

Early Childhood ACLT Committee
February 11, 2024

Membership

Kate McKenney, Chair
Maggie Slye, Vice Chair
Members: Catherine Cheney, Gail Burrell Gerry, Eric Gobrecht, Amy Graham, Ellen Vicens

Staff Liaisons

Cameron Childs, Early Childhood Specialist
Elaine Perkins, Early Childhood Coordinator

Recommendation: Understand barriers to Virginia Preschool Initiative enrollment, particularly in Title 1 schools, to meet community needs and increase participation, reducing early achievement gaps.

Alignment to Strategic Plan

Priority: Student Academic Growth and Success

Performance Objective: Growth in Reading & Math

Strategies: Systematically provide resources and support to parents to help foster their elementary child's literacy and numeracy development, supporting parents' understanding of additional supports that are available at their child's school. *Key Performance Indicators: NWEA MAP Growth Reading and Math*

Summary: As early childhood is the most developmentally critical period for learning and growth, many of the disparities seen in K-12 student achievement are reflective of access to high-quality early childhood experiences. [APS 2024-25 student performance data](#) suggests this link between pre-K enrollment and student achievement is a contributing factor to student outcomes in our district. The Virginia Preschool Initiative (VPI) offers free pre-K for Arlington's lowest-income families, but enrollment has declined since the pandemic and has yet to rebound. Further investigation is needed to identify barriers to access and determine how APS can increase enrollment for Arlington's most vulnerable children, a critical step in closing K-12 achievement gaps. To support this effort, we propose:

1. **Speak directly with families**
 - Conduct conversations (e.g., empathy interviews) with parents, especially those whose children qualified for VPI but did not enroll.
 - Focus on schools with the lowest pre-K participation rates to ensure targeted data collection.
 - Ask families to identify barriers to VPI enrollment and attendance.
2. **Involve trusted members of the school community**
 - Ensure trusted members of the school community, such as bilingual coordinators and/or school social workers, conduct conversations to ensure responses are accurate and families retain their privacy.
3. **Leverage the existing kindergarten enrollment process**
 - With kindergarten enrollment starting this month, it is an ideal time to implement these data collection efforts.

This information will help identify what specific actions, if any, APS can take to increase APS pre-K participation or inform efforts in the community to increase pre-K access for more Arlington families. Further recommendations from this committee may follow based on the findings.

Budgetary Implications

We anticipate this recommendation will be **budget-neutral**, as this proposal involves allocating existing resources at the school level to collect data and central office staff to compile and share the data. However, this process will take some staff members' time and that time needs to be allocated by their supervisors.

Committee vote: 7 in favor, 0 opposed **Date:** 2/2/25

Detail

Inequities in access to and quality of early childhood education contribute to early achievement gaps which are evident in children before kindergarten. The achievement gaps children enter APS with have long-term developmental and academic consequences—they are slow to narrow and often never fully close.

Unfortunately, children from low-income families, racially diverse communities, and non-English-speaking households typically face the greatest barrier to accessing high-quality early learning programs (*Exploring the Opportunity Gap for Young Children*, 2023). [APS data on 2024-2025 kindergarteners highlights the impact early learning has on our school district.](#)

Varied Pre-K Experience for APS Kindergarteners APS invests in four high-quality early childhood programs- Virginia Preschool Initiative (VPI), Primary Montessori, Community Peer Program (CPP), and our Early Childhood Special Education Programs. However with the county's mixed-delivery early learning landscape, APS programs are only a portion of local pre-K offerings. Whether in an APS or community program, [pre-K experience data for 2024-25 APS Kindergarteners](#) (Appendix A) show 12.8% of students did not have a pre-K experience. When data is [disaggregated by race](#), it is clear groups are not accessing early learning equitably in Arlington. For instance, 24% of Hispanic kindergarteners enter APS without pre-K experience compared to 6.3% White students.

Pre-K experience statistics also vary by elementary school and geographic location within the county. For example, at Carlin Springs (South Arlington), nearly 34% of kindergarteners had no pre-K experience, while all children at Jamestown (North Arlington) had early learning experiences. Of note, six of the eight Title I elementary schools have over 18% of kindergarten students with no-PreK.

In 2023, this committee requested a survey to understand why APS children did not attend pre-K (including APS, private, public, in-home, DOD, or center-based programs). The survey identified three primary explanations: minimizing COVID-19 exposure (33%), family preference (30%), and cost (26%). In regards to cost, it is important to note that while APS does account for family income when collecting payment for early childhood programming (some Montessori and CPP program students), the current sliding scale fee structure is far from the Department of Health and Human Services recommendation of 7% of income as the threshold for affordable child care. For instance, families making \$77,000 pay \$13,313 or 17.3% of their income. This is a serious concern for access and affordability.

