



February 9, 2023

Dear Dr. Kay-Wyatt, Chair Alderton & Alexandria City School Board Members,

As part of its advocacy efforts, the Alexandria Parent Teacher Association Council (PTAC) sought input from local PTA units on the proposed ACPS Fiscal Year (FY) 2024 Combined Funds Budget. The input amplified the criticality of investing in the recruitment and retention of high-quality staff, improving school safety, and providing robust mental health services to students, in alignment with PTAC's top priorities for the 2022-2023 school year (see PTAC letter dated August 31, 2022). Accordingly, PTAC implores the ACPS School Board to maximize investment in the following areas in the FY 2024 Combined Funds budget:

- **Retain and Hire High-Quality Staff.** Teacher turnover in the City of Alexandria is higher than surrounding districts and national averages, and ACPS has gained hundreds of students at the high school level since 2020 but kept resources for teaching positions flat, causing class sizes and demands on teachers to increase. Local units tell PTAC their classrooms are too crowded for students to thrive, regardless of whether they can physically accommodate more students, and their teachers are overwhelmed and overworked. Accordingly, the FY 2024 budget should fully fund principal FTE requests, add additional instructional staff, counseling, and social work positions, eliminate more than one bottom step, and increase the market rate adjustment from 2.5 percent to 5.5 percent—consistent with the November 2022 Washington-Arlington-Alexandria rate of inflation.
  - PTA units have expressed concern that ACPS pay is too low to retain staff and attract applicants to vacant positions. Starting pay for Instructional Assistants (IAs) in ACPS is \$17/hr, as compared to \$23/hr in neighboring Arlington. Approximately 10 percent of IAs with 20+ years of tenure in ACPS make less than \$40,000 a year. One PTA reported that a vacant parent liaison position with a salary range of \$29,000-\$33,000 a year has attracted no qualified applicants all school year. The School Board should recognize the value of these critical staffers that promote Equity for All through increased pay.

- PTA units flagged concerns that grade-level enrollment projections are just slightly below the threshold that would warrant the funding of an additional FTE and reduce class size, and below grade level 2022-2023 actual enrollment. To enhance transparency, PTAC highly recommends that the table on Elementary Student and Homeroom Teacher Projections in future ACPS Budget Requests include grade-level actual enrollment figures for the prior fiscal year (see page 142 of the FY 2024 proposed budget.)
- One school reported that 4th graders with significant learning loss due to COVID are struggling to catch up in a classroom of 27 students that leaves little room for individualized attention, especially since the sole teacher is not supported by an instructional assistant.
- **Keep our Children Safe.** Too many students, staff, and families reported in the ACPS Equity Climate Survey that they do not feel safe at school, a fundamental prerequisite to learning. Only 58 percent of students and 78 percent of staff said they felt safe at school. ACPS can and must do more to strengthen safety by keeping weapons out of our schools and ensuring that all staff safety positions are filled. In the 2021-2022 school year, 28 incidents that included weapons were reported as part of the Incident Report Protocol, and anecdotal reports continue to surface of weapons entering facilities. The School Board should prioritize investment in weapons abatement technologies to detect weapons and prevent them from entering a school. It must also prioritize staffing security vacancies, including the six currently vacant positions. The budget must also ensure that children can get to and from school safely and prioritize staff to support both pedestrian and bike education and Safe Routes to School program coordination.
- **Provide Robust Mental Health Support.** Students continue to struggle emotionally from the pandemic, and the loss and disconnection of quarantine continues to impact students. By extension, teachers report that the challenges many students face have made their work far more difficult, contributing to retention challenges. Schools without full-time psychologists and too few counselors report to PTAC that staffing levels are insufficient to meet the high demand for mental health support. The budget should prioritize at least one full time psychologist per school and ensure staffing levels can meet demand without long wait times. Special attention should be on staffing levels at our large secondary and K-8 schools to ensure robust counseling, behavioral support, therapeutic interventions, and social work support to enable students and teachers to focus on learning. For those students who pose a threat to

themselves or others, we urge the School Board to create more academic options for them outside of the classroom, whether online, after school hours, in an expanded Chance for Change campus, or in a second facility that can accommodate middle school students.

PTAC appreciates the investments in the proposed budget that advance these priorities as well as your further consideration of these budget priorities for FY 2024.

Thank you,

Alexandria PTA Council Executive Board 2022-2023

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