

Arlington Education Matters (AEM) School Board Candidate Survey

Thank you for taking the time to answer important community questions that have been the most discussed within the AEM Facebook group. Please return your answers by May 1st and we will post the responses on AEM. We recommend keeping the answers as short and bulleted when possible.



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1. Improving Literacy in APS has been a School Board Priority for the last few years. Based on the data points presented below, what do you think are APS' Reading Program strengths and areas that need additional focus? How can APS continue to narrow the Achievement Gap.

As of December 2016, APS recognized 3,762 students as having at least one disability. Based on the following May 2016 SOL Fail Rates for these students, what will be your focus as a school board member with regard to improving the academic outcomes for our Students with Disabilities?

By-grade statistics are singular points in time and do not really help us evaluate whether, or to what extent, specific interventions are truly working. Test scores reflect a different group of students each year, and there can be a fair degree of turnover in students from year to year.

I have long-advocated for longitudinal data and analysis to evaluate the progress of each individual student over time. This would provide better insight into methods that may be the most beneficial to different students, and also show whether we are investing our resources as effectively as we can be.

I would also like to look at data for student subgroups by school to determine if instruction across the system is equally effective. Additionally, staff has reported that ESL students begin to approach the level of their peers as they acquire a sufficient level of English proficiency. I would ask staff to report on observations or research identifying any similar factors relating to economically disadvantaged students that might provide insight into specific areas to target.

For students with disabilities specifically, many parents I've spoken with have indicated a need for more Orton-Gillingham (O-G) instructors. Having more teachers trained in O-G methods in each school could benefit many students even before a reading disability is identified and could be introduced into regular reading instruction to reach students earlier.

But not all students, not even all students with dyslexia, benefit from the same approaches. All of our schools and programs need to be able to provide the various accommodations and services students need in order to foster greater inclusivity within classrooms, within and across schools, and to allow students to thrive in the least restrictive environments possible. We need to provide more flexible planning factors and consistency in resources, services, and policies from school to school.

To minimize achievement disparities, some of the things I would look at are:

- summer programs to minimize summer learning loss
- ways to increase preschool opportunities (Arlington's Creative Preschoolers program, arrangements with private providers, our large employers, etc.)
- pre-first grade classes and other programs that give students additional time to develop the vocabulary, literacy, and/or English proficiency that will facilitate their learning and minimize disparities with their peers
- exploring ways to work with our public library system to encourage more families from diverse backgrounds to participate in programs and increase their exposure to books, which many lower-income families may not have access to at home
- providing more inclusive environments and more socioeconomically diverse academic and social experiences that expose children to vocabulary and academic vernacular and experiences their more affluent peers are exposed to during their early development (Academic Partner Schools, joint field trips, joint PTA events, etc.)

3. What instructional benefits have you seen from the 1:1 implementation in elementary school? Middle school? High school? How would you propose to change it or improve it? Do you feel a policy needs to be in place to ensure there is a balance of screen time and hands on learning in elementary school and if so what is this based on?

With proper preparation, we likely would have seen more positive benefits from the outset, including greater instructional consistency across schools. Instead, in some ways, we have inadvertently increased instructional disparities.

Some teachers and some schools have established effective programs and policies that both teachers and parents appreciate - Abingdon and Claremont, among some other examples. Some students with special needs also receive specific benefits from appropriate applications of technology. But the benefits have not been imparted to all students at all schools. Also, parental concerns regarding the uses of technology and the amount of time children are spending on "screens" have grown, particularly at the elementary and middle school levels. And at all levels, there are significant student privacy concerns that need to be addressed.

