



PARENT TEACHER ASSOCIATION

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Via Electronic Mail Only

Board Members

Arlington Public Schools

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Dear Arlington Public School Board Members,

I write on behalf of the Arlington Traditional School (ATS) Parent Teacher Association (PTA) to express our concerns surrounding two of Arlington Public Schools' (APS) current initiatives — the "Pre-K-12 Instructional Programs Pathway" (IPP) and the "Planning for the 2020 Elementary School Boundary Process" initiatives. As part of these initiatives, APS staff has advanced two proposals to relocate ATS and other schools prior to drawing new school boundaries. We are deeply concerned about the impact of these proposals on ATS and the APS community at large.

We thank you for your efforts to ensure that all Arlington children now and in the future have the opportunity to excel in a safe learning environment that meets APS's core values of excellence, equity, inclusivity, and collaboration. We recognize the challenge of delivering on this promise and believe that employing a transparent, collaborative, and data-driven process will provide improved solutions and help us meet our shared goal of excellent educational opportunity. In the spirit of collaboration, we offer the ATS community as continued partners in meeting the needs of our growing community and planning together for a successful future for Arlington's children.

With this goal in mind, our community is concerned that the current proposals undermine Arlington's commitment to excellence, equity, inclusivity, and collaboration. The draft IPP and current proposals to move option schools before redrawing the boundary map raise questions about APS's use of data and the community engagement processes. Further, the draft IPP and current proposals suggest that APS does not value the traditional model of instruction at ATS and is using the draft IPP as an attempt to delegitimize our three-time Blue Ribbon Award-winning educational model. We recommend that APS update the draft IPP to reflect the inclusion of the traditional educational model as an option program, separate the current draft IPP from the boundary change efforts, and propose any option school moves at the same time as elementary school boundary changes.

1. The ATS PTA reaffirms the value of the traditional model of instruction at ATS.

Board members, staff, and community members often ask what is “traditional” about ATS and how the program differs from neighborhood schools with the same curriculum.¹ In response, we are proud to share our history and success as a traditional teaching model school.

ATS opened in 1978 as a reaction to school administrators’ decisions to experiment with the latest trends of the day when open space and multi-grade classrooms were popular - before those trends faded away or were replaced by other new experiments in education. Throughout these changes, ATS has stayed true to its core mission as an alternative program intentionally designed *not* to swing with the pedagogic pendulum.

For over 40 years, ATS has remained grounded in a traditional teaching method guided by strict adherence to clearly defined tenets such as:

- Teacher-guided instruction in self-contained classrooms allowing the one classroom teacher for all core subjects to adjust lesson plans across subject matters according to the needs of the child(ren);
- Emphasis on fundamentals in the core academic areas (e.g., reading, writing, and mathematics) and celebration of core academics through the annual Reading Carnival Day and the Summer Reading Challenge;
- Regular and meaningful homework assigned at all grade levels, including kindergarten;
- Weekly written progress reports sent home at all grade levels, building a student-teacher-parent partnership to promote grade level mastery;
- Behavior and dress code standards that teach personal responsibility and foster a quiet and orderly learning environment for all;
- Participation by all fourth and fifth grade students in chorus, instrumental music, and orchestra or band; and
- Weekly school-wide assemblies featuring class plays and multicultural presentations that reinforce and build school community.

The traditional education model focuses on strengthening students’ role as lifelong learners and responsible community citizens. ATS students are set up for success on multiple pathways because of the pure traditional education foundation.

ATS’s traditional teaching method has proven successful for all students regardless of language, disability, or economic background. According to the data, ATS consistently excels on Standards of Learning (SOL) testing while celebrating student diversity from all Arlington neighborhoods, representing over 30 countries and 20 different languages. ATS students’ SOL pass rates of 96.67% were the highest in the county between 2017-2019. ATS is one of the most successful county schools at closing the opportunity gap by enabling children from all socio-economic backgrounds to achieve academic success. For example, in 2018-2019:

- 96% of ATS students passed the reading SOL, compared to a county-wide pass rate of 79.83% for APS elementary students;
- 98% of ATS students passed the math SOL, compared to a county-wide pass rate of 86.5% for APS elementary students;
- 92% of ATS students with disabilities passed the math SOL, compared to a county-wide pass rate of 61.5% for APS students with disabilities; and

¹ It is important to note that a “different” curriculum is not a defining feature of an option school. All APS elementary schools teach the same curriculum - neighborhood schools, Spanish immersion, ATS, and other option programs alike.

