

Preparing for Strategic Planning: Engaging the Community and Assessing the Needs of Alexandria City Public Schools



FourPoint Education Partners

11/22/19

Introduction

In May 2019, Alexandria City Public Schools (ACPS) contracted with FourPoint Education Partners to help facilitate the development of a new strategic plan. ACPS' existing strategic plan— *ACPS 2020: Every Student Succeeds*—was due for an update, but other contextual factors make the strategic plan update almost timely:

1. ACPS' Dr. Gregory C. Hutchings, Jr. was beginning the second year of his tenure as superintendent, and five of nine of the members on the school board were new as of January 2019 while the remaining board members were just starting their second terms.
2. After significant analysis and debate, the board voted on September 26, 2019 to expand T.C. Williams—the Division's only comprehensive high school—rather than to create a brand new additional high school, thus providing clear direction for how to address long-standing concerns about overcapacity with high school enrollment and to develop an innovative high school educational program.
3. The City of Alexandria is currently developing the Children and Youth Master Plan and the Community Health Improvement Plan with expected completion dates in Spring 2020. The city's mayor, city manager, and the agencies taking the lead in both these plans—the Department of Community and Human Services and the Department of Health—have formalized an agreement to coordinate their plans with that of ACPS.
4. Although some student achievement gaps have narrowed in ACPS, many persist, and the percentage of all students who are proficient in reading is declining. There is widespread consensus across the Division and its stakeholders that something different must be done to improve academic outcomes for all students.
5. As a result of the achievement gaps, Superintendent Hutchings began advocating for a focus on equity almost immediately upon his hiring. The school board and almost all stakeholders interviewed for this report strongly support this focus, with most stakeholders acknowledging the need for a clear definition and specific action steps that address standard measures of progress.

It is this last point—widespread agreement on the need to focus on equity—that serves as the main organizing principle of the Division's new strategic plan and, therefore, of the community engagement and needs assessment intended to inform the plan. This report summarizes the community engagement and needs assessment process as well as the findings and recommendations that resulted.

Methodology

To begin the community engagement and needs assessment process summarized in this final report, FourPoint used the *Building Equity Taxonomy* framework guiding the Division’s thinking of key components of educational equity. During the community engagement and needs assessment phase, which took place from September-October 2019, FourPoint applied this framework to identify system strengths that ACPS can build on and improvement areas that can be addressed in the strategic plan.

The community engagement process and needs assessment were informed by the six domains—each aligning to the Building Equity Taxonomy—agreed upon as focus areas by ACPS and FourPoint leadership. ACPS and FourPoint leadership also agreed on guiding research questions to be addressed in each domain. Figure 1 summarizes the six domains, how they align to the Building Equity Taxonomy, and the research questions addressed.

Figure 1. Domains and Research Questions Guiding FourPoint’s Community Engagement Process and Needs Assessment

Research Domain	B.E.T. Domain	Research Questions
Finance	Physical Integration & Opportunity to Learn	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How are resources currently allocated to schools? • What are current funding priorities for the division? • How equitably and strategically are resources allocated to schools? • In what ways could resources be allocated more equitably and strategically?
Governance	<i>(Gathered input and feedback on all BET domains)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To what extent do school board members believe that the board is using best practices? • What are the priorities of the board? • What would convince city leaders that schools and the district are improving? • What are the biggest priorities for city leaders? • How can city agencies support improved outcomes for students?
School Improvement	<i>(Gathered input and feedback on all BET domains)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are the characteristics and challenges of schools across the division? What are the characteristics and challenges of those identified as needing to improve? • How much autonomy do schools have? Is this well understood by key stakeholders? • What is the division’s strategy for school improvement? To what extent is this strategy consistent with the division’s goals and theory of action? How effectively does the district implement the strategy?

Research Domain	B.E.T. Domain	Research Questions
Instructional Delivery	Instructional Excellence, Engaged and Inspired Learners, & Social-Emotional	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To what extent are research-based instructional strategies used equitably across ACPS classrooms? To what extent are students engaged and challenged? To what extent are student groups equitably experiencing rigorous teaching and learning in ACPS?
College, Career, and Life Readiness	Opportunity to Learn, Physical Integration, & Instructional Excellence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What is the division’s profile of a successful graduate? How are the division’s college and career readiness programs and opportunities promoted and made available equitably? How are all students connected with the surrounding community to explore, learn, and serve in ways that meaningfully develop their progress toward postsecondary pathways of interest?
Community Voice	<i>(Gathered family and community input and feedback on all BET domains)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What do stakeholders believe to be the division’s greatest strengths and challenges? In what ways do community stakeholders assess the quality of their schools and the division? What would convince them that schools and the division were improving? What are the biggest priorities for community stakeholders? How do different stakeholders define equity, and how well does the ACPS working definition of equity capture the concerns, needs, and goals of the division’s diverse group of stakeholders?

To address the research questions, FourPoint used the following methodologies:

- Reviewed extant data, including a Strategic Planning Committee Workbook that summarizes a number of system audits that ACPS has conducted over the last few years with a focus on equity.¹ It is important to note that information from the audits—including a careful analysis of student outcomes—informs the current report but is not repeated.
- Interviewed 58 individuals, including school and Division administrators, teachers, counselors, and city officials. City officials included the Alexandria mayor and city manager as well as the director of the Department of Community and Health Services and the director of the Department of Health.
- Conducted focus groups with 105 parents and community members during 15 sessions, including some focused on speakers of languages other than English (Spanish, Amharic, and Arabic).
- Conducted six focus groups with 38 middle and high school students.

¹ Hanover Research. 2019. *ACPS 2025 Strategic Planning Committee Workbook*. <https://www.acps.k12.va.us/cms/lib/VA01918616/Centricity/Domain/1330/Updated2025StrategicPlanCommitteeDataWorkbook.pdf>

- Facilitated discussions during two meetings of ACPS' strategic planning committee that comprises 79 individuals, including representatives (teacher and/or administrator) of every school in the Division, parents and community members, and city officials.
- Conducted 175 walkthroughs of K-12 classrooms in every school in ACPS using FourPoint's Focused Classroom Walkthrough tool and process.
- Facilitated two sessions with the school board to develop a revised vision, mission, and set of core values for the Division.

FourPoint analyzed the data from these methodologies to develop the findings and recommendations outlined in the following sections.

Findings

Several findings, outlined below, emerged for each of the six domains studied by FourPoint.

Finance

Effective use of resources involves strategic budgeting so that each and every dollar can have its maximum impact and is aligned with goals and strategies to drive improvements. This happens through a variety of decisions both large and small involving the school board, central office leaders, principals, and other building staff. In reality, every decision the Division makes from offering a new elective, to adding another teacher, to what professional development is offered, is in essence, a resources allocation exercise. Resource allocation is also a key indicator of equity: By tracking resources back to each school building, Division leaders gain a clear picture of alignment between needs and resources.²

1. **ACPS is a well-resourced Division.** Compared with other divisions in the Washington metropolitan area, ACPS has the lowest student-per-teacher ratio at all grade levels.³ ACPS also has the lowest class sizes, by far, of any area division for elementary grades and the second lowest class sizes for high school.⁴ Salaries in the Division—including average raises of 2.6% and the addition of staff—increased by 4.8% in FY 2019.

ACPS is well resourced because the City of Alexandria far exceeds the state’s required local effort contribution. The state’s required contribution for FY 2019 was \$98 million. By contrast, Alexandria contributed \$230 million in local supports for schools. The city provides regular increases to education funding that mirror overall increases to its budget; if the city budget increases by 4% the division generally receives a 4% increase to its budget. In the metro area, only two other divisions, Arlington County and Falls Church City, provide a higher percentage of local revenue than ACPS for K-12 education.⁵

2. **The Division’s budget is made up of an unusually high percentage of local funds and unusually low percentages of state and federal funds.** ACPS receives 82.8% of its budget from local revenues and only 16.7% and 0.1% from state and federal funds, respectively.⁶ On average, Virginia school divisions receive 55% of their revenues from local sources, 45%

² Data for the finance analysis is based on FY19 information. The analysis requires a full year of expenditure data making FY 2019 the last complete year.

³ <https://www.fcps.edu/sites/default/files/media/pdf/FY19-WABE-Guide.pdf>

⁴ Ibid.

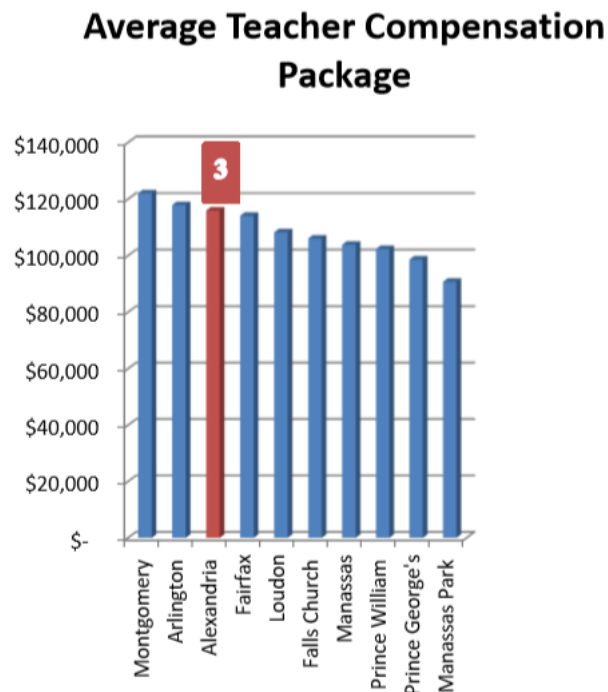
⁵ <https://www.fcps.edu/sites/default/files/media/pdf/FY19-WABE-Guide.pdf>

⁶ These figures refer to the operating fund only and do not include federal Title I or Special Education funds.

from state sources, and 10% from federal sources.⁷ In the case of ACPS, the relatively small contribution from the state is due to the structure of Virginia’s state education funding formula, which drives significantly more resources to lower-income jurisdictions. Limited funding from the state means that cost increases, like those from an increasing student population, must be covered either by increased city funds or by reallocating resources from other areas of the education budget. To date, the city has provided the Division additional resources sufficient to cover escalating costs.

3. **Staff salaries and benefits comprise an unusually high percentage of the Division’s budget.** ACPS spends 88% of its budget on salaries and benefits; on average, divisions across the country spent 80% of their budgets on salaries and benefits during the 2013-14 school year.⁸ Despite the amount spent on staffing, interviews suggest that central office administrators believe that more staff are needed, and school principals reported the need for additional staff to support full implementation of Multi-Tiered Systems of Supports (MTSS) and to serve students who are learning English and students who have an identified disability. ACPS has the third highest teacher compensation in the region, behind only Montgomery County (MD) and Arlington (VA) (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Average Teacher Compensation in the ACPS Region



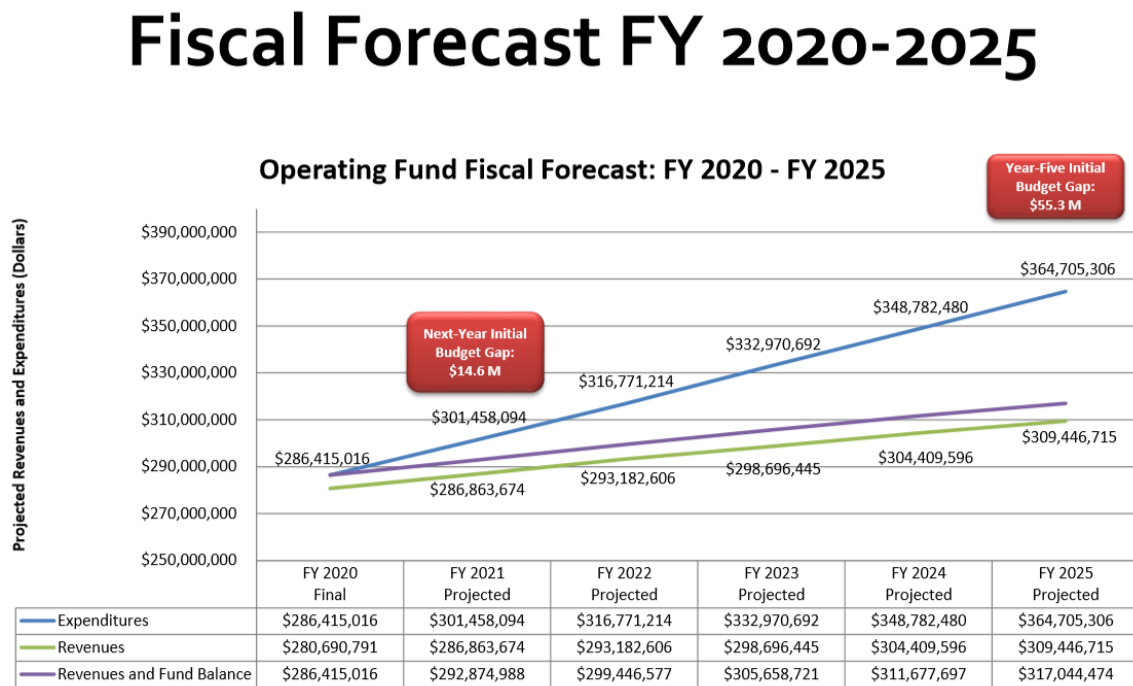
⁷ U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data. See *Digest of Education Statistics 2016 table 236.60*

⁸ U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data. “National Public Education Financial Survey.” *Digest of Education Statistics 2016, table 236.60.*

Source: ACPS Preliminary Fiscal Forecast, FY 2020-2025: Operating Fund

- The Division is running a structural deficit that is growing in size. Revenue, and principally the revenue from the City of Alexandria’s annual appropriation, is not anticipated to keep pace with projected growth in operating-fund expenditures. According to the Division’s 2020 fiscal forecast, the projected gap between revenues and expenditures grows from \$14.6 million in FY 2019 to \$55.3 million in FY 2025 (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. ACPS Fiscal Forecast



Source: ACPS Preliminary Fiscal Forecast, FY 2020-2025: Operating Fund

Each year, ACPS uses the fund balance to fill budget gaps between revenues and expenditures, following Division policy that allows the use of the fund balance up to 2% (approximately \$5 million) of projected operating expenditures. Savings realized over the course of the year (from replacement hires that have lower salaries than incumbent employees, from short-term unfilled positions, etc.) mean that the fund balance has remained relatively stable over time at around \$12 million.⁹

- Fund Balance June 2020 \$6,666,811 (budgeted)
- Fund Balance June 2019 \$12,391,035 (budgeted)
- Fund Balance June 2018 \$12,391,035 (actual)
- Fund Balance June 2017 \$12,167,991 (actual)

⁹<https://www.acps.k12.va.us/cms/lib/VA01918616/Centricity/Domain/803/2019OperatingBudget.pdf>

In the coming years, the Division will need to reduce expenditures or find additional sources of revenue as the deficit grows larger. The district will not be able to cover the gap by dipping into the fund balance.

- 5. Two factors—continued increases in student enrollment and need for expansion and maintenance of facilities—are the primary stresses on the budget.** Student enrollment is expected to grow from 15,522 in 2018 to a projected 17,518 in 2025.¹⁰ In addition, growth in the number of students who are English language learners and/or have an identified disability is creating a need for additional specialized staff. A total of 61.26 new operating-budget-funded FTEs are incorporated into the FY 2019 budget in response to increased enrollment and specialized staff. The proposed 2020 budget continues this trend adding \$2.5 million for additional 50 teachers and instructional support personnel.

The need for expanding and repairing facilities is the other major stress point on the budget. The ACPS school board does not have the funding authority to issue debt, the primary way capital improvements are funded. Alexandria’s City Council approves the appropriate funding option based on project requests. The total Capital Improvement Program (CIP) budget is \$474.68 million and includes \$68.33 million for FY 2019. The city and Division work closely on all capital improvement projects. ACPS’ FY 2019-2028 CIP is framed by two main considerations: capacity issues due to continued enrollment growth and the deteriorating condition of aging facilities and infrastructure. Alexandria has established an Ad-Hoc Joint City Schools Facilities Investment Task Force (Task Force) to provide recommendations to guide facilities investments. The FY 2016-2025 CIP began the modernization process that will be continued in the FY 2019-2028 program. Modernization will focus on increasing capacity to accommodate anticipated enrollment growth and student needs and on-going major repairs of facilities that are not scheduled to be modernized within the 10-year program. During the 2019-20 school year, the Division has refined its process for prioritizing non-capacity facilities improvements. This process—the Targeted Facilities Condition Assessment and Prioritization Process—is based on a more detailed look at needs and priorities, and promotes equity and transparency as well as efficiency in allocation resources for facilities updates.

- 6. Currently, ACPS allocates school-based staff based on student counts.** Additional staff are allocated to support English language learner students, students with disabilities, and Talented and Gifted (TAG) Students. In addition, ACPS uses a student-based formula to allocate non-personnel base funding to each school. The formula for non-personnel base funding includes materials, services, and capital outlay. Elementary schools receive a base

¹⁰ ¹⁰ <https://esbpublic.acps.k12.va.us/attachments/461fca4f-8b12-4648-bd62-b90f5ac745e8.pdf>

allocation of \$10,000 plus \$95.00 per student. Middle and high schools receive a per-student allocation: \$155.00 and \$195.00 per student, respectively. Position-based allocations (FTEs) are outlined in Figure 4.

Figure 4. ACPS Position-Based Allocations

Elementary Position Allocations	
Elementary Homeroom Staffing	
<i>Based on grade-by-grade enrollment projections. When class size reaches maximum level, an additional homeroom class is added (+ 1.0 FTE).</i>	
Grade Level	Maximum Class Size
Kindergarten	22
Grades 1-2	24
Grades 3-5	26
Elementary Encore Teacher Staffing	
<i>Library media specialists are allocated at 1.0 FTE per school. All other elementary encore positions are allocated to schools based number of classrooms.</i>	
Position	Allocation Formula
Art/Vocal Music/Health & PE	0.20 FTE per classroom*
Library/Media	1.0 FTE per school
Special Student Populations	
<i>Position allocation formulas for SWD, EL, and TAG students are based on a number of factors.</i>	
Position	Allocation Formula
Special Education Staffing	School-based allocations [^] are determined by disability category and level of service.
EL Staffing, schools with <119 students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1-30 students: 1.00 FTE • 31-60 students: 2.00 FTE • 61-119 students: 3.00 FTE
EL Staffing, schools with 120+ EL students	Uses service minutes formula based on student grade and level of English proficiency
Talented and Gifted (TAG) Staffing	Based on class size and enrollment + additional time and program considerations
Assistant Principals	
<i>Allocated to schools based on enrollment.</i>	
Position	Allocation Formula
Assistant Principals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1.00 FTE for up to 600 students • 2.00 FTE for 601 to 900 students • 3.00 FTE for more than 900 students
Student Support	
<i>All elementary schools receive the same base allocation. Large, high FRL schools receive an additional 1.0 FTE. School principals have flexibility in how these positions are assigned.</i>	
Position	Allocation Formula
Student Improvement Positions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 3.5 FTE per elementary school • Additional 1.00 FTE for schools with > 700 students enrolled and > 60% FRL

*This is the formula for 2019. For 2018, allocations were calculated using class-time increments, but the calculations were also based on number of classrooms.

[^] In addition to school-based allocations, all paraprofessional and certified nursing assistant positions are placed in a centralized pool and follow students.

By comparison, divisions looking to push resources to schools with higher needs typically allocate resources through some version of a weighted student funding formula. Weighted student funding allows divisions to better target resources to increase funding equity, transparency, and flexibility. Weighted student formulas:

- Allocate dollars, not FTEs
- Use objective and measurable student characteristics as weights—such as poverty status, English learners (EL), students with disabilities (SWD), grade enrolled, low academic performance, or high academic performance/gifted status, among others.¹¹

Even among divisions that allocate positions instead of dollars, many use some form of student weights or targeted funding to drive additional resources to disadvantaged students.

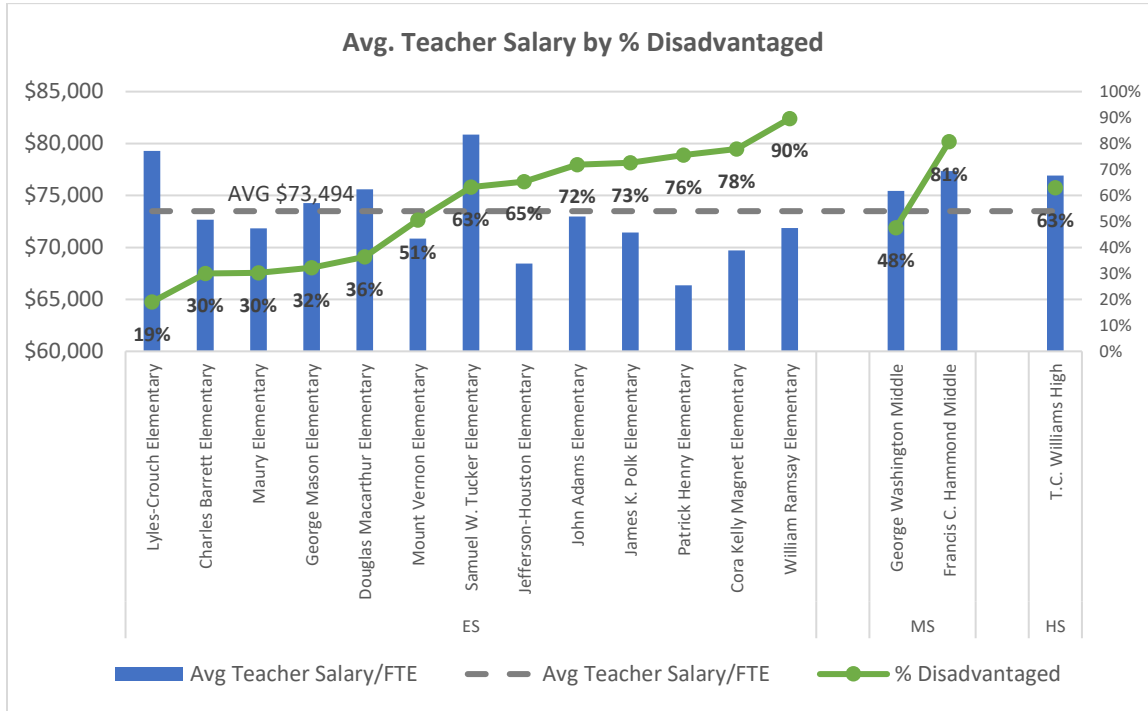
ACPS is beginning to follow this strategy to a limited extent by refining the way allocations are made from the reserve pool.¹² In the past, allocation of reserve positions was determined by student enrollment. This past year, to promote equity, other needs at the schools were also considered in allocating additional staff.

7. ACPS' current resource-allocation process does not ensure that the highest-need schools receive additional resources. More experienced, higher-salaried teachers are clustered in ACPS schools with fewer disadvantaged students, a common outcome of purely position-based allocations. Figure 5 shows that average teacher salaries—and thus teacher experience—tend to be higher in schools serving smaller percentages of students receiving free and reduced price lunch. For elementary schools, per-pupil expenditures (PPE) vary widely across schools, with no clear relationship to the percentage of disadvantaged students, which varies from 19 to 90 percent (Figure 6). The greatest variation occurs among the schools with the highest portion of disadvantaged students (>70%). Two of these schools have among the lowest per-pupil expenditures in the Division. A similar pattern holds when looking at the relationship between per-pupil expenditure and EL status. As shown in Figure 7, Title I, IDEA, and Preschool Initiative funding do little to close the massive PPE imbalances among the highest-need schools; even with the additional funds included, both the lowest PPE and second-highest PPE are among the schools with the highest percentage of disadvantaged students (top quartile).

¹¹ <https://reason.org/policy-study/weighted-student-formula-yearbook-2019/>

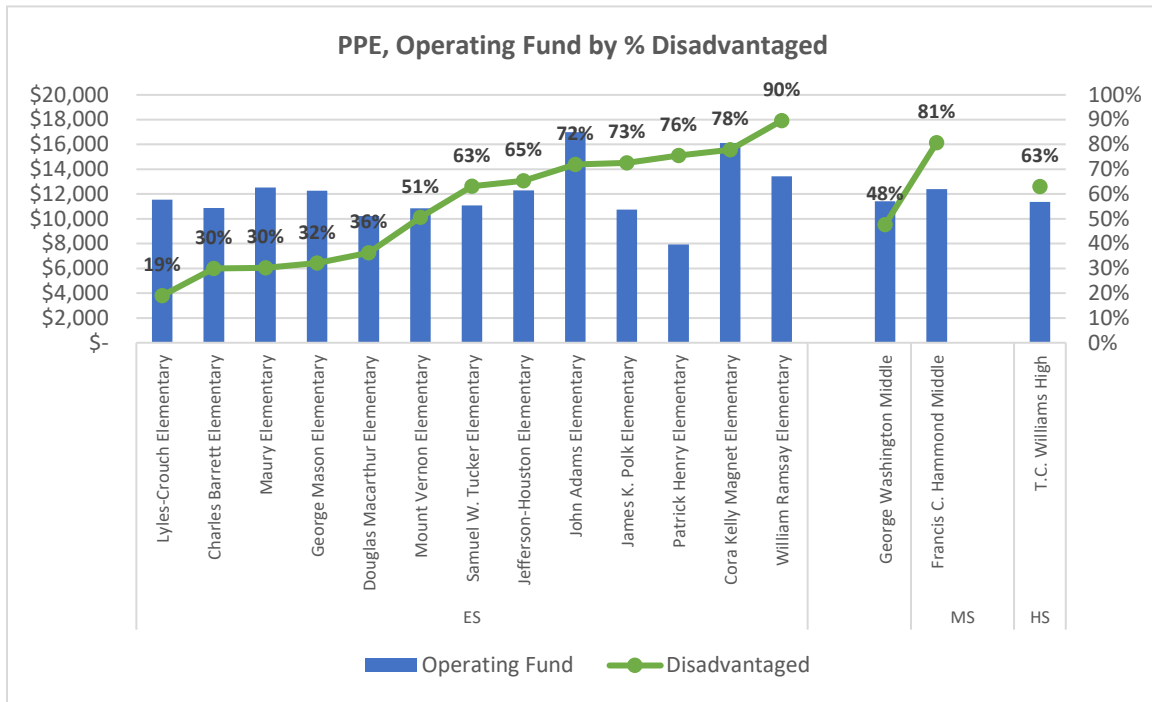
¹² The reserve pool has 12.5 positions.

Figure 5. Average Teacher Salary in ACPS Schools (with Percentage of Students Receiving Free or Reduced Price Lunch)



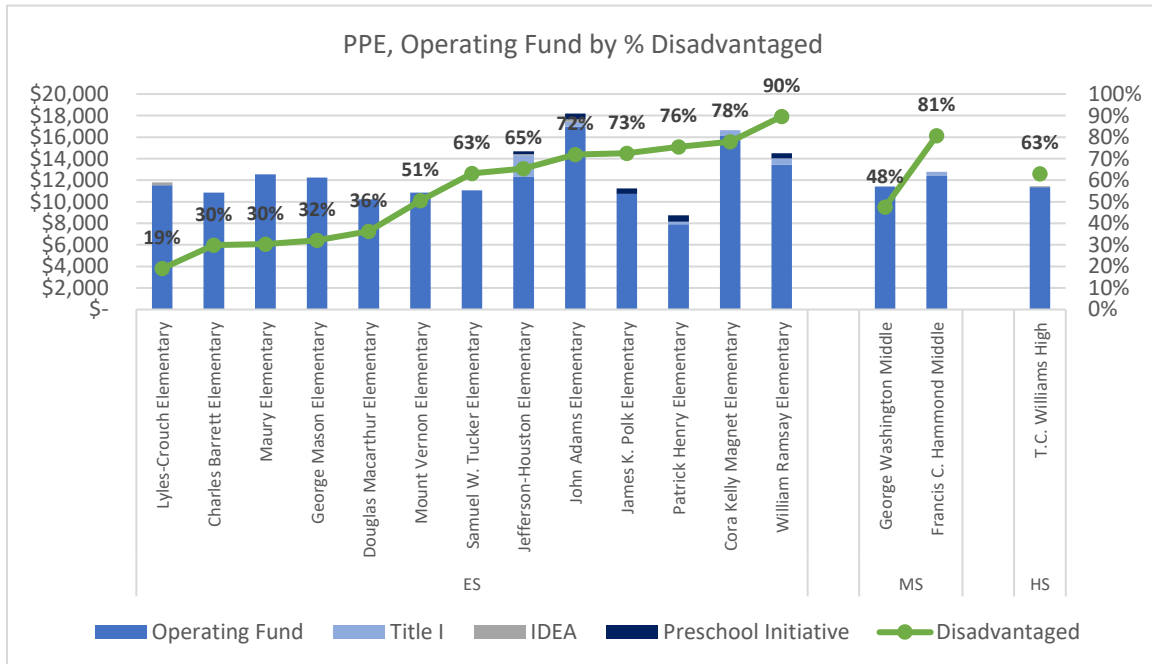
Source: FourPoint Education Partners analysis of ACPS data.

Figure 6. Per-Pupil ACPS Operating Fund Expenditures (PPE) by School (with Percentage of Students Receiving Free or Reduced Price Lunch)



Source: FourPoint Education Partners analysis of ACPS data.

Figure 7. ACPS Per Pupil Expenditures (PPE) (Operating Fund, Title I, IDEA, and Preschool Initiative) by School (with Percentage of Students Receiving Free or Reduced Price Lunch)



Source: FourPoint Education Partners analysis of ACPS data.

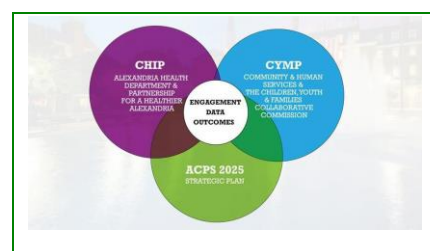
8. The Division has been slow to adapt to new systems that utilize data-based functions and electronic formats to improve workflow. Interviews suggest that staff have been slow to adopt new data system procedures and that accuracy of data entry is a persistent issue.
- There have been issues accessing up-to-date information on CIP projects since most of the budget and expenditure data for those functions reside within the City's system. Staff are working on a more streamlined process for sharing data.
 - ACPS is using the TimeClock Plus system for all staff. They also use Zimbra for emails. Both of these systems are outdated, and there are regular pay-related issues due to errors in timeclock.
 - The budget office trains building staff to use Munis. While the Division has documents to support use of Munis by building staff, additional support and materials were requested by several building staff.

Governance

Leadership of a school division and supports for students occur within a context of a community with its own leadership structures, priorities, resources, and challenges. Ideally, school divisions work collaboratively with other city leaders to ensure that students and their families are healthy, secure, productive, and well educated. This collaboration can occur at multiple levels but must include the high-functioning leadership of the division's school board, which is responsible for setting the overall direction of the division, communicating with stakeholders, and hiring and holding accountable the superintendent.

9. **ACPS' strategic planning is happening at an opportune time for coordinating with other efforts to improve outcomes for children, youth, and families.** In addition to ACPS' current strategic planning work, Alexandria's Department of Community and Human Services is currently working to revise the Children and Youth Master Plan, and Alexandria's Department of Health (along with the Partnership for a Healthier Alexandria) is currently working to revise the Community Health Improvement Plan. Both plans are expected to be completed in the Spring of 2020 and are currently coordinating with ACPS.

More generally, Alexandria City's leaders indicated that coordination and collaboration with ACPS has improved greatly at the leadership level in recent years, although there is still a need for improved coordination and collaboration between city and Division staff. Developments increasing northern Virginia's profile as a high-tech hub present an ideal opportunity to foster this coordination and collaboration. ACPS, along with Arlington and Fairfax, are already working to support these efforts, which should continue as a priority of the Division.



While there is significant momentum behind coordinating planning, there are still significant questions about how agencies will work together after the planning process. City leaders added that the Division can do a better job of informing the public about its successes. Too often, they noted, stories tend to focus on challenges related to facilities and low performance among certain groups of students.

10. **There is widespread agreement among City and Division leaders on high-level priorities for the Division, including—most notably—a focus on equity.** The vast majority of stakeholders interviewed for this report expressed strong support for a deep focus on equity by the Division and the city. City officials and Division administrators also agreed that mental health is high-priority area in which the Division and city agencies can collaborate, and DCHS indicated the ability to provide additional supports in this area. Based on a community-wide survey, ACPS has seen reduced substance use (except e-cigarettes), improved mental

health, and reduced discipline incidents for some subgroups of students.¹³ However, some indicators that can be jointly addressed by the city and Division have not improved and are concerning. For example, less than one-third of Alexandria youth agree that they live in a caring neighborhood and go to school with a caring climate, and less than half feel safe.¹⁴ These are indicators that leaders across the city and Division can help address.

Meanwhile, school board members recently identified several priorities for funding and implementation, including K-2 literacy programming, outreach to under-served communities, equity training for all staff, chronic absenteeism among Hispanic students, full implementation of Multi-Tiered Systems of Support, and implementation of audit findings from the students with disabilities, human resources, and facilities audits.

11. **The school board can improve its focus on ensuring that all students succeed** by working collaboratively with the superintendent and Division leaders to review formative data to better anticipate and inform changes in student achievement, helping the Division stay focused on a clear theory of action for school improvement, asking questions about the implementation of a few strategic initiatives, and not getting overly distracted about issues unrelated to ensuring student success.

School Improvement

In an effort to ensure effective and coherent supports for schools that will ensure that all students are successful, school divisions organize themselves along a continuum of school management approaches. At one end of the continuum—a “centrally managed” approach—the central office controls many inputs required for an excellent education, including hiring of staff, resource allocation, curriculum and assessment, and professional development. At the other end of the continuum—a “school-based management” approach—the central office empowers schools to make most decisions related to how an excellent education is delivered to students.

Research has found challenges and benefits to both the centrally managed and the school-based management approaches, and, in reality, most divisions fall somewhere between the two far ends of the school-management spectrum. Although there is no “correct” position, research finds that school divisions must be purposeful in identifying their placement on the school-management continuum, based in part on an understanding of student characteristic, and then make decisions related to central-office organizational structure and staffing, systems,

¹³ 2025 Strategic Planning Committee Data Workbook.

¹⁴ 2025 Strategic Planning Committee Data Workbook.

use of resources, and school-improvement strategies that are consistent with their selected approach.¹⁵

12. All ACPS schools are fully accredited for the first time in 20 years, and some achievement gaps have narrowed. For example, gaps between White and Black students' Standards of Learning (SOL) pass rates and on-time graduation rates narrowed over the past five years, and Black students now have similar kindergarten readiness levels as White and Asian students.¹⁶

13. As in many divisions across the country, significant gaps in student achievement persist. For example, White and Asian students tend to outperform Black and Hispanic students in terms of SOL pass rates, average SAT scores, and on-time graduation rates. Gaps between White and Hispanic and English Learner students' SOL pass rates and on-time graduation rates have widened. Large gaps remain between White and Hispanic kindergarten students who meet fall Phonological Awareness Literacy Screening (PALS) benchmarks. SOL pass rates in reading have declined over the past five years and remain well under the ACPS 2020 target for Black, Asian, Hispanic, and economically disadvantaged students, and for students with disabilities and English Language learners.¹⁷

14. Student outcomes other than achievement also differ by race/ethnicity and program. For example:

- Hispanic students are disproportionately chronically absent from school and failing to graduate.
- There are multiple instances of disproportionality in suspensions at ACPS. For example, while Black males comprise 14% of all ACPS student enrollment, they comprise 32% of suspensions.¹⁸
- The number of “children of color” or culturally and linguistically diverse children referred for testing and subsequently considered eligible for special education has been found to be “worrisome.”¹⁹ In particular, there is significant disproportionality in the Division’s identification of Black students with an emotional disability.
- As described further in the College, Career, and Life Readiness findings section below, the percentage of students identified for the Talented and Gifted (TAG) program in

¹⁵ Childress, S. et. al (January 31, 2007). Note on the PELP Coherence Framework. Public Education Leadership Project at Harvard University.

¹⁶ See the 2025 Strategic Planning Committee Data Workbook for a summary of student achievement across the Division.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

elementary schools varies considerably across schools depending on the percentage of students served who receive free and reduced price lunch (Figure 8) and by race (Figure 9) and special program (Figures 10). In our focus groups, most parents noted that processes for identifying students for TAG varies widely by school and that strong parent advocacy often determines higher identification rates.

- Differences in TAG participation by race persist into middle and high school students' enrollment in honors and other upper level courses even though these courses offer "open enrollment" and have no eligibility criteria.

Figure 8. Percentage of Students at Each ACPS School Receiving FRPL, Proficient in Reading, and Identified as TAG

School	% Students Eligible FRPL (2018-19)	% Students Proficient Reading (2018-19)	% TAG Identified (2017-18)
Elementary and K-8 Schools			
Lyles-Crouch	18%	85%	23%
Charles Barrett	30%	80%	15%
Matthew Maury	30%	74%	27%
George Mason	31%	71%	24%
Douglas MacArthur	35%	72%	24%
Mount Vernon	52%	57%	13%
Samuel Tucker	62%	74%	9%
Jefferson-Houston (K-8)	63%	61%	11%
John Adams	67%	64%	7%
James K. Polk	72%	67%	11%
Patrick Henry (K-8)	75%	74%	11%
Cora Kelly	85%	56%	5%
William Ramsay	87%	43%	5%
Middle Schools			
George Washington	45%	73%	33%
Francis C. Hammond	77%	61%	11%
High School			
T.C. Williams	58%	77%	12%

*Note: According to the National Association for Gifted Children, it is difficult to estimate the absolute number of gifted children. The association adds, however, that many consider children who are in the top 10% in relation to a national and/or local norm to be a good guide for identification and services.²⁰

²⁰ National Association for Gifted Children: <http://www.nagc.org/resources-publications/resources/what-giftedness>.

Figure 9. Percentage of TAG-Identified Students by Race (2017-18)

Student Subpopulation	Percentage of Total ACPS Enrollment	Percentage Identified by TAG
Asian	5%	5%
Black	28%	15%
Hispanic	36%	12%
White	28%	63%
Other	3%	6%

Figure 10. Percentage of TAG-Identified Students by Special Program (2017-18)

Special Program	Percentage of Total ACPS Enrollment	Percentage Identified by TAG
Free/Reduced Price Meals	61%	20%
English Learner	43%	11%
Special Education	10%	2%

15. The Division would benefit from a clear theory of action for school and instructional improvement, with aligned systems and structures that focus on a select number of high-leverage priorities. Prior to Dr. Hutchings’ administration, ACPS schools had considerable autonomy from the central office with relatively little accountability in the education they provided to their students. Efforts are currently underway to pull back autonomy from schools by setting expectations around the delivery of a common curriculum and several high-leverage initiatives, including Balanced Literacy, Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS), Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS), cooperative learning, Guided Language Acquisition Design (GLAD), restorative practices, Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), training for instructional coaches and interventionists, and social-emotional and academic learning (SEAL). According to interviews, school and Division leaders are still gaining clarity as to which of these initiatives are the top priorities and acknowledge that implementation varies greatly across schools.²¹ For example, although the Division has a framework for how schools are expected to implement MTSS, the framework is not being used; as a result, schools have been struggling to implement MTSS effectively. Principals expressed strong support for the central office (with input from

²¹ FourPoint’s classroom walkthroughs confirmed that implementation of initiatives tends to be low and inconsistent across schools.

principals) identifying and focusing on a select number of high-leverage, high-priority levers for improvement, with a focus on implementing these priority efforts with fidelity.

Although the Division does have an instructional framework, so far few educators or administrators are aware that it exists and so it has not guided the planning, delivery, and assessment of instruction. Moreover, the Division currently does not have a definition of instructional leadership for teacher leaders, coaches, and school and central office administrators, and interviews found that there are significant questions about the quality and completeness of the Division’s curriculum (including its alignment with the State’s definition of a high school graduate), expectations around teacher lesson planning, and the alignment of benchmark assessments with the curriculum.

In addition to these challenges, key central office systems and structures intended to support schools, while based on known best practices, are in the early stages of implementation and not yet effective. For example:

- **Principal supervision.** The central office has two executive directors—one for elementary schools and one for secondary schools—responsible for coaching and supervising principals. National research suggests that this position can be a key strategic lever used by school divisions to improve supports for and accountability of principals, develop instructional leadership among principals, and ultimately increase student achievement.²² Each executive director is responsible for defining their objectives, school-improvement focus, amount of time in schools, and ways in which they work with principals. Both executive directors agreed that they would benefit from more clarity in their role, clear understanding that most of their time should be focused on supporting principals, clarity in how their role interacts with other supports for schools (e.g., professional development and integrated teams), and a more strategic approach to school improvement.
- **School consultations.** Every quarter, the superintendent and members of his leadership team meet individually with each principal (and staff of their choosing) to discuss academic progress, challenges they are facing, and ways in which the central office can improve school supports. Principals expressed strong support for these meetings, indicating that they valued leadership’s attention and interest in their work and the improved communications between the schools and the central office. This promising practice should continue to evolve, ensuring that the work of the principal supervisors and integrated teams is aligned with the outcomes of the consultations.

²² See, for example, Jerald, C. (2012). *Leading for Effective Teaching: How School Systems Can Support Principal Success*. Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

- **Integrated teams.** The Division’s curriculum and instruction department recently created teams in the areas of literacy, humanities, STEM, data, and college and careers to improve coordinated supports for schools. Serving on each team are central office staff responsible for curriculum, professional development, English language learners, and specialized instruction. Such teams have been used effectively in divisions across the country, but to date the ACPS teams lack a common understanding of their objectives, responsibilities, and ways of operating. Team members and coordinators acknowledge requiring additional guidance and mentoring. Meanwhile, the “functional” offices focused on improving outcomes for students—curriculum, special education, English language learning, and professional development—reportedly work in isolation from one another.
- **Division-wide professional development.** ACPS can improve the strategic use of professional development:
 - With a budget of \$1.5 million, the central office is responsible for providing three days of professional development to educators from across the Division. Central offices can use division-wide professional development to develop skills needed by educators to effectively implement high-leverage instructional strategies and/or initiatives. If a central office is unclear about which instructional strategies or initiatives should be used or attempts to provide training around too many strategies or initiatives, the professional development will not be effective and student achievement will not be impacted. Unfortunately, that appears to be the case in ACPS. In a recent (October 14, 2019) professional development day, the central office offered 86 courses from which educators can choose.
 - While some attempts have been made to align professional development courses to the current strategic plan and to key Division initiatives, content and delivery of the courses are developed by staff on their own (without coordination), educators can select the courses they attend (with no consideration to their needs or the needs of the schools), and there is no follow up. Neither principals nor senior Division staff members attend the professional development, and there is very little accountability as to whether teachers do.
 - The Division has invested about \$70,000 to send educators to Harvard for “instructional round” training and recently hired a vendor to provide support to educators in a one-day training. Instructional rounds have the potential to be a powerful strategy for improving classroom instruction, but they are currently disconnected from other initiatives.

- Principals indicated that they would benefit from professional development, including an opportunity to see and learn about what their colleagues are doing in other schools. Moreover, while they say that principal meetings have improved greatly under Dr. Hutchings’ leadership (addressing topics such as equity, differentiation, and specialized instruction), principals indicated that the meetings could do more to develop them as leaders and serve as the foundation of future conversations.
- **Educator and staff evaluation.** The means by which teachers, staff, and principals are evaluated is currently undergoing revision and is not being implemented consistently.

16. The board’s September 26 decision to maintain a single comprehensive high school will enable the Division to continue providing many opportunities to students without contributing to modern day segregation. The school board supported the superintendent’s “Connected High School Network” model for the delivery of high school instruction. The community values the 400 courses that T.C. Williams High School already makes available to students. Opportunities for students are expected to expand as Northern Virginia continues its evolution as a high-tech hub.

Instructional Delivery

One of the most important ways that a school system can ensure that all students meet their full potential is to provide a guaranteed and viable curriculum. Curriculum refers to the knowledge and skills that students are expected to learn as defined by state standards. It includes aligned, common formative and summative assessments that verify that every student has mastered the intended course knowledge, skills, and application of the standards.²³ The curriculum should be developmentally appropriate in scope and pacing and include instructional strategies that consistently and reliably address the standards-based learning targets. Essential curriculum maps are then created to inform teachers and principals of the essential learning and assessment measures and establish a scope and sequence for instruction. These maps are then used to develop unit and lesson plans. ACPS had a full audit conducted of its written during the 2015-16 school year, and it was outside FourPoint’s scope to conduct another in-depth. That said, educators and administrators interviewed for this report indicated that curricula are in place but may be of uneven quality and used inconsistently.

Nationally renowned curriculum and instruction expert Robert Marzano argues that when a consistent, high-quality curriculum is in place and delivered effectively, students across a

²³ Marzano, R. J. *What Works in Schools Translating Research into Action*. Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2003.

division—regardless of their teacher or school—have the opportunity to learn the same standards-based content and skills by the end of the school year or course. Without a guaranteed and viable curriculum, student performance is typically uneven (by subgroup population, school, or teacher) and lower than it could be. This section examines the extent to which ACPS written curricula are delivered through the use of high-impact instructional strategies as observed by FourPoint across 175 classrooms that included all ACPS schools.

