

MEMORANDUM

TO: Arlington School Board

FROM: Gifted Services Advisory Committee

DATE: October 24, 2021

SUBJECT: Draft Report and Recommendations

COMMITTEE CO-CHAIRS: Greg Eastman and Carlisle Levine

COMMITTEE MEMBERS: Dan Corcoran, Alan Arnold, Tara Bradshaw, Shelly Stoneman, Reg Goeke, Marcio Silveira, Gigi Richardson, Jamie Borrell, Ryan Faith, Heather Selig, Sherry Haideri, Hsieh Nindorf, Amy Smith Beaumont, Yun Kang, Wesley Jo, Tamara McFadden, Adrienne McQuillan, Dawn Nelson, Cynthia Torg

STAFF LIAISON: Cheryl McCullough

Introduction

The Gifted Services Advisory Committee seeks to ensure that all gifted students and advanced learners in APS can achieve their full potential. This requires offering every student access to academic, music and arts teaching that can challenge them, as well as the supports they need to benefit from that teaching. This year, we continue to focus on:

1. How APS meets the academic and social emotional needs of all advanced/gifted learners in middle school

Recommendation: *Institute open-enrollment, intensified English, social studies, and science choice courses at all middle schools*

- Provide a comprehensive program giving students choice in areas of strength
- Leverage the ATSS system of support for all learners by providing appropriate and ongoing supports to *2e students, English language learners, and underachieving students to increase access, rigor and engagement*
- Create system of advocacy to ensure courses match the demographics of each school
- Build resiliency, perseverance and confidence in a middle school experience that will increase access (reduce equity gap) and successful completion (provide foundations of knowledge and skills) in AP/IB courses

2. What structures APS needs to have in place to support the collaborative cluster model, talent development and continuing to increase the identification of historically underrepresented populations

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

- Provide structure to increase collaboration between Offices of Equity and Excellence, English Learners and Special Education to support talent development and increase equitable access and advocacy in schools
 - Provide increased support to cluster teachers as they deliver differentiated, comprehensive units/lessons to students who demonstrate need or potential for advanced work within heterogeneously grouped classrooms
 - Provide increased support to the one RTG per building who support differentiation in all content areas and lead screening and identification of gifted learners
-

Recommendation #1: Institute open-enrollment, intensified English, social studies, and science courses at all middle schools, along with adequate supports for 2e students, English language learners, and others who might need assistance to thrive in these classes.

- Currently 82% of APS students enrolled in the only advanced/intensified option available: Algebra. This proposal provides ~80% of students with opportunities that may be better choices for them.
- Many families supplement opportunities outside of the school day so that their child has rigorous, engaging experiences in their learning; we believe all families should have access to choice, rigor and engagement within the school day in middle school
- These open-enrollment, intensified classes will provide a greater range of advanced opportunities for a greater diversity of students. This is a tangible, comprehensive program and first step to address the needed rigor and engagement in middle school while providing the foundation for more students to be successful in AP/IP high school classes thus reducing the equity gap.
- APS will increase equity and ongoing support by developing a system of outreach and advocacy to families involving administrators, counselors, instructional specialists to include RTGs, special education teachers, EL teachers, equity and excellent coordinators to ensure courses match the demographics of each school. This creates a tangible connection between intensified courses and equity.

The problem

We need to ensure that every year every student receives the academic year of learning they are promised in all of their subjects, regardless of their starting point, to achieve their potential. Currently, this is not the case. Our APS gifted services program evaluation and subsequent data collected by APS show that middle school students identified as gifted (representing 30% of all middle school APS students) are not receiving the academic year of learning in English¹ that APS promises via the currently available general education classes. In contrast, those same students, who have intensified/advanced math classes, are receiving an academic year of learning in math. While the study focused on gifted students as part of the Gifted Program evaluation, we believe it applies to most APS middle school students. We hope that all students would find an intensified class they could take in middle school.

There is a large unmet need for intensified courses in APS middle school. 82% of APS middle school students take algebra I in 7th or 8th grades, in other words 82% of APS students want the only intensified class available to them. Math may not be the student's preference for an intensified class but it is their only option and providing a greater diversity of choices may cause some students to switch to the subjects better suited to them.

