

# Public Comments for Virtual School Board Meetings #167

<b>I would like to provide: *</b>	Written Public Comments
<b>My public comments are related to: *</b>	Virtual+ Plus Learning
<b>Topic *</b>	Technology and Communications during VirtualPLUS+
<b>Full Name *</b>	George Mason Elementary School PTA Board and Family Outreach Committee
<b>What is your relationship to ACPS? *</b>	Parent/Guardian of an ACPS Student
<b>Enter your comments here OR upload below:</b>	See comments on next page.

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## **Written Public Comments**

**October 29, 2020**

**Ashley Simpson Baird**

### **Testimony on Technology and Communications during VirtualPLUS+ George Mason Elementary School PTA Board and Family Outreach Committee ACPS School Board Meeting**

**October 15, 2020**

Dr. Hutchings and members of the Alexandria City Public Schools Board, thank you for your commitment to Alexandria children and families. We appreciate your capacity to listen and respond to the needs of families during these unprecedented times. We also appreciate the district's ability to provide one-to-one devices and connectivity options for families. We submit this testimony because we have concerns about the lack of effective, accessible technology and communication for some of our most vulnerable families. The perspectives of these members of our community, who have also been most impacted by the health and economic consequences of the pandemic, may not be fully captured by ACPS survey data. While these issues only directly impact some families at our school, they indirectly impact our entire community. At George Mason, we know that our collective well-being is contingent upon every individual's access to the resources they need to be successful.

While GMES families of all backgrounds have experienced some technical challenges with virtual learning, it is striking how the technology disparity falls so clearly along socioeconomic and linguistic lines. No matter how much our English-speaking families struggle with this transition, they will always have the language necessary to access support and are more likely to have points of contact to do so. Our non-English-speakers are at a distinct disadvantage because when they encounter technological difficulties, they are less likely to be able to troubleshoot them, adding an extra layer of difficulty.

The George Mason PTA Family Outreach Committee has gathered input from our teachers, social workers, front office staff, and community partners who have been working directly with students and families who live in Arlandria and Chirilagua. We suspect that these concerns are not unique to our school and are likely more widespread. With the prospect of continued virtual learning for the foreseeable future, it is imperative that these issues be addressed so that all children can fully engage in online learning.

#### **Technology Problems**

**Internet connectivity problems.** While ACPS has tried to provide reliable, low-cost internet service for all students to access virtual learning, many students are still struggling to connect

with their classes. Many families have found Kajeets to be unreliable and unable to support multiple devices at one time. Students are losing their connections in the middle of class and are often delayed in logging back on. While Comcast Essentials is a better option, families have difficulty going through the application process. Some families have reported receiving no response to their application or having to wait a long time for a response. A reliable internet connection is a basic necessity for virtual learning, and we look forward to your leadership to ensure reliable connectivity for all ACPS families.

**Insufficient orientation to devices and applications.** Many families, especially those with young children, are still in need of a one-on-one orientation to their tablet or Chromebook, including how to log on and access each of the appropriate learning applications. ACPS staff are stepping in to fill the void as best they can. At GMES, our registrar, Ariana Lara Rendon, has taken time to give families one-on-one help. Ana Bonilla-Galdamez, the Family Engagement Social Worker at T.C. Williams High School, has created videos like this [one](#) to help families understand how to get their devices set up and their apps working. ACPS should create more videos in additional languages and for elementary-grade families.

**Problems with accessing learning applications.** Some learning applications (e.g., SeeSaw) require users to re-login each day. A single sign on for all applications would greatly improve families' ease of use. Some families have lost logins or QR codes to some applications and are unsure how to obtain new ones.

**Hardware problems.** Many teachers have reported that their students have microphone issues on their devices (i.e., garbled speech, breaking up, no sound) which limits their ability to participate in class. Some teachers have reported parents asking if children could use their parents' phones to access virtual learning because of problems with Chromebooks. The tablet screens are too small (7 inches) to fully engage in Zoom sessions or complete some assigned activities. Relatedly, some families report that their children complain of blurry vision and/or headaches after using the tablets.

**Lack of technical support.** To make these matters worse, many families have experienced frustration with the ACPS Help Line, saying that no one answers when they call, and it takes days to get a call back. Many families are unable to travel to T.C. Williams during the school day to get quicker tech support. ACPS should establish scheduled times when Help Line staff could be available to offer support to families at a location in Arlandria/Chirilagua, on weekends or other times when parents are not working.

### **Communication Problems**

The adjustment to virtual learning necessitates increased electronic communication between schools and families. There are multiple daily emails with essential communication from teachers, staff, the PTA, school leaders, and the district that it is overwhelming even for English-dominant families. For families who do not have a fluent English speaker in the home, it is nearly impossible to keep up. ACPS should implement a district-wide communications plan for

getting key information to families in languages they can understand, and via a medium that is easy for them to access. In our experience, video and text messages are highly effective means of communicating important information, but it is essential that they be in families' preferred languages.

We know that this school year has presented unprecedented challenges for all us, and we are all doing our best to adapt. As leaders in our community, we want to make sure that all children and families continue to have access to the high-quality education that our school provides. Thank you for hearing our concerns. We look forward to hearing about how the School Board and ACPS will address the issues we have raised. We stand ready to work as partners in ensuring that in Alexandria, "every student succeeds."

Respectfully,

Ashley Simpson Baird, Ph.D., GMES PTA Family Outreach Committee Co-Chair

Alexia Smokler, J.D., GMES PTA Family Outreach Committee Co-Chair

Jessica Buchanan, GMES PTA President

Sarah Hoffman, GMES PTA Past President

Emily Krebs, GMES PTA President-Elect

Jane Frazer, GMES PTA VP of Outreach

Nichole Corey, GMES PTA VP of Programs

Cori Woods, GMES PTA VP of Fundraising

Beth Aiken, GMES PTA Membership & Website

Alicia Rutherford, GMES PTAC Representative

Lea Poggi, GMES PTA Treasurer

Kara Kokernak, GMES PTA Secretary

Holly Curtis, BSW, GMES MSW Intern