


Public Comments for Virtual School Board Meetings #160

I would like to provide: *	In-Person Virtual Public Comments
Select the meeting date:* *	October 15, 2020
My public comments are related to: *	Virtual+ Plus Learning
Topic *	Virtual Plus+ & Reopening Strategy
Full Name *	Jessica Buchanan
What is your relationship to ACPS? *	Parent/Guardian of an ACPS Student
Enter your comments here OR upload below:	See attached
Upload a copy of your public comments or other supporting documents:	 gmes_public_statement_for_school_board_meeting_10_15_20.docx 10.12 KB .DOCX

Attachment statement is included on the next page.

October 15, 2020

ACPS School Board Meeting - Public Comment

Dr. Hutchings, Chairperson Anderson, ACPS and School Board Leadership,

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today. My name is Jessica Buchanan, and I am the PTA President for George Mason Elementary School. As a representative of our school community, students, & parents, I would like to focus on the current status of Virtual Plus+ and the reopening plan.

As we are underway with Virtual Plus+ Online Learning, there are some urgent and necessary topics that should be looked at, especially for our younger students, students with special needs, and English Learners. Our community believes our students need to be in our schools as soon as possible before this unsustainable online learning environment becomes detrimental to their current learning year.

As you have stated and heard from Alexandria citizens, online school for our K-1 is very difficult. Little hands and minds cannot sufficiently navigate a tablet or computer to effectively participate and learn with their teacher. As educators, you already know the detrimental effects a significant amount of screen time has on growing brains. Without being in school, children of this age do not get focused attention, interaction with their teachers, and specific help on needs as they transition to a school environment. We know this is not a normal school year, and transition into full day school is difficult in person, not to mention being online. But there are no resources or flexibility in place to accommodate the needs of these young learners and their families who have to physically support and navigate for them. Activities that kids can do on their own (e.g., worksheets, drawings, watching videos) do not need to happen in a full group setting on Zoom. Zoom should be used for interaction, not individual work. Individual work should happen off-screen with a medium for submitting to the teacher (e.g., email, photo, video, 1-on-1 meeting). With this in mind, it is imperative that K-2, at the very least, are brought back to school as a priority for the interaction needed for learning.

It has also come to our attention that children with Special Needs are not being met with the requirements and services needed for them to learn. Social interaction is key in learning for those with special needs. Those with IEP's and 504's have not been sufficiently met with or received guidance as to what online learning will be like for them. It is of the utmost important that ACPS turn their attention to our children with special needs and get them into a safe environment as soon as possible, so as to stop the already fast regression these students are experiencing. We see that a plan is in place to get children who need

specialized programming back into school and we appreciate the concerted effort to meet their needs first.

As a district with a 31.5% of students that are English Learners (September 2019 statistic), I can personally attest that their needs are not being met. I can see our EL students struggle on my own children's Zoom meetings. Although our teachers, paraprofessionals and EL instructors are doing their very best to include and teach each student, our EL students are not going to enough break out rooms or receiving services and resources needed to learn in this online environment. Some students are learning a new language and how to read and an online environment does not effectively meet this need to learn. English language students should have in-person instruction, either outdoors or in a classroom. Our own local community centers, like Casa Chirilagua, have set up outdoor tables with access to wi-fi/hot spots and students are able to learn with volunteers there to assist.

One pertinent issue with ACPS's approach to virtual school is that it is being treated like in-person school, not distance learning. There are so many things that cannot be accomplished in the virtual environment that are possible in-person. We need to let go of those things until we are back to being in-person. The first of these is the 6.5 hour school day -- if VDoE has not applied for an ESSA waiver for the 180-day/990-rule regulations, all schools in our district need to as soon as possible and ACPS should support and advocate for this. It is developmentally inappropriate and likely detrimental to children's development to spend an extended time in front of screens without real face-to-face interaction. Revisiting the current online school situation every nine weeks is too long to wait, too long to meet about, and too long to implement any real change. A hybrid in-school reopening plan can help this issue with part in-person and part online learning.

As a community member, I am pleased that George Mason can be used as an all day care facility for our families in ACPS. I am pleased they can have access to help during Zoom and use classrooms to decrease distractions. As a parent at GMES, I see no reason why some of our student's needs cannot be met at in-person school on an alternating or half day schedule. There are several empty classrooms, outdoor space, and room to spread out in our larger classrooms. It is disappointing to know that students can attend GMES for all daycare (which is much needed), but the school is not safe or prepared to house our younger, special needs and english learning students for a few hours of the day. In addition, Alexandria Soccer Association is using the outdoor grounds at GWU for students to learn and socialize together. ACPS can be innovative and use our outdoor space for our students. Due to incoming cold weather, we are already losing time to use our green space for students to meet outside.

ACPS is ill-prepared and behind in sending our children back to school - supplies were not ordered, technology was not counted, and our schools have sat frozen in time since March 2020. There was no forward thinking into our future to prepare for Virtual Learning, which was the likely case, even in the Spring. The community understands the insurmountable task it will take to get our children back into schools - among many obstacles are staffing concerns, safety protocols, and transportation. The minutiae in detail is overwhelming. Many schools around our area and around the country have gone back to school successfully and ACPS should look at these schools to determine what systems will work for our community. There is no need to reinvent the wheel, but to find the right wheel that works for our district and students.

Let me be clear, our parents do not expect a five day a week, in-person schedule. We know safety measures will need to be in place - wearing masks indoors, social distancing in the hallways and classrooms, lunch in classrooms. There are reasonable plans being implemented country-wide and we ask for a sensible and safe model that fits our district's needs. It is unacceptable, however, to expect our general education student population to remain online until Quarter 3.

I urge you to vote with the intention of getting our whole student population back into school sooner than February 2021 and REJECT this current plan being submitted. Our neighboring school districts- Loudon, Fairfax, Arlington, and Falls church have all announced plans for bringing groups and/or all of the students back in some part to school. Alexandria is behind other school districts who are already implementing plans to return, in turn behind in *re-building* the education our children deserve. .

Thank you for your time and endless work on behalf of all of our students. I urge you again to vote no and begin to plan for the earlier return of ALL students to buildings and a sustainable plan for the future.

Jessica Buchanan
GMES PTA President 2020-2021