

Port Angeles School District
Highly Capable Students Program Task Force
Preliminary Recommendations
June 22, 2009

BACKGROUND

In the fall of 2008, at the second board meeting in November, the board proposed the creation of the Highly Capable Students Program Task Force to be made up of school staff, community members, parents, members of the higher education staff and facilitated by district administrative staff. The Highly Capable Students Program Task Force comprised eighteen members, including one board member, Dr. Patti Happe; two elementary school certificated staff members, Sharon Fritschler, and Terri Longin; two middle school certificated staff members, Leann McComb and Vicki Helwick; three high school-level certificated staff members, Derek Johnson, Ron Jones, and Keith Johnson; one elementary school principal, Nancy Pack; one secondary school administrator, Mary Ann Unger; four parents, each from a different school, Violet Kildall, Melody Charno, Karen Meyer and Dr. Kathie Hennessey; two community representatives without children in school, Dr. Phyllis Darling and Dr. Richard Sherman; a district staff support person, Mimi Tideman, and the task force's non-voting chair, Michelle Reid.

The Highly Capable Students Program Task Force held its first meeting on February 10, 2009, and set a meeting schedule through June, 2009. The task force met on a regular basis, Tuesday late afternoons, at least twice per month.

This preliminary report has been designed to present the directive from the board and superintendent, describe the task force composition, provide a summary of task force meetings, describe scope of current highly capable programs in the Port Angeles School District, and provide the board of directors with preliminary recommendations.

PARAMETERS

The Highly Capable Students Program Task Force was charged with the responsibility to a) study relevant literature, current district offerings, and model programs; b) to research K-12 students program needs; c) to research successful highly capable programs' operations in Washington and the nation; d) to examine potential effects on existing programs of expanding highly capable offerings; e) to examine whether students who want to get into "Tier 1" schools are supported by the current program structure; if not, what changes should be made; f) to develop accurate cost data for alternative program structures; g) examine successful assessment and accountability models for highly capable programs, including mechanisms for following student progress throughout the enrollment years; and h) to report on the results of the research, study, and formulations of alternatives and propose to the board recommended policy revisions including general philosophy and approach to highly capable program goals, long and short range program changes, including enrollment and staffing structure revisions, aimed at improving student access and achievement.

The school board held a study session on November 3, 2008 to discuss students' needs, the program history, literature describing gifted programs, admission criteria, assessments, and existing high school Advanced Placement course expansion. Numerous questions were posed by board members during the course of the discussion, among them:

- In order to better prepare students for the high school highly capable offerings, should the district expand the highly capable offerings at the middle school by adding middle school advanced placement course work?
- How shall students be selected for entry into highly capable programs at the middle school level if highly capable offerings are expanded?
- What can be done to remove barriers to students entering advance placement courses at the high school?
- Is there another way to structure the 9th grade to accommodate highly capable students' course needs, and should the current pod structure be replaced by the Stevens team structure or something similar?
- Are other course area requirements (e.g., music courses) creating a barrier to highly capable course enrollment; if so, what should be done that would also preserve the music program quality?

The board determined that a broader study effort was warranted, and charged the superintendent with developing a task force structure and charge to address the topic during the 2008-09 school year.

Port Angeles School District Superintendent Dr. Gary Cohn met with the task force at its first meeting. Dr. Cohn set the context for the task force's work. The purposes for our task force were explained in the context of other task force work and the current conditions in the Port Angeles School District. Dr. Cohn reiterated the expectations outlined by the board, reminded members that their recommendation would be advisory in nature, and responded to questions from the task force members.

PROCESS

The task force was provided multiple articles that describe highly capable students and requisite programs. Articles are being included as attachments to the board report for June 22, 2009.

The discussion following the review of the articles resulted in a consensus among task force members regarding the value and importance of time for highly capable students programs at all levels in the district. The task force began by identifying a unifying definition for highly capable students. The accepted working definition for the group is; ***“Highly capable students are those who show strong capabilities in intellect and/or creativity, especially ones capable of abstract thought. In creating programs for these students, we would tend to favor involving students with at least above average capabilities who through sheer will power and a strong work ethic can succeed in doing the work. These students need differentiated instruction or services beyond those being provided in the regular school program in order to realize their intellectual, creative or specific academic potential.”*** –February 24, 2009

The task force utilized this definition as deliberations continued with regard to responding to the board queries posed. Research articles were provided and reviewed as the task force deliberated on the specific questions posed by the board of directors. All decisions were reached by consensus of those in attendance at the time of the decision. Each question was addressed.

TASK FORCE PRELIMINARY RECOMMENDATIONS

The following questions will be followed by their requisite recommendations.

