



June 15, 2015

Randy Booker, Incoming Superintendent
Cheryl Wozniak, Director of Curriculum and Instruction
Stephanie Griffin, Director of Instructional Technology
Brent Daniels, Principal, PHS
Ryan Fletcher, Principal, PMS
Anne Dolid, Principal, Havens Elementary
Michael Corritone, Principal, Beach Elementary
Carol Cramer, Principal, Wildwood Elementary
Satyendra Shah, Incoming Principal, Millenium High School
Board of Education
Piedmont Unified School District
760 Magnolia Ave, Piedmont, CA 94611

Dear Superintendent Booker, Dr. Wozniak, Ms. Griffin, Principals, and the Board of Education,

Piedmont ALPS was formed in 2011 by families with advanced learners (including, but not limited to, GATE-identified students) in the Piedmont Unified School District. Our main goal is to help the District support advanced students at every level. It is often thought that “these students will do fine on their own” when in reality they need just as much support, challenge, and attention as other students. We achieve our mission through education, advocacy, community building, and fundraising. Our members are active participants on the GATE Advisory Committee and various Site Councils. Our group’s official membership has grown to over 135 families, increasing dramatically this past year.

During this past year, our group:

- Identified and helped fund the cost of hiring a third-party expert (Dr. Cheryl Holzmeyer) to synthesize relevant research to inform the decisions of the Piedmont Math Task Force (e.g., whether to adopt an integrated or traditional pathway; whether and how to cluster students by ability level)
- Provided a \$5,000 grant to support the district in sending 10 teachers to attend an intense 2-day workshop on “Differentiation for ALL learners” in Las Vegas, Nevada. The teachers who attended then shared their learnings with other teachers and district staff.
- Provided ongoing input, advice, and support to district staff on the design of the Common Core Math Pathways
- Co-hosted a Parent Information Night for Parents of Advanced Learners with Randy Booker on October 16, 2014
- In conjunction with district staff, co-hosted a teacher panel on differentiated instruction on December 2, 2014
- Hosted a talk by Piedmont High School Assistant Principal Ginna Guiang-Myers on differentiation and then facilitated an interactive group discussion with parents on May 11, 2015.

- Shared information about Common Core Math changes and other, related news to our members and the broader community
- Helped fund a second research report by Dr. Cheryl Holzmeyer on different approaches to identifying students as advanced learners.
- Provided \$3,000 funding for hands-on professional development in writing for our tri-school Kindergarten teachers with the Lucy Calkins program.

We acknowledge and appreciate the measures the district has put in place this year to support differentiated instruction for all learners, including advanced learners (e.g., Problems of the Month). At the same time, we believe that some of the prior gains that had been made to support advanced learners have been diluted and, in some cases, even reversed in recent years (e.g., the loss of acceleration / compression opportunities in 6th grade math). So, even though we recognize the funding challenges the district currently faces, we would still like to submit the following recommendations for your consideration to implement in 2015-2016 and beyond:

1. Hire a district-wide enrichment / differentiated instruction program specialist. We believe that this role is critical to making differentiated instruction work in practice--not just in theory. Moreover, we conclude from the past few years of experience that this role cannot simply be "tacked onto" an existing administrative role. Rather, it requires a dedicated resource. We envision this role being filled by someone who is GATE-certified, skilled at identifying students who need extra challenge through a variety of assessment techniques, and passionate about making sure that their learning needs are fully met. We see this person leading and coordinating the efforts of site-specific differentiated instruction specialists (described below)--for example, by collecting and disseminating best practices in differentiation across sites.

2. Install dedicated differentiation instruction specialists in each school site. We applaud the commitment and hard work of classroom teachers. At the same time, it is clear that classroom teachers vary considerably in their ability to provide differentiated instruction. To address these inconsistencies, we feel strongly that each school site should have a dedicated differentiated instruction specialist who is charged to: (1) help classroom teachers identify students who need extra challenge or extra support; (2) coach classroom teachers on how to differentiate specific pieces of content; and (3) work with advanced learners who need a level of challenge that cannot be provided within the regular classroom context. In addition, we would strongly encourage the district to install a differentiated instruction resource at Piedmont Middle School to work with advanced learners in 6th grade math (Common Core Math 6). We continue to hear from many parents and students that a large contingent of students in Common Core Math 6 has felt inadequately challenged. Given that students no longer have the opportunity to compress / accelerate in math in 6th grade, we think it is essential to put in place some additional differentiated instruction support for these students.

3. Redouble the efforts in teacher professional development. We commend the teachers who have invested considerable time and energy to receive training on differentiated instruction and to receive GATE certification. To further address the inconsistencies in teachers' ability to differentiate instruction, we would encourage the district to: (1) look to hire more teachers who are GATE certified; (2) provide incentives (e.g., stipends) for teachers to receive training in differentiated instruction and / or GATE certification; (3) offer more on-site differentiated instruction training for all teachers; and (4) strengthen the differentiated instruction coaching model that was recently put in place. It is clear that one-shot professional development programs are simply inadequate. Instead, we need an ongoing and systematic program of professional development for teachers--particularly on how to provide differentiated instruction.

4. Offer individualized differentiation instruction plans for advanced learners. Parents of advanced learners want to know how their child's needs are being met. We advocate creating a simple, brief, written plan for each advanced learner or GATE-identified student to document educational goals and identify concrete steps that will be taken to meet those goals. This document could be a "living document" that helps ensure that a student's learning needs are documented and shared with his or her new teacher in the transition from one grade level to the next.

5. Evaluate and, as Appropriate, Adjust the Math Pathways. We think it is critical to begin collecting and analyzing the data that will be needed to assess the effectiveness of and potentially modify the newly adopted math pathways. Two key questions that seem important to revisit with hard data / evidence are: (1) whether compression / acceleration opportunities should be provided to students before 7th grade; and (2) whether students should be more sharply clustered by ability group / level.

We have tried to make these recommendations specific, reasonable, and actionable. Our group would be happy to discuss the fundraising implications and resources needed to support these goals. Depending on how the role were structured, we would be open to contributing a substantial portion of our budget for 2015-2016 to helping fund the Common Core Math 6 differentiation resource described above. Also, if the Giving Campaign for next year were focused on the theme of differentiated instruction, we would also be happy to have one of our board members take point for supporting this broader fundraising effort. In sum, we look forward to working collaboratively with you to achieve as many of these goals as possible in 2015-2016 and beyond.

If you have any questions, please feel free to email Sameer Srivastava: srivastava@haas.berkeley.edu. We look forward to hearing your feedback and reactions.

Regards,

Piedmont ALPS Board and Members:

Sameer Srivastava, Kim Fisher, Elizabeth Shook, Cindy Wire, Jim Govert, Dana Lung, Stephanie Teleki, Julie Caskey, Lisa Joyce, Kathleen Crombie

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