that there seems to be no formal program of gifted services at Williamsburg.

One journalist whose daughter is at a different middle school noted, “I’m appalled at what her classroom teachers do for reading and writing. . . There is not enough writing which is a foundational skill and opens so many doors . . . They are reading *The Outsiders* and some owl book. This is not challenging. This is insulting to 60 percent of the kids.” Her daughter reads the assigned books quickly and moves on to much more challenging self-selected work. This student and her peers have lost an opportunity to learn from a teacher and one another how to parse through a literature text, use analytical skills to support their points, and craft viable written arguments -- skills that every college-bound student needs.

Regarding the removal of honors classes in core subjects, some parents pointedly wonder, “Why don’t we provide the same course selection options as schools in Fairfax where there are honors middle school classes? How is our student population so different from theirs?”

While some parents and students are unhappy, other parents and students find teachers that are gems. One Gunston student reported that her social studies teacher makes the class “so interesting and awesome and relates to kids. It’s really fun to learn with him.” These students are truly grateful for the higher-level subject content than they found in elementary classes.

Some parents, however, are at their wits’ end with the lack of differentiation and their inability to get change after speaking with teachers and principals. Parents ask the classroom teacher about differentiation and are told to speak to the resource teacher. The resource teacher says that “I don’t meet with students directly, so work with your classroom teacher.” One parent says that by middle school most families really “despair over the system and have just given up.” They are afraid to stand up for better instruction, and “if they do it makes things worse.” This fear of retaliation by teachers and administrators is expressed by many families.

Some families stay in APS for social reasons but feel that they are paying an academic price. Some of Arlington’s most involved families see what happens in middle school and opt to leave the system all together.

Other families just don’t see the point in pursuing gifted services for their students. “As for our personal experience with the gifted programs: I have never felt that the APS gifted program was worth pursuing. Sorry - don’t mean to be a downer on this, but we have had to advocate for our son on our own, teacher by teacher, because there was never any movement when we approached the gifted lead at our middle school.”

High School

One Yorktown HS family with two students reported that sophomores are only allowed to take one AP class. This family also said that gifted students did not receive additional differentiation in high school. (When reporting on their elementary school and middle school experience, which is now quite old, this family also did not see differentiation.) Some AP classes are suited to gifted students but some are not academically advanced enough. Also, these students were sometimes unable to fit in an AP class and had to take intensified classes, which were not always sufficiently challenging for them. As would be expected, teaching quality varied; some teachers were excellent and some were not. This family has now left the APS system and both children attend top universities. Their son was surprised to learn that Arlington had gifted services. He was identified only in social studies in elementary school, but did not know he was identified. Although he became a National Merit Scholar and had a perfect math SAT score, he was not identified in math.

Similar reports came out of Wakefield and Washington-Lee. These schools rely strongly on IB (Washington-Lee) and AP (Washington-Lee and Wakefield) classes to do the work for the gifted program, but some students are ready for even more challenge. A family with one son at Thomas Jefferson High School for Science and Technology and one son in an APS high school felt that our local schools could provide much more

enrichment for gifted students and that we should bring more of the choices provided at Thomas Jefferson to APS students who do not attend that school.

End Notes

ⁱ <http://www.nagc.org/sites/default/files/Position%20Statement/NAGC-NMSA%20Joint%20Position%20Statement.pdf>, p.1.

ⁱⁱ <http://www.nagc.org/sites/default/files/Position%20Statement/NAGC-NMSA%20Joint%20Position%20Statement.pdf>, p.1.

ⁱⁱⁱ NAGC Position Statement on Middle School, Curriculum and Instruction section, p.2.

^{iv} Id.

^v NAGC Position Statement on Middle School, p. 3.

^{vi}

http://www.apsva.us/cms/lib2/VA01000586/Centricity/Domain/62/Gifted_Services_Program_Eval_Report_wApp.pdf

^{vii} Id. at ii

^{viii} Id. at 52

^{ix} Id. at v.

^x p. 58

http://www.apsva.us/cms/lib2/VA01000586/Centricity/Domain/62/Gifted_Services_Program_Eval_Report_wApp.pdf

^{xi}

<http://www.nagc.org/sites/default/files/Position%20Statement/Growth%20in%20Achievement%20of%20Advanced%20Students.pdf>

^{xii}

<http://www.apsva.us/cms/lib2/VA01000586/Centricity/Domain/62/New%20Final%2012-17%20GS%205%20year%20Plan%20v8b%20May%2016%20v2.pdf>