



January 19, 2022

Dear Dr. Hutchings, Chair Alderton & Alexandria City School Board Members:

As part of its advocacy efforts, the Alexandria Parent Teacher Association Council (PTAC) recently sought input via a survey from members of local PTA units on budget and policy priorities for Alexandria City Public Schools (ACPS). The PTAC survey, which closed on January 15th, received 116 responses. 83 percent of respondents identified themselves as members of an ACPS PTA. The largest number of responses came from George Washington Middle School, Naomi Brooks Elementary, and Patrick Henry K-8. Responses were received from parents and/or staff of all ACPS schools. The survey results have informed PTAC's position on budget priorities.

In fiscal year 2023, **ACPS should prioritize increasing salaries and benefits to hire and retain the best teachers and staff, reduce class size, hire new positions to support student achievement, and enhance mental health and counseling services.** The following responses from survey takers are illustrative of this prioritization.

- *"Please invest in our teachers. We desperately need them and want to retain the outstanding talent that we already have. Salaries and benefits must be increased to match the cost of living in this area."*
- *"Students are struggling to manage their emotions at all levels. We need a robust investment in mental health counselors."*
- *"Our teachers and staff members have been through a lot and need as much support as we can give them. Additionally, we need to make sure students and their families have access to mental health and counseling services as the pandemic enters the third year and doesn't appear to be ending anytime soon. We must be serving the whole child."*
- *"Tutoring, hiring more substitutes, incentivizing substitutes in order to get high quality employees in our kids' classrooms."*

ACPS should prioritize grounds and building improvements. When asked what facilities-related projects survey takers believe should be completed at their school, several school-specific themes emerged: HVAC and ventilation at Charles Barrett; timely construction at Douglas MacArthur; HVAC, mold, and modernization at George Washington; playground maintenance at John Adams; and air quality at Mt. Vernon. To quote one survey taker: *“Schools shouldn’t fall apart in order to be renovated. Improvements should be done dynamically and aggressively.”*

ACPS should consider building and grounds infrastructure in its family equity work. Ferdinand T. Day’s community has voiced concerns to PTAC about families not being able to access the school playground during off-hours, which poses a barrier to the development of social connections and a sense of community. Meanwhile, the nearby John Adams playground lacks sufficient maintenance to support two schools. Future facilities and grounds projects should be developed with an eye toward ensuring that families across the district have access to equal academic, recreational and social opportunities.

ACPS should ensure that all students in need of additional academic support receive after school tutoring. Parents noted that bussing needs to be provided so all students can equitably receive after school programs, especially tutoring. **ACPS should ensure that students have equitable access to a wide variety of onsite after-school activities, including clubs,** even in schools without PTAs that organize and provide financial support for such activities. Survey takers commented about inequitable access to after school clubs and programs within ACPS.

The ACPS School Board should develop creative measures to hear and seek input from all parent voices on crucial policy decisions. Such measures could include student roundtables, office hours, community forums in each district, community walks, visits by each School Board member to every school (not just the ones to which they are assigned), participation in PTA meetings and cultural competency training for families, more community surveys (including ones specifically geared toward our Special Education families), lunch visits to see community needs first hand, issue-based task forces (like Special Education and Dual Language) made up of stakeholders qualified to speak on various issues, etc.

Survey takers also support **streamlining ACPS communications** so families have a reliable, one-stop shop for the latest news, as well as the **development of clear calendar planning procedures and guidance,** working with current and past calendar committee members and **public input.** Survey takers commented about a lack of

communication on the calendar, school starting earlier yet extending through mid-to-late June, the absence of snow days, and too many long weekends.

Survey takers support ACPS expanding foreign language learning opportunities at the elementary school level, to include expanding enrollment in dual language programs. Parents noted that foreign language should be part of the required curriculum in elementary schools, and students are missing out on the most critical years for language learning. To quote a Patrick Henry parent, *“Why are our kids in multilingual schools and don’t learn new languages??? Fail.”* Parents at John Adams, Mount Vernon, and Hammond also noted that they would like to see investment in the Dual Language central office so there is more than one person responsible for the programming, professional development, resources, and curriculum across four schools.

PTAC offers the following takeaways from survey takers to inform ACPS and School Board safety protocols and COVID mitigation efforts moving forward:

- 88 percent of respondents strongly agreed/agreed that ACPS should make antigen rapid self-test kits and N95, KN95 or KF94 mask widely available to ACPS staff and students;
- 80 percent of respondents strongly agreed/agreed that ACPS should make an outdoor lunch option available at all schools, weather permitting, to mitigate the spread of COVID;
- 77 percent of respondents strongly agreed/agreed that ACPS health personnel should administer the COVID vaccine, including boosters, to ACPS students in school buildings during the school day with parental consent;
- 72 percent of respondents strongly agreed/agreed that ACPS should work with the Alexandria Health Department to prioritize expedited contact tracing;
- 63 percent of respondents strongly agreed/agreed that ACPS should require a negative coronavirus test for every student and staffer returning after an extended break.

PTAC appreciates your consideration of these budget and policy priorities. We hope that this community input will inform your review of the fiscal year 2023 Combined Funds and Capital Improvements Program budgets and pandemic-related efforts.

Thank you,

Alexandria PTA Council Executive Board 2021-22

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