Reflections from Two Years of Watching Arlington School Board Meetings

The past two years have brought intensified focus on the decisions being made (or not made) by the Arlington School Board. At Arlington Parents for Education, we have been summarizing school board meetings and maintaining data on how the school board spends its time. We have also watched most school board work sessions as well (though they are not incorporated in our data). It is easy to "Monday-morning quarterback" the performance of others, and we recognize that our Board members are citizens who hope to improve the way our school system operates. In the hopes of driving similar improvement, we offer the following observations and thoughts.

I.   How Has Our School Board Used Its Board Meetings?

Over this past year, we have watched over 2,400 minutes of School Board meetings (approximately 40 hours). For each meeting, we have summed the minutes spent on various topics, including announcements and recognitions, facilities issues, issues affecting school operations, policy issues, topics related to academics and curriculum, the VLP program, equity issues, budget issues, Covid-related issues and learning loss. The proportion of time spent on those items over the past year are reflected below.

How Our School Board Used Its Meeting Time

We monitored 2400 minutes of school board meetings during the 21-22 SY

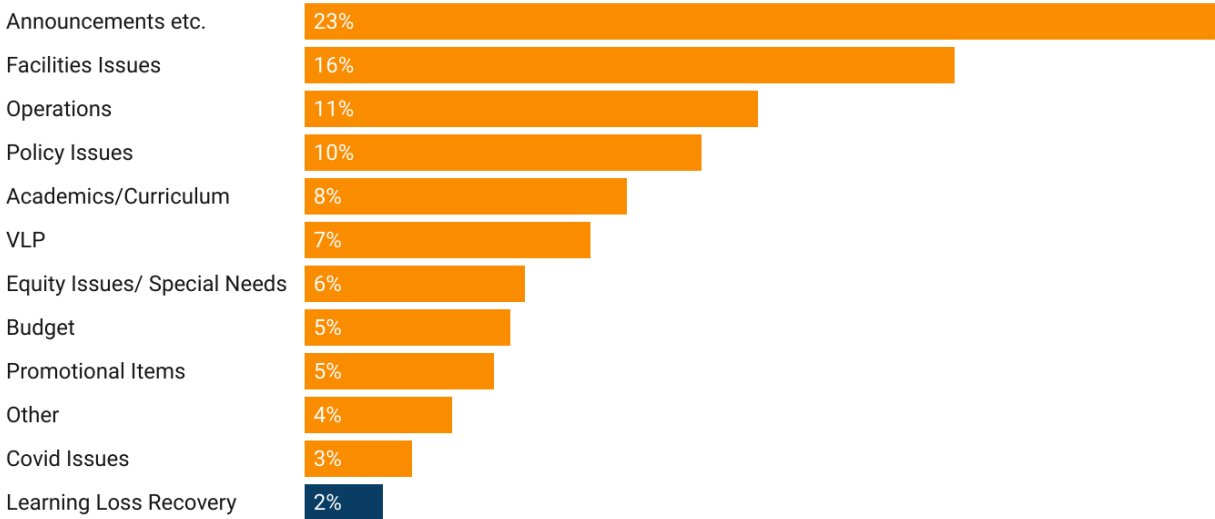| Category	Percent
Announcements etc.	23%
Facilities Issues	16%
Operations	11%
Policy Issues	10%
Academics/Curriculum	8%
VLP	7%
Equity Issues/ Special Needs	6%
Budget	5%
Promotional Items	5%
Other	4%
Covid Issues	3%
Learning Loss Recovery	2%

Chart: APE • Source: Arlington Parents for Education • Created with Datawrapper

Several items from this data deserve comment.

   • **Less than 2% of Time Spent on Learning Loss Recovery.** In the year following the COVID shut downs, the effect of learning loss and the steps that school systems should take to recover from it have been at the top of the agenda for every educational organization, from the U.S. Department of Education to the Virginia Department of Education. The fact that the School Board spent less than 2% of its time addressing that critical issue is disheartening. Yet, the Board's minimal time spent on learning loss is consistent with the fact that APS devoted almost none of its budget for either the last school year or the coming school year to address that issue. Even as we enter a fourth school year since the pandemic began, APS has yet to put forward (let alone implement) a comprehensive plan to address learning loss as other nearby districts have done.

