



Cambridge Advanced Learning Association

Providing community, resources, and advocacy for families

<http://cambridgeadvanced.org/>

CALA General Meeting

Jan 24, 2012

Tobin School, Room 315, Vassal Lane, Cambridge, MA

In attendance: Freedom Baird, Emily Dexter, Joanna Fischer, Zina Gomez-Liss, Anne Holtzworth, Janie Katz-Christy, Zeyneb Magavi, Trish Marti, Heather Nelson, Patty Nolan, Linda Rabieh, Stephanie Reiss, Christine Schueller, Susan Shelkrot, Daniel Serfaty, Jannie Tamaoki, Alice Turkel, Belinda Watt

Agenda

- 5 min: people introduce selves
- 10 min: review last month's "action items"
 - Reach out to family liaisons and principals at underrepresented schools
 - Add CALA to the agenda for the next CSAG meeting to talk about Academic Challenge, advanced learners
 - Create a packet to talk with teachers about, for when a kid is identified as being advanced
 - Collate booklist generated on the parents' Yahoo group
 - Start up CALA's twitter account
 - Brainstorm ways to work with school librarians about book choices
- 30 min: Go around the table: discuss the recently presented Academic Challenge Plan:
 - What's viable? What are we glad to see included?
 - What's good but needs work, needs more explicit, detailed policy, and additional commitment of resources from the district?
 - What's not going to work, what should not be included?
- 20 min: define action items for the coming month(s) in light of the **CALA 2012 Action Plan** (included at the end of these minutes), including the six steps we have requested the district to take (see the plan and steps on the next page). Identify topic for next month's meeting.

Meeting Minutes

Please note: a core principal of CALA is to maintain the confidentiality of information about our children and families that we share with each other. Any such information in the minutes will be stripped of identifiers, and included in a pool of information from multiple contributors.

Please be mindful of not publicizing personal information, online, in email, or in conversation, without permission. Thank you.

Parents experiences and concerns about their kids:

- One child reading at a more advanced level than all other kids in her classroom. Other child is on an IEP. I'm a room parent. I'd like to be a conduit for information back to parents at our school.
- Multi-age classrooms have been difficult for our son. He doesn't want to be a teacher to the other kids. So last year was tough (when he was a 2nd grader in a 1-2 classroom).
- Two kids, 3rd and 5th grade, both not challenged in math. Supplementing with Russian Math School. They're happier there. But we're looking for a solution in CPS. What about families that can't afford something like Russian Math School?
- Would like to see high expectations in the classroom for kids who need academic challenge.
- Cambridge tries to meet the needs of all students except those who need challenge. They are shut out.
- A parent of 3rd grade twins. One is content. The other is a very advanced learner. For four or five years now, CPS has not met his needs. Solutions offered are "bandaids". There's a sizeable population of advanced learners in CPS. Families are leaving the school system. It's a form of discrimination, to not meet these kids needs.
- This is a long-term issue. How do we address the needs of kids who the typical teacher cannot, right now, address?
- Math is a big issue for our kids, concerned that math curriculum is not challenging, across the board
- Breakthrough Cambridge helped us identify our child's strengths
- I have a 5th, 3rd, and J-ker, so far have been very happy in a heterogeneous setting
- Son is very advanced in math. 2nd grade teacher is doing an amazing job with him and other kids. Family is supplementing with Russian Math School. Family is committed to public school.
- We have three kids. They run the gamut in terms of need. One is twice-exceptional, on an IEP and also very advanced in math and science, and above grade level in reading and writing. His teacher is wonderful with helping him with disability.

- I started an after-school math program for twice-exceptional kids
- Son is already advanced in math. I'm from a European country where families can decide at what age to start a child in school. So there's no tracking by age.
- We have 3 kids. The two older ones have needed more challenge. When our daughter got to 4th grade we could see the difference in the way she was being taught, in the way her needs were set aside.
- Have had kids at the Int'l French School of Boston, and this year one child in CPS. The contrast between the two school environments is stark. The French school is very diverse, curriculum is very rigorous, expectations are very high. My daughter in the CPS is saying she hates math, that she did it two years ago. Her teacher said "I have to take care of all the kids who need special plans first." Another big shock is that we can't use the word "smart".

Response to Academic Challenge Plan:

- In the interest of time, we'll suspend the rest of the agenda, and focus on shaping our response to the Academic Challenge Plan.
- JY is off to a good start in acknowledging that there is such a thing as an advanced learner. That is major. Hasn't been done for years in Cambridge. Want him to go farther, develop a substantive program for these kids.
- It seems CPS doesn't respect kids. Don't want kids to learn. It seems there's a huge percentage of kids who are not being challenged. Maybe even as big as 90%. We've had friends move away. We came from a private school to CPS. Our kids loved math, English. Came to public school and it stopped.
- Maybe advanced learners needs to include kids who are less than 2+ years ahead.
- Don't want kids marginalized for being good at math. The kids need to have academic peers. Kids they can relate to who are learning at the same level that they are.
- The district is willing to put academic peers together in the HS, but not in elementary or middle grades.
- I love CPS's social justice curriculum, and respect for individuality, except for their lack of respect for advanced learners.
- I'm concerned that the Academic Challenge Plan is only focused on 6th-8th graders (though I know it's part of the Innovation Agenda, and for the middle grades only). It would be better if it could reach down into the lower grades too.
- I don't agree with the term "Scholars" in the Academic Challenge Plan. Feel that it's lip service.

- CPS should provide support for what our teachers are doing really well. Advanced learners can benefit other learners in the classroom. Having high expectations through school serves to lift everyone up.
- The way advanced learners are identified will have to be fluid. Especially so that advanced learners who develop asynchronously can still be identified. Some advanced learners show up as behavior problems.
- Some advanced learners are ahead in ELA. Their needs must be addressed too in the Academic Challenge Plan.
- Every advanced learner needs an SAP (subject acceleration protocol), not just kids who are “2+” years ahead.
- Sometimes a heterogeneous group just doesn’t work. The teacher just can’t do it, not enough minutes in the day.
- The current draft of CALA members’ response to the plan is too kind, too generous. The Academic Challenge Plan is a lot of lip service. Our response should be tougher. Make it shorter. Take out all the praise.
- The issue of “2+ years above grade level” is a red herring. There are lots of kids who could be 2+ years above grade level if they were being challenged, if classes were truly rigorous.
- In my experience, honors in the same classroom with the same teacher (so-called “embedded honors”) will not work. I agree, it’s lip service. It’s window dressing.
- Our response should call for the introduction of honors in all core academic subjects, within a committed time frame.
- Major question about the “2+ years ahead” criterion. What about social studies? How would a child be considered “2+ years ahead” when they haven’t had exposure to a given content area yet? It’s not clear. It’s easy to show that a kid is 2+ years ahead in reading or math, but not in other subjects.
- Emphasize that we are not elitist. We are not talking only about extremely rare geniuses. We are talking about a wider pool of advanced learners that need more challenge. About 500 to 1000 kids.
- Make the response shorter. Doesn’t work to attack the CPS. Be strategic.
- We can convey conviction without being unnecessarily hostile.
- It’s confusing: who will the Plan serve? 6% of students, 20%?
- It’s always hard when you’re offering an intervention to a child, depending on where they are relative to a certain threshold. The kids it’s hardest to decide are those that are closest to the

threshold. Just on one side of it or the other. Will they be helped by the intervention or not? That's for teacher, parent, and student to decide.

- The response is too long. Also, add a section about how it's important to address the needs of advanced learners in the elementary grades.
- There needs to be a specialist in the classroom for advanced learners. We're talking about children who have a *difference* in their ability.
- Add a sentence about needing services for advanced learners in all grade levels. A peer group of advanced learners can support each other a lot.
- Every child can benefit from a group that tries to lift up all.
- Study differentiation in CPS schools where it's being done effectively.
- A Subject Acceleration Protocol and individual education plan would benefit every child. Have one for every child.
- What's the language our school leaders use around the subject of advanced learners? Do our school leaders know how many advanced learners are at their school? Who is this population? It's about 15-20% of students.
- We (parents) can be ambassadors, go to teachers, school leaders. Ask that needs of advanced learners be a topic in their meetings and work at their schools. And also be a topic for professional development.
- School leaders may have dual goals. One goal is for outcomes, getting kids to proficiency. Another goal is for each kid's every day experience. For advance learners, the former is already taken care of (in some content areas). So the focus needs to be on the latter. On how they are experiencing learning every day.
- We're not looking for kids to get ahead, but to be who they are. To be respected for who they are as learners. To have their needs adequately met.
- For some kids it's traumatic to have their needs go unmet. They get depressed, disconnected.

Minutes taken by Freedom Baird

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CALA's 2012 Action Plan – working with our district leaders and educators on specific tasks, including:

- **Outreach to grow a diverse parent community**, with special effort to include families disadvantaged by racial bias, English language ability, socio-economic status, or other factors; meet with school leaders; work with the district to coordinate a monthly meeting space for CALA, and distribute literature and announcements; find a volunteer parent contact from each school who can pass along email announcements, be a contact for new CALA parents, etc.
- Hold a **monthly CALA meeting**, open to the public, either for planning or a workshop on a specific topic
- **Meet with school leaders** – principals, assistant principals, family liaisons – at every school to learn about different schools' approach to advanced learners
- Continue to **meet with our district leaders** in the administration and School Committee to shape policy and programming that meets the needs of advanced learners across CPS
- To **support Massachusetts state advocates** working to create state legislation mandating policy and programs for advanced learners
- Assist the district in **fundraising** for programs for advanced learners, especially in light of the recent NCLB waiver, the Blueprint for Reform, and the Investing in Innovation Fund
<http://cambridgeadvanced.org/2011/12/19/nclb-waiver-leaves-room-for-improvements/>
- **Raise overall awareness** in the district about the needs and challenges of advanced learners in the CPS

On this latter goal of raising awareness, the CALA community requests that, in the coming months, our district leaders take the following six specific steps:

1. Utilize an evidence-based method to accurately approximate the number of advanced learners in the district
2. Include needs of advanced learners as a professional development topic for principals and teachers during the coming year, and how the issue can be addressed throughout the grades and classrooms, including classrooms which use ability grouping, cluster grouping, or differentiation.
3. Enact policy that requires all Cambridge Public Schools to set goals that challenge *all* students, including advanced learners already performing beyond grade level.
4. Directly address the needs of advanced learners in the CPS middle grades as the specifics of the Innovation Agenda are developed and implemented.

5. Request a summary from each school's literacy and math coaches about what they currently do to serve the needs of advanced learners, and what additional resources they need in the way of materials or time with specialists.
6. Commit to sending professional CPS representatives to the 18th annual New England Conference on Gifted and Talented Education that will take place in Rhode Island in October, 2012 [<http://www.necgt.org/>]