

MEMORANDUM

TO: Arlington School Board
FROM: Early Childhood Advisory Committee
DATE: December 14, 2012
SUBJECT: Recommending Year Report

Background

The Early Childhood Advisory Committee (ECAC) studies issues related to the instruction of the Arlington Public Schools' youngest students, pre-K through 2nd grade. ECAC seeks to ensure that every child in APS during these foundational years experiences a high quality setting that not only allows him or her to succeed, but is the basis for future growth and learning.

Young children between the ages of three and eight think and learn in ways which are related to their stage of development and which differ from those of older children and adults. The foundation that is laid during these years can profoundly shape what happens in later life. A strong early childhood education program based on research and knowledge about how young children think and learn enriches development and enables later academic success. Ensuring that instruction during these years fully meets children's needs is essential to achieve the outcomes we seek for every child.

A core principle of child development is that all domains – cognitive, social, emotional and physical – are important, and are, in fact, closely interrelated.¹ The ECAC thus approaches its work with Goal 5 of the APS Strategic Plan as its lens: to meet the needs of the whole child. Our specific recommendations at this time, build on our work from previous years in the areas of social and emotional learning, providing a high quality Pre-K experience for at risk children and ensuring a rich and rigorous Montessori program. Note that while we are not bringing forth a specific recommendation on class size, ECAC strongly supports maintaining class sizes in the early grades that give young children the physical space they require as very active learners and the teacher engagement they necessitate as they are gaining self-regulation.

Social Emotional Learning

¹ Cople, Carol & Bredekamp, Sue (ed.) (2009). *Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs Serving Children from Birth through Age 8*. Washington DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children.

Recommendation #1:

The Office of Early Childhood should create a policy or position statement articulating the guiding principles of developmentally appropriate classroom management and outlining best practices.

Budgetary implications: The direct budget cost would be zero, although it should be noted that the recommendation would require allocation of staff time.

Recommendation #2:

The Office of Early Childhood should continue to review instructional practices related to social emotional learning, particularly classroom management techniques, in early childhood classrooms across the district, including further disaggregation of the CLASS data collected for program evaluations.

Budgetary implications: The direct budget cost would be zero, although it should be noted that the recommendation would require allocation of staff time.

Recommendation #3:

Allocate additional funds to the Office of Early Childhood to expand training in social emotional learning to kindergarten teachers in Title I schools.

Budgetary implications: The cost of substitutes for one full day training would be \$3,599. The cost of a Conscious Discipline trainer for a six-hour session would be \$900; note that a Responsive Classroom trainer would cost more.

2011-2017 Strategic Plan Alignment:

Articulating best practices, analysis of teacher performance, and professional development in social emotional learning directly and powerfully supports Goal 5: Meeting the needs of the whole child. It also supports Goal 1: Ensuring every student is challenged and engaged, by developing our students as responsible citizens, fostering character development and ensuring the necessary foundation for 21st skills through development of self-regulation, awareness and problem solving. Training teachers in social emotional learning also works to support Goal 2: Eliminating the achievement gap and Goal 5: Meeting the needs of the whole child by giving teachers tools to create a culturally competent classroom environment.

Rationale:

Social emotional learning (SEL) is a fundamental element of high quality early childhood education. Early childhood is a critical period in developing the skills to recognize and manage one's emotions and deal effectively with others:

- Self-control
- Seeing and understanding another perspective
- Managing conflict productively
- Taking responsibility for one's actions
- Problem-solving and decision making
- Respecting others and appreciating differences
- Working effectively in groups

Fostering these skills creates a positive school climate, builds community and reduces bullying.

SEL is more than a social issue, however; it is also an instructional one. Research demonstrates that instruction is not only most effective in a positive classroom climate, but further that when teaching actively promotes social emotional learning there is a direct impact on cognitive development. Children's experiences shape their motivation and approach to learning (persistence, flexibility, initiative): these characteristics are not innate and can be taught. The development of self-awareness, reflection and social problem solving actually develops the same part of the brain used for critical thinking and academic problem solving, leading to increased academic achievement in later years.² Students who have participated in programs that specifically address social and emotional learning score significantly higher on achievement tests³ and children with poor self-regulation skills test significantly lower on measures of reading and math skills.⁴

Learning social emotional skills requires more than an enthusiastic and warm teacher. It occurs through classroom routines and rituals that build community and the use of classroom management techniques that teach strategies for self-control while fostering a positive sense of self. Most teacher preparation programs do not cover effective, developmentally appropriate classroom management at all, making on-going professional development opportunities in this area vital. Training in SEL programs like Conscious Discipline and Responsive Classroom gives teachers the tools to use everyday situations as explicit opportunities for social emotional learning and to create a classroom

² National Scientific Council on the Developing Child (2007) *The Science of Early Childhood Development: Closing the Gap Between What We Know and What We Do*. Cambridge, MA: Center on the Developing Child, Harvard University.

