

MEMORANDUM

TO: Arlington School Board

FROM: Arlington Special Education Advisory Committee

DATE: October 8, 2024

SUBJECT: Need for Special Education Staff Pay Incentives

Later this month, the School Board will consider the FY2026 Budget Direction. We respectfully request that you consider amending prior direction regarding competitive salaries to better prioritize hiring for our hardest to fill Special Education positions - including teachers in our county-wide programs, vision and hearing staff, and related service providers. We likewise recommend that the Board direct the Superintendent immediately look into whether closeout for SY2024 or other funds could be used for more immediate incentives to fill currently available positions. Finally, we provide several ideas to address recruiting and retention efforts.

APS is not remaining competitive with neighboring districts for these positions and many openings remain unfilled. APS has a specific responsibility under federal law to provide a Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) to students with disabilities. Failing to recruit sufficient qualified staff undermines students with disabilities and puts APS at risk of potential non-compliance with federal and local regulations.

The inability to hire enough special education staff is a perennial issue and is getting worse. According to staff, APS had about 35 openings for Special Education teachers at the end of school year 2023.. In August of 2023, APS was [98% staffed](#), but the majority of unfilled positions were for Special Education and English Learners staff openings. APS ended the 2024 School Year with about 45 special education teaching positions (more than the prior year) and nearly half of those positions remain unfilled by the start of the 2025 school year, including hard to fill positions for the Multi-Intervention Program for Students with Autism (MIPA) and the Functional Life Skills Program. As of October 7th, APS has not yet filled 22 teaching positions and 9 assistant positions for the current school year.

While Special Education staffing remains a challenge nationwide, APS is repeatedly losing qualified candidates to neighboring districts. ASEAC has learned that APS is able to offer an additional two steps which translates into a salary increase of about \$4000 and can offer salary matches to candidates. However, matches are rarely offered and we lost candidates to DCPS this summer paying \$12,000 more and to Fairfax which offered bonuses of \$7000 *in addition* to being paid on an "[extended contract](#)" for an additional 30 minutes per day.

ASEAC members have addressed this issue of staffing in past recommendations (e.g. [June 2023 recommendations](#)). To address this ongoing issue, ASEAC recommends the following strategies:

1. Prior School Board Budget Direction should be updated to prioritize hiring of Special education staff (new text in italics): “Enhances our commitment to recruit, hire, retain and invest in high-quality and diverse workforce by funding competitive salary scales and benefits and *allowing for hiring incentives for hard-to-recruit classifications like special educators.*”
2. APS should advertise its current incentives. For example, APS may provide up to two steps and/or match offers from other districts for certain positions, but this is not consistently advertised or offered.
3. APS should assess if there have been meaningful changes since the [2021 compensation study](#) with regard to salaries and benefits of Special Education teachers and assistants benefits in Arlington and nearby counties. Anecdotally, incentives appear to be increasing for these roles.
4. APS should consider its current recruitment efforts. For example, APS often pays to attend job fairs, but it’s unclear that APS hires many special education candidates through these efforts. How many job fairs does APS attend? Does APS participate in Special Education job fairs? What is the cost of attending (booth rental, travel, etc.)? How many special education hires come from attendance at any job fairs?
5. APS should strengthen or form partnerships with regional higher education institutions, particularly those institutions with special education expertise, to increase the pipeline of student teachers. We recommend that APS use all tools available to ensure it is retaining promising student teachers in permanent positions.
6. APS should consider a work group to develop a comprehensive plan to recruit and retain staff. On retention, we understand that APS does not have a cohesive retention strategy that considers the monetary and non-monetary factors for departure. A forthcoming [audit](#) will look more closely at some of these issues, including the use of exit interviews and other factors impacting staff satisfaction.

Finally, we appreciate that APS continues to prioritize planning factor reform, which was previously included in [FY2024 Budget Direction](#) and resulted in [recommendations](#) last spring. If those recommendations were fully implemented, APS would need to hire more than 130 new Special Education teachers and assistants, but yet we are struggling to fill even 22 teaching positions and 9 assistant positions. While the important work on planning factor reform continues, it is imperative that APS address current unfilled positions and ensure APS is competitive for the 2026 school year.

