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Lafayette school board rejects plan to eliminate AIM class

By Sora O'Doherty

A very large number of speakers, including current students, parents, and former students, showed up at the meeting of the Lafayette School Board on March 13 and spoke out against a plan to eliminate the AIM class for fourth and fifth grade students. After hearing recommendations and data from staff, and public comments, the Board decided not to proceed with getting rid of the AIM class at this time.

The discussion focused on two elements of the class, which is intended to group 25 gifted students from all four Lafayette elementary schools in one class for both fourth and fifth grade. One element was how the selection of students is made, and the other element is the nature of the class itself.

The board was presented with some data that seemed to show that the selection of students was skewed such that it favored male students and disfavored female students, as well as Black and Hispanic students. However, a group of parents of AIM students criticized the way that the data was compiled.

Lafayette is alone in Lamorinda in having a special class for gifted and talented education, which has in the past been labeled as GATE, but is now known in the Lafayette School District (LAFSD) as AIM, meaning Alternative Instructional Model.

After hearing the analysis, the recommendations, and the comments from the public, the majority of the board seemed to agree with the parents and students that what the AIM class is really about is, as one director put it, "that students felt close bonds with their fellow classmates, that they felt safe in their environment." The director continued saying that "the project based learning specifically and the mentoring opportunities kind of all stood out to me."

Another director said, "That's what I saw when I entered our AIM classroom. I saw kids who had found their tribe. I saw kids whose needs were being met at the individual level, who, you know, if we viewed them as special ed kids - and we could - their needs were being met at where they were found." Another added, "every time we hear from families who have been in the AIM program, the one thing that stands out to me is not necessarily the academics . . . but it's really the feeling of belonging that their student has felt being part of a two year class cohort." Continuing, the director added, "this is the environment where students thrive; a really successful incubator for a lot of the things that help kids . . . feel like they belong, that they're welcome, they're accepted for who they are."

Another director noted that "I love hearing about the deep project-based learning that happens in those classes [and] the feeling of commonality like a common spirit," but added that it stood out and made her sad to hear a student say, "It was really bad for me until fourth and fifth grade."

Additionally, board members felt that the proposed options being recommended to replace the AIM class were not sufficiently developed. As one director said, "You don't drive your car towards the canyon and then build the bridge as your car is moving in that direction!"

Parents and students agreed. One student who has participated in the Odyssey of the Mind program, which is one of the suggested offerings, said that while she had participated in the program for the past two years, and her team placed first in regionals both years and she was invited to the world competition in 2023, "Odyssey could not replace all the collaboration, critical thinking, and problem solving that takes place in our AIM classroom every day."

Other speakers noted that Odyssey of the Mind is largely an afterschool program, and is mainly run by parent volunteers. Another suggested program to challenge students is the addition of a student newspaper. Teacher Kathy Martinson, who has been the AIM teacher for the past 11 years, spoke in favor of the program. "First and foremost," she said, "it provides a community, and that's what I keep hearing over and over, a community for those, this special population of kids, many of whom have difficulty in a regular classroom. It also provides an opportunity to challenge them, as you've heard. Whether it's in reading, writing, social studies, math, whatever. They're given the opportunity to pursue their own interests." She did agree with others, however, who felt that the OLSAT test, administered to third grade students, and which currently is the only criterion for admission to the AIM class, is not a suitable means to determine eligibility.

Parents were unhappy about the fact that they were only given notice that the Board would be considering the proposal three days in advance of the meeting. A group of parents who talked to the Lamorinda Weekly complained that the district appeared to use conflicting methodologies in comparing data to show that the AIM program was not as diverse as the general school population. The parents said that the school appeared to be saying that AIM had no effect on academic performance, but pointed out that the AIM kids scored as high as was possible, and could not have scored any higher.

However, the parents emphasized that the main benefit of the AIM program is the students in the AIM program do not do well in regular classes, where they aren't challenged. They also suggested that as Stanley Middle School does not have a gifted program, roughly one-third of AIM students go to private middle schools directly out of elementary, with a continuing trickle to private schools afterwards.

Following the meeting, the board, having reached the conclusion that the AIM program will be continued for the time being, released the OLSAT scores, which had been withheld from the third grade students who took the test, and invitations were offered to those who may join AIM next year.

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