

## Summary of Peer Review – Accelerated Progress Program (APP)

May 2, 2008

*The Seattle Public Schools has completed a number of academic and operations **peer reviews**. These reviews, which have been performed by national experts, show us what we are doing well and point out how we can improve.*

*The recommendations from each peer review will inform the district's strategic planning process, so changes and improvements to individual programs will advance our overall vision for the future.*

### The Subject

#### Accelerated Progress Program

The **Accelerated Progress Program (APP)** is designed to challenge and support students who are capable of working two or more years above their grade level. These students usually score in the 98<sup>th</sup> or 99<sup>th</sup> percentile in tests of reasoning ability and in the 95<sup>th</sup> percentile or above in both reading and math.

APP began as a pilot program at Madrona Elementary in 1978. Today, it is offered at Lowell Elementary (for grades one through five) and at Washington Middle School (grades six through eight) and Garfield High School (grades nine through 12).

APP is one of several advanced learning programs at Seattle Public Schools. Students can also qualify for the **Spectrum** program, which serves students in grades one through eight at 11 elementary schools and eight middle schools; or **Advanced Learning Opportunities**, which serves students in grades one through eight at 12 elementary schools and two middle schools. High school students can apply to an **International Baccalaureate** program (at two schools) or register for **Advanced Placement** courses at the other eight comprehensive high schools.

During the 2007–2008 school year, 1,290 students are enrolled in APP.

### The Reviewers

The APP study was conducted by a team of researchers from the **University of Virginia**. The review team members are all experts on educating gifted students. They based their review on the National Association for Gifted Children's *Standards for Gifted Programs*. Team members included Carolyn M. Callahan, Ph.D., Catherine M. Brighton, Ph.D., and Holly Hertberg Davis, Ph.D.

## Summary

After reviewing the APP program at all grade levels, the review team recommended a number of strategies to improve APP and other advanced learning programs:

- **Develop a program vision and curriculum** that will meet the needs of students with different gifts and abilities.
- **Provide professional development training to APP educators** to help them teach in a way that challenges and engages their students.
- **Increase the racial and economic diversity of students in APP** and other advanced learning programs by helping teachers throughout the school district identify and encourage advanced learners.
- **Strengthen support for APP students and their parents** so that all people feel respected and valued in APP.

## Study Methods

The review team carried out their study through a combination of methods. They **reviewed** the APP website, program documents and curriculum materials; **observed** APP and Spectrum classrooms; and **interviewed** APP students, teachers, principals, parents, counselors, Spectrum students, and school district leaders and administrators.

## Findings and Recommendations

The review team studied seven different areas of APP. They made recommendations in each area:

**Program philosophy:** The reviewers praised Seattle for recognizing that gifted students need special educational support. They also praised the clear definition of what a student must do to qualify for APP.

They noted, however, that APP is outdated in terms of its approach to gifted students. Different ideas about how APP should be operated (such as whether APP should be located at a single school or at a number of schools and how much APP students should mix with other students) must be resolved. The reviewers also noted that APP is not racially or economically diverse and that the program should do a better job identifying and supporting a diverse group of students.

The reviewers recommended that APP students get more opportunities to interact with other students, possibly by expanding the number of APP sites, but only after clarifying the program's curriculum and expectations so that two or more sites

could remain faithful to a common design. They also recommended that a study group be formed to help shape the program's vision for the future.

**Administration and management:** The reviewers praised Seattle for keeping parents well informed of their students' progress. They also praised the district for the commitment to hire a full-time director of advanced learning programs.

However, the reviewers were concerned that some APP parents do not feel empowered to share their opinions; instead, a small group of parents is perceived as having more say about how APP operates. In addition, the reviewers noted that because APP has not been managed by an expert in gifted education in the past, the program has not fully taken advantage of new developments in technology or new theories about the best ways to manage special education programs.

The reviewers recommended forming a broad-based advisory group that represents all interests within APP. They also recommended that the program be managed to reflect up-to-date philosophies and theories about gifted education.

**Curriculum and instruction:** The reviewers commended APP teachers for helping students perform at very advanced levels. They also praised the program's focus on reflective writing and higher-level thinking skills.

The reviewers expressed concern, though, that APP did not have an overall instructional vision, and the level of challenge for students seemed to vary from class to class and teacher to teacher. They were also concerned that APP classes did not permit "differentiation" to allow students who have different levels of skill in different subjects to move at a different pace.

The reviewers recommended that APP develop a curriculum vision with goals and a "scope and sequence" for how skills will be taught. This new curriculum vision should ensure that students master grade-level skills at high levels before they move on to more advanced work. The reviewers also recommended that APP teachers receive the professional development training they need to use the new curriculum.

**Program design:** The reviewers praised APP staff for working to incorporate academic standards into the APP curriculum. However, they expressed concern about the single location for APP at each grade level, which has meant that there are few opportunities for APP students to interact with other students (particularly in the elementary grades) and few opportunities to provide support for students who are eligible for APP but choose not to attend an APP school.

The reviewers recommended again to establish a broad-based advisory group to help develop an overall philosophy for APP and then determine how to design a new curriculum to serve gifted students.

**Program evaluation:** The reviewers noted that SPS administrators believe in regular evaluation of programs but expressed concern that there was no plan to

evaluate APP regularly, track the performance of APP students or use evaluation findings to guide the program. The reviewers recommended that SPS develop a long-term evaluation plan for APP and that it track long-term information about the performance of APP students.

**Identification of students:** Only students who are “identified” as meeting APP standards can be admitted to the program. However, the reviewers were concerned that these identification standards had led to a lack of social and economic diversity in APP. They recommended that SPS restructure how it uses tests to admit students to the program. For instance, they recommended that students need more than one opportunity for testing, so one set of scores would not overly determine a student’s future. In addition, the reviewers recommended that SPS develop ways for all schools identify gifted students and nurture their talent so that all students have the opportunity to thrive.

**Professional development for teachers:** The reviewers praised SPS for recognizing that APP teachers need additional training to help them meet the needs of their students. They recommended that the APP program provide opportunities for teachers to receive additional training in meeting the needs of gifted students. The reviewers noted that it is particularly important that teachers learn how to “differentiate” their lessons so that they can effectively teach students with differing levels of ability.

**Guidance and counseling:** The reviewers commended APP’s attention to the social and emotional needs of APP students. However, they recommended that counselors need more training in specific strategies to help highly advanced students. In addition, they noted that some APP parents and students have experienced racism in the program. They recommended that all teachers, counselors and administrators in APP have the opportunity for cultural sensitivity training and that parents and students have a safe place to go to report concerns.

## Next Steps

The APP peer review was carried out as part of the **Seattle Public Schools’ strategic planning process**. The strategic plan is being developed to help the school district strengthen academic achievement for all students by allowing us to assess where we are now, develop a list of priorities for improvement and then take action. The strategic plan will be adopted by the School Board in June 2008 and will be carried out over the next several years.