



Coalition for TJ

“Second-Look Semifinalist” Alternative to the Merit Lottery

Introduction

The Coalition for TJ is composed of parents, students, and community members advocating for **diversity** and **excellence** at Thomas Jefferson High School for Science and Technology (“TJHSST”) We understand that Gov. Ralph Northam has issued a budget mandate that “each academic year, governor’s schools shall set diversity goals for its student body and faculty, and develop a plan to meet said goals in collaboration with community partners at public meetings.”

We are extremely disappointed at the so-called “merit lottery” proposed by Fairfax County Superintendent Dr. Scott Brabrand for admissions to TJHSST.

Dr. Brabrand’s plan fails to serve the interests of underserved communities in Fairfax County (the chief beneficiary of the proposal will be white students, who could approach 50% of TJHSST enrollment), and it fails to preserve the academic excellence of TJHSST. It is a plan plagued by self-contradictions.

Selection of the lottery pool is hardly based on “merit” with only a GPA requirement, Algebra 1 enrollment, and an essay. On the contrary, selection of matriculated students is based on a “lottery.”

The superintendent insists that the current TJ admission process is missing the “true talent” of Fairfax County Public Schools. We believe that this lottery plan will miss the BEST talent in Fairfax County. Moreover, [modeling data](#) prepared by data scientists in the Coalition for TJ reveals that this plan is *unlikely* to improve the representation of the underserved groups. Instead, it deprives the deserved opportunities of the most qualified STEM students in all groups.

Solutions

We hereby offer a concrete proposal and several recommendations to materially increase the numbers of underrepresented minorities at TJHSST, while maintaining the excellence of education at TJHSST:

The goal of TJHSST, a Governor’s School, is to promote STEM education in Fairfax County and surrounding jurisdictions. TJHSST aspires to create future science and technology leaders, a job it does extraordinarily well thanks to 35 years of sustained efforts by all stakeholders. The No. 1 rule of a fair screening plan is that it must not inadvertently screen out potential top candidates for the program. The lottery plan will randomly screen out the most talented STEM students because the lottery system is not designed to find the best STEM students -- it is designed to achieve “fairness”. By depriving TJHSST of these top STEM students, it will undermine the long-standing tradition of academic excellence of TJHSST. In return, the merit lottery offers a false impression of “fairness” while penalizing students (including those from underserved groups) who work hard and have great passions, depriving them of deserved opportunities.

The goal of a **diversity plan** should be to MAXIMIZE the potential of each eligible student who is interested in a STEM-focused education. A successful diversity plan should include:

1. A well-designed and tested admissions program;
2. Appropriate recruitment activities uniquely designed for the program;
3. An evaluation of the admission process;
4. Targeted recruitment activities;
5. Publicity about the program;
6. Community partnerships for long term commitment;

7. Communications and outreach to communities; and
8. Retention activities.

The lottery plan will inevitably fail the underserved groups in Fairfax and surrounding counties as it only addresses one of the above areas and addresses even that one poorly.

Coalition for TJHSST Action Proposal - Second-Look Semifinalists

To further improve the rigor of the current TJHSST admission process in screening for “hidden” talents, e.g. students who might have lower GPA or perform poorly on standardized tests but otherwise would bring unique value to the TJHSST community and benefit from the specialized STEM education at TJ, the Coalition for TJ proposes the following program:

The standardized test is to be administered in the same manner and with the same requirements as of now (3.0 GPA and Algebra 1 required). Prior to the release of the list of semifinalists, each of the Fairfax County’s 26 middle schools (as well as the other feeder counties and private schools) would have a “second look” and each public middle school would be ensured of having at least five (5) semifinalists. This would total approximately 115 Second-Look seats and make up 13-15% of the incoming TJHSST semifinalist class from the FCPS and home school cluster. Significantly, the Second-Look program would materially increase both the geographic and the socioeconomic diversity at TJHSST and should reduce the rate of offerees declining admission due to lack of peers from the same home school. Note that we chose five (5) so as to cause the number of Second-Look Semifinalists to be approximately 15% of the semifinalist pool.

For middle schools that have four (4) or more semifinalists named following the administering of the standardized test, the principals and staff of those schools will have the opportunity to name one additional “Second-Look Semifinalist” -- presumably someone extraordinary who nonetheless did not qualify based upon the standardized test. Written justification is required for recommending a Second-Look Semifinalist. As a result, each middle school will have a minimum of one Second-Look Semifinalist.

