

**Advanced Academic Programs
Advisory Committee**

**Report on Advanced Academic Programs
of the Fairfax County Public Schools**

May 5, 2009

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Introduction

The Advanced Academic Programs Advisory Committee (AAPAC) is pleased to provide its annual report on Advanced Academic Programs of the Fairfax County Public Schools (FCPS).

It has been an informative year and a great opportunity to continue our work with Assistant Superintendent of Instructional Services, Peter Noonan; the Director of the Office of Elementary Instruction and Library Information Services, Mary Ann Ryan; the Director of the Office of Middle School Instruction, Linda Whitfield; and the Coordinator of Advanced Academic Programs, Carol Horn, all of whom have done an outstanding job of providing us with requested information and historical perspective. We are also grateful for the assistance of Cheryl McCullough, Kirsten Maloney, Natalie Livingston, Anne Horak, Linda Cable and Faye Brenner of the Advanced Academic Programs office team. Also attending several of our meetings throughout this year was FCPS School Board member Brad Center.

Our report this year has two components:

- Recommendations in two sections for the 2009-10 school year
- Review of the Local Plan for the Education of Gifted Students

The AAPAC appreciates the efforts of the School Board, Superintendent Jack Dale, administrators, teachers and staff in continuing to address the needs of the growing and changing population of advanced learners in Fairfax County.

Section I

For the 2008-2009 school year, the Advanced Academic Programs Advisory Committee (AAPAC) looked at the revised charge “AAPAC will provide recommendations on how the school system can support and meet the needs of gifted students in achieving the School Board’s three student achievement goals with an emphasis on assessment.”

In order to fulfill this charge, the Committee heard from expert speakers from the Center for Gifted Education at William & Mary College who made a presentation on current assessment research for gifted learners; read current journal articles on assessment; learned about eCART; and reviewed the assessment vehicles that are currently in use within FCPS levels of gifted service. AAPAC focused on how these assessment practices within FCPS can be expanded or enhanced to ensure that students continue to grow and learn in all academic areas.

An examination of current practices within the AAP continuum of services underscores that a variety of methods is already being used to assess gifted learners. The Standards of Learning tests measure proficiency toward grade level objectives. As students in Advanced Academic programs frequently enter school with the content knowledge needed to succeed on these tests, scores often cannot provide a complete assessment of the intellectual growth of these learners. As a result, the committee focused on how alternative methods of assessment currently in use can best track students’ progress over time and recommends the following:

Recommendation 1: Assessment should promote student and parent understanding of individual progress toward mastery of content, skills, and higher-level thinking

In order to achieve this, the Committee recommends that FCPS should:

- Review alternative assessments currently embedded in the curriculum and identify passage points to measure growth over time;
- Include more open-ended assessments in e-CART;
- Develop a Continuum of Expertise from novice to expert so student progress can be evaluated against developmentally-appropriate checkpoints, with a continued focus on passage points to communicate students’ development and academic growth;
- Align a reporting system with this continuum of expertise that reflects progress towards mastery; and
- Promote individual goal-setting and self-reflection by students.

Recommendation 2: Ideally, vertical articulation of students should continue to take place as they rise through grade levels, ensuring growth and appropriate subject area acceleration.

To that end, the Committee recommends that FCPS should:

- Continue training teachers on how to utilize professional learning communities to improve assessment of gifted learners;
- Utilize performance assessments and vertical teams to increase the reliability in documenting growth in critical thinking and reasoning; and
- Continue using formative assessment to inform instructional decisions regarding acceleration, depth, and complexity.

Section II

In February 2009, the Advanced Academic Programs Advisory Committee (AAPAC) was asked by FCPS School Board member and AAPAC liaison, Brad Center, to consider the current delivery of services model for Advanced Academic Programs in Fairfax County Public Schools and make recommendations to the school board.

AAPAC has three sets of recommendations for the School Board:

1. It is vital that both traditional GT centers (now Level IV) and existing Local Level IV services at the elementary level continue to receive strong support.
2. Although we are sensitive to the current economic climate, this committee recommends that transportation to Level IV centers serving grades 3 – 8 and Thomas Jefferson High School for Science and Technology (TJHSST) continue to be provided.
3. FCPS should continue to support the current delivery model of Level I through III services; advanced academic programs staff should continue to enhance their communication, particularly by making use of their informative web site and other outreach efforts, to explain the levels of service.

Recommendation 1: It is vital that both traditional GT centers (now Level IV) and existing Local Level IV services at the elementary level continue to receive strong support.

As has been highlighted by earlier Advanced Academic Programs Advisory Committee (formerly GTAC) reports, traditional GT centers (Level IV) provide instructional benefits to students by grouping a critical mass of students who are at the same/similar academic level. High-achieving students grouped at a center create a unique learning environment. Although the curriculum, instruction, and the training of the teachers are comparable to Local Level IV, the peer groups are different in a Level IV center. There are students whose academic and social-emotional needs are best served by the grouping available only in a Level IV center.

For students who choose to enroll in the Level IV Center, rigorous instruction is provided with other Level IV center-eligible students. This may seem a minor difference, but educators have agreed that the community of students in the classroom influences the pace and rigor of instruction.