For the 2024-25 school year, APS changes to the registration process have been implemented, aiming to help families determine eligibility earlier, complete paperwork, and enroll their children more efficiently. These adjustments were made in response to many children missing the beginning of the school year due to incomplete paperwork. If this change will help boost enrollment is yet to be determined.

APS Kindergarten Performance According to Pre-K Experience [APS 2024-25 student performance data](#) suggests pre-K enrollment is positively aligned with student achievement. Across

assessments, students without pre-K performed at lower levels in math and literacy compared to their peers with pre-K experience. The NWEA Map Growth Math assessment was administered to 1st to 3rd grade students this year. Among 2024-25 APS 1st graders, 29.1% of students without pre-K scored at the lowest level in math, compared to just 10.3% of those with pre-K. Similarly, in the NWEA Map Growth Reading literacy assessment administered to 3rd grade students, 26.8% of students without pre-K demonstrated low proficiency, compared to 13.8% of their peers with pre-K. Furthermore, the VALLS literacy assessment was administered to APS 2024-25 kindergarten through 2nd grade students. For kindergarteners, the gap between scores for pre-K and no pre-K students is stark: 60.2% of students with no pre-K are at high risk compared to 14.8% for students with pre-K experience. For second graders, the gap narrows but is still noteworthy: 34.6% of students with no pre-K experience are at high risk compared to 16.6% of kids with pre-K. These trends align with national data, showing that the achievement gap seen at kindergarten enrollment narrows slightly, but it persists through 3rd grade and beyond, with lasting implications for academic success.

Low Enrollment in VPI At the end of the 2023-24 school year, APS closed five Virginia Preschool Initiative (VPI) classrooms at Arlington Traditional School, Fleet, Carlin Springs, Campbell, and Barcroft due to low enrollment. While capacity remained available (larger class sizes could have accommodated more children), enrollment was low despite clear data showing a significant need for early childhood education in Arlington, particularly in Title I schools.

For the 2024-25 school year, the Commonwealth of Virginia has allocated funding for up to 411 VPI seats; however, as of January, [only 384 seats have been filled](#). VPI enrollment trends have shown a downward trajectory since 2020. Prior to the pandemic, APS filled approximately 515 VPI seats annually. It is unclear what barriers are resulting in this change in enrollment.

VPI Enrollment in APS (2019-2024)

June 2019	513
June 2020	517
June 2021	388
June 2022	470
June 2023	497
June 2024	441

Partnership in the Early Learning and Care Ecosystem Families rely on many types of early learning programs (Head Start, private, in-home, DOD, and center-based programs) in Arlington administered and regulated by several local, regional and state entities. Not unique to Arlington, the landscape is complex and efforts are siloed and inefficient. Increasing access to early learning for future APS students will depend on partnership between county agencies, local businesses, health care providers, and others in our community who support the families of young children.

References

National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, Division of Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education, Board on Children, Youth, and Families, & Committee on Exploring the Opportunity Gap for Young Children from Birth to Age Eight. (2023). *Exploring the opportunity gap for young children from birth to age*

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<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK596379/>

Staff Response

Appendices

Appendix A: 2024-2025 Kindergarten Student PreK Experience Data (Source: APS Data Coordinator)

Schools	PreK Experience						Total Children	Percentage w/o Pre-K
	Head Start	Public	Private / Daycare	DOD	Family Home Daycare	No Pre-K		
Abingdon Elementary School	2	43	34			30	109	27.5
Alice West Fleet Elementary School		85	3	8		6	102	5.9
Arlington Science Focus Elementary	1	23	71			13	108	12.0
Arlington Traditional Elementary		55	13			28	96	29.2
Ashlawn Elementary School	2	19	60			8	89	9.0
Barcroft Elementary School		41	16			13	70	18.6
Barrett Elementary School		53	12			3	68	4.4
Campbell Elementary School	1	30	32			5	68	7.4
Cardinal Elementary School		4	72	1		3	80	3.8
Carlin Springs Elementary School		49	2			26	77	33.8
Claremont Elementary School	4	44	40	2		6	96	6.3
Discovery Elementary School		19	60			1	80	1.3
Dr. Charles R. Drew Elementary School		43	8			13	64	20.3
Escuela Key Elementary School	1	36	39		1	19	96	19.8
Glebe Elementary School	1	19	65	1		8	94	8.5
Hoffman-Boston Elementary School	3	55	20			16	94	17.0
Innovation Elementary School	3	30	26			9	68	13.2
Jamestown Elementary School		15	63				78	0.0
Long Branch Elementary School	2	22	28			9	61	14.8
Montessori Public School of Arlington		64	7			1	72	1.4
Nottingham Elementary School	1	5	35			3	44	6.8
Oakridge Elementary School	4	41	29	3	2	21	100	21.0
Randolph Elementary School	2	34	18			12	66	18.2
Taylor Elementary School		18	47	1		3	69	4.3
Tuckahoe Elementary School		23	40		1	3	67	4.5
Total	27	870	840	16	4	259	2016	12.8