³ Durlak, J.A., Weissberg, R.P., Dymnicki, A.B., Taylor, R.D. and Schellinger, K. (2008). *The Positive Impact of Social and Emotional Learning for Kindergarten to Eight-Grade Students*. Chicago: CASEL, University of Illinois.

⁴ McClelland, N.M., Acock, A.C. and Morrison, F.J. (2006) The impact of kindergarten learning-related skills on academic trajectories at the end of elementary school. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly* 21 (4): 471-90.

environment that is most conducive to learning. Although SEL is absolutely fundamental to growth in all areas of development and academic subjects⁵, APS has not systematically provided professional development and support to teachers to ensure they have these essential tools for effective teaching. Over the past couple of years, the Office of Early Childhood has recognized this need and provided training in Conscious Discipline to VPI Pre-K teachers, but simply lacks the professional development funds to do more given the wide-ranging demands on its budget. ECAC feels that allocating additional funds to the Office of Early Childhood to expand training in SEL to kindergarten teachers would make a critical difference at a key period for students as they enter elementary school. Given the pressures on the budget, we recommend initially providing training for just kindergarten teachers in Title I schools, prioritizing the needs of the most at risk students.

The Department of Instruction should also continue to systematically review and analyze data to assess strengths and weaknesses, work that was begun in response to ECAC recommendations two years ago. An initial review of CLASS data from program evaluations conducted in 2011-12 indicates that teachers score on average at the high end of the middle range in the emotional support domain, which is positive, but there is enough variation in scores to warrant concern about consistency. Examining this data at the school level and by program or population could be helpful in identifying where support is needed. It is also important to recognize that CLASS looks at some components of SEL like positive classroom climate, but not others such as routines that build community or specific types of classroom management technique. Clear articulation of developmentally appropriate classroom management practices through a position or policy statement would be an additional tool to ensure greater consistency across the district.

Update of Previous Recommendations

Past Recommendation #1: Despite increasing budget constraints, APS should maintain the size of its Pre-K programs. Inclusion of at risk children, as defined by qualification for free and reduced lunch, should continue to be the priority.

2011-2017 Strategic Plan Alignment: Simply put, providing Pre-K to at risk children is demonstrated by research in APS and nationally to be overwhelmingly

⁵ Zins, J.E., Weissberg, R.P., Wang, M.C. and Walberg, H.J. (ed.) (2004). *Building Academic Success on Social and Emotional Learning: What Does the Research Say?* Columbia: Teacher's College Press, NY, NY.

the most effective way to eliminate the achievement gap ⁶(Goal 2). A high quality Pre-K experience also supports Goal 5: Meeting the needs of the whole child and Goal 1: Ensuring every student is challenged and engaged by ensuring every child enters kindergarten ready to learn.

Status and Rationale:

Over the past two years, APS Pre-K programs have continued to enjoy the strong support of the APS Department of Instruction, the Superintendent, and the School Board. Three VPI classrooms and one primary Montessori classroom have been added to meet the need of at risk children in the community. But given the intense pressure the combined challenge of increasingly limited resources and increasing enrollment places on the APS community, ECAC feels it is critical that we continue to highlight the importance of Pre-K in meeting the goals of our APS Strategic Plan, to remind ACI and our community of the abundance of data in support of maintaining every Pre-K classroom with a full level of support to the program, and to educate parents in the community about the impact on every child in the classroom when our most vulnerable children do not enter school ready for kindergarten. We urge the School Board to maintain Arlington Public Schools' commitment to its youngest learners.

