

A+ Education Learning Fun



Hot Enough

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Gifted?

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More for Gifted Students?

Lower student-to-teacher ratios can allow for more individualized teaching in private schools.

By **Julia O'Donoghue**
The Connection

Alexa Williams knew her academic experience would be different when she transferred into Episcopal High School in 10th grade.

The teenager grew up in the Mount Vernon area and attended Fairfax County Public Schools up until then. Attending Episcopal, a boarding school in the City of Alexandria, would be nothing like her ninth grade year at West Potomac High School.

But Alexa, who had always been a straight-A student, was unprepared for how much more challenging Episcopal's curriculum was.

"I got straight A's without trying to hard and I took four honors classes at West Potomac, which is the most you can take as a freshman," said Alexa,



Photo by Julia O'Donoghue/The Connection
Ken Nysmith is the head of school at Herndon's Nysmith School for the Gifted, one of a few independent schools in the area that caters exclusively to students considered intellectually advanced.

who had also gone through the honors program at Carl Sandburg Middle School and taken some pull-out "gifted and talented" classes at Fort Hunt Elementary School.

Alexa assumed that, even if she had to try a little bit harder in school, she would be able to earn all A's at Episcopal as well. She was wrong.

Even though she was giving it her all, Alexa's grades still dropped sophomore year as she adapted to Episcopal's tougher academic standards.

"I had to take a grammar test at Episcopal and I completely failed it. I didn't even know what a gerund was," said Alexa, who had always considered English her best subject. At West Potomac, she had earned a numerical average of 100 percent in her ninth grade honors English class.

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Accelerated Learners

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“I didn’t really know how to study before Episcopal,” she added.

Now headed into her senior year, Alexa’s grades have gone back up and she has adjusted to Episcopal’s higher academic standards. She is planning to take five Advanced Placement classes this fall, though she said most of her general education classes will also be challenging.

“I think the regular classes at Episcopal are equal to the honors classes at West Potomac,” said Alexa.

FAIRFAX and Montgomery counties have robust and well-regarded public education programs for students who are motivated and academically advanced.

Both offer a range of educational options for students who are working above-grade level, including honors, Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate courses. But the academic programs in the two suburban school systems that are considered the most elite tend to be the “gifted and talented” centers, where qualified students have their own teachers and only take classes with each other.

In Fairfax, about 13 percent of the elementary and middle school students are enrolled in one of these special gifted centers at the elementary and middle school level. Out of the county’s 12,900 ninth grade students, just 480 – including a handful from outside Fairfax County – were admitted to attend Thomas Jefferson High School for Science and Technology, Fairfax’s only magnet program for the upper grades.

Montgomery County’s gifted and talented centers are even more exclusive. The Maryland school system identified nearly 34 percent of its student population as “gifted” last year but just four percent of elementary school students, three percent of middle school students, and two percent of high school students attend the most exclusive programs.

With few slots available, both Fairfax and Montgomery counties adhere to relatively rigid admissions standards when it comes to centers and schools for students identified as “gifted.”

The two public school systems rely heavily on standardized test scores to determine who is initially “center eligible.” Students who do not achieve a very high score on an

● On the Cover:

Sophomore running back Joe Meier takes a handoff during the Robinson football team’s first full practice of the year on Tuesday, Aug. 11.

Photo by **Craig Sterbutzel/The Connection**



The Potomac School in McLean.

Photo by **Louise Krafft/The Connection**

apptitude test are usually not even considered for gifted center admission, though they can enroll in honors and advanced placement courses at the middle and high school level.

LOCAL PRIVATE SCHOOLS take a very different approach to the education of academically advanced students and could offer an alternative to parents of high-performing students who are able to cover the tuition costs, which are typically well over \$20,000 per year.

“We don’t label kids. We are opposed to the whole idea of children thinking of themselves as gifted and talented,” said Robert Kosasky, head of school at St. Andrew’s Episcopal School in Potomac.

