



April 18, 2022

Dear Members of the Arlington County Board:

We write on behalf of Arlington Parents for Education to emphasize the importance of County support for APS, not only with respect to the current proposed budget but also to ensure that APS has the resources, foresight, and discipline to deliver the highest quality of education to Arlington's 27,000 students over the coming years. This is not the School Board's job alone—it is a job that requires the County's financial support, partnership, and oversight.

Funding Education Is the County's Highest Priority. Delivery of high-quality education is, and should be, one of Arlington County's highest priorities. Across the country, education is by far the largest budget element of every local government. Education is not "a" priority of local governments, it is "the largest priority" of those governments. Arlington's budget, 39% of which is devoted to APS, already confirms the high priority that the County—and its residents—place on education. A high quality educational system attracts families to Arlington, increases the property values (and therefore taxes) for Arlington, and helps retain residents (and therefore the tax base and connectedness of our local community) in Arlington. Indeed, studies suggest that for every \$1 invested in school funding, per pupil housing values will increase \$20. Those findings confirm that additional school expenditures benefit everyone in the community whether they actually have children in the school system or not. Arlington's experience with school bond offerings likewise confirms that our residents generally place high value on educational spending.

As Mr. Schwartz explained during the meeting with the School Board, "our number one investment is our schools because it's our number one selling point when we're trying to attract businesses here and residents. Our success as a county is absolutely reliant upon the success of schools." A high-quality APS is also a critical part of our commitment to attracting "missing middle" families and encouraging them to commit to our community. And a strong school district is also the element most likely in the long term to achieve equity across Arlington. The data shows that following the COVID school closures, existing gaps in student performance by certain demographic groups has dramatically widened, in particular for our minority students and students with disabilities. There has never been as great a need from an equity perspective for investment in the school district as there is now. Our most disadvantaged students need access to tutors, need opportunities for more instructional time, and need smaller classes to ensure that they know—as Dr. Durán so aptly described—that they are safe, welcomed, and that their teachers see their needs and will help them recover from two years of learning loss.

Arlington County Should Ensure Funds Are Spent on the Highest Priorities. We understand that Virginia state law requires the School Board and superintendent to be in charge

of the day-to-day operations of the school system. But that does not absolve the County Board of its ultimate responsibility to deliver quality services and to make sure that such quality is maintained. Ultimate funding of those efforts is in the hands of the state and our local governments, like the County Board. The Virginia legislature provides the County Board with the power to make appropriations to the school system based upon 9 strict funding categories, including “instruction.” With those funding obligations comes an obligation to ensure that those funds are being well spent, including ensuring that quality instruction is provided.

Arlington County Should Provide Additional Funding for Teacher Compensation and Smaller Class Sizes. Arlington Parents for Education supports APS’ proposal to increase teacher compensation and reduce class sizes. But, respectfully, as outlined in our letter to the School Board, we believe that proposal does not go far enough in either category. With respect to teacher compensation, even after the proposed teacher salary increases, Arlington will still lag our regional peers in teacher compensation because our neighbors are likewise raising their pay. Absent an additional increase, in the range of at least 3 percent, APS risks losing the highest quality teachers—both new recruits and our existing teachers—to our neighboring districts, where pay is higher and cost of living is lower. There is no greater recipe for long-term failure than underfunding our teacher compensation. We estimate that a further teacher salary increase would require approximately \$9 million in addition to the budget amount proposed by APS.

Similarly, even after reducing the class size planning factors as proposed this year, APS will continue to have the largest class sizes of any district in the region. Next to teacher compensation, such oversized classes is the next greatest risk to our students’ performance. Oversized classes directly threaten the quality of student instruction through insufficient individualized attention, lack of sufficient teacher time to provide quality feedback on homework and written product, and limitations on student ability to participate in classes. Further, such oversized classes also contribute to teacher burnout, which ultimately threatens the quality of teachers who will remain in our district.

At the joint meeting with the School Board, Mr. De Ferranti questioned APS’ prioritization of smaller class sizes. But as Arlington Parents for Education has published, the research is compelling that reduced class sizes are an important factor in educational outcomes. There is a reason that Virginia, and most states, place a limit on class sizes. Policy makers across the country recognize that class sizes are a critical factor for academic success. To be sure, arguments to the contrary exist—but they are principally premised on the risk that smaller class sizes will be achieved through hiring less qualified teachers. A school system like APS should (over time) be capable of staffing more classrooms with quality teachers. We estimate that a further reduction in APS class sizes could be achieved with an additional investment of \$6 million.

Arlington County Should Commit to Help APS Fund Learning Loss Recovery over the Next Year. As APS made clear during the work session, our County (along with most counties) face a critical need to fund resources to help students emotionally and academically recover from the last two years. The reports of student mental health declines (including concerning trends that predated the pandemic) are troubling, and the County was appropriately focused on these concerns during last week’s work session. But the student test score data—from SOLs to Math Inventory, to Reading Inventory, to DIBELS—confirm an equally troubling story: our students have suffered dramatic learning loss as a result of APS’ prolonged school closures.