PLEASE NOTE: It is not expected that all instructional strategies that FourPoint looks for and analyzes should be evident in all classrooms; neither should any school division attempt to prepare its teachers to be effective in all strategies. Rather, a successful division strategically identifies a number of high-impact strategies that are most likely to address the learning needs of its students and ensures that most teachers are able to apply these strategies effectively in order to support student learning. It must also be noted that the absence (or non observation) of any instructional practice does not mean in any way that teachers or instruction is bad. The presence or lack of observed use of a practice reflects what a school or division believe to be important and therefore support through high-quality professional development and coaching.

17. Observed teachers communicated high expectations for student behavior and participation resulting in well-managed classrooms despite the lack of an observable behavior management system. Classroom walkthroughs found:

- Orderly classroom management at every level of schooling (evident in 100 percent of observed elementary schools and 92 percent of secondary classrooms).
- Communicated rituals and routines for student behavior and participation in the learning process (evident in 95 percent of observed classrooms) and students following the expected behaviors (observed in 94 percent of classrooms).
- Demonstrations of positive student-to-teacher interactions (observed in 90 percent of classroom) and student-to-student interactions (observed in 90 percent of all elementary classrooms and 53 percent of the observed secondary²⁴ classrooms).
- Demonstrations of student respect for teaching staff (observed in 94 percent of all observed classrooms).

18. Additional strategies are needed to ensure students’ emotional engagement in learning.

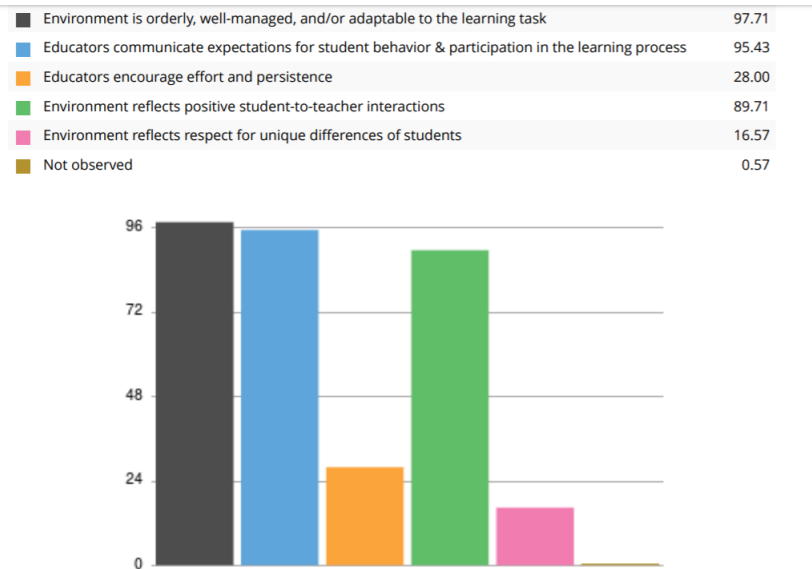
Creating a learning environment for student engagement *and* high-level thinking requires that students believe they can learn and persevere through difficult learning tasks. A teacher’s positive demeanor and communication and modeling of the expected behaviors

²⁴ The difference between elementary and secondary classrooms is likely the result of teacher-selected instructional models. Elementary teachers designed opportunities for student discourse and discussion while secondary teachers were observed lecturing much more frequently with fewer opportunities for student interaction.

have a strong influence on students’ emotional engagement in learning. For example, as summarized in Figure 11, teacher behaviors reflected:

- “Positive student-to-teacher interactions” in 90 percent of the observed classrooms but of those interactions only 28 percent were to “encourage effort and persistence” in the learning process.
- “Reinforcing students’ efforts and providing recognition” in 36 percent of classrooms.
- Little encouragement or re-direction to the learning task when secondary students were observed to be sleeping, on their phones, or engaged in other off-task behavior. Students observed to be “struggling with the learning tasks” were observed to “persevere in the learning task” in only 6 percent of the observed classrooms.

Figure 11. Classroom Walkthrough Data: Learning Environment



Source: Data collected and analyzed by FourPoint Education Partners

19. Classroom walkthroughs reveal limited evidence that teacher planning and delivery of instruction is guided by the ACPS Teaching and Learning Instructional Framework (Plan-Teach-Assess-Adjust) designed to support all students in learning the curriculum standards through participation in engaging, high-level thinking tasks (see Figures 12 and 13 below).

- Teachers delivered lessons aligned to the Virginia Standards of Learning (observed in 94 percent of the classrooms) and communicated learning objectives/targets aligned to standards (observed in 62 percent of the classrooms). Some teachers provided immediate, specific feedback on the learning objectives/targets (observed in 42 percent of the observed classrooms). When teachers identify and communicate clear learning targets, they send the message that there is a focus for the learning activities to come.

This reassures students that there is a reason for learning and provides teachers with a focal point for planning instruction. Moreover, providing feedback specific to learning targets helps students improve their performance and solidify their understanding.²⁵

- In observed classrooms, teachers inconsistently used Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles²⁶ or best practice strategies aimed to promote student engagement and learn at high levels. These important strategies guide teacher actions to support language and content acquisition for the district English Learners (EL), who represent over 30 percent of the Division’s student population, students with low socioeconomic status (over 60 percent of the Division’s population), and students with disabilities (approximately 11 percent). Teachers:
 - Used strategies to meet students’ diverse language and cultural needs (observed in 21 percent of classrooms). For example, classroom observations revealed:
 - Learning environments that reflect respect for unique difference in 17 percent of the observed classrooms. Most classrooms were absent of pictures, posters, or artifacts from other countries that reflect student ethnic, language, or cultural backgrounds.
 - Limited language acquisition strategies. For example, teachers used limited sensory supports and visuals (e.g., real-life objects, manipulatives, illustrations, diagrams, drawings, magazines, newspapers, body movements, facial expression, gestures, and hand motions).²⁷ These supports—sensory, graphic, and interactive—are embedded in the World-class Instructional Design and Assessment (WIDA) standards to address language learners with language acquisition.
 - Used strategies to promote student participation and address learning styles (observed in 68 percent of classrooms). For example, teachers asked students to “quick write” their responses to teacher asked questions, solve math problems on white boards, signal “thumbs up” to correct responses, or engage in turn and talk with a partner. Teachers at several elementary schools used these strategies in at least 90 percent of the classrooms observed. Secondary teachers were observed using these strategies in about 50 percent of observed classrooms.

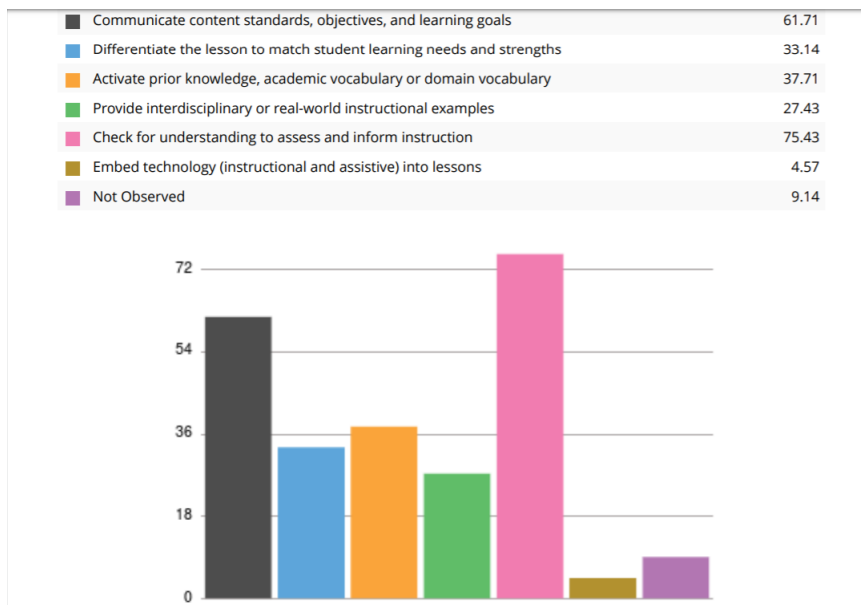
²⁵ Hattie, J. (2009). Visible learning: A synthesis of over 800 meta-analyses relating to achievement. New York: Routledge. Updated in 2014.

²⁶ Universal Design for Learning. <http://www.cast.org/research/udl>

²⁷ Gay, G. (2000) Culturally Responsive Teaching Theory, Research & Practice

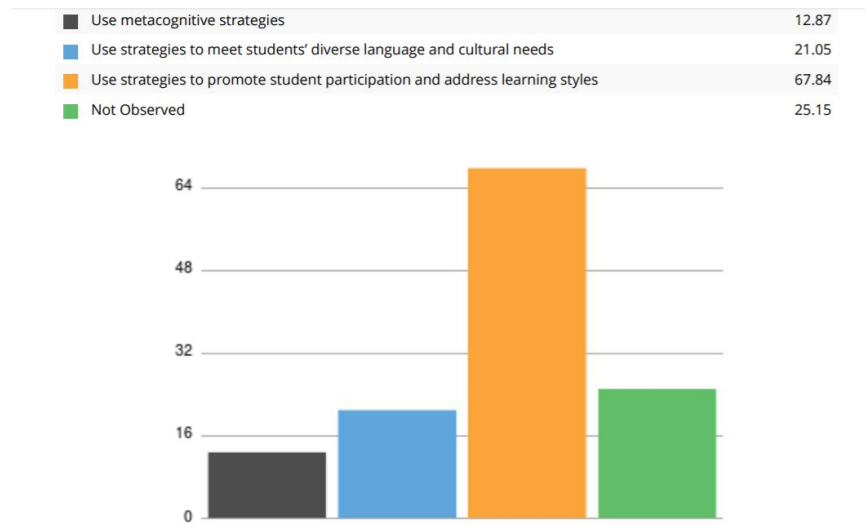
- Activated prior knowledge, academic vocabulary, or domain vocabulary (observed in 38 percent of classrooms). Title I schools demonstrated the use of this strategy more frequently (52 percent of observed classroom) than non-Title I schools.
- Provided interdisciplinary or real-world instructional examples (observed in 27 percent of classrooms).
- Differentiated the lesson to match student learning needs and strengths (observed in 33 percent of all classrooms, 44 percent of classrooms in Title I schools). Opportunities for students to demonstrate what they learned through a variety of means (e.g., expression of thoughts and ideas, projects or illustrations, etc.) was observed in 25 percent of classrooms.
- Checked for understanding to assess and inform instruction (observed in 80 percent of elementary classrooms and 57 percent of secondary classrooms). It is important to note that teachers were observed checking to ensure understanding of the directions to complete the instructional task in about 30 percent of classrooms.