Kosasky said St. Andrew’s likes to emphasize persistence over natural

are more likely to let a child take an honors or accelerated course if the student is enthusiastic about the subject but even if he or she hasn’t been identified as advanced in that area.

MANY INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS said they did not have a “cut off” score students must achieve on a standardized test to be accepted either to the school in general or into an honors class, like the public school systems do.

At The Potomac School in McLean, math is the only subject for which students are separated out into different classrooms by ability, and that separation does not happen until students reach the seventh grade.

But at Potomac, until ninth grade, there are no honors or advanced sections for courses like science, social studies or language arts, though students in one class section may be “grouped together” based on ability level, said Bill Cook, Potomac’s assistant head of school for academics.

Cook would not answer whether Potomac considers all of its students gifted and talented.

“That is the kind of question I would rather not answer but we are blessed with an able constituency of families. That doesn’t mean they are all brilliant though,” said Cook.

MANY INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS also offer more opportunity for students who might be considered gifted in certain subjects areas but are not academically advanced across the board.

In both counties, elementary school gifted and talented centers take an “all or nothing” approach to education. Students are unable to enroll in gifted and talented center classes for just one class, like math, while working at or below grade level in another course, like language arts.

Those who are “center eligible” are assumed to be intellectually advanced in all core subject areas. In Fairfax, this is even true at the middle and high school level. For example, all English classes at Thomas Jefferson are considered to be “honors” courses, even though the school focuses on science and technology.

Most private school administrators interviewed said it is rare for any one student to be one of the highest achievers across all subject areas.

“We do not have a gifted and talented track. ... We find that students’ performance in math and reading is

“We have very small groupings so we can meet every child’s educational needs.”

— **Mimi Mulligan,
Norwood School**

ability. They want students to know that if a person works hard enough, they can perform at a very high academic level, regardless of their innate aptitude.

Several other administrators made similar remarks about their school’s philosophy and said that is why the standards for their advanced academic standards tend to be more flexible than the public school system.

For example, several private schools

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Heat a **Hot** Topic at Football Camps

With two-a-days underway, football teams are mindful of heat.

By Jason Mackey
The Connection

As late afternoon and early evening met one another and the sun slid into a crease between the trees that line Yorktown's football field, the lengthy drive from Maryland for that evening's opponent, the Forestville Military Academy's Mighty Knights, suddenly became a point of contention.

For the past hour or so, Bruce Ferratt was performing his normal routine; a sling psychrometer in his left hand and a digital psychrometer in his right, Yorktown's head athletic trainer was measuring wet-bulb temperature or the evaporation of moisture on a surface or skin — essentially how well the body can cool itself. Ferratt, because he's practically maniacal about these sorts of things, takes the average of both readings.

The number Ferratt calculated was upwards of 81 degrees Fahrenheit, which is the Fairfax County-mandated threshold for safety. Or the point where a preseason football scrimmage possibly becomes a cancellation. So, Ferratt consulted with the game officials, as well as Patriots coach Bruce Hanson and the school's director of student activities, Mike Krulfeld.

All agreed that it wasn't something they would try to push, especially not with the July death of Edwin "Dek" Miller, a football player at Northwest High School in Germantown, Md.

The scrimmage was delayed for 45

minutes until the temperature cooled down enough to produce an acceptable reading. And although Ferratt wasn't tackling anything outside of his job description, it's a situation that sticks with him to this day.

"I really got no flack, and it was nice to see the support on the administrative side that we're taking the steps to hold it off," said Ferratt, who started his 13th year at Yorktown Tuesday when area football teams hit the practice fields for two-a-day practices.

In the wake of Miller's death, everyone involved with high school football has become more attuned to heat and acclimatization matters. The National Athletic Trainers' Association published a set of preseason heat-acclimatization guidelines for secondary schools, which lists, among other things, a suggested building-up period to the most grueling practices.

