

MEMORANDUM

TO: Arlington School Board
FROM: Early Childhood Advisory Committee
DATE: October 15, 2014
SUBJECT: Recommending Year Report

Background

The Early Childhood Advisory Committee (ECAC) studies issues related to the instruction of the Arlington Public Schools' youngest students, Pre-Kindergarten through Second grade. ECAC seeks to ensure that every child in APS during these foundational years experiences a high quality instructional setting that not only allows him or her to succeed, but also serves as the basis for future development and love of learning.

Young children between the ages of three and eight think and learn in ways which differ from those of older children and adults based on their stage of development. The foundation laid during these years can profoundly shape what happens in later life; a strong early childhood education program based on research and knowledge of how young children think is therefore crucial for later academic success. Studies prove that children who have rich early learning experiences are better prepared to thrive in kindergarten and beyond. They are therefore more likely to avoid school failure, peer rejection, substance abuse, truancy, incarceration, unemployment, divorce, psychiatric illness, and early death in adolescence and adulthood.¹

Providing Pre-K opportunities is an investment that reaps significant returns not only to the students attending Arlington Public Schools, but our community as a whole. A major study by the Rand Corporation which analyzed economic returns from investing in Pre-K education in California found that every dollar spent resulted in \$2.62 of direct, tangible returns to the community.² Other studies have found returns as high as \$9.00 for every dollar spent.³ It is important to view the cost of maintaining APS Pre-K programs as a critical investment because research has demonstrated the outcomes of Pre-K education are significantly greater than

¹ **Derzon**, J. H. and **Lipsey**, M. W. (1999), Predicting tobacco use to age 18: a synthesis of longitudinal research. *Addiction*, 94: 995–1006. AND

Cohen, M. A., **Piquero**, A. R. and **Jennings**, W. G. (2010), Studying the costs of crime across offender trajectories. *Criminology & Public Policy*, 9: 279

² Karoly, L.A. (2005) *The economics of investing in universal preschool in California*. The Rand Corporation.

³ Meier & Belfield, C.K. (July 2006) *Fiscal Impacts of Universal Pre-K: A Case Study Analysis for Three States*. Queens College, City University of New York.

those realized by any other educational intervention for children at risk. Access to APS Pre-K programs is critical for eliminating race-based, language-based and income-based achievement gaps. For all these reasons, the Early Childhood Advisory Committee strongly encourages increasing access to PreK programs proportional to rise in Kindergarten enrollment.

Our specific recommendations at this time are guided by the Board's request that each committee help identify inconsistencies within APS programs. These recommendations affirm our commitment to developmentally appropriate instructional practices and a rich and rigorous Montessori program.

Recommendation #1: The Office of Early Childhood should create and implement a centralized process for VPI and Montessori Pre-Kindergarten registration.

2011 – 2017 Strategic Plan Alignment: Goal 2- Closing the Achievement Gap, Goal 4- Provide Optimal Learning Environments

Rationale: Streamlining the process by which families are integrated into the school district maximizes the number of students served while minimizing un-filled slots, last minute student transfers, and increases the accuracy of the data collected on students being served. Currently families apply for both the Primary Montessori and VPI Pre-Kindergarten programs by completing and submitting multiple paper applications directly to each of the schools where they are eligible to apply. In School Year 2013-14, APS processed over 2,000 applications for approximately 437 Primary Montessori slots and over 1,500 applications for 544 VPI Pre-Kindergarten slots.

The 2006 county-wide Montessori Steering Committee included in their final report a recommendation to centralize registration for the Primary Montessori programs based on the following advantages: 1) Families would submit one application for any/ all Montessori schools; 2) Information provided to families would increase in consistency; 3) Reduction of inconsistency of process across schools; 4) Ability to have accurate centralized wait list data; and 5) Potential to have language interpretation support at a single point of entry.

The goals of centralized registration are to:

1. Increase communication and transparency of the application process, lottery system, enrollment procedures, and wait list notification for families.
2. Lower barriers of access to families by reducing the number of applications they must complete and submit to schools.
3. Reduce duplication of staff work due to schools processing an application at multiple sites.
4. Access data about the number of families applying, enrolled, and on the wait list efficiently and quickly.

Budgetary Implications: The direct budget cost will depend on the mode of execution. The Early Childhood Office estimates it would need additional personnel to manage the thousands of applications coming in each year. This may be served by internal transferring of school-based staff that currently serve in this role without the hiring of additional staff.

Recommendation #2: APS should contract with an outside firm to conduct a comprehensive, independent evaluation of the Primary Montessori program; concurrent with and in addition to the Early Childhood Program Evaluation.

