



**Indian Prairie School District**  
**#204**

Inspire all students to achieve their greatest potential

FINAL REPORT:  
AUDIT OF ACADEMICALLY TALENTED PROGRAMMING

April 2024

**Burns / Van Fleet**  
**Educational Consulting**

*416 Hawthorne Street, Houston, TX 77006*  
*(443) 854-0183*  
*stuartberger@comcast.net*

---

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<i>Executive Summary</i>	<i>Pages 3-6</i>
<i>Introduction</i>	<i>Pages 7-8</i>
<i>Project Scope</i>	<i>Page 9</i>
<i>Methodology</i>	<i>Page 10</i>
<i>Local Context</i>	<i>Pages 11-12</i>
<i>Best Practices</i>	<i>Pages 13-14</i>
<i>Perceptions</i>	<i>Page 15</i>
<i>Campus Leadership</i>	<i>Pages 16-17</i>
<i>Faculty &amp; Staff</i>	<i>Pages 18-19</i>
<i>Students</i>	<i>Pages 20-21</i>
<i>Parents &amp; Families</i>	<i>Pages 22-23</i>
<i>Central Office Personnel</i>	<i>Page 24</i>
<i>District-Wide Survey</i>	<i>Pages 25-26</i>
<i>Fairness, Equity, &amp; Communication</i>	<i>Page 26</i>
<i>A Valuable But Flawed Program</i>	<i>Pages 27-28</i>
<i>“Gifted” &amp; “Academically Talented”</i>	<i>Page 29</i>
<i>Findings</i>	<i>Pages 30-33</i>
<i>Recommendations</i>	<i>Pages 34-37</i>
<i>Conclusion</i>	<i>Page 38</i>
<i>Appendices</i>	<i>Pages 39-117</i>
<i>Appendix A: Current PA/MA Parent Survey Questions</i>	<i>Pages 39-40</i>
<i>Appendix B: Former PA/MA Parent Survey Questions</i>	<i>Pages 41-42</i>
<i>Appendix C: Non-PA/MA Parent Survey Questions</i>	<i>Page 43</i>
<i>Appendix D: Faculty &amp; Staff Survey Questions</i>	<i>Page 44</i>
<i>Appendix E: PA/MA Parent Survey Responses</i>	<i>Pages 45-64</i>
<i>Appendix F: PA/MA Parent Additional Feedback Responses</i>	<i>Pages 65-72</i>
<i>Appendix G: Former PA/MA Parent Preparation Responses</i>	<i>Pages 73-76</i>
<i>Appendix H: Former PA/MA Parent Suggested Changes Responses</i>	<i>Pages 77-82</i>
<i>Appendix I: Former PA/MA Parent Additional Feedback Responses</i>	<i>Pages 83-84</i>
<i>Appendix J: Non-PA/MA Parent Suggested Changes Responses</i>	<i>Pages 85-89</i>
<i>Appendix K: Non-PA/MA Parent Additional Feedback Responses</i>	<i>Pages 90-91</i>
<i>Appendix L: Faculty &amp; Staff Suggested Changes Responses</i>	<i>Pages 92-117</i>

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Indian Prairie School District (hereinafter IPSD) is an excellent school system which provides numerous meaningful learning experiences. Among these are Project Arrow (hereinafter PA), an enrichment language arts program in grades 3-5 with a broader continuation in middle school. This program is provided to meet the needs of academically talented students.

The other program for some of these students is Math Acceleration (hereinafter MA), which is as its name suggests an acceleration program. These students complete the 4<sup>th</sup> grade math curriculum in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade. This continues through 5<sup>th</sup> grade, and some students are accelerated again between 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grade. Thus, some students have completed one year of high school math or two by the end of middle school.

Both of these programs have existed for about as long as anyone can remember. Their successes are clear. Nevertheless, questions have been surfacing for a number of years. Among them:

- (1) Is this a program for gifted students or academically talented students?
- (2) What is the difference?
- (3) Is there instructional consistency of the program, especially PA, among the schools?
- (4) Are admission criteria basically the same across the system?
- (5) Are admission criteria rational, equitable, and flexible?
- (6) Are the formal assessments predictable, reliable, and equitable?
- (7) Are the amounts of financial and administrative resources devoted to the program equitable?
- (8) Should a separate program for “gifted” students be created?

IPSD contracted with Burns / Van Fleet (hereinafter BVF) to conduct a study to answer these questions. BVF has evaluated numerous academically talented programs recently as a vital part of its work with districts’ leadership transitions.

In order to answer these questions, BVF Consultants spent ten (10) days in the district. Twenty-five (25) interviews were conducted with central office administration, principals, and teachers. More teachers and principals engaged in discussions during school visits to twelve (12) campuses, which also included lunch forums with students.

In addition, three (3) dedicated forum meetings were facilitated for both parents/guardians of PA/MA students in both virtual and in-person formats. These sessions were further supplemented by a dedicated in-person forum for IPSD faculty and staff.

Moreover, an extensive campaign of surveys was undertaken. Virtual surveys were developed with tailored questions for the following populations:

- *Current Parents/Guardians of PA/MA Students*
- *Former Parents/Guardians of PA/MA Students*

- *Current & Former Parents/ Guardians of Non-PA/MA Students*
- *Faculty & Staff*
- *Administrators*
- *Students*
- *Community Members*

Surveys were completed by more than five hundred (500) IPSD stakeholders, with the vast majority coming from parents/guardians and faculty and staff. Their responses included both quantitative questions utilizing a five-point scale and qualitative questions in which participants could provide open-ended responses.

The methodology led to a number of Findings and Recommendations. Among the most important are:

## **FINDINGS**

### *Findings: General*

- **There is a general consensus that the programs are effective and positive overall for students.**
- **Inconsistencies abound in PA.**
- **It is unclear if these programs are geared to academically talented students or gifted children.**
- **Various parent cultures place a premium on student achievement.**
- **A small percentage of PA/MA teachers are certified in gifted education.**
- **Staff allocation is uneven with a negative impact on certain schools.**

### *Findings: Admission & Exit*

- **Formal documents exist that provide guidelines for admission.**
- **Some admission flexibility exists.**

### *Findings: Admission Assessments*

- **All students are required to test using the CogAT and iReady assessment platforms. IOWA is being phased out.**
- **Tests that allow for preparation are not the best predictors.**

- Tests need to be research-based and culturally relevant.

Findings: Communications

- Central office administration is very responsive to students and parents.
- Not all aspects of PA and MA are readily transparent.

Findings: Equity

- Inconsistency is both the friend and foe of equity.
- IPSD has tried to increase diversity, especially racial.
- PA and MA have become Tier 1 rather than Tier 3 interventions.
- It is certainly inequitable to employ assessments which lend themselves to private “tutoring” for preparation.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations: General

- ⇒ IPSD should continue to provide meaningful learning opportunities for gifted and academically talented students.
- ⇒ Using this Report as a resource, staff must clearly define “gifted” versus “academically talented.”
- ⇒ IPSD should retire the “Project Arrow” moniker and replace it with a title that more clearly reflects the explicit purpose of the program.
- ⇒ A document needs to be prepared to try to standardize current and future PA (or whatever the future iteration of the program is called).
- ⇒ The District must do a better job of helping all parents understand the United States educational system.
- ⇒ A full-time central office position should be assigned to coordinate academically talented and gifted programs.
- ⇒ Teaching positions for PA and MA should be provided separately by the District.

