

ACHIEVEMENT

How can we close the achievement gap?

Parental Involvement

One of the most promising ways to reduce the achievement gap is by involving all parents in their children's education. Success for all of our students requires that parents have high expectations and support reading and learning at home.

As a former PTA president, I saw firsthand what a difference parental involvement made in the success of individual students and in the success of a school.

To increase parental involvement, we must support programs that work. For example, PESA (Parent Expectations Support Achievement) is a program designed to help parents of English language learners to create an environment at home that promotes student achievement.

In addition, the Arlington Education and Employment Program (REEP) provides English classes for parents and offers family literacy programs. However, the family literacy program that was once offered at five locations around the County is now available only at Drew Model School. Because reading is so fundamental to a child's success, I believe that we need to explore ways to expand these family literacy programs.

Preschool

Expanding the opportunities for quality preschool education is critical to closing the achievement gap. This year, Arlington Public Schools (APS) provides preschool education to nearly 850 students through Montessori programs, the Virginia Preschool Initiative, and pre-K special education programs. I value that commitment and would like to see us do even more to meet the needs of at-risk preschool children. APS has applied to administer the Head Start pre-K program next year, which would serve nearly 300 students. This is a step in the right direction.

Our kindergarten teachers do a remarkable job in meeting the needs of students who enter school with a wide range of experiences: from children who already know their letters and can read, to those who have had little exposure to books. As good a job as these teachers do, expanding our pre-K programs for at-risk students is an important part of closing the achievement gap.

Should we expand the foreign language curriculum?

Yes. We all know – and studies show – that students learn foreign languages best when they start at a young age. Learning foreign language not only helps prepare our students to live in a diverse world, but also helps them succeed in other academic areas. As a Vice Chair of the School Board's Advisory Council on Instruction, I am working with my colleagues to promote expansion of our foreign language curriculum.

Arlington currently has Spanish language pilot programs at two of its elementary schools: Glebe and Henry. We also offer two Spanish immersion programs at Claremont and Key. In addition, Randolph offers Spanish instruction

as part of its International Baccalaureate program. Yet the rest of our 23 elementary schools provide no foreign language instruction as part of the curriculum. In addition, most of our middle schools do not provide more than cursory exposure to foreign language in sixth grade. As a result, most students do not begin to study foreign language until they are about 12 years old.

As I walk through Arlington neighborhoods and talk with citizens, I have heard resoundingly a desire to expand our foreign language curriculum. I will make this a priority.

How else can we increase achievement for our students?

Provide healthier school meals and make sure students eat breakfast

Nutrition is linked to achievement. I am working with parents, teachers and APS staff on the Food Services Advisory Committee to improve the nutritional quality of the food we give our children at school. We can do better.

The great news is that APS has a new Director of Food Services who is committed to giving our students healthier meals. We also have a large, committed group of parents and teachers who are helping make this happen. Some of the junk food that used to be offered in school cafeterias, like funnel cake for breakfast, is gone.

In addition, the Food Services Advisory Committee is proposing ways to increase the number of students who eat breakfast at school. I received an email from a teacher at Washington-Lee High School, who said that he has started to buy breakfast for his students. He can see a real difference in how they perform when they eat the healthy breakfast he provides. Our teachers should not have to do this. Providing nutritious, grab-and-go breakfasts for high school students is one way to get more students to eat breakfast – and to achieve!

Support specialists in elementary schools

Math specialists, reading specialists and resource teachers for the gifted are an important part of our teaching staff. By providing direct instruction to students and professional development for teachers, these individuals reduce class size and help increase student achievement. Committees of the Advisory Council on Instruction have consistently recommended increased staffing for specialists and a committee appointed by the School Board currently is reviewing this issue. As a School Board member, I will be committed to ensuring the adequacy of specialist staffing levels.

How do we promote success for all our students?

It is important that we promote success for all of our students. This includes special needs students, gifted/talented students, English language learners, and “average” students. Our goal should be that every student will reach his or her potential. The APS Strategic Plan recognizes this and includes responsive education as one of its four goals. APS describes responsive education as: “Preparing each student to succeed in a diverse, changing world through instruction and other school experiences responsive to each student’s talents, interests and challenges.”

Teachers are our most important resource

How can we best promote success for all of our students? Teachers are essential. We all remember teachers who motivated us to reach our potential. Arlington must attract and retain great teachers.

APS staff reports that the biggest reason that teachers leave Arlington is to work closer to where they live. We all know how expensive it is to live in Arlington and how difficult a long commute can be. We also know how important it is for teachers to be part of the community. We need to explore options for affordable housing for our teachers so that they can live where they work.

Students with Special Needs

I have met with many parents of special needs students and have attended meetings of the Arlington Special Education Advisory Committee (ASEAC). It is clear to me that communication with parents needs to be improved, so that they can more easily understand and access the range of available services. For example, parents should know the various programs offered in different schools for reading and for assisting students with communication and which programs might best meet the needs of their children. More summer school offerings for special needs students and a better transition from middle to high school and to life after high school are areas for improvement as well.

Early diagnosis and intervention are critical to success for special needs students and for students with mental illness. We have all seen the recent news reports about the increasing number of students diagnosed with autism spectrum disorders. Arlington Public Schools must engage in long-term planning about how we will meet the needs of our special education students now and into the future.