For middle schools with three (3) or fewer semifinalists (under-represented schools), the principals and staff of those schools will have the opportunity to name a sufficient number of “Second-Look Semifinalists” to bring the number of semifinalists from each middle school to five (5). For example, a school with three (3) semifinalists after the

administering of the standardized test may name two (2) additional Second-Look Semifinalists. At the other extreme, a middle school with no semifinalists following the administering of the standardized test would be permitted to appoint up to five (5) additional Second-Look Semifinalists.

The list of the Second-Look Semifinalists and justification for choosing these students will need to be submitted to the TJHSST admission office for final approval.

Second-Look Semifinalists would be deemed to receive a specified and pre-agreed “bump-up” on their score in the standardized test based on the amount necessary to raise the average score of the Second-Look Semifinalists to the average score of all semifinalists, although each Second-Look Semifinalist will be awarded an identical bump-up to their base score. For example, if the average test score of all the Second-Look Semifinalists is 11 points below the average of the other semifinalists, then each Second-Look Semifinalist will be awarded an identical 11 point bump-up to their base score as an additional reward for earning the special recommendation of their principals and teachers.

There will be no distinction made between standardized test semifinalists and Second-Look Semifinalists in the list of overall semifinalists released to the public. The names of Second-Look Semifinalists will not be released to the public.

At this point, all semifinalists (both standardized test semifinalists and Second-Look Semifinalists) will be given identical problem-solving essays and be subject to a holistic process for selecting the admitted class at TJ. We propose to conduct an individualized and qualitative assessment of each applicant, with the goal of identifying a pool of finalists that includes the top STEM achievers from all socio-economic backgrounds. For example, underrepresented background and moral traits to overcome these barriers are evaluated favorably and weighted in the admission process - methods used by many top universities in the country and merit-based award selection processes at regional and the national levels.

In summary, we strongly advocate for a plan to increase the diversity representation at TJHSST without compromising the academic rigor of TJ.

Coalition for TJHSST Additional Recommendations

The Coalition for TJ also proposes the following additional actions, in accordance with some well-established federal [guidelines](#) that have proven successful in increasing diversity while preserving excellence:

1. **Eliminate the source of inequity from the Advanced Academic Program**

Elementary students admitted to the AAP program have a higher chance to be ready for the rigorous standards of TJHSST education, yet underserved groups are underrepresented in the AAP program. To select students for the AAP program, FCPS administers the Naglieri Nonverbal Test (NNAT) to all registered students. The NNAT was designed to test the nonverbal non-knowledge-based critical thinking ability in young children; it is also race-blind according to [research](#). The data show that when Black and Hispanic students do submit intelligence tests, they are just as likely to gain admission as their white and Asian counterparts, per [AP analysis](#). However, the analysis also pointed out that “fewer than 50 Black and Hispanic second-graders have filed successful appeals.

That is less than 3 percent of the 1,737 second-graders admitted through the appeals process.”

We propose to eliminate the appeal process and instead offer additional opportunities to retake the NNAT test at FCPS when the test is administered again.

Policy and awareness of the opportunity should be publicized on FCPS and communicated by the gifted resource teachers, with special attention paid to cover the underserved population.

Each school should have at least one gifted resource teacher and proper teacher training for the AAP process should be in place in underserved areas.

2. **Sponsor summer and/or after-school STEM activities for underserved populations**

STEM-focused extracurricular activities are highly desired in the holistic admission process of TJHSST. To optimize exposure to the underserved population, we propose to offer extracurricular resources to underserved students, either through grants/aids to attend STEM-based summer camps or after school activities. We propose to engage TJHSST students and faculty to offer free resources for the underserved population, such as open lab sessions in the summer on a volunteer basis. One suggestion is to engage the infrastructure of the previous [VISION](#) and [LIFT](#) programs and make this a long-term sustainable effort. Considering having FCPS fund these activities.

3. **Open additional channels in TJHSST admission to screen for underserved populations**

For example, FCPS should start a diversity enrichment program that invites the underserved population to apply for entry to TJHSST. A holistic review process, as exemplified in the Second-Look Semifinalist proposal should still be present to ensure that the selected students, with proper training and support, could succeed in STEM.