- In order to better prepare students for the high school highly capable offerings, should the district expand the highly capable offerings at the middle school by adding middle school advanced placement course work?

To answer this, the middle school staff on the task force met with middle school staff back at the school over the course of several weeks. The team structure at Stevens Middle School allows for flexible grouping and collaborative teacher planning opportunities. The Seminar class at the middle level has long been the focal point of the middle level highly capable programming in the district. This is a pull-out highly capable course which requires standardized testing to qualify for. There remain two sections of this course available at both the seventh and eighth grade levels. The staff at the middle level reported, and the task force agreed, that the recommendation rising from attention to this question should be the ‘clustering’ of highly capable students in the various content areas they excel in. Teachers felt that they could differentiate their instruction and enable flexible grouping among the current sections they have to meet the needs of these highly capable students. Math would continue its rather specific accelerated track and be outside the clustering model.

- How shall students be selected for entry into highly capable programs at the middle school level if highly capable offerings are expanded?

Students would be selected for entry by objective state identified assessments as well as teacher recommendation. This process was identified more specifically in the prior year Seminar Program study group report. Teacher teams at Stevens reserve the responsibility to move students around for flexible grouping in content area courses where the clustering is structured. Professional development is viewed by the task force as essential for those teachers teaching clusters of these identified students.

- What can be done to remove barriers to students entering advance placement courses at the high school?

The task force recommends that for the purpose of earning an academic letter, honors and AP courses would be similarly weighted as they are for the academic honors are for graduation distinction. Scholarship notebooks would also include a notation of a ‘weighted’ GPA in addition to the actual GPA. These steps are recommended to encourage students to pursue more rigorous coursework without the potential penalties that at least we can internally monitor. Additional grading practice conversations are necessary to explore other remedies to this perception.

- Is there another way to structure the 9th grade to accommodate highly capable students' course needs, and should the current pod structure be replaced by the Stevens team structure or something similar?

After significant and spirited debate, the task force determined that the current pod structure was actually not the prevailing reason for the current lack of highly capable course, exclusive of math, at the ninth grade level in science and English. The prevailing barriers seem to revolve around philosophical beliefs connected to grouping of students, essentially the conflict between the good of the many and the good of the few. The two recommendations in this area then are: 1) to have a 9th grade honors English course, along with objective identification criteria developed for the 2010-2011 school year. There will need to be a sufficient number of sections offered to serve the needs of identified students; and 2) to have a 9th grade honors science course, along with objective identification criteria to be developed for the 2010-2011 school year. There will need to be a sufficient number of sections offered, be credited as a lab science class, and enable students who successfully complete the course to take upper level science courses.

- Are other course area requirements (e.g., music courses) creating a barrier to highly capable course enrollment; if so, what should be done that would also preserve the music program quality?

The task force deliberated over the course of several meetings on this topic. High school music students were also surveyed to gather data on the scope of the perceived dilemma. The consensus was that there was not an appreciable barrier, given the types of exceptions granted and the input of the students. Indeed, it was acknowledged that in a six period day, students and parents must make choices and there are by nature conflicts in those courses offered only as single course during the school day. With the enrollment decline and budget challenges, this problem is only getting more challenging.

The task force reviewed data from other similar sized school districts with regard to AP and honors courses at the high school level as well as K-8 honors and highly capable programming. We recognize we can improve our course selections and improve in meeting the needs of our highly capable students; thereby enhancing the educational experience for highly capable students in our district.

The task force is recommending that this work be continued by this task force into the next year, 2009-10. Possible agenda items for the 2009-2010 Highly Capable Students Program Task Force include 1) monitor implementation of recommendations accepted by the board; 2) address objective identification process for middle school clusters; and 3) address identification and curriculum needs of highly capable at the elementary level.

Important elementary program components to schedule for 2009-2010 school year include during October 2009: Presentations to elementary staff and administrators beginning professional development on: identification and testing, clustering and teaching highly capable students – awareness level and discussion of opportunities. Topics would include planning of program for elementary students (cluster model? pull out? other?)

The district would provide focused professional development for teachers and administrators interested pursuing more deeply the skills and knowledge needed to meet the needs of elementary highly capable students. This focused professional development can be done in-house and not be cost prohibitive. During the winter, there would be continued contact with teachers sharing research, program options from similar districts, preparation for referrals from teachers and testing. In the spring, activities would include identification of students, scheduling for 2010-2011 classes reflecting clustering of highly capable students or planning for pull out or other program to meet the needs of identified students at the elementary level.

There is clearly much more work to be done on this integral topic.