

ARLINGTON BRANCH #7047
NAACP

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February 16, 2021

Francisco Durán, Ph.D.
Superintendent, Arlington Public Schools
2110 Washington Blvd.
Arlington, VA 22204

Arlington County School Board
2110 Washington Boulevard
Sequoia Plaza 2
Arlington, VA 22204

Re: Arlington NAACP Budget Priorities for Arlington Public Schools, Academic Year 2021-2022

Dear Dr. Durán and APS School Board Members:

Due to the significant adverse impact of Coronavirus COVID-19 (COVID-19) and virtual learning which we believe exacerbate pre-existing opportunity gaps, we urge Arlington Public Schools (APS) **not** to eliminate or delay funding for any of the instructional priorities outlined in this letter, or delay compliance with the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) Settlement Agreement regarding English Learners (ELs). The math and reading assessments administered the first quarter of this school year revealed significant declines for Black and Latino students, ELs, and students with disabilities, which we believe have been exacerbated by school closures.¹ Given that pre-pandemic performance disparities indicated a learning crisis within APS minority populations, the current declines increase the need for focused and intentional actions to assure that our most vulnerable populations are receiving appropriate identification, interventions and instruction. This is not the time for APS to sacrifice instruction due to budget constraints.

We ask that APS allocate funding to ensure the mental health and social emotional wellbeing of APS students, comply with Federal civil rights laws, and ensure an anti-racist and bias-free learning environment so that all students can thrive and learn in an emotionally safe place. We believe you should **seek additional funding as necessary to achieve these objectives**, which we view as *non-negotiable* and *essential* to closing the opportunity gaps, aligning with the 2018-2024 APS Strategic Plan, and ensuring future academic success for every student.²

¹ [Monitoring Report, November 17, 2020 Update](#)

² <https://www.apsva.us/strategic-plan/>

Our budget priorities are itemized into four categories: Curriculum and Instruction; Mental Health and Emotional Support; Compliance; and Civil Rights. We challenge APS to ensure that budget allocations align with its stated values of equity and high academic standards. In the words of President Joe Biden, *“don’t tell me what you value; show me your budget and I will tell you what you value.”*

I. Curriculum and Instruction

- **Reading Instruction**: Provide training to accelerate the transition to structured literacy instruction (i.e., Orton-Gillingham) for Grades K-3 and at the secondary level. We support APS’s commitment to transition from balanced literacy to structured literacy, which is based on the science of reading. However, no public timeline has been established for implementation. We request that funding for teacher training be prioritized for the upcoming academic year as too many students are continuing to fall through reading gaps with balanced literacy.
- **Reading Intervention**: Prioritize funding for the implementation of structured literacy intervention (i.e., Orton-Gillingham) for Grades 4-12. While a commitment has been made to transition to structured literacy for Grades K-3, it is essential that the commitment is expanded to include structured literacy reading intervention for struggling readers in Grades 4-12. It is secondary students who will not have the benefit of structured literacy instruction. They are at high risk and need structured literacy interventions given the likelihood that they will struggle in other content areas due to reading difficulties.
- **Identification of Reading Disabilities**: Allocate funding to expand the Rapid Automatic Naming/Rapid Alternating Stimulus (RAN/RAS) pilot at all elementary schools and implement RAN/RAS screening to middle and high school students with or suspected to have reading difficulties, including English Learners. The data from the one-year RAN/RAS pilot revealed a 14% to 20% increase in students identified as at risk for reading difficulties.
- **Universal Reading Screening**: Implement Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) pilot for Grades K-5 at all elementary schools, as the Phonological Awareness Literacy Screening (PALS) fails to identify a significant enough number of reading difficulties. It is imperative that we have the data from the DIBELS pilot to support a waiver request from the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) requirement that school districts use PALS as the universal reading screener.
- **Evidence-Based Math Instruction and Intervention**: Commit to training and implementation of Multisensory Math.³ There is inconsistency among schools at every level in the interventions used for students who struggle with math. There are also significant gaps in identifying students with math disabilities. It is well documented that many students who struggle with language-based learning disabilities like dyslexia also struggle with mathematics, which is also a type of language. Reading and math scores in APS have trended downward over the past several years. While APS is addressing literacy with Orton-Gillingham, which is a direct,

³ <http://www.multisensorymath.com/>

explicit, multisensory, structured, sequential, diagnostic, and prescriptive way to teach literacy, APS leadership should also take this opportunity to provide funding to implement Multisensory Math. Multisensory Math is also Orton-Gillingham based and is a direct, explicit, multisensory, structured, sequential, diagnostic, and prescriptive way to teach mathematics.

