

# MEMORANDUM

**TO:** Arlington School Board  
**FROM:** Gifted Services Advisory Committee (GSAC)  
**DATE:** March 7, 2016  
**SUBJECT:** 2015-16 Report to APS Advisory Council on Instruction

## Summary

The Gifted Services Advisory Committee (GSAC) is pleased to see that the proposed 2016-2017 budget addresses one of our most urgent recommendations from last year—providing a full-time Resource Teacher for the Gifted (RTG) to all elementary schools, regardless of size. As we explained last year, and as the proposed budget notes, gifted services simply cannot be delivered effectively by a half-time RTG, and providing a full-time RTG will help close the achievement gap by ensuring that all elementary schools have the requisite minimum level of staffing to meet the needs of their gifted students. We applaud the Superintendent for recognizing and addressing this recommendation, and urge the School Board to fully fund this portion of the proposed budget.

While the budget proposal for RTGs is very welcome, GSAC considers the overall current state of gifted services within Arlington Public Schools (APS) as a work in progress that continues to need significant improvement in other critical areas. While progress has been made on policy, implementation remains frustratingly inconsistent. The lack of fidelity in implementing APS policy at the individual school level results in a wide disparity in actual services delivered to our students. Not only does this mean that individual children are not reaching their full potential, but it also means that, for advanced learners, APS is not making progress on three of its five stated goals in the strategic plan:

- Goal one: Ensure that every child is challenged and engaged
- Goal two: Eliminate achievement gaps
- Goal five: Meet the needs of the whole child

Cheryl McCullough joined APS in 2013 and since then, she has worked tirelessly to ensure that APS policy reflects current best practices in gifted education. Unfortunately, many schools are slow to adapt to the changes required to deliver gifted services effectively. We see this play out in myriad ways, but there are two issues that urgently need to be addressed. First, teachers need training in differentiated instruction *for advanced learners*. Teachers generally do not learn how to address this population when attaining an education degree, so additional professional development is required. Second, administrators need to comply with clustering advanced learners in groups of five to eight children in each classroom in elementary and in each subject area in middle and high school, and then placing those students with a teacher who has been trained to deliver more complex curriculum. Without these two pieces of the puzzle, the whole APS model of delivering gifted services falls apart. Currently, there is no accountability at any level that gifted services will be delivered as stated by APS. Neither teachers nor

administrators are incented to deliver gifted services, nor is there accountability when they do not meet the county's gifted education goals. The result is a broken delivery model with no path to resolution. Frustrated children and parents have no recourse but to lodge complaints that typically go nowhere— or to leave APS, either for other districts or for private schools.

Given the complex demands placed on teachers in today's classrooms, perhaps it is time APS considered a different model for delivery of gifted services. Outside of a handful of select elementary schools, GSAC sees no evidence of consistent delivery of gifted services. With so much in flux given the current capacity crunch, perhaps the time is right to consider gifted centers. Another alternative would be to borrow an idea from Fairfax County's Advanced Academics model and implement a "school within a school" concept – similar to their "level four" schools. GSAC would be happy to meet with the Superintendent, the School Board, and the Department of Instruction at any time to discuss alternate models of delivering gifted services.

If APS wants to continue pursuing its existing policy, greater attention must be paid at the executive level to ensure that all school principals are adhering to that policy so that gifted services are actually delivered to advanced learners. Although this is not a recommending year, we are asking that the Superintendent require and review an annual report from all elementary and middle school principals each September that shows classroom level detail on clustering and teacher placement for identified gifted students, as well as which teachers have received updated training on differentiated instruction for advanced learners.

## **Update on Delivery of Services**

Over the past two years, APS has changed from a "pull-out" model for delivery of services (in which students who are identified as gifted are pulled out from the regular classroom for once-weekly sessions with the RTG in their area(s) of identification), to a "push-in" model, in which the RTG works with the classroom teacher to provide differentiated instruction and increased depth and complexity to students during regular classroom instruction. There are several advantages to this change. Correctly implemented, gifted students receive appropriate instruction all the time, across all subjects, rather than in one or two short weekly sessions. For our twice exceptional (2E) students, the push-in model eliminates two more transitions from the school day. Often those transitions consume 2E time as the student takes a few minutes, or the whole session to regulate her/himself enough to attend to the instruction, then must transition back to his/her regular schedule. Finally, all students in the class benefit from the enriched environment created by the additional depth and complexity introduced into the curriculum by the RTG.

Unfortunately, the shift to this model is not complete across the county, and, even where it has been implemented, students are still not receiving adequate gifted services. RTGs in a number of elementary schools continue to provide services by pulling students out, rather than pushing in to the classroom and supporting the classroom teachers in providing depth and complexity for all students. Parents also

report occasional pull-out instruction in middle schools, a practice which reduces the time available for the RTG to support and collaborate with classroom teachers, and which further perpetuates the perception by parents and students that gifted services are only delivered in a pull-out model. RTGs report only to their Principals, and lack of support and accountability at the Principal level has resulted in the incomplete adoption of the push-in model.