In addition to APS Special Education preschool programs, which serve roughly 250 three and four year olds, APS currently has two Pre-Kindergarten (Pre-K) programs: 18 classrooms serving approximately 275 3, 4 and 5 year olds in the Montessori program, and 34 classrooms serving approximately 520 4 year olds as part of the Virginia Preschool Initiative (VPI), which uses a more traditional approach to curriculum. At risk children who benefit most from Pre-K make up a significant portion of APS Pre-K enrollment, as 2/3 of the slots in the Montessori program are reserved for families who make less than \$84,800 (80% of the median income for a family of four in Arlington County) and all of the slots in the VPI program are for families who make less than \$84,800. Both programs enjoy strong interest from the community.

There is ample research to support the educational benefit of Pre-K experience. Kindergarten children in APS who had attended preschool had significantly higher pass rates on the K-PALS than children who did not attend Pre-K.⁷ The difference in pass rates was most pronounced for at risk children. Furthermore, at risk children and Limited English Proficient (LEP) students who had attended Pre-K continued to outperform those at risk children and LEP students who had not attended Pre-K through the fifth grade, as evidenced by SOL scores and

⁶ Isaacs, J., Roessel, E. (2008). *Impacts of Early Childhood Programs*. Brookings Institution.

⁷ Children who attended Pre-K had a pass rate of 93%; those who had not attended Pre-K, 83%. Further, those students who qualified for Free and Reduced Lunch Programs had a pass rate of 90% when they had attended APS Pre-K, 71% when they had attended a non-APS Pre-K and 59% when they had not attended Pre-K. APS Pre-Kindergarten Program Evaluation Report, 2010.

Degrees of Reading Power.⁸ These APS findings are consistent with numerous longitudinal studies that have demonstrated Pre-K for at risk children results in such benefits as significantly increased high school graduation rates, decreased rates of placement in special education and decreased rates of being retained in a grade.⁹

Providing Pre-K may be an expensive endeavor, but it is an investment that brings significant returns. A major study by the Rand Corporation that analyzed economic returns from investing in Pre-K education in California found that every dollar spent resulted in \$2.62 of direct, tangible returns.¹⁰ Other studies have found returns as high as \$9 for every dollar spent.¹¹ It is important to view the cost of maintaining APS Pre-K programs as an investment because research has demonstrated the outcomes of Pre-K education are significantly greater than those realized by other educational interventions for children at risk, maintaining Pre-K is critical to eliminating the achievement gap. Maintaining the current level of enrollment in APS Pre-K programs, and increasing enrollment as need in the community dictates, is the surest and most direct way to ensure the greatest number of children, especially those at risk, attend Pre-K.

Budgetary Implications: The recommendation is to maintain current level of funding for Pre-K programs, so the budget implication would be zero.

ACI Vote in 2010: Yes, 26; No, 2; Abstaining, 1.

Past Recommendation #2: APS should dedicate resources to strengthen APS Montessori programs by adding a Montessori specialist to the Early Childhood Office as soon as resources allow. ECAC does *not* feel there are resources for this position at this time, but does feel it is important for APS School Board and staff to maintain awareness of the real need for the position at some point in the future.

Status and Rationale:

The hiring of an acting principal at Drew Model School who is Montessori certified does mitigate the need for a Montessori Specialist. However, with recent leadership changes in the Early Childhood Office and senior staff there is no one with the in-depth, professional knowledge provided by Montessori certification

⁸ APS Pre-Kindergarten Program Evaluation Report, 2010.

⁹ Schweinhart, I.J., Weikart, D., et al (1993). Significant Benefits: The High/Scope Perry Preschool study through age 27. Monographs of the High/Scope Educational Research Foundation No.10. Ypsilanti, MI: High/Scope Educational Research Foundation; Reynolds, A.J., Temple, J.A., Robertson, D.L & Mann, E.A. (2002). *Age 21 cost-benefit analysis of the Title I Chicago Child-Parent Centers*. Discussion Paper no. 1245-02. Madison, WI: Institute for Research on Poverty.

¹⁰ Karoly, L.A. (2005) *The economics of investing in universal preschool in California*. The Rand Corporation.

¹¹ Meier & Belfield, C.K. (July 2006) *Fiscal Impacts of Universal Pre-K: A Case Study Analysis for Three States*. Queens College, City University of New York.

that would best ensure the program's success across 11 schools and 32 classrooms and success of the more than 600 students ranging in ages from 3 to 13. An experienced, Montessori trained educator is needed to coordinate, oversee and guide this program with the kind of vision and support that can only come from extensive training in Montessori teaching methods, materials and curriculum. Some staff and parents have felt that without this type of leadership, oversight, rules and understanding of the program have been inconsistent.

