

## MEMORANDUM

**TO:** Arlington School Board  
**FROM:** English Language Arts Advisory Committee  
**DATE:** January 4, 2023  
**SUBJECT:** Draft Report and Recommendations

**COMMITTEE CHAIR/CO- OR VICE CHAIR:** Kate Merrill (Chair), Mike Miller (Co-chair)

**COMMITTEE MEMBERS:** Rasha AlMahroos, Linda Arnsbarger, Cloe Chin, Jamie B. Gillan, Katherine Godesky, Reginald Goeke, Kristin Hauser, Gail Perry, Carolyn Sheedy

**STAFF LIAISON(S):** Sarah Cruz and Lori Silver

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**Recommendation 1: APS should create and implement a long-term plan for writing instruction that spans K-12 and guarantees that secondary students produce longer, multi-draft, research-driven writing supported by substantive teacher feedback. This must include focused instruction on writing mechanics in the lower grades.**

One of the most common complaints that our committee hears from parents is that their students are not being given consistent writing instruction that includes meaningful assignments and actionable feedback. In APS, teachers are largely on their own to develop writing assignments and expectations for their classes. Although some teachers may be providing rigorous writing instruction, this is not consistent across APS. Students and families report extreme variations from school to school, and sometimes even from class to class within the same school. APS alumni feedback that our committee gathered in 2019 suggested that APS graduates do not feel prepared for the rigors of college writing. The alumni suggested that APS consider more research-paper assignments, more teacher feedback, and more writing experiences in general to better prepare students for college and career. Further, anecdotal stories suggest that some students entering the AP and IB programs feel unprepared for the extent of writing required in those programs.

We therefore recommend that APS create a long-term plan for research-based writing instruction across elementary and secondary grades that includes professional learning for teachers. This plan should culminate with the requirement that secondary APS students produce longer, multi-draft, research-driven writing supported by substantive teacher feedback. In particular, these writing assignments should meet the following criteria:

- A. The writings should have clear expectations as to length. For example, 9th graders might write 3-5 page (750-1250 word) writings that incorporate and cite at least 4 sources, 10th graders might write 4-6 page (1000-1500 word) writings that incorporate and cite at least 6 sources, 11th graders might write 6-8 page (1500-2000 word) writings that incorporate and cite at least 8 sources, and 12th graders might write 8-10 page (2000-2500 word) writings that incorporate and cite at least 10 sources.

- B. The writings should evolve over the course of multiple drafts to encourage revision. The revision between drafts should be guided by substantial, qualitative written feedback from teachers.
- C. The writings should be argumentative / persuasive, where students develop and support their own arguments in response to the arguments of others.
- D. Students should have significant choice in their topic, argument, and genre.

To prepare students for these writing assignments in high school, students must be provided with more explicit instruction in elementary and middle school on the fundamentals of writing and writing mechanics, including grammar, sentence structure, punctuation, spelling, and outlining and organization of papers. By the end of middle school, APS should ensure that all students are effective in the mechanics of writing to prepare them for lengthier writing assignments in high school.

We further recommend that APS create and maintain accountability structures so that we do not continue to see such vast discrepancies between schools and classrooms. There is simply no excuse for students graduating APS having never received substantive writing instruction and feedback. We recognize that teachers may need wide-ranging professional development in order to deliver high-quality writing instruction, which APS will need to plan for as well.

Budgetary implications: Funding for professional learning is included in the ELA department budget; creating a plan for writing instruction should be a current function of the ELA department.

This recommendation aligns with the following core values and goals in the Strategic Plan:

- *Core Values:* Equity, Inclusivity, Excellence, Innovation
- *Goal:* Student Success
  - *Strategies:*
    - Embed the 5Cs (critical thinking, creative thinking, collaboration, communication, and citizenship skills) into curriculum and instruction.
    - Deliver curriculum through innovative and relevant instruction that is differentiated to meet the diverse needs of each student.

**Recommendation 2: APS should hire four additional district level literacy coaches (two for elementary and two for secondary) in order to provide teachers with job-embedded professional learning.**

APS has proven success with the current grant-funded one elementary literacy coach and one secondary literacy coach. Our recommendation is that APS add an additional two coaches per level to enhance the ability of the ELA office to provide job-embedded professional learning for teachers. Teachers continue to request more differentiated support, which a coach can provide. The professional learning that the coach will provide to teachers will include data analysis, diagnostics and intervention planning, writing instruction, providing student feedback, explicit/systematic phonics instruction, and curriculum implementation. Literacy coaches will also be able to model instructional strategies for teachers.

Currently, there is simply not enough time on the calendar for professional learning to take place (only one full day and two early release days). Research shows that in order to see a measurable impact on instruction, teachers require consistent and actionable professional learning that is embedded in their practice and includes ongoing support (Yoon et al., 2007). Rather than adding more release days to the calendar, a literacy coach can provide job-embedded support to teachers during the school day, including cross-disciplinary support and consultation. This can include modeling high-quality instruction and providing targeted professional development during CLT or planning time. With the new resource adoption, this type of consistent support is critical for both new and veteran teachers. Furthermore, literacy coaches can also provide professional learning in support of our first recommendation on writing instruction.

Instructional coaches are a high-value investment for the APS teaching force. Research shows that instructional coaching has a statistically significant, positive impact on student achievement, as noted by M. Kraft and colleagues in *The Effect of Teacher Coaching on Instruction and Achievement: A Meta-Analysis of the Causal Evidence*.

Budgetary Implications: 4 additional certified staff positions to the ELA budget.

This recommendation aligns with the following core values and goals in the Strategic Plan:

- *Core Values:* Equity, Inclusivity, Excellence, Innovation
- *Goal:* Student Success
  - *Strategies:*
    - Embed the 5Cs (critical thinking, creative thinking, collaboration, communication, and citizenship skills) into curriculum and instruction.
    - Deliver curriculum through innovative and relevant instruction that is differentiated to meet the diverse needs of each student.
- *Goal:* Engaged Workforce
  - *Strategies:*
    - Recruit, retain, and advance high-quality employees.
    - Provide growth opportunities by implementing a competency-based professional learning and evaluation framework inclusive of all staff members.

Sources:

Kraft, M.A., Blazar, D., Hogan\*, D. (2018). *The effect of teaching coaching on instruction and achievement: A meta-analysis of the causal evidence*. *Review of Educational Research*, 88(4), 547-588.

Yoon, K. S., Duncan, T., Lee, S. W.-Y., Scarloss, B., & Shapley, K. (2007). *Reviewing the evidence on how teacher professional development affects student achievement* (Issues & Answers Report, REL 2007–No. 033). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory Southwest. Retrieved from <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs>