



February 21, 2022

Dear Dr. Duran and Members of the School Board:

I am writing to follow-up on my comments during the February 17, 2022 School Board meeting on behalf of Arlington Parents for Education regarding the APS 2022-2023 budget. As noted, APS should use the upcoming budget cycle to reflect that student education is the number one priority for APS. The factors that will most impact the quality of student education that additional financial resources can address are (i) great teachers, (ii) in smaller classes, (iii) with additional instructional time.

**Recruiting and Retaining Teachers.** APS needs to focus on retaining its great teachers, and recruiting additional high-quality teachers. The war for teacher talent appears particularly intense in the Northern Virginia area. APS reports that teacher turnover is at an all-time high of 11%, and that 7% of our teaching positions are vacant. Teacher pay is one of the most important factors for recruiting and retaining great teachers (though the teacher survey last fall also reflected that “management, administration, leadership, culture and work environment” were also important factors). APS announced in December a revised pay scale that would increase teacher pay by 7.4 percent. The stated goal at the time was for APS to be among the top 2 or 3 districts (among the 8 benchmarked districts) in terms of teacher pay at all years and steps. We support this goal.

Yet since APS’ presentation in December, surrounding districts have announced pay increases of their own.

- Fairfax is increasing pay by 4% plus step increases;
- Loudoun is increasing pay 5%’
- Alexandria is increasing teacher pay 10.5% over two years, with 5.1% coming this year;
- Prince William is increasing pay 7% (including a 4% COLA and a step increase);
- Falls Church is increasing salaries 2%; and
- Montgomery County is increasing pay 1.5%.

Applying those pay increases to the benchmarks reflected in the December compensation presentation, APS’ compensation would remain at fourth or fifth (among the eight districts) even with the planned increase.

For APS to achieve its goal of placing among the top three for all years and all steps would require at least an additional 2% pay increase (in addition to the proposed revised pay scale announced in December). And if APS wants its compensation to be competitive with Fairfax (which we believe is important given the volume of teachers that Fairfax employs), APS may need to increase pay by 3% or more beyond the amount associated with the revised pay scale. We estimate that adding 2-3% to the existing pay proposal for teachers would increase the

budget by approximately \$6-9 million (accounting for salary and benefits). This incremental investment is necessary for APS to achieve its goal of attracting and retaining the best teachers in the area. For APS to invest \$21 million for additional teacher compensation (as planned in the existing proposal), while still remaining middle of the pack or in the bottom half of our local peers in teacher compensation, would be a significant missed opportunity.

**Reduced Class Sizes.** As set forth in our white paper on class sizes (available [here](#)), Arlington Parents for Education believes APS must focus on reducing its class sizes. APS' class sizes at the elementary level are the highest among the WABE benchmarked school districts. At the middle school level, the average class sizes for SOL classes have increased substantially. In addition, the number of middle and high school classes with 27 or more students has increased exponentially over the past two years. Arlington Parents for Education has asked that APS undertake a two-year process to reduce elementary class sizes by an average of at least 2-3 students per grade, which will likely require a reduction in the planning factors by up to 5 to 6 students. As a first step, we ask that APS reduce the elementary class size planning factors by 3 students in this year's budget. For secondary, we ask that APS reverse the planning factor increase of one student per class that was made in the budget two years ago, and supplement class offerings in those subjects where class sizes exceed 27 students. As reflected in our white paper, we estimate those class size reductions would cost between \$6 and \$7 million.

**Increased Instructional Time.** The results of last year's SOL [scores](#) leave little doubt about the magnitude of learning loss suffered as a result of the pandemic. The beginning of the year DiBels test scores and the math inventory performance from fall and winter confirm the extent of that learning loss, and also suggest that APS' "accelerated learning" program has not to date materially mitigated that impact. As we [noted](#) last September, recovery from such learning loss requires an investment in additional instructional time, and many superintendents across the country used their ESSER funds for high-intensity tutoring and additional instructional time. As just one example, Prince George's County [implemented](#) after school small group tutoring programs in elementary reading and English language arts, for elementary and middle school students struggling in math, for middle school students in reading and writing, and for high school students in English language arts, math and social studies. Fairfax's ESSER [plan](#) also devoted \$55 million (about 1.6% of its \$3.4 billion operating fund) to "Academic Intervention," which allocated money to schools for tutoring, both in-house and external. In APS' most recent state ESSER application, APS asked for what it needed to address learning loss, and that amount was \$15 million (though APS was only awarded \$2 million). That application underscores that APS still requires a substantial investment to help APS' students recover from learning loss.