For the push-in model to work correctly, students identified as gifted should be clustered in groups of 5-8 with a classroom teacher trained in working with the gifted and access to gifted curriculum. Push-in is also easier on 2E students as their services and accommodations are available where the pull out model often causes the 2E students to endure that time without their accommodations. Even in schools that have primarily transitioned to the push-in model, clustering with trained teachers is not consistently happening across the county. RTGs in many elementary and middle schools report that students are, at best, only partially clustered, and are not necessarily with a classroom teacher trained and capable of providing differentiated instruction for advanced learners. In those situations (which are reported by a large number of parents), gifted students are, in effect, receiving no services. Ultimately, each school's Principal is responsible for ensuring that proper clustering exists, but a number of elementary and middle school Principals are not demonstrating a commitment to doing so.

In addition to the challenges and deficiencies in APS's implementation of the push-in model, parents and students have raised a number of ongoing concerns about the quality and availability of gifted services. First, as discussed above, in situations where a classroom teacher is not trained in gifted curriculum or does not provide differentiated instruction, students do not receive gifted services. Second, even if students receive differentiated instruction on an individual basis, they cannot access the proven benefits of interacting with academic peers if they are not clustered appropriately. Interaction with intellectual peers is essential for both the academic growth and the social and emotional health of gifted students. If gifted students are not properly clustered, they cannot form those connections and peer groups.

Even when the push-in model is executed correctly, it has been more difficult for parents and students to know whether students are receiving gifted services as neither school work nor homework are identified as differentiated. Many parents have expressed a concern that when pull-outs stopped, gifted services were no longer offered, or that the child had been removed from gifted services. These concerns highlight the need for robust, detailed communication about differentiated instruction from the classroom teachers and RTGs to parents. There is currently only one mechanism, the Differentiated Progress Report Form, which is supposed to go home with each report card. The adoption of this form has been slow and inconsistent, and parents typically do not understand it. To be effective, the form must be used by all teachers with gifted students, and it needs to be reworked based on parent feedback.

To improve delivery of gifted services, elementary and middle schools must first ensure that identified students are clustered in groups of at least 5-8, with a trained teacher, able and willing to use gifted curriculum and provide differentiated instruction, across the school day, in all subjects. Classroom teachers must also provide detailed, frequent communications to parents about differentiated

instruction—for example, many elementary school teachers send a weekly email or update a classroom blog regarding the week’s activities. All instances of differentiated instruction should be highlighted in this communication. Schools must be proactive both in providing gifted services and communicating those services and results to parents. Finally, Principals must be held accountable for ensuring that their schools are providing gifted services in accordance with current APS policies.

We know that adequate service delivery can be achieved with the current model, because there are a handful of schools doing it well. However, most are not. The resulting inequity in service delivery exacerbates the achievement gap. Privileged parents often provide enrichment outside of school but that is no substitute for in-classroom learning. Less fortunate gifted children continue to be at a disadvantage. Given that as many as thirty percent of students are identified gifted -- not including other high-achieving advanced learners who are not identified -- the lack of priority in serving these children is astonishing. Although it starts in elementary school, this problem is most acute in middle school. In high school, advanced class variety improves and gifted students finally begin to be challenged.

## Status of 2014-15 Recommendations

<p><b>I. Past Recommendation #1: Reinstate intensified class options in all core subjects in all middle schools.</b></p>
--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

ACI Vote: 18 yes, 1 no, 4 abstained

This recommendation has not been implemented. In various meetings, stakeholders including middle school principals and staff have raised objections to this recommendation, with some expressing concern that it would lead to “tracking,” while others noted that it could be difficult to implement logistically given the other demands of middle school scheduling. GSAC reiterates its proposal that these classes be open to all students, allowing for self-selection regardless of identification.

Although clustering is APS policy for the delivery of gifted services, the only two middle schools that have been doing it are Williamsburg and Swanson, and only in one subject, English Language Arts. Despite several conversations with stakeholders last spring, that is still the case yet another year later. The status quo of only intensified Math is still in place at all other schools. Students who are identified in Social Studies and Science are not receiving services daily at any of our six middle schools.

While some staff believe that implementing the existing APS policy of clustering gifted students is the better solution, it is important to note that clustering for gifted services does not provide the same scope or reach as intensified classes. Intensified classes allow high-achievers to continue to make educational progress—students who may or may not be identified as gifted. Also, the entire class would be taught at an accelerated pace. Even where clustering is in place now, the assignment of advanced work is inconsistent and the teachers are not always trained in differentiation for gifted learners.

