

October 28, 2025

Dear Advisory Committee Working Group,

We write to you as co-chairs of the Advanced Academic and Talent Development Advisory Committee (AATDAC) to endorse “option 2” from the ACTL working group survey: keeping some standing committees.

In its current form, we believe the ACTL Working Group proposal will lead to lesser outcomes for APS students, teachers, and the Arlington community and it will unnecessarily erode public confidence in both APS and the School board.

At present, the 13 advisory committees under ACTL provide value to APS, its students, and to the school board in several important ways. First, by focusing on specific areas, advisory committees serve as ‘early warning’ for issues confronting APS students, often working to identify relatively small fixes before emerging challenges become larger problems. Second, by attracting and sustaining members interested in a specific issue, advisory committees develop expertise in the topic area and in how APS operates. Third, by attracting numerous volunteer community members (roughly 177 based on available data)—including those who are not parents of current APS students—the advisory committee structure facilitates participation and buy-in from the APS community. This represents significantly more participation than the proposed ACTL-replacement committee.

Under the proposed structure, each school would be represented on the ACTL-successor committee by one representative from each school. Ad-hoc subcommittees would be drawn from that committee’s membership to focus on a single issue as identified by the school board. Those representatives, chosen from existing members, would be expected to represent the full population of their school and to participate in additional ad-hoc committee meetings, though likely without significant existing background on the committee topic. This is a large commitment in terms of time, mental, and organizational capacity to ask of volunteers.

AATDAC understands, based on conversations with other advisory committee chairs, that the working group’s proposal seeks to achieve several goals: increase responsiveness to school board priorities; enhance inclusion in the advisory committees; and, ensure recommendations aligned with the APS strategic plan.

AATDAC is open to seeking to incorporate specific school board priorities into the work and recommendations of the committee. To do so, it would be helpful to hear from the School Board what its priorities are. In many cases we can accommodate and support those goals. In other cases, we believe it is our responsibility to advocate for advanced learners (30% of APS students, based on APS policy) when they are potentially omitted from strategic priorities.

AATDAC, like all other subcommittees we have spoken with, supports the goal of more inclusive and representative membership in our committee. Like many other committees, we have found it challenging to recruit from all elements of the APS community—though we have seen some progress in recent years. Attending regular meetings is difficult for parents of young children, and more so for single parents, and parents whose jobs are not 9-5.

AATDAC also supports identifying recommendations aligned with the APS strategic plan. This committee's recommendations have been aligned with the APS strategic plan for several years. We believe there are times, however, when bounding committee recommendations solely to the strategic plan actually limits what APS can achieve. For example, AATDAC applauds APS for adopting the principle championed by AATDAC that each APS student should achieve at least a year of academic growth in each core academic subject each school year—an idea which seems to resonate across APS though it was not specifically in the strategic plan.

AATDAC also has significant concerns with the ACTL Working Group's stakeholder outreach and feedback mechanism. The stakeholder survey appeared to be developed without adequate consideration for neutrality, potentially leading to predetermined outcomes. Specifically, the survey requested stakeholder opinions on the new plan without first providing a comprehensive explanation of the existing plan or its functionality. This omission is critical, as a lack of necessary context creates an immediate barrier to participation, preventing stakeholders—particularly those new to APS or not already familiar with the existing structure—from providing informed feedback. We recommend a critical evaluation of the survey methodology before any claimed results are used to justify policy decisions.

For these reasons, AATDAC advocates for retaining the advisory committees under ACTL, encourages the school board to communicate its priorities and objectives to those subcommittees, and for APS to retain the strong sense of shared effort and benefit that the wide-range of advisory committee volunteers bring to APS.

Sincerely,

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