Recommendations: Admissions & Exit

- ⇒ Flexibility in admission should continue.
- ⇒ There should be clear exit criteria.

Recommendations: Admission Assessments

- ⇒ There should be a baseline score for admission below which a student will not be considered.
- ⇒ The CogAT should no longer be used.

Recommendations: Equity

- ⇒ The focus on equity throughout the program is commendable and should be continued.
- ⇒ Needs of students should be addressed in the classroom before an intervention, which PA and MA are.

Hopefully, the reader will have the opportunity to read the Report in its entirety. If not, this synopsis should help. PA and MA are major contributors to the excellence of IPSD.

## INTRODUCTION

It is extremely unusual, if not unheard of, for a Burns / Van Fleet (hereinafter BVF) report to begin with a commendation of the school district. But it is highly appropriate in this instance.

Public school districts are notoriously risk-averse. Here, the administration of Indian Prairie School District 204 (hereinafter IPSD) has taken a double risk. First, IPSD has a reputation as an excellent school district. Undertaking an audit that might uncover areas for improvement is, of course, a risk. Choosing the area of academically talented programming, which is inherently controversial, only adds to the concern.

Nevertheless, IPSD chose to do so in order to improve outcomes for students. Related to that are instructional, financial, communications, and political issues. Each of these areas will be explored within the context of the entire program.

Project Arrow (hereinafter PA) has been the District's academically talented program in literacy for grades three (3) through eight (8) for as long as anyone can remember. The same is true for Accelerated Math (hereinafter MA). Obviously, questions, concerns, and suggestions have occurred throughout this time, but the bones of the two programs have remained intact.

Questions have recently become more abundant. Student identification, their mental health, and instructional progress are topics of interest. How do the various cultures of the student body impact the programs?

One of the biggest debates is whether these programs are enrichment or acceleration. Clearly, MA is primarily acceleration in that the students skip a year of math content between second and third grades and possibly another between fifth and sixth grades to eventually operate one or two grade levels ahead of their peers.

Equity is a driving force. There is legitimate debate about how fair the program is. Are all students given an equal and equitable chance for admission?

PA is clearly enrichment. Instruction is diversified while emphasizing higher-level thinking, project-based learning, and independent study.

While all of the above are quite important, in every study themes emerge. In this case, there are many important issues to explore; but the catch phrase, "It varies," captures the most significant concerns from teachers, parents, and administrators.

This theme will permeate this audit, both explicitly and implicitly. The lack of consistency will be a driving factor in reporting the findings and providing the ultimate recommendations.

As will be noted throughout, PA and MA are worthwhile programs which should be basically preserved. It is the goal of the administration, assisted by this audit, to improve a program that is providing a major educational component to many students.



## PROJECT SCOPE

The Request for Proposals (RFP) issued by IPSD asks for, among other things:

- *Identification Process Evaluation*
- *Review of Program Documentation*
- *Equity Analysis*
- *Program Evaluation*
- *Comparison with Best Practice*
- *Resource Allocation*
- *Recommendations*

The Final Audit Report will address these topics among others. Consultants have analyzed most of these concerns directly, while drawing some other findings and conclusions from inference.

Among the areas to be discussed will be: (1) the scope of the audit, (2) its methodology, (3) best practice, (4) program comparisons, (5) perceptions of all direct stakeholders, (6) a comprehensive look at survey results, (7) funding, (8) and concrete recommendations. An Executive Summary will be included.

While the RFP stated grades 3-5, the audit necessitates at least some discussion of the K-2 talent development and PA and MA in grades 6-8. After all, an academically talented program is a sequence, not isolated offerings.

## METHODOLOGY

The methodology is comprehensive, thorough and transparent. The key to a meaningful audit is the quality of the gathering of data.

BVF puts the emphasis of data collections with various stakeholders, especially PA and MA teachers. In fact, individual interviews produced the backbone of the audit findings. Upper-level central administrators, representative principals, and selected teachers engaged in one-on-one interviews of at least forty-five (45) minutes.

School visits also served as a vital information source for the consultants to gain context as well as engage directly with vital stakeholders. Twelve (12) of the district's twenty-one (21) elementary schools were visited in the course of the consultants' in-person time within the district. All visits were comprised of a combination of at least two of the following components: observation(s) of PA, MA, or Talent Development (hereinafter TD) classes, one-on-one interviews with principals, and/or a student focus group comprised of third, fourth, and fifth grade students enrolled in PA and/or MA and intended to elicit their genuine perspectives on the program. (Three additional interviews from principals of non-visited IPSD schools were also conducted at the district's central office.)

All students participating in focus groups did so with parental consent. The schools' principals remained in the room for the discussions, but stressed to all participating students that their role was solely to listen and not squelch genuine feedback.

Three (3) forums specifically designated for families of students enrolled in PA and/or MA elicited useful perspectives. In order to ensure maximum accessibility for parents who desired to participate, forums were conducted in both virtual and face-to-face formats and during both weeknight and weekend time frames.

In addition, a dedicated forum for IPSD faculty and staff was facilitated at a time and location that would not disrupt instructional activities and encourage participation. More than fifty (50) IPSD faculty and staff members attended this forum.

Finally, a comprehensive survey was disseminated to stakeholders across the district. The survey offered tailored questions for parents/guardians of current and former PA/MA students, parents/guardians of non-PA/MA students, faculty and staff, administrators, students, and interested external parties.

Following the BVF consultants' return to their office, they conducted the document review discussed above, with follow-up calls and Zoom meetings as necessary. It is essential to a reliable, valid report that proper emphasis is given to methodology.

## LOCAL CONTEXT

By school district standards, IPSD is a relatively “young” school system. Recognizing the burgeoning population growth in the suburban communities of Aurora, Bolingbrook, Plainfield, and Naperville as well as the need to establish a cohesive K-12 system for students, the district was formed in 1972 through the amalgamation of three existing elementary school districts. Population growth was particularly robust during the 1990s, during which IPSD built eleven (11) campuses. Such growth has continued in the subsequent decades and shows no sign of subsiding.

The district currently enrolls approximately 25,500 students across its thirty-four (34) campuses. Of particular relevance to this Audit, a total of 12,412 are formally classified as “gifted” as noted on the Illinois School District Report Card.

Student achievement results are high across the system, with the district accruing a ninety-five percent (95%) graduation rate. Five (5) of its schools have earned exemplary rankings, twenty-four (24) have earned commendable rankings, and two (2) have been identified as targeted. Approximately thirteen percent (13%) of students are designated as English language learners and eleven percent (11%) of students are classified as having special educational needs as signaled by the establishment of an Individualized Education Plan (IEP). Staff turnover is quite low, with a ninety-five percent (95%) teacher retention rate across the district.

