

## TAGAC IDENTIFICATION AND TESTING SUBCOMMITTEE REPORT

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**TO:** Laura Rose, Chair, Talented and Gifted Advisory Committee

### **SUMMARY:**

The Talented and Gifted Advisory Committee (TAGAC) hosted four guest speakers during the 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 school year to share their knowledge and experience in providing special services to talented and gifted students. The guest speakers all offered insights that would facilitate efforts to build a more inclusive and equitable TAG program in Alexandria City Public Schools (ACPS). With the benefit of the speakers' presentations, the subcommittee recommends that ACPS:

1. Continue to engage in the universal screening of all students in specific grade levels (first and third).
2. Explore test administration strategies to ensure the best possible testing environment and outcomes for all students, the creation of an assessment matrix that more heavily favors ability than achievement and the use of local school-based norms.
3. Consider implementing equitable, flexible ability grouping in ACPS elementary and middle schools. Students should be grouped, and periodically regrouped, based on potential in addition to performance, using local norms to more comprehensively identify students.
4. Implement a high-level curriculum across ACPS classrooms that will challenge students at all levels, both within and outside of the TAG program.

### **BACKGROUND:**

TAGAC hosted the following speakers during SY 2019-202 and SY 2020-2021:

- Dr. Jack Naglieri, Ph.D. - Developer of the NNAT (Naglieri Nonverbal Ability Test)
- Dr. Jonathan Plucker - President of the National Association of Gifted Children
- Ms. Angela Greene - ACPS Department of Accountability

The TAGAC Identification and Testing Subcommittee reviewed TAGAC minutes, committee member notes, and TAGAC meeting videos to produce relevant lessons and recommendations for improving Talented and Gifted (TAG) services in ACPS.

The TAGAC summarized the speaker's comments along a theme of "Equity and Access to Services." The TAGAC also assessed the speakers' stressed importance of effective

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communications and outreach, flexible grouping, identification, and local norms, improving TAG services through improved curriculum, flexibility, and socialization. Some specific speaker comments are cited below:

### Identification

**Dr. Jack Naglieri, Ph.D.** is currently a Research Professor at the University of Virginia, Senior Research Scientist at the Devereux Center for Resilient Children, Emeritus Professor of Psychology at George Mason University, and the developer of the Naglieri Nonverbal Ability Test (NNAT). The NNAT can be used irrespective of a students' native language. Furthermore, it requires no specific prior knowledge. The test seeks to evaluate how a student has to think in order to complete a task rather than what the student needs to know to complete the task. Thus, the NNAT provides an equitable approach to assessment; and we believe its continued use will enable ACPS to acknowledge students who come from low income families, culturally and linguistically diverse environments, and English language learners.

**The goal of identification for gifted and talented services is to find those students with the potential for learning at an advanced level.** To achieve that desired result, the TAGAC recommends that ACPS focus on identification methods that assess students' potential rather than their current performance. In view of the foregoing, the TAGAC supports ACPS' continued use of universal screeners as a means of identifying students with the need for advanced academic services.

We recommend that ACPS continue to engage in the universal screening of all students in specific grade levels (first and third). Moreover, the TAGAC supports ACPS' decision to expand the universal screening of students during the 2021-2022 school year to all children in grades first through fourth due to the COVID-19 pandemic. We encourage ACPS to consider providing expanded screening opportunities on an ongoing basis at the elementary school level, as well as providing such opportunities at the middle school level.

TAGAC supports ACPS' continued use of the Naglieri Nonverbal Ability Test (NNAT) as a means of assessing a student's general ability. The NNAT can be used irrespective of a student's native language. Furthermore, it requires no specific prior knowledge. The test seeks to evaluate how a student has to think in order to complete a task rather than what the student needs to know to complete the task. Thus, the NNAT provides an equitable approach to assessment; and we believe its continued use will enable ACPS to acknowledge students who come from low income families, culturally and linguistically diverse environments, and English language learners.

For purposes of assessing a student's skills in specific areas, we recommend ACPS consider the use of the new "Naglieri Ability Test-Verbal" and "Naglieri Ability Test-Quantitative" tests as a possible alternative to the current Cognitive Abilities Test (CogAT), which is currently used as a universal screener for third graders. The NNAT Verbal looks at associative relationships between pictures and the NAT Quantitative examines relationships and patterns between

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numbers. These tests were designed to help educators equitably identify underserved populations because the tests do not require knowledge of English. Findings based on pilot testing of general ability tests closely matched the US population on key demographics such as race, gender and education.

### *Further Consideration*

TAGAC was impressed by the testing oversight provided to all third graders in the administration of the CogAT, to ensure the best possible results for all children. It is unclear whether this same level of oversight is available to first graders currently being administered the NNAT. We strongly recommend that testing oversight for any test used to assess a child's eligibility to receive Talented and Gifted services be rigorously administered to ensure equity.

We further recommend ACPS consider creating an assessment matrix that favors scores on tests like the NNAT. We recommend testing and obtaining scores from all students with less reliance on referrals. To do otherwise risks creating or at least perpetuating inequities in the evaluative process because of flaws inherent in other assessment tools. For instance, traditional ability tests focus on achievement rather than potential and teacher referrals can sometimes present bias towards a student or group of students.

