

TO: Advisory Council on Instruction

FROM: Early Childhood Advisory Committee (ECAC)

DATE: November 26, 2018

SUBJECT: Recommending Year Report to Advisory Council on Instruction (2018-2019)

## Background

As of September 30th, 2018, about 32% (8352/26,389) of the children enrolled in APS were Pre-K through second grade students.<sup>1</sup> This population is projected to grow to 8841 by 2027.<sup>2</sup> As shown in the table, the Pre-K population is serviced by several county-wide programs. Two-thirds of the slots in the Montessori program are reserved for families who make less than \$88,240 (80% of the median income for a family of four in Arlington County) and all of the slots in the VPI program are for families whose income does not exceed 350% on the Federal Poverty guideline currently at \$87,850 for a family of four in Arlington County.

Program	Classrooms	Students
Montessori (3, and 4 year olds)	19	211
Virginia Preschool Initiative (VPI; 4 year olds)	35	510
Early Childhood Special Education (2, 3 and 4 year olds)	26 (7 programs are co-taught with VPI/Montessori; 8 programs are located off site through Integration Station)	202
Early Childhood Special Education community-based resource program serving students in private Arlington preschools and child care centers		48

Providing early childhood education opportunities is an investment that reaps significant returns not only to the students attending Arlington Public Schools, but also to our community as a whole. It is especially important for children who are at-risk because, on average, they are exposed to fewer early academic concepts outside of the school setting. Young children between the ages of 3-8 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 demonstrate that children who have rich early learning experiences are better prepared to thrive in kindergarten and beyond.<sup>3</sup>

## 2018 Recommendations

The Early Childhood Advisory Committee (ECAC) comprises Arlington parents and staff who identify, discuss, and research issues related to the educational experience and instruction of Arlington Public Schools' (APS) youngest students, Pre-K through second grade. ECAC seeks to ensure that every child in APS during these foundational years experiences a high quality instructional setting that allows him or her to thrive academically and socially, and to foster a love of learning.

In the 2018-2019 recommending year, the ECAC focused on evaluating Pre-K to 2 learners with respect to APS Strategic Goal 1 (Student Success) and Goal 2 (Student Wellness). We identified two areas for potential improvement:

1. Address the Opportunity Gap before Kindergarten
2. Expand and Align the Continuum of Educational Models for Pre-K to 2 Learners

This document describes both recommendations and our rationale for providing them. It also provides an update on the status of 2016-2017 ECAC goals.

### **Recommendation 1: APS should develop a Strategic Plan for Equitable Developmental Opportunities to address the opportunity gaps present before kindergarten**

**Rationale:** Research suggests that the opportunity gaps between children differing in socioeconomic status, parent education, and race, begin long before children enter kindergarten.<sup>4</sup> Developmental gaps can be found as early as 9 months of age, and are shown to widen by 24 months of age.<sup>5</sup> Later school success is highly correlated with such indicators as early childhood vocabulary skills.<sup>6-10</sup> Research demonstrates a significant vocabulary difference for at-risk populations.<sup>7,11</sup> Parent awareness of indicators of later achievement can impact their child's developmental progress, and the support of empowered parents' efforts can have a significant impact on later reading proficiency.<sup>12,13</sup> For example, families instructed about the importance of talking with their very young children and provided a word-counting application on their phones demonstrated a 44% increase in the number of words used around their children.<sup>14</sup> Families can be empowered to help their children develop to their highest potential before they enter formal schooling. Studies report that children whose parents are involved in their schooling are more likely to earn high grades and enjoy school than children whose parents are not involved in their schooling.<sup>15</sup> Arlington Public Schools has an interest in our community's children being as prepared for a successful life as they can be, and has committed to addressing opportunity gaps.<sup>16</sup> In the 2015-2016 school year, the APS Early Childhood Program Evaluation Report quantifies the opportunity gap between children who had not attended any kind of Pre-K program and children who had attended APS Pre-K programs. While 97-99% of children who had attended APS' Montessori, VPI, or Special Education programs were found to have expected pre-academic readiness in pre-reading skills (as measured by the PALS benchmark scores), 79% of children who had not attended a formal Pre-K program demonstrated the same level of readiness.<sup>17</sup>

Engagement in early outreach to young children's families that would complement the building of school readiness in Arlington is currently supported by many community agencies, including: Project Family; Parent Academy; Northern Virginia Family Services/Healthy Families; Arlington

Public Libraries; Arlington Partnership for Children, Youth, and Families; Arlington County Parks and Recreation; and the Office of Child Care Services; and other local agencies whose missions support families at risk in a more general way who would be useful to partner with include APAH, and AHC. Agency cooperation and partnerships would provide a consistent message to families and would keep all parties working toward the same goal: equitable developmental opportunities in Arlington.