Other school systems in the area solve this problem by offering gifted center or honors course options in all academic areas in middle school. Chesterfield County, Fairfax County, Virginia Beach offer MS Gifted Center Options. Alexandria, Fairfax, Falls Church, Loudoun, and Prince William offer Honors Courses. APS stands alone in *only* offering intensified courses in math.²

Middle school is a critical time for students to receive the academic challenges they need. It is a time when students begin to identify their interests and strengths, but also a time when students start to disengage from school for many reasons, including by not being encouraged to nurture their academic potential. Unfortunately, APS's survey of MS students found a significant number who reported a lack of academic challenge. This disengagement can increase the equity gap.

¹ The program evaluation focused on English and math. We do not have data on learning in science and social studies.

² See Appendix for data.

The results of this situation are visible in APS' equity gap in AP and IB high school classes. The lack of diversity of intensified middle school classes reduces students' opportunities to be challenged at a younger age and hinders their preparation for AP and IB classes. There is no other tangible program that addresses this equity gap. The lack of intensified classes also increases the equity gap because some students with resources are able to supplement to get the intensified experiences needed to prepare them for advanced high school classes.

How APS is addressing this problem

APS seeks to address this problem by having classrooms of students with diverse learning needs and asking teachers to differentiate their teaching to them. While this push-in model is admirable, the challenge of meeting all learning needs in large, heterogeneous classrooms results too frequently in the model not working for advanced learners. Even the most talented teachers report that meeting the needs of the full range of learners in their classroom is exceedingly difficult to do and the group that does not get their ongoing attention are the gifted students.

Proposed new solution

To help APS middle school students achieve their full potential, APS should establish open enrollment, intensified middle school courses in English, social studies, and science, with adequate supports for students who need them.³ To be clear, this is not a gifted student related proposal, it should be open to all students who are interested. The classes should have no prerequisites.

Our data demonstrate that the current push-in model is not giving our advanced learners in middle school the year of growth they are promised in these subjects. This can have significant consequences and will widen the equity gap when you have some families who are supplementing rigorous learning experiences outside of school while others are trusting and relying on the schools to give their children the support and advanced opportunities.

Open enrollment, intensified middle school courses in English, social studies, and science would offer middle school students the same benefits that are offered by the currently existing advanced middle school math courses. Enrolled students, who otherwise would have risked not having their academic needs met in general education classes, would be challenged to achieve their potential. Students currently flock to advanced math classes, whether or not math is a particular interest or strength for them, because advanced math classes are the only classes available that might meet their academic needs. In this new model, students who are interested and strong in other academic subjects would have equally challenging courses from which they could choose. **Having a greater diversity of intensified classes should attract a greater diversity of students.**

For open enrollment, intensified English, social studies, and science classes in middle school to successfully attract all advanced learners – including students from underrepresented groups, they must be offered in a very intentional way. The success of these courses will depend on administrators, counselors, teachers, RTGs, and instructional specialists at elementary and middle school levels focusing on students who might benefit from intensified middle school classes, but who might not think to enroll in them on their own. They must encourage these students to enroll, and continue to support them, once they are enrolled.

Supporting advanced learners from underrepresented groups, so that they can take advantage of intensified middle school classes must begin in the early years of elementary school. Elementary school RTGs must be allowed to devote their full attention to identifying gifted children from underrepresented groups and to supporting teachers' efforts to

³ In the future there could also be intensified classes in arts and music.

meet their needs. Teachers must then pay close attention to all advanced learners from underrepresented groups (e.g. Young Scholars and Talent Development) and offer them the opportunities for critical and creative thinking and ongoing support they need to take on academic challenges.

With open enrollment, intensified courses in English, social studies, and science, tracking would not be an issue. Because these courses do not build on each other year-after-year, students would be free to select these courses as they pleased, choosing general education courses some years and intensified courses for others. With teachers, counselors, and RTGs focused on encouraging students from underrepresented groups to take these courses and with adequate supports in place for them, the classroom composition of these intensified courses should and can mirror that of their schools.

Budgetary implications

There is no cost to offering these courses. All staff required for this shift are already in place. The existence of these courses will ease teachers' burdens, since teachers teaching general education and intensified courses will each be required to meet a narrower range of learning needs. Through APS' Gifted Services, all teachers already have access to curricula designed to meet the needs of advanced learners. Training materials exist and RTGs are in place to support teachers in their efforts.

Strategic plan alignment

This recommendation is aligned with APS' mission and vision. Among the strategic plan's core values, it aligns with Excellence and Equity, and among the goals, with Student Success, Student Well-Being, and Engaged Workforce.

Committee vote: The recommendation received unanimous support when we voted.

Recommendation #2: Add a second Teacher Specialist staff position to the Office of Gifted Services to focus on supporting gifted services at the elementary school level.

APS Gifted Services is understaffed. Gifted Services supports all students in APS with training and materials for teachers that reach and engage learners of all levels, not just the 30% of APS students identified as gifted.⁴ There is one K-12 supervisor and one specialist in the Office of Gifted Services and this understaffing stands in stark contrast to the staffing that other APS offices experience.

How APS is addressing the problem

Providing a budget for a first Teacher Specialist staff position for the Office of Gifted Services last year doubled the amount of guidance and support that the Office of Gifted Services can offer APS' schools. This was a positive move towards meeting the needs of APS' gifted students and advanced learners.

There is currently funding for a second Teacher Specialist staff position for the Office of Gifted Services in this year's budget. With the addition of this third position in the Office of Gifted Services, the Gifted Services staff will be better able to focus on the different needs of different age groups among APS' students and better support teachers in meeting those students' needs.

⁴ 30% of Arlington students in Middle School and High School have been identified as gifted. 20% of all students are identified as gifts across K-12, but that includes Kindergartners, none of whom are identified as gifted as the testing does not happen til later and this artificially lowers the percentage of students identified.

Proposed new solution

Given the importance of meeting the academic needs of all APS students, and the high percentage of APS students who are advanced learners or gifted, we urge the School Board to keep the second Teacher Specialist staff position in the current budget. We recognize that APS is facing budget pressures, but we hope that, given the degree of understaffing, the position in the budget will be protected.

Budgetary implications

There is no budgetary implication as it maintains the position.

Strategic plan alignment

This recommendation is aligned with APS' mission and vision. Among the strategic plan's core values, it most closely aligns with Excellence and Equity, and among the goals, with Student Success, Student Well-Being, and Engaged Workforce.

Committee vote: The recommendation received unanimous support when we voted.

Potential Recommendation for Next Year: Ensure that Resource Teachers for the Gifted (RTGs) assigned to each school remain fully dedicated to supporting gifted services.

The pandemic has caused greater work and a shortage of teachers and staff, thus putting enormous pressure on APS. We appreciate that everyone has pitched in through these times. We hope that going forward the work imbalance will be rectified and RTGs will be allowed to focus fully on their jobs. As a result of RTGs being tasked with assignments outside of their roles (i.e., teaching classes in addition to their RTG role, acting as testing coordinator, being placed in classrooms when a teacher has not been hired, being substitutes), this impacts their time to plan with cluster teachers on an ongoing basis and work with teachers to build portfolios to find and nurture historically underrepresented students for gifted services. Ultimately it is the students who benefit most from this talent development who will be negatively impacted the most.

Appendices

Fairfax County data on middle school total enrollment, Honors enrollment, and percent of honors enrollment by race.

Ethnic	Grades 7 and 8	In Honors (1-4)	
White	66,001	6,342	9.60%
Black	18,022	1,474	8.20%
Hispanic	48,507	3,302	6.80%
American Indian	457	39	8.50%
Asian	35,625	2,801	7.90%
Two or more	10,533	906	8.60%
Native Hawaiian	225	24	10.70%
	179,370	14,888	8.30%

Gifted Center and Honors Course options in Middle Schools in the Region, SY 2020-2021

Gifted Center Options in Middle School		
Chesterfield County	Math, ELA, Science, Social Studies, World Languages	Formal screening for placement
Fairfax County	Math, ELA, Science, Social Studies	Formal screening for placement
Virginia Beach	Math, ELA, Science, Social Studies, World Languages	Formal screening for placement
Honors Course Options in Middle School		
Alexandria	Math, ELA, Science, Social Studies	Prerequisites in math only
Arlington	Math	Prerequisites required
Fairfax	Math, ELA, Science, Social Studies	Prerequisites in math only
Falls Church	Math, ELA	Prerequisites in math only

Loudoun	Math, ELA, Science, Social Studies	Prerequisites in math only
Prince William	Math, ELA, Science, Social Studies	Prerequisites in math only