As IPSD encompasses portions (but not all) of the communities of Aurora, Bolingbrook, Plainfield, and Naperville, its stakeholders tend to compare its performance to that of the neighboring districts. Of particular interest is Naperville Community Unit School District 203, located immediately to the east of IPSD and whose size, demographics, and overall performance closely mirrors that of IPSD. Across its twenty-two (22) schools serving approximately 15,952 students, eight (8) have been designated as exemplary and thirteen (13) as commendable. Naperville has formally identified just one hundred twenty-six (126) students as gifted as noted on the Illinois School District Report Card. (The Consultants stress this statistic is not intended for comparative use, as it is not clear that the respective districts are utilizing the same identification criteria and/or processes prior to reporting such data to the state.)

Naperville’s 96% graduation rate is nearly identical to IPSD. It is comprised of a lower percentage of English language learners (8%) and an identical percentage of special education students (11%). Teacher turnover is almost identical as well, with a 92% teacher retention rate.

Located to the northwest of IPSD, Batavia Unit School District 101 demonstrates similar academic results on a smaller scale. Within its enrolled student population of approximately 5,167, five percent (5%) are classified as English language learners and fourteen percent (14%) having special educational needs as exhibited by the establishment of an IEP. Its graduation rate closely mirrors its neighbors at ninety-five percent (95%). Though it represents a slightly higher overall percentage of the total student body than in Naperville CUSD 203, Batavia USD 101 has identified a total number of one hundred sixty-eight (168) as gifted as noted on the Illinois School District Report

Card. (Please see note above regarding issues related to comparison of this statistic across districts.)

It is within this context that IPSD has made decisions related to its academic programming. The district's nearest "competitor", Naperville CUSD 203, has long offered a small and elite program for students classified as gifted. IPSD initially emulated much of that approach with its launch of Project Arrow roughly thirty years ago, but gradually modified it to expand to include a far greater number of students under an umbrella of "academically talented" programming.

## BEST PRACTICES

A great deal of research has been done on the tenets of effective practices for the teaching and learning of academically talented as well as gifted students. The consultants make an important distinction in this report between the terms “academically talented” and “gifted.” The terms are often used interchangeably within IPSD, but at their core mean two very different things.

“Gifted” students have traditionally been defined as those who (through tailored assessment of intellectual capacity) have distinguished themselves among the top two (2) to five (5) percent of all learners. “Academically talented” students constitute a broader swath of prospective students who show strength in the areas of critical thinking, academic performance, or other cognitive skills; however, this group tends to constitute a much larger swath (e.g., students ranking in the top 25% of their peers) than their “gifted” peers.

This distinction is important because it, in turn, informs the optimal structure and foci of the learning processes for the selected students.

- Research has shown great benefit for “academically talented” students in the use of enrichment practices; reading materials may be tailored to students’ interest and/or levels of literacy proficiency, and activities are designed to foster development in a range of skill areas.
- Though research has validated the benefit of enrichment for “gifted” students, the greater preference tends to be that of acceleration for students in this group. Within this scenario, students are advanced one or more grade levels in academic content to place them in an academic context of optimal challenge and engagement.

At its outset nearly three decades ago, PA began purely as a program for “gifted” students and was structured as such. Program enrollment was low, as qualification was limited to the small number of students performing at the most exceptional levels of academic performance as measured through assessments such as the CogAT and/or the IOWA. The program operated on distinct and separate curricula across content areas.

As the district sought to broaden representation within the program, PA adapted into more of an enrichment model. In the course of his observations of PA classrooms, one Consultant noted that the intent of the teacher seemed to be to engage the intellectual capabilities of his/her scholars in a manner that might not otherwise be available in their mainstream classroom.

PA’s trajectory continued on the path toward “enrichment”, and student enrollment increased dramatically as a result. Admission criteria broadened solely from test scores to instructor recommendations and/or other qualitative evidence. In an attempt to increase the proportion of under-represented student populations within the program, district administration housed the PA (and MA) programs within a larger “pathways” infrastructure that would span throughout children’s elementary and middle school years.

Throughout this period, the MA program remained a purely “acceleration” program. Though there is large overlap in the specific students participating in PA and MA, their compositions are not identical.

Thus, it is feasible that a student selected for participation in PA and MA in third grade could continue on that pathway (or even experience greater acceleration) through eighth grade. By the time of their enrollment in high school, the “pathways” model ceases to be as prescriptive and all students may opt into the coursework they feel is most appropriate for them.

## PERCEPTIONS

When amalgamating the feedback provided by central-office administrators, teachers, principals, parents, and other relevant stakeholders, one is left reverting to the old maxim, “Some can’t live with it. Some can’t live without it.” All parties recognize that both the PA and MA programs add instructional value to the students they serve, with many of their parents and teachers acting as steadfast advocates for the opportunities afforded to those students as a result. Yet the evolution of the program over the last thirty years has undeniably fostered inequities, systemic gaps, and perceptions within the community that have proven difficult to reverse. The following sections will seek to parse how individual constituency groups perceive both the program and its needs for the future.

## PERCEPTIONS: CAMPUS LEADERSHIP

PA and MA operate on every IPSD elementary school campuses, but with numbers of participating students fluctuating significantly based on a number of factors.

1. Though there are high levels of interest among parents for their children to be “selected” for the PA and/or MA programs across all elementary schools, the degree of intensity associated with that desire can manifest itself in different ways.

As school leaders are attempting to follow district guidelines in their facilitation of admission practices for PA and MA, two problems persist.

- Interested families are aware not only of the use of the CogAT exam as a means of determining eligibility, but readily inquire about the specific version or edition being employed in order to prepare their students for what should be a non-preparatory exam. It is well-known across schools that a high proportion of students are prompted to study for the CogAT, with off-the-shelf study materials and even face-to-face courses available within the community.
  - Interpretation of more qualitative criteria for admission is not necessarily normed across schools, leading to subjective judgments by campus administrators and by extension strident advocacy by parents for their children to be admitted. (The district used to have a dedicated central-office staff member focused solely on addressing issues related to admission and administration of PA/MA, but it has now been several years since that position existed.)
2. As a result of these factors, principals feel an inherent conflict between their duties to honor the district’s commitment to offer a high-quality PA/MA program in each school while also doing so in an environment that advocates for high-quality instructional practices for all children. Particularly in regard to PA, multiple principals noted that they had many more students who would benefit from the core elements of the program (differentiated instruction, creative assessment, etc.) but that they find it difficult to push in some of these perceived “PA-specific” practices into their non-PA classrooms with limited resources.
  3. That pressure is exacerbated by a staffing and funding model that has failed to adapt to the changing nature of the program itself. In the course of his visits to twelve (12) campuses, one consultant observed schools with totals of PA students ranging from the mid-twenties to over one hundred. (The campuses’ overall enrollments did not deviate significantly.) Yet each school is allocated one (1) FTE position for PA and MA regardless of their levels of program enrollment.

