

Arlington Public Schools

Gifted Services Program Evaluation Report: Executive Summary

Prepared by the Office of Planning and Evaluation
Response from the Gifted Services Office

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Gifted Services Program Evaluation: Executive Summary

About the Evaluation

The Gifted Services (GS) program evaluation began in 2014-15, during which a planning committee met regularly to develop the questions that would guide data collection. Committee members included staff from APS Planning and Evaluation, the GS Office, other central offices and school staff, as well as community members. Data collection occurred in 2015-16 and the evaluation proceeded in 2016-17.

The study centered on two overarching questions: (1) How effectively was the Gifted Services program implemented? and (2) What were the outcomes?

The study concludes with a detailed report, which can be found at www.apsva.us/evaluationreports, and this executive summary.

About the Gifted Services Program

Mission and Services

APS is committed to meeting the academic, artistic, and socio-emotional needs of gifted learners. The GS Office operates within the Department of Instruction to meet APS Strategic Plan goals. The office:

- Works with school administrators, specialists, and teachers to provide appropriate daily differentiated services based on ongoing assessment data to meet students' learning needs
- Collaborates with APS central offices on curricular resources to add depth and complexity to the general education curriculum
- Provides curriculum, materials, program development and revision, and professional development to promote successful delivery of gifted services by school administrators, resource teachers for the gifted (RTGs), classroom teachers, and other professional educators who work with gifted learners in order to:
 - Recognize characteristics and behaviors of gifted children and respond appropriately
 - Administer school-based screening/referral processes with consistency and inclusivity of all students
 - Utilize research-based best practices and resources for gifted learners
- Manages the identification process, including the use of universal screeners, to identify gifted learners in Grades K–12 in Specific Academic Aptitude(s) and in Grades 3–12 in Visual/Performing Arts Aptitude
- Encourages parent and community involvement in the gifted educational program

Recent Gifted Services Initiatives

Throughout the program evaluation process, the Gifted Services program has continued to evolve and engage in practices of continuous improvement. The practices described below are those that have been implemented during the course of the program evaluation and were not reviewed within the evaluation. This work has been completed through collaboration with resource teachers for the gifted as well as staff throughout schools and instructional programs, and the Gifted Services Advisory Committee (GSAC).

- Implemented two universal screening assessments to provide objective measures of students' potential ability:
 - Grade 2 - Naglieri Nonverbal Assessment (NNAT)
 - Grade 4 - Cognitive Abilities Test (CogAT)
- Redesigned delivery of gifted services for elementary students by
 - initiating an inclusion model that provides daily differentiation in content area instruction,
 - focusing on the cluster grouping of identified students for better efficiency and support, and
 - eliminating isolated pull-out services.
- Piloted the Young Scholars Model at Drew (2015) to find and nurture historically underrepresented students for gifted services and to raise the level of rigor for all learners. Because of the success, Young Scholars was expanded to Randolph and Barcroft (2016-17) and will expand to all Title I schools in the summer of 2017.
- Improved the process for screening traditionally underrepresented students, by providing a more holistic approach to the review of students across all racial, ethnic, and socio-economic groups.
- Established a Twice Exceptional (2e) committee to focus on services and opportunities for students dually identified with intellectual gifts and special needs.
- Created a Professional Learning Community (PLC) for RTGs focusing on ongoing learning opportunities in coaching, collaboration and best practices for gifted learners.
- Provided Adaptive Schools and Cognitive Coaching training to resource teachers for the gifted and others to support how students and staff engage in learning.
- Created a Differentiation Form to report progress to parents at the elementary level.

Summary of Findings

Evaluation Question #1: How effectively was the Gifted Services program implemented?

More students have access to Gifted Services and additional strategies will be implemented to ensure students served mirror the APS student population.

- Since the implementation of universal screening, the district has seen an increase in referrals to gifted services at the elementary level in all academic areas.
- The percentage of the elementary population referred for gifted identification varies across elementary schools, with nine schools' referral rates at more than three points above or below the percentage of the total elementary population referred (10% in 2015-16).
- While more students are being referred, black and Hispanic students, English learners, and economically disadvantaged students continue to be less frequently referred and identified than their counterparts.
- The percentage of students with disabilities who are referred and identified has increased in the last two years.

