

3/11/24 Public Comments Given by:  
Maureen McNulty

Good evening Mayor Wilson, Vice Mayor Jackson, and City Council  
Members.

My name is Maureen McNulty. I am pleased to have the opportunity to  
speak with you tonight about my #1 City budget priority, the funding of  
Alexandria City Public Schools.

My husband & I have been Alexandria homeowners for the last 20  
years. Our two children are AC Titans. I have been a member of an  
ACPS PTA for the last 17 years and have served as an officer in various  
roles,

including President of the Alexandria PTA Council. I've been proud of  
the work our PTAs have done in our school communities. I think

Alexandria has the most committed and generous families in the  
Commonwealth.

I'm here today because I believe in the transformative power of a strong public school system. Great public schools change lives and ensure our children reach their maximum potential. Strong public schools are the cornerstone of a thriving, livable community and a vital ingredient in economic development and sustainability. If we want Alexandria to attract top-tier business investment, we need our public schools to also be top notch.

I understand the enormity of the School Board's budget ask and I appreciate the difficult choices City Council must make. I work at the Mark Center so I see first-hand our City's pressing social service needs. However, we as parent volunteers, would not be here tonight, if we didn't think this request was essential. We are at a pivotal moment in our community----we either choose to stand behind our educators and school staff and fully support their needs, or we continue with the status quo. And let me tell you, the status quo in ACPS isn't sustainable.

With one of the highest percentages of English Language Learners & students living in poverty in NOVA, ACPS is tasked with not only educating a complex student population, but also must do so while navigating a myriad of deep-rooted social and racial inequities that plague diverse American communities. Additionally, our schools are dealing with the post-pandemic realities of absenteeism and poor student behavior. So it's no surprise that our teacher vacancy rate is higher than neighboring school districts. Teachers often leave ACPS to work in less demanding school environments for equivalent or more pay. Additionally, due to previous step freezes, our most experienced teachers find their salaries are higher if they leave to teach in other districts.

At PTAC, we have heard countless stories of teachers leaving mid-year for less demanding opportunities in other school districts. Or schools starting with no teachers assigned to a class. My 10<sup>th</sup> grader had no statistics teacher for the first four weeks of the school year. In 8<sup>th</sup> grade,

my son's Spanish teacher left third quarter and another teacher stepped in to finish the school year. He had As & Bs for the first three quarters and then received a failing grade from this new teacher.

So, for me there is no doubt this endless revolving door of teachers negatively impacts student outcomes.

Our School Board understands the dire situation confronting ACPS with retaining and attracting high quality educators. They asked for an additional 4% increase in funding from City Council to ensure ACPS teachers are being paid as competitively as its neighboring districts. We urge you to adopt their budget, and prioritize our most powerful and transformative City resource, our public schools. It's time to shake up the status quo.

Thank you for your consideration and everything you do for our wonderful City.

Dear Mayor Wilson, City Council Members, and City Manager Parajon,

I'm here to express my strong support for fully funding our public schools and approving the school board's proposed budget request. As an Alexandria resident and the parent of two children in ACPS, I believe that investing in education is essential for the well-being and future success of our children and city as a whole.

I'm proud to live in Alexandria to send my kids to Alexandria Public Schools. It is a joy to see them learn and thrive in the Spanish dual language immersion program, and participate in ACPS sports and music programs. It makes me so proud to turn on NPR and hear stories of our ACHS students celebrating Black History Month, or to watch School Board meetings with student representatives sharing their experiences including a student who arrived from Afghanistan only a few years ago.

Much of the world has moved on from COVID, and federal COVID funding is ending. What hasn't ended is the impact of COVID on our students, teachers and schools. Other regional and global events continue to impact our classrooms, as well. Virginia state funding lags behind national state funding for education and faces even further cuts. Students with hopes and dreams for a better future arrive in our schools every day.

Teachers are on the front lines of how all of this impact our community every day. Our educators teach with trauma informed approaches, offer enhanced social emotional learning lessons and supports, and differentiate every lesson to classrooms of students who had varying levels of access and support during years of interrupted schooling. They encourage families and kids to send students to school during an unprecedented time of school absences. They take Narcan training and they guide students through active shooter drills. I don't have to tell you that they are heroes day in and day out. And while it is crucially important that we support teacher training programs and initiatives to bring new educators into the field, we must support our experienced educators who are in our classrooms now and not lose them to surrounding districts. These educators have the experience to mentor and guide new teachers and to keep the culture and commitment to our kids going day in and day out.