2011 – 2017 Strategic Plan Alignment: Goal 1- Ensure That Every Student is Challenged and Engaged, Goal 3- Recruit, Retain, and Develop High Quality Staff, Goal 4- Provide Optimal Learning Environments, Goal 5- Meet the Needs of the Whole Child.

Rationale: There is no program evaluation that assesses the quality of the current APS Montessori instructional program. While this committee enthusiastically anticipates the upcoming Early Childhood Program Evaluation, the process is not designed to offer insight into the authenticity of Montessori instruction. CLASS observers are not likely to hold Montessori certification, nor are they charged with assessing Montessori-specific instructional practices in their report. In some cases, the optimal teacher/student interactions according to CLASS are in direct opposition to the Montessori model. The authenticity of the APS Montessori program is placed at an additional risk in light of the fact that there is no member of the Department of Instruction with Montessori certification to assess the program or to provide the necessary:

- Recruitment of Montessori teachers and support of new hires
- Maintenance of standard Montessori best practice procedures
- Guidance to principals on supporting a positive Montessori experience
- Identification and addressing of issues in the Montessori program

The Early Childhood Office has a great record of supporting the APS Montessori community through coordination of professional training, educational opportunities, and information dissemination to Montessori families such as Montessori Information Night in the fall. However, the Office of Early Childhood does not employ a certified Montessori staff member who possess the expertise required to ensure fidelity to this unique pedagogical method. Discussions within our committee have led to concerns about the consistent implementation of the Montessori Best Practices document (written by the Montessori Steering Committee in consultation with two national Montessori experts in 2006) among the 19 Primary classrooms (under the oversight of nine different school administrators). Our committee would like to note that one-third of the the Primary Montessori students pay tuition to participate in the program⁴. As APS's only tuition-charging instructional program, it is important that we offer parents a comparable product to the private Montessori options available⁵. While our committee is only tasked with students in Second Grade and younger, we would suggest that an independent evaluation of Montessori instruction across all grade levels offered is urgently needed.

Budgetary Implications: The direct budget cost is estimated at \$10,000 - \$15,000.⁶

⁴ <http://www.apsva.us/cms/lib2/VA01000586/Centricity/Shared/school%20board%20policies/40-finmgmt/40-1.20.2-ef-fee-schedules-PIP-2014-2015.pdf> to see the sliding scale for tuition fees.

⁵ *Chesterbrook Montessori* costs \$9300 per year for the half-day program, \$12,300 for half-day plus extended care; *Arlington Montessori House* costs \$13,100 for the full day; *Full Circle Montessori* charges approxiamately \$13,000 for the full day program.

⁶ Riga, Ginny. (2014) Proposal Estimate for Arlington County Public Schools. See addendum.

Recommendation #3: The Department of Instruction should develop accountability measures for ensuring compliance with all aspects of the current APS Homework Policy as written.

2011 – 2017 Strategic Plan Alignment: Goal 1- Ensure That Every Student is Challenged and Engaged, Goal 2- Closing the Achievement Gap, Goal 3- Develop High Quality Staff, Goal 4- Provide Optimal Learning Environments, Goal 5- Meet the Needs of the Whole Child.

Rationale: Homework can serve many purposes and have multiple potential benefits, as explained in the current APS policy 20-2.120. The current guidelines for early grades range from 30 minutes to 50 minutes of combined reading and homework. Noted researchers agree that “[f]or younger students, homework should be used to reinforce the basic skills learned in class and foster positive attitudes toward school and better academic behaviors and character traits.”⁷ “For the low-income kids . . . , thoughtful, well-crafted homework, especially in reading, remains an essential gap-closing tool”⁸. Homework also provides an important opportunity for parental engagement in the learning process. We support the current policy because it calls for the differentiation of assignments, an essential element of student success.

According to the most recent APS Community Satisfaction Survey, the majority of APS parents are comfortable with the amount of time their child spends on homework in the younger grades. Unfortunately, one in five students experience serious frustration⁹, which often negatively impacts family interactions. Anecdotal evidence presented to our committee suggested a common experience that when too much of the wrong kind of assignments are the norm in a classroom or even in a school culture, inconsistencies in adherence to the homework policy can lead to a “cumulative effect [which] can be crushing for students”¹⁰. Students can quickly lose interest in school due to boring, repetitive, long or otherwise inappropriate homework assignments. Homework for this age group may not be worth sacrificing needed playtime, family time, and even sleep, which kids are getting less of than they did thirty years ago¹¹.