The Montessori Steering Committee, comprised of the Office of Early Childhood and APS and private Montessori administrators, teachers and parents, recommended in its report in 2011 that APS employ an experienced Montessori teacher to serve as curriculum coordinator to administer and cohesively oversee the entire program – primary, elementary, and middle school - as described in the *Essential Elements of a Public Montessori School*. Adding a Montessori Specialist would also support the development of best practices outlined in the APS Montessori Best Practices document, guidelines to support the development of a consistent countywide program written by the Office of Early Childhood with the consultation of two national Montessori experts in 2006.

The need of a coordinator is not specific to Montessori. The Spanish Immersion program could not have been so successful without the help of a full time immersion specialist qualified to meet the needs of their students' unique educational experience. Montessori curriculum necessitates the same attention. A letter in support of the position to the School Board from the National Center for Montessori in the Public Sector outlines the importance of leadership, guidance and oversight informed by a deep understanding of Montessori core principles to ensure integrity of the pedagogical method in program structure and planning, as well as curriculum, classroom environment and teaching practice.

¹²The problems that exist without Montessori central staff leadership include:

- Proper recruitment of Montessori teachers which needs long lead time to identify good hires.
- Maintenance of standard Montessori best practice procedures
- Guidance to principals on supporting a positive Montessori experience
- Identifying and addressing issues in the Montessori program

While the Early Childhood Office has a great record of supporting the APS Montessori Community through coordination of some professional training, educational opportunities, and information dissemination to Montessori families like Montessori Information night, it does not possess the expertise required to ensure program quality including teacher evaluation, recognizing systemic Montessori classroom issues and strategic planning to improve the program.

Strategic Plan Alignment: For the students in the Montessori program, Pre-K

¹² See Appendix B, letter from the National Center for Montessori in the Public Sector.

through middle school, a Montessori Specialist would support Goal 1: ensuring that every student is challenged and engaged, Goal 4: Providing an optimal learning environment, and Goal 5: Meeting the needs of the whole child, by ensuring a rich and rigorous Montessori program: curriculum, teaching methods, environment, structure and materials.

Budget Implications:

A full time T-scale position costs \$89,000 or half time would be \$44,500. These figures include 30 percent fringe benefits.

Note that the immediate budget implication would be zero, as we are not recommending the position be added at this time due to budget constraints, but rather at some point in the future.

ACI Vote in 2010: Yes, 10; No, 11; Abstaining, 8. Note that ACI had voted in favor of this recommendation in 2008 and in 2006.

Committee members:

Allison Collins, Bette Flentje, Amy Fry, Robin Goffen, Liz Hendrickson, Karen Hunt, Julie Luncher, Bethany Matz, Jean McCarty, Susan Mordan-White, Monique O'Grady, Kelly Polsinelli, Adena Porter, Amanda Raziano, Sandra Redmore (Chair), Taryn Roman, Jessica Tierney, Stacey Whyte, Fielding Winters

Our APS Staff Liaison is Kate Graham, Early Childhood Coordinator.

Appendix A

Letter from the National Center for Montessori in the Public Sector

NATIONAL CENTER for MONTESSORI in the PUBLIC SECTOR

November 20, 2012

Arlington County School Board
Arlington Public Schools
1426 N. Quincy Street
Arlington, Virginia 22207

Dear School Board Members:

I am pleased to write this letter in enthusiastic support for the proposal to recruit and hire a Montessori Specialist to support the more than 600 students from ages three through eighth grade currently being served by eleven Montessori programs in Arlington Public Schools.

Montessori education is an established and expanding element of American public education. To date, more than 500 public Montessori schools operate in 32 states and the territory of Puerto Rico, and the number is growing steadily. As parents, leaders, and educational reformers continue to seek solutions to pressing problems of educational equity, access, and performance, Montessori is, increasingly, recognized as a solution that is at once child-centered, rigorous, and appealing to a broad spectrum of the population.

