

Port Angeles School District
Highly Capable Students Program Task Force
Final Report
August 9, 2010

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, Dr. 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.

A preliminary report was provided to the board to review 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.

This then is the final report as work on the remaining goals was completed during the 2009-10 school year. Several member changes occurred during the second year. John Henry replaced Derek Johnson, Amity Butler replaced Nancy Pack and Quinn Rankin replaced Violet Kildall. The committee again met Tuesday afternoons during the past year.

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.

Then 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.

This work then was determined to continue through the 2009-10 school year as the course reviews and implementation plan needed development and support.

PROCESS

The task force was provided multiple articles that describe highly capable students and requisite programs. Articles were included as attachments to the board report for June 22, 2009. These articles were reviewed during the outset of the work this year as this research informed decision-making with regard to instructional programming for highly capable students. While these students have highly capable intellectual traits, there are many developmental characteristics critical for consideration if they are to be as successful as they can be.

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 continued to utilize this definition as deliberations continued with regard to responding to the board queries posed and other work identified this year. 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 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. This course reviewed the course expectations for this class and in accordance with the grant requirements evaluated the program during the spring of this year. The evaluations were informative with regard to student progress in the prescribed curriculum. The task force supports the continued utilization of the developmentally appropriate instructional calendar previously approved. These units were thoughtfully designed and must be implemented with fidelity. Again, the topic of professional development for teachers working with these students was reinforced. These highly capable students have unique needs and the staff working with them need to continue to develop their instructional skills in working with them.

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.

With the advent of the Purdue Project, the middle school had a teacher team attend the two day training and is working with their team to implement the cluster grouping model at the middle level. They will have support from Purdue in their work and will be piloting a different approach to grouping students. The task force supported their work as it will dovetail nicely with the work being implemented at the elementary school.

- 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 previous 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 continues to be viewed by the task force as essential for those teachers teaching clusters of these identified students. Staff members again were encouraged to attend EduFest as a professional development activity.

- 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.

This practice was put into place during the 2009-10 academic year. Multiple students were recognized for their academic excellence and taking the honors courses. The practice was met with approval from students,, parents and staff. It appears to be having the intended outcome of encouraging students to take the more rigorous courses without the negative impact on their GPA for internal award opportunities. There may yet be more work to do with grading practices so that actual GPA transcripts will not be adversely affected.

- 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 were:

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.

A significant part of the work done by the task force this spring was to review the new courses slated for implementation this fall. The Honors English 9 course and the Honors Biology course are on schedule for implementation this fall. Student sign-up has been completed for these courses. Four sections of English and three sections of science are currently planned in the high school master schedule. Student and parent responses to these courses have been extremely positive. High school administrative staff and department chairs will oversee the rollout in the fall.

- 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 also heard a report from high school administrative staff regarding the College Board report on predictable success for students in a variety of AP programs based on their PSAT scores. This report was very illuminating and led to spirited discussion on what a high school our size could and should support in the AP course realm. As we are able, the consensus was to continue to add AP courses in content of interest to students and where staff has appropriate preparation. To the degree our budget will allow it, staff professional development in these areas will also be provided.

The task force spent considerable time working with the lead researcher from Purdue and reviewing the proposed work of the grant at the elementary level. The grant will be a five year roll-out grant. Three elementary schools will be 'treatment schools' in the coming year, while two elementary schools will be control schools in the coming year. All elementary schools in the district will continue to engage in high quality professional development work with their staffs

and have high expectations for all their students. The professional development provided by Purdue will be an exciting opportunity for our district. This national scale up project is a tremendous opportunity for both our students and staff. A district parent meeting was held this spring at Franklin Elementary School. About thirty parents attended with questions and ideas they shared with district administrative staff. This project addresses the planning of elementary programming for highly capable students and enriches the experience for all students.

The district will continue to provide focused professional development for teachers and administrators interested in pursuing more deeply the skills and knowledge needed to meet the needs of highly capable students at every level. This focused professional development can be done in-house and not be cost prohibitive. During the academic year, there would be continued contact with teachers sharing research, program options from similar districts, preparation for referrals from teachers and testing. During the summer, options such as EduFest would continue to be available.

As the task force ends its work, it is acknowledged that the needs of highly capable students continue to be a concern. Essentially, developmentally appropriate programming is necessary as the variety of unique needs for this student group require attention as do the needs of other student groups. Professional development for staff working with these students also continues to be viewed as necessary.