

Public Comments for School Board Meetings

#519

I would like to provide: *

Written Public Comments

My public comments are related to: *

Budget

Topic *

Patrick Henry overcrowding and FY24 proposed budget

Full Name *

Christie Harris

What is your relationship to ACPS? *

Parent/Guardian of an ACPS Student

January 18, 2023

Dear Alexandria City School Board,

I am Christie Harris, an Alexandria City resident and proud parent of a kindergartener at Patrick Henry K-8 School. I am writing to address two issues about which I am deeply concerned: overcrowding at Patrick Henry and the proposed FY24 budget.

OVERCROWDING AT PATRICK HENRY

Throughout the 2022-2023 school year, Patrick Henry has experienced overcrowding that compromises the quality of instruction, ACPS’s compliance with Virginia law, and educational equity. As the parent of a kindergartener, I will focus on the impacts in the younger grades. Patrick Henry Elementary currently has 5 kindergarten classrooms with approximately 27 students each. As you know, Virginia law limits classrooms to a maximum of 22 students (up to 29 with an instructional aide). ACPS is already non-compliant with its own established classroom maximum of 24 students per kindergarten classroom for SY22-23, which is already an increase over the SY21-22 cap of 22 students.

Kindergarten is where students establish a strong foundation of learning that lends itself to improvements in student performance and outcomes years down the line. Improving test scores and graduation rates starts with kindergarten. Overcrowding inhibits our children’s ability to learn and our teachers’ ability to provide quality instruction. Teachers are forced to do more with less – more differentiated instruction in less time, and more classroom management in less physical space. Although the staff at Patrick Henry is immensely talented, they are not miracle workers. My child’s teacher has 20 years of experience and has earned Teacher of the Year honors, and even she struggles to provide the type of individualized attention such young learners require.

Other kindergarten classes within Alexandria City and in neighboring jurisdictions average closer to 14-18 students each. Kindergarten enrollments are down across ACPS (1351 students in SY21-22 compared to 1338 in SY22-23) while Patrick Henry saw a substantial increase of 16 students. In other jurisdictions, that increase alone would have warranted an additional kindergarten class, but not at Patrick Henry. Douglas MacArthur Elementary School currently shares the Patrick Henry campus and has much smaller class sizes - their kindergarten classes sit approximately 18 students, while Patrick Henry is bursting at the seams merely a drop-off lane away. ACPS’s strategic plan centers around the theme of Equity for All. It is objectively inequitable when one population of students has 27 students per class, while another population has 18. To give you a better idea of the populations I am referring to, I have compared the student demographics of Patrick Henry and Douglas MacArthur:

SCHOOL	% Hispanic	% Black	% White	SY21-22 Kindergarten enrollment	SY22-23 Kindergarten enrollment	SY22-23 Kindergarten classrooms	SY22-23 Avg. KG class size
Patrick Henry	29%	37%	16%	114	130	5	27
Douglas MacArthur	25%	21%	42%	97	94	5	18

To be clear, I am referring to the obvious racial disparities and blatantly gerrymandered school boundaries that result in one elementary school comprising 42% white students with 18 students per kindergarten class, and another comprising 16% white students with 27 students per kindergarten class.

State-level financial data also shows historical inequities in per student funding – in SY2020-2021 (the most recent year available), Douglas MacArthur’s per-pupil funding was \$17,203 while Patrick Henry received \$15,269 per student, which is below the ACPS average of \$17,858. As I will discuss later, the FY24 budget does not attempt to address this glaring inequity in funding. If we do not act now, teachers will be doing even more with even less, and students will suffer.

Specific to the immediate issues at Patrick Henry:

- What options are available to address equitable distribution of students and resources, and what data analysis is being conducted (or is already available) to support ACPS decision-making?
- What will ACPS provide in terms of additional resources and support for Patrick Henry?
 - Additional funding to support instruction and service delivery (including direct services for English learners and students with disabilities);
 - More teachers – not just the promised-yet-undelivered unskilled “monitors” – to reduce classroom ratios;
 - Utilization of available space at other schools (including Douglas MacArthur, as it is just across the parking lot).

More generally, although challenging and in no one’s best interest, the current classroom ratios are technically compliant with Virginia law. However, ACPS is quickly approaching the point of non-compliance in terms of kindergarten class size and student: teacher ratios. ACPS currently has the advantage of anticipation, and has the opportunity to act before actual non-compliance arises. To address long-term concerns:

- What is ACPS and the school board doing to monitor enrollments and equity across schools? Enrollments that exceed projections, increased class-sizes, and high student: teacher ratios are not going away. Again, my daughter is only in kindergarten with a younger sister expected to enroll in Patrick Henry when her time comes - these issues will persist unless action is planned and taken NOW. What is ACPS doing to anticipate and plan for future challenges and needs?
- How can parents and school communities support and inform ACPS decision-making on short- and long-term actions to address these challenges?

FY24 PROPOSED BUDGET

Quite simply, the proposed FY24 budget for Patrick Henry is not rooted in reality, and it does not create the funding conditions necessary for Patrick Henry to address or mitigate the overcrowding problem next year or beyond. In the preface to the budget, ACPS Interim Superintendent Dr. Melanie Kay-Wyatt states that a strategic goal of the FY24 budget priorities, developed by this School Board, is to “reduce class sizes” as part of “instructional excellence”. The Patrick Henry budget that follows these statements has no rational connection to stated goal. Even in the face of known overcrowding, Patrick Henry’s proposed FY24 budget eliminates four full-time positions in kindergarten, including two whole kindergarten classrooms¹. This is outrageous and nonsensical. Patrick Henry has seen steady increases in student enrollment, especially in the lower grades. This year’s kindergarten enrollment outpaced last year by 15 students. And yet, Patrick Henry’s kindergarten enrollments are projected to dramatically **decrease** from the current 130 students to 88 students in SY23-24. In recent years, kindergarten enrollments at Patrick Henry have ranged from 114 to 141 students:

- SY 2018-2019: 141
- SY 2019-2020: 116

¹ Please note that the proposed FY24 budget states that the current FY23 Patrick Henry budget allots six (6) kindergarten teachers, while Patrick Henry currently only has five (5) kindergarten teachers and classrooms.

- SY 2020-2021: 116
- SY 2021-2022: 114
- SY 2022-2023: 130
- SY 2023-2024: 88 (projected)

How is it possible, reasonable, or justifiable to project an enrollment of 88 students in SY23-24 and eliminate two kindergarten classrooms? With this year's high enrollment at Patrick Henry, what is the rationale for the significant drop in kindergarten enrollment next year? This is a significant risk that has the potential to further exacerbate inequality issues, cause additional stress on teachers and staff, and place undue hardship on our youngest students. I understand how enrollment projections are made, and I strongly encourage ACPS and the City of Alexandria Planning and Zoning Department to revisit and revise projections for Patrick Henry to match the reality of what we all see in the school: growing student enrollments, and increasing student needs.

If the City of Alexandria, Alexandria City Public Schools, and the Alexandria City School Board truly believe in Equity for All, action must be taken now to address the clear inequities at Patrick Henry. It is imperative that ACPS and the Alexandria City School Board re-examine enrollment projections and right-size resource allocation at Patrick Henry, especially as compared to enrollments and resources at other similarly-situated schools. We cannot make the same mistakes next year, and we must position Patrick Henry for success in future years.

The wellbeing of students and teachers is a shared priority for parents, school communities, administrators, ACPS central office, and the school board. I hope we can all work together to right the wrongs I have identified and to work towards educational Equity for All in Alexandria City schools. I would be happy to discuss my concerns further, or answer any questions you may have.

Regards,

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