

possible outcomes for all students will continue to bring us together.

In this end of year report for the 2020-2021 school year, we will review the Budget Advisory Council's activities for the past year and then offer our recommendations to the APS School Board

group, we would encourage the Board to repeat the idea gathering process next year and to formally end it with such a gathering, hosted by the BAC, for the benefit of all groups, so that all of the committees' ideas can be shared and discussed openly. (Attachment 3)

Fourth, the BAC prepared for the Board's review and consideration an extensive report on the proposed FY22 budget, including comments from our whole committee, representing a wide range of backgrounds and viewpoints from around our community. A summary of that report was presented at a budget work session with other committees in April. However, given that the budget is our committee's sole focus, and given the amount of preparation done for such interactions with the Board, we respectfully request that the BAC be given additional time in this work session in future years, especially if the Board would like to attract and retain talented and engaged citizens on the BAC. This year the BAC had about 10 minutes to discuss the work of our committee with the Board. (Attachments 4 & 5)

Lastly, the BAC prepares its end of year report, which you are reviewing now.

**FY22 Budget Recommendations**

*We recommend that APS shift to longer term planning, and tackle the structural challenges required to address future budget deficits. While recent budgets have been very focused on closing the current year's budget gaps, future years' projected budget deficits have been growing, alarmingly so. With a projected deficit of over \$100M by FY25, we need to start planning more than one budget year at a time, and we need to identify budget cuts in a manner that does not result in cuts that reappear in the following year's budget. We include a list of budget savings ideas that show up in the Long-Term Savings Section of the FY22 Proposed Budget Executive Summary.*



quickly as possible, we encourage the board and APS leadership to explore maintaining a virtual high school program for those students who want to attend virtually and who have demonstrated their maturity to handle a virtual program. It has the potential to be positive for the budget and for those families who chose this option.

We also recommend exploring some additional virtual classes for older students to reduce the number of undersubscribed classes at the high school level.

Smaller classes could be aggregated across high schools. Or students could attend classes from a more central source, like Virtual Virginia. Additional virtual options should be explored where they could reduce cost and expand choice for our older students.

**FY 2022 Budget Recommendations**

*We recommend more transparency in the budget process, for the community and board.* In last year's report, we discussed the importance of making the community aware of the major areas of consideration in the budget earlier in the process. With the size of the budget deficits ahead of us, and the likely need for larger, structural changes, this recommendation will become even more important. While we appreciated and welcomed the Superintendent's regular communication about the budget and APS's financial situation necessitated by the pandemic this past year, our recommendation urges him to take this communication a step further. We encourage him and his team to be clear about the larger areas up for debate and consideration before he announces his budget. For example, if he is asking the Board to reconsider options programs or transportation choices, or other larger structural changes, the Board and the community would need to be aware of these areas for consideration. While we believe larger changes will be needed, we urge the Superintendent not to spring these changes on the community for the first time in late February, but rather to tell the community that certain things are being considered, so that the community has time to weigh in and participate in the conversation, before large decisions are proposed and made.

*We encourage the Superintendent and the Board to build community partnerships aligned with APS priorities, especially closing the budget gap.* In past years, the BAC has encouraged APS to pursue partnerships in several areas, but the most important type of partnership in future years may be those that are revenue-generating or cost-mitigating. The key is to set goals, assign ownership, and track progress. A couple of ideas that we shared in our budget reports are included here, but there are many more.

With Amazon in our backyard and benefiting from tax breaks from the County, we should not be shy in approaching them about supporting STEM focused priorities for APS, such as a multi-year STEM grant for such things as the TJHSST pathway, the Outdoor Lab, the Planetarium, advanced science curriculum, technology initiatives, etc.

With budget deficits threatening bread and butter activities like middle school sports and academic competitions, field trips, and no cut sports, there is an opportunity to engage our business opportunity to sponsor activities of their choice - academic, athletic or otherwise. We have a diverse and supportive

community in Arlington. If we got out and made the requests, we are confident we could bring local businesses to the table.

*We ask the Board to think about what it really wants from the BAC, and then work with the committee to productively deliver that goal.* The BAC's purpose is to provide "advice and insight to the School Board to help maintain fiscal integrity, public confidence, and wise stewardship of taxpayer resources..." But we are not sure that we are fulfilling that duty. For most of the year, we guide ourselves, trying to get smarter about APS and School Board priorities in advance of the budget being released so that we can review it as quickly as possible and then provide the best input possible when our few moments (literally, see earlier comments) with the Board arrive. We have a terrific partner in Assistant Superintendent Peterson, and we have greatly appreciated Chair O'Grady's input. But we encourage the Board to think about how to better engage (and guide) the BAC both during the budget process and to engage us with other questions on other topics that impact the budget throughout the year.

#### **Recommendation: Return to a balanced budget**

We recommend that the Board return to asking the Superintendent for a balanced budget, as was historically part of the budget guidance. The balanced budget can include a wish list, if additional funding is available, but it would start with balance, rather than with deficit.

We recognize that this challenge will be more acute given that the FY23 budget will need to replace nearly \$40M in one-time funds received and used to close the FY22 budget gap. But we urge the Board and Superintendent to shift from short-term thinking to longer term planning and begin to tackle the larger structural questions that will be required to close current and future year budget gaps. Focus on the next 3-5 years, not just FY23. Include plans for the areas identified for long-term savings in the FY22 budget - transportation, planning factors (student/teacher ratios), energy savings, IPP savings, collaboration with the County - that begin in FY23 and increase in the out years.

For example, start with concrete plans to increase class size by 1-2 students per grade, or if equity concerns are too great, propose a more equitable implementation of this suggestion with a similar financial impact.

We encourage greater transparency in the months leading up to the release of the Superintendent's proposed budget, starting with the Board, to ensure that the budget is not balanced with cuts that are not tenable to the Board (as a proxy for the community). Ideally the Board and the community should be more engaged in the larger, structural decisions well before the final decisions need to be made, so that the community is ready for them, when the time comes.

We welcome the push for equitable outcomes and look forward to Board Member Reid Goldstein's project on an alternative funding model for schools based on the demographics of the students who attend those schools, but we also encourage the Superintendent and Board to find a way to fund this model with changes to the current planning factors given current and future budget deficits and lack of reserves, or to fund it through advance commitments from the County Board.

We recommend that APS focus on delivering tighter enrollment forecasts. While it is prudent to be conservative, being overly conservative will result in other programs being cut and reserves being overspent, so more balance is warranted going forward than has been required in the past. We welcomed the adjustments made by the Board in the final budget approval on May 6, but we think they remain too conservative given the reality of our financial situation.

We recommend that deadlines are set for families to determine their mode of instruction (virtual v. in person) in plenty of time in future years to ensure that these decisions can be accounted for in the final budget, if virtual instruction will be a significant factor in enrollment and therefore budgeting going forward.

We strongly encourage the board and APS to study and publish the key lessons learned from the past year. This study should address cost savings and expenditures due to COVID requirements, what actions APS took f

**GHZZ**

Leslie Peterson, Assistant Superintendent for Finance and Management Services

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Monique O'Grady

Attachment 1: July 2020 BAC Comments on C6