



December 8, 2023

Dear Dr. Melanie Kay-Wyatt, Dr. Michelle Rief, and Esteemed Members of the School Board,

The Alexandria City Council of PTAs' mission is to make every child's potential a reality by engaging and empowering families and communities to advocate for all children. **Today, we are calling for a closer partnership between Alexandria City Public Schools (ACPS) school administrators and ACPS PTA units to create safer, more enhanced playgrounds that address the diverse needs and preferences of our students and their families for the benefit of all our children.**

Studies have shown that access and use of high-quality school playgrounds can positively impact our children's well-being, development, and school success. Having a safe, accessible and fun play space for all students during the day ensures our children can exercise, build social skills alongside their peers, and remain focused in the classroom. There is significant data linking exercise and time outside to brain growth and emotional regulation. We also believe our children will be more motivated to use their playgrounds and reap their benefits when families' perspectives are also incorporated into playground plans.

Prompted by many of our PTA units' desire to help repair or replace playground equipment at their schools, we have been closely following the process for school playground assessments and repairs across the city since spring break 2021. We strongly believe that our school playgrounds should be maintained and replaced in ways that create equitable opportunities for all students to use these spaces throughout the school day, as well as with their families and friends during non school hours. We also believe that our families should be given more opportunities to learn about the playground process so they can better advocate for playground improvements at their schools.

We are proposing the following:

The school facilities team/administrators engage parents/PTAs regarding playgrounds at individual schools in discussions about the timing of assessments, repairs, and replacements so there is a better understanding of the process. A clear effort should be made to educate parents about how to alert ACPS about damaged equipment and other conditions or features that could be improved to create better play spaces for students.

Once assessments are complete, **the results of playground assessments for each school need to be shared in a timely manner with the respective school's PTA unit. A school facilities team representative should be available to answer any questions, preferably during a PTA meeting or school-wide event.** Parents should have accessible avenues beyond school board meetings to stay informed about the status of school playgrounds. Relying solely on these meetings poses challenges; many parents lack the time or ability to sift through lengthy sessions and associated documents, often spanning hours and lacking language translation. Their comfort in discussing concerns and ideas at their "home base" should be respected. Alternative communication channels such as PTA meetings or school-located forums will enable parents to better understand the condition of the playgrounds and actively participate in advocating for necessary improvements.

While prioritizing playgrounds with the greatest assessed damage is essential for safety reasons, we also propose **fast-tracking the repair and replacement of playgrounds with the most significant usage.** This approach ensures that improvements directly benefit the largest number of students and community members and allows repairs to happen before damage becomes too severe for that larger population to use safely.

The School Board should ensure that playground assessments take into account the total usage of each playground, both by ACPS students during school hours and by the surrounding community after school hours. Many of our school playgrounds are utilized by students on weekends and by their peers in their neighborhoods during non school hours or as part of city recreational programs. **In some parts of our city, playgrounds on school grounds are the only playgrounds available for children.**

Recognizing the unique needs of each school and its community will result in more accurate and impactful improvements. For example, a school with more than 600 students and an attached rec center, such as William Ramsay Elementary School, has significantly different needs than a school with only half that number.

In alignment with ACPS' attention to providing a truly inclusive educational experience to students with disabilities, we ask that not only all schools have ADA accessible equipment and accessible pathways for students to play but that the district **strive to include playground equipment that allows children who use wheelchairs, children who have other mobility issues, and children who are on the autism spectrum to join in recess.** As ACPS moves to repair and replace damaged and unsafe equipment according to assessments, we ask that it incorporates inclusive and accessible playground equipment into its design and construction. Our special education and DEI chairs in PTAC and our PTA units could be great partners in the design of these spaces.

We are aware that our requests take time and in some cases, increased funding or resources. PTAC and its PTA units are prepared to advocate for resources needed to make these playground improvements a reality. We are also willing to work with ACPS to identify and

facilitate private partnerships to support needed improvements. We look forward to engaging in further discussions with you in the coming months about increased collaboration with you regarding our school playgrounds for the benefit of our entire community.

Sincerely,

Alexandria City Council of PTAs (PTAC) Executive Board 2023-2024

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