

4-4-05

PTA Council Statement
City Council Public Hearing
April 4, 2005

Good evening Mayor Euille, Vice-Mayor Pepper and City Council Members, My name is Sheryl Gorsuch and I am speaking on behalf of the PTA Council. Thank you for the opportunity to share our thoughts with you today.

First and foremost, we want to emphasize the importance of quality teachers and principals. They are the core of what makes ACPS an excellent school system. Alexandria's high cost of living creates recruitment and retention challenges. For this reason, we must continuously look for ways to remain competitive with neighboring jurisdictions and make Alexandria more affordable for our teachers.

We are concerned about the impact of proposed changes to the vacancy savings amount. Our historical lapsed salary trend is not an adequate indicator of our present needs, especially when it includes the hiring freeze necessitated by Sept 11th. No Child Left Behind legislation requires highly qualified teachers with specific credentials, and those standards rise in subsequent years. We cannot assume that a new hire will cost less than the employee that leaves or retires. There are currently shortages for staff with degrees in math or science, bilingual speakers and para professionals with associate degrees, especially in the Northern Virginia area. We need the flexibility to hire quality experienced individuals when they are available throughout the school year to remain competitive. We also need a greater pool of reserve teachers and substitutes based on the shifting of enrollment between schools required through Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) provisions of NCLB. Maintaining our small class sizes could be jeopardized if hiring decisions are compromised at the beginning of the year to meet higher annual vacancy savings.

The school's proposed budget includes additional money for health care insurance which will bring our school employees on par with City employees. We applaud this effort to reward our employees for their tireless dedication to the noble profession of teaching and help us to remain competitive with neighboring jurisdictions. While it is an increase in the School portion, the overall budget is likely to see offsetting savings in costs through the combining of City and School employees in a common health insurance pool. We hope there will similar cost saving initiatives found in the future which benefits everyone.

The increases to the School program funding over the past few years has been money well spent. Test scores are rising and we are addressing the achievement gap between various demographic groups. In fact, more schools have achieved state accreditation each year. Many of these cost increases are required expenses under federal legislation along with other state mandates, and merely represents an adequate budget rather than an extravagant budget with excessive discretionary spending.

In fact, there are several initiatives not covered in this budget that are particularly important to pta leadership, parents and the community. One involves increased physical activity for our elementary school students. In the past two decades, the number of overweight children nationwide has nearly doubled, while the number of overweight teens has tripled. In Virginia, more than 1 in 3 people diagnosed as obese each year are children. Chronic diseases such as hypertension and Type 2 diabetes, once thought to affect only adults, are now showing up in overweight children. We need to work toward bringing our school system in alignment with the recommendations outlined by Virginia's Action for Healthy Kids Initiative. Besides overall health, increased physical activity will further improve student achievement and test scores.

Another important area of interest is universal preschool access. Early intervention for our students, especially given our demographics, is critical to the long term success of our students and our schools. Studies show that students without preschool experience start behind and never catch up to their peers, creating a larger achievement gap as the student progresses through their education. We support improvements to preschool access wholeheartedly and are encouraged by the discussions between City Council and ACPS on this topic.

Thank you for your continued support of public education and the Alexandria City Public schools.

Page 2 of 2
PTA Council Statement
City Council Public Hearing
April 4, 2005