4. Enhance targeted recruitment activities

Enhance recruiting at schools containing more underrepresented groups, engage diversity organizations, local chapters of professional organizations, and role models of the underserved community in the recruiting and publicizing of TJHSST admissions. There should be Spanish language outreach, text messaging, and social media-based outreach. Consider partnering with professional sports organizations to increase underrepresented outreach -- the Wizards and DC United (popular in Latin America) for example.

5. Develop retention activities

Although there are no accurate statistics, case reports showed that some underserved students did drop out of TJHSST due to paramount pressure to maintain a threshold grade (the current requirement of TJHSST is that accumulative GPA has to be >3.0). To further enrich the diversity plan, FCPS must engage peer mentoring resources and adequate faculty support to identify and address the needs of admitted underserved students. Peer-mentoring is already largely in place in TJHSST. Efforts should be made to provide full coverage to each individual underserved student with periodic evaluation of the mentoring outcomes. Provide summer classes for students who need academic support that is funded by FCPS (e.g., students with grades lower than “C” or so), similar to this program by the [Virginia Beach City Public Schools](#), which is completely free to students with academic needs including free transportation.

6. Increase diversity of staff

A fundamental reason for the lack of interest in TJHSST and AAP programs is the lack of diversity among the staff. In particular, there should be more Spanish-speaking staff. There have been calls for decades for FCPS to address this issue in its hiring practices, without adequate progress. Unless underserved communities are represented, they will feel voiceless and will be less likely to apply to TJHSST and AAP programs. The holistic process that FCPS is formulating is a majority view of the holistic process and is going to be very different from a holistic view from a more diverse administration perspective.

7. Free FCPS TJHSST test preparation fees for low-income households

Dr. Brabrand mentioned in the 9/23/2020 town hall meeting that test preparation offered by test providers and Fairfax County Public Schools places students from low-income households at a disadvantage. The Coalition for TJ has identified several providers, such as TJHSST Test Prep and Inspiring Test Preparation, that are willing to offer free test TJHSST admission test preparation services for those students at the end of the seventh grade with a 3.8 GPA or greater whose families' are considered 'low-income' and are eligible for the FCPS school lunch program. The Coalition for TJ recommends that FCPS pay for TJHSST Test Preparation for qualified applicants from low-income households.

8. Address anti-private school bias in admission selection

Each year, at a disproportionate rate, TJHSST denies offers of admission to several qualified applicants, who made it to the semi finalist round, from private schools that have GPAs of 3.8 or higher. TJHSST can increase its diversity increasing the number of applicants offered admission from this pool.

9. Improving oversight for the TJHSST admission process

A holistic admissions process that will identify the true STEM talent in the Fairfax community is needed, and we need to enhance the oversight and continuous monitoring of this process by local stakeholders. We echo the Loudoun County School Board's position to assemble a regional governing board with key local stakeholders to oversee policy change and administration of the TJHSST admission process. An example of this is the [Regional School Board at Maggie L. Walker Governor's School in Richmond](#). This will help create a stable learning environment at TJHSST and shield current and future TJHSST students from dramatic and destructive changes that disregard the best interest of the learners at FCPS.

10. Provide comprehensive support from different aspects

FCPS needs to collaborate with other agencies to allocate resources to help disadvantaged groups. Family is the first education environment for a child, yet too many students grow up in broken families, with a lack of parental involvement and support, and constantly face abuse and violence. For these students, STEM education or getting into TJHSST will be the last thing on their mind.

11. Enhance proper training with structured support

Regarding prep classes, there is criticism that TJHSST students are those privileged ones who can afford those prep classes and pay their way into TJ. Many don't believe that is true. However if such prep classes are believed to be so effective, and can help

students to advance, we would highly encourage FCPS to set up similar programs, like those Special ED programs with individual learning plans. Such a program would provide systematic, structured, and free tutoring programs to help those disadvantaged students to advance in STEM.

12. Allocate TJHSST resources through advanced technology

We need to think outside the box and seek creative solutions. The trend of distance learning and collaboration online is no longer a mystery, but a hard reality. We need to invest in advancing technology to enhance distance learning so that more students can have access to TJ. We need to give our teachers more freedom to teach, so they can leverage their passions and reach out to more students, and we need to give our students more freedom in course selections, so they can feed their curiosity and explore their capabilities at the click of their fingertips.

#TJHSST