

Progress Memo

To: Advisory Council on Teaching and Learning & APS Department on Teaching and Learning

From: Early Childhood Advisory Committee

cc: Elaine Perkins, Early Childhood Coordinator

Date: December 4, 2020

Re: Progress memo on distance learning

1. What is working well for teaching and learning?

Topic:

[Adapting, Growing, Learning and Changing

Information source:

Feedback discussed during ECAC meetings. Committee members gathered information from other stakeholder groups such as PTAs, Early Childhood Planning Team members, Early Childhood Focus Group, etc.

Description:

Our committee noted across all groups in APS (administrators, teachers, parents and students) a universal willingness to grow, change and adapt since beginning virtual learning in March 2020. This dynamic mindset in this unexpected virtual learning landscape has had a positive impact on virtual instruction.

In addition to formal professional learning opportunities, school teams continue to collaborate with one another in order to discuss challenges, brainstorm possible solutions and implement new practices to positively impact student learning. Across the board, teachers and instructional assistants are eager to adapt, grow, learn and change their practices to ensure their students have the most engaging and successful learning experience possible.

Topic:

Embracing new opportunities for building community

Information source:

Feedback discussed during ECAC meetings. Committee members gathered information from other stakeholder groups such as PTAs, Early Childhood Planning Team members, Early Childhood Focus Group, etc.

Description:

The virtual learning environment has provided a unique opportunity to build a classroom community where classroom doors have been “opened” to families and caregivers. Since children are learning from home, parents have had more visibility into daily learning than would happen during a typical school year. This has provided parents with insights into their child’s learning as well as the curriculum their child is exploring. It has invited new opportunities for parent/teacher collaboration and for parent engagement/involvement.

Though not together face to face, through regular synchronous instruction, consistent routines and expectations, and an emphasis on social/emotional learning, teachers have successfully built strong classroom communities.

Additionally, our committee heard from both parents and APS staff that our youngest learners are logging on, excited and eager to see their teachers and one another each day.

2. What is not working well for teaching and learning?

Topic:

Engagement

Information source:

Feedback discussed during ECAC meetings. Committee members gathered information from other stakeholder groups such as PTAs, Early Childhood Planning Team members, Early Childhood Focus Group, etc.

Description:

The committee identified a need for increased engagement across multiple realms:

The committee heard from parents and staff that many students are successfully logging on to synchronous learning and engaging throughout the morning. However, these young learners are becoming less engaged as the day goes on, some not returning to synchronous learning after lunch. Staff report that even during in-person instruction, early childhood students often get fatigued as the day wears on. However, the virtual environment limits the tools that teachers have at their disposal to keep youngsters engaged throughout the second half of the day.

All stakeholders emphasized the need for less synchronous whole group instruction in favor of more synchronous small group instruction. In virtual learning, the whole group setting is more challenging to actively engage all students simultaneously. Parents and staff reported that students have more opportunities to participate and share, get personalized feedback from teachers, and interact with their peers in small group settings. These were viewed as integral to keeping children focused and engaged as well as offered students the chance to practice critical social/emotional skills learned during SEL lessons.

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| Topic: Materials | Information source: Feedback discussed during ECAC meetings. Committee members gathered information from other stakeholder groups such as PTAs, Early Childhood Planning Team members, Early Childhood Focus Group, etc. |
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Description:

While all early childhood students were provided with home learning kits and iPads for their distance learning, many parents have requested more off-screen supplemental hands-on materials.

Currently, when physical materials are available for students, families are asked to go to the school to pick them up. Going to the school at a designated day/time to pick up the materials can be challenging for families.

3. What are implications and/or solutions for teaching & learning for the longer term?

Moving forward, the committee submits the following suggestions:

- To the extent possible, adjust schedules so that reading and math instruction takes place during the morning hours when the students are most available for learning.
- Encourage the use of small group learning. Consider using all available APS personnel, even those who aren't typically tasked with direct instruction to supervise small group work (such as independent work, read aloud, unstructured social interaction, facilitated games, collaborative play, etc) Moreover, the committee proposes exploring the possibility of utilizing non-APS volunteer adults, such as parents, caregivers, grandparents, and mentors to support small groups. This could ease the burden on teachers as well as provide opportunities for students to develop positive and meaningful relationships with trusted adults in their communities.
- Our county has an abundance of resources that we could look to capitalize on in order to benefit our students. We are not currently taking advantage of all possible partnerships that could provide students with additional academic and/or social-emotional support. Seeking out and facilitating partnerships, with corporations, non-profit organizations as well as private citizens could provide students with additional opportunities and ease the burden on the district resources and teachers/APS staff. Our committee urges APS to consider a "One Arlington/One community" centralized approach to recruiting and matching donations/volunteers to the areas of greatest needs.
- Consider having teachers/APS staff/parent and community volunteers deliver materials to families' homes in a socially distanced manner. This could simultaneously ease the burden of material pick up on families and also continue to strengthen the bond between students and their teachers/broader school community.