Figure 12: Classroom Walkthrough Data: Universal Design for Learning Principles



Source: Data collected and analyzed by FourPoint Education Partners

Figure 13: Classroom Walkthrough Data: Best Practice Strategies for Engagement and High-Level Thinking

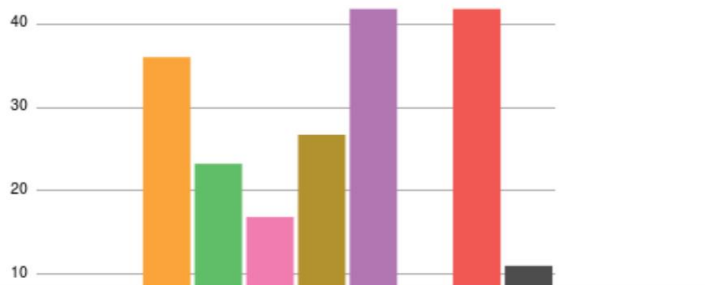


Source: Data collected and analyzed by FourPoint Education Partners

- Teachers infrequently used strategies that accelerate learning. For example, teachers:
 - “Organized learning in groups” (cooperative learning, pairs or small groups) in 27 percent of observed classrooms. Few classrooms utilized Kagan’s structural approach to cooperative learning, a Division priority.
 - “Used cues, questions, & advance organizers” in 41 percent of observed classrooms.
- Moreover, teachers empowered students to engage with few strategies that have been found to have a high effect size for increasing student achievement (Figure 14) such as:
- “Identify similarities and differences” (observed in 3 percent of the classrooms).
 - “Summarize or take notes” (observed in 2 percent of classrooms).
 - “Generate and test hypotheses” (observed in 6 percent of classrooms).
 - “Represent knowledge linguistically and non-linguistically” in 17 percent of classrooms.

Figure 14: Classroom Walkthrough Data: Strategies that Accelerate Learning

Identify similarities & differences	2.91
Summarize or take notes	1.74
Reinforce students' efforts & provide recognition	36.05
Use homework & practice opportunities	23.26
Represent knowledge linguistically/non-linguistically	16.86
Organize learning in groups (cooperative learning, pairs, or small groups)	26.74
Set objectives & provide immediate, specific feedback	41.86
Generate & test hypotheses	4.65
Use cues, questions, & advance organizers	41.86
Not observed	11.05



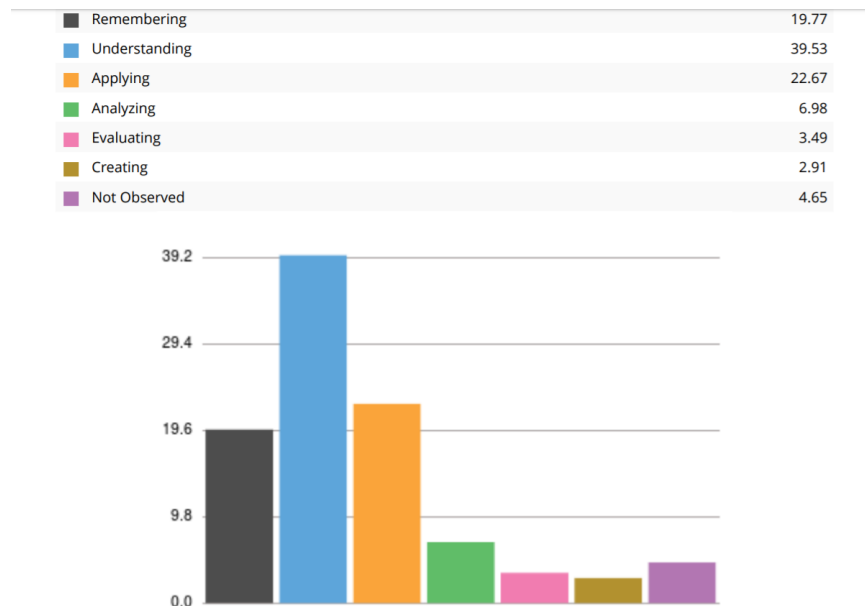
Source: Data collected and analyzed by FourPoint Education Partners

20. Student engagement in classroom instructional tasks required low levels of cognitive rigor in observed classrooms. Bloom’s Taxonomy measures the cognitive level students are expected to demonstrate while Webb’s Depth of Knowledge is focused more on the context—the scenario, the setting, or the situation—in which students are expected to express the learning. Bloom’s Taxonomy and Webb’s Depth of Knowledge (see Figures 15 and 16) were used to capture the measure of cognitive of rigor in classroom and instructional tasks for students to gain knowledge, reason/think, practice skills, or create.²⁸

- In FourPoint’s walkthrough, the level of student thinking and the depth of knowledge required were consistently low. For example, student “application of knowledge”—the third of six levels within Bloom’s taxonomy—was observed in 23 percent of classrooms, and student “creating”—the highest level of the taxonomy—was observed in only 3 percent of classrooms. In most classrooms observed, instruction typically occurred at the lowest levels of rigor, with 20 percent (on Bloom’s Taxonomy) and 40 percent (on Webb’s Depth of Knowledge) of classrooms asking students only to “remember and understand.” FourPoint observers found the required depth of student understanding to be at “Level 2: Skills and Concepts” in 47 percent of classrooms observed and “Level 1: Recall and Reproduce” in 30 percent of classrooms.

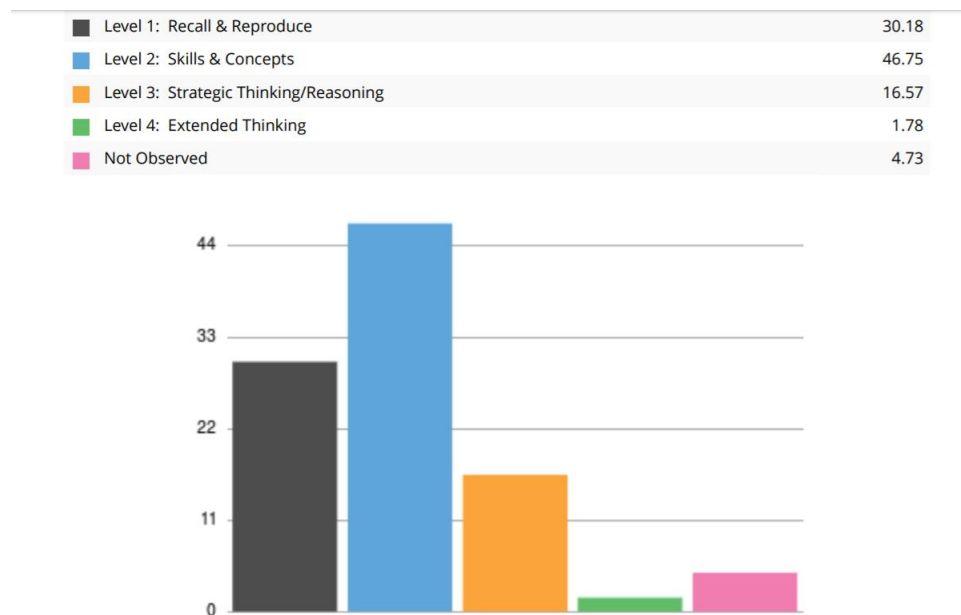
²⁸ Armstrong, P. (2017). Blooms taxonomy. Retrieved from <https://cft.vanderbilt.edu/guides-sub-pages/blooms-taxonomy/>. Francis, E. (2016). What exactly is depth of knowledge? Retrieved from <http://edge.ascd.org/blogpost/what-exactly-is-depth-of-knowledge-hint-its-not-a-wheel>.

Figure 15: Classroom Walkthrough Data: Blooms' Type of Thinking



Source: Data collected and analyzed by FourPoint Education Partners

Figure 16: Classroom Walkthrough Data: Webb's Depth of Knowledge



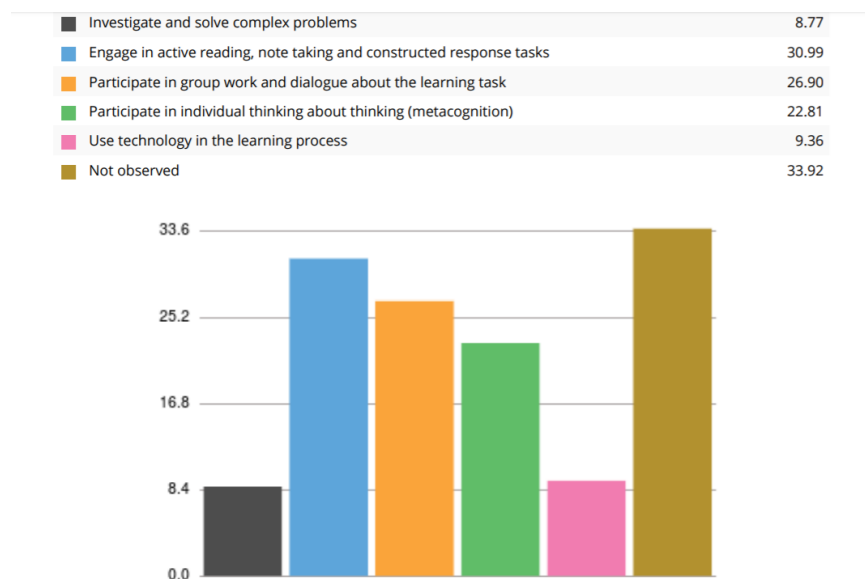
Source: Data collected and analyzed by FourPoint Education Partners

- In classrooms observed, students experienced limited opportunities to participate in learning tasks designed to engage students at high levels of thinking. Observed student tasks—as with instructional practices exhibited by teachers—also reflected low levels of rigor (see Figure 17). For example, students were observed:

- Investigating and solving complex problems and using technology in the learning process (observed in 9 percent of classrooms).
- Participating in thinking about thinking (metacognition) (23 percent of classrooms).
- Participating in group work and dialogue about the learning task (27 percent of classrooms).
- Engaging in active reading, noting and constructed response tasks (31 percent of the classrooms).
- Participating in a non-rigorous task was observed in 33 percent of the classrooms. For example, elementary students were observed sitting on the carpet waiting while teachers arranged students to sit in straight rows, and secondary students were observed being asked to copy teacher-generated notes or were compliantly listening to teacher lecture with no assigned task to demonstrate cognitive engagement.

Across all classrooms observed, FourPoint saw few instructional methods such as the use of debates, simulations, or project/problem based activities. Even students in TAG were observed to be engaged in low-rigor learning tasks. It appeared that students were engaged in the next grade level standards rather than engaging in grade level standards in new or different ways. This finding was supported anecdotally in parent focus groups.

Figure 17: Classroom Walkthrough Data: Student Interactions with the Learning Task

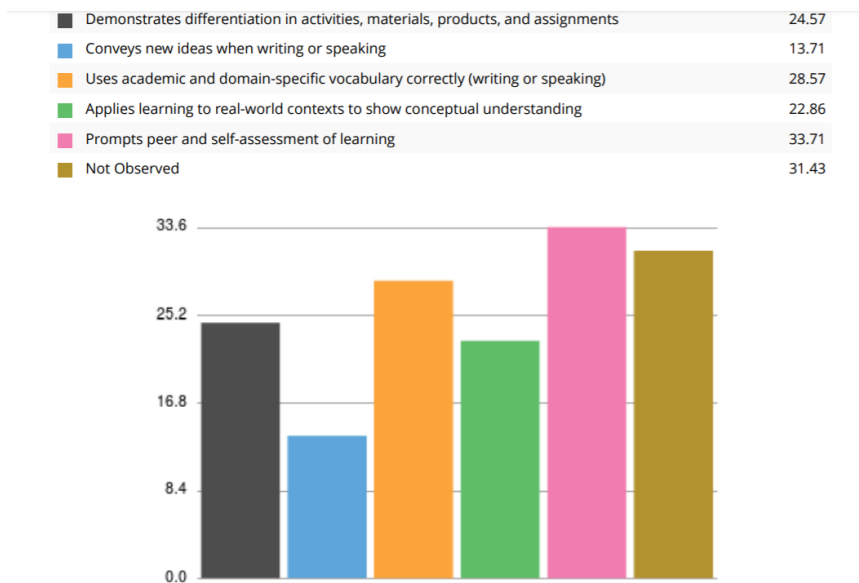


Source: Data collected and analyzed by FourPoint Education Partners

- In classrooms observed, students experienced limited opportunities to demonstrate learning (See Figure 18). FourPoint observers found students:

- “Conveying new ideas when writing or speaking (observed in 14 percent of classrooms).
- “Applying learning to real-world context to show conceptual understanding” (23 percent of classrooms).
- “Using academic and domain-specific vocabulary when writing or speaking (29 percent of classrooms).
- “Prompting peer and self-assessment of learning (34 percent of classrooms).
- “Demonstrating progress toward the learning target” (31 percent of classrooms).