In light of so many conflicting opinions, it is most important to have thoughtful and consistent adherence to the existing policy, which is now seven-years-old. Many new teachers and administrators have entered the District since its adoption. A renewed emphasis on compliance with the current Policy Implementation Procedures at all levels of the school system should include:

- A process for accountability by which Administrators at all levels demonstrate exactly how they “ensure that their staffs and parents are aware of the APS

⁷ Cooper, Harris (2007) *The Battle Over Homework: Common Ground for Administrators, Teachers and Parents*. Corwin Press, CA. pages 90-92.

⁸ Pondisco, Robert (September 2014) *The Atlantic online*.

<http://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2013/09/poor-students-need-homework/279566/>

⁹ Site Based Survey (2013) Arlington Public Schools. Question: “How do you feel about the amount of time your child spends on homework?”

¹⁰ Rice, Allison (Sept./Oct.) Arlington Magazine. *The Great Homework Debate*.

<http://www.arlingtonmagazine.com/September-October-2013/Homework/>

¹¹ Kohn, Alfie. (The Homework Myth: Why Our Kids Get Too Much of a Bad Thing, 40 (2006).

policy and guidelines on homework at the beginning of the year” beginning with the 2015-2016 school year.

- The full wording of “The APS policy and policy implementation manual should be published in all appropriate system-wide and local school handbooks and brochures” beginning with the 2015-2016 school year. Currently, no guidelines are included in the abbreviated homework statement in the APS Handbook, nor is any link provided to such information. The Elementary Program of Studies document for this school year (not available on web site as of 10/13/14) gives more complete information, but with repeated changes of unknown authority, including additions and omissions to the wording of the actual Policy and Policy Implementation Procedures.
- A process for accountability by which Instructional Supervisors demonstrate exactly how they “communicate to teachers, at least once a year, their expectations concerning homework for their curricular areas including but not limited to, information on type of appropriate homework assignments ...” focusing on suggestions for cross-curricular integration and differentiation be put in place beginning with the next school year.
- The final clause of the homework policy: “The Superintendent periodically will solicit feedback from the Student Advisory Board, the Teachers’ Council on Instruction, and the Advisory Council on Instruction on the Policy Implementation Manual and the implementation of its guidelines in accordance with this policy” should be acted upon to ensure continued relevance and adherence to the policy.
- Policy guideline indicating “total amount of time spent daily on homework over four nights a week” needs clarification. It is commonly inferred from this wording that homework is not expected to be assigned on the weekends prior to high school. This committee encourages the School Board to clarify for parents and teachers if there is in fact an expectation of no homework on weekends in the younger grades.

Budgetary implications: The direct budget cost would be incidental, although it should be noted that the recommendation would require allocation of staff time.

Update of Previous Recommendations

Past Recommendation #1:

The Office of Early Childhood should create a policy or position statement articulating the guiding principles of developmentally appropriate classroom management and outlining best practices.

Budgetary implications: The direct budget cost would be zero, although it should be noted that the recommendation would require allocation of staff time.

Status and Rationale: No policy or guidelines have been issued at this time.

ACI Vote in 2012: For: 19; Against: 0; Abstention: 1

Past Recommendation #2:

The Office of Early Childhood continues to review the CLASS data compiled through annual program evaluations to monitor the socio-emotional needs of students. The Office of Early Childhood should continue to review instructional practices related to social emotional learning, particularly classroom management techniques, in early childhood classrooms across the district, including further disaggregation of the CLASS data collected for program evaluations.

Budgetary implications: The direct budget cost would be zero, although it should be noted that the recommendation would require allocation of staff time.

Status and Rationale: Efforts have been made by the Office of Early Childhood to offer continuing professional development for teachers and their assistants in the area of social emotional learning.

ACI Vote in 2012: For: 19; Against: 0; Abstention: 1

Recommendation #3:

Allocate additional funds to the Office of Early Childhood to expand training in social emotional learning to kindergarten teachers in Title I schools.

Budgetary implications: The cost of substitutes for one full day training would be \$3,599. The cost of a Conscious Discipline trainer for a six-hour session would be \$900; note that a Responsive Classroom trainer would cost more.

Status and Rationale: No additional funding was made available, therefore no training was offered specifically for the targeted audience of Title I Kindergarten teachers; however, the Early Childhood Office offered a two-day training for any interested K-2 teachers across APS during the June 2014 FOM Learning Conference. All participants have been invited to participate in a monthly book study during the 2014-2015 school year to expand their knowledge of socio-emotional learning and supporting these needs in students. Additionally, the EC Office is offering two full days of training to Kindergarten and Montessori classroom assistants.

