

To: Arlington School Board  
From: Gifted Services Advisory Committee (GSAC)  
Date: October 8, 2018  
Subject: 2018-19 Recommending Year Report

## Introduction

GSAC is pleased to present our 2018-19 recommendations. The recommendations are designed to improve the educational opportunities for all APS students and improve upon gifted identification and teacher training designed for students who are gifted but which can be applied to all students.

1. We recommend APS direct middle school teachers to pilot an intensified English 7 course at all middle schools. The course would be open to all students. English language learners as well as students with disabilities should receive the supports they need to access this course. It would begin the process of providing appropriate foundational instruction that supports the rich offering of AP and IB classes at the high school level. GSAC also supports piloting an intensified English 8 class at all middle schools.
2. We recommend that a Teacher Specialist staff position be added to the Office of Gifted Services. This Specialist would be instrumental to further improving consistency across the training of teaching skills that can be applied not only to gifted students but to all students.

The first recommendation to pilot an intensified class is a modest first step to begin addressing the longstanding problem of APS middle schools' failure to meet the needs of advanced learners. Advanced learners represent over a third of APS middle school students. These students report not being challenged in their non-math courses, and teachers report not planning to meet the needs of advanced learners and not using materials designed for gifted students, despite the availability of these materials. A pilot would allow APS English teachers to address these issues for current middle school students and prepare those students for the more challenging coursework of high school.

As noted by Dr. Byrd in the school board work session on September 11, APS has enrolled students in IB/AP classes and now must support these students. From GSAC's perspective, allowing students to opt into intensified classes in middle school builds the necessary skills to succeed in these higher-level classes early, allowing students to scaffold skills leading into their high school work. A successful Intensified English 7 pilot would lead logically to an Intensified

English 8 pilot the following year. Together, the classes would build a strong foundation for high school intensified classes that already exist. APS could choose to reverse course, starting with the oldest students who are closest to high school first and add an Intensified English 7 pilot after a successful Intensified English 8 pilot.

The second recommendation of hiring a Specialist would (a) offer more training for teachers to incorporate differentiation into the classroom; (b) improve consistency in identification of gifted students; and (c) provide additional support for resource teachers for the gifted (RTG) across APS, improving services to all advanced students.

### **Recommendation 1: Pilot an intensified English 7 course, open to all students at the middle school level.**

2018-2024 Strategic Plan Alignment:

Goal One: Student Success – Provide multiple pathways

An intensified class allows for a second route through the middle school English classes, doubling the pathways currently available in ELA. If successful, additional pilots could be adopted in additional grades and subjects so that ultimately all core subject instruction could line up with math instruction – which offers an optional, intensified experience.

Goal Two: Student Well-Being – Healthy, Safe and Supported Students

This recommendation supports the whole child by providing the academic rigor that advanced students need, who comprise 30% of the APS middle and high school student population.

Calling on APS to provide English language learners and students with disabilities the support they need further aligns the recommendation with inclusion.

Goal Three: Engaged Workforce

This recommendation supports the workforce by allowing staff to teach classes with more rigor, giving instructors options for variation in their teaching. Allowing teachers to innovate and design a pilot to meet their students' needs is an important step towards longer-term goals of providing personalized learning.

Goal Four: Operational Excellence

This recommendation aligns resources with student needs and is driven by APS data showing the effectiveness of intensified instruction in challenging our advanced learners.

GSAC has recommended the implementation of intensified classes across the core subject classes in middle school since at least 2011. ACI voted this recommendation #5 overall for

2016/17, and the nationally recognized consultant APS hired to evaluate the gifted services program in 2016 recommended that APS implement intensified classes.

To date, APS has failed to implement this critical recommendation. It is long past time for APS to allow teachers to pilot intensified classes.

In meetings with the Department of Teaching and Learning and School Board members, objections have been raised to this recommendation previously, primarily that these classes could lead to “tracking.” GSAC believes that making these courses open to all students, and allowing for self-selection regardless of identification, can solve this issue. Opening the courses to all students allows for a flexibility which “tracking” never allowed. Thus, this recommendation inherently does not support “tracking.” The recommendation, however, does support the APS Strategic Plan goal of building access to all curricula without barriers.

Further, unlike math (which currently provides an intensified series of classes), other subjects do not necessarily build from one year to the next, instead covering diverse and separable topics. The nature of these courses means that a student can move between intensified and non-intensified levels and not get “stuck” in a particular track.

We recommend preparing students for the pilot by introducing the class at either a school-wide assembly, in STAR classes, or as part of English 6. Middle school administration and faculty could describe the pathways to students so that all are reasonably aware of the opportunity. Parents could be informed at PTA meetings or at a special meeting, similar to the meeting held to describe the new math pathways. We believe these actions will keep the classes from becoming “tracked” and allow students to take control of their education.