We need to:

- Take a strategic pause and make sorting this all out a top priority;
- Clearly define the goals and objectives for the 1:1 initiative and implement specific performance metrics to evaluate its effectiveness;
- Ensure the way technology is used instructionally is not actually impeding learning – keep an eye on student achievement in math or analytical thinking;
- Decide if and how we scale back the program as we develop a thoughtful and coordinated plan for using the devices in our curriculum at each grade level;
- Look to best practices within APS to date, as well as to other districts that may have more mature programs;
- Provide our teachers with the proper training and thoughtfully "re-introduce" – or jumpstart – the program in an effective and consistent way system-wide;
- Specify policies and guidelines to provide a balance of a variety of learning opportunities;

- Fully address concerns regarding the privacy of students and the control of their work by Google and Apple;
- Resolve issues with online access away from school and be fully prepared with alternatives for students to be able to complete and turn in their work on time;
- Aside from the 1:1 itself, establish consistent policies regarding student use of personal devices (tablets, cell phones) during school hours and school activities;
- Work with families to help establish an appropriate balance of screen and non-screen activities and to manage tensions created or exacerbated in the home related to the additional time spent on devices due to the use of technology in education.

4. Do you believe the current “option” programs, formerly called “choice schools” work well? How would you improve them? Please provide examples and address the impact of these option program changes on diversity, accessibility to all students, meeting the needs of the individual whole child, and equity in educational experience in your answers.

Option programs “work” if the students who would most benefit from each type of instructional program are able to access them, and if each school is able to provide the supports and accommodations students need to be successful in the program. Not every school is right or best for every child, and these schools can help address the diverse needs of our students.

Option schools have the potential to create more diverse learning environments; but some of our programs do this better than others. Admissions policies can address this through seat set-asides for economically disadvantaged students, for example. But we should not purposefully create a more diverse school through “choice” at the expense of diversity in neighborhood schools. If we do, we are not improving equity in educational experiences across our system, we are merely moving inequities around. Individually, option programs may “work well” but we really need to know if they work well within the system as a whole.

APS needs to institute an evaluation procedure to determine:

1. who is choosing which programs for what reasons;
2. whether the students who would most benefit from special programs are accessing them;
3. whether the option school is meeting its established goals and objectives;
4. what the impact(s) are on student achievement, enrollment, and diversity in both the neighborhood and option schools.

As the Board revises the admissions and transfer policies, it needs to:

1. clearly explain the purpose and objectives of the admissions policies for each program, including an explanation of the specific purpose for each program itself;
2. implement a means to evaluate whether those objectives are being met;
3. monitor the effectiveness of the new policies yearly and tweak as appropriate.

5. Do you believe Reed should be made into a neighborhood elementary school or into an option school?

I do believe we need to thoughtfully expand our option schools as we add capacity in order to maintain students' access to educational opportunities. Getting ahead of our capacity shortage effectively and as cost-efficiently as possible is my priority. And I understand the appeal of the Reed site for a neighborhood school: uniting a neighborhood that is currently split into multiple school zones, the potential "walkability" of the site, and the need to address overcrowding and balance enrollment across multiple nearby neighborhood schools.

We also need to make sure schools in close proximity can be maximally utilized. Some nearby neighborhood schools are currently under capacity. Taking a close look at the projected enrollment for all of the schools in the years leading up to and extending beyond 2021, the potentially competing "walk zones" for each, and how current boundaries could be adjusted to maximize use of those schools, would be warranted. This would also help determine the number of seats the area could fill at the Reed site and how to best make full use of a 725-seat school there.

It is important that we make decisions with consideration to the needs of our system overall, including access to the educational options we offer and the best locations for our option and neighborhood schools. It may seem easier to simply establish an option program in a new school, rather than considering an existing neighborhood school location. But we need to look at all of our schools and not merely jump to the easiest or most convenient decision.

6. Do you believe current neighborhood school boundaries work well? What problems exist and what do you believe are the solutions? Do you believe the Arlington community wants A) more socio-economic diversity in schools or B) proximity to closest school location/walkability to be the prime decision point in future boundary decisions? Is there a limit on how far you believe students should be required to be bussed in the county in order to increase economic diversity or would you support bussing across the entire county? Is that answer different based on elementary/middle/high school? Do you believe the current policy for walkzones is appropriate?