2018-2024 Strategic Plan Alignment: This recommendation aligns with the following core values and goals in the strategic plan:<sup>16</sup>

#### Core Values

- **Equity:** Eliminate opportunity gaps and achieve excellence by providing access to schools, resources, and learning opportunities according to each student's unique needs.
- **Inclusivity:** Strengthen our community by valuing people for who they are, nurturing our diversity, and embracing the contributions of all students, families, and staff.
- **Collaboration:** Foster partnerships with families, community, and staff to support the success of our students.
- **Stewardship:** Manage our resources to honor the community's investment in our schools; create safe, healthy, and environmentally sustainable learning environments; support civic and community engagement; and serve current and future generations.

#### Alignment with Strategic Plan

- **Goal #5:** Strong and Mutually Supportive Partnerships Develop: Develop and support strong connections among schools, families, and the community to broaden opportunities for student learning, development, and growth.

#### The ECAC Recommends:

1. **Develop a Strategic Plan for Equitable Developmental Opportunities to address the opportunity gaps present before kindergarten**
2. **Provide outreach materials to all families with young children in Arlington, focusing on the building blocks of school and life readiness.**
3. **Provide developmentally appropriate activity ideas for families to be empowered to be their child's first teacher.**
4. **Start communication with future APS families well before children start school in order to best build the bridge between home and school success.**

Budgetary Implications: Work could be embedded into existing positions; budgetary implications could be cost neutral.

#### **Recommendation 2: Expand and align the continuum of educational models in early childhood education to meet the needs of all Pre-Kindergarten-2 learners:**

Rationale: In 1975, US Congress passed Public Law 94-142, Education for All Handicapped Children Act (after 1990 it became known as IDEA, Individuals with Disabilities Education Act), thereby providing access to education to students with disabilities. It is hard to imagine, but just 43 years ago, as many as 200,000 people were in state institutions, with only their most basic

needs (housing, clothing, food) being met, in most cases, their educational needs were completely neglected.<sup>18</sup> In less than two generations, our educational system has undergone monumental change as we now strive to not only educate, but maximize the potential of every student. Beginning in the 1980's, research emerged suggesting that children were not well-served in segregated environments, thereby beginning a movement toward inclusive education.

There is a wealth of evidence supporting the benefits of high-quality inclusion.<sup>19</sup> Providing access to a wide range of learning opportunities, activities, settings and environments is a defining feature of high-quality early childhood inclusion.<sup>20</sup> Achieving meaningful, authentic inclusion is a difficult task,<sup>21</sup> though there are some elements which are consistently part of schools that are successfully implementing high-quality inclusion:

- Successful, meaningful inclusion requires proactive and effective leadership from school administrators. In fact, researchers have found that having engaged school leadership is associated with improved academic achievement<sup>22</sup> and is critical for developing and maintaining inclusive practices. In addition, research has also found that inclusive schools must, "...have an ongoing service delivery process that adjusts the staffing and collaboration among teachers each year in response to student needs."<sup>23</sup>
- Research widely supports use of universal design, a variety of instructional formats, and peer mediated instruction to support all learners in an included classroom.<sup>20</sup>
- In co-taught classrooms, it is critical that the regular education teacher and special education teacher are well-versed in strategies that support all learners. The research shows that co-teachers who have improved outcomes for students benefit from the following conditions: have positive attitudes about the benefits of inclusion for all students; cultivate a collaborative and supportive relationship with their co-teacher and spends time weekly to collaborate and prepare. Both teachers must feel equal responsibility for the progress and well-being of all students. Co-taught relationships are most successful when teachers have the support that permits for them to work collaboratively.<sup>18</sup>

APS has an esteemed array of high-quality inclusion opportunities at the pre-kindergarten level. Schools like Discovery and Drew have developed co-taught Montessori/ECSE pre-kindergarten programs, while K.W. Barrett, Carlin Springs, Drew, Randolph Hoffman-Boston and Key have developed co-taught classrooms in recent years with the Virginia Preschool Initiative (VPI) classrooms. And at Integration Station, APS has partnered with The Children's School for more than 25 years. More recently, Integration Station has expanded its innovative collaboration with new community partners including Little Beginnings Child Development Center and Head Start. These collaborations have provided students with disabilities the opportunity to develop relationships with non-disabled peers in a meaningful and authentic way, and have opened doors and friendships with typically-developing peers that were not previously accessible and extend beyond the school setting.