In 2016, APS commissioned Dr. Joyce VanTassel-Baska, Founding Director of The Center for Gifted Education at William and Mary, to evaluate gifted services in APS. Her study agreed with GSAC, recommending that APS

“Establish intensive classes in all the core subjects in each middle school. Given the success of both AP and IB for gifted learners, it is essential that all learners have access to advanced work earlier that can prepare them effectively for these hallmark secondary experiences.”

GSAC contends that Dr. VanTassel-Baska’s recommendation fits perfectly with APS Director of Secondary Education Ty Byrd’s work session comments that APS needs to support students in AP/IB classes.

Some staff contend that implementing the longstanding APS policy of clustering gifted students and delivering differentiation is the better solution. It is not a solution if it is not working effectively. Clustering for gifted services does not provide the same scope or reach as intensified classes. Intensified classes encourage academic growth for all of APS's advanced learners. Differentiation has been part of the APS model since at least 2003, and it is still not being delivered, 15 years later. From the 2008 Program Evaluation (which cites data back to 2003),

“The areas that require improvement are primarily in the differentiated instruction for gifted students in the general education classroom and the identification of students in science and social studies.”

In the follow-on 2016 study, Dr. VanTassel-Baska noted in “Discussion, Commendations and Recommendations:”

“There is little evidence that models of thinking are being employed in the schools observed. In the absence of using materials that promote higher level thinking systematically nor in teaching a model for it, gifted students may not be advancing appropriately in their learning.”

This final statement counters the very first goal in the APS Strategic Plan. The observation reflects that schools are not challenging students academically and not setting high expectations for all students. Finally, meeting with the Department of Teaching and Learning, GSAC asked if they had studies or academic papers that documented a successful implementation of differentiation meeting the academic needs of advanced learners. The Teaching and Learning representative responded that she did not have any references to provide GSAC.

The 2016 Program Evaluation continued the finding that differentiation in APS does not meet the needs of those students identified gifted:

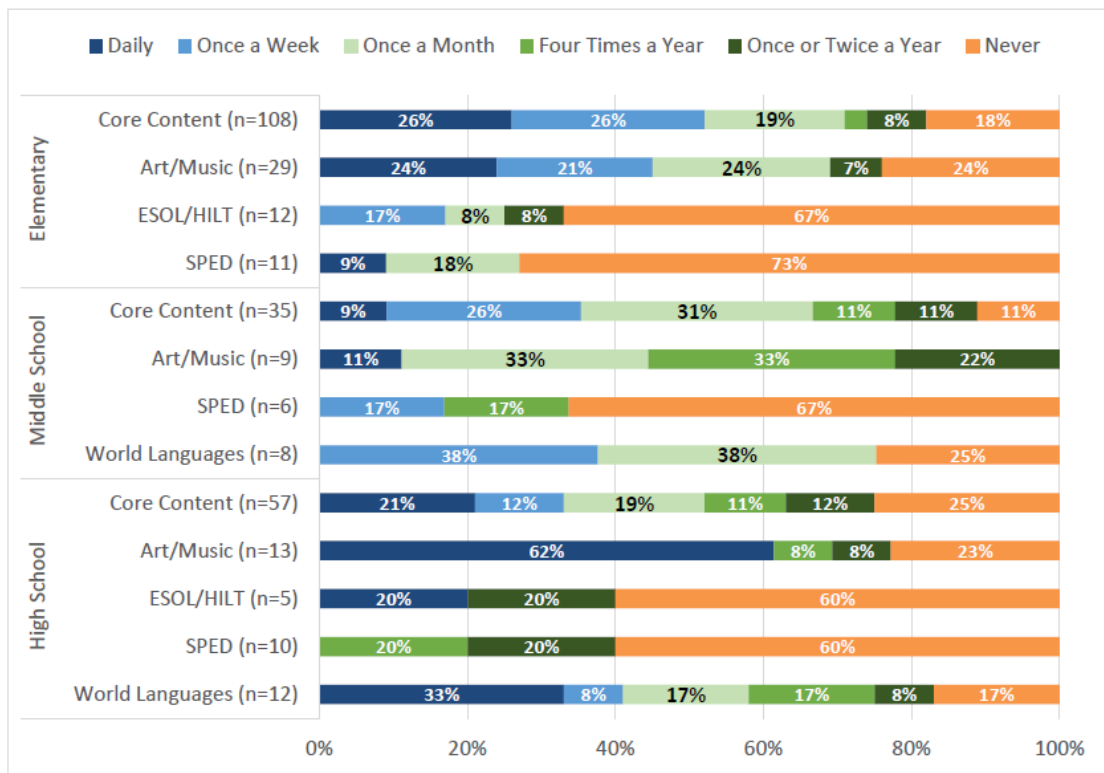
“Findings suggest that the pattern of instruction in classrooms where gifted students are served is not sufficiently broad in respect to the use of differentiation strategies nor deep in respect to effective utilization of them.”