Given the objections raised to the intensified class recommendation, GSAC is confused by the rapid implementation of intensified Spanish at all middle schools, as well as other intensified courses in World Languages at both Swanson and Jefferson. It's clear that the need for intensified courses exists, and it is also clear that scheduling is not an issue. We do not understand why these classes cannot be offered in all subjects. We also do not understand why most schools refuse to even cluster gifted students together in subjects in which they are identified. The bottom line continues to be that APS is not delivering gifted services to students identified in Science, Social Studies and in most cases, English Language Arts, in middle school.

For reference, we are again including this chart that shows other Virginia school districts' intensified class offerings in middle school. Why is Arlington satisfied with providing less for our children?

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=TVNfUE9TXIwMTQzM>

[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/>

## **II. Past Recommendation #2: Provide Full-time RTGs In Each Elementary School**

ACI Vote: 21 yes, 1 no, 1 abstained

In our prior report, we noted that using the 500 student K-12 planning factor as the break point between a full-time and half-time RTG presented a number of serious challenges. We explained that a half-time RTG was not able to adequately execute the push-in model for gifted services. We also observed that fluctuations in enrollment could easily drive some schools above and others below this arbitrary threshold, making future planning more difficult and introducing a great deal of uncertainty into staff retention. Finally, we identified a number of schools that had retained a full-time RTG despite having fewer than 500 students by combining the RTG's role with other duties. This made the impact of the 500 student threshold even more uneven and difficult to predict, because some schools were able to mitigate the effects of falling below that number.

We therefore recommended eliminating the 500 student K-12 threshold, and supplying all elementary schools in the county with a minimum of one full time RTG position, regardless of enrollment. This would allow all APS students to receive a consistent level of services, no matter which elementary school they attended. This is particularly relevant to closing the achievement gap, as all but two of the schools with less than 500 students are also Title I schools. In addition, providing a full-time RTG to all elementary schools would enhance predictability, making it easier for staff to plan for the future and provide stability for the student population.

We are extremely pleased to see that the Superintendent's budget proposal for 2016-2017 recognizes the need for full-time RTGs at all elementary schools, regardless of size, and proposes funding for adding full time positions to those schools that do not currently have them.<sup>1</sup> As support, the proposed budget notes that:

- Effective push-in services cannot be provided by halftime RTGs, and
- The fact that a number of schools are near the 500 student cutoff makes planning more difficult.<sup>2</sup>

We are also gratified to see that the proposed budget recognizes that adding full-time RTGs serves at least two critical functions. First, it is an integral part of ensuring that APS is providing adequate differentiation in instruction, and thus meeting the needs of all APS students. Second, as we explained last year, it is an important part of closing the achievement gap. The 500 student threshold serves as an

---

<sup>1</sup>

[http://www.apsva.us/cms/lib2/VA01000586/Centricity/Domain/99/Budget\\_FY2017\\_Proposed\\_Final\\_ForWeb.pdf](http://www.apsva.us/cms/lib2/VA01000586/Centricity/Domain/99/Budget_FY2017_Proposed_Final_ForWeb.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> *Id.* at 54.

inadvertent barrier to giving these schools the resources that they need to provide instruction at the same level as other schools throughout the county.

For the reasons set out in the proposed budget and in our prior report, we urge the School Board to adopt this proposal and fully fund these new full time positions. Data collected since our prior report only reinforces the importance of this proposal. As Table 2 shows, even the smallest elementary schools in Arlington have several hundred students; the idea that the 392 students at Randolph, for example, can adequately be served by a half time resource teacher is simply untenable.

Moreover, the concern about enrollment fluctuations has been borne out by developments since our last report. The data now show that since our last report, one school has climbed above the 500 student line while two have dropped below. A fourth school, Discovery, opened since our last report, and did so above the 500 student mark, though just barely so. A number of other schools continue to be relatively close to the threshold, and are thus at risk of losing their full-time RTG position.

Table 1: Schools Over 500 K-5, Dec. 2015

*New additions in bold; enrollment from prior Report in parentheses*

School	K-5 Total	Preschool	Overall Total
Abingdon	559 (582)	51 (46)	610 (628)
Arl. Sci. Focus	654 (615)	20 (18)	674 (633)
Ashlawn	618 (609)	35 (42)	653 (651)
Carlin Springs	514 (501)	91 (68)	605 (569)
Claremont	691 (692)	38 (36)	729 (728)
<b>Discovery</b>	<b>515 (N/A)</b>	<b>32 (N/A)</b>	<b>547 (N/A)</b>
Drew	521 (504)	143 (142)	664 (646)
Glebe	578 (574)	18 (39)	596 (613)
Jamestown	509 (600)	59 (36)	568 (636)
Key	681 (660)	41 (54)	722 (714)
Long Branch	540 (510)	29 (26)	569 (536)
McKinley	591 (563)	22 (23)	613 (586)
<b>Patrick Henry</b>	<b>523 (469)</b>	<b>44 (50)</b>	<b>567 (519)</b>
Oakridge	766 (740)	33 (27)	799 (767)
Taylor	721 (777)	15 (11)	736 (788)
Tuckahoe	665 (687)	14 (15)	679 (702)

