

DRAFT

Recommendations for the expansion of the ALP Program

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“We are currently preparing students for jobs that don’t yet exist; using technologies that have not been invented to solve problems that we don’t know are problems”

Karl Fisch

District wide Mission: Accelerated Learners Program

Vashon School District’ Accelerated Learner Program is a District supported program that serves the needs of students who are academically gifted. Students who are academically gifted present differing learning styles, learning pace, and curricular needs that require daily and systematic modification to a general education curriculum and classroom experience to achieve educational benefit. This program is not to serve as the reward for hard work, but is a needs-based program for those students who meet a specific set of criteria that would identify them as intellectually gifted.

The Accelerated Learner Program provides a rigorous, accelerated curriculum that challenges students to apply complex thinking skills when working with core skills and concepts. The curriculum is presented at an accelerated learning pace, focuses on grade level expectations that are above students’ assigned grade levels, and emphasizes an advanced level of complexity and depth. At the elementary level, eligibility is based on ability, at the middle school level; eligibility is based on ability and achievement and at the high school level on achievement.

Status of the program:

Vashon District has provided Chautauqua Elementary School with a part-time teacher to serve ALP students. In her role as the ALP teacher Gail Labinski has served as a catalyst and helped create three or four enrichment options at the 4th and 5th grade levels which include the **Writer’s Notebook curriculum- a creative writing unit, the 5th grade Robotics program, a Night of the Notables curriculum, Math Olympiad and Math is Cool.** Gail also mentors individual ALP students who are looking for acceleration or enrichment in their classes and works with classroom teachers to help differentiate the curriculum to keep these students challenged. Her assignments have also included conducting a parent group for ALP students (SENG- Social and Emotional needs of Gifted Students), and administering and evaluating the results of the Cognitive Abilities

Test administered each year at 3rd and 5th grades. Gail is an advocate for ALP students all the way through elementary school and their transition to McMurray Middle School.

In March, 2007 I was hired as a part-time ALP Program developer with the following job description (Attached) My work with Chautauqua School started in March and continued once a week through the month of June.

- At the request of the principal Kate Baehr , my first task was to take the time to interview 16 teachers about their views about the ALP program using a questionnaire (see attached) as a guide. The feedback I received confirmed that teachers recognized that highly capable students in their classrooms were not always challenged. They asked for support and training to work with these students. There were feelings of uncertainty about the proposed “clustering’ of gifted students and the fear of “creaming the top 1% of the most “highly capable” students for special classes. Teachers also informed me that there were several initiatives already in place to promote higher level thinking skills for all students and asked to be acknowledged for good work that was already taking place.

To build trust, these interviews were preceded by a presentation that I made introducing the charge given to me by the district. I also assured teachers that I intended to listen to all voices, to pay attention to the culture and history of the school and to keep teachers informed as my work with Chautauqua Elementary school progressed.

Following these interviews and with the help of Principal Baehr a committee of teachers (an ad hoc ALP committee) was created with teacher representatives from every grade level (Pre-K- 5) who volunteered to serve on this committee.

The goal of the committee was to invite the teachers of the committee to a) look at the current offerings, to b) educate themselves on the specialized needs of highly capable students, c) to evaluate options for these students at all grade levels and d) to determine the most suitable options for each grade level taking into consideration, the culture of the school and the enrichment options already in place.

Between the months of March and June 2007, the committee met six times. Listed below are some of the ways in which our time together was utilized.

- We held discussions about the differentiated needs of highly capable students, identifying the rationale and needs for expanding program to all grade levels. We talked about identifying enrichment options for students that were already in place and entertained new ideas for building on these activities. Several handouts relevant to teaching highly capable students were shared. Committee members were encouraged to create a file of resources which could be used to support their leadership with their respective grades. All were invited to speak openly about their concerns and suggestions.

- Bobbi Frankel, a retired teacher for highly capable students was invited to speak to the committee to share her knowledge and experience as a teacher who taught highly capable students and teaching thinking skills in enrichment programs to all students in her school.
- Gail Labinski, captured our thinking by outlining a model that emphasized the need for encouraging thinking skills through the school, creating accelerated opportunities for the top 5% of the student population and the need for occasional “cluster grouping” for the top 1% of the population.
- Principal Baehr and Dr. Ghosh outlined a budget presented to Dr. Terry Lindquist, Acting Superintendent for Vashon School District. This budget attached) included a stipend to all members of the ALP committee to meet once a month to oversee the identification and progress of ALP students
- Dr. Jayasri Ghosh and Bobbi Frankel made a final presentation to the teachers – articulating the need for options for ALP students. Bobbi modeled a thinking skills lesson for the teachers.
- Two teachers from Chautauqua Elementary school were invited to participate in a training session to teach the program “Philosophy for Children” designed to stimulate higher level thinking skills in students. This workshop was held at Seabury School on Monday, June 18, 2007 and was taught by Bobbi Frankel.

