

## Notes from the East High United Meeting on Thursday, November 13, 2008

At least 30, and by the meeting's end more like 40-50 people, including parents and staff, attended the meeting, drawn by the announced meeting topic: "TAG/AP/Honors Curriculum discussion – What does TAG at East mean to you?" Mr. Harris dispensed with his usual Principal's report, and began by emphasizing that the overarching goal for the meeting was getting input on what the East *community* means by "Continue and Expand TAG programming", which is the first component of the first Vision 2012 goal, "High Expectations and Accountability." Both Mr. Harris and East High United's Jill Jokela recalled the intense discussion on TAG and other advanced programming at East that took place at an East High United meeting two years ago. Mr. Harris asked those at *this* meeting to consider these questions: what are the strengths of East's current offerings, especially the TAG/AP classes that are East's most rigorous offerings for grades 9-12? How can East build on these strengths? How can the offerings be expanded to include more students?

Mr. Harris offered some anecdotal background on TAG at East, stating that in the early to mid 1980's, there was concern at East that courses were insufficiently rigorous and challenging. Under George Kelly's leadership, an application process that included an essay was developed for TAG classes. Approaches to TAG varied—and vary—by department; for example, TAG English is offered in grades 9-12, Math offers Honors Geometry but no TAG as such, and for Science there is only TAG Biology.

Mr. Harris then introduced Annie Potter, East's TAG/Literacy Coordinator, and Brad Harris, a TAG resource teacher for MMSD. Ms. Potter began her presentation by stating that it is not easy to figure out all of East's advanced programming—it took her four months to map it all out! The next step is to try to get more programming consistency across content areas, departments, and grade levels. Consistency is important for students and parents, and also for universities. For example, universities question what "TAG" means. East High School's profile, like that of other high schools, is sent out to all universities; the profile explains that TAG = "talented and gifted", and TAG classes are identified as such on transcripts, but neither the profile nor the transcripts explain TAG further. TAG is not a universally used term; and "TAG classes" at East do not necessarily qualify as what "Talented and Gifted" means at even the district level.

### **Enrollment in TAG/AP classes at East**

14% of East students are currently enrolled in 1 or more TAG class(es). 10% of East students are currently enrolled in one or more AP class(es). Make up of advanced classes at East: the total East minority population is 44%. 17% of students enrolled in TAG classes are minorities, as are 20% of students enrolled in AP classes. Students eligible for free and reduced lunch make up 45% of East's population; 14% of the students enrolled in TAG classes are eligible for free and reduced lunch, as are 12% of students enrolled in AP classes. The data is not readily available for previous years, which would help in identifying trends.

One of the goals of the AVID program, currently serving 75 students at East, is to prepare students to take TAG/AP classes as juniors; due to AVID, there will be more students ready to take these classes.

(NOTE: handouts—one of more detailed information on TAG enrollment statistics, and the other including a listing of Advanced Programming offerings at East as well as tables on the percentage of AP exams taken at the four MMSD high schools by content area—were distributed at the meeting, and would be available on request from Ms. Potter.)

### **AP classes and AP tests**

**AP classes** are usually for 11<sup>th</sup> & 12<sup>th</sup> graders. Some 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> graders are in AP classes, but they would usually have been advanced coming in from middle school. (About 12 8<sup>th</sup> graders come to East for Geometry and English.) At present, there are AP classes in Social Studies, Science, and Math, as well as French, Spanish and Music Theory. Potential AP offerings for the 2009/2010 school year: Studio Art, and Literature and Composition.

Taking an AP class will help to prepare a student for the **AP test** in that subject; the grade in the AP class is completely separate from the AP test and its score. Students can opt to take AP tests without having taken AP classes. On the AP test, 1 is the lowest score, 5 is the highest. Scores of 3, 4, 5 are considered "mastery level"—this is what universities look for. East is second after Memorial in the District for AP offerings. Some

universities will award college credit for higher AP test scores. Per UW Madison, AP classes look good on transcripts. East does not weight AP class grades so they count for more; some schools do. Asked about this, Mr. Harris said that at the meeting two years ago, there was some hesitation about adding more AP classes. It was also noted that there are starting to be new and different requirements for teachers of AP classes; they need to submit a syllabus and course plans to College Board to approve.

### **TAG classes**

Students can't just sign up for a TAG class. There is an application process that requires a teacher signature and prerequisites. In the past, middle school students were self-selected to apply for TAG classes. In many cases, they were encouraged by parents to apply. Last year, all of the 8<sup>th</sup> graders at Black Hawk and Sherman were tested for admittance to TAG classes; students at O'Keeffe were given the opportunity to write application essays during school hours. Mr. Harris noted that testing all students at O'Keeffe for TAG classes is part of an ongoing discussion. (70% of East's TAG applicants typically come from O'Keeffe.) More minority students were accepted into TAG classes this year, but some students, a high percentage of them minorities, did not sign up for TAG classes. Guidance counselors at the middle schools pursued students to try to get them to change their minds.

Answers to a few parent questions about TAG classes: Once students are enrolled in a TAG class in a content area, they don't need to reapply for admittance after the first year, unless they are "failing miserably." If students drop out of a TAG class, they do need to reapply. And there is recruiting for TAG after freshman year; the annual application process is open to everyone.

Mr. Harris noted that East's current "TAG" classes are really more Honors classes. East's TAG population may need to be served in Honors classes, but also in other ways.

### **MMSD TAG program**

MMSD is developing a philosophy and vision for a K-12 Talented and Gifted (TAG) program, with clear guidelines for assessing/nominating students for TAG. At this point, parents, teachers and students all nominate. MMSD now has a draft TAG flowchart. Previously, they only reacted to referral. The flowchart begins with screening data, such as WKCE scores. The flowchart proceeds from screening and referral, to analysis of assessments (existing assessments, or if there is insufficient data, additional assessments), on to using assessment data to plan curriculum modifications and InStep interventions, and finally to cluster grouping with peers and differentiation. At present there is screening at 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> grades, adding 5<sup>th</sup>; referral for grades in between. Last year, a screener was piloted with first graders at Thoreau and Emerson to identify underrepresented populations. The screener used was the Naglieri Nonverbal Ability Test, described by Hoagie's Gifted Education page ([www.hoagiesgifted.org](http://www.hoagiesgifted.org)) as a "...[c]ulture-fair and language-free means of determining students' nonverbal reasoning and problem-solving ability, regardless of language or educational or cultural background. Group test, divided into seven grade-based levels. May be administered in a group setting in about 30 minutes...."

### **Advanced programming at East: what does the community want?**

In a nutshell: challenging curriculum, rigorous classes—with other students who want the same thing and have chosen to be there—that prepare students to be able to participate at the highest level at universities.

### **Strengths of current advanced programming at East**

Teachers are seen as one of the most important components of successful classes. There was some discussion of collecting anecdotal impressions of teachers at East; Mr. Harris suggested that rather than looking at individual teachers, look at what makes their classes work, and support and expand upon that. What are the components in those classes that students and parents value? What should an honors class "look" like? Some suggestions from parents included: high expectations, lots of writing, application/exploration, not just memorizing, depth of analysis and rigorous thought, a common sense of learning goals, clearly articulated goals and expectations, more challenging work, not just more work. The Wisconsin Center for Academically Talented Youth was suggested as a model for honors program curriculum and pacing.

## **Weaknesses in/other issues with current advanced programming at East**

The **nomenclature**, in particular “TAG”, is confusing or even misleading.

There was a fair amount of negative comment about the **English** program at East. Writing in the English Department is perceived as weak, lacking, missing; there is also a sense that few students take upper level TAG English classes. It was noted that there are more English electives at the 12<sup>th</sup> grade level (there are more elective options at the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade level in general), so students may choose, for instance, to take “The Novel” instead of 12<sup>th</sup> grade TAG English. English now has three strata: TAG, advanced and AP; this could probably be cut to two: Honors and AP. In response to a question about whether the “difficult but necessary conversation” with the English Department was happening, Mr. Harris said that they are right in the middle of that conversation.

**Communication with parents** was another area in need of improvement.

As indicated by the amount of discussion about **access to advanced programming**, access is seen as an issue, if not an outright weakness. Several people expressed concern that the current TAG application process limits access too much, and that TAG classes (and other advanced programming) are too homogenous. Other comments: East is a richly diverse school, and this diversity should be reflected in advanced classes; especially with students of color and other traditionally underrepresented populations, it is important to work with cohorts—it is hard to enter this different environment alone. One possibility would be to open honors classes to everyone, with some basic criteria, but dismiss students from these classes if they don’t demonstrate their commitment. Mr. Harris mentioned the Long Beach Unified School District (<http://www.lbusd.k12.ca.us/>), where four years ago access to advanced classes was opened, and students in those classes were offered summer courses and other support. Is access to advanced programming limited by the number of sections available? This should not be a limiter; for example, in the Math Department, students sign up for classes first, and then the Department works out how many class sections are needed. Along with the desire to encourage more students to participate in advanced programming, people were also concerned about the continuing need for academic rigor and student commitment and responsibility. Being in an honors class should be seen as a privilege to be earned, and students in honors classes need to be prepared to make an effort.

## **Definitions of “academic rigor” and “gifted”**

“**Rigor** is the goal of helping students develop the capacity to understand content that is complex, ambiguous, provocative and personally or emotionally challenging.” Adapted from *Teaching What Matters Most: Standards and Strategies for Raising Student Achievement* by Strong, Silver, and Perini, ASCD, 2001.

From the National Association for Gifted Children: “**What is gifted?** The federal definition: Students who give evidence of high achievement capability in areas such as intellectual, creative, artistic, or leadership capacity, and who need services and activities not ordinarily provided by the school in order to fully develop those capabilities. The NAGC definition: *A gifted person is someone who shows, or has the potential for showing, an exceptional level of performance in one or more areas of expression.*”

## **Useful websites**

National Association for Gifted Children (<http://www.nagc.org/>)

MMSD Talented and Gifted Homepage (<http://tagweb.madison.k12.wi.us/>)

Wisconsin Center for Academically Talented Youth (<http://www.wcaty.org/>)

College Board AP page (<http://www.collegeboard.com/student/testing/ap/about.html>)

## **Next steps**

Mr. Harris and Ms. Potter will take the information gathered at the meeting, and work with teachers. They may try to set up a subcommittee that would include parents. It will probably be the 2010/2011 school year before any significant changes in access are made; the nomenclature may change if possible for next school year.

*(NOTE: to conserve space and reduce repetition, these notes were clustered by general topic, rather than following the somewhat meandering flow of the actual discussion at the meeting...)*

## **Next meeting**

**Thursday, December 11, 2008, 7 p.m. Focus topic: SLC grant update**