In 2008, and again in 2016, external, expert evaluators have emphasized that differentiation is not meeting the needs of the identified gifted in APS. On the other hand, intensified classes allow advanced learners 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, while actual differentiated instruction is virtually non-existent. In most cases, teachers are not trained in differentiation for gifted learners. A recent survey of APS faculty showed that in non-intensified classes, teachers deliver differentiated lessons infrequently, even when they have been assigned a cluster group of gifted students.

The chart below shows data from the Gifted Services Program Evaluation. Focusing on middle school, one-third of core-content teachers who have gifted clusters deliver differentiated lessons on a daily or weekly basis. One-third report delivering differentiated instruction four or fewer times a year. The problem is worse for special education teachers with gifted students. For this group, almost three-quarters of respondents indicated they never delivered differentiated instruction.

**Figure 45: I use curriculum materials designed for gifted students. (Teachers who teach gifted students, by type)\***

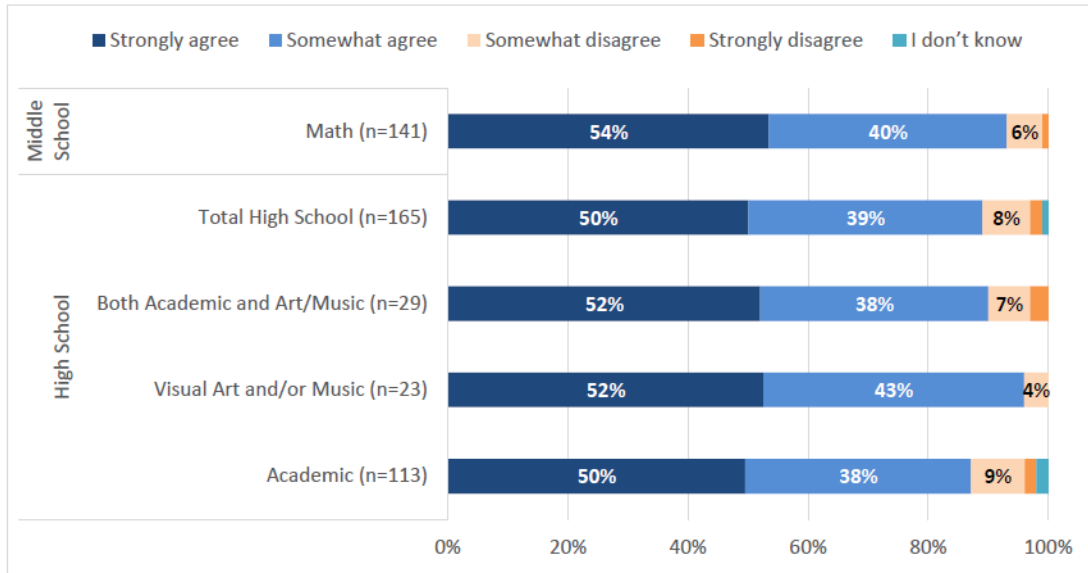


\*This question was asked only if a teacher indicated that they taught students identified as gifted. Fewer than five middle school ESOL/HILT teachers responded to this question; responses omitted.

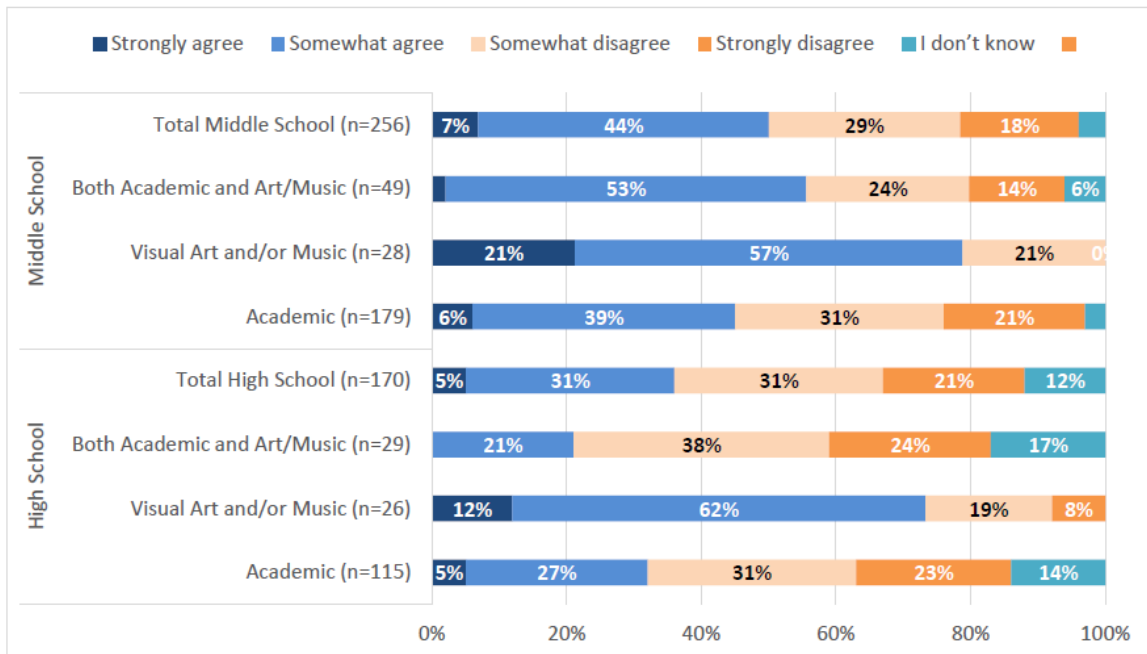
Students were also surveyed on how challenging their coursework was. Student responses indicate a clear rationale for offering intensified classes. In middle school, when students report taking an advanced or intensified class in math, they are much more likely to report that they are challenged and get to think creatively. While over half of students in an intensified or