From the standpoint of balancing enrollment across our system, our current boundaries likely could be more effective. If certain schools are consistently very overcrowded and others under- or near-capacity, then boundaries aren't working and need to be adjusted. And if we need to regularly relocate special education programs or preschool classes to manage capacity, then our boundaries are not working as well as they should. However, our network of option schools and corresponding admissions and transfer policies are contributing factors that need to be taken into consideration before undertaking a systemwide boundary revision.

In terms of socioeconomic diversity, it is quite clear that our current approach to boundaries does not work. There are, however, steps APS can – and should - take to mitigate some of the imbalances in diversity resulting from our neighborhood-based boundaries, such as:

- Academic Partner School programs;
- Centralized instruction for music and art, or science (which also increases capacity cost-effectively and equally across schools);

- PTA partnerships and collaborations;
- Reasonable districting of planning units that already receive bus transportation;
- Looking at our school system overall when re-districting, rather than confining boundary adjustments to specific geographic areas.

I do believe our community generally values diversity and would welcome more diversity in our schools. According to a recent APS survey, a strong majority believe diversity is ‘important’ or ‘very important’ at all three levels of schooling. Many families across the County already choose to take a bus or to drive their children to schools farther away for more diversity.

While the majority of respondents prefer neighborhood schools at the elementary level, they report an increasing interest in specialty programs in middle and high school and also indicate a tolerance for bus travel of 30 minutes. With sufficient buses and drivers, most schools could be reached within that time frame. And, by working with the County to provide public bus routes to accommodate secondary students traveling to and from school, we could facilitate a better balance of diversity at the middle and high school levels, and devote more of our existing APS transportation resources to facilitate more diversity in our elementary schools.

I believe we can balance the community’s various priorities in a way that serves the interests of our whole system well; and as a member of the Board, I will support policies and decisions that reflect that balance. The ideas I listed above are ways to foster diversity while preserving the neighborhood-based foundation of our system.

7. What does the APS Whole Child Initiative mean to you? What specific indicators would you look to measure APS’s success in this area?

The “whole child” initiative is an ideal. It extends beyond making sure each child achieves minimum standards and passes standardized tests. It involves each child being engaged in learning and requires meeting the social, emotional, and academic needs of each and every student. The “whole child” can be facilitated by the personalized learning initiative, including such things as:

- not over-emphasizing test scores
- allowing adequate recess and free time
- a mix of learning experiences (project-based, hands-on, emotional-social)
- making sure every student is engaged in learning
- social skills and developing the ability to work and communicate with people from various backgrounds
- education about - and providing all of the types of supports for - each student needs in order to reach his/her potential (physical and mental health, etc.)
- learning where the child is in his/her abilities and development, and implementing a plan to encourage, support, and guide his/her educational experience and achievement.

These things are not easily quantifiable; but we could look at indicators such as:

- academic achievement indicators relative to expectations for the student
- regular reports/checklists for each student to show how needs are being met, which would be incorporated into the personalized learning records of each student

- number of students seeking counseling services and analyses of how effectively students' counseling needs are being met
- reports regarding classroom behaviors
- number of referrals for various services or supports and follow-through rates
- community survey responses
- absenteeism and tardiness records

APS should, however, start by clearly defining the expected outcomes of a “whole child” approach to education. Without specific goals, it is difficult to determine performance metrics to evaluate the effectiveness of our efforts or of the initiative overall.

Regardless, in order for APS to realize this ideal of educating the whole child, we need to look beyond APS and develop an integrated network of school, County, community, and business sector resources. We already have limited resources; and as enrollment continues to rise another 10-15,000 students, resources will only be more strained. We have to increase available resources and streamline services in ways that mutually benefit APS and the broader community. (Refer students for mental health services; coordinate public transit routes to serve secondary students, which in turn provides more transit service to the broader community; coordinate goals, budget cycles, and maintenance with Parks and Recreation; etc.)