That has required principals to exercise extreme creativity in their allocation of staff. In schools with smaller PA populations, PA teachers can actually “push in” to classrooms in



grades K through 2 to begin an early process of “Talent Development” (TD). Within the schools with larger populations, this is an impossibility; these schools have been forced to re-allocate responsibilities of key personnel such as interventionists to cover MA classes, and in turn lack meaningful qualitative observations to inform comprehensive recommendations about ultimate PA and MA placement.

4. While the majority of principals indicated that their faculty and staff communities were generally supportive of the existence of the PA and MA program on their campuses, they acknowledged that it fostered certain instructional disconnects that are hard to rationalize.

The PA program utilizes a literacy curriculum written specifically by the district for Project Arrow. Its materials (e.g., books such as “The Secret Garden”, “Green Book”, etc.) are presumably not used in neighboring mainstream classrooms, and certain areas of focus (particularly grammar) are highlighted to a much higher degree than in the rest of the school.

As the district now prepares for a new ELA curricular adoption this fall, no comparable alignment or overhaul is planned for the PA content. Thus, as a result, PA teachers lack the opportunity to collaborate with their mainstream peers on optimal methods of instruction with these new curricular tools.

Even within the district’s cohort of PA and MA teachers, limited opportunities exist for colleagues to come to shared understandings about best practices using their shared curricula. The district has offered “job-alike” days in which PA teachers could share some of their strategies, but the session was perceived to lack significant structure and/or follow-through. That sense was validated in the consultant’s observation of PA classrooms. In all of the PA classrooms he visited, he found high-quality, engaging instruction occurring; yet he also saw little consistency in how different teachers were approaching similar concepts or following a shared scope and sequence that would allow for thoughtful instructional coaching.

Without any specific prompting, the vast majority of principals interviewed underscored a heartfelt request for the district in regard to PA/MA and its approach to serving academically talented students as a whole. Specifically, they felt that the district lacked a coherent vision for its core philosophy in this area, and as a result has found itself paralyzed in the use of systems that become harder to alter as they become more entrenched in the system itself. They are desperate for the district to engage in these difficult conversations with all relevant parties, cognizant that in doing so it may not be possible to please everyone.

## PERCEPTIONS: FACULTY & STAFF

As noted at the outset of this report, BVF found the responsiveness and openness of all stakeholders to the audit process to be truly noteworthy in IPSD. This trend held, especially true for IPSD's faculty and staff, whether they were directly involved in administering the PA/MA program or served in mainstream classroom settings.

In order to gain as much input from IPSD faculty and staff as possible, the consultants utilized two distinct platforms for soliciting participation.

- *During their time in the district, the consultants convened a dedicated forum for IPSD faculty and staff to share their perspectives on the program. Approximately fifty (50) faculty and staff members attended, with robust participation exhibited throughout the session.*
- *Following this in-person forum, an electronic survey was made available to all IPSD faculty and staff over a period of three weeks. One hundred and sixty-six (166) faculty and staff members responded to the survey.*

This section of the Audit shall focus on the input provided by faculty and staff during the in-person forum. The survey results will be analyzed in greater depth in a subsequent section of this report.

As noted previously, the discussion among the faculty and staff members in attendance for the forum was spirited and thoughtful. Teachers serving in PA/MA as well as mainstream classroom settings were in attendance, as were teachers ranging in experience from just a few years to more than thirty (30) in the district.

The consensus of those individuals in attendance was that PA/MA teachers were adding demonstrable value to the learning of the students they serve, but that they did so within an overarching programmatic structure that required re-examination and refining.

Faculty and staff initially identified one of the trends that had concurrently been raised by school principals: the efficacy of the assessments used to determine students' programmatic eligibility. Teachers were fully aware that a good deal of pressure is placed on students to perform on the mandated CogAT assessment in order to gain admission, and that the ability to prepare in advance for the exam undercuts its credibility as an objective and fair determinant of student capacity. Moreover, the assessment's credibility was called into question based on concerns of lack of cultural relevance – particularly for the program's under-represented student populations.

Indeed, faculty and staff members echoed a heartfelt imperative to look out for the mental and social-emotional health of students in the program. External pressure on students to be accepted and/or remain in the program is high, and it is not always clear that all admitted students are well-suited to its demands.

As the most immediate point of contact, it is perhaps not surprising that they felt the greatest need for the district to strengthen its systems for addressing key issues related to PA/MA proactively. Multiple teachers expressed the necessity for the district to introduce and implement a formalized and comprehensive communications plan to inform families as well as school stakeholders about the purpose, criteria, and structure of PA/MA.

Faculty and staff concerns related to an overarching district strategy was not solely restricted to communications. Indeed, as IPSD prepares to introduce new English Language Arts curricula for the 2024-25 school year, PA/MA teachers cited the lack of any district guidance tailored to their contexts as they already have a separate PA curriculum. The ELA adoption has appeared to have no impact on the structure or components of the in-house developed Project Arrow curriculum, thus preventing PA/MA teachers and their non-PA/MA counterparts from engaging in meaningful collaborative planning in this content area.

Finally, faculty and support staff reiterated the inconsistency of implementation of specific elements of PA/MA across its schools. The phrase, "It varies," became a common refrain when asked about how individual schools structured their deployment of PA/MA staff, how admission standards could be appealed, and indeed what was being taught at any one time in PA/MA teachers' classrooms using their dedicated district-wide curricula. They aspire to a future in which PA/MA teachers can compare student work products across the district to norm their expectations, but as of now that proves impossible due to the overarching lack of consistency.

## PERCEPTIONS: STUDENTS

By far, one of the most instructive (and enjoyable) components of this study was the opportunity to engage directly with small groups of PA/MA elementary school students. As a former elementary school teacher himself, the consultant was keenly aware of how perceptive students of this age could be in their understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the program in which they were enrolled. But they had to feel safe and secure in their ability to be candid in their feedback.

Prior to the consultants' arrival in IPSD, central-office liaisons engaged with campus principals to request that they reach out to a small group of parents of PA/MA students who might be interested in allowing their children to share their perspectives on the program. These students were advised ahead of time that they could participate in such a session over pizza during their lunch breaks. Though the principal remained in the classroom during the session to serve as a "reassuring face" during the meeting, the discussion itself was facilitated by the consultant.

Without exception, the consultant found the students to be thoughtful, perceptive, and respectful. When the consultant cited his newness to IPSD and asked the students to help him gain an understanding of PA and MA, they were eager to provide him not just with their own understanding of the rationale of the program but readily shared examples of what practices he might experience if he were himself a PA/MA student.

As the consultants would ultimately find with the students' parents as well (to be featured in a subsequent section), the children articulated an understanding of their placement in the program based on an interchangeable definition of being "gifted" and "academically talented." They described how they perceived the process for program selection to work in practice: "take the CogAT test, and then the school may look at some other factors as well." But there was no ambiguity among the students that testing had played or would play an integral role in program participation.

Without solicitation, students described in universally positive terms their interactions with their PA and/or MA teacher(s). They appreciated the additional challenge that they perceived their PA/MA teacher offered them, almost perceiving it as a sign of trust in their own abilities. They relished the opportunity to work in groups with students whom they might not otherwise be inclined to interact, recognizing that PA/MA had been intentional in taking them outside of their "comfort zones" to work with a diverse array of students.