advanced math class strongly agreed with a statement on being challenged (figure 56), only 6 percent of students in a non-advanced or intensive class reported the same (figure 55).

**Figure 56: The advanced math class I take challenges me to think at a higher level or solve problems creatively./The advanced classes I take (intensified, AP, or IB) challenge me to think at a higher level or solve problems creatively. (Secondary Students Identified as Gifted and Enrolled in MS Advanced Math or HS Intensified, AP, or IB Classes in their Gifted Area)**



**Figure 55: The general classes I take (non-advanced) challenge me to think at a higher level or solve problems creatively. (Middle School and High School Students)**



By not offering intensified classes at the middle school level, APS fails to meet the needs of all learners, sets lower expectations for some students than they merit, and does not challenge all students to their potential.

Staff at Teaching and Learning and School Board members have questioned whether the implementation of personalized learning or block scheduling could solve the problem of advanced learners not being challenged in class. While GSAC fully supports all efforts to provide individual learning opportunities that would be a good fit for every student, getting to that point cannot happen without a significant investment in time and other resources as teachers learn about and become familiar with new methods. Block scheduling, which changes the number of consecutive minutes a student can receive instruction, will not allow teachers to deliver appropriate lessons to all students. Teachers must cover the same amount of material in a block schedule that they must in a traditional schedule. The idea that a portion of the class can sit and work while instruction is delivered to the remainder of the class rests on the notion that there is significant time wasted in our current schedule. That seems unlikely.

Below, please find GSAC's idea for Intensified Classes. Open to all, flexible to allow students to take intensified one year and non-intensified the next and vice-versa. The idea is to give students a choice to take a class with more rigor and allow teachers to tune their instruction to a higher level.

## GSAC Proposed Intensified Courses

<u>What they are</u>	<u>What they are not</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Available to all</li><li>• Flexible, Open Enrollment</li><li>• Deeper dive/critical thinking</li><li>• Language Arts, Science, Social Studies</li><li>• A way to meet Whole Child needs of advanced learners</li><li>• A way to address equity issues<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>– give more kids from under-represented populations an advanced academic experience</li><li>– improve consistency of service delivery across MS</li></ul></li><li>• A way to build capacity for and a smooth transition to HS</li><li>• A way for kids to explore interests in greater depth</li><li>• Delivered in the classroom during the school day</li><li>• A way to reduce teaching complexity</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Only for gifted kids</li><li>• Tons of homework</li><li>• Fixed track</li><li>• Sequential</li><li>• More stressful</li><li>• After-school enrichment</li></ul>

The final ACI session last school year devoted considerable attention to this issue. The data presented at that meeting showed gifted students are not being challenged, many have not met the goal of one year of progress during the academic year, and only a fraction of APS teachers who have students identified as gifted have met minimum training standards. Sixty-two percent (62%) of teachers of identified gifted students do not meet the APS requirements to teach gifted students.

APS needs to pilot an intensified English 7 class in the 2019-2020 academic year, with additional subjects and grades to follow if the pilot meets with a reasonable amount of success. These classes will ensure that all students are engaged and challenged as well as prepared for the higher-level course offerings at the high school level. We support piloting an Intensified English 7 class as a logical pathway to an Intensified English 8 class. It would also allow students two opportunities (first in grade 7 and then again in grade 8) the opportunity to opt into an intensified class. APS could instead offer an Intensified English 8 class, which would provide one year of intensified English prior to entering the rich curriculum offered to advanced students at the high school level.

## **Recommendation 2: Add a Teacher Specialist staff position to the Office of Gifted Services**

2018-2024 Strategic Plan Alignment:

Goal One: Student Success – Provide multiple pathways

This recommendation allows for doubling of the Office of Gifted Services, which means more and diverse training for APS teachers. In turn, this means better and more varied instruction for all students.

Goal Two: Student Well-Being – Healthy, Safe and Supported Students

This recommendation supports the whole child by supporting the academic rigor that advanced students need.