Figure 18: Classroom Walkthrough Data: Student Demonstration of Learning



Source: Data collected and analyzed by FourPoint Education Partners

- Finally, student engagement was observed in close to 85 percent of the classrooms, an impressive amount. Given the low level of rigor of student tasks and few opportunities for student demonstration of learning, however, this engagement can best be described as passive and compliant rather than active and focused on knowledge and skill building needed for college, career, or life success.

College, Career, and Life Readiness

Research has demonstrated that regardless of a graduate’s choice of postsecondary pathway, success in the economy of today and the future requires a combination of 21st Century skills and experiences, including a relevant credential in addition to the high school diploma, as well

as the ability to effectively communicate, collaborate, and create.²⁹ Developing these skill sets and accompanying mindsets for successful self-management requires a gradual release of responsibility for students to take charge of their learning, stemming from postsecondary advising and increasingly rigorous academic and work-based learning experiences inside and outside school, over the course of the pK-12 career.³⁰

T. C. Williams High School offers a wide variety of challenging high school programs and courses, including opportunities to earn a substantial number of college credits, as well as industry-recognized credentials and internship experiences. However, awareness, participation, and success in advanced programming vary widely by student group. As a result, there are significant achievement gaps in high school outcomes for ACPS graduates, with high rates of dropout among Hispanic students and English learners, for example.

21. The Division lacks a shared definition and understanding of the profile of an ACPS graduate despite the Commonwealth’s recent implementation of new graduation requirements (beginning with the Class of 2022), which include the *Profile of a Virginia Graduate* (Figure 19 below).³¹ Prior efforts to ensure all secondary students have individual career and academic plans built around a profile of a graduate were not sustained due to shifts in leadership. Without clear expectations across central office departments, school staff and students have generally fallen back on mere graduation credit requirements—less comprehensive than the Profile—when asked how ACPS defines a successful graduate.

Figure 19. Profile of a Virginia Graduate



²⁹ http://static.battelleforkids.org/documents/p21/P21_Framework_DefinitionsBFK.pdf;
<https://goodjobsdata.org/wp-content/uploads/Good-Jobs-wo-BA.pdf>

³⁰ <https://consortium.uchicago.edu/sites/default/files/2018-10/Foundations%20for%20Young%20Adult-Jun2015-Consortium.pdf>

³¹ <http://www.doe.virginia.gov/boe/accreditation/grad-req.pdf>

The emphasis on graduation requirements rather than the Profile of a Virginia Graduate is evidenced by the 119-page ACPS 2019-2020 Program of Studies³² for high school graduation, program, and course information, which includes a page on graduation requirements but no mention of the Profile of a Virginia Graduate, nor even a single mention of skills.³³ The lack of common expectations for the skill sets and experiences of graduates contributes to the wide variation in students' learning experiences by student groups. While much attention needs to be given to increasing core practices including instructional rigor and family engagement to close current equity gaps; clear expectations for the skill sets that all students need and deserve must be shared across schools, programs, faculty, and staff to set the necessary foundation for identifying and delivering needed improvements and interventions.

Developing work associated with the Division's High School Project, led by its Educational Design Team, has laid out the skills students will need to be ready for the future. As the plans move forward, it will be critical that communication plans support and foster shared understanding across the community, perhaps starting with secondary school faculty and staff, who will be on the front lines of implementing the new vision and helping students and families understand and embrace it.

22. **Families' social capital plays an outsized role in students' participation in TAG and other advanced and specialty programming in middle and high school.** Research affirms that greater levels of parental engagement predict higher academic achievement and lower rates of dropout among children who are immigrants or whose parents are immigrants.³⁴ A substantial portion of ACPS families are immigrants for whom English is a second language. Increased ACPS Family and Community Engagement (FACE) efforts to help families understand enrollment processes and how to access basic services have been well received by the community and by school staff. However, early, disproportionate identification of students for elementary school TAG programming provides unique advantages to a social circle of families with deep familiarity with pathways to middle and high school academic programming.

As illustrated in Figure 7 above, with the current TAG identification processes, White students are more than four times more likely than Black students, six times more likely than Hispanic students and students at economic disadvantage, and eight times more likely than English learners to be identified for TAG programming. Students interviewed for this report conveyed a clear adoption and internalization of the labels associated with the programs in which they are enrolled. Without proactive engagement to help immigrant

³² <https://www.acps.k12.va.us/cms/lib/VA01918616/Centricity/Domain/822/program-of-studies.pdf>

³³ <https://www.acps.k12.va.us/cms/lib/VA01918616/Centricity/Domain/822/program-of-studies.pdf#page=10>

³⁴ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6226253/>

families and others whose children would be the first generation to attend college in their families (First Gen) to understand scaffolded academic programming structures, these students tend to inadvertently miss out on ‘opt in’ opportunities for honors, AP, and dual enrollment classes, among other experiences.

Parent empowerment efforts by the Family and Community Engagement (FACE) have not yet included the development of materials or sessions specifically designed to help develop understanding of career and college pathways, or of the need to advocate for students to take advantage of opportunities to become better prepared for postsecondary opportunities. In other communities, including those with high proportions of students of color and English learners, such efforts have been demonstrated to result in better student outcomes.³⁵

- 23. Counseling and postsecondary advising resources are well designed but unevenly implemented.** ACPS is one of a small proportion of public school divisions nationally that meets the American School Counselor Association’s recommended student-to-counselor ratio of 250:1. In addition, the Division has a roadmap for career and college exploration to develop Individual Career and Academic Plans (ICAPs) from grades 6 through 12 (see pages 9-12 of the *Program of Studies*). This roadmap illustrates that the Division invests in key resources, such as the Naviance online platform, to help students explore careers and map out the educational pathways to reach careers of interests. However, students experience these steps and resources quite differently, depending on the programs in which they are enrolled and the teachers and counselors who support them.

Students interviewed for this report uniformly reported an open-access approach to counseling support, by which they are invited through general school announcements and class presentations to visit their counselors and the newly renovated College and Career Wing of T.C. Williams High School. There is an opportunity to better leverage these resources by establishing common expectations and practices for more consistent and proactive introduction and usage of these resources. This is also an example in which more proactive efforts at parent engagement would be beneficial, in that even students who were familiar with the Naviance platform reported that their parents had “never heard of it.”

More attention also needs to be given, over a longer period of time, to ensure students and families are guided through the Program of Studies to make the most of the course selection process. Although it is designed (nationally) and described (both nationally and locally) to be a school-wide program, the AVID (Advancement Via Individual

³⁵ <https://www.nmeffoundation.org/getattachment/67f7c030-df45-4076-a23f-0d7f0596983f/Final-Report-Family-Engagement-AIR.pdf>

Determination) program accrues the most benefits to the groups of students in each secondary school who are part of the AVID elective course. AVID course experiences include the extended guidance through the Program of Studies and course selection, for example. Middle and high school advisory periods provide fertile ground for better leveraging teachers and other staff in support of the collective responsibility for framing high school as a pathway to the future.³⁶

24. Teachers need support in building capacity around cultural awareness and responsiveness to ensure all students feel welcome and supported to explore and pursue pathways of interest. In a recent equity audit:³⁷

- Approximately two-thirds (63%) of staff respondents agreed with the negative statement that “There is a noticeable relationship between student demographics and rigorous classes.”
- Only 60% of students agreed that there are tensions in school between students with different backgrounds and identities. Parents who are recent immigrants expressed similar sentiments during FourPoint’s focus groups.

When taken together, these results suggest that staff would like professional development to support their knowledge and skills in culturally responsive practices. Feedback from student and parent focus groups indicates that this could help address challenges that underrepresented students face in feeling welcome and supported in challenging programs and courses. Both middle and high school students shared examples of micro-aggressions (in a high school student’s own words) suggesting students of color may not be ready or capable of advanced coursework. Student leadership is emerging on this front through the work of the Minority Student Achievement Network, and involving students in this important work is an opportunity to foster civic engagement in the present, rather than as a theoretical future aspiration.³⁸

25. ACPS focuses minimal attention on ensuring a smooth and successful transition from middle to high school. Research on high school success has repeatedly demonstrated the many challenges students face as they begin high school.³⁹ Ninth-grade success correlates directly with on-time graduation and earning a quality diploma, and social-emotional factors during this period of adjustment tend to play an even more important role in their academic preparedness. Comprehensive orientation entails opportunities for all middle school students to visit the high school in advance of the course selection period, to

³⁶ <https://www2.ed.gov/programs/slcp/finalbuilding.pdf>

³⁷ <http://esbpublic.acps.k12.va.us/attachments/2dc4707d-ac48-4d91-9145-925f3685a818.pdf>

³⁸ <http://msan.wceruw.org/about/index.html>

³⁹ https://toandthrough.uchicago.edu/sites/default/files/UChiToThrough_ResearchOverview_20160413.pdf

receive adequate on-site orientation in the summer prior to starting ninth grade, and to be introduced in person to key resources areas and staff upon the start of the school year.

While many AVID students seem to have had some of these experiences, some ACPS middle school students visit Minnie Howard for academic and extra-curricular opportunities, and many ninth graders at Minnie Howard attend a class or extracurricular activity at the T. C. Williams main campus; there is no systemic structure or practice to provide a comprehensive introduction or orientation to the receiving schools. Given the relatively high dropout rate among Hispanic students and English learners, ACPS can get back on target for its Division graduation rate goal by attending to closer 9th grade monitoring and supports for these students.

26. **ACPS can and should capitalize on emerging industry developments in the region to ramp up work-based learning opportunities and related career readiness outcomes for more students.** Students participating in CTE programs conveyed a high level of interest and engagement. To capitalize on this avenue to increased student engagement, ACPS has solid plans for increasing the number of high-value credentials students will be able to earn through CTE programming. These plans should include targeted attention and resources for maximizing the partnership opportunities described above with Virginia Tech and Potomac Yard.

Anticipated state expectations for work-based learning for all high school students will increase the value of the high school experience and diploma. This will require ACPS to identify staffing resources to support effective planning, partnership coordination, and implementation.

Community Voice

Community voice—defined in this report as the perspective of community stakeholders and especially parents and caregivers (hereafter referred to generally as parents) of the students served by ACPS—can be thought of in at least three ways. First, it can be thought of as the ultimate measure of the Division’s success by answering two key questions: (1) In the opinion of those who know the students best, how effectively are students being educated and supported? (2) What are the schools’ and Division’s greatest strengths and challenges?

Second, community voice can help school and Division leaders assess the extent to which their efforts to engage stakeholders—one of the most important components of a high-quality education for students—is effective and can be improved. Finally, understanding community voice is critical to ACPS’ developing plans related to equity. At the beginning of the needs assessment process, ACPS defined equity as “meeting students where they are and not

necessarily where we want them to be.” While this definition has a great deal of power in theory, community voice makes clear that there are nuances that must be understood before equity can be operationalized in a way that ensures that every student will be successful.

