



Cambridge Advanced Learning Association

Providing community, resources, and advocacy for families

<http://cambridgeadvanced.org/>

January 24, 2012

Dear Dr. Young, Dr. Turk, Ms. Likis, Ms. MacDonald, Members of the Administration, Mayor Reeves, and Members of the School Committee,

This statement is a response to the recently published Academic Challenge Plan. It is signed by twelve parents in the new CALA community. In preparing the statement we incorporated input from 31 CALA parents, 18 of whom showed up this morning at our general meeting.

CALA, the Cambridge Advanced Learning Association, is a newly formed group of parents and educators who have come together around concerns about advanced learners receiving an adequate and equitable education in the Cambridge Public Schools. CALA exists to support and advocate on behalf of advanced learners from every socio-economic bracket, and of every race, ethnicity, and learning style. We heard this morning, and over the last several months, from CALA parents who, far from being elitist or arrogant, are just plain worried. They are worried because they have seen their children's needs unmet or set aside, and they have seen the damaging impact this has on their children. These are not parents who are looking for their children to get ahead, but rather for their children to be supported, valued and respected in who they are as students.

We, the co-authors of this statement, know that a great deal of work by many of our district's educators and leaders has gone into shaping the Academic Challenge Plan, and we want you know that we are aware of and grateful for your efforts and your dedication to Cambridge's students.

There are some issues that we are relieved and gratified to see addressed in the Plan, and other aspects about which we are deeply concerned. Also, although the Plan and our response to it address advanced learners in the middle grades, there are CALA parents with children in every grade, and with concerns about our elementary schools and high school as well.

When we talk about gaps in student performance, we're talking about two types of difference. One type of difference has to do with the **circumstances of a student's life**, including prenatal care, childhood nutrition, socioeconomic status, racial or other biases, stability of home life, etc. These factors all contribute to the sub-group achievement gaps that – as a community that values social justice – we take on as our collective responsibility to close. The other type of

difference has to do with *who a child is*. Their learning style, their passions, their innate disability and ability. It is about the **essence of who a student is as a learner**.

The idea of difference caused by social inequity is so abhorrent to us, that, in conversations, policy, and practices in the Cambridge Public Schools, as a community, we have, over the course of many years, allowed that conversation to *eclipse* the conversation about the needs of advanced learners. So, it is a *dramatic improvement* to see, in the Academic Challenge Plan, that Dr. Young and his administration are willing to acknowledge that there is such a thing as an advanced learner, and that there is tangible need for these students to be identified and appropriately educated. It's a significant change in our school leadership's stance toward these students. We thank you for your willingness to see and validate the truth of these students' experience and their needs.

We also applaud the Plan's acknowledgement of the need for: rigorous curriculum and instruction, habits of scholarship, disciplinary literacy, self-efficacy, extra support for students in their transitional sixth-grade year, and a plan to evaluate the middle schools in 2012-13. We agree that these practices will serve CPS's middle school students well.

We are grateful for the administration's commitment to send staff to attend the 18th Annual New England Conference on Gifted and Talented Education and/or other relevant middle grades conferences.

We are also encouraged to know that advanced learners will have the option of requesting a Subject Acceleration Protocol, which will include the creation of an individual plan for their education. We commend the Academic Challenge Plan authors for insuring that eligibility for an SAP will be based on a thorough, multi-faceted assessment, using both quantitative and qualitative evidence. As we understand it, the phrase "Learners 2+ Years Above Grade Level" is shorthand for this nuanced assessment. We look forward to learning more about the specifics of the assessment process, eligibility, etc.

We also ask you to confirm that you are referring to students advanced in *any* given content area, including music, or the visual arts, not just in a core subject. We want to emphasize that, in identifying which students could benefit from an SAP, special attention must be paid, and special instruments used, to identify and support advanced learners who are disadvantaged by socio-economic status, racial or cultural bias, English language ability, or other factors.

We feel that the SAP will be the cornerstone of an equitable education for advanced learners in the CPS, as it will involve the student, teachers, specialists and parents, and guide the delivery of services needed by these students. It is a great beginning.

Also, when rigor and expectations are increased across the board, we're going to see a lot more students who are performing at 2+ years beyond grade level in different content areas. We also want to note that some in the CALA community support the concept of an SAP for *all* students, not just for advanced learners.

So, those are the things we applaud and support in the Academic Challenge Plan. Next we will address our serious concerns. Essentially we feel that the Plan, as it stands now, is a beginning, but our district leaders must take it the rest of the way, to make it truly substantive and effective.