Goal Three: Engaged Workforce

This recommendation supports the workforce by providing a means to more options for teachers to employ in their instruction.

Goal Four: Operational Excellence

This recommendation aligns resources with student (rigor) and teacher (tools/training), and is driven by APS data showing the great need for additional training of APS staff with respect to advanced learners.



At present, roughly one third of APS middle and 25% of high school students are identified as gifted. Currently, only one staff member at the APS Administration level – the Supervisor of Gifted Services – supports this entire population. Adding a Teacher Specialist position in the Gifted Services area would enable the office to maximize its support for Resource Teachers for the Gifted in APS schools across the county and better integrate with other programmatic services such as ESOL/HILT, Title 1, and Special Education. Adding a Teacher Specialist to the Office of Gifted Services would be consistent with other APS programs including English Language Arts, Math, Science, Social Studies, ESOL/HILT, Special Education, Mental Health, Arlington Tiered Support Services, Minority Achievement, and STEM.

One of the many tasks currently undertaken by Ms. McCullough, the Supervisor of Gifted Services, is to collaborate with other APS departments to increase the numbers of students from under-represented populations identified as gifted and to reach all APS students with innovative programming and quality curriculum. The added Teacher Specialist position would be critical to expanding the collaborative role of the Gifted Services Office throughout APS. For example, Gifted Services and Title 1 successfully introduced the Young Scholars program at multiple schools, worked with Social Studies to offer new Middle School Summer School enrichment options and revamped the Summer Laureate program.

The sheer number of responsibilities of the Gifted Services office requires additional staffing. The one staff member—Ms. McCullough—is responsible for, among other things:

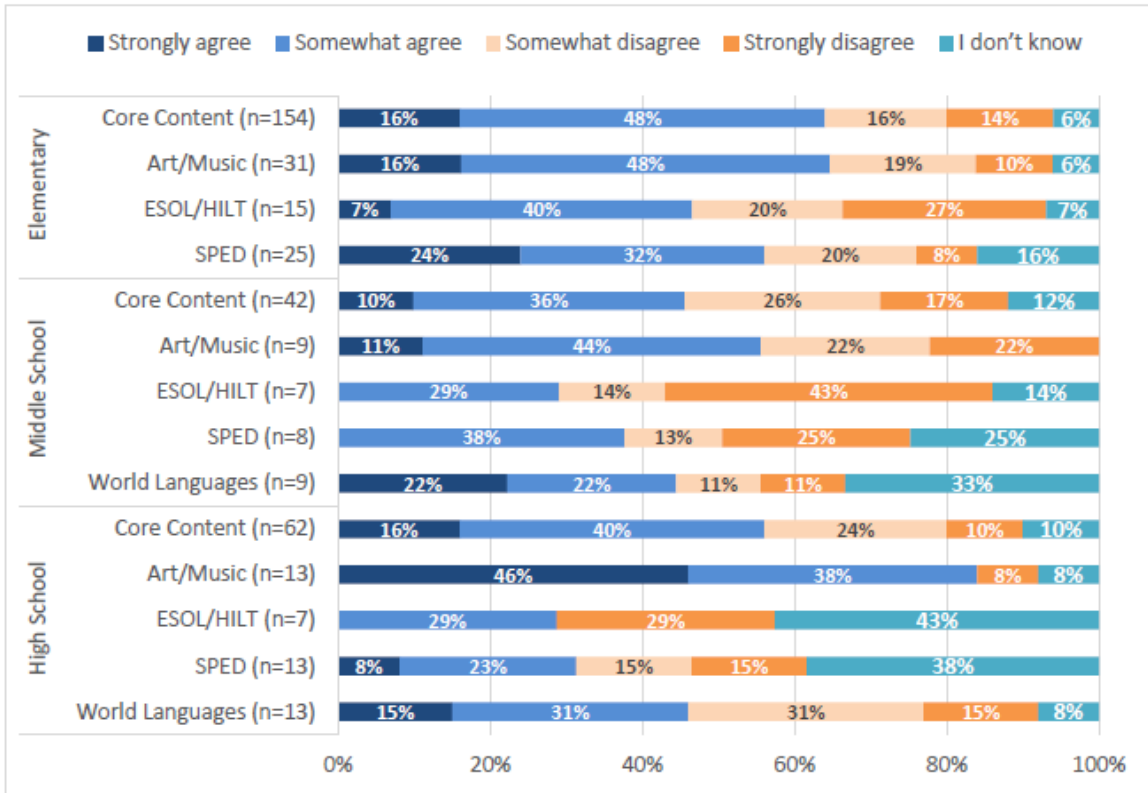
- advocating for gifted students through collaborative work with other APS departments,
- working with curriculum and program supervisors to develop and select materials for gifted learners,
- creating and managing adherence to the Local Plan for the Gifted,
- working with all APS administrators and teachers to facilitate curriculum implementation for gifted learners,
- working with schools to support the identification of gifted learners from diverse populations,
- administering and training staff for the eligibility processes,
- working with principals (e.g. classroom observations and feedback),
- developing, providing, and offering ongoing training and professional development for RTGs and classroom teachers across the county,
- evaluating and selecting APS submissions to Virginia Summer Residential Governor’s academic programs,
- setting up adjudications for all areas of arts at the county level for Visual Performing Arts programs