- **Comprehensive Writing Curriculum**: APS must cultivate strong writers at every level. An informal English Language Arts Advisory Committee (ELAAC) survey of APS graduates found that many required tutoring or remedial writing in college. We have also held discussions with parents who revealed that their students lack basic writing skills, causing some families to resort to private tutors or to depend on companies that teach writing skills to cover the gap left by APS writing curricula. Writing is an essential component of literacy that is critical for both college and career success. As such, APS should allocate funding to allow for the implementation of a comprehensive, evidence-based writing curriculum, such as Step Up to Writing or a comparable evidence-based program, to reduce the need for high school students to compete for limited space in the International Baccalaureate program to receive a rigorous writing curriculum.

II. Mental Health and Social Emotional Support

- **Student Support**: Increase funding to bring the number of counselors and school psychologists to state recommended ratios or higher. Due to the impact of COVID-19, students need mental health support now more than ever. Students are experiencing challenges on multiple fronts during distance learning, including social isolation, depression, fear and anxiety. In addition, some students report a perceived sense of failure in school while others cope with family tragedy, increased economic hardships and pressures due to the pandemic.
- **Trauma-Sensitive Schools**: Provide funding for training on recognizing and adapting to student trauma for teachers and staff. Living through the COVID-19 global pandemic is traumatic for most people, however, it is unduly traumatic for Black and Latino students whose families and communities have experienced coronavirus-related deaths, unemployment, and housing displacement at alarmingly disproportionate rates. Students cannot focus and learn when their trauma is unaddressed. Given that some of APS's most vulnerable students were managing trauma prior to the pandemic, it is realistic to expect that children who were traumatized during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly those with layered trauma, will require teachers capable of understanding the many ways in which that trauma may manifest and be able to direct families to appropriate resources, as needed.

III. Compliance

- **U.S. Department of Justice Settlement Agreement**: Maintain funding for continued timely implementation of the DOJ settlement requirements for ELs.⁴ APS should avoid requesting any additional extensions to meet requirements under this settlement agreement, as ELs continue to be overrepresented in the opportunity gap.

⁴ [DOJ EL Settlement](#).

- **2019 Special Education Evaluation Report**: Commit funding to address recommendations in the 2019 Special Education Evaluation Report.⁵
- **In-house Attorneys and Paralegal**: Provide sufficient funding to hire in-house General Counsel, Assistant General Counsel, and paralegal(s) with expertise in special education and civil rights to ensure compliance with the DOJ settlement agreement, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), and the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

IV. Civil Rights

- **Restorative Justice Implementation**: Provide funding to implement K-12 restorative practices. The most recent civil rights data from the U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights (2017-2018) for Arlington County Public Schools indicates systemic and disproportionate suspensions and reporting to law enforcement of Black and Latino students and students with disabilities, compared to their White counterparts.⁶ This disturbing trend continues to plague APS, with no improvements from the 2015-2016 report and in some instances, increased disparities in key areas.⁷
- **Anti-Bias Training**: Provide funding for annual anti-bias and cultural competency training for all APS teachers and staff. Over the past year and a half, the NAACP has documented multiple verified complaints of racist and anti-Semitic incidents occurring within APS schools, perpetrated by staff, contractors, or students. The most recent incident occurred during virtual learning as part of the curriculum. It is long past time for APS to require that teachers and staff get consistent anti-bias and cultural competency training not only to address their personal biases, but to enable them to effectively intervene and guide students when situations occur.
- **Anti-Racist Curriculum**: To complement anti-bias and cultural competency training, APS leadership must demonstrate their commitment to cultivating anti-racist learning environments through the adoption of anti-racist curricula. This can be done with minimal budget impact, as illustrated by other local districts using free available resources, such as *Learning for Justice*.⁸

⁵ [2019 Special Education Evaluation Report](#)

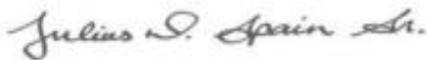
⁶ [2017 OCR Discipline Report](#)

⁷ [2015 OCR Discipline Report](#)

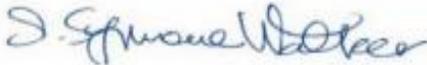
⁸ [Learning for Justice](#)

As you navigate the budget process, we strongly suggest that you incorporate these items into the 2021-2022 budget to help make APS a more equitable, enriching, and excellent learning environment for students, regardless of their race, ethnicity, disability, or socioeconomic status. The time is now to buttress our curriculum with evidence-based instruction as the most efficient way to address learning losses due to COVID-19, performance disparities that existed prior to the pandemic, and reinforce our most vulnerable students for academic success.

Sincerely,



Julius D. "JD" Spain, Sr.
President, Arlington Branch NAACP #7047



S. Symone Walker
Co-Chair, Education Committee



Sherrice L. Kerns
Co-Chair, Education Committee

cc: Bridget Loft
Assistant Superintendent
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Lori Silver
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APS Budget Advisory Council