8. Do you believe current APS enrollment projections, overall and by school boundary, are accurate?

- Projections are not going to be 100% accurate. The community should expect reasonable variations.
- Implement recommendations from the demographic consultant's report, including adjusting planning units to be more uniform in size.
- Continue working closely with the County for impact analyses of proposed projects.
- Consider running a parallel methodology to provide a range for projections.
- Ensure we have sufficient staff and expertise to handle the workload for multiple projects accurately and efficiently.
- Institute a “verification” system to ensure proper processes and calculations were made.

If growth continues and we are not providing additional facilities quickly enough:

- We may need to set-aside our goal of not re-districting a planning unit more than once in a set # of years in order to maintain enrollment balances across schools.
- We need to look at the district as a whole when re-drawing boundaries, not continue our piecemeal approach by confining ourselves to strict geographical demarcations as we add schools and draw new attendance zones.
- We need to know which site can best handle some trailers and which ones are disproportionately impacted by trailers because of lot sizes, etc. This needs to be taken into consideration in determining the ability of each facility to bear enrollment above capacity. 110% capacity utilization at one site may have more significant impacts on the academic experience of the students than at another. The capacity percentages are not necessarily meaningful apples-to-apples comparisons.

- Aim higher in our capacity-building plans and maximize efficient use of existing and future facilities, not “planning” to maintain trailers to meet needs.

9. Do you believe APS should have a fourth comprehensive neighborhood high school? If so, where and why? Where would you locate the currently planned 1,300 seats?

Yes. I believe we should have already been planning for a fourth comprehensive high school. I share concerns with many in the community about a “mega” high school of 3,000 – 4,000 students. Schools of that size in nearby jurisdictions pose some down sides that are not compatible with the educational expectations we have here in Arlington. But more to the point, all indicators have been, and continue to be, that growth in Arlington is expected to continue for several years. We also already knew that the internal renovations to expand capacity at Yorktown and Wakefield would not be enough. We keep trying to do the minimum in order to “meet” capacity that we already need instead of striving to provide the capacity we’re going to need.

It is my hope that the Board will make a thoughtful, strategic, and cost-effective decision regarding the 1300 seats within the context of a future fourth comprehensive high school – and begin talking with the County now to secure financing for it.

Where the 1300 seats should go depends on a number of factors, including:

- is it intended to be a first-phase of a larger school?
- is it intended to be a permanent entity of its own?
- how much would each option cost (both initially and overall if it is a multi-step process)?
- what are the full possibilities for each site? is it possible to effectively renovate the existing Ed Center site with fewer seats at lower cost now and develop and implement a plan for a full-sized comprehensive school sooner?
- how could boundaries for each site address our desires for transportation efficiency and socioeconomic diversity?
- how would all the amenities of a comprehensive school be provided for each site?
- what are the complications for each site (can Kenmore MS remain, or will we have to find another site for a new middle school? Would we relocate Montessori program again in order to use the Career Center site? What do we do with the Ed Center building if it is repurposed for 1300 seats now but is vacated when another new high school opens?)
- if we do want or need more specialty programs as we continue to grow, how can that happen from within the context of a new comprehensive school at each site?

While they are a great asset to our system, we do not have the luxury of time or resources *right now* to rely on multiple small specialty programs to provide the seats we need and *know* that we will alleviate crowding at all of our schools. Our priority should be to effectively and efficiently meet our basic needs for capacity system-wide first. Additional programs can be thoughtfully grown and developed as we move forward, and can even be created within the settings of our comprehensive schools.

We can also work with the County Department of Parks and Recreation to plan how the various amenities can be provided in a way that mutually benefits APS and the community-at-large.

We should be taking stock and evaluating the most efficient use for each of our existing sites and develop a long-range master plan to meet expected capacity needs. And, we should proactively engage the County to address traffic and student safety problems at sites now, so that we can more easily make the best use of them in the future - and perhaps reduce the amount of time to get a new project in place. For example, even if we do not choose the Kenmore site now, we should get the traffic concerns on Carlin Springs rectified anyway – it's currently a safety problem that should be mitigated to allow for the most efficient use of the site.