Other school districts, including Fairfax, have invested tens of millions of dollars into high-dosage tutoring, before and after school programs, an extended school year and additional learning time. We believe APS has not been sufficiently pro-active in addressing this issue, and that its “business as usual” approach has been inadequate. Additional instruction for learning loss should have happened this year. Nonetheless, APS has identified steps it could take to address learning loss next year, and requested \$15 million from the state to fund those actions. It was awarded only \$2 million. We believe APS must invest at least an additional \$10 million next year to address this critical need. Such investment—1.5% of APS’ budget—would be more in line with the investment made by Fairfax. That additional \$10 million should be expressly tied to providing additional instructional time to address learning loss.

Arlington County Should Partner with APS over Several Years to Help Focus APS’ Resources on Attracting Teacher Talent, Reducing Class Sizes, and Addressing Learning Loss. Arlington Parents for Education asks the County to partner with APS to advance its budget priorities and, ultimately, to ensure that APS delivers high quality instruction. APS needs a source of sustainable funding to meet those objectives not just next year, but in subsequent years as well. Further, APS—and more specifically our students—need a focused three-year effort to fund additional instructional time for our students. APE asks the County not only to fund APS’ existing budget request, but to provide a substantial additional amount along with a commitment to provide a similar amount in the next two years. Such funds should not be given without condition; instead, those funds should be specifically tied to achieving the goals outlined above—increased teacher compensation, smaller class sizes, and increased instructional time to address learning loss. Further, the funds should be conditioned on APS undertaking meaningful community engagement on how it allocates the learning loss funds, and also on developing a budget that over several years reallocates its spending toward student-facing positions so that APS can sustain these investments in student performance over the long term.

Arlington County Should Increase School Budget by 4%. We propose that the County increase funding to the schools by an additional 4% over the current budget, which would bring the APS budget just over 40% of the County’s budget. Given that education is, and should be,



Arlington County’s highest priority, such a modest short term increase in funding should similarly be a priority by the County. As we have noted in our [study of benchmarking data](#) of local school districts, the state bases its school funding allocation on a Local Composite Index intended to determine the financial capability of local districts to fund their school priorities. Using that index, the State’s data confirms that Arlington can afford to fund a larger share of the APS budget than can other neighboring districts (including Fairfax, Loudoun, and Prince William). Yet, benchmarking data confirms that, aside from Alexandria, Arlington pays the smallest portion of its general fund to its public school system. While we recognize that Arlington also has a smaller percentage of families with students than some other districts, as noted above, investments in schools benefit all Arlington taxpayers by increasing our property values and by addressing equity issues in our community.

Increased Funding Should Be Dedicated to Instruction. The increase in funds for the 2023 Fiscal Year should be accompanied by a commitment for a similar increase over at least the following two years. Such commitment is important to provide APS assurance that it will not face an immediate funding cliff, and to give APS sufficient time to re-allocate funds within APS so that APS devotes a greater share of its total budget to student facing priorities. Further, those funds should be specifically conditioned on APS devoting those funds—over and above its normal budgets—to those high priority items addressed above: teacher compensation (35%), smaller classes (25%), and learning loss (40%). Further, the County should facilitate a partnership between APS and Parks and Recreation to deliver a stronger summer school program, along with additional funding so that more students can participate in the program.

Funding Should Come with Additional Direction. We encourage the County to tie some strings to that funding decision to the extent permitted by law. With respect to the funds used for learning loss, APS should provide public notice of how it plans to spend such funds, with an emphasis on additional instructional time (high dosage tutoring, after school programs, and extended school year programs), and APS should obtain (and respond to) community input regarding those plans.

Further, while the County can afford to fund APS at higher levels, APS also must demonstrate that it is serving as an effective steward of those resources. As we noted in our [benchmarking report](#), APS spends more per student than any other local school district, and yet still has neither the best paid teachers nor the smallest class sizes. Benchmarking data suggests that this may be in part due to a higher portion of APS staff in non-school based positions. We suggest that as an additional condition to providing the additional funding, APS be required to provide budgets over the next three years that (i) increases the percentage of funding devoted to student-facing positions; and (ii) that will result in teacher compensation at all levels among the top two locally, class sizes among the top two locally, and a per student budget no greater than the second-highest locally.



As noted above, the education of Arlington’s students is not just the responsibility of APS—it is the responsibility of the community, and in particular of the County Board. We ask that you partner with APS to help it, and all our students—particularly our most vulnerable—overcome the learning loss resulting from APS’ prolonged school closures, and that you use your position of funding and oversight to ensure that our school funding dollars are efficiently used to focus on achieving outstanding results for our students.

Thank you for your support for our children.

Arlington Parents for Education.

cc: Arlington County School Board
Dr. Durán