



Fairfax County Association for the Gifted

Position Statement as Adopted by the FCAG Board of Directors, September 18, 2020

Response to Proposed TJHSST Admission Process Changes

At the FCPS School Board Work Session held on September 15, 2020, the Superintendent introduced a new proposal for a merit-based lottery process for admissions to TJHSST. **While a “Merit Lottery” identifies all students who could thrive at TJ, it does not identify exceptionally gifted students who need TJ to thrive academically and emotionally.**

FCAG suggests that FCPS create a two-pronged application process to TJHSST to maintain high academic standards while also creating a racially and socio-economically diverse student body:

- **All applicants must meet the Merit Criteria.**
- **Merit Criteria should include an algebra competency test designed to test algebraic reasoning, not to exceed concepts taught in the first two quarters of FCPS Algebra I Honors curriculum, offered free to all students.**
- **An optional competitive process with a *very high ceiling* finds students with extraordinary accomplishment, interests, and strengths (who have also met other required criteria).**
- **The Merit Lottery model is for admissions outside the optional pathway.**

The Fairfax County Association for the Gifted (FCAG) represents a diverse group of people who are passionate about advancing educational excellence in Fairfax County. Our association invites differing opinions and open-minded discussion and we hope that FCPS strives to foster such discussion as well. It is FCAG’s recommendation that the scope of this change warrants a public hearing so that all voices may be heard and considered to ensure that FCPS has ample community input before implementing any drastic changes to the TJHSST admission process.

Some gifted learners in the TJ catchment area have shown themselves to have exceptional achievement and academic progress by the end of middle school; for many of them, TJ is the only viable option for high school that offers the academic and socio-emotional support they need. TJ currently offers advanced coursework that goes far beyond standard AP courses, including courses that are typically offered to upper-level students (juniors and seniors) at many universities. Students at TJ compete at the international level as part of the U.S. Math Olympiad and the U.S. Physics team. These students should be at TJ and we would be remiss not to search for them and admit them. The community of learners at TJ offers a unique opportunity for students who are already intellectually far outside the box to find others like themselves, others who crave a high-level, intense intellectual connection through STEM activities.

The two-pronged application process to TJHSST is justified by current FCPS goals, to promote access to all students at TJ, maintaining the high standards for advanced academic rigor in STEM that has led to its international reputation.

- **All applicants must meet the Merit Criteria.** Currently FCPS has proposed that these criteria include a 3.5 GPA, math of Algebra 1 or higher, and a sufficiently strong response on a series of short essays, with the possible inclusion of a problem-solving essay. We recommend that FCPS implement an additional component to the Merit Criteria (see below).
- **Merit Criteria should include an algebra competency test designed to test algebraic reasoning, not to exceed concepts taught in the first two quarters of FCPS Algebra I Honors curriculum, offered free to all students.** A good math test will ensure that students who arrive at TJ have the mathematical skills they need to thrive in a STEM school. This test can lower the stakes compared to the current test by being more straightforward and focused on skills needed for success at TJ. Like the GPA requirement, differences in scores on this test would not be meaningful for the process; only the threshold would be relevant. **This test is necessary, because an A in Algebra I Honors is not sufficient for TJ success** — variability across the county in the “level” that Algebra I is taught, combined with many opportunities to improve grades (retake policy) — has translated into a number of students with high grades but weak math skills.



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This is especially true for the current year since 4th quarter grades during Spring 2020 received no mark but provided an additional opportunity for grade improvement. *The 2020-2021 admissions math test could be administered online.*

- **An optional competitive process with a very high ceiling finds students who have extraordinary accomplishment, interests, and strengths.** Identifying these students involves multiple metrics, and may be as cumbersome as the current process, however it is possible that identification could be carried out through an optional challenging problem-solving student essay. Other possibilities include additional tests, teacher recommendation letters or nominations, or high-level interviews with out-of-the-box problem solving. The aim of this optional process is to find the extraordinary students, for whom TJHSST is a lifeline. Students who do not meet the very high threshold for admission should be nonetheless considered as part of the Merit Lottery pool, provided they meet the criteria.
- **The Merit Lottery model is used for admissions outside the optional pathway.** Since many more students will qualify for TJHSST based on the Merit Lottery, and since the group of students admitted for extraordinary accomplishment would have been lottery-eligible regardless, the two-pronged approach will promote the creation of a diverse student body.

By allowing some students to attend TJ through the optional competitive process, we ensure that the governor's school is meeting its obligation to gifted children who love science and math. The TJ community, however, does not benefit from knowing which students were admitted through the optional process. Students who apply through the optional process need not be told whether they were admitted via this route or through the lottery.

FCAG strongly believes that a two-pronged approach modeled as above would ensure that students who get into TJ have the math skills to thrive there, that exceptional students are admitted to TJ, and that all meritorious students have a chance to attend TJ.