Gifted Services has taken a number of steps to better align services to address the needs of gifted students. There is evidence that these steps are working, particularly across many elementary schools.

- An external evaluator recognized the work in APS around providing services to gifted students as part of the regular school day. The evaluator observed that the use of differentiation methods, including clustering of students, varied across levels and pointed to a need for more frequent and effective use of clustering at the middle school level.
- Time use analyses completed by resource teachers for the gifted (RTGs) show variation across schools and levels in the role of the RTGs. RTGs reported spending varying amounts of time on activities such as providing instruction, enrichment, or extension to gifted students; building capacity for daily differentiation among teachers; and managing the identification process.
- The frequency with which teachers collaborate with RTGs and the extent to which they receive other support from RTGs vary by content area, school level, and whether or not they teach advanced students.

Differentiated instruction is good for all students. Many of the elements for differentiated instruction are in place and were evident across classrooms, and in the information shared by teachers.

- Among classroom teachers, teachers of clusters of gifted students or advanced courses were the most likely to have completed the APS 40-hour professional development requirement. Elementary cluster teachers and high school teachers of advanced courses were more likely than their peers to have even further professional development.

- The external evaluator found that, across grade levels, teachers of gifted students frequently use differentiation strategies commonly associated with good teaching. She suggested that all levels, particularly middle school, can better utilize higher-level strategies.
- Most teachers strongly or somewhat agreed they have access to curriculum materials designed for gifted learners. Among core content teachers these rates were 64% for elementary, 46% for middle, and 56% for high school.
- Core content teachers reported using curriculum materials designed for gifted learners on a daily or weekly basis at the following rates: 52% elementary, 35% middle school, 33% high school.

Evaluation Question #2 – What were the outcomes?

Gifted students are engaged and challenged.

- CLASS observations show a high level of student engagement in the observed classrooms that include 5 or more gifted students. Average scores ranged from 5.5 to 6.3 across levels and content areas; the high range is considered to be 6-7.
- Most parents strongly or somewhat agree that their child is intellectually stimulated at school: 81% elementary, 71% middle, and 86% high school.
- In the past three years, around two-thirds of middle school students gifted in math had completed Algebra I before entering 8th grade.
- In 2015-16, the following percentages of high school students who were gifted in a specific content area enrolled in an advanced course in that content area: social studies 87%, English 78%, science 78%, and math 72%. In the same year, 91% of all middle school students identified as gifted in math were enrolled in an advanced math course.
- Among middle school students who were identified as gifted in English and who scored in the advanced band in the fall, 43% in grade 6, 28% in grade 7, and 23% in grade 8 achieved a year's worth of growth between fall and spring on the Reading Inventory assessment.

Staff Responses to Evaluation Findings

In examining the findings of the evaluation, staff identified the following key recommendations and associated action steps. These are also reflected in the Gifted Services Local Plan that is submitted to the Virginia Department of Education. Implicit in the implementation of all the recommendations is the importance of: (1) alignment with system-wide initiatives such as the APS Strategic Plan, Whole Child Framework, personalized learning and Aspire2Excellence; and (2) synchronization among offices and schools in support of the successful delivery of gifted services.

Recommendation #1

Increase the use of differentiation strategies and personalized learning with gifted learners.

Across grade levels, teachers of gifted students frequently use differentiation strategies commonly associated with good teaching. Observations and surveys indicate the need to increase classroom use of higher-level learning practices; clustering; and implementation of strategies, curriculum, and materials designed for gifted students.

This recommendation aims to systemically engage appropriate APS office staffs, principals, and teachers in developing and implementing challenging, engaging, differentiated and personalized learning experiences for gifted learners.

Action Steps

1. Create teams consisting of principals, RTGs, classroom teachers and central office representatives to develop, embed, and implement a consistent, system-wide model of personalized learning for gifted learners.
2. Implement learning experiences using curricular resources written for advanced learners that reinforce critical and creative thinking strategies.
3. Define with principals and RTGs communication methods for understanding and application of differentiation for gifted learners, which benefits all students as well as classroom management for cluster groups.
4. Continue the expansion of Young Scholars across all Title I schools.
5. Define and determine the measures of growth to guide instruction for gifted students.

