

**Gifted and Talented
Advisory Committee**

**Annual Report on Gifted and Talented Programs
of the Fairfax County Public Schools**

May 1, 2007

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Introduction

The Gifted and Talented Advisory Committee (GTAC) is pleased to provide its Annual Report on Gifted and Talented (GT) 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 for Instructional Services, Ann Monday; 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 GT Programs, Carol Horn, all of whom have done an outstanding job of providing us with requested information and historical perspective. Also attending several of our meetings throughout this year were FCPS School Board members Cathy Belter, Kaye Kory and Janet Oleszek.

Our report this year has three components:

- Changing the name of Gifted and Talented Programs
- Guidelines for offering Local Level IV Services (formerly school-based centers)
- Review of the Local Plan for the Education of Gifted Students

The GTAC appreciates the efforts of the School Board, the Superintendent, administrators, teachers and staff in continuing to address the needs of the growing and changing population of gifted students in Fairfax County.

Attachment A lists the committee membership and voting record.

Changing the name of Gifted and Talented Programs

Background

As part of one of the three recommendations presented by GTAC to the School Board in May 2006, the Committee suggested developing a framework for creating and fostering a positive school climate in schools which currently have a GT Center. We recognized that administrators and teachers must promote respectful interactions between center and non-center students. Finally, we recommended that schools should integrate GT students into the total school community through team building and improved communication, as well as provide parents a better understanding of the GT curriculum or Level IV service. The Committee recognizes and commends the ongoing efforts by the School Board and its staff to respond to these issues.

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During the course of the GTAC discussions this year, the question was raised about the name of the program itself. We know that the State of Virginia requires Fairfax County Public Schools to provide gifted services, but it does not designate the name of those services. Several choices were discussed and, while some members did not support a change, the majority of the Committee membership approved of a name change from Gifted and Talented Services to Advanced Academic Programs. It was felt by the Committee that this name change emphasizes efforts to put a label on the service being offered and recognizes the academic nature of the program.

Guidelines for Offering Local Level IV Services

Background

Throughout the course of this year, GTAC was provided information including: a 2006 White Paper entitled “Level IV Services at the Local School;” the process a school must go through in order to be considered for Local Level IV services; a sample of the Local Level IV services plan and parent survey; the geographic distribution of local schools offering Level IV services by Cluster within the County; number of students who elected to remain at their local school and receive Level IV services; and additional information concerning both boundary and transportation issues. (The complete “Continuum of Gifted Services” provided by FCPS can be found in Attachment B.)

The issue of school-based centers (hereafter called Local Level IV services) was included in a “Status Report” prepared by GTAC and presented to the School Board in October 2005. In that report, the committee found the following benefits in schools offering Local Level IV services:

- Through differentiation for advanced learners teachers ensure students having specific academic strengths are challenged through flexible instructional groupings.
- Collaboration between general education and GT center teachers often results in all students taking part in events. The events may have been originated in GT centers but are now a part of the grade level program, benefiting a broader range of students.
- Students can experience the GT center curriculum without leaving their local school community.
- Helps reduce overcrowding.

The following disadvantages or drawbacks included:

- There is a greater chance the classes will be multi-age or a single grade level class, possibly providing fewer opportunities for students to change their group of classroom peers. Some parents object to multi-age classrooms and/or smaller GT centers.
- GT center teachers have a smaller cadre of colleagues who are trained in gifted education for planning and collaboration.

The committee noted that while further study is required, and final recommendations were not included, a summary of some of the findings of the committee included:

- Schools offering Local Level IV services provide a greater continuum of services.
- In schools offering Local Level IV services, teachers have noted other students “rising to the top” in the general education classrooms.

- The program provides more options and access to services to parents and students and Local Level IV services can assist children with different strengths through flexible grouping.

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Traditional GT centers draw eligible students from two or more schools whereas Local Level IV services allow students to remain at their base school and receive the GT center curriculum. The first school to offer Local Level IV services was Beech Tree Elementary in FY04. Currently, there are 17 schools offering Local Level IV services at the elementary level and in FY08 there will be 22. In grades 3-6, there are 5,055 students enrolled in traditional centers and 310 center-eligible students receiving Level IV services at their local school. Initially, there was concern expressed by a few members of the GTAC that allowing schools to offer Level IV services at the local level would eventually lead to the dissolution of traditional centers and therefore services for highly gifted students in particular would be diminished. However, it is our understanding from both the Superintendent and the School Board that traditional centers will continue to exist as they do now.

Our charge was not to consider the actual process for developing Local Level IV service as that already exists. Rather, we were requested to consider the community's view of the future implementation of Local Level IV services consistent with the needs of neighborhood schools and traditional GT centers. Some GTAC members expressed concerns about Local Level IV services because of the following:

- The ability of the district to support both Local Level IV services and traditional GT centers.
- The impact on the viability of traditional centers.
- The potential risk that the highest achieving students will not be sufficiently challenged and may not have intellectual peers.
- The ability of the district to find teachers who have the capacity to meet the needs of the students who are receiving Local Level IV services.

However, the majority of the membership favors continuing the implementation of this option for the following reasons:

- Local Level IV services allow center-eligible students and their families the choice of leaving their local school for a center or remaining in their local school and receiving the same Level IV services through the GT center curriculum framework.
- Students, including twice-exceptional and Young Scholars, benefit from flexible instructional grouping and opportunities for a high level of challenge in areas of academic strength.
- Local Level IV services increases parent awareness of advanced academic opportunities at the elementary level.
- Local Level IV services address specific community needs.

Review of the Local Plan for the Education of Gifted Students

Virginia Code Section 22.1-18.1 requires the GTAC 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 complete Plan was also presented to GTAC in 2006 as was the outline of goals due in 2007. It is the opinion of the Committee that the activities of the FCPS Gifted and Talented Programs successfully implemented the goals required by the Plan. The complete outline of the objectives due in 2007 and their results can be found in Attachment C.

Conclusion

The majority of the GTAC membership approves of:

- A name change from Gifted and Talented Services to Advanced Academic Programs.** This name change emphasizes the effort to put a label on the service being offered and recognizes the academic nature of the program.

- Continuing the implementation of Local Level IV services.** Local Level IV services offer center-eligible students and their families choice, students benefit from flexible instructional grouping and opportunities for a high level of challenge in areas of academic strength, parent awareness of advanced academic opportunities at the elementary level is increased, and the services address specific community needs.

- Successful Review of the Local Plan for the Education of Gifted Students.** The goals due by 2007 have been successfully implemented by FCPS.