ACI Vote in 2012: For: 18; Against: 0 ; Abstention: 2

Respectfully submitted by Committee members:

Allison Collins, Bette Flentje, Amy Fry (Chair), Robin Goffen, Karen Hunt, Jennifer Johnson, Kathleen Jones, Laura LoGerfo, Valerie O'Such, Mimi Veeraraghavan, Stacey Whyte

Our APS Staff Liaison is Kate Graham, Early Childhood Coordinator.

Addendum

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Proposal Estimate **Arlington Public Schools** ***Evaluation of Primary Montessori Program (19 classes at 9 schools)***

Upon looking at the list of the 11 components requested for the evaluation, I determined that:

- 3 can be submitted prior to on-site visit (see below)
- 3 will be conducted during 19 classroom observations
- 1 (principal support) could be completed by a brief survey/ interview of teacher(s) and principal at site visit
- 3 (staff development needs for principal, teachers and assistants) would be recommendations in summary report
- 1 (new recordkeeping system) I would need to know what software is used and assess teachers' progress in using new system

Items that can be sent to me before the on-site visit for my review:

- 1) Daily schedule
- 2) Roster for each class with number of 3K, 4K and 5K's.
- 3) Teacher training/certification

On-site work would mainly be observing in each classroom for about 45min. during uninterrupted work time. Completing the class observation form takes about 20 minutes per class (I do some of it while observing). I am going to assume that primary classes have a work period in the afternoon as well as morning, so that it would be possible to visit two – three schools (or about three to four classrooms) per day. Using the higher estimate – it would take between four-five days to observe the 19 classes.

For the above type of on-site work, the fee is \$800 per day. The pre-visit analysis of items submitted and the detailed summary report/action plan (usually between 6-10 pages) would cost \$800. Therefore, to include the eleven components requested, the cost of the evaluation is in the range of \$4000 - \$4800. Added to this would be travel and housing expenses.

This cost can be somewhat decreased by eliminating or paring down the thoroughness of the evaluation. However, I think the components you requested match up well to the Best Practices document developed by the Montessori program.

Note: In my current role (second year) as Montessori consultant for a five-year Montessori research project being conducted at The Dick Riley Institute at Furman University, I have spent a great deal of time developing indicators in five areas of Montessori classroom/program authenticity. Your requested evaluation components and Best Practices document are “on target” for the critical essentials of high quality Montessori!

Respectfully Submitted by Ginny Riga, July 28, 2014

Proposal Estimate - ADDENDUM
Arlington Public Schools
Evaluation of Primary Montessori Program (19 classes at 9 schools)

Elements requested: 1) Parent knowledge of Montessori and engagement in the program
2) District wide structure of program

- 1) A. A parent survey and/or focus groups would provide input on parents’ self- assessment of knowledge of Montessori guiding principles, movement of the children through the three-year cycle in the Primary level and the importance of the 5k year.
B. From information gathered above, as well as informal input from Montessori teachers and principals, goals and action items on parent education and engagement would be included in the summary report of the evaluation
- 2) A. Efficacy of program structure (location of classrooms) would be evaluated by discussions with administrators and other stakeholders, with regard to key components of:
 - student learning
 - student turnover
 - completion of 5k year in Montessori
 - teacher placement/turnover
 - principals’ expertise in Montessori
 - transportation
 - budget
B. Relocation of classrooms within the past 3-5 years can be examined for any effects on student continuity with peers during these transitions, as well any of the areas listed in 2A above.

Data collection for some of the above elements can be completed before a site visit as follows:

- The evaluator would provide the parent survey, analyze data and share results with the district. The survey distribution and collection of results can be conducted electronically, by the schools or the district's technology department.
- Assuming that historical data can be sent to evaluator on student continuity at each school, student turnover and completion of 5K year, this data can be analyzed before site visit.
- Evaluator can develop questions and format for Parent focus groups, if these are to be conducted. District personnel can conduct and record data from the sessions.

Note: The inclusion of the above two elements would be added to the 11 elements requested for the original proposal estimate (dated July 28, 2014). Each element has its own value in the evaluation and collectively would provide an analysis of the quality/authenticity of the Arlington Montessori Program as a whole and at each site.

Additional Cost:

Estimate of additional number of days for work described in this addendum is 2-3 days, at \$800 per day whether completed prior to the visit or on-site (or combination of both). This would add between \$1600 - \$2400 to the original proposal.

Respectfully submitted by Ginny Riga, Ed.D., August 18, 2014