

AUTISM
COMPLEX
SPEECH ALIEN
REPETITIVE
LINCOLN ALONE
TRUSTING
TOUCH
HONEST
FORD
OBSESS
MOZART
DIFFERENT FOCUS
SENSORY ROUTINE
EMPATHIZE
EINSTEIN FEELINGS
ORGANIZATION
HONEST
EYE CONTACT
FACIAL EXPRESSION
BENJAMIN FRANKLIN
EMOTIONALLY IMPAIRED
BRAIN
NEWTON
FRIENDSHIP
REPETITIVE
SMALL TALK
ASPERGER'S
ANXIETY
DSM
GEORGE WASHINGTON
BOYS PERCEPTION
NONVERBAL
SCHEDULE
DIFFICULT
ROBIN WILLIAMS
TEACHER
CLUMSY
SOCIAL SKILLS
EDUCATION
VAN GOGH
LOVE
AS
MICHELANGELO
DEPRESSION
GIRLS
ADVOCATE
GRAHAM BELL
COGNITIVE
ASPIE
SARCASM
PARENT
JOBS
PEERS
SKILLS
BILL GATES
ATYPICAL
BEETHOVEN
HANS
WITHDRAWN
THERAPY
IEP
LINGUISTIC
BEHAVIORAL
1944
PERSIST
IQ
IMPAIRMENT

A REQUEST to the Arlington School Board

to **reject proposed cuts** to the Secondary School **Asperger's/Autism** program, and **ensure funding** for a ratio of 2 assistants for every 8-9 students to make sure that the budget and staffing allocations **reflect the actual ratios** in the schools; and to **strengthen and expand the program** in response to the Superintendent's **FY15 Arlington Public School Budget**

SUBMITTED TO:
The Arlington School Board
Abby Raphael, Chair
James Lander, Vice Chair
Sally M. Baird
Noah Simon
Emma Violand-Sanchez

FROM:
Concerned Parents of Arlington Students with Asperger's



April 11, 2014

A jewel in the crown for APS

There is a highly successful program in Arlington Public Schools that has been doing exemplary work since 2010. The Secondary School Program for Students with Autism (the “Asperger’s Program”) has been helping middle and high school students in Arlington who have High Functioning Autism (HFA) or Asperger’s. It has been so beneficial that following the first year at the HB Woodlawn’s Middle School and High School programs, it was expanded to an additional middle school, Jefferson and two additional high schools, W-L and Yorktown.

A January 2013 report by Public Consulting Group to APS identified the program as one of four receiving “the highest accolades from staff and parents.”¹

It is a program that is considered a best practice and is unlike any other provided by nearby jurisdictions. It is worthy of awards, replication and expansion.

However, it now faces reduced funding – specifically, the reduction of more than half of the assistants.

Staffing: Across the two Middle Schools (Jefferson and H-B Woodlawn) and three High Schools (Washington & Lee, Yorktown and H-B Woodlawn) in the district, five talented teachers and 12 essential assistants have been doing highly effective work supporting kids who need a lot of extra help overcoming their social skills and organizational deficits, staying on track and engaging their intellectual capabilities. This year, 72 students are in the program, and the numbers are expected to notably increase annually.

Success in regular classrooms: The Secondary School Asperger’s program makes it possible for young people with Autism to access general education classes that challenge their frequently higher than average IQs and provide important neuro-typical role models. The assistants are an essential part of the program design and are critical to its success. They spend almost all of their time in regular education classrooms supporting students with Autism, so that they are not limited to slower moving general inclusion classes or more detrimental contained classes with students with a variety of special education needs.

The financial benefit. Thanks to the excellent Asperger’s program, these students are able to receive an appropriate education in the Arlington Public Schools. Undermining this program may also result in some additional students being placed in inclusion classrooms, requiring out-of-district placements, or even be home-schooled, which is paid for by APSVA.

What is HFA? What is Asperger's?

High-functioning autism (HFA) is a term applied to people with autism who are deemed to be cognitively "higher functioning" (IQ>70) than other people with autism.

Asperger syndrome (AS), also known as Asperger disorder (AD) or simply Asperger's, is an autism spectrum disorder characterized by significant difficulties in social interaction and nonverbal communication, alongside restricted and repetitive patterns of behavior and interests.

Many psychiatrists consider HFA similar to or the same as Asperger's.

Most HFA or Asperger students present a particularly challenging task for educators in that they are often highly intelligent in