Gifted/Talented Students – Challenging Education

Parents who are advocates of challenging education also are concerned about communication. When many of these parents have approached teachers about whether their children are being challenged and are reaching their potential, they feel that their concerns are not heard. We need to do better.

The Gifted/Talented Committee of the Advisory Council on Instruction consistently has recommended that funding for Resource Teachers for the Gifted (RTGs) should be increased so that each elementary school would provide a full-time (instead of a one-half time) position. RTGs work with students in the classroom and assist classroom teachers by helping to differentiate lesson plans so that students are challenged to reach their academic potential. In addition, this Committee has recommended use of adaptive testing to measure student progress, instead of focusing on whether a student is performing at grade level.

English Language Learners

One of the greatest strengths of our schools is the diversity of our students, who represent 127 countries and speak a total of 105 languages. To ensure the success of our English language learners, we must continue to

provide sufficient resources for the ESOL/HILT teachers in our schools. In addition, classroom teachers must have adequate training to teach English language learners effectively once they are no longer part of the ESOL/HILT program. I also believe that we should continue to support the First Language Support program for Spanish-speaking students in grades K-3 to help improve academic achievement.

“Average” Students

Ensuring that all students are working to their potential includes students in the middle. Many parents tell me that they are concerned that their children are “falling below the radar” – that they are not achieving all that they can because they are not receiving sufficient attention in the classroom. Maintaining small class sizes is important so that teachers can meet the needs of all students.

Are test scores the only way to measure student success?

No. We should educate well-rounded students, with attention not only to academic performance, but also to the physical and emotional well-being of each child.

I supported the work of many parents who were successful in having the School Board adopt a policy on recess in 2006. Elementary school students need unstructured time to play during the school day. This helps them to be physically fit and to learn to work things out with their classmates on their own. At my daughter’s elementary school, it has been a joy to see students invent their own games and rules for tether ball – without any help from adults.

We also must be mindful of students’ emotional well-being. While we want students to achieve and be successful academically, we must be aware of the stress children face today and find healthy ways to address it.

Our curriculum should continue to emphasize the arts as well. Vocal and instrumental music, theater, and visual arts are all important parts of our children’s education.

BUDGET

How can we ensure fiscal responsibility?

I have been working with my colleagues on the School Board’s Budget Advisory Council to ensure fiscal responsibility. As real estate assessments decline, it is critical that the School Board look for cost savings. One possibility is administrative costs. According to the Washington Area Boards of Education, Arlington has more non-school based positions, as compared with positions in the schools, than any other jurisdiction in the Washington area. The School Board should direct the Superintendent to identify possible reductions in administrative costs, which could then be used to help fund programs, such as expanding the foreign language curriculum.

In addition, we should ask the State Department of Education to conduct an efficiency review, as 22 other school districts in Virginia have done. These

reviews have resulted in proposals for millions of dollars in cost savings in other districts. Arlington should not miss the opportunity to have this independent advice.

COMMUNITY

How can schools be more a part of their neighborhoods?

Schools should be an integral part of their neighborhoods. Schools are a community resource, and when the buildings are not being used for school functions, they should be available to residents for community use, such as basketball games in the gym in the evening, or civic association meetings.

Schools should make it a priority to communicate with their neighborhoods about activities. When I was PTA president at my daughter's elementary school, our PTA worked to inform the community about our Halloween parade, concerts, and volunteer opportunities at the school. Arlington is such a diverse and talented community. We should encourage neighbors to volunteer in the schools – reading with students, acting as mentors, and helping students with homework during extended day. There are so many opportunities to get involved.

All schools should provide opportunities for students to participate in community service activities.

When I worked as an Assistant Commonwealth's Attorney in Arlington, I spent a lot of time in Juvenile Court. One of the lasting impressions of that work was that many young people involved in the justice system lacked empathy. As a result, I started a community service program at my daughter's elementary school. I wanted every child to have the chance to do something for someone else. Helping others fosters empathy, builds self-confidence and demonstrates that every student has the power to make a difference in the community.

I will never forget one of our first community service projects – the Help the Homeless Walk. Every child listened to a presentation from staff from a local homeless shelter and had a chance to ask questions. We then marched in the neighborhood with banners to raise awareness about homelessness. Those who could donated money. At the end of the day, every child in the school was able to say that he or she had done something to help the homeless.

At a recent PTA meeting at my older daughter's middle school, the counselor discussed bullying, noting that bullies lack empathy. Doing something to help someone else gets students to think beyond themselves – particularly when they reach the age when they think the world revolves around them.

There are so many opportunities for our students to perform community service to help their classmates, neighbors near their schools, and people all over Arlington. I want to see our schools provide these opportunities for each and every one of our students.

Everyone should have a voice in the decisions that the School Board makes.

We need to work together as a community to make the best decisions about the challenges that we face. The decision-making process must be

inclusive, transparent and fair. We talk about the “Arlington Way” – where citizens are a meaningful part of decisions. But many people feel that the “Arlington Way” is perhaps a thing of the past.

One of the best ways to include everyone in the decision-making process is for the School Board to listen – to really listen. I have been listening to individuals from across Arlington as I continue my walks through neighborhoods. I have been to more than 1100 homes so far, and plan to reach hundreds more before election day. Almost everyone has a view about our schools and I have truly enjoyed learning from so many people. As a School Board member, I will continue to seek the opinions of Arlington citizens and will continue to listen to what you have to say. Together, we can make a difference for Arlington.