Nevertheless, there continue to be self-contained special education classrooms where children with disabilities have little or no opportunity to interact or learn from typically developing peers. There are also some general education co-taught classrooms where children with disabilities

are not given the opportunity to interact in meaningful ways with their typically-developing peers, limiting both groups' opportunity to learn from each other.

At the preschool level, APS is currently employing elements known to be part of high quality inclusion. Extending APS's current successes in the pre-K level would create a strong and robust continuum of placement options that values the contributions of all students by welcoming them into classrooms that meet their needs, providing a setting that enables them to reach their full academic potential, while also keeping them in their communities.

Aligning K-2 service delivery models at the elementary level with the existing pre-K models reflects a commitment to providing a continuum throughout and within all APS schools. It also responds to IDEA's requirement for individualized programming based on students' unique needs. Additionally, it supports APS's commitment to "evidence-based practices, and use of data-driven decision making, and instruction in the least restrictive environment", as is stated in the APS mission statement on Inclusive Practices. As schools nationwide grapple with how to meaningfully include students with disabilities in their school communities, building a well-founded continuum of learning opportunities reflects Arlington's desire to take an innovative approach to education, consistent with the 2018-2024 Strategic Plan which states, in part, "Engage in forward-thinking to identify bold ideas that enable us to be responsive to the expectations of our organization and community..."<sup>17</sup>

2018-2024 Strategic Plan Alignment: This recommendation aligns with the following core values and goals in the strategic plan:<sup>17</sup>

#### Core Values

- **Equity:** Eliminate opportunity gaps and achieve excellence by providing access to schools, resources, and learning opportunities according to each student's unique needs.
- **Inclusivity:** Strengthen our community by valuing people for who they are, nurturing our diversity, and embracing the contributions of all students, families, and staff.
- **Collaboration:** Foster partnerships with families, community, and staff to support the success of our students.
- **Stewardship:** Manage our resources to honor the community's investment in our schools; create safe, healthy, and environmentally sustainable learning environments; support civic and community engagement; and serve current and future generations.

#### Alignment with Strategic Plan

Goal #1: Multiple Pathways to Student Success: 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 excellence.

Goal #2: Healthy, Safe, and Supported Students: Create an environment that fosters the growth of the whole child. APS will nurture all students' intellectual, physical, mental and social-emotional growth in healthy, safe, and supportive learning environments.

**The ECAC recommends:**

1. **Expand the co-taught models with VPI and Montessori and peer model programs in Pre-K with technical assistance and professional learning provided by the Offices of Early Childhood and Special Education.**
2. **Align K-2 service delivery models at the elementary level with Pre-K co-taught models and other inclusive models to strengthen and increase consistency of the continuum of services at each school.**
3. **Provide additional professional development for LEA Representatives and IEP team members to support innovative and flexible educational programming to support a robust continuum of services to meet the individual and unique needs of all learners.**

**Budgetary Implications:** Additional staffing, reduced class sizes and increased support for elementary schools as needed to meet student needs to align K-2 service delivery models consistently.

**Update on 2016-2017 Recommendations:**

**Recommendation 1:** Amend the APS Wellness Policy section 25-3 (“Support for Students-Wellness”) regarding outdoor recess time and commit to a minimum of 30 minutes per day for children pre-k through 2nd grade. Ensure the APS recess policy is successfully communicated to and implemented by ALL pre-k and elementary programs.

*APS Policy Implementation Procedure (PIP) I- 10.30 (“Support for Students-Wellness”) was revised on September 14, 2018 regarding recess: “All elementary schools will provide recess; typically outdoors, totally at least 150 minutes per week for students in grades K-5. Recess for Pre-K students should meet or exceed these requirements.”*

**Recommendation 2:** Technology in Early childhood: APS should develop and articulate specific school-level and classroom-level goals for personalized digital learning devices (i.e. iPad) use in elementary classrooms and formulate a plan for evaluating the effectiveness of the program (both during and after implementation).

*As noted during the March 5th ACI presentation, information regarding grade level expectations can be found in curriculum documents and the instructional framework. A study of 1:1 digital devices is planned for SY 18-19. More information can also be found at <http://www.apsva.us/engage/> and the Digital Learning Devices Webpage: <http://www.apsva.us/digital-learning/>*

**Recommendation 3:** Technology in Early Childhood: APS should suggest time limits on school-related personalized learning device use for its youngest learners, in the same way it sets limits on homework and suggests minimum recess times. APS should also develop ways to communicate information on usage and best practices to parents.

*As noted during the March 5th ACI presentation, screen time concerns are addressed in Policy Implementation Procedures (PIPs) and spring meetings with families. More information can be found at <http://www.apsva.us/engage/>*

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