Table 2: Schools Under 500 K-5, Dec. 2015

*New additions in bold; enrollment from prior Report in parentheses*

School	K-5 Total	Preschool	Overall Total
Arl. Trad. Sch.	480 (481)*	21 (20)	501 (501)
Barcroft	444 (494)*	44 (54)	488 (548)
<b>Barrett</b>	<b>483 (500)</b>	<b>53 (54)</b>	<b>536 (554)</b>
Campbell	352 (351)*	68 (65)	420 (416)
Hoffman-Boston	352 (331)	175 (169)	527 (500)
<b>Nottingham</b>	<b>441 (713)</b>	<b>2 (14)</b>	<b>443 (727)</b>
Randolph	392 (417)	59 (62)	451 (479)

**III. Recommendation #3: Augment and improve scheduling of advanced class options in all high schools.**

ACI Vote: 19 yes, 0 no, 4 abstained

There has been no movement on this recommendation. This problem has two components. First, the scheduling of advanced classes and second, the large number of students interested in the limited number of advanced classes offered. Students would like the option to take more intensified courses instead of general education (gen ed) classes for one or more of the following three reasons:

- They are not able to take an AP or IB class because of a conflicting scheduling issue
- It is not one of their strongest subjects but the gen ed class is not challenging enough
- They do not want more than 3 AP or 3 high level IB classes in a single semester

Given the growing concern in our community about the stress levels of our students, providing more intensified courses that students could take instead of AP/IB seems like a logical step forward.

**IV. Recommendation #4: Accurately Measure Gifted Student Progress**

ACI Vote: 19 yes, 1 no, 3 abstained

There has been no movement on this recommendation. 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. The key to success is to develop a set of measures for different subjects and grades that together allow teachers to quickly determine students' starting points and also 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. Today there is no way to show a year's worth of academic progress for advanced learners.

## A Look Ahead

Gifted Services is in the middle of a five year program review. In our next report with recommendations (2016-17), GSAC is likely to include some recommendations based upon the findings from the program review. We are also likely to recommend adding a gifted specialist to APS county staff to support the Supervisor of Gifted Services. The current volume of work is unsustainable for one person. Additionally, this low level of staffing is inconsistent with other county programs, and with staffing levels in neighboring districts. We will also have a recommendation relating to the rollout of Arlington Tiered System of Support (ATSS) as it relates to advanced learners.

We are encouraged by the partnership between Title 1 and Gifted Services and the focus on the Young Scholars Model. The goal of this model is to find and nurture students from historically underrepresented populations for gifted services. We look forward to monitoring the progress of this initiative at Drew Model School. If the program continues to go well, we may recommend expanding it to other Title 1 schools next year. Congress recently passed the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which has provisions for gifted students<sup>3</sup>. In this new law, Congress makes clear that schools serving disadvantaged students may use federal Title I funds to identify and serve gifted students.<sup>4</sup>

GSAC will continue to liaise with the ASEAC 2E subcommittee and may develop a data-based recommendation on 2E next year. The 2E students experience the same issues as other gifted students. Frequently these issues are amplified, as it is more likely that a gifted special education student will exhibit inappropriate behavior during general instruction due to boredom stemming from a lack of challenge. However, research shows that when intellectually engaged, 2E students' problem behaviors are substantially reduced, if not eliminated entirely.

### **More reading on clustering (also called grouping or cluster grouping) as a best practice in Gifted Education:**

- <http://www.nagc.org/resources-publications/gifted-education-practices/grouping>
- [http://www.davidsongifted.org/db/Articles\\_id\\_10691.aspx](http://www.davidsongifted.org/db/Articles_id_10691.aspx)
- [http://www.edweek.org/tm/articles/2013/05/20/fp\\_olszewski.html](http://www.edweek.org/tm/articles/2013/05/20/fp_olszewski.html)
- <http://www.hoagiesgifted.org/grouping.htm>

---

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.nagc.org/sites/default/files/Advocacy/ESSA%20Q%20%2B%20A.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> <http://edexcellence.net/articles/leaving-talent-on-the-table-fixing-gifted-education-in-america>

**GSAC 2015-16 Members:**

Beth Dowd, co-chair

Josh Turner, co-chair

Dan Corcoran

Karen Freeman

Samara Goodman

Yun Kang

Selene Ko

Meredith Purple

Cynthia Torg

Penka Trimble

Nick Walkosak