- working with Information Services on reports for the school system and subsequently training RTG's to use the reports,
- facilitating the work on the Young Scholars program,
- processing all acceleration cases; working with families and schools throughout the process,
- supporting and coaching all K-12 RTGs,
- leading, refining and revising supports for schools in the implementation of a collaborative cluster model,
- working with the Superintendent's Seminar coordinator to evolve the experience for secondary students,
- prescreening of all RTG candidates,
- coordinating with Special Education on twice exceptional student cases, and
- mediating with parents, teachers, RTGs and principals.

This office clearly needs more than one person to ensure this work is executed throughout all APS schools.

Figure 44 below shows the teacher responses to the program evaluation summary question concerning curriculum materials designed for differentiation for gifted clusters. A significant number of gifted cluster teachers report that they do not have access to these materials. But APS-purchased materials are available for teacher use across APS; teachers may need guidance to find and implement the instructional materials. A specialist would prove invaluable in providing this guidance.

**Figure 44: I have access to curriculum materials designed for gifted students. (Teachers by Type)**



A Teacher Specialist in the Gifted Services office would improve the awareness and training of APS cluster teachers. A Specialist would greatly promote the program development options organized by Gifted Services, as well as the materials purchased by APS to support differentiation. Teachers would have better awareness of the resources the county has for differentiation, as well as better understanding of how to use the materials to better meet the needs of students in heterogeneous classrooms.

Consistent feedback to GSAC from parents across the county is that gifted identification and delivery of services is inconsistent – something that we believe could be ameliorated with the addition of a Specialist in the gifted services office. An individual student’s experience is highly dependent on the school he or she attends and even more so on the student’s teacher. A Specialist in the Office of Gifted Services would reach more teachers, and improve the consistency of the experience seen by students.

In addition, the specialist could address a recurring problematic issue, the inconsistency of gifted services delivery. Figure 38 below (labeled as it appears in the Gifted Services Program Evaluation June 2017) demonstrates the inconsistency of gifted services delivery. Survey results tabulated in the graph show a great disparity in the services provided to gifted students across APS. The percentage of core content middle school teachers who make plans to challenge their

gifted students daily matches the percentage who make plans only once per month. Two identified gifted students, with two different teachers, may have wildly disparate academic experiences in the same subject. Obviously, no two teachers are exactly alike, but the experience of a student whose teacher plans to challenge her everyday will be starkly different from a student whose teacher only plans to challenge her once per month. The gifted services office regularly provides training opportunities, and teachers sign up for them. But without additional staff, the number of sessions that can be delivered is necessarily limited. A specialist could facilitate teachers' understanding of how to challenge students more consistently.