•**Only 8% of Time Addressed Academic Issues.** The School Board devoted only 8% of its time to addressing academic issues or issues related to the academic curriculum. The time they did spend on those topics (about 3.3 hours in total) was mostly devoted to listening to APS presentations with little debate or meaningful challenge. Those presentations included ones on the math program (1 hour), on literacy in K-2 and in secondary schools (.5 hour), education technology (.8 hours), advanced classes (.2) and secondary math (.4).

•**Board Spent Twice as Much Time on Facilities as Academics.** Despite the repeated mantra that instruction should drive construction (and not the other way around), the APS Board spent twice as much time discussing facilities issues (notably the Career Center) as it spent addressing academic or curriculum issues. We certainly agree that the Board should not approve a $170 million project without sufficient deliberation. But the Career Center has over the years consumed substantial board time, yet the educational purpose of the modifications to the facility have never been clearly articulated. This year's CIP ended in much the same way, with no vision (much less a plan) for the students who will occupy the new seats to be built. The Board should focus on determining curricular objectives, identifying the target student audience for the program, and let those decisions determine what is built. In any event, the Board should consider how to more effectively address those facility issues so that time can be focused on the academic issues that should be the Board's principal focus.

II.   **Board Effectiveness**

There is extensive literature addressing the factors that make for effective school boards, and that literature largely focuses on the same factors:

1.   Establishing a vision with a focus on high expectations for student achievement;

2.   Using data and monitoring progress;

3.   Being transparent in decision-making; and

4.   Effectively engaging with the community.

For example, one article, titled "School Board Leadership: Best Practices," identified best practices to include developing a vision with a focus on academic achievement for all students, setting goals and remaining committed to those goals, using data, monitoring progress and taking corrective action. In Edutopia, effective school boards were defined as focusing on student achievement, allocating resources and watching return on investment, using data and engaging the community. Another article identified six items, including setting a clear vision and annual goals, committing to high expectations for student achievement, prioritizing professional development, being transparent, staying focused on financial health and collaborating with the community. The National School Board Association has also published a list of eight characteristics of effective school boards, which include committing to a vision of high expectations for student achievement, belief in student capability, being accountability driven towards goals set by the school board, having a collaborative relationship with staff and the community, and embracing and monitoring data.

A. Vision with Focus on Student Achievement

The available research uniformly points to effective school boards having a vision with a focus on high expectations for student academic achievement. APS adopted a strategic plan in 2018, and periodically reviews and "tunes" that strategy, the last time in February 2022. The Board's stated vision for APS is "to be an inclusive community that empowers all students to foster their dreams, explore possibilities and create their futures." With respect to academic achievement, the Board's stated goal is to "ensure that every student is challenged and engaged while providing multiple pathways for student success by broadening opportunities, building support systems and eliminating barriers. APS will eliminate opportunity gaps so all students achieve success."

In APS' recommended performance objectives–which were adjusted in January as part of the "tuning" process–the Board identified two student outcome performance objectives:

- By 2024, APS will reduce opportunity gaps for all reporting groups on state assessments; and

- By 2024, all elementary and middle school students will annually demonstrate growth by a minimum of one level using district assessments and students performing at the advanced level will continue to perform at the advanced level.

We agree with the goals of inclusiveness and reducing the opportunity gaps (as we have noted in other publications). But demonstrating one-year's progress in one year – and only for elementary and middle school students – is hardly setting high expectations for students, or for the school system. Nor did APS set a particularly high bar for itself in setting a two-year goal of

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simply reducing opportunity gaps, without setting some substantial quantified goals for that reduction.

By contrast, neighboring school districts have set higher (and more quantified) goals:

- In Fairfax, the school system set an extensive set of quantified metrics for student performance, including 100% of students passing the reading and math SOLs by 2024, specified targets for students participating in advanced academic programs, and 100% of students showing proficiency in at least one AP or IB course, among many other quantified targets.

- In Montgomery County, the school system has similarly set quantified metrics for student performance, including 90% of students meeting evidence of learning in reading and math, an increase in the number of students invited to participate in enriched and accelerated programs, and 100% of students meeting college and career readiness standards with 75% of students enrolling in post-secondary education.

- In Prince William County, the 57-page strategic plan includes detailed objectives by subject, including a targeted 85% pass rate on reading and math SOL scores, a targeted increase on pass advanced rates of 10% across all grades, an increase in science students participating in VJAS, and regional, state and international science fairs, and development of a STEM-center.

