

June 25, 2018

Randall Booker, Superintendent
Cheryl Wozniak, Director of Curriculum and Instruction
Adam Littlefield, Principal, PHS
Ryan Fletcher, Principal, PMS
Anne Dolid, Principal, Havens Elementary
Michael Corritone, Principal, Beach Elementary
Carol Cramer, Principal, Wildwood Elementary
Shannon Fierro, Millennium High School
Board of Education
Piedmont Unified School District
760 Magnolia Ave, Piedmont, CA 94611

Dear Superintendent Booker, Dr. Wozniak, Principals, and PUSD Board of Education,

Piedmont ALPS was formed in 2007 by families with advanced learners (including, but not limited to, GATE-identified students) at PUSD. Our main goal is to help the District support advanced students at every level with sufficient challenge and differentiation to meet their learning needs. We achieve our mission through education, advocacy, community building, and fundraising.

During this past year, our group:

- Provided \$8,000 for 2017-18 differentiation specialist/coach Amy Symons Burke;
- Met regularly with Dr. Cheryl Wozniak about updates to the secondary math pathways, provided survey questions and feedback on topics to ask middle and high school students and families, discussed concerns with teachers, staff and parents and shared feedback with administration, attended and represented the needs of advanced math learners in meetings and during the School Board's consideration of changes to the pathways;
- Co-hosted September 2017 GATE Parent Information Night for parents with Dr. Wozniak and school GATE coordinators;
- Co-sponsored Education Speaker Series event with Parenting Author Mary Sheedy Kurcinka, author of multiple books, including *Raising Your Spirited Child*;
- Hosted a parent education night with Dr. Lisa White, a psychologist from the Summit Center, about different ways to challenge students with advanced learning needs;
- Met with the Principals of each our six schools (PHS, MHS, PMS, Havens, Wildwood and Beach) to discuss how advanced learners can best be accommodated in the classroom;
- Advocated for the District to keep track of race and gender statistics for students who are GATE-identified; and
- Shared information about opportunities and events for advanced learners with our community.

We acknowledge and appreciate the measures the District has put in place to support advanced learners, including the differentiation specialist and the GATE site coordinators. We submit the following recommendations for implementation in 2018 - 2019 and beyond:

1. Challenge All Students in Math

We appreciate the administration's efforts in listening to survey feedback from students and families and working to improve the secondary math pathways. We support compression options for PMS and PHS, as well as better accommodations to allow students to work to their ability during the regular school year (not summer). Since recent changes have been made to the pathways that effectively reduce options for advanced students, PUSD should gather data at least annually on student experience, test scores, teacher and family feedback, and enrollment (including whether students are opting to enroll in math courses outside of PUSD).

At the elementary level, we continue to be concerned about the elimination of pull-out math enrichment in favor of a push-in model. PUSD should gather parent/student input on how the push-in model is working to meet their students' need for challenge either through a survey or questionnaire.

We appreciate the District's responsiveness to improve practices for the constantly changing student body. With recent turnover among secondary math teaching staff, we ask that new hires be sought with experience in differentiation and in teaching compression classes. We also ask that the District continue to monitor course pace, content and ability grouping at all levels of math to ensure that advanced learners are receiving sufficient differentiation and challenge -- so that every Piedmont student with the desire and ability can pursue math at the appropriate pace.

2. Stress Reduction & Cultural Change

During the secondary pathway discussion, some teachers expressed concern about how certain math students can be adversely affected -- both by student stress, if they sought challenge for which they were not ready; and by negative self-comparison with their more advanced peers. ALPS supports teacher efforts to reduce stress, both by allowing students to work at the appropriate level for them and to change the culture of negative comparison. It is important to note that limiting course options or limiting challenge can cause stress and frustration for some of our advanced students. They need access to more advanced material for their own sense of well-being. So limiting advanced courses is not a "one size fits all" solution. For other students, stress may be created by seeking advanced courses when not academically ready, perhaps because of internal or external pressure to keep up with others.

Today's culture of competition is a cause of negative self-comparison. ALPS would like to see better understanding and communication around this issue. We would like to work with PUSD to provide support, parent education, and continued opportunities for all learners. ALPS supports an academic climate that reduces stress by improving consideration, acceptance, and accommodation of students' differing academic and social-emotional needs.

3. Consider how to offer more challenge in Science and Language Arts

Our District has a high percentage of students with advanced learning needs. As the District continues to work on implementing a new secondary science curriculum, we support **offering new NGSS/AP Science Courses**, including engineering and computer science, as well as providing more advanced courses in chemistry and physics (see our letter of 3/28/17). In addition, as the District updates language arts curriculum, we request that appropriate consideration is given to **the needs of advanced learners for more challenge and better differentiation in reading and writing** at all grade levels. We especially see a need at Piedmont Middle School for more challenge in Language Arts as the students attain academic maturity and prepare to launch into high school.

4. Continue to improve, broaden and deepen teacher education, coaching and support on differentiation for advanced learners and concerns related to gifted and 2e learners.

We applaud the commitment and hard work of our classroom teachers, and believe that it is a continuous process to learn differentiated instruction techniques, improve inconsistencies between different classrooms and projects, and better meet the needs of advanced learners. We join the District in supporting an **FTE increase for our district-wide differentiated specialist/teacher coach**. PUSD's current differentiation coach Amy Symons Burke can coach more teachers in Piedmont with greater funding, so ALPS supports increasing her contract as a resource for teachers beyond .6 FTE. We also encourage the District to help each site **take better advantage of their trained GATE coordinators** to help classroom teachers identify students who need extra challenge and/or extra support; help coach on how to differentiate specific pieces of curriculum; and work with advanced learners who need a level of challenge not provided within the regular classroom context. Lastly, we suggest that the District **continue teacher professional development in differentiation and GATE**. We hope the District can hire more teachers who are GATE certified, provide incentives (e.g., stipends) for teachers to receive training in differentiated instruction and/or GATE certification, and offer on-site differentiated instruction training for all teachers, beyond coaching and consultation.

5. Offer individualized differentiated instruction plans for advanced learners.

Parents of advanced learners want to know how their child's needs are being met. We continue to advocate for a brief written plan for each advanced learner or GATE-identified student to document educational needs and goals and identify concrete steps that will be taken to meet them. Plans could be shared between teachers during yearly and school transitions and shared with parents early in the academic year.

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. We look forward to continuing to work collaboratively with PUSD to achieve as many of these goals as possible in 2018-2019 and beyond. If you have any questions or feedback, please email us at piedmontalps@gmail.com.

Regards,

Piedmont ALPS 2017-18 Board and Members

Julie Caskey, Elizabeth Shook, Christina Hsia, Cristie March, Siow Fang Tan, Julie Drassinower, Kim Fisher, Cindy Wire, Joshua Posamentier, Dana Lung, Michele Kwok, Jim Govert, Venus French