“In a rising tide all boats rise”

Chautauqua Elementary School is a school of approximately 600 students on Vashon Island. Located in the midst of a very supportive community, the school is rich with curricular resources, strong leadership and a corps of parents who are very actively engaged in the life of the school. My conversation with teachers yielded rich information about initiatives throughout the school that support enrichment and extension of the regular curriculum (See attachment). Several teachers have over the years been trained in a variety of programs such as Junior Great Books, multiple intelligences and thinking skills, but the school has *not had the time or the opportunity to fold these programs into day to day teaching in every classroom..*

The need: Currently 4th and 5th grade accelerated learners are being served in the areas of math and writing. At this point, there are no programs that have been purposefully created for ALP students in the PK- 3rd grade classes. ALP students who I spoke to expressed a wish for more challenging classes in mathematics and science.

Research does show that gifted students need to be appropriately challenged at the earliest point of entry in school to maintain their love of learning and to acquire the necessary skills of higher level thinking and personal discipline to take advantage of their talents. In addition, these children need the benefit of working with their intellectual peers and with teachers who understand their needs for differentiated learning. The absence of these programs can lead to students who are unchallenged, who slip into unhealthy work habits when much of the work is too easy. Loss of self esteem because

they are not regularly faced with assignments that are matched to their abilities and skills is also possible. It is not uncommon to witness a “regression to the mean” or a wish on the part of students to perform at average levels just to be accepted by their fellow students.

In the learning environment of Chautauqua Elementary School, there are several opportunities that exist for the 2007-08 school year.

- The current programs for the ALP students at the 4th and 5th grade are an excellent model for the rest of the school. Similar differentiated options in math, humanities and science could be created for PK-3 students. The goal would be to have some initiative at every grade level. These could include the creation of “Thinking Skill” centers in the early grades and opportunities for ALP students to have opportunities to be clustered at least once a week for reading and math.
- Teachers already support and participate in the administrations of the Cognitive Abilities Test at 3rd grade as an important tool for identifying accelerated learners. This could be expanded to the lower grades. Other means of identification could include parent and teacher nomination forms, and a review of the portfolio of students.
- Programs such as Junior Great Books could be used to benefit strong readers and to enhance higher level thinking skills with students. These programs have the added benefit of surfacing strong thinkers who need further differentiation-
- One teacher in the building already has extensive training in teaching higher level thinking skills and spent a sabbatical year developing curriculum to share. She could be used as peer mentor and/or presenter to support the work of the ALP Committee.

The vision for the ALP Program will result in:

- A highly functional ALP Committee
- A well orchestrated set of opportunities for ALP kids, in both the 5% range and the 1% range.
- Clear identification system with more than one opportunity to assess students
- Broad community understanding of the needs and services of ALP students
- Board and administrative support for the recommendations of this report.
- *A core of teachers for creating, supporting and disseminating powerful teaching ideas.*
- A plan for ongoing teacher training – understanding the minds of gifted and highly capable students
- An openness on the part of teachers to a variety of thinking models
- A sustainable model that leads seamlessly into the middle and high schools

Functions of the ALP Committee:

- To give Gail Labinski a support group to enhance the creation of ALP offerings through the school. Gail's role would continue to be an advocate for ALP students, working with individual students and assisting teachers in gathering resources and providing strategies for differentiating curriculum which may include acceleration and/or enrichment.
- To oversee the identification and placement of ALP students using the COGAT and other instruments such as nomination forms, achievement test data and portfolio information on students to determine the special talents and interests of students at all levels
- To articulate program options at each grade levels with a clear commitment to serve highly capable students in a focused manner sometime during the week
- To serve as the connection between highly capable students who have special learning needs who need challenge in ALP classes but also time to obtain the necessary basic skills to experience success
- To educate themselves on the most innovative programs for highly capable students
- To serve as trainers for accepted teaching and learning strategies for highly capable students. These include the use of Bloom's Taxonomy for higher level lessons, strategies for compacting curriculum, strategies to make differentiation work, tiered instruction, team-teaching, acceleration, deceleration, flexible grouping, anchoring activities , adjusting questions, project-based learning etc.,
- To serve as peer mentors to share resources with classroom teachers at their grade levels which might include "show and tell" sessions"
- To identify and support appropriate teacher training opportunities including attendance at the annual WAETAG (Washington Association of Teachers for the Talented and Gifted) conference.
- To identify and utilize evaluation tools to assess the effectiveness of programs using a variety of methods including tests, portfolio assessment and measures of students initiative and understanding of material and problem-solving strategies.
- To create innovative ways to create dialogues across grades highlighting best practices and units that worked well. A school web page could also be created to share ideas among teachers.

During my four months of work, I have worked successful with classroom teachers on the ALP committee, with Gail Labinski, ALP Coordinator and Principal Kate Baehr. I felt it was important to keep the lines of communication open with all groups so there would be receptivity for change and growth in the ALP offerings.

The stage has been set for some new initiatives for the year 2007-08. It is hoped that this Fall, this report will be disseminated at the school and the ALP committee will start convening to plan the year's offering.