

## MEMORANDUM

**DATE:** October 26, 2021

**TO:** Members of the Alexandria City School Board

**FROM:** Budget Advisory Committee  
Nancy Drane (Chair); Selena el Hajii; Sukumar Rao; Ryan Reyna

**SUBJECT:** 2021-2022 Scope of Work

**CC:** Robert Easley, ACPS Director of Budget & Financial Systems  
Dominic Turner, ACPS Chief Financial Officer  
Kathy Stenzel, Alexandria City Budget and Fiscal Affairs Advisory Committee

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The School Board Budget Advisory Committee (BAC) submits the following scope of work document for the School Board's review.

By way of background, BAC surveyed School Board members during its 2019-2020 term to secure input on the potential scope of BAC's activities and desired outcomes from the perspective of the School Board. (The results of that survey are available [HERE](#).) In May 2021, BAC issued a comprehensive report that addressed one issue consistently raised in that survey, namely the budget calendar and sequencing with the City's budget activities. (That report is available [HERE](#).)

An issue that came up in the 2019-2020 survey, and again as BAC developed its May 2021 report, was budget-related community engagement and communication. Several of BAC's recommendations centered on these issues, as excerpted in Appendix 1. By 'community engagement,' BAC intended to include communication within the ACPS community (i.e., to ACPS families, students, and staff) and communication to the Alexandria community writ large on school-related budget needs.

Between now and the end of its 2021-2022 term, BAC will explore these issues in more depth and develop a series of recommendations for the Board and ACPS staff to consider.

While we expect our work to be iterative as we explore this topic, BAC's Scope of Work may include some or all of the following activities:

- research into communication and engagement strategies utilized in other jurisdictions on budget related topics;
- identification and exploration of current methods of community engagement in the ACPS budget process;
- recommendations for additional or alternative community engagement opportunities;
- specific recommendations related to outreach as a tool to solicit and secure community engagement;

- review of budget-related public facing materials, including ACPS website;
- recommendations for additional or alternative public facing materials and/or revisions to the website and other existing materials;
- specific recommendations related to the annual community budget forum; and
- suggestions for certain areas of the budget that might warrant more targeted communication tools (i.e., comprehensive fact sheet that summarizes budget-related investments related to a certain student population like special education); and
- additional research and/or recommendations as relevant.

In order to advance this Scope of Work, BAC members will (and have already begun to) reach out to community stakeholders (i.e., PTA Council of Alexandria; City Budget and Fiscal Affairs Advisory Committee) to secure their feedback and ideas.

Finally, BAC would like to ask for the Board's help in identifying additional volunteers to expand its current membership of four members. One of BAC's May 2021 recommendations stated that, "[i]f it had a full complement of members, BAC might also be utilized to solicit and synthesize public feedback on the budget and then submit it to the School Board for its consideration." We continue to need the Board's help in identifying individuals who might wish to join our efforts. The City has a structure whereby each Council members nominates a member to the BFAAC (the city's equivalent body). That type of approach would be welcomed by BAC.

BAC appreciates the School Board's support of its work and will endeavor to continue to provide the best recommendations possible on the budget and fiscal affairs of Alexandria City Public Schools. Board members are welcome to reach out to BAC with any feedback on BAC's proposed 2021-2022 Scope of Work. Chair Nancy Drane may be reached at 202-997-0294, [bac@acps.12.va.us](mailto:bac@acps.12.va.us), or [nancydrane@aol.com](mailto:nancydrane@aol.com).

## APPENDIX: BAC MAY 2021 BUDGET PROCESS REPORT [EXCERPTS]

**4. The Board should revamp its public engagement on budget issues to be more equitably accessible, meaningful, and efficient, in keeping with the Board's stated equity and inclusion goal. ACPS and the Board should create a detailed and actionable communication plan related to budget-related engagement.** Giving parents and community members multiple ways to engage that do not require physically appearing at a public hearing would allow for more equitable access to providing feedback to the Board. This approach, while independently valuable, may also create opportunities to streamline the budget calendar to allow for the alignment referenced above. It may seem counterintuitive to adjust or reduce formal public engagement calendar items on an issue as critical as the budget, but in BAC's view, "bigger is not better." ACPS public engagement opportunities like the Community Budget Forum and public hearings on the budget are often poorly attended and participation is not diverse, nor representative of the community. BAC's view is that being more strategic, deliberate, and targeted with public engagement might yield better results. Further, equity demands engagement opportunities other than formal public hearings. **Elements of this budget engagement plan should include:**

- a. multiple modes of communication, genuine collaboration, and engagement with external stakeholders;
- b. a work plan calendar that allows for sufficient notice to the public for budget-related opportunities/events;
- c. a consideration of how this engagement translates to community members who do not have family members enrolled in ACPS, with emphasis for the importance of investment in ACPS as a community good;
- d. means to solicit participation from ACPS families and the larger community in its various budget-related public engagement tools well in advance using email, text, and more on-the-ground outreach, such as through the FACE Center, PTAC, PTAs, and other community groups (e.g., Casa Chirilagua);
- e. use of online tools like a survey/comment page on Division's budget page (e.g., used in Fairfax County and Newport News) to solicit feedback on the budget; and
- f. acceptance of written comments (in lieu of live testimony) during Board meetings and public hearings and continued allowance of video, rather than in-person testimony; consider tools like "think tank" that promote interactive engagement during public hearings or other forums

**5. The Community Budget Forum, traditionally held in October, has been a missed opportunity for public engagement and should be revamped if continued.** ACPS should reconsider its goals in offering the Community Budget Forum (i.e., education about the budget process, soliciting feedback on budget priorities, reviewing the content of the budget, or something else) and whether the format and timing is appropriate. It may be that other public engagement approaches, as described above, would be more effective in meeting ACPS's goals here. If the event is continued, ACPS budget staff should partner with the FACE Center, PTAC, or other entities well in advance to gain feedback on program format and ideas for generating interest and participation. BAC is of course also willing to be a partner in this effort.

**7. ACPS budget staff has made positive improvements to the website in the past several years – ACPS should continue to pair the public engagement opportunities listed above with robust public information on budget-related issues (e.g., interactive and educational materials on ACPS budget web page).**

**8. ACPS' efforts to improve its budget-related communications through use of short, digestible fact sheets and on the budget "telling a story," etc. should be pursued. For example, the published budget calendar, while comprehensive, is hard to read and could be streamlined for public-facing communications.**