Recommendation #2:

Clearly articulate expectations for gifted instruction and align these expectations with the roles and responsibilities of RTGs, classroom teachers, and principals, with a focus on the middle school level.

The evaluation shows:

- RTGs assume different roles at different levels, from working directly with students to facilitating, coaching and supporting teachers, and providing professional development.

- To varying degrees from school to school, the gifted program meets the basic social-emotional needs of gifted students, with room to more effectively equip students with strategies to handle psycho-social growth.
- Collaboration between teachers and RTGs can be improved in both frequency and consistency, particularly at the middle school level.

This recommendation aims to align APS expectations for gifted instruction with school-based staff's understanding of and accountability for meeting those expectations.

Action Steps

1. Provide professional learning to increase the use of coaching, collaboration, and co-teaching skills among principals, RTGs and cluster teachers through structured, systemic, and sustained opportunities.
2. Evaluate and revise the existing RTG and cluster teacher job descriptions, with a focus on middle school.
3. Develop performance evaluation criteria that correspond with expectations outlined in job descriptions.
4. Provide professional learning opportunities for principals, school counselors, social workers and special educators to address the socio-emotional needs of gifted learners, such as performance anxiety, perfectionism, asynchronous development, and underachievement.

Recommendation #3:

Take steps to improve the availability of data that will facilitate ready identification of trends and focus areas for gifted services and, subsequently, appropriate response.

Collection, reporting, availability, and analysis of data—both at the district and school level—are essential to identify and respond to trends and focus areas in program implementation and outcomes. For the gifted program, these data include referrals, identification, cluster group implementation, student growth measures, and teachers' completion of professional development requirements.

As an example, the Gifted Services Office needs ready access to data to accurately measure the number of referrals and identifications across the district. APS uses referrals as a measure of success in increasing access to the gifted program, with the goal of referring and identifying students in elementary school. In recent years the district has seen a sharp increase in referrals at the elementary level in all academic areas, along with a corresponding need for continued emphasis on inclusiveness of all students.

The evaluation revealed that gifted students tend to perform well on standardized assessments, most of which measure proficiency. There are challenges in measuring true academic progress among students who are already high performers since proficiency and growth are two very different benchmarks for academic progress. Most gifted students perform in the upper proficiency strata on the SOL, AP and IB tests, the latter two of which are not administered until the high school level. Beyond the Reading Inventory administered in middle school, APS has limited standardized methodology for measuring

growth, and thus no reports available for analysis; growth measures are important for gifted students as so many of them are already performing at an advanced level.

The evaluation indicated the need for improved, additional, and/or new reporting mechanisms in some data areas, greater “cross-walking” among reports, and full access to data in easily accessible formats for the GS Office and other relevant offices. The action steps below address these points as well as associated professional development and communication with principals and teachers.

Action Steps

1. Direct Information Services to:
 - provide the Gifted Services Office access to all data related to the program.
 - create reports on referral and identification data by school to track progress and identify focus areas.
 - create reports that enable monitoring of clustering and credit roster data.
2. Provide training to staff at schools that have referral and identification gaps to support increased access to gifted services for all students.
3. Provide an implementation plan for principals and RTGs to:
 - increase the understanding of the universal screening process.
 - identify and use measures of growth to guide instruction for gifted students.
 - monitor the referral process on a quarterly basis at the school and district levels.

Recommendation #4:

Develop and implement a plan to clearly and regularly communicate gifted services information to students and families.

Survey results showed that parents of elementary gifted students report greater knowledge about the gifted services their child receives and greater communication about their child’s progress than do middle and high school parents. As staff reviewed these findings, the question became “Are schools not supplying the information or do parents (and students) not realize that what they receive pertains to gifted services?” This recommendation addresses the need for a communication plan and common vocabulary.

Action Steps

1. Communicate expectations with principals and RTGs responsible for identifying the frequency and nature of communications with parents and families. Make revisions to current practices as needed in order to provide frequent and clear communication to families on a quarterly basis and ensure communication expectations are met.
2. Meet with stakeholders annually to determine strengths and areas of improvement related to communication strategies.

3. Develop a communication plan with Gifted Services and School and Community Relations staff that includes strategies for engaging families and staff in all schools regarding gifted services opportunities.
4. Develop and implement a common vocabulary for messaging.
5. Ensure that messaging is consistent across all APS media.