- 93% of ATS economically disadvantaged students passed the reading SOL, compared to a county-wide pass rate of 65.13% for APS economically disadvantaged students.²

By busing children to a central location, Arlington children from all economic backgrounds have the opportunity to contribute and grow as part of our ATS community.

Arlington parents recognize the value of the traditional education model at ATS. Last year, ATS had more applicants than the two Spanish immersion programs combined and currently has over 500 students on its wait list despite maintaining larger classroom sizes than other county elementary schools.³

We are proud of our tradition as a shining example of the possibility of academic achievement across socio-economic boundaries when equitable access and options are provided for all. And we are grateful to be recognized this year by the U.S. Department of Education as a Blue Ribbon Award-winning school for the third time in 15 years (i.e., 2004, 2012, 2019).

2. The IPP process delegitimizes ATS as an option school.

APS launched the IPP community engagement process in early 2019 as an effort to define elements of “option schools,” ensure equal opportunity for access to all students, and solicit feedback to inform option school planning for the future. At the February 12, 2019, School Board Work Session, APS’s school administrators described reshaping classrooms based on the latest in today’s post-Industrial “national trends in K-12 education,” including student-led classrooms and facilities with flexible, modular shared space that resemble modern workplaces.⁴ While these changes may be exciting for older grade levels, they are reminiscent of the failed open classroom concepts from the 1970’s that inspired the creation of ATS.⁵

The most alarming part of this IPP launch was the conspicuous omission of the traditional model on slide 40 titled “Initial Staff Reviews: Key Decision Points,” asking “[w]hat programs should APS consider as pathways?” The slide lists current option programs like immersion and expeditionary but fails to include traditional while simultaneously considering trendier ideas for the future such as a “museum” program and others. This omission reminded ATS families of a document that APS admitted to inadvertently posting to its website over a year ago indicating that the ATS facility would no longer house an option program and Nottingham Elementary

² ATS’s excellence in ensuring equity of access and opportunity bears out in every single instructional category (reading, history and social sciences, mathematics, and science).

³ ATS recognizes that hard decisions have to be made as the population grows and has been one of APS’s solutions for seats over the past several years. Each classroom at ATS operates at the maximum county capacity. As a countywide option school, ATS has taken on additional students to meet the needs of the growing student population, becoming one of the highest utilized school buildings in the system.

⁴ [https://www.boarddocs.com/vsba/arlington/Board.nsf/files/B9F6ZG6AA1FF/\\$file/PreK-Grade%2012%20Instructional%20Program%20Pathways%20Presentation%20021219.pdf](https://www.boarddocs.com/vsba/arlington/Board.nsf/files/B9F6ZG6AA1FF/$file/PreK-Grade%2012%20Instructional%20Program%20Pathways%20Presentation%20021219.pdf)

⁵ During this work session, Mr. Goldstein asked why student-led classrooms were preferable to teachers trained to deliver the education experience and why we would want classrooms to look like the workplace since “there is a difference” between the two. Similarly, we encourage board members to challenge staff to distinguish how these trends differ from the failed experiments of the past, especially at the elementary school level. See 1:08-1:12 at <https://www.apsva.us/school-board-meetings/school-board-work-sessions-meetings/previous-school-board-work-sessions/>.

School would become an IB school.⁶ Many at ATS began to see a “thumb on the scale” of this IPP process to exclude and delegitimize the traditional model as an option program in order to justify its closure or unrecognizable evolution in the future.

APS staff also crafted proposed elements for option schools as the starting point for the community’s discussion of the future of option schools in Arlington. These elements were limited and arguably favored some option school programs over others (for example, recognition by an outside agency). After a community engagement process with an apparent low level of participation, APS staff then issued its recommendation for the definition of option schools and preferred programs at the September 5, 2019, Board Meeting. As you know, the traditional model was not among those option schools recommended for future planning purposes, and Ms. Stengle suggested that the traditional option needed to “evolve” to fit the new definition for option schools.⁷ Given the staff’s repeated dismissal of the traditional model throughout this process and over recent years, we are concerned that APS actions demonstrate that APS does not value our program or school community and will continue to delegitimize the traditional model until ATS has “evolved” into another school entirely.

Further, even though the IPP was presented as a “draft document” and “work in progress,” the IPP is a driving force for the current survey and ultimately the feedback that staff will receive from the community on the two move proposals. In one question, the survey asks respondents to rank four considerations associated with option school movement. One of these considerations is whether the “[o]ption school is clearly defined in the PreK-12 Instructional Pathways (IPP) framework.” This consideration appears designed to elicit survey results that support elimination of the traditional model option. In another question, respondents are asked to rank considerations associated with school movement in the context of the broader boundary changes. These considerations include “keep[ing] as many students together in each school community as possible” and “enabl[ing] walking to neighborhood schools as much as possible.” These considerations undermine county-wide choice schools like ATS that rely on busing. Overall, the survey appears designed to support a preexisting agenda for the boundary change process than to collect true community input.

