



July 16, 2020

Dear Dr. Durán and Arlington School Board members,

The Arlington County Council of PTAs (CCPTA) appreciates the changes APS has made to the plan to reopen schools to acknowledge the rise in COVID cases nationwide and to safeguard the health and safety of APS staff, students, and their families. We recognize that APS is in an incredibly difficult position as it works to reopen schools this fall. We know it will require coordinated, intensive effort from staff, students, and families to make this school year a success for all Arlington students and we want you to know that we are ready to collaborate and support student wellbeing in any way we can.

It is in that spirit that we are reaching out to share the questions and ideas below. As APS continues its planning leading up to September 8, and at such time as families need to make choices between fully-distant and hybrid learning models, we encourage APS to share as much detail as possible with families. The questions listed below are the ones that we are hearing from PTAs that are the most critical to address.

Additionally, we urge APS to provide this information in multiple languages and in multiple formats: on the Engage website and social media, in virtual meetings, via phone texts, and in paper form.

We encourage the School Board to approve Dr. Durán's proposal to begin school on Tuesday, September 8. We remind APS and the School Board that the entire 2020-21 school calendar will need to be updated to reflect the reality of educating during a global pandemic. We recommend the following:

- **Extend the July 20 deadline for families** to decide between the hybrid and full-time-distance learning models to July 27 and **clarify what this choice means** now that all schools are proposed to open fully virtually in September.
- Dr. Duran recently stated at the Town Hall that there would be an opportunity for families to change their choices but that raises some additional questions:
  - **When and how often will families be able to adjust their choices** in response to new information?
  - How will these preliminary choices be used by APS to plan for the rest of the school year?
  - Are *all* families truly free to change their choices?
  - What if most families decide to change their original decision? How would that impact APS' planning?

*Many families are struggling to understand their options and some do not have easy access to the amount of information being posted online only. School administrators are quickly setting up virtual meetings to help educate families, and some school populations need more time to receive answers to their questions in virtual meetings or in paper form, often in multiple languages. They need more time to communicate with their school communities.*

We also suggest:

- **Build the new school calendar with breaks** of several days between quarters so that any needed adjustments can be made to facilities, operations, and instruction (e.g., professional learning, upgrades in software, installation of new health and safety equipment) and allow for families to shift between the hybrid and full-time distance learning models based on new information about the coronavirus and how to keep our students, staff, and families safe.
  - If families cannot be allowed to shift between models periodically, we would appreciate understanding the rationales behind requiring adherence to a family's initial choice for the entire school year.

We understand that we won't know everything there is to know before school starts, and at some point staff, students, and families will have to take a leap of faith together. However, families and staff need and deserve more information in the areas below before taking that leap.

### Health and Safety

- RESPONDING TO CHANGING CIRCUMSTANCES:
  - What procedures does APS have in place for addressing different types of COVID exposures whether they happen in a school building, in a household, or in the community? It is unclear what will happen regarding **how families will be notified, what circumstances lead to school closures**, etc.
    - If a teacher gets sick, will all of the children that teacher came into contact with, as well as other staff, have to quarantine?
  - Will APS **consider implementing a bubble system** within school communities to allow for small groups to quarantine and prevent the entire school from shutting down?
    - Since some students will have more difficulty staying socially distant at home, it is important to ensure that some schools are not repeatedly shut down more than others and that risks are mitigated within school communities.
- ENSURING COMPLIANCE WITH SAFETY REQUIREMENTS:
  - When will parents have access to school-level plans (ES/MS/HS) for implementing health and safety-requirements, to include:
    - How will APS ensure that health and safety requirements will be implemented consistently and fully?
    - What tools and authority will APS have to enforce social distancing and other necessary safety precautions?
    - How will students be educated and encouraged about the need for compliance with requirements without creating an environment dominated by restrictions and anxiety?

### Communication

- What communication methods is APS using to **ensure that all students and their families have access to the same information** about their choices, resources available, and supports that will be in place? What communication tools will be used to ensure that families are kept updated as things change?
  - *Communicating solely online is inadequate to meet the needs of many of our students and our families.* For example, phone calls and texting work really well for some families, especially those who do not have regular internet access and/or who do not use email.

## Technology and Virtual Instruction

- FOR STUDENTS AND FAMILIES:
  - How is APS **modifying and expanding its IT support services** this school year to meet the increased need from APS staff, students, and families?
  - When and how is APS providing **training for families about the devices and software** that students will be using for distance learning?
    - What ongoing IT support will be available to families?
  - What changes will APS be making in distance learning (including professional development for staff) to address the survey findings that showed that **families and students did not feel adequately supported or connected during virtual learning in spring 2020**?
    - Only 40% of families said yes to “My student(s) felt included in distance learning with teacher(s) and other students”
    - Only 40% of families said yes to “Teacher(s) and other staff members provided support to my student(s) to help them manage themselves and their time”
    - Only one-third of ES students and two-thirds of HS students said yes to “I am able to talk to other students about my assignments”
    - Only two-thirds of ES students and one-third of HS students said yes to “I get help from my parent or guardian to support my learning”
  - How is APS addressing the **need for support of families who face significant barriers to distance learning** (with both the hybrid and full-time learning models)?
    - Besides known issues with device access and internet access (which have still not been fully addressed), this includes families who do not speak English at home, families who are not available at home to teach their children, and students who are unable to attend virtual synchronous sessions.
- FOR STAFF:
  - What changes will APS be making to address the survey findings that showed that **virtual instruction tools used in spring 2020 were inadequate** for staff, students, or families?
    - Only 43% of instructional staff said they felt systems to create and access recorded lessons were “extremely” or “quite” accessible.
    - Only 42% of instructional staff rated the systems for video and audio conferencing as “extremely” or “quite” accessible.
    - Only 23% of instructional staff said they felt “extremely” or “quite” prepared to administer student assessments in distance learning.
    - What professional development will be offered to staff to increase their confidence and abilities to use virtual instruction tools?

## Special Populations

- Per APS’s settlement with the Department of Justice, APS needs to pay **careful attention to its service to English language learners and their families**.
  - Is APS certain that the digital platforms, applications, online courses, and internet resources it is utilizing in distance learning are fully in compliance with the DOJ settlement provisions and thus fully accessible to English language learners?
- Survey results indicate that **APS staff feel unequipped to provide service to special populations via distance learning**. How will APS remedy this?
  - ¼ of teachers feel “somewhat prepared” and 38% say they are “slightly” or “not at all prepared” to meet the needs of English language learners. The same percentages hold true for special education students.

- Differentiation strategies and resources for special education students and English language learners were the top two requests from staff taking the survey. When and how is this being addressed?
- If more families choose the hybrid model than can be accommodated at their home school, would APS consider **prioritizing English language learners and special needs students who selected the hybrid model**?
- How are resources being allocated and/or increased in **schools with higher populations of need to ensure equitable access to information and opportunities**?
  - For example, schools with higher English language learner student populations will need more staff assistance for families to access and support virtual learning, including an increased need for assistance to set up and use devices and internet access.

We appreciate your consideration of our suggestions and feedback and we look forward to working with you to address the needs of all of Arlington's students during this difficult time.

Sincerely,

Emily Vincent, President  
Mary Kadera, Vice President  
Claire Noakes, VP of Policy  
Katherine Novello, VP of Special Projects  
Mike O'Leary, Secretary  
Kendra Anderson, Treasurer  
Kate Merrill and Karrie Beaudry, CPCI Committee Co-chairs  
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