**Figure 38: I make specific plans to challenge my gifted students. (Teachers who teach gifted students, by type)\***

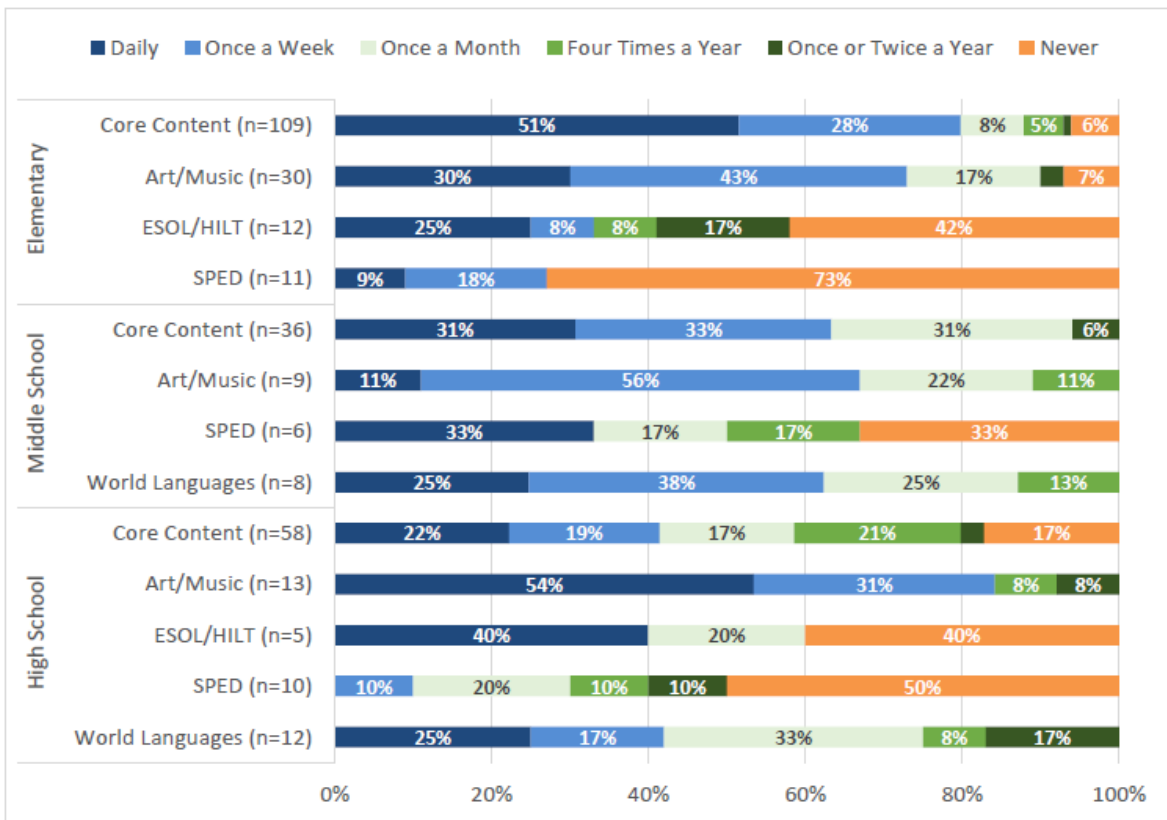
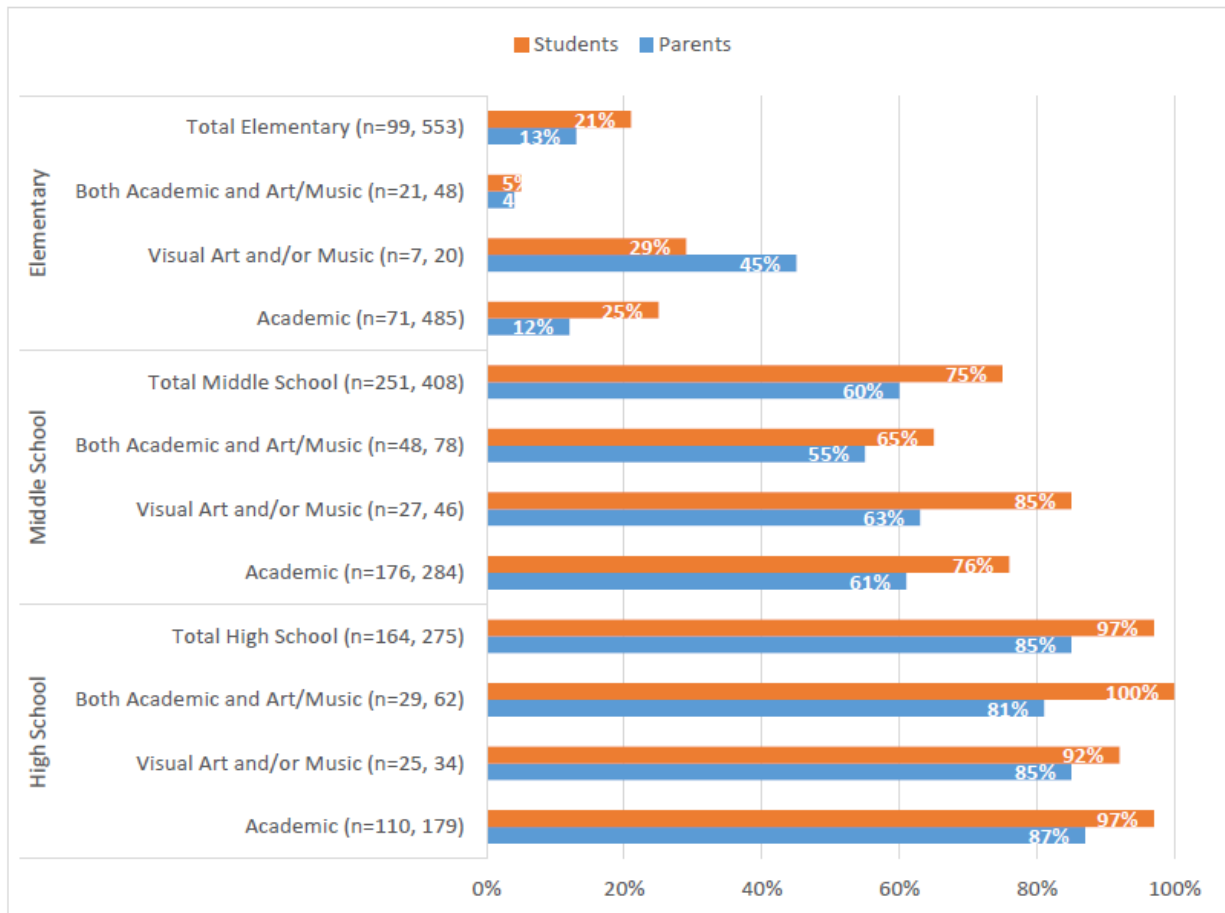


