



February 22, 2023

Dear Dr. Durán and Members of the School Board:

We are writing on behalf of Arlington Parents for Education regarding the APS 2023-2024 budget. As we noted in our [letter](#) from last year, we continue to believe that APS should invest its budget into those factors (that additional financial resources can address) that will have the greatest impact on the quality of student education: (i) great teachers, (ii) in smaller classes, (iii) additional instructional time.

We appreciate that last year's budget cycle partially addressed two of those three factors. The pay increases for teachers brought APS at (or near) the top in the region for [teacher pay](#). And the class size reductions to some extent addressed APS' relatively larger class sizes. That said, we were very disappointed that last year's budget did not include additional resources for increased instructional time and that APS has devoted minimal resources to addressing learning loss.

Increase Investment to Address Learning Loss

Last year, we asked that APS devote 1.5% of its budget to (\$10.5 million) to learning loss, a percentage similar to what Fairfax invested, in order to provide [additional in-person instructional time](#) (preferably in the form of in-person tutoring, but potentially also through extended day and before- or after-school instructional options). As [we noted then](#), Fairfax and Prince William county implemented investments at a similar scale. As we [reported](#) in November, the SOL scores from this past year reflect that both those districts increased their performance at a significantly greater rate than did APS.

We appreciate that the School Board allocated funds last year for tutoring from Paper, but as we have [reported](#) (and as seen in other jurisdictions), virtual tutoring programs reach a relatively small number of students, often not the ones who are most in need, and are very costly on an hourly basis. We also appreciate the School Board's recent allocation of [\\$293 thousand from Fiscal Year 22 closeout funds](#) for "Targeted Resources for Student Learning Needs," but this is not sufficient to the need. Indeed, as [noted](#) to the County Board last year, APS sought \$15 million of additional learning loss recovery funds from the state. That need did not diminish just because the state only awarded APS \$2 million.

Further, APS' staff and advisory committees continue to urge APS to invest more heavily in resources for learning loss. As recently as November, the Math Advisory Committee recommended that APS fund [34 full-time equivalent \(FTE\) Mathematics Interventionists and 7.5 FTE Mathematics Coaches](#) (41.5 FTE total), echoing the same need identified by APS's Mathematics office. APS presently has only 6 math interventionists working at 10 different schools - 3 middle schools and 7



elementary schools. The needs of our students are well beyond APS's current capacity and we again urge APS to budget for the number of interventionists our students need, not just the amount of funds APS believes it can spare. Such a focus on interventionists will also advance equity. As we shared in a [recent newsletter](#), APS's learning loss is uneven across our schools. The student progress dashboard shows that schools in our wealthiest neighborhoods demonstrate less learning loss than our schools with the highest free/reduced lunch eligibility. At one school alone, there are 253 students who require math intervention (95% of students assessed). Increasing interventionists allows APS to target those students and schools that need more support.

We urge APS to adopt a high-dosage tutoring program, similar to the \$7 million program recently [announced](#) by DC Public schools. That districts all around APS are adopting such high-dosage tutoring programs confirms that such programs can be implemented at scale with sufficient dedication of resources. APS should follow the lead of its peer districts.

Further, we continue to support an increase in APS' summer school program, including incentive payments for summer school teachers. Unlike other districts, APS responded after the COVID closures by [decreasing](#) the size of its summer program. Rather than increasing the summer program, the enrollment this past year [shrunk](#) yet again. Nor is the program of [the duration recommended](#) by the US Department of Education.

Increase Staffing to Address Our Student's Mental Health Needs

Last year, we [advocated](#) for APS to retain two FTEs for both counselors and social workers. Those positions would otherwise have been reduced in the Superintendent's Request. APS [planning factors](#) generally allow for one FTE Elementary school counselor per 325 students, with slightly more complex planning factors for Middle and High School. Likewise, APS planning factors currently allow for one school psychologist and one social worker per 775 students systemwide. National recommendations from professional organizations [recommend lower ratios](#), but APS generally has better staffing ratios than many districts (e.g., [the national student to counselor ratio is 408:1](#) versus APS ratio of 325:1;) We recognize that reducing these ratios would be an ongoing cost, but that the need among our students is particularly acute in the aftermath of the pandemic, consistent with [recent findings](#) from the CDC. Their report indicates that the mental health crisis among young people is both worsening, "alarming" and that "our young people are in crisis." We note that Fairfax County Public Schools recently received a 5-year [\\$13.5 million grant](#) from the US Department of Education to increase their staffing for school counselors, psychologists, and social workers. We urge APS to prioritize reducing planning factor ratios or otherwise increasing staffing during this critical time for our students

To fund these initiatives, we recommend that APS [allocate one-time funds from the county that were placed in reserve last year](#) or reallocate funds from the recently estimated [\\$17.7 million](#) expected to



be available at closeout from the current fiscal year. APS has continually missed opportunities to meaningfully resource and prioritize learning loss, including its utilization of [American Rescue Plan funds](#) and last year's historic level of [\\$62 million of closeout funds](#). Simply put, the opportunity to address the impacts of a once-in-generation crisis is narrowing. We urge the School Board to act more boldly to address the significant academic and mental health needs of our students. If the Board chooses not to allocate these resources, then we urge APS to expand existing partnerships with community organizations who are already supporting students in before- or after-school programs, and to seek out additional grant opportunities. Public schools around the nation are responding to this like the crisis that it is. APS must do the same.