Arlington Parents for Education asks that APS devote at least 1.5% of its budget (\$10.5 million) (similar to what Fairfax invested) to provide additional in-person instructional time, preferably in the form of tutoring, which has been shown to have the greatest impact on student learning. We ask that APS provide extended day and before- or after-school instructional options, and lengthen the school calendar so that APS has over 180 days of school.

APS should also increase both the size and duration of its proposed summer school program. As we noted in our recent white paper, APS' peer districts responded to the pandemic by increasing the number of students in their summer school program, while APS shrunk the size of its program. Further, APS' summer school program is only 4 to 5 weeks long, and provides only half days of instruction, which is one to two weeks shorter than what is recommended by the US Department of Education, and falls short of the full day instruction that best practices recommend. We ask that APS revisit the design of its summer school program to address those shortcomings.

**Where Will the Funding Come From?** We recognize that this increased focus on our students' educational performance will require a shift in resources. But as the district with the highest cost per student within the Washington Area Boards of Education (WABE) benchmarks, we believe APS has the resources to fund those priorities. In particular, APS should shift its resources away from non-student facing administrative positions, use some of its close out reserve funds, devote some of the savings it will generate from lower enrollment, and partner with the County on a two- to three-year recovery plan with additional funding beyond the general revenue sharing.

**Non-Student-Facing Spending.** As noted in our recent white paper analyzing the WABE benchmarks, APS has the second-highest percentage of non-school-based positions of the benchmarked school systems. Bringing those positions more in line with our peers would alone pay for half, and potentially all, of the cost of reducing class sizes. Further, the WABE benchmarks suggest that while APS pays its teachers on the low-end of average, APS' overall compensation per employee exceeds our peers. This suggests that either APS' mix of staff, or its compensation for non-instructional staff, should be re-evaluated. In addition, APS' debt service far exceeds our peer school systems, suggesting that APS should carefully consider whether additional investment in projects such as the Career Center (which threatens to add \$7 to \$8.5 million to APS' annual debt service) are worth the tradeoff in terms of providing students with additional instructional time with great teachers.

**Close Out Reserves.** As a result of savings from school closures, there was \$62 million in unspent funds – an unprecedented level of close out funds – from fiscal year 2021. Although APS' close-out plan allocated \$15 million of that amount to certain FY 2022 expenditures, APS set away reserves of \$16.8 million as an addition to the compensation reserve, and \$28 million as an addition to the future budget year reserves. While rebuilding our reserves for future rainy days is certainly a worthy goal, Arlington Parents for Education believes that APS (and its students) have just endured a tsunami, and that some of those funds should be used this next year for the critical rebuilding effort. Surely the students who suffered the most from the school closures should be those who benefit the most from the budget savings those closures generated.

**Savings from Reduced Enrollment.** APS' 2021-22 budget was premised on an enrollment estimate of 29,108. Actual enrollment for the year was 26,911, and the 2022 projected enrollment is 27,586. In other words, from the FY 2022 budget to the FY 2023 budget, the enrollment on which the budget is premised will decrease by over 1500 students. Based on the



savings estimate in the FY 2022 Budget resulting from an enrollment reduction of 525 students, we estimate that an enrollment reduction of approximately 1500 would translate into savings of approximately \$9 million.

***Partnership with the County.*** APS should also partner with the County on a two-to-three year recovery plan, which would provide for dedicated additional funding beyond the County’s typical revenue sharing. Those amounts should be dedicated to student learning loss recovery efforts. The allocation of those resources should be the subject of stakeholder engagement, and the spending of those resources should be a subject of dedicated School Board monitoring.

As reflected above, we believe that focusing the APS budget on student instruction requires a significant shift in APS’ resources, and an investment over prior budgets. Some of those investments will (hopefully) be short term investments to help our students recover from a once-in-a-century pandemic. Other investments, we propose, should become part of the fabric of APS in focusing its resources on those factors that will most impact our student’s education – quality teachers, with smaller classes, and more instructional time.

We appreciate your consideration of our request.

Respectfully,

Reg Goeke  
On behalf of Arlington Parents for Education

cc: Budget Advisory Committee