To be highly effective, the Board should set high expectations for student achievement and for the school system's achievement, including in areas such as closing gaps. Those objectives should be achievable, but should challenge and stretch our school system and our students. The expectations should be much higher than a year's worth of educational progress in a year.

These principles of setting numerical targets to ensure accountability were recognized by the Arlington School Board over twenty years ago, when APS was a leader in setting such targets for achievement. As reported in 1999, following a year when the targets were not met, the school board and superintendent explained that they would continue setting such numerical targets. "You have to have specific goals," said then Board member Elaine S. Fulow. "It is too easy to duck and dodge when you have vague generalities." "Accountability is risky, yes," said then Vice Chairperson Libby Garvey. "That is why people don't do it. But it is necessary."

As APS is set to develop a new strategic plan by 2024, the Board should return APS to its past leadership position of setting aggressive numerical targets for performance and holding itself accountable for delivering such targets.

B. Using Data

A second key theme in every research report on effective school boards is a focus on the use of data. As stated by Sims: School Board Best Practices: "'The best boards use data to make informed decisions and develop policies' (Black, 2008, p. 34). It has been suggested that effective school boards gather data together as a group prior to making a decision (Johnson, 2010)." As Edutopia summarized:

It has been said, "In God we trust. All others bring data." By definition, informed policy making requires using data. Otherwise, effective boards cannot be assured that all students, regardless of gender, race, or socioeconomic status, are progressing toward and reaching high standards. The challenges to student learning, and particularly to providing equity among all students in achievement, are complex. Intuition-based assessment of student learning is tricky at best and certainly is an insufficient basis to determine education policy. Further, without data, reports to communities about the education return on investment are hollow and unconvincing. Communities expect measurable results, through data, from their tax dollars.

Fortunately, APS has recently implemented a student progress dashboard, which provides access to at least some ongoing student performance data. But to be useful, that data must be analyzed and discussed amongst the Board to inform thoughtful decisions and guidance. For example, reports regarding recent DIBELs data reflect students' reading performance declining in 4th and 5th grades. APS responded to note that this was due to the structured literacy program not being implemented in those grades last year. That data should prompt questions about the extent to which the structured literacy program will be fully integrated this year, and what APS will do to address the needs of those students who are now in 6th grade (or beyond), having not received the benefit of the structured literacy program. Recent SOL data, which shows declining performance in history and science programs should prompt similar questioning. The discussion at the most recent August 18, 2022 Board meeting suggests that the Board may be moving in the right direction. We would hope to see a continued focus on such data throughout the school year.

And the data on the APS dashboard is also only a small fraction of the data that could be considered by the Board. For example:

•What does the data on the pass rates for AP exams tell us about the effectiveness of our AP classes (or the preparation of our students to take those classes and the exams)?

•How do APS' SAT and ACT scores match up to scores of peer high schools in neighboring districts (before and after adjusting for demographics) and what does that tell us about APS' opportunity to strengthen its programs?

•How does the amount of assigned homework affect outcomes and equity?

•How many students are not reading on grade level by middle school and high school and how is APS identifying and providing appropriate intervention for these students?

•How has the student performance gap changed during the pandemic, which schools are the most affected, and how should that affect APS' resource allocation?

Beyond data that APS has available on student performance, there is also extensive data and research available to our School Board to inform its most weighty decisions. For example, there is extensive research available on what instructional methods work most effectively to address learning loss. Budgets from school systems across Virginia, including in our neighboring districts, are also available as benchmarks that could inform the Board's own budget discussions. The Board's budget discussion, instructional views, and even COVID mitigation proposals could be substantially enhanced by bringing and sharing data amongst the Board. See Sims: School Board Leadership (noting that successful Boards consume data from multiple sources aside from information provided only by the District). Demonstration that the Board has considered such data can also help assure the community that our Board members are making informed decisions.

As stated in the research, highly successful school boards do not just have access to data, but they in fact review data on student performance with great frequency to determine if the school system is on track to meet its goals, and use that data to inform its decisions. As one recent article noted, successful school boards will "add the topic of academic performance to every school board meeting agenda, and report on school progress in each meeting." The NSBA similarly notes that successful school boards will seek information on student test scores and needs "on a regular or monthly basis," and that such boards "were not afraid to confront negative data."