Remain Competitive on Compensation and Non-Compensation Factors to Recruit and Retain Teachers

We appreciate the steps taken by APS last year to increase compensation for our teachers. According to [WABE](#), APS now has the highest average compensation per teacher, and among the highest compensation at each level of teaching experience. Other jurisdictions are budgeting cost of living increases of 3% ([Fairfax](#)) to 5% ([Prince William](#), [Loudoun](#)), and we encourage APS to at least keep pace with its peers.

Of course, recruiting and retention of teachers requires more than just competitive compensation. We understand that as part of its analysis last year, APS' consultant surveyed teachers about their reasons for leaving, and we also understand that APS was going to initiate exit interviews of departing employees. To the extent feasible, we urge APS to address those non-compensation issues that would not affect the quality or quantity of instructional time.

Reduce Class Sizes

Based on the WABE analysis, the changes APS adopted last year have helped address some of the classroom crowding issues in the middle and high schools we identified last year. However, APS has not produced its report on class sizes as is typically done by this time of the year, making it difficult to see the number of classes with 27 or more students. As we have noted in several discussions, we continue to hear reports of overcrowded elementary classrooms at a number of APS schools, including public comment at the [February 2nd school board meeting](#). That said, APS continues to be [above](#) the average of its peers in students per elementary classroom, by almost 1.5 students per class. APS should continue reducing the class sizes at the elementary schools by lowering the planning factors by at least two this year.

Freeze Syphax Growth

We wrote last year that APS ["leads among the local districts in the percentage of its employees that are non-school-based"](#). APS has since added even more non-school based positions in last year's



budget, e.g. centralized headcount has grown dramatically in a number of organizations between 2015 and 2022, including HR (over 70%, over 20 FTEs), the Superintendent's office (over 100%, over 15 FTEs), and in various other non-school-based personnel. Based on [this year's WABE report](#), APS still has a greater percentage of personnel that are non-school based than the average of its peers.

We note that the Budget Advisory Council recommended at a budget work session last year that APS should "[freeze growth in non-teaching positions for another year](#)." As structural deficits begin to catch up to APS, we recommend that APS freeze growth in non-school based positions [as defined by WABE](#). If the Superintendent requests additional non-school based positions, the School Board should closely scrutinize those requests. For example, is this request filling an intermediate need or a permanent one? Can the need otherwise be met by reassigning duties among existing staff? Further, we note that once new full-time positions are added to Syphax, it is unlikely that they are reversed. In contrast, at the school level, FTEs are controlled by [planning factors](#) and as we have seen in past budget cycles, increasing class sizes (through planning factor changes) is relied on to produce budget savings. However, we rarely see non-school based positions at Syphax eliminated to produce budget savings.

Address 2-tier Leave Policy Exacerbated by 2021 change

Similarly, we are very concerned about a leave change that was adopted in 2021 and was the focus of a [public comment](#) at the February 16th School Board meeting. Pursuant to this change, 12-month APS employees now have [31 paid holidays](#) this school year (e.g., federal holidays, winter break, spring break and religious observances). These days are in addition to annual leave that they separately accrue, where 12-month employees receive 14 annual days and accrue an additional day of leave per year of service. We know from previous school board votes on leave policies that this change has a calculable and ongoing budget cost. For example, when APS added 10 days of paid parental leave in [2016](#), it was estimated to cost \$500,000 - those benefits were later reversed in [2018](#). During this budget season, we request that APS transparently address the costs of this policy change, noting that one of the School Board's priorities is to "[systematically review departmental organizational structures and practices to identify potential savings to APS](#)". We also request that APS address the unintended consequences of an inherently unfair 2-tier system in which 12-month employees (e.g., Syphax, Principals, Administrative Assistants) are paid for these days, but 10-month employees, predominantly teachers, are not. We understand this policy is adversely impacting both staff morale, as well as impacting APS's official duties around onboarding staff (particularly substitute teachers), enrolling new students mid-year, impacting responsiveness, etc.

Assign Planning Factors for Instructional Technology Coordinators

Nearly every staffing and materials resource in our schools is controlled by annually published planning factors - including teachers, math coaches, librarians and staff members and materials like



art supplies, textbooks, and instructional hardware/software. Notably, instructional technology coordinators are not controlled by planning factors, but rather reviewed by the Department of Information Services. Current practice is that elementary schools and middle schools have one ITC. Our three comprehensive high schools now have two ITCs per school, following an increase in last year's adopted budget (though [past budgets](#) have recommended both cutting those positions and converting these 12-month employees to 11-month contracts). We recognize ITC's role in supporting classroom teachers to enhance lessons with technology as well as provide tech support, though APS also has separate systemwide technicians who provide hardware and software support for schools and central offices. However, we recommend that APS bring ITCs into alignment with the allocation of other planning factors. Further, we recommend that the School Board closely examine APS's investment and increasing reliance on instructional technology and the effectiveness of our investments in educational software. Last year, APS indicated more than \$2 million of expenditures on educational software on numerous programs, but had very little information regarding the effectiveness of these programs (see [budget question 23-58](#)).

Strengthen the Independence of APS's Auditor

We believe that one of the most important course-correctives that APS could undertake is establishing a more independent auditor, consistent with the model adopted by the County Board. Under the current structure, the auditor can be fired at will by the Superintendent and reports to a Committee on which the Superintendent sits. This violates both APS policy and fundamental auditing standards [per a letter](#) to APS from the Association of Local Government Auditors (ALGA). We [recommend](#) that the School Board should adopt the structure used by the County Board, and recommended by ALGA, in which the auditor reports to an audit committee of which the majority consist of community members.

We appreciate your consideration of our request.

Respectfully,

Arlington Parents for Education Board Members
Alison Babb
Katie Sunderland
Reg Goeke
Sheila Kelly

cc: Budget Advisory Committee