27. **Parents believe that schools have many high-quality teachers and support staff, and they are pleased with the range of programs and supports available for students with unique needs.** Specific programs cited by parents include AVID, dual language, TAG, Young Scholars, special education,⁴⁰ and some afterschool opportunities.
28. **Stakeholders believe that public perception of the Division and individual schools has improved greatly over the last several years.** Parents and other community members interviewed attributed ACPS’ improving reputation to greater transparency by the Division, better communications (although as noted below, this remains the Division’s biggest challenge in the eyes of parents), stronger relationships with city officials, an influx of new families and young teachers, and demonstration of progress in addressing facility needs.
29. **Stakeholders cited several areas of challenge that need to be addressed.** Challenges cited varied by focus group and the demographics of the parents participating in each group, but the following themes were mentioned most frequently:
 - **Communication.** This theme emerged in all 15 focus groups. While some stakeholders noted that communication from schools and the Division has undoubtedly improved in recent years (especially related to general information communicated through email, social media, and mail), parents overall expressed frustration. They noted that information about programs such as TAG and Young Scholars was difficult to come by and required research, leaving many parents who are recent immigrants confused and ill informed. Parents also noted that communications with teachers, which has been bolstered with online apps, varies greatly by school and even classroom, with no consistent approach or expectations.
 - **Parent engagement.** Parents also expressed frustration with how they are engaged by the Division and schools, again noting that expectations and approaches vary widely across schools and classrooms. Many immigrant parents noted that they would like to be more involved in their children’s learning by, for example, helping them with homework. But these parents complained that their children don’t come home with enough resources to enable them to help and that they don’t have a

⁴⁰ It should be noted here that while some parents expressed gratitude for the support that their children received in special education, other parents expressed frustration with the difficulty in getting access to those services.

good understanding of what their children are learning or how they are progressing. Members of PTAC noted that schools don't seem to want parents to get involved in classrooms or with the school and don't have a clear understanding of how to leverage PTAs and other volunteer organizations to their benefit. PTAC members also noted the challenge of diversifying parent representation in schools and with the Division generally and in PTAs more specifically. In general, parents—and especially parents who are recent immigrants—expressed appreciation and gratitude for participating in the focus groups and being able to share their views. They also requested that the school and Division administration make greater efforts to continue engaging them in authentic ways in the future, which—they added—likely requires additional bilingual staff in the schools.

- **Transportation.** Most focus groups expressed significant frustration with buses. Parents said that buses are frequently late and don't communicate their status, leaving parents to worry about their children. Parents also said that buses are frequently overcrowded, creating a safety hazard for students, and require additional monitors to ensure students' safety.
- **Safety and security.** Most parents and other community members expressed concern about bullying, intolerance, and disrespectful behavior from other students and adults. According to focus group parents, many of the students are bullied based on their disability and cultural and religious differences. Parents expressed a need for more conversations, celebrations, and opportunities for all students to learn about and understand the benefits of living in a diverse community. Beyond bullying, some parents noted that, in the middle schools especially, there are too many students who roam the halls and/or disrupt instruction during class time. In general, these parents expressed support for a strong police or security presence in the schools to ensure student safety.
- **Inconsistency of program implementation.** Parents across all focus groups almost unanimously agreed that access to programs such as TAG is determined by how savvy parents are in learning about the programs and advocating for their children. Moreover, parents insisted that how students are selected and served for these programs varies considerably by school and even by the administrator or teacher who is responsible for the program. Parents who are recent immigrants expressed bewilderment about special programs, saying that they were unaware of them. A few parents also complained about the length of time it took their child to be referred to special education, noting that they lost important supports in the process.

- **School counseling and mental health services.** Most parents pointed to the challenges of students transitioning from one school level to another (i.e., from elementary school to middle school and from middle school and high school), selecting courses in middle school and high school, and learning about college and career opportunities and requirements. They added that, while there are outstanding counselors available, there simply are not enough of them to ensure that all students get served. Similarly, most parents noted the lack of support for students who are struggling with mental health issues.
- **Language development.** Participating parents who speak Amharic or Arabic feel that those languages should be taught in schools.
- **School uniforms.** The majority of parents interviewed whose first language is not English expressed strong support for a mandatory school uniform policy across the Division.

30. Stakeholders generally support the idea of equity, but there are important nuances that ACPS should take into consideration. Virtually all community members interviewed agreed with the notion that schools should provide students with the help they need to be successful. That said, several themes emerged that point to some of the challenges of fostering equity:

- There is a lot of work to do before this vision of equity is realized.
- Parents who speak Amharic and Arabic believe that they are “third-class citizens” behind White, Black, and Latino families.
- PTAC members noted that “equity costs money” and that “equity can’t be achieved by taking away resources from some kids and giving them to others.” PTAC members added that choices need to be made. As one member put it: “ACPS can’t do everything that needs to be done. How are we going to decide on priorities?”

According to some parents, the current way that equity is defined does not address students’ interests or social and emotional needs.

Recommendations

To address the findings, FourPoint Education Partners recommends that Alexandria City Public Schools focus its strategic plan on addressing a limited number of Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) through an intense focus on equity. This focus on equity aligns nicely with the Division’s new vision, mission, and core values being developed by the school board and can serve as the framework for the strategic plan and for the recommendations emerging out of FourPoint’s needs assessment of the Division.

Key Performance Indicators

KPIs define the outcomes that an organization are trying to achieve and can be used to evaluate the success of an organization in meeting strategic targets. KPIs should be broad enough to account for all the outcomes for which the organization is responsible but focused enough to enable leaders to make strategic decisions and stakeholders to understand the degree to which progress is being made. KPIs are complemented by measures (see recommendations section, below), which enable the Division to assess the implementation of *processes* that will result in the improved *outcomes* defined by the KPIs.

FourPoint proposes the KPIs in Figure 20 for consideration. These KPIs will be taken up by the Division’s Strategic Planning Committee on December 11 for consideration and revision, after which FourPoint will propose a final list to ACPS leadership.

Figure 20: Proposed Key Performance Indicators for ACPS Strategic Plan

- Elimination of structural deficit
- Reading proficiency (by student subgroup)
- Mathematics proficiency (by subgroup)
- Percentage of students (by subgroup) chronically absent
- Percentage of students (by race) identified with a disability
- Percentage of 9th graders on target to graduate high school in 4 years (by subgroup)
- Percentage of 9th graders on target to graduate high school with an advanced studies diploma (by subgroup)
- Percentage of students (by subgroup) who graduate high school with an advanced studies diploma

Focus on Equity

To improve outcomes related to the final KPIs, FourPoint proposes that ACPS promotes equity throughout the system by ensuring that five **key elements** are in place:

- 1. Systemic Coherence** means that the Division’s approach to school improvement is aligned with a clear theory of action. A theory of action, which should be commonly understood by all educators and administrators, should answer three questions:
 - Which aspects of the school improvement process are principals primarily responsible for and which aspects is the central office primarily responsible for?
 - What limited number of initiatives are all schools responsible for implementing with proper support from the central office?
 - How will these strategic initiatives be supported and monitored for full implementation?
- 2. Instructional Excellence** means that all teachers should be ensuring that all students—regardless of background—should feel welcomed and cared for. It also means that teachers should be using high-impact instructional strategies to ensure that students are mastering a common curriculum’s learning objectives. The presence of high-impact instructional strategies and access to the common curriculum should not be dependent on the characteristics of the students or the demographics of the school. But the responsibility for instructional excellence is not only the teachers’: Principals are expected to be highly effective instructional leaders, the central office is expected to provide strategic supports to schools around a limited number of high-leverage social-emotional and academic strategies and to help monitor implementation and impact of these strategies, and school support staff should ensure holistic support for all students.
- 3. Student Accessibility and Supports** means that students’ ability to participate in a program should be determined by clearly defined criteria and not by their race/ethnicity, country or language of origin, disability, or family’s socio-economic status. Participation rates in programs should not differ based on demographics or disability. At the same time, students receive the supports—academic, early childhood education, health and mental health, counseling, and social work—that enable them to thrive.
- 4. Strategic Resource Allocation** means that schools should receive the high-quality staffing, instructional materials, facilities support, and other resources they need to ensure that all their students succeed. Resources—including staffing—should be allocated strategically, equitably, and in a transparent manner. Given that schools in ACPS serve students with different strengths and needs, strategic resource allocation *does not* mean that all schools receive the same resources.
- 5. Parent and Community Engagement** means that ACPS takes active steps to reach out and ensure all stakeholders feel welcomed in schools, that caregivers are viewed as

teachers' and administrators' partners in the education of their children, and that the community (including government agencies, nonprofit and religious organizations, companies, and volunteers) are viewed as resources that can help ensure that all students are successful.

FourPoint presented this equity framework to ACPS leadership and the Strategic Planning Committee for feedback, which has been incorporated. We recommend that this framework is used as the outline for the objectives and strategies in the strategic plan.

Proposed Objectives and Measures Aligned to the Equity Focus

FourPoint organizes its proposed objectives (defined as process outcomes that will enable the Division to make significant progress on the KPIs) and measures (defined as indicators that the objectives are being implemented) for the strategic plan by the five elements of equity. The objectives and measures will be considered and edited by the strategic planning committee prior to the development of action steps for each objective.

1. Systemic Coherence	
<p>Objective: Create and implement a plan for school and instructional improvement that is:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> aligned to a clear theory of action based on a limited number of strategic initiatives that all schools implement with fidelity well understood by educators and administrators supported and monitored by the central office in collaboration with school leadership based on a clear definition of instructional leadership 	<p>Measures:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Educator and administrator support for and knowledge of theory of action and strategic initiatives (survey) Implementation of strategic initiatives by each school (rubric)
2. Instructional Excellence	
<p>Objective: Ensure that all students have access to high-quality instruction that is:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> aligned to an instructional framework and high-quality curricula engaging, rigorous, culturally relevant, and sensitive to students' strengths and needs focused on a few high-leverage instructional strategies supported and monitored by school and Division administrators and instructional coaches 	<p>Measures:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Student performance on formative assessments at school and Division levels Percentage of classrooms in each school demonstrating use of high-impact strategies (observation) Percentage of teachers agreeing that they feel well supported (survey)

3. Student Accessibility and Support

Objective: Ensure students have access to programs and supports that will enable them to meet their full potential.

Measures:

- Percentage of students completing specified grade-level steps for academic and career planning
- Percentage of students in TAG, honors, and AP by school and student demographics
- Number of students chronically absent by school and student demographics
- Percentage of students referred to special education by school and student demographics
- Quality of implementation of selected programs (external or internal evaluation)
- Percentage of students who feel safe, valued, and knowledgeable about key transitions (survey)

4. Strategic Resource Allocation

Objective: Provide resources and supports to schools based on the strengths and needs of the students they serve.

Measures:

- Size of projected annual deficit
- Resource allocation to each school
- Quality of data entry (periodic mini audits)
- Timeliness and safety of buses

5. Parent and Community Engagement

Objective: Ensure that parents and other stakeholders feel welcomed in schools and empowered to support the delivery of education and services to students

Measures:

- Percentage of parents feeling welcomed and empowered to help their children be successful (survey)
- Percentage of service providers and volunteers feeling welcomed and empowered to support the delivery of education and services to students (survey)
- Percentage of students who feel safe, valued, and cared for (survey)