Across all four focus groups, the students underscored that the greatest challenge and takeaway from their participation in PA/MA was the skill of time management. In multiple instances, students shared initial experiences in which they grappled with completing varied expectations for both their mainstream and PA/MA teachers, and in turn how they learned to budget their time effectively. In all cases, the students cited the PA/MA teacher as a positive influence in this area; though in each case, the specific methodology in which the teacher instilled those skills varied.

It was evident that students felt a great degree of pride in their affiliation with the PA/MA program. They were not dismissive of the content they were receiving in their mainstream classrooms, but in some cases did not seem as invested in it or that it was tailored to their skills as much as their PA/MA content.

When asked whether they felt any pressure to maintain their performance in order to remain in the PA/MA program and/or continue it into middle school, responses were mixed. (In reality, few students are ever involuntarily exited from the program.). They clearly felt supported by their classmates and that their teacher was providing validating feedback that affirmed that their efforts were leading to positive results. But it was also clear that these students were privy not only to influences within the school, but within their homes and families as well that could affect their perception of how their actions might impact future prospects.

## PERCEPTIONS: PARENTS & FAMILIES

The consultants sought to offer IPSD parents, guardians, and families multiple opportunities to provide feedback on the PA/MA program in face-to-face, virtual, and written formats.

Three dedicated “family forums” were scheduled at varying times on Thursday, February 22<sup>nd</sup>, Saturday, February 24<sup>th</sup>, and Monday, February 26<sup>th</sup>. One of these meetings was conducted virtually using the Google Meets platform, while the other two were convened in-person using IPSD facilities.

In addition, an online survey was developed and made available to any IPSD parent or guardian (including those with students in MA/PA as well as those not in MA/PA) over a three-week period for responses. These results are summarized in a subsequent section of this report.

Similarly to the paradox expressed by principals, parents are simultaneously grateful for the opportunities afforded to their kids through PA/MA but at times struggle with understanding how the program operates in the context of their children’s larger educational journey.

On the whole, parents (at least those who participated in the forums) appear quite satisfied and supportive. They realize that, for the most part, the programs are providing high-quality instruction from dedicated teachers. One parent summarized their group’s perspective that PA/MA represented “the best part of their child’s day at school.”

Yet those same parents also recognized gaps in their children’s educational offerings as a result of their participation in PA/MA. They perceptively recognized the FTE issue cited previously, and saw the knock-on impact that this problem ultimately had in either overly large PA class sections or schools being forced to co-opt or cancel PA classes when other vital duties had to be addressed. One parent questioned whether her child’s participation was causing him/her to miss out on valuable social-emotional learning activities that may be delivered in the mainstream classroom while they are in the PA/MA setting. Another cited the lack of inclusion of PA/MA feedback in their school’s parent-teacher conferences.

Parents acknowledged the need to be cognizant of academic pressure for their students, and brought forth specific examples in which “more was not necessarily better.” In multiple sessions, parents expressed concerns about the amount of homework being given. Similarly, the unique grading system utilized within PA/MA left some parents (and by extension students) feeling unclear about their children’s progress.

Parents also stressed the need for consistent and thorough communication from both the district and campus levels. Much like some of the principals interviewed, they too wanted greater transparency on the formula being used to determine admission to the program. They wanted to be able to effectively advocate for their students, but were doing so faced with an unclear process in which they felt forced to question seemingly subjective judgments and were unsure if that process was employed consistently and reliably across the twenty-one (21) schools.

Most importantly, these parents simply wanted to feel that they were part of a larger dialogue with the district and their schools at all stages of the programmatic process. It is therefore not wholly surprising that some parents have formed an advocacy group entitled the Project Arrow PTA (PAPTA). This title is a bit misleading; though functioning like a traditional PTA in some ways, it is primarily a strong lobbying organization. The relationship between PAPTA and the district as a whole is positive overall, though some tensions lie below the surface on both sides. (This tension is unsurprising since, as a programmatic advocacy group, PAPTA has a much more concentrated focus than district-wide overarching concerns of the central administration.)

Understandably, parents have questions and concerns. First among them is the admission criteria and the testing that is its major component. What are the criteria? Are there exceptions? Are they consistent among the twenty-one (21) schools? These questions will be directly addressed in the Findings section.

Parents also lack clarity about grades. Since the PA program is theoretically supplemental, IPSD issues numbers instead of grades to students for this program; the system does not align with those used in the students' mainstream classrooms. Though the system seems clear and logical in its own right, parents feel that grades would be more meaningful.

Also, there is some concern about the amount of homework. (This concern is more prevalent, however, in the middle school grades.). There is a realization that more is not necessarily better. How many math problems solved correctly is sufficient to indicate the skill has been mastered?

Further quantitative feedback from parents on their perceptions of the program will be featured in the upcoming "District-Wide Survey Findings" section.

## PERCEPTIONS: CENTRAL OFFICE PERSONNEL

The views and opinions among central staff are a mixed bag. While almost all administrators interviewed were supportive of the general concept, numerous concerns were expressed in relation to equity, finances, logistics, and the program's impact on non-PA/MA students.

Debate on this topic swirls a bit underground within IPSD. Though PA has existed for many years and can take pride in many achievements: the realization that the needs of the district's academically talented students must be systematically re-examined is nearly universal. It is the details that cause a bit of angst.

The biggest challenge for central office administrators is that it too, like other stakeholders, keenly recognizes the dilemma of inconsistency. The district's long-standing history of granting significant autonomy to its campuses (including in regard to administration of PA/MA) has been appropriate in many ways but not so in others. There is worry that, within such a context, individual teachers may exercise a disproportionate amount of influence on the effectiveness of the program and the experiences of PA/MA students.

Equity has been especially vexing. A number of ideas have been tried to attract more African American and Hispanic students into PA/MA. The results have not been promising. The need is obvious, but the solution has been evasive. Additional detail related to issues of equity is discussed in the Findings section.

While the issue of finances is beyond the scope of the audit, it is understandable that it raises questions. Are PA/MA students accruing additional expenditures and, if so, how much? Central administrators crave financial data and are certainly important to decision making.

A potent issue that may be a bit overlooked is the impact of the PA/MA program on non-participating students. When forty percent (40%) of the students in a particular grade within one school are enrolled in the program(s), it is inevitable that the other students will be impacted. Many administrators are trying to systematically measure such effects.



## DISTRICT-WIDE SURVEY

At the earliest stages of IPSD's planning of this audit, senior leaders stressed the importance of gaining a macro-level perspective of district-wide perceptions and trends through the administration of a comprehensive electronic survey. The consultants concurred in their recognition of the value of such a process, and upon commencing their work with IPSD began the design of a survey instrument that would be relevant to all IPSD families (including those with children in PA/MA), faculty and staff, administrators, and external community stakeholders. Integrating input and feedback from IPSD senior leaders, BVF prepared a survey tool that would ultimately go live for all of the aforementioned constituencies on March 4, 2024. The survey remained open for submissions until March 23, 2024, with more than five hundred (500) responses received across all constituency groups.