At last summer's July 20th meeting with ISP families, these questions were asked of those who attended: "Do you think it's possible to challenge 6,000 students without grouping them by ability? If we provided ***all the necessary resources***? Who believes that's possible?"

Where the Academic Challenge Plan falls troublingly short is in identifying and committing to providing ***all the necessary resources***. It falls short in the specifics of ***how*** teachers will meet advanced learners' needs in the middle grades, and with ***what*** resources. We ask that these details be provided, either as amendments to the Plan, or in other written policy detailing the Plan's implementation. If not, then, as far as advanced learners are concerned, the Academic Challenge Plan is only a shell of a plan, with no substance.

What follows are the specific issues that we, the co-authors of this statement, having heard from many in the CALA community, feel must be addressed. Although we saw some brief mention of some of these in the plan Appendices, we saw no commitment regarding their actual implementation –

- **If You're Going to Do Honors as Cluster Grouping, You've Got to Do It Right**

In the CALA community there is not consensus on the issue of ability-grouped classrooms vs. heterogeneous classrooms. Some in our community strongly support the ISP, some strongly support the concept of discrete honors classes, and some are in favor of heterogeneous classrooms with honors offered via Cluster Grouping. We, the authors of this statement, want to strongly emphasize to our district leaders that if you decide to have heterogeneous classrooms with honors in the form of Cluster Grouping, as the solution to addressing the needs of advanced learners, you're going to have to *do Cluster Grouping right*. Putting a few advanced learners together in the hallway, or in the back of a classroom to look at Kahn Academy videos or other materials, is ***not*** Cluster Grouping, and does *not* comprise an equitable education for these students.

Cluster Grouping is an established educational process in which four to six advanced learners are grouped in an otherwise heterogeneous class. This grouping occurs *daily*. The purpose of the cluster is to provide the students access to each other as academic

peers, and so that the cluster can be taught at times by the classroom teacher who has been specially trained in differentiation for advanced learners, and at times by an *Academic Challenge Resource Teacher*.

True Cluster Groups are structured in such a way that they don't cut into the rest of a student's schedule. Advanced learners should not be asked to sacrifice one part of their education to receive adequate instruction in another.

Within a true Cluster Group, instructional options can include: enrichment and extensions, higher-order thinking skills, pretesting and differentiation, curriculum compacting, an accelerated pace, and/or more complexity in content. Research shows that cluster grouping is academically effective, is cost effective, and does not negatively impact students.

A full description of the practice is in this definitive guide:

The Cluster Grouping Handbook: A Schoolwide Model: How to Challenge Gifted Students and Improve Achievement for All, by Susan Winebrenner and Dina Brulles

http://books.google.com/books/about/The_Cluster_Grouping_Handbook_A_Schoolwi.html?id=V8Rj7F3wKzEC

The Brookline approach to advanced learners, which uses a Subject Acceleration Protocol within a Cluster Grouping model, works, because Brookline also has an *Academic Challenge Resource Teacher placed in every school*. So the students in those clusters have access to their academic peers, and to a trained teaching specialist, and to curriculum designed especially to meet their needs.

- **Listen to Our Teachers**

Members of the CALA community have heard directly in recent months from CPS teachers, specialists, and coaches who have struggled in their efforts to effectively differentiate learning. It is essential for our district leaders to hear, anonymously or otherwise, from teachers who find themselves struggling with this work, as well as from teachers who are succeeding. Professional development around the issue of advanced learners must reflect the experience, needs, and concerns voiced by CPS teachers.

- **Curriculum Designed and Implemented Specifically to Meet the Needs of Advanced Learners**

In addition to increasing rigor and expectations across the board, to lift up *all* students, the district must insure that the newly designed curricula and their implementation in classrooms take into account the needs of advanced learners, and have built in materials and methods targeted toward these students. Currently CPS teachers are not

formally supported by the district in their efforts to meet the needs advanced learners in their classrooms. There is nothing offered, currently, in the Academic Challenge Plan that would change this. The Plan must include specific mechanisms to insure that classroom teachers and Academic Challenge specialists have the means and methods to spend time with advanced learners, review their work, and provide guidance and meaningful goals.

- **Official Academic Challenge Program with Oversight**

Solutions offered to CPS's advanced learners must *not* be in the form of an orphaned non-program, as ISP has become in recent years. We ask the administration to create an official **Academic Challenge Program**, overseen by a district-wide official, and run by a coordinator with training in education for advanced learners, who manages all aspects of the program, oversees in-school Academic Challenge Resource Teachers, coordinates resource teachers' schedules, provides resources to teachers, specialists and parents, and collaborates with parent advisory groups. The Academic Challenge Program coordinator will also oversee essential outreach to the community, and foster diversity in family involvement in programs, resources and events related to advanced learning.