To date, as shown by the public meetings, the Arlington School Board has largely waited for APS to conduct data analysis and present it to the Board rather than conducting its own analysis of available data. It is difficult for a Board to hold a school system accountable if it is relying on that same system to provide all the data analysis. Without suggesting anything improper, it is a natural tendency of organizations (and employees) to focus on those aspects of their work that are doing well, and to spend less time highlighting areas of needed improvement. The Board needs to identify the data that is most relevant to student achievement, ask for regular

and consistent reporting of that data, use that data to perform its own analyses (as needed) of APS performance, and drive policies and decisions based on the results of such analyses. The Board may already be requesting such data and performing such analyses, but if so, it is not apparent from public meetings.

C. Transparency

One of the other defining characteristics of successful school boards is transparency. As one white paper put it:

Public transparency refers to how well school boards maintain open and honest lines of communication with citizens and keep them informed on decisions that are made in the best interests of the district. From the perspective of school boards of directors, the public is always watching and waiting to see how well they uphold their responsibilities of governance and oversight. In this position, school boards are expected to be as open as possible concerning board discussions and any decisions that will be made on behalf of the district. Especially because school boards determine and oversee initiatives focused around student success, concerned family members and community members are likely to feel untrusting of the district's school board if they suspect that any business is being conducted behind closed doors.

A part of transparency is an open airing of issues—particularly those issues where there may be debate or dissension within the Board, or between the Board and the school system. As noted above, the public is watching to see how well the Board upholds its responsibility of governance and oversight.

Transparency can and should include periodic instances where hard, and sometimes awkward questions are put to APS publicly. See Edutopia Article on Effective Boards ("Effective policy makers today make their greatest gains by asking appropriate questions). Dr. Kanninen, for example, strongly advised APS in March of 2021 that it should try harder to find ways to return more students to schools. Cristina Diaz-Torres in Fall 2021 also pointedly asked APS to address issues arising at the VLP program. But those examples are more frequently the exception than the rule.

The Board's typical approach to public displays of dissent was epitomized in Dr. Kanninen's response to Board member Kadera's questions about the Career Center project, where Dr. Kanninen appeared to squelch debate, suggesting that students from the Career Center who may be watching would take away a message that the Board did not care about their program. While Board members (and certainly APS staff) may prefer to avoid public criticism or upsetting segments of the community that may prefer one outcome to another, it is far more important that competing views be aired, and that the public understands that the Board is taking

its governance and oversight responsibilities seriously. Effective and strong public institutions are transparent in their decision-making, including the debates and competing concerns that lead to those decisions.

In addition to engaging in constructive debate during Board meetings, as noted above, the School Board should avoid the appearance that school business is being conducted behind closed doors. As another source noted, "Even if every stakeholder is not entirely satisfied with the Board's progress, they will respect that the Board is open and candid about its inner workings." The Board's discussion of its 2022-23 priorities at the August 18, 2022 Board meeting exemplified the issue. The Board explained that those priorities would drive the budget, work plans, and agenda for the Board. Yet the priorities were adopted without any public input, apparently based on discussions amongst the Board, staff and Superintendent with no transparency to the public, and announced during a summer meeting with no public present.

We also understand from multiple sources that Board members exchange voicemails in order to avoid having their communications be subject to FOIA (even though voice mails are subject to FOIA, the District does not routinely search them). We also understand that Board members hold "2-on-1" meetings with Dr. Durán, which allows them to avoid open meeting laws. We also witnessed this last year that the School Board hastily called a closed door meeting to authorize bringing legal action against the Governor, even though the procedural steps did not comply with Board policy and potentially with open meeting laws.

One can debate (and we have) the extent to which all meetings and Board business should be public, or at least subject to public discovery. But, what should the public assume when Board members refuse to exchange emails with each other so that the public cannot learn how the Board debated and addressed an issue? What views and arguments are Board members making that they do not want to see the light of day? And if Board members do hold meetings with the administration with a goal that they not be subject to open meeting rules, at the least the Board should provide summaries of the discussions of such meetings so that the public need not be left to speculate about what is being addressed behind closed doors. The Board's insistence on using processes that skirt the open meeting laws and FOIA requirements only adds to public distrust of the Board's conduct. As noted above, the Board would be much better off, from the perspective of public trust and buy-in to Board decisions, if the public believed that the Board was open and candid in its workings with Arlington citizens.