We also recommend that ACPS explore "local norms" as a strategy to improve the identification of students from all racial, cultural, and income groups. To do so, ACPS would need to compare a student's performance to grade level peers in each individual school, rather than the district as a whole. This would enable ACPS to better ensure that students are not being unfairly penalized for not having learned certain content because it would assess whether those students have academic needs that cannot be met in the regular classroom at their current school.

In closing, to measure the effectiveness of the general ability tests, ACPS must decide on how to obtain and evaluate data for each student. The type of information collected must be relevant and reliable. The data collection methods must be consistent, secure and centralized; aggregated data needs to be continually analyzed to identify opportunities for improvement.

### **Equity and Access to Services**

**Dr. Jonathan Plucker** is the Julian C. Stanley Endowed Professor of Talent Development at Johns Hopkins University, and the current President of the National Association of Gifted Children. His research focuses on education policy and talent development. Dr. Plucker's presentation to the committee focused on the successful outcomes that have been observed with ability grouping when implemented flexibly and equitably as one means to promote advanced achievement. He noted recent studies have considered the benefits of ability grouping when incorporating flexibility. Flexible grouping, where students are frequently evaluated and often re-assigned during the school year, provides the benefits of ability grouping (e.g., easier teaching, focused learning) without the negative social impacts or inability to break out of a group once assigned. Flexible ability grouping could be determined in a variety of ways such as

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course subject, reading, or cognitive skills or most importantly by potential vs performance. Training for teachers and staff would assist in grouping for potential disposing of stereotypes of gifted students. Teachers could use flexible ability groups to assist in providing “personalized” (not individualized) teaching to their students, as well as re-grouping when appropriate when a student’s needs evolve.

Dr. Plucker also stressed that any ability grouping must be equitable. He acknowledged the concerns with equity that have been expressed with ability grouping. But in his view, flexible grouping with universal and frequent assessment has the potential for the most equitable outcomes. He also stressed that it is critical to assess equity holistically, looking not just at the public school system, but also at private educational opportunities. Citing San Francisco schools as a cautionary example, Dr. Plucker strongly advised against discontinuing advanced programs such as TAG.

He elaborated that selection for flexible grouping must be universal (e.g., testing in 2nd and 4th grades), but must also look for student potential not only performance or achievement. While gifted students in early elementary are often not necessarily “high achieving,” they do demonstrate “strong potential” through their classroom behavior and personality (e.g., asking questions, curiosity, ability to concentrate). Moreover, he stressed that due to differences between schools or neighborhoods, he advocated adopting local norms for identifying students since central criteria might not apply to all situations.

Dr. Plucker’s local norms observation directly applies to ACPS. ACPS has four major language groups. While translation services are present, this may not be sufficient to capture the diversity, school culture or atmosphere, and to identify more effective ways to engage local communities and connect with parents. TAGAC feels that ACPS could benefit from including parent support groups and parent resources for every school in developing local norms. Once established, dedicated training for parent liaisons and front office personnel (the first people to see and connect with the parents) on differences between Specific Academic Aptitude (SAA) in language arts, math, science or social studies, General Intellectual Aptitude (GIA), and Young Scholars services using local norms.

Critical to a successful educational program that serves all ability levels, in Dr. Plucker’s view, is a high level curriculum that appropriately challenges all students. When coupled with flexible grouping, a high level curriculum serves to engage all students by meeting them at their level.

The TAGAC believes there is merit in considering equitable flexible ability grouping in ACPS for the elementary and middle school levels. This model provides useful tools to provide personalized instruction to the widely diversified student bodies in the ACPS elementary and middle schools. The TAGAC feels that due to the vast array of courses offered at the high school level that the benefits of flexible grouping would be less effective. Flexible ability grouping could permit teachers and administrators to tailor services to the specific needs of their classrooms and neighborhood schools. Then with regrouping, there are additional opportunities for students to move to new groups that suit individual needs avoiding labels or

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stereotypes. However, selection must be equitable by looking for potential in addition to performance using local norms. Looking for potential and using local norms in student selection should be especially considered at the middle school level where the ability diversity within classrooms tends to be greater than elementary schools.

**Angela Green** is a testing analyst with the ACPS Department of Accountability. Ms. Green presented information about the CogAT test and how it is used as a universal screener to identify students for TAG services in third grade. The CogAT is given to all ACPS third graders in the fall over the course of three days. Student illness and testing form completion errors can contribute to testing irregularities. One benefit of the CogAT is that it can identify students who have a high level of academic ability that may not be reflected in observed levels of achievement. A student who scores in the 95th percentile (nationally normed by age reference) will create an automatic TAG referral as follows: Verbal—referral for language arts, science, and social studies; Quantitative alone—referral for math; Nonverbal combined with Quantitative—referral for math; Nonverbal alone—referral for math.

### **RECOMMENDATION:**

The Superintendent recommends that the School Board review the TAGAC Identification and Testing Subcommittee Report.

### **IMPACT:**

TAGAC believes that pathways to equity within the Talented and Gifted Program starts with a revised testing strategy and implementing a high-level curriculum for all students and consideration of ability grouping and local norms.