While all of this is true and important, so is the reality that this budget request, while a sacrifice for our city now, is crucial to deal with and isn't something that can be kicked down the road. I'm aware that the city has many projects to support and this is a challenging budget environment. We are lucky to have a city council who supports public education, and we know that your advocacy at the state and national level echoes all of the concerns that we face in our city and schools.

I recognize that we face a chicken or the egg dilemma. Attracting business and commercial investment in our city is a priority to reduce the tax burden on our residential base. We need strong schools to attract business investment in our city. I would argue that Investing in

teachers now will ultimately benefit all of us and help us increase the commercial tax break, but we have to show them that they are vital partners in making this happen now.

This may mean putting other initiatives on hold and raising taxes. I think we need to stand up and say that our teachers are worth fighting for. They're fighting for our families and kids every day.

I urge you to prioritize education funding. Investing in our children's education is an investment in the future prosperity of our city.

## PUBLIC STATEMENT GIVEN BY META VIERS

Good morning. Thank you for the opportunity to speak before you today.

My name is Meta Viers. I'm the mother of two ACPS students on the West End. I'm also the proud president of the Alexandria Council of PTAs (or PTAC).

I am here to advocate for the full funding of the ACPS school board approved FY 2025 budget.

In my role as PTAC president, I have interacted with many parents, educators, and community members, who are deeply invested in the success of our children both in and beyond the classroom.

I'm now starkly aware of the challenges faced by our schools: Overcrowding, teacher retention and recruitment, ability to meet the needs of an influx of refugee families, and the needs of children requiring special education resources.

PTAs, composed of dedicated volunteers, have stepped up to meet some of these needs through initiatives like teacher grants and fundraisers. And I have seen amazing things happen because of those efforts in support of our teachers and students.

But those are short-term solutions. We must work together to find sustainable solutions. True progress requires collective action and investment from ALL stakeholders. We've seen it happen in our city before on other projects and commitments. We can do the same for our public schools.

I saw a ray of hope when I saw some of the additions to the ACPS budget. Many of them address those crucial challenges I mentioned. Adding more staff who speak Dari, for instance, would make a huge impact for our West End schools in adding support for our Afghan families new to the area. I didn't see one suggested position that would NOT be needed.

Funding is a crucial piece of the puzzle. While it may not solve every issue, it's a significant step towards providing the support our teachers and students deserve. And that coveted Equity for All we love to talk about.

Our teachers, who have weathered many challenges, including a global pandemic, deserve more than just our gratitude or the occasional luncheon. They deserve salaries that reflect their dedication and allow them to thrive in our community.

Recent reports showed Alexandria teachers are third when it comes to teacher salaries in the area. Initially, that seems pretty good. But take into account the cost of inflation and rising cost of living. Then, consider that some teachers aren't just single adults - they have families. Families like yours. Anyone who is the head of a household knows just how differently your finances look when you have dependents.

Passion can drive a teacher's commitment for a while, but it can't pay for those basic necessities. They need those so they focus on what they do best - nurturing and educating our children.

I believe it's imperative that we find a way to fund the suggested 2% cost of living increase or restore a missing salary step for our most experienced and valued teachers. The city manager's budget currently does not include either.

We're seeing a high rate of vacancies across our schools, not just in certain parts of town. A 6% vacancy doesn't seem like that much. But as of last week, the Virginia Department of Education, showed there were 50 unfilled teacher positions at ACPS. If each of those was a homeroom teacher with at least 25 kids in the classroom - which is pretty standard now - that means more than 1200 students have had their learning disrupted.

When you look at specialized teaching, it's shocking. This school year, there is a reported 12.6% vacancy rate reported for special education. The needs are different and they are crucial for students who need those services. We must have those resources.

We know that the shrinking teacher pipeline means other areas are getting aggressive and what they're offering encourages some of our teachers to leave mid-year. And it's getting harder to replace them. That's tough on our students in the short-term and potentially the long-term. When students don't get what they need to succeed, we end up paying in other ways - coincidentally, through many of our city services.

Would we rather pay some now or do we want to pay later?