The creation of Local Level IV services at the elementary level allows Level IV center-eligible students access to the same Level IV center curriculum at their base schools. It also expands advanced learning opportunities for other students identified as having specific academic strengths. The innovation of Local Level IV provides families with a

viable alternative for Level IV center-eligible students who seek more rigorous instruction in their base schools.

As an unintended consequence of the expansion of Local Level IV services, there is a concern that the Level IV center population may decline. FCPS staff should continue to monitor these decisions and their outcomes over time and provide information as requested to the School Board. FCPS should consider steps to maintain both options and protect the educational needs of all center-eligible students wishing to avail themselves of advanced academic services either through Local Level IV or a Level IV center program.

Recommendation 2: Although we are sensitive to the current economic climate, this committee recommends that transportation to Level IV centers serving grades 3 – 8 and Thomas Jefferson High School for Science and Technology (TJHSST) continue to be provided.

Given the importance of peer groups at traditional GT (Level IV) centers as well as at TJHSST, transportation for eligible students to Level IV centers (even if Local Level IV is available) and TJHSST should continue. Ending transportation to the centers may eliminate this opportunity for students whose parents cannot provide transportation. This could impact the viability of existing Level IV centers.

Recommendation 3: FCPS should continue to support the current delivery model of Level I through III services; advanced academic programs staff should continue to enhance their communication, particularly by making use of their informative web site and other outreach efforts, to explain the levels of service.

There is widespread support of the current delivery model for gifted services K - 12. FCPS Advanced Academic Programs offer a continuum of advanced academic services that provides all students with opportunities to engage in complex subject matter and helps prepare them for more challenging and rigorous classes as they advance in grade level. The county has four levels of advanced academic service; and teachers, administrators, and specialists work together to make decisions that will provide the level of service that is most appropriate for each learner, knowing that many will move to another level when they are ready.

Every elementary school provides three levels of advanced academic service for students in grades K-6 through the collaborative efforts of the Advanced Academic Resource Teacher (AART) and classroom teachers. Level I consists of model thinking lessons that are taught to all students. These lessons are designed to develop critical and creative thinking through learning activities that extend and enrich the Program of Studies. Students who exhibit specific academic strengths are considered for differentiated services, or Level II, within the classroom. These services are specifically planned to provide more challenging content, assignments, resources, and/or instructional groupings within the classroom. In grades three through six, Level III advanced academic services

are delivered through a collaborative model that is designed to strengthen direct services for advanced learners and to enhance the quality of instruction offered to all students. The AART collaborates with classroom teachers to design differentiated lessons that challenge students to learn at a faster rate, think on a higher level, and study sophisticated and complex content through extensions of the FCPS Program of Studies. In addition, many elementary schools with large numbers of students from diverse cultural, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds have implemented the Young Scholars model. Young Scholars is a K-6 model that is designed to increase the proportion of historically underrepresented students in advanced academic programs.

At the middle school level, school-based services are offered through Honors classes in the four core subject areas. Middle school Honors ensures that students who have specific academic strengths will be considered for appropriate placement in one or more Honors classes. Students who take one or two Honors classes receive Level II gifted services. Students who take three Honors classes receive Level III services, and students who participate in four Honors classes receive Level IV services.

Advanced academic programs in Fairfax County high schools consist primarily of two nationally and internationally recognized rigorous programs – the Advanced Placement (AP) and the International Baccalaureate (IB). Both are comprehensive programs with high standards and challenging externally assessed examinations. AP and IB courses are open to all students with the appropriate prerequisites for the courses; these courses are primarily for 11th and 12th grade students with a few exceptions. A few schools also offer a small sample of dual enrollment courses (high school and college).

Over the past several weeks, the Advanced Academic Programs staff has worked with AAPAC to provide more information on the Advanced Academic Programs' web site www.fcps.edu/DIS/gt. AAPAC recommends that this effort continue in order to enhance communication with families.

The current organization of advanced academic services in the county is geared to universal availability of academic challenge. Students receiving services at the middle school level have often been part of the program during elementary years. The vertical integration of advanced academic services K – 12 should continue to be a priority.

Review of the Local Plan for the Education of Gifted Students

Virginia Code Section 22.1-18.1 requires the AAPAC to review the local plan for the education of gifted students and determine the extent to which the plan was implemented. The Local Plan for Fairfax County Public Schools was submitted to the Commonwealth in 2006 and will be in effect until 2011. The objectives due in 2009 and their results can be found in Attachment B.

Conclusion

This year, the members of AAPAC continued the study and evaluation of assessments and focused on how alternative methods of assessments can best track the progress of students over time. As a result, the Committee recommends that assessments should promote student and parent understanding of individual progress and that focusing on vertical articulation of students should continue to take place. Further, in response to the request that the Committee consider the current delivery of services, the Committee recommends that FCPS should continue to give strong support to Levels I through III in all schools and to Level IV services at both traditional centers and at the local level. And, while we are all mindful of the current economic climate, the Committee recommends that transportation to Level IV centers and to Thomas Jefferson High School for Science and Technology (TJHSST) continue to be provided.