

TO: Arlington School Board

FROM: Early Childhood Advisory Committee

DATE: November 3, 2021

SUBJECT: Fall 2021 Report and Recommendations

COMMITTEE CHAIR: Meredith Jaeckel

COMMITTEE MEMBERS: Lynn Cannon, Gail Gerry, Hassan Riggs, Maggie Slye, and Miranda Turner

STAFF LIAISONS: Elaine Perkins and Cameron Childs

The Early Childhood Advisory Committee requests that Arlington Public Schools reassess several [planning factors](#) that impact early childhood education. Specifically, we recommend the following changes:

- **Reverse the class size increases and return to 2018-2019 class sizes in kindergarten through second grade.**
- **Fully fund 2 full-time salaried Early Childhood Special Education classroom assistants for each pre-k special education classroom.**
- **Adjust the planning factor for reading staff (reading specialists and literacy coaches) and include pre-k students in the calculation.**

Reverse Class Size Increases:

In 2018-2019, the last full school year prior to the pandemic, APS class size ceilings were 24 students for grades K-1, 26 for grades 2-3, and 28 for grades 4-5. This year, ceilings are 26 students for grades K-1, 28 for grades 2-3, and 30 for grades 4-5. These increases were approved by the School Board in connection with a budget situation that many expected to be difficult; the class size increases were calculated to result in a reduction of 20.8 FTEs across elementary grades and \$1,786,475.

However, County budget closeout analysis reflects that APS has [\\$62.1 million](#) in carryover funds, including \$58.7 million in unspent money from last year. Unexpectedly low enrollment figures for the current year (approximately 2200 students fewer than projected) means that APS may face the same pattern this year, spending less than budgeted because it has fewer students than anticipated.

These increased class sizes could not have come at a worse time. APS students across all grades- and especially early childhood students-- have seen significant learning losses over the past year and a half. [APS presented data](#) on the overall scope of the problem, showing that math and reading scores are down countywide. The drops are even more significant for younger learners.

Moreover, young children's social and emotional growth was severely affected during the pandemic. All families were impacted by the pandemic and changes in education but a recent [study at the University of Michigan](#), concluded that children from families with low incomes, children of color, and dual language learners (DLLs) bore more of the brunt of the crisis than their peers. Not surprisingly, teachers in APS report that they are overwhelmed with trying to support the social and emotional needs of

students, many of whom have delayed skills due to the pandemic, all while trying to focus on academic recovery. In sum, students are demonstrating greater social, emotional and academic needs while at the same time, more children have been added to the classrooms. This is a recipe for unmet needs among our students and burnout among our teachers.

Accordingly, we recommend that the School Board immediately reverse the class size increases of prior years and return to 2018-2019 levels. APS enrollment and budget environment allow for these reductions, and smaller class sizes will improve outcomes for both our students and teachers.

This recommendation aligns with multiple APS strategic goals, including providing an exemplary education that is academically challenging and meets students' social and emotional needs and eliminating opportunity gaps by providing access to resources and learning opportunities according to each student's unique needs. In addition, it supports the goal of retaining high quality employees.

Adjust Planning Factor for Early Childhood Special Education Programs:

The Early Childhood Advisory Committee commends the Early Childhood Special Education Programs for offering a robust spectrum of inclusion opportunities at the preschool level. Consistent with [APS' 5 Year Student Support Action Plan](#), Early Childhood is committed to meeting its students' academic and social/emotional needs in the least restrictive environment possible. However, appropriate staffing is necessary in order to deliver high-quality inclusive programs.

Since returning to full-time in-person instruction, student needs in all developmental areas, especially communication and social-emotional regulation and behavior, have increased and requests for additional instructional assistant support have increased. Further, the Child Find team is finding an increased number of pre-k students with significant special needs that were exacerbated by the pandemic.

Currently, Early Childhood Special Education (ECSE) programs are allotted 1-1.5 special education instructional assistants in the classroom. Over the past two years, the Office of Special Education (OSE) has received requests from almost all of our schools with special education Pre-K classes for additional staff to have 2 full-time assistants in the ECSE classes.

In most cases, OSE has been able to use contingency funds to support hourly staff. However, it is very difficult to attract highly qualified staff for hourly positions.

The APS budget environment allows a chance to make funding permanent for these positions. Moreover, fees collected from the enrolled students without disabilities in the Community Peer Pre-K Program could substantially offset the budget implications of this recommendation.

This recommendation aligns with APS strategic goals of student success and supports APS's efforts to provide high-quality inclusive programming. In addition, it supports the goal of attracting and retaining high quality employees.

Reduce Planning Factor for Reading Specialist/Reading Coaches:

The Early Childhood Advisory (ECAC) committee wholeheartedly supports the English Language Arts Department's recent shift away from balanced literacy in favor of structured literacy, which will align APS's literacy instruction with the science of reading. ECAC recognizes the considerable challenge of

implementing a new method of reading instruction and supported the English Language Arts Advisory Committee's March 2021 recommendation that APS should provide significant professional learning in structured literacy.

Furthermore, we know that our youngest students, particularly students in Grades Pre-K through 3, received most of their foundational reading instruction during the pandemic and therefore likely have experienced instructional gaps and would benefit from additional reading support.

We know that high quality instructional materials are necessary - but not sufficient - to ensuring that all students receive effective literacy instruction rooted in the science of reading. APS must provide on-going, job-embedded professional learning so that our teachers have the mindsets, knowledge, and skills to effectively implement structured literacy. In other words, it is critical to our long-term efforts to close opportunities gaps that APS consistently build teacher-capacity as highly knowledgeable and effective literacy teachers.

In addition to professional learning opportunities, APS can and should support teachers and students by funding literacy coaches with expertise in structured literacy to be based in elementary schools. The role of these literacy coaches would be to instruct students, alongside classroom teachers and reading specialists, thereby providing real time models of structured literacy to teachers. In addition, these coaches could be a resource to classroom teachers as they undertake the enormous task of learning how to interpret student reading assessments and create instructional roadmaps under structured literacy. In addition, these specialists and coaches could support PK-5 CLTs (Collaborative Learning Teams) and ATSS (Arlington Tiered System of Support) teams with tiered and targeted literacy support and intervention for our young learners.

The 2022 Adopted Budget Planning Factors allocates 1.0 reading staff teacher for 1-499 elementary students. Given the district's prioritization of literacy, we recommend changing the planning factor to 1.0 reading staff teacher for 1-350 (combined elementary and pre-K) students, which is in line with the planning factor for PE, music and art teachers. Recognizing the critical need in particular for at-risk students, especially in light of the heightened impact of the pandemic on this segment of APS students, we recommend maintaining the current additional .5 reading skills teacher for schools that have free and reduced lunch percentage greater than 60%.

APS has invested time and money to shift to a scientifically proven method of reading instruction. Without sufficient support around the transition, APS risks dilution of the curriculum at a time when students are grappling with deficits from the past 18 months and teachers need to use classroom time as efficiently as possible.

This recommendation aligns with multiple APS strategic goals, most importantly student success. Effective implementation of the new structured literacy curriculum is likely to increase achievement for all reporting groups on district and state reading assessments and will likely contribute to progress relating to eliminating the opportunity gap. Providing additional support and professional instruction for teachers supports the goal of attracting and retaining high-quality employees.