As noted previously, the survey was specifically designed to be inclusive of all of the following constituencies:

- *I am the parent/guardian of current student(s) enrolled in Project Arrow and/or accelerated math in grades 3, 4, and/or 5.*
- *I am the parent/guardian of student(s) who previously participated in Project Arrow and/or accelerated math in grades 3, 4, and/or 5.*
- *I am the parent/guardian of current student(s) who did/do NOT participate in Project Arrow and/or accelerated math in grades 3, 4, and/or 5.*
- *I am an IPSD faculty or staff member.*
- *I am an IPSD school administrator.*
- *I am a current PA/MA student in grades 3, 4, and/or 5.*
- *I was a PA/MA student when I was in grades 3, 4, and/or 5.*
- *I am an IPSD community member with no students currently enrolled in its schools.*
- *Other*

A significant majority of responses fell into the following four categories:

- *I am the parent/guardian of current student(s) enrolled in Project Arrow and/or accelerated math in grades 3, 4, and/or 5.*
- *I am the parent/guardian of student(s) who previously participated in Project Arrow and/or accelerated math in grades 3, 4, and/or 5.*
- *I am the parent/guardian of current student(s) who did/do NOT participate in Project Arrow and/or accelerated math in grades 3, 4, and/or 5.*
- *I am an IPSD faculty or staff member.*

Following respondents' selection of their specific classification and the school(s) with which they were/are affiliated, the survey tool then directs them to a tailored set of questions following the same general structure but adapted for each unique group. Unless otherwise noted, all questions are answered on a one (1) to five (5) rating scale with five (5) representing the highest possible rating. All question sets are included for review in the appendices of this report.

The consultants were gratified that survey responses in both of the identified categories included representation from all IPSD elementary schools. Though some schools had higher numbers of responses than others, none represented a disproportionate amount that would skew the applicability of survey findings to the district as a whole.

The consultants were further pleased by the number of respondents who choose to include narrative responses in tandem with their quantitative ratings. The sentiments expressed varied significantly on a range of topics, but reflected the breadth of issues raised in the previous sections of this report. These questions (as well as those raised in the course of family and faculty forum sessions) have informed the consultants’ analysis of the issues at hand.

**PARENT SURVEY: FAIRNESS, EQUITY, & COMMUNICATION**

Across the three parent cohorts who participated, there were multiple points of significant variance on a number of issues: specifically, questions related to program identification, equity, and communication as highlighted below.

*“I felt like the process by which students were identified was/is fair and equitable.”*

<u>CURRENT PA/MA PARENTS/GUARDIANS</u>	<u>FORMER PA/MA PARENTS/GUARDIANS</u>	<u>NON-PA/MA PARENTS/GUARDIANS</u>
Average rating of 4.13	Average rating of 3.86	Average rating of 2.70

*“I believe the assessments used to identify students for the program are fair and equitable.”*

<u>CURRENT PA/MA PARENTS/GUARDIANS</u>	<u>FORMER PA/MA PARENTS/GUARDIANS</u>	<u>NON-PA/MA PARENTS/GUARDIANS</u>
Average rating of 4.06	Average rating of 3.89	Average rating of 2.75

*“As a parent, I felt well-informed about the program from the beginning.”*

<u>CURRENT PA/MA PARENTS/GUARDIANS</u>	<u>FORMER PA/MA PARENTS/GUARDIANS</u>	<u>NON-PA/MA PARENTS/GUARDIANS</u>
Average rating of 3.24	Average rating of 3.22	Average rating of 1.73

*“I feel that school resources are equitably distributed regardless of program enrollment.”*

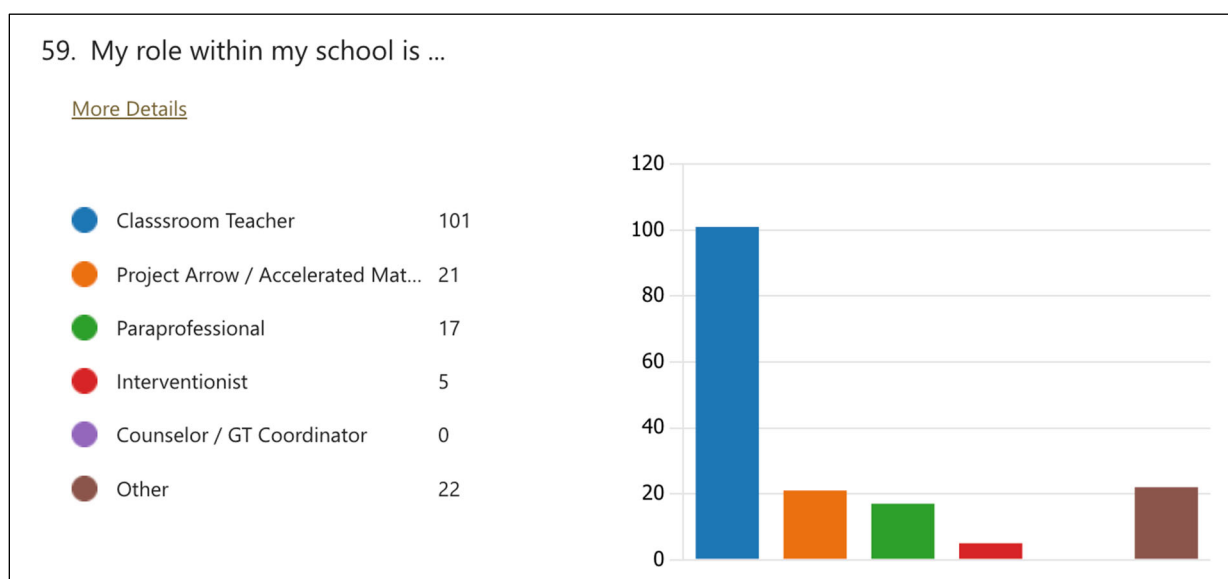
<u>CURRENT PA/MA PARENTS/GUARDIANS</u>	<u>FORMER PA/MA PARENTS/GUARDIANS</u>	<u>NON-PA/MA PARENTS/GUARDIANS</u>
Average rating of 3.88	Average rating of 3.29	Average rating of 2.82

It is clear that the perceptions of IPSD parents, guardians, and families vary significantly based on their students’ participation (or lack thereof) in the PA/MA program. Those who have “made the cut” feel that the manner in which their children were admitted was/is proper; those whose children do not participate identify fundamental flaws in its methodology, the manner in which its purpose and processes are communicated to families, and how its presence impacts the equitable service of all students within the school environment.

## FACULTY & STAFF SURVEY: A VALUABLE BUT FLAWED PROGRAM

Responses among faculty members also reflected competing sentiments about the program: they feel it is a valuable asset for their school, but that substantive change is required for the future.

As noted previously, the consultants were gratified to observe broad-based participation in survey submission. Staff members representing twenty (20) of the district's twenty-one (21) elementary schools submitted responses. The same trend held true in regard to respondents' respective roles within their schools; the majority of respondents were mainstream classroom teachers, with smaller percentages representing PA/MA teachers and other support staff. (It is not wholly surprising that PA/MA teachers did not constitute the majority of respondents, as they represented nearly the entirety of those staff members who attended the in-person faculty forum instead.)



Faculty respondents affirmed their perception of the program's quality through an average rating of 4.16 and highlighted it as an asset to their schools through an average rating of 4.29. Moreover, they expressed confidence through an average rating of 3.95 that the program's presence on their campuses was not leading to inequitable distribution of school resources.

Yet when posed with similar questions of equity and access, faculty and staff were candid in their belief that change is necessary. When asked whether they thought that the process by which students were/are identified for the program is fair and equitable, faculty responded with an average rating of 3.53. Concurrently, when asked whether significant change is needed to improve the PA/MA program, an average rating of 3.19 reflected a significant span in perceptions among respondents.

A review of the accompanying open-ended responses to the question, "What feedback would you offer about the district's academically talented program? What changes might you suggest to improve the experience for students/families/colleagues, etc.?" illustrates both the consensus among faculty that change is

required, but also significant dissonance in what that change should be. Responses included declarations such as:

- either too few or too many students are admitted to the program;
- the program should either adopt a truly “gifted” model, a whole-campus “academically talented enrichment” structure, or no academically talented program at all; and,
- their schools’ approach to PA/MA varies significantly from other campuses across the district.

In spite of these divergent views, faculty members did express consensus on some key issues:

- the wide-spread availability of the standardized testing materials (e.g., CogAT) used for program selection leads a substantial number of families to engage in “test preparation” activities with their students in an attempt to improve likelihood of admission;
- A robust program of educating parents and families about the program, its purpose within the larger K-12 continuum, and its processes ahead of the second grade testing threshold is needed on both the campus and district levels; and,
- There is currently a disconnect between PA students’ participation in that course’s instructional activities and those being taught in their mainstream ELA classrooms.

## “GIFTED” AND “ACADEMICALLY TALENTED”

As was identified in previous sections of this report, the terms “gifted” and “academically talented” are employed just as interchangeably in respondents’ survey submissions as they were during in-person interviews and small-group forums. In the absence of a concerted district-wide process to review current research regarding the unique aspects of each category AND discuss how MA/PA does/should fit within those categories, many survey respondents and face-to-face participants expressed frustration that the program was not fulfilling its implied charge.

Indeed, the lack of system-wide discourse about the current state and future direction of PA/MA has intensified pre-existing issues. Within some school communities, a disconcerting number of families have become convinced that it is imperative for their children’s future to be admitted into the program and have stressed that case to teachers and administrators. Some of these families come from cultures abroad in which such testing imperatives were in fact the sole determinants of a child’s academic pathway and future. The district has done little to address this vital distinction directly with its families, which often leads administrators facing intense pressure to accept students into their campuses’ programs or face significant strife with parents.

This issue is further exacerbated by an inconsistent structure of middle and high school coursework structures.

- As elementary school students advance to middle school, they are guided into prescribed pathways for mainstream, accelerated, and highly accelerated math learning; existing and newly-identified Project Arrow students are also directed to a distinct set of courses mirroring focus areas on the elementary level.
- Yet by the time that those same students advance to high school, their prior PA/MA designation (or lack thereof) is of little import in the selection of their academic coursework. Indeed, students may (and do) opt into advanced-level coursework regardless of their prior course enrollment.

Thus, if past PA/MA enrollment is not an official prerequisite for students to excel in advanced courses leading to their graduation from IPSD, how much pressure is being placed on students at ages as young as eight (8) to meet criteria for program acceptance based on the inaccurate precept that it will be determinative of their future academic opportunities? And how much elementary administrative and teacher energy is being expended to justify the qualifications (or lack thereof) of individual students based on those same precepts held by some families?

## FINDINGS

### A. General

1. **There is a general consensus that the programs are effective and positive overall for students.**

Even the most severe critics acknowledge the need for some type of program.

2. **Inconsistencies abound in PA.**

With the exceptions of general guidelines regarding assessment and hours of instruction, there is hardly a coherent system-wide offering. Admission criteria varies. Instruction is not uniform. In fact, PA is often unrecognizable from school to school.

3. **Inconsistency is the greatest concern.**

Not only does the inconsistency impact equity (See below.), but it has hurt the program's image.

4. **It is unclear if these programs are geared to academically talented or gifted students.**

The percentage would lead an observer to conclude the former, since the percentage of students is so high.

5. **Whether the needs of the truly gifted are being addressed is an open question.**

Gifted math students are probably challenged by the two-year acceleration. ELA, social studies, and science do not receive the same attention.

6. **Various parent cultures place a premium on high achievement.**

Overall, this emphasis on academic excellence is a real positive. But, like many things, it has its limits. Sometimes the pressure on young children to excel and be admitted is overwhelming and causes real anxiety.

7. **PA has unintended consequences.**

In schools with high percentages of PA students, non-PA students often are not being challenged significantly because so many high achievers are not participating. Staffing is also negatively impacted in schools with high PA populations.

8. **Administrative support for the program is insufficient.**

Not enough administrative time is allocated for the various tasks which need to be completed.

**9. A small percentage of PA/MA teachers are certified in gifted and talented education.**

While unquestionably teachers without the endorsement are quite effective, specific training is usually helpful.

**10. Staff allocation is uneven with a negative impact on certain schools.**

Schools with high percentages of PA students have to adjust staff because of the resources devoted to PA.

*B. Admission & Exit*

**1. Formal documents exist that provide guidelines for admission.**

There are “pathways” which provide indicators for admission into PA and MA. There are “characteristics” which affect admission. There is also a general statement in a document entitled “Academically Talented Students.”

**2. With the exception of “Academically Talented Students”, these documents are for internal use only.**

There are pros and cons to this approach. Debate is limited as to transparency.

**3. Some admission flexibility exists.**

While admission is heavily based on test scores, in some cases other criteria are considered. Inevitably, these are subjective but still worthwhile.

**4. There is no formal exit process.**

While the district rarely removes a student, it happens occasionally. More often, parents choose to remove a student for a number of reasons. This decision may result from a student’s frustration or unhappiness.

*C. Admission Assessments*

**1. All students are required to test using the CogAT and iReady assessment platforms. IOWA is being phased out.**

Generally, admission requires a certain score: often the ninetieth (90<sup>th</sup>) percentile.

**2. Tests that allow for preparation are not the best predictors.**

CogAT is the best example. It is certainly inequitable to employ a measurement for which private vendors are assisting students in attaining high scores.

**3. Tests need to be research-based and culturally relevant.**

While what assessments are the most appropriate is the determination of the district, there are valid reservations about the current tests.

**4. Make-up dates need to be provided.**

Some parents believe that, if a testing date is missed, there are not other options.

**5. Flexibility is apparent.**

Options exist beyond just test results which is consistent with best practices.

*D. Communications*

**1. Central office administration is very responsive to students and parents.**

These prompt responses to inquiries is a major strength of the program.

**2. Not all aspects of PA and MA are readily transparent.**

While it is understandable that not all administrative materials can be shared, possibly more can be.

**3. Having a PTA is helpful, but its name is probably a misnomer.**

The PA “PTA” is very supportive and usually cooperative with both building and central administration. It plays an important role, which may need a bit of mutual clarification.

**4. More frequent formal parent and staff updates would be helpful.**

A little more written communication would be positive. Admittedly, this is another task without anyone currently allocated the time and capacity to do so.

*E. Equity*

**1. Inconsistency is both the friend and foe of equity.**



In the cases of PA and MA, it is definitely both. Schools are allowed discretion, which both benefits and penalizes them.

**2. IPSD has tried to increase diversity, especially racial.**

Sadly, these efforts have basically failed. Certain sub-populations are over-represented while others are under-represented.

**3. The district must emphasize its commitment to diversity in its Academically Talented program.**

Equity's importance is under the surface but not emphasized.

**4. PA and MA have become Tier 1 rather than Tier 3 interventions.**

While apologizing for the use of education jargon, the point is clear. What at least in theory should be a high-level intervention is rather the norm: i.e., the numbers are probably "out of whack."

**5. Diversified instruction implicates equity.**

One of the greatest barriers to equity is not having high expectations for all students regardless of race, ethnicity, or socio-economic status.

**6. It is certainly inequitable to employ assessments which lend themselves to private "tutoring" for preparation.**

Simply put, it's not fair?

These Findings will be the basis of the Recommendations that follow. (Not all findings result in a recommendation.)

## RECOMMENDATIONS

These Recommendations reflect the consensus of the interviews, survey results, and document review. While hopefully a number of them are worthy of implementation, they should all provoke thought, discussion, and evaluation.

### A. General

1. **IPSD should continue to provide meaningful learning opportunities for gifted and academically talented students.**

Whatever debate may exist about the efficacy of PA and MA, even their most vocal critics recognize the need for a program.

2. **Using this report as a resource, staff must clearly define “gifted” versus “academically talented.”**

Currently, the terms are often used interchangeably; but while related they are NOT synonymous. While many IPSD students are academically talented, fifty percent (50%) are not truly gifted.

3. **IPSD should retire the “Project Arrow” moniker and replace it with a title that more clearly reflects the explicit purpose of the program.**

Given the program’s evolution over the last thirty years, it is not surprising that stakeholders across the district hold differing understandings of the program’s intent and target population. Rather than consistently attempting to re-explain what the “new Project Arrow” is, it is time for IPSD to refresh its terminology and educate its various constituencies on their current/future programming for academically talented students without the constant comparison to prior iterations of Project Arrow.

4. **A document needs to be prepared to try to standardize current and future PA (or whatever the future iteration of the program is called).**

Recognizing that flexibility is important, the district needs to ensure that PA is relatively consistent between and among schools. This is especially true as to instruction and assessment.

5. **IPSD should consider a grades 4-8 magnet school for truly gifted students.**

Obviously, not only will this recommendation be controversial, but it has the potential to exacerbate problems, especially equity and parental pressure. Nonetheless, there is a small group whose needs require a new program. This recommendation will require a great deal

of discussion with various stakeholders. Admission criteria would be multi-faceted and require individual testing.

- 6. The district must do a better job of helping all parents understand the United States educational system.**

Many IPSD parents have experience in educational systems that are far less flexible than the U.S. Parents need to know that admission to PA or MA is not determinative of a student's academic or career future.

- 7. The unintended consequences of PA must be addressed.**

Non-PA/MA students are being inadvertently negatively affected, especially with schools with large percentages of students in the programs. Staffing is skewed, cooperative learning less available, and higher-level activities lacking.

- 8. A full-time central office position should be assigned to coordinate academically talented and gifted programs.**

Certainly, adding a central office position is often viewed negatively, especially in a district that the state does not properly fund. However, there is too much work to be an add-on. Despite everyone's yeoman's efforts, a few tasks (especially communications) are not always completed.

- 9. IPSD should establish clear certification requirements for PA and MA teachers.**

Certainly, any teachers without a gifted endorsement are doing an outstanding job, but should some coursework be required?

- 10. Teaching positions for PA and MA should be provided separately by the district.**

Allocating the same number of positions for each school is illogical given the significant fluctuation in student numbers among the various buildings.

B. Admission & Exit

- 1. As much information about admission criteria as possible should be published.**

While it is clear that standardized tests play a major part in the decision, there are other criteria. Within reason, these should be published.

- 2. Flexibility in admission should continue.**

Consistency is good. Rigidity is not.

3. **There should be clear exit criteria.**

While students rarely exit, there still need to be guidelines. In fact, such guidelines might lead to some students being able to exit without stigma.

C. Admission Assessments

1. **There should be a baseline score for admission below which a student will not be considered.**

The “floor” should be reasonable but adhered to.

2. **The CogAT assessment should no longer be used.**

Generally speaking, tests that can be “prepped” are not reliable predictors of academic talent or giftedness. This is definitely the case for exams that allow for professional coaching. Equity concerns prevail.

3. **IPSD needs to review which tests are likely to be the best predictors.**

In doing so, the district needs to be sure the tests are valid, reliable, culturally relevant, and research-based.

D. Communications

1. **The administration needs to be as transparent with parents as possible about the program.**

The central office personnel are open, accessible, and candid when concerns are raised. Despite time constraints, more proactive communication is always positive.

2. **The “PTA” and central office must continue to work cooperatively.**

Both entities have the same goals – providing academically talented students an excellent education. As an advocacy group, the PTA’s concerns are not necessarily as comprehensive as that of the administration.

E. Equity

1. **The focus on equity throughout the program is commendable and should be continued.**

Equitable inputs and outcomes are quite challenging in education, and certainly true in selective programs. Fairness, credibility, and support require an equity lens.

2. **To assist with diversity of students, percentage guidelines should be established which recognize demographic differences within the district.**

One possibility is that non-Title I schools would have a goal of ten percent (10%) to twenty percent (20%) participation while Title I schools would be fifteen percent (15%) to thirty percent (30%). These percentages should increase diversity while upholding rigorous admission standards. These percentages would be based on district admission criteria.

3. **Needs of students should be addressed in the regular classroom before an intervention, which PA and MA are.**

More of the excellent instruction in PA and MA must be part of the regular classroom. It is certainly happening, but more attention needs to be paid to basic classroom instruction.

4. **Diversified and differentiated instruction must be the norm.**

IPSD teachers are excellent. The excellence must exist in every classroom.

## CONCLUSION

The consultants tried to prepare as comprehensive a report as possible; they hope it is not overwhelming. While like almost all studies/audits the negatives are emphasized, the positives are abundant.

PA and MA are good programs, but change is probably a bit overdue. This report attempts to suggest possible improvements while retaining the basic program.

The consultants would be negligent not to acknowledge the cooperation of various groups, especially teachers, parents, and administrators. The cooperation is exceptional.

IPSD is a high-functioning district with an excellent academically talented program. Hopefully, this report will enhance the current offerings.