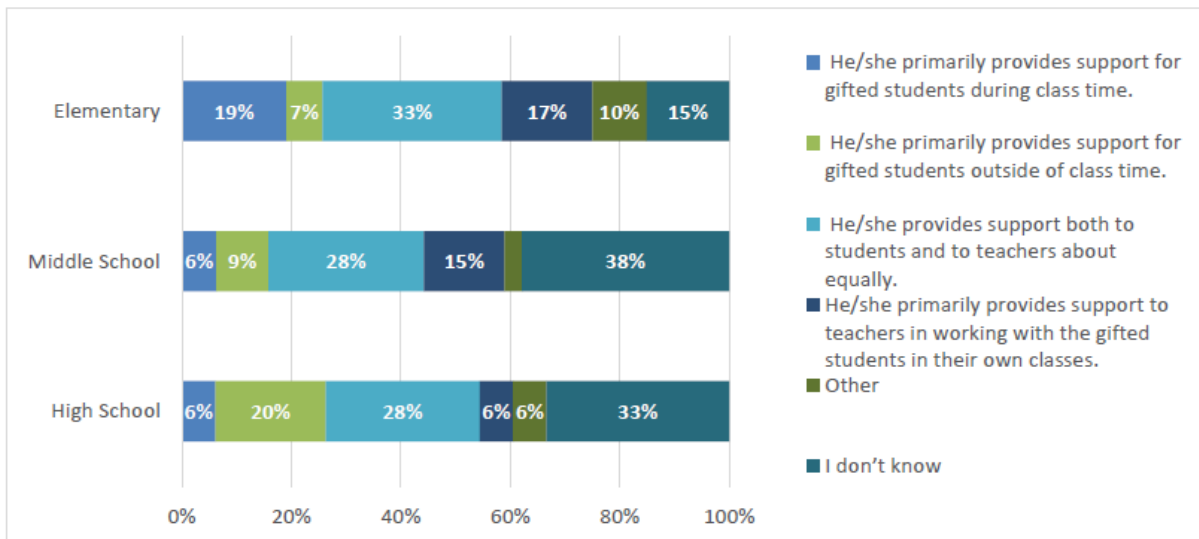
Figure 19 displays survey results of students and parents responding that they received no services as a result of gifted identification. The results actually do show consistency, just not the kind we want to see – the older the student, the less likely the parent/student perceived gifted services delivery. Almost all (97 percent) of identified gifted high school students and 87 percent of their parents indicated that the student received no gifted services in academic subjects.

**Figure 19: Services Received as a Result of Being Identified Gifted: None that I know of (Students, Parents)\***



Finally, Figure 29 below provides teacher responses on the role of the Resource Teacher for the Gifted (RTG) in their respective school settings. While the above figures demonstrate the misalignment between parents, students, and teachers with respect to delivery of gifted services, Figure 29 looks at teacher, administrator, and counselor perceptions of the primary role of their co-worker, the RTG. Astoundingly, 33 percent of high school and 38 percent of middle school staff responded they do not know the role of the RTG in their school. The role of the RTG will vary somewhat between schools, especially at the elementary level. However, Arlington’s push-in model for the delivery of gifted services indicates the primary role of the RTG is to support the teachers. Certainly, in the middle and high schools, the ratio of RTG to students means the RTG has to support the teachers.

**Figure 29: Which of the following most closely matches how you would describe the role of the resource teacher for the Gifted (RTG) at your school? (Teachers, Counselors, Administrators, by Level)**



Differentiation in lessons for gifted students remains inconsistent, who receives services and how those services are delivered is inconsistent, and the perception of the role of the RTG is inconsistent. The figures presented here are just a sample. The Program Evaluation document contains a plethora of examples of the inconsistency of gifted services across APS.

### Conclusions

GSAC firmly believes that intensified classes are the best way to meet the needs of the identified gifted in APS at this time – along with all advanced learners and others seeking a challenging class environment. The past two program evaluations show clearly that differentiation was not meeting the needs of the identified gifted in 2008, and the 2017 report lucidly demonstrates differentiation is still not meeting those needs today. In contrast, the report shows how well intensified classes are meeting the needs of our advanced learners.

GSAC firmly believes the Gifted Services Supervisor needs a specialist to effectively support the large numbers of identified gifted in Arlington as well as teachers who need help in challenging all their students. The addition of a Specialist to the Gifted Services office would greatly improve the consistency of identification, services delivered to students, and the contributions of the RTGs. A Specialist would help create and conduct training, work directly with RTGs and teachers and help support other program offices in APS – greatly ameliorating the problems noted with consistency and service delivery.