3. Moving option schools in isolation unacceptably limits transparency and accountability.

It is important to note that the School Board did not vote on the staff’s list of IPP recommendations and the document remains in draft form. However, the document continues to serve as a driving force for future planning efforts, such as this year’s proposal to move option school programs and the upcoming elementary boundary school change process.

APS staff is soliciting feedback on two scenarios - both ostensibly to create a neighborhood school in the Rosslyn corridor. APS has proposed moving Key into the ATS location or to Carlin Springs, displacing the newer Carlin Springs school community into Campbell’s location and moving Campbell to ATS. Both scenarios raise questions without clear answers such as:

⁶ Though APS admitted to the inadvertent posting, the document has since been taken down and is currently unavailable.

⁷ Based on the data released to the community, 28 percent of survey respondents supported an additional traditional program. Yet, APS staff failed to include the traditional model in its recommendation at all, instead proposing to expand other option programs that garnered less community support (e.g., only 24 percent of respondents supported an additional Montessori program and only 17 percent supported an additional Hybrid High School). We challenge staff and board members alike to confirm whether the data actually supports the recommendations.

- Why would APS propose moving the larger Key community into one of the smallest elementary facilities in the APS system (i.e., ATS)? How is APS planning to accommodate the Key community at ATS's smaller facility? If APS is planning to expand the ATS facility, why wouldn't APS keep ATS at its current site and use the planned expansion to meet the large demand for ATS's very popular program?
- Why would APS move Key to the Carlin Springs location, adding more bus traffic to an already congested Carlin Springs corridor near Kenmore Middle School and the county's other immersion program?
- Why does APS tout the central location of the ATS site as suitable for the Campbell and Key option programs but fail to mention how movement from a central location to the edge of the county (at McKinley) would impact the ATS community and program? Has APS analyzed the impact of transporting students to the far western border of the county to attend ATS?
- Why is APS proposing to move a county-wide option program to the McKinley facility when APS's prior analysis does not identify the McKinley facility as a potential site for an option school?⁸ Specifically, we understand that the McKinley facility is not designed or equipped to accept the number of buses needed for a county-wide option program.
- APS's Frequently Asked Questions, recently updated on November 11, respond to concerns that APS is "trying to get rid of Immersion."⁹ In response, APS assured the immersion community that APS "is committed to strengthening the dual-language Immersion K-12 pathway."¹⁰ ATS wants APS to express the same commitment to the ATS traditional education model. Will APS commit to valuing and *preserving* the Arlington Traditional program? If so, will APS include the traditional model in the final IPP recommendations for option schools for board approval?
- Staff have suggested that moving ATS to McKinley would allow APS to move 100 students off the ATS waitlist (i.e., adding 100 students to the ATS student population). ATS classes are already full to capacity and hold more students than most other APS elementary classrooms. Can APS explain how ATS will take 100 new students without increasing the student-to-teacher ratio or adding additional kindergarten classes (which will create bubble classes of students)?

Clearly, the current scenarios raise questions that must be answered *before* three to five school communities are uprooted and moved across the county, impacting and limiting equitable access to option school programs (in direct contradiction to a stated goal of the IPP). No less important are the negative impacts to the excellent neighborhood schools that will be asked to absorb students displaced by these option school proposals. They deserve to see the relevant data for boundary lines impacted by this process. For these reasons, we agree with other

⁸ See School Board Work Session Elementary School Planning Initiative Phase 1 – Review of Initial Analysis, Apr. 12, 2018, at <https://www.apsva.us/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/ES-Location-Analysis-SBWS-April-12-Update-2.pdf>.

⁹ See FAQs - Elementary School Planning for 2021 Boundary, Question 21, at <https://www.apsva.us/engage/planning-for-2020-elementary-school-boundary-process/faqs-elementary-school-planning-for-2021-boundary/>.

¹⁰ *Id.*

affected school communities that APS should combine the decision on option school site movement with the boundary adjustment decisions slated for 2020.

We look forward to your response to the questions and concerns raised in this letter. And we remain committed to working with the School Board and staff on a holistic boundary process that responds to community concerns and preserves the successful traditional option program at ATS.

Respectfully,



Kenny Kraft
ATS PTA President

cc: Via Electronic Mail Only
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