I urge you to put our children and teachers first. Let's create a city where our teachers feel valued, our children receive the support they need to thrive, and our city flourishes as a beacon of education and opportunity.

Thank you.



**Catie Brownback**

**Public Comment-Budget 3/11/2024**

Hello. My name is Catie Brownback and I am the parent of two James K. Polk Elementary students as well as one future Polk Owl. I am also the PTAC VP of Advocacy for the current school year. Thank you for the opportunity to speak out in support of fully funding the full proposed ACPS budget.

I fully recognize that the city is facing a difficult year. However, without a strong public school system we run the risk of negatively impacting the entire city. Engaged, inspiring teachers keep students engaged and reaching their full potential. We are facing a nationwide teacher shortage and every year it is harder to both recruit and retain teachers in ACPS. We must remain competitive with the surrounding jurisdictions in order to keep our teachers in Alexandria, all of whom are proposing significant cost of living, step, or even bonuses for years of service.

My oldest is in 5th grade, and we have been with ACPS for the past 6 years. I love the diverse and varied experience both he and, more recently, my daughter in first grade, have experienced at their large Title 1, CEP school of over 850 students. We have been lucky that in all but one year, they have both had qualified teachers leading their classes and helping them to grow. We have also been sad to watch a beloved teacher leave each year to take a job closer to where they live at a school with more manageable class sizes. We're nervous about next year, when my son moves up to Hammond Middle school because we've heard the stories from friends about their children not having a teacher for a class at the middle school for months. The ACPS vacancy rate went from 2.8% for 2022-2023 to 6.6% for the 2023-2024 school year. I'm afraid to hear how high that number will go by 2024-2025 if we don't competitively and fairly compensate our staff.

In order to keep our city strong and enticing to both people and businesses, we need to keep our school system strong by fully funding its needs. Underfunded schools will lead to higher dropout rates, lower performance on state testing (leading to lower desirability to live in Alexandria), increased social service needs, and reduced workforce readiness. As we continue to increase affordable housing options in the city(as we should), we will also be increasing enrollment in ACPS. With rising cost of living for everyone, we can't expect the budget for schools to stay flat.

Please help keep Alexandria a thriving city long term by fully funding our schools. Thank you for your time.

Mayor Wilson, Vice Mayor Jackson and City Council members - good morning.

My name is Missy Estabrook. I'm Past President of the Alexandria PTA Council and a proud mother of two boys at ACPS.

I join with the many parents and teachers who have shared their concerns about the City Manager not including the School Board's additions in the City's proposed FY25 budget. I'd like to address the items specific to ACHS and GWMS where both of my boys have incredibly dedicated administrators and teachers but for whom the challenges of working in public education are becoming increasingly untenable.

If you do not fully fund the School Board approved budget, our nearly 5000 high school students will not receive:

- > A full-time College & Career Counselor;
- > A full-time Psychologist; or,
- > A full-time Athletic Trainer.

Meanwhile, our middle schoolers will not receive the additional Dean so desperately needed to help manage that already overcrowded school.

In addition, none of our teachers will receive the 2% Cost of Living increase or the restoration of a missing salary step for our most experienced and valued teachers.

However, those teachers would receive those benefits if they left ACPS to go to neighboring districts and that is exactly what they'll do, leaving more students in the position of my 11th grader who did not have a math teacher for the first THREE MONTHS of school. Not surprisingly, his grade floundered but since a teacher was hired in November, he's had all As. That's great news for him - and a quick shout out to Mr. John Maes for making it possible - but this isn't about the grades of one student at one school. This is about a City Budget that should mirror the priorities and needs of our City - and no need is more significant than the education of our children.

I understand that Council is facing a difficult budget year with decreased revenue projections and numerous funding demands all designed to help Alexandria thrive, but strong public schools are an essential component of a community's economic vitality. If offsets cannot be found in the City's \$911.3 million operating budget to cover the additional \$11 million needed to fully fund ACPS, then taxes should be raised and I fully support that. Whichever path you choose to get us there, I'm confident you share PTAC's goal of helping ACPS students realize their full potential and bringing families and educators together to make our community stronger.

Please show your full support for Alexandria City Public Schools by FULLY FUNDING the ACPS FY 2025 Approved Combined Funds Budget.