- **Academic Challenge Resource Teachers**

We ask that the Academic Challenge Plan include a commitment to placing an Academic Challenge Resource Teacher in each school. This teacher, specially trained in teaching advanced learners, will serve as a resource to classroom teachers, parents and students. She'll work with teachers to help them successfully differentiate instruction, and develop extension and enrichment opportunities within their classrooms.

- **Study Effective Differentiation**

Differentiation has been used for years in the CPS, with uneven results. We strongly urge the district to hire Nancy Brigham Associates to study the CPS middle grades' classrooms that are currently succeeding with differentiated learning. What is the source of that success? How can it be replicated in the new middle schools? This study needs to be conducted *now*. It's our last chance to observe these successful classrooms in action.

- **Create a Culture of Academic Tolerance**

We have heard from parents in the CALA community whose kids have been taunted, marginalized, or bullied for being academically different from their peers. As part of the Academic Challenge Plan, we ask that the district enact a district-wide campaign fostering a culture of tolerance around academic difference. Students, teachers, and our district leaders and School Committee members must embody this core value: every student and their family deserves respect and acceptance, no matter where they are

academically. Students need to be given language and guidance around how to talk about academic difference. As the adults, we should all be setting the example. The Academic Tolerance campaign should include work against harmful speech and other types of bullying.

- **Participate in Nomenclature Reform**

We ask our district leaders and School Committee members to join CALA in adopting more neutral, accurate nomenclature, and to use the phrases “advanced learner” or “students in need of advanced learning”. Although the terms “gifted” and “talented” are established in the literature and organizations, we believe that these terms are inaccurate and harmful. There are advanced learners from many families, including disadvantaged families, whose parents do not seek support, because they are alienated by these outdated, biased terms. This year some CALA members will be writing to state and national advanced learning organizations to promote this concept of nomenclature reform.

- **Commit to Policy and Programs for Advanced Learners in Every Grade**

There are advanced learners in every grade in the CPS who are in need of policy, programs, and resources to meet their educational needs. As part of a full-fledged Academic Challenge Program, we ask our district leaders to include support for advanced learners in our elementary schools, in our new middle schools with the measures outlined in this document and including honors offered in *all* middle school academic subjects by 2012-2013, and in our high school with a commitment to preserving honors and AP classes at the Cambridge Rindge and Latin High School.

The question will come up: what about funding for these resources for advanced learners? If Massachusetts’s NCLB waiver is granted, then, the Commonwealth will be eligible for federal funding as outlined in the Obama Administration’s Blueprint for Reform, which includes this section on meeting the needs of advanced learners:

COLLEGE PATHWAYS AND ACCELERATED LEARNING

Our proposal will provide competitive grants to states, districts, and nonprofit partners to increase access to accelerated learning opportunities for students. At the high school level, these opportunities will include college-level work. At the elementary and middle school levels, these opportunities will include access to gifted and talented education programs.

Grantees will carry out activities that help students prepare for, or directly provide, college-level work (including early-college or dual-enrollment programs, Advanced Placement (AP) programs, and International Baccalaureate programs), other accelerated

learning programs, and gifted and talented programs in elementary or middle schools. Applicants may propose additional activities, such as allowing credit based on successful demonstration of competency via examination or other valid means, or providing counseling, mentoring, or programs to develop study skills. Priority will be given to applicants that propose to serve high schools with low graduation rates and that partner with state higher education offices and institutions of higher education in a program that allows higher education credits to be portable beyond the individual partner institution or institutions. Our proposal will continue to provide support to states to improve access to AP tests for low-income students.

Excerpt from the United States Department of Education's **Blueprint for Reform**, March 13, 2010. <http://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/blueprint/blueprint.pdf>

While we, as members of the CALA community, are gratified at the CPS administration's willingness to acknowledge the existence of advanced learners, and the need for these students to have Subject Acceleration Protocols with individual plans for their education, we find the current Academic Challenge Plan unacceptably incomplete, in its lack of detail about committing resources to these students and their teachers.

We look forward to the ongoing work with you of adding detail and substance to the Academic Challenge Plan, and working toward its successful implementation.

Sincerely,

Freedom Baird, Susan Shelkrot, Julie Croston, Andy Adler, Tara Greco, Brian Sadie, Karen Propp, Janie-Katz Kristie, Bill Bogstad, Martha Sieniewicz, Gayle Sherman, Anne Holtzworth, Sandy Goldberg

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