D. Engaging With the Community

Every analysis of the practices of successful school boards identified engagement with the community as a critical factor for success, including for education results. As one article noted:

The community involvement must not stop at the school's vision; it must extend to community forums that allow the board of education to receive community feedback on educational issues (Johnson, 2010). Effective school boards seek numerous methods of involving parents and stakeholders (Rice et.al, 2001). Hofman (1995) found that school boards with increased community involvement and shared decision-making had better educational results. Black (2008) stated that gaining input from a panel of community members can be very valuable as long as the board of education is willing to take that advice.

The APS Board does include parents on Board advisory committees. But the advisory committees have repeatedly complained that the Board does not take the advice of the committees. See, e.g.,Math Advisory Committee report 2020 ("there has been no official action since our 2017-18 recommendation" regarding math coaches); Budget Advisory Committee Report 2020 (noting that for most of the year the committee guides itself, and that it is allotted only 10 minutes to present to the Board).

Many advisory committees make the same recommendations year in and year out, with no action taken by the Board, nor even any indication that the Board either likes, or dislikes, the proposals. Informally, we have heard several members of advisory committees complain about the Board's lack of action on advisory committee recommendations. As the Budget Advisory Committee noted in its 2020 report, the failure to engage with those committees or to accept their advice threatens to reduce the willingness of qualified candidates to volunteer their time. As noted above, seeking input from panels of community members is valuable only if the Board is willing to take the advice of those panels.

Further, the Board's process of hand-selecting advisory committee members for key committees also creates significant potential of excluding community members whose opinions might differ from the Board's views. Such a process has the potential to instead reinforce "group think." The value of community input comes from exposure to new ideas and the perspectives of a broader set of the community, which the Board should consider as it appoints committees.

Rather than seeking "numerous methods of involving parents and stakeholders," as suggested above, the APS Board has gone in the opposite direction. The Board used to offer office hours that provided an opportunity for a two-way dialogue, where constituents (including small groups) could meet with school board members for discussion of at least 15 minutes. The Board now limits office hours to a 5-minute, largely one-way monologue, where the Board members rarely engage in discussion or provide feedback beyond a perfunctory "thank you." The same is true of written comments, which typically receive an acknowledgment of receipt, but not a substantive response. And the same applies to the public comment portion of Board meetings, where the public is given incredibly short two-minute slots to articulate their concerns, and the Board does not substantively respond to public comment (unlike the County Board, which does provide responses).

This Board's views on public engagement and public comment was epitomized in the Board's announcement at the July 19, 2022 Board meeting where the Board said it wanted to conduct its necessary business promptly, "and accordingly will not have public comment during the summer meetings." That the public cannot participate at Board meetings for two months is a minor, temporary issue. The bigger issue is the implication that the Board views public engagement as something that interferes with the Board doing its job, rather than contributing to it. As the above findings illustrate, community and parental input should not be viewed as a nuisance to be endured before commencing Board business. Rather, community involvement is critical to the success of the Board mission, and is demonstrated to lead to better educational results and better decisions.

Notably, new Board Member Kadera has adopted a practice of responding to most public commenters, and meeting with parents who are interested in school affairs, which has been well received by Arlington citizens. The Board should follow her lead in looking for increased opportunity to engage with the community.

Conclusion

The past several years have been challenging for the APS School Board, and the Board itself has seen substantial turnover. Despite the competing views within the community, for most community members and the Board there is alignment around the goal of developing a best-in-class school system, supporting academic excellence for our students, reducing performance gaps, ensuring all students can read, challenging our students academically, and delivering instruction in a cost-effective manner. By setting high academic expectations and objectives, using data to track performance against those objectives, being transparent in decision-making, and engaging constructively with the community, the Board could head off many of the concerns raised by parents and the community.

When the community and the Board have shared goals for our schools, a common understanding of how we are performing against those goals, a transparent view of how key decisions are made, and genuine bilateral engagement, there will be far greater levels of trust. While there may still be areas of disagreement, some of the vitriol experienced by the Board would likely dissipate. It is no coincidence that those same attributes are what distinguish effective boards from ineffective boards.

Arlington Parents for Education is a volunteer-led, non-partisan coalition of parents, teachers, students and citizens dedicated to accountability, transparency and education excellence at Arlington Public Schools.
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