No longer are these the days of three-a-day workouts with water breaks manipulated for motivation or punishment. No longer are players handed a bottle of orange liquid and told to be back in full pads at 1 p.m. Coaches and trainers must work together to be mindful of the weather, both because of prior misfortunes and for the prevention of future ones.

In-practice hydration techniques are more advanced than ever, with devices to calculate head indexes on the fly and determine whether or not it's safe to conduct practices outside. At several schools, parents team up to provide a tent for between-practice refuge, filled with sodium-infused

snacks and drinks to replenish lost electrolytes.

"Rehydration is a 24-hour-a-day issue," said Jon Almquist, the athletic training administrator for Fairfax County Public Schools. "It's not just during practice. The parents have to get involved, making sure they're pushing the fluids and the proper fluids."

In the past year, Almquist said that 52 cases of heat-related illnesses were reported across Fairfax County schools, with 34 of them related to football. Furthermore, 34 happened during the fall sports season, with one occurring during the winter and 12 during the spring.

All were classified as minor, meaning less than seven days were lost from participation.

MEREDITH SHEERON, Lake Braddock's head athletic trainer and her assistant, Ashlee Harris, spend a good portion of each session during camp walking around the Bruins' football practice field, measuring wet-bulb temperature like Ferratt.

The findings, which typically range from the high 60s to the low 80s, correspond with steps to take to eliminate risk for players. For example, if the wet bulb temperature that appears on Sheeron's screen is in the low 70s or below, practice will continue as normal, and coaches are urged to increase the frequency of water breaks as a precaution.

But if the measurement falls between 75-76.9, players must remove



Photo by Craig Sterbutzel/Centre View

At the start of summer camp for the Chantilly football team on Tuesday, Aug. 11, a few Charger linemen work the sled to improve their blocking technique.

their helmets if they're not participating in a football-related activity. If the reading falls between 77-78.9, all players must take off their shoulder pads and helmets for non-contact, teaching parts of practice. If it's 79-80.9, that means practice can only be completed in shorts and T-shirts.

"Both coaches that I've worked with since I've been here have been really good about water breaks and realizing that they might need to slow down and take more breaks," said Sheeron, referencing her nine-year career at Lake Braddock, which has included time spent working with former coach Marty Riddle and the Bruins' current one, Jim Poythress.

Some coaches, such as Robinson's Mark Bendorf, have even built time into their practice schedules for breaks. Under a set of trees off to the far corner of Robinson's practice field, Bendorf insists that his players find some shade and sit or lay down. Shoulder pads are off. Helmets are, too. Players can even take off their shoes if they'd like.

"If it's real hot, we'll lengthen that break or take more breaks," Bendorf said. "Even if it's a cool day, it's in my practice schedule to take a break. That allows for a reprieve to cool themselves down."

But coaches, while mindful to not overexpose their players to excessively hot weather conditions, still want to improve their football team during summer camp, the most crucial building block to a successful season.

Practice times, as a result, have shifted; several teams now elect to start before sunrise and cram two sessions on the field before noon.

With the rest of the day, players are exhorted to go home, enjoy the air conditioning and stay off of their feet.

AT CHANTILLY, coach Mike Lalli has his players on the field at 6 a.m. for about a two-and-a-half-hour workout. This is followed by a 90-minute break and another practice at 10 a.m. While some coaches might instead choose to run one elongated practice, Fairfax County's rule system dictates that coaches can only keep their team on the field for three hours at a time.

The rule doesn't affect Lalli, who generally schedules practices for around two hours at a time.

"I think every coach is very conscious of the issue," Lalli said. "We all laugh about the days of old where you weren't allowed to take your chinstraps off or get water. There's not many in the high school world that do it that way; we've all been educated enough to know that it doesn't prove that you're strong and tough."

Rob Everett, the Lee football team's head coach, conducts a morning session and then sends his players home. However, his coaching staff typically brings a grill to cook lunch at camp and Everett welcomes players who might not be able to get home and back to stay and eat. His primary concern is that players do not make good use of the free time before they

Keep This in Mind

Ask Jon Almquist, who's the athletic training administrator for Fairfax County Public Schools, for a few pieces of advice when it comes to avoiding heat-related issues during football camp and it's hard to keep that list short. But Almquist was able to point out a few things that those starting two-a-day football camps this week should remember.

Hydration doesn't start with thirst. Often when a player finally feels the need to get a drink, it's already too late. Almquist, like all athletic trainers, recommends frequent water breaks and making sure the body is full of fluids the night before an intense day of practice.

And they should be good fluids, too. Almquist said sports drinks such as Gatorade and Powerade are perfect for hydration because they replace lost electrolytes and sodium. Caffeine, by contrast, is not good, so nix those Red Bulls and Monster drinks this week.

return for the evening session of practice, which typically runs from 4-7 p.m.

"The best case scenario is for them to make sure they're getting something to eat and not just going over to the mall and hitting the food court," Everett said. "We want them going home, sitting down, drinking some water and getting ready to get back after it."

To further help his players' chances, Everett, like many coaches, has stressed off-season conditioning more than ever. After his girlfriend one day insisted that he try a Pilates workout, Everett, 29, was spent.

So, naturally, he adopted it as part of his team's daily workout routine. Lee also conducts a four-day-a-week lifting and running program that has players entering camp in excellent shape to begin with, which is a necessary component to avoiding heat-related issues, according to George Mason University's head athletic trainer, Ray Yamrus.

"Being in shape for your sport helps tremendously with trying to alleviate any potential problems because your body is used to working out," said Yamrus, who works with the men's soccer, wrestling, women's lacrosse and both men's and women's golf teams.

Joe Allen is the head coach at Winston Churchill High School in Potomac and knows Northwest's head coach, Mark Maradei, on a personal basis. Every year before the first practice session, Allen

Another important point is to use the first two months of summer for fitness, which will allow players to enter training camp in a physical state that better sets them up for success.

"Tuesday isn't the time to start [conditioning]," Almquist said. "They should've started three weeks ago because they need to get acclimated to the heat and exercise. They need to go out there and start running and getting in shape for the sport. Don't use the sport to get in shape."

Good things to eat between practices are also important, says Meredith Sheeron, the head athletic trainer at Lake Braddock. Sheeron said that since sodium lost through sweating must be replaced soon after a workout is completed, parents at Lake Braddock help distribute beef jerky, peanut butter, pretzels and bagels to players during the 90-minute break between practice sessions.

hands out a pamphlet supplied by Montgomery County's school system, explaining proper hydration to his players.

Practices at Churchill are typically kept to two hours, with a water break at least every half hour.

"A lot of the onus is on these players because they think they have to tough it out," Allen said. "It's not just the coach's responsibility, but it shouldn't all fall on the kids. It's really everybody's responsibility to make sure everyone stays hydrated."

The Connection's Mark Giannotto contributed to this story.



Photo by Craig Sterbutzel/The Connection

Sophomore running back Joe Meier takes a handoff during the Robinson football team's first full practice of the year on Tuesday, Aug. 11.



After a resurgent season in 2008, the Herndon football team tried to build on its 6-5 campaign from a year ago when it started practice on Tuesday morning, Aug. 11.



Photo by Craig Sterbutzel/The Connection

Robinson quarterback Mike Lopresti drops back to throw during the first day of football camp on Tuesday, Aug. 11. Two-a-day practices, an annual rite of passage for players, have been monitored closely as of late because of heat-related issues.

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not aligned at all. A child that is advanced in reading may not be advanced in math. In fact, they may need extra support in math," said Mimi Mulligan, admissions director and former teacher at Norwood School in Bethesda.