As one of the nation's first publicly funded programs, Arlington Public Schools is ahead of the curve on Montessori education. Having established a tradition of making quality Montessori education accessible to significant numbers of families, regardless of socio-economic status, the district offers a model for others to emulate. Likewise, as a community that serves more than 600 students in a variety of programmatic structures, Arlington is approaching a threshold in which ensuring quality will become simultaneously more important and more difficult. Funding the proposed position will be a crucial step toward maintaining this tradition of exemplary public Montessori education.

Like all exemplary schools, excellent public Montessori programming rises or falls based on the quality of the leadership of those programs. The most successful Montessori schools – public or private – have several common features. First, they maintain the integrity of the Montessori pedagogical method. Integrity is evident in school schedules, student groupings, the organization of learning environments, and

in the training of the instructional staff. Second, they strategically balance federal and state mandates against the core principles and practices of the Montessori program. Third, and perhaps most important, they are directed by leaders who (1) possess a deep understanding of core Montessori principals and practices, (2) cultivate responsive and rigorous cultures of excellence, and (3) constantly engage all constituents around the goals and outcomes of the program.

The absence of leadership capable of delivering these outcomes has invariably resulted in drift away from high quality implementation.

A handful of districts across the nation face similar situations: Milwaukee, Wisconsin, South Carolina and Puerto Rico all house significant numbers of public Montessori programs, and each is supported by a centralized administrator whose charge is to coordinate professional development, teacher recruitment, family engagement, and communications efforts.

While strong Montessori leadership in every school building is always a goal, the realities of district life do not always make that goal feasible. This is particularly true as public Montessori communities grow larger. The solution of a centralized administrator is one NCMPS endorses as a strategy for ensuring coherence and quality while at the same time reducing redundancy.

If we can be of further assistance, please do not hesitate to be in touch.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Keith Whitescarver".

Keith Whitescarver
Director

Enclosures

Appendix B

Essential Elements of Successful Montessori Schools In the Public Sector

- Employ Montessori teachers who have Montessori credentials for the levels they teach
- Maintain an active and open recruitment for Montessori credentialed teachers.
- Budget for future Montessori teacher education for non Montessori-credentialed teachers.
- Provide professional Montessori in-service by experienced credentialed Montessori educators.
- Contract for on-going internal and periodic external Montessori consultation and/or professional support as follow up to Montessori teacher education.
- Employ one paraprofessional per classroom, each having received Montessori orientation for that role. Administration
- **Employ an experienced Montessori teacher to serve as curriculum coordinator.**
- **Employ a building principal/educational leader who has knowledge of Montessori principles and curriculum through Montessori coursework, Montessori Administrator Credential and annual conference exposure.**
- Maintain commitment to the core Montessori curriculum and instruction **even with changes in administrative staff.**
- Sustain the support of the central administration through high profile communications about program development.
- Recognize that the best implementation process is to begin with the 3-6 age group and add one age at a time for gradual progression.
- Provide Montessori parent education programs that promote understanding of Montessori principles and curriculum.
- Develop and admission process that informs parents about the nature of Montessori and seeks the necessary commitment to the program.
Curriculum/Environment
- Offer a full complement of Montessori materials (about \$25,000 per classroom) purchased from Montessori dealers.
- Develop a classroom design that is compatible with Montessori” prepared environment” principles.
- Create uninterrupted daily work periods of 90 minutes to 3-hours, considering the 3-hour work cycle as ideal.
- Integrate specialty programs (music, art, physical education, etc.) around the uninterrupted work periods.
- Apply the appropriate multi-age groupings: 3-6, 6-9, 9-12, 12-15, necessary for the diversity, flexibility, and reduced competition integral to Montessori.

- Use a process of reporting student progress that is compatible with Montessori and includes parent conferences and authentic assessment tools such as observation, portfolio, performance assessment with rubric
- Implement state mandated assessment in such a way that the character of the Montessori program is not compromised.
- Budget for continuing education through Montessori workshops and conferences.
- Maintain membership with one or more of the professional Montessori organizations and seek Montessori accreditation to assure consistent quality.
- Endorsed by the following organizations:
 - American Montessori Society (AMS)
 - Association Montessori Internationale (AMI)
 - North American Montessori Teachers' Association (NAMTA)
 - National Center for Montessori Education (NCME)
 - Montessori Education Programs International (MEPI)
 - Southwestern Montessori Training Center
 - Center for Contemporary Montessori Programs