

Advanced Learning Programs
at
Greenwich Public Schools, CT

Student and Parent Focus Group Findings

Conducted by Project Adventure, Inc.

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Introduction

The overarching purpose for conducting these focus groups is to inform the phase II review of the Advanced Learning Programs (ALP) at Greenwich Public Schools. A structured group process was utilized, conducted by a Project Adventure consultant well versed in using this methodology to gain insights into the ALP program. Given the two-day format, this focus group process was fairly comprehensive in that a number of different constituencies were interviewed.

The following *groups* were conducted:

- 3 - Parents of ALP children totaling 28 individuals
- 2 - Parents of children not in ALP totaling 14 individuals
- 1 - Parents of both an ALP and a non-ALP child totaling 7 individuals
- 1 - Regular Education teachers totaling 11 individuals
- 1 - Current AP/Honors High School Students who participated in ALP totaling 9
- 1 - ALP teachers totaling 10
- 1 - School Principals totaling 6

Each focus group was 75 minutes. All schools were represented within these focus groups. Discussions did involve some comments about individual schools but did not allow mention of individual teachers. The focus groups were conducted by Project Adventure's Vice President, Jane Panicucci and notes were taken by Marty D'Andrea, administrator for ALP.

The following *types* of questions were used in the focus groups. Questions did vary for different constituents:

- Describe your overall impression/experience of yours or your child's ALP and/or Regular Education experience. (Using experiential activity)
- Describe your perception of the ALP/Regular Education program.
- Are your child's needs being met in ALP/Regular Education?
- Do you believe the selection process is appropriate and equitable?
- (Teachers and Principals) What impact does ALP have on your school/classroom?
- Please provide ideas for improving the ALP selection process and/or program.

Overview:

All parties interviewed were articulate and invested in the education of the children attending Greenwich Public Schools. Each constituency focused on issues relevant to their specific situation but common themes also emerged. The report will begin with the themes that are shared by most of the groups interviewed:

Themes Common to Majority of Focus Groups:

1. *Who are we serving?* The District needs to define who the ALP population is and then effectively educate all parties as to who the ALP population is. Most of the educators interviewed are clear that this is not a gifted program, but that belief varies greatly among parents. Many describe their children as being “gifted” while others are aware that that may not be the case. The options mentioned include:
 - a. Gifted learners
 - b. Advanced learners
 - c. Learners who are getting an enrichment program
2. *Communication and PR:* There is too much mystery around all aspects of the ALP program. Every constituency asked for more transparency and more information. A clear articulation of what the program is, who the target population is, and the testing process would serve the District well. This then needs to be disseminated often and widely.
3. *Differentiated instruction:* All parents, ALP and non-ALP, heralded the need and desire for regular education classrooms that provided for differentiation. Both sets of parents recognized that regardless of the “pull out” advanced learning program, a very diverse set of learners remain in the classroom. Both sets of parents were concerned about the children who were on the “cusp” of getting into ALP, and how their needs were served. The non-ALP parents were also concerned about the “middle” children, and not wanting them to be the ones who “get missed”.

Differentiation was also a key theme in the teacher and principal meetings. Principals were clear that differentiation in the regular education classroom is a requirement for their teachers. However, both teacher and administrator recognize that it is hard to do, and that some are better skilled than others. Differing from parents, however, were the professionals stating that differentiation is also necessary in ALP, and that there are also ALP teachers *not* differentiating effectively in their classrooms with diverse advanced learners. The students in their focus groups also recalled enjoying classes that differentiated more than those that did not.

The notion of flexible grouping was another theme discussed among the educators interviewed and very much supported by principals. The theory is simply that rather than be selected for the advanced math group, one may be advanced for multiplication, but middle for geometry.

4. *Take the mystery out of the selection process.* Teachers, parents, and even some administrators suggest that the process is far too secretive, hard to follow, and not well communicated. Many non-ALP parents came to the session as a way to learn more. The veil of secrecy should be lifted especially when a revised system is to be launched.
5. *Shared parent comments regarding the selection process include:*
 - a. There is very little upset regarding the length and intensity of the testing process even among non-ALP parents
 - b. There is wide belief that some parents are tutoring to the specific tests and that this should not be continued.
 - c. Variability between schools is a shared concern. What the concerns are do vary but include:
 - i. When testing happens
 - ii. Notification to parents about testing days
 - d. Should everyone be screened in grade 4-5 as well? Varying opinions on this.
 - e. Most cared about the kids on the cusp. (except some ALP parents thought even fewer should get in)
6. *Should the standards for getting in vary between schools?:* This was discussed in every group and opinions and knowledge of what exactly the standards are again vary wildly. The District would be wise to get clear on its stance on this issue and communicate it thoroughly to all. Regardless of what is decided, some will disagree, but being silent on the issue continues to breed more questions, distrust, and falsehoods.

Parents of Children in the Advanced Learning Program

ALP parent themes about what is positive about ALP:

There is widespread support for and satisfaction with ALP from these parents.

1. Many expressed that their children are academically challenged for the first time when they enter ALP. They appreciate that ALP gives their children a chance to both succeed and struggle, and they recognize the value of providing their children with activities that stretch their capabilities.
2. The social benefit of having their children “with other children like them” was very important to most parents. One parent lightly said “My son is a huge math geek, and he is with other math geeks and they get each other.” There was a sense of social protection for their children, a place where they more naturally fit in.

3. There is a general belief that both the instruction and the curricula are better than in regular education class. They appreciate the special attention that their children receive and perceive the curriculum as being more creative and better “thought out.”
4. Some acknowledged that without ALP, their children were labeled difficult. Their conclusion is that without ALP the children are simply too bored and that is the cause of any behavioral issues.
5. A number of parents have come to this District because of ALP.

ALP parent themes about what is less appreciated about ALP:

1. There seems to be the most discontent at either the grade 2 level or the Middle School Level.
 - Middle School is more confusing to parents as to what is and is not ALP.
 - Some parents suggested that the Middle School program is a joke – too easy. Science was discussed as a weak area. (Repeat of grade 3 interdisciplinary)
 - No enrichment math. ALP MS curriculum is a joke.
 - Grade 2: some wish that it was more frequent than only twice a week
2. Best practices need to be better shared among schools. These parents are very organized, and what happens in one school is quickly noted and compared by parents throughout the District.
3. Although not widely shared, some feel that it is not ideal for their child to have the same teacher for 3 years in a row.
4. Surprisingly, most parents did not mind that their children were in and out of their regular classroom and that there was some discontinuity created due to this. However, it is noted that some parents of three strand children acknowledge that this does cause some challenges.
5. The lack of data about the quality and results of this program was voiced by both ALP and Non-ALP parents. “How do I know my child is being served appropriately? How do I know if this is helping my child meet our educational goals for him/her? What are the statistics of who goes on to AP/Honors classes and who attends what colleges and universities?”
6. Some parents were clear in expressing that ALP was not enough. They would like services similar to Special Education. They believe that if this was mandated by the State, the District would pay more attention to these children.
7. Parents more familiar with ALP historically, voiced the need for a *full time* coordinator.

ALP parent themes about the regular education program:

There were very varied views of the *realities* of the regular education classroom and thus the complexity of the role of a regular education teacher. Some parents recognized that because the classroom is inherently different than an ALP class of more homogeneous learners, the teacher may need to employ different strategies and/or may simply not be able to give their child the one on one attention that they believe he/she deserves. Others were far less appreciative of these inherent challenges.

1. Regular education teacher/student ratios are too high.
2. My child is simply bored in the regular education class which leads to lack of enthusiasm for school and learning and for some, behavioral issues.
3. The teacher does not give my child or myself, enough detailed feedback as to his/her progress.
4. If the teacher does not “go to bat” for your child, he will be lost in the system. The teacher plays a key role in whether the child gets selected for ALP, gets special attention, etc.
5. The teaching practices are not as good in the regular classroom.
6. Lack of differentiation. Parents of more advanced learners, both in ALP and non-ALP alike, dislike the notion that an advanced child is sometimes asked to assist the slower learners in a non-differentiated classroom.

ALP parent reactions to the question “What would you do if ALP was eliminated?”

This question was posed with the caveat that this was *not* what the District was proposing, but that I wanted to hear reactions simply as another data point. Even with this explanation, some groups got so upset, I chose to only use this question on a couple of occasions. Parent statements included:

1. I would fight tooth and nail. There has to be a program to serve these children “who are our future world leaders.”
2. I would add enrichment during the summer to keep my child engaged.
3. I would have the school board replaced.
4. I would look to IB to help fill the gap. If that did not work, I would leave the district.
5. When asked, most parents would seek other resources. Six out of ten in one group would send their children to private school. Others did mention that they did not feel that private school was rigorous enough and instead would supplement using tutoring, etc.

ALP parent themes on the selection process:

1. If teachers and principals are part of the process as to who is selected or tested, they need special training on how to spot an “advanced or gifted” learner.
2. Test data needs to be interpreted for parents so that they can understand the bottom line. Give a synopsis. The rubric is confusing.
3. There are varying opinions about whether everyone should be screened in grades 4-5.
4. Some believe that the test should be harder so that fewer kids are selected.
5. There is recognition that some parents are using the actual ALP selection tests with their children and tutoring to this test. Consequently, some children are in ALP not because of talent, but because of preparation. Many of these children consequently do not belong and hold the rest of the ALP class back. Can there be a process of re-testing so that they can get sent out if necessary?
6. Consider more data points than the ALP tests. Use CMT, OLSATs etc..

Other Comments:

There were few, if any, concrete ideas for improving the selection process or the program in general. There were many opinions, but few suggestions.

Parents of Children Not in the Advanced Learning Program

Many of these parents attended the focus group session in hopes of simply learning more about a program that has felt mysterious to them. These non-ALP parents did not attend the focus groups in an effort to lobby against the ALP program. They certainly have concerns about the level of service provided their non-ALP child, but rarely did their discussion include any desire to eliminate the program.

Non-ALP parent themes about their child not being in ALP:

1. *Do the “middle of the road” children get left out?:* Every parent wished that their child received the same level of attention as either an ALP or a special ed child. The idea that everyone is paying the same amount of taxes but getting very different levels of service was repeated in many focus groups.
2. *Non-ALP children are explicit about not being as “smart” as the ALP students.* So many parents were articulate about the negative impact on the self-esteem/self-perception of their young children. At an early age, these students articulate that they are simply not that smart and/or not as smart as the ALP kids. One parent told the story of her grade 3 daughter, who upon learning that she did not “pass the test” to get in to ALP, sobbed, and sobbed and sobbed. This was not the parent worried about the grade 3 student’s future, but the child worrying. Is this simply too young an age to create this dynamic?
3. *Creates a social hierarchy:* Once the “sting” of not getting into the ALP program wears off, there develops a social hierarchy between ALP and non-ALP students.

Non-ALP parent themes about the regular ed program:

1. A number of parents are very happy with the regular education experience at Greenwich.
 - a. “My child has had phenomenal teachers and done very well. The regular ed. students do really blossom if given the chance.”
 - b. “We love the IB curriculum and additional social component that it provides.”
 - c. “Being in the regular ed. program, where my child excels, has been good for his self-esteem.”
 - d. Some parents feel that their child is actually farther ahead in regular ed. math and test better on the CMT than many ALP students.
2. Parents hope for more differentiation and higher standards in the regular ed. classroom. They want challenging experiences for their children within the regular ed. curriculum.

3. There was greater emphasis placed on the quality of the teacher having an impact on the quality of education for the children in the regular ed. program.
4. Parents would like the same level of innovative and problem-solving type units taught in regular ed. as in ALP. "My child would love to build robots!". Some parents claim that a number of interesting ALP programs are "banned" from the regular ed. classroom which perpetuates the feeling of their child having a "less than" experience.
5. The curriculum involves too much, consequently the teacher and the students are always cramming. There is a collision between amount of content, testing, and learning.
6. Parents would like more communication about how their child is doing. Some parents believe that their children can not be graded above level unless they are in ALP, which skews their children's assessments.
7. The regular education experience is perceived to vary widely between schools.

Non-ALP parent themes about the ALP program:

1. Non-ALP parents are frustrated by two practices that they feel give unfair advantage to some students eager to get into the program. Whether or not this impacts their child's entrance, they believe some ALP students are in the program for the wrong reasons. They suggest that some parents:
 - a. Tutor their child for ALP, and, in some cases, tutor directly to the test.
 - b. Hold children back so that they have a better chance of qualifying for the program.
2. There is acknowledgement that ALP parents are "the most outspoken lobbying group in town."
3. The curriculum is more innovative, more challenging, and should be offered to all students.
4. Parents with students on the cusp were most worried about the educational opportunities that their children are missing. They want a curriculum that will give their children opportunities to fail as well as succeed.

Non-ALP parent Prominent themes about the selection process:

1. *The selection process is NOT equitable:* In one focus group, nine out of ten parents agreed with this statement. Here are some of the mental models that lead to this conclusion.
 - a. Standards are different for different schools. My child would be in ALP if they attended "x" school.
 - b. Parents who push, can get their child into ALP even with borderline test scores.
 - c. Some schools are stricter about the standards than others because the Principal is trying to make a statement about their dislike of the program.
2. *Testing process:* Many non-ALP parents thought that the program started too young. It is simply too early to test, select, and track students. Secondly, many parents were not notified prior to testing and had no idea that their children were

tested at all. Lack of communication around the testing was an important complaint.

3. *Parent nomination*: This would be a very popular addition to the selection process.

Building Principals

The building Principals and Assistant Principals offered some very comprehensive suggestions and reflections on the ALP program. This report is greatly enhanced by their informed perspective and some of their concrete suggestions. Important to their discussion was the desire for the District to *clarify who this program is supposed to serve*, advanced learners or gifted learners? This decision can then inform curriculum, selection, and schedule of the ALP program.

1. *Negative impact on scheduling*: This was one of the primary criticisms voiced by Principals regarding the impact of ALP on their school. The structure of the program forces them to arrange the schedule to meet the needs of one teacher and one program. The regular classroom teachers are then required to work around the ALP program.
2. *The need to serve advanced learners*: Although not everyone is philosophically aligned with labeling children so early in age, there was recognition that advanced learners do need to be served in some way. See some concrete suggestions below.
3. *Need for change and renewal in the ALP Program*: “ALP has been uniquely inflexible and unwilling to change.” This was widely acknowledged by the visiting Principals.
4. *Curriculum needs a major overhaul*. It needs to be streamlined, more differentiated, and updated. Specifically cited was the use of Word Masters as an outdated activity. Also cited was the interdisciplinary curricula and its lack of globalization. There was also mention of the defensiveness of ALP teachers about said curricula.
5. *Grade 2*: The suggestion is to either eliminate the Grade 2 program or make it five days a week. Having students pulled out to work above grade level on a particular subject only two days a week is extremely disruptive to both the student and teacher when they are back in the classroom for the other 3 days.
6. *Eliminate making the tests public*: Tutoring to the actual tests that children take has resulted in students being placed in ALP who simply do not belong.
7. *Superintendent expectations about ALP students and CMT*: There is a disconnect between the vision that ALP students will be high performers on CMT and that the ALP curriculum does not teach to the CMT.
8. *Tension between ALP teachers and the rest of the faculty/staff*: Although not a major point of discussion, there was recognition that this existed. Most of the tensions could be a result of structural issues such as: faculty meetings not relative to the ALP teachers, lack of communication between the ALP teacher and the classroom teacher.

Principal Suggestions:

1. Before any restructure of the ALP program, re-visit who it is supposed to serve and for what grade levels.
2. Consider a *push in* program where students are in flexible groupings using an aligned curriculum. Therefore, a child may be in an advanced group for multiplication, but a regular ed group for geometric math, for example. Having the groupings occur within the regular classroom may also alleviate some of the social tensions that the pull-out program creates.
3. Re-vamp the selection process according to whom the program is trying to serve. They agree that Principals need to have a key role in the process. Some suggest that every student should be screened every year, and some like the idea of keeping parents totally out of the ID process.
4. Give the ALP teachers more training in working with gifted and advanced learners. Most are not trained to do this.
5. Update ALP teachers on newer teaching models such as the Workshop Model, Readers' Workshop, Discussion Group Model, and Differentiated Instruction.
6. Better communication to parents and staff about the ALP program.

Regular Education Teachers

Regular education teachers all support having a program for advanced learners. However, just like the Principals, they believe that this program needs to be re-vamped. Following are some of the key themes as discussed.

1. Regular education teachers also want the District to clarify who this program serves. A discussion of enrichment vs advanced, and the implications of how an advanced program sometimes leaves a child without the basics, followed. *These teachers felt that ALP should be an enrichment curriculum.*
2. Regular education teachers would like more clarity as to their role when a student comes in and out of their classroom. Often, what they are doing in ALP has no relationship to what they are teaching in the classroom.
3. Aligning the ALP curriculum to the regular education curriculum would solve a lot of problems regarding re-integrating ALP students back into the regular education classroom.
4. These teachers identified many of the same themes as highlighted above including:
 - a. Elitist attitude by ALP students
 - b. Classroom disruption by ALP students who are used to more attention in the ALP program.
 - c. Students on the "cusp" suffer consequences
5. Who is responsible for the three-strand student who is rarely in the regular education class? Grade two is less disruptive in terms of children being out of the classroom, but the curriculum does not align at all making re-integration back into the classroom challenging.
6. Many teachers believe some of the same opportunities should be afforded the regular ed student such as robots, Shakespeare, etc..

7. Why ALP teachers are not held to the same standards is a question voiced by many regular ed teachers. They are not using best practices, not required to differentiate, and some wonder if they have different requirements regarding the TEPL.
8. Most agree that the correct children are being served. However the testing process does lead some children to believe that if they are being tested, they are in the program. Lots of tears and disappointing feelings follow when this is not the case.
9. Most teachers agreed that starting in Grade 2 is too early.

ALP Teachers

These teachers have a lot of pride in the ALP program. They see the value of a program to meet the needs of special learners, and love creating an environment where their students can truly flourish. To the question as to whom this program serves, this group was the most clear that this is an *advanced* program and not a gifted program or an enrichment program. However, they do agree that there is confusion at the parent level, especially, and that there needs to be more communication/education of parents.

1. ALP teachers hope for more *professional development*. Many explained that they have no credentials or former training in advanced learning programs. They are also eager to have more input into professional development options and more training in the areas that they are teaching.
2. Important to consider ALP as special education and to keep the small class sizes.
3. There was a lot of discussion about the difference between schools and class sizes and how that relates to the *billet formula* that the District uses. Unlike ESL where billets are assigned based on number of students, in ALP each school gets the same number of billets. This means that some teachers have classes of 20+ while others may be working in a ratio of 2:1.
4. When asked whom they “report to” they were clear that currently it is the building Principal. They all agree that Principals should be a part of ALP and that they need to collaborate effectively with the Principals.
5. *Relationship to the regular education teacher*: There are generally positive relationships between ALP and regular ed teachers. Important to setting this tone is the Principal, whose attitude toward ALP impacts all staff. Some feel that regular ed teachers are envious of the ALP teaching schedule and class size. Curriculum alignment does impact teacher relationships, however. When the curricula align more, so do the teachers!
6. *ID and Testing Process*:
 - a. *ALP teacher role*: The testing process is challenging for ALP teachers as they are conducting the tests while teaching their normal load. The sheer volume of tests and the need to hand-score them is difficult.
 - b. *Three-pronged approach is their ideal*: Ability, Achievement, and Performance should be the factors considered in placing ALP students.

- c. *Standardize parent, Principal, and teacher involvement:* There was no consensus on what their roles should be, but they do agree that there needs to be consistency across schools in how these constituents influence ALP placement.
 - d. *Grade 1 screening:* Most do not like this process as the students are tested on content that they have not yet learned, so it is more about how well they were tutored and less about ability.
7. *Push-in program:* The idea of this model prompted two teachers to say they would quit, others to say they love the philosophy of it, and others to say it could work with the right classroom teacher.
 8. ALP teachers need to meet more often to share best practices and to collaborate on projects and curricula. This has been minimized with a part-time coordinator.
 9. District should consider consolidating ALP to fewer schools and busing ALP kids into the program from the schools that do not house an ALP classroom. This would obviously have many ramifications, but may solve the issue of consistency across schools, less disruption going in and out of regular ed (if this became a self-contained classroom) and could solve the billet allocation problem.
 10. *Probationary period:* Create a period where students can be exited from the program. They agree that this will become very political, but standardizing and messaging this to parents will be important. They do need to be able to remove children from the program when necessary.

Former ALP Students

The students were eager to talk about their ALP experience and were all very positive.

1. *Sense of superiority:* They all acknowledged that being in ALP did give them a sense of superiority over other students. Some cared that this impacted relationships with regular ed. kids; others did not. Everyone did like being in what they perceived as “the cool” group.
2. *Regular ed class:* The IB students felt little difference between ALP and the regular classroom and felt the transitions were seamless. Others felt less able to relate to the content in the regular classroom, especially because it usually did not align at all with what they were doing in ALP. One student commented that this gave him fodder to act out and to be generally irritating to his teacher.
3. *Impact of ALP on honors level classes today:* Most believe that being in ALP gave them the discipline and critical thinking skills that support current day learning. However a number of students who were not in all three strands, are now in honors classes in the subject area that they stayed in regular ed for. Some suggest it was the work ethic that helped them the most.
4. *Testing process:* Most agree that there should be more levels than just advanced and everyone else. Even these students were suggesting flexible grouping and more differentiated instruction for all.
5. *Negative comments?* Some students did not like that they moved in and out of ALP and would have preferred a self-contained classroom. This was not unanimous, but minimizing the ins and outs and aligning curriculum were suggestions for improvement.