Even at Nysmith School for the Gifted, which uses I.Q. tests to help determine who is admitted, faculty do not find that students are working on a superior level in all academic courses.

"That is the exception.

There are very, very few students who excel in all subject areas," said Ken Nysmith, who has been working at the Herndon school for about 25 years.

"Some of the children here are working on grade level in certain subjects," he said.

NYSMITH'S MOTHER, who taught in Fairfax County's gifted and talented program, originally started the school in the 1980s for kindergarten through second grade students, who were expected to feed into the local gifted and talented center at Sunrise Valley Elementary School at third grade.

The school ended up expanding up to eighth grade at the suggestion of parents and families, Ken Nysmith said. Approximately 30 to 40 percent of the students who graduate from Nysmith end up attending Thomas Jefferson in high school, he said.

Like proponents of the gifted and talented centers in public schools, Nysmith said it is important for advanced students to be in a learning environment with their intellectual peers for social reasons.

In a program or school filled with gifted children, children who are exceptionally smart are not as likely to be picked on or isolated. They tend to feel more confident.

"The biggest benefit is that the children don't feel different," he said.

But even in a school focused on gifted children, Nysmith does not organize its class sections for most courses by ability level. Math is the only subject for which they separate out the more advanced students.

Instead, Nysmith faculty will teach children operating on several different grade levels in one classroom. For example, children in one science class could be working on three or four different lessons at the same time, said Nysmith.

ONE OF the reasons private schools like Nysmith do not have to group students in classes by ability level is because of smaller class sizes with lower teacher-to-student ratios.

"There are very, very few students who excel in all subject areas."

— Ken Nysmith,
Nysmith School for the Gifted

For example, at Nysmith, there is one teacher for every nine students and the faculty have time to give each child one-on-one attention.

At Norwood, individual classes for math and reading have no more than 12 students in them, compared to

approximately 25 to 30 children that are grouped together in Fairfax County, regardless of whether it is a gifted or general education program.

"We have very small groupings so we can meet every child's educational needs," said Mulligan of Norwood.

BUT A CRITICAL MASS of students, particularly for those operating well beyond their other "gifted" peers, can make a difference.

For example, at 480 students, Thomas Jefferson's freshman class is likely to be larger than the entire high school program at most independent schools. With that many academically advanced students, the school is more likely to be able to offer an extremely advanced class, like Real Analysis, an upper level college course.

Still, many administrators said their private schools can accommodate students who have moved beyond the school's standard curriculum. At Potomac, Cook taught a student advanced Latin one-on-one.

St. Andrew's has joined with other local private high schools in and around Potomac to offer one niche course, like Advanced Placement Economics, on each campus which only a few students from each individual school would be qualified to take.



Photo by Louise Krafft/The Connection

The Nysmith School in Herndon.

Local Dancers Compete Nationally

Nine tap dancers that attend different area schools share their love of dance at Barbara Sheppard's Academy of Dance. Winning gold medals in 2007 and 2008 at Dance Masters Mid Atlantic Chapter 17, the girls once again qualified for the National Convention Performing Arts Competition.

This year marked the 125th National Convention at the Gaylord National Convention and Resort Center at National Harbor. The studio decided to have the girls go to National Convention to compete for the first time on a National Level. They won Hi-Silver in the 11-12-year-old tap category.

The youngest member of the group 9 year old Reagan Raczynski also captured the Mid-Atlantic Chapter 17 "Miss Petite" title and went on to win the Interview category and place in the top ten. Reagan's mother and grandmother are co-directors of the Barbara Sheppard's Academy of Dance.



Front, from left, Caroline Clemson, Burke; Reagan Raczynski, Chevy Chase, Md.; Tyler Wernecke, Springfield; Middle, Annina Zelkin, Lorton; Angela Click, Burke; Kendall Griffith, Fairfax Station; Back: Eliana Nash, Fairfax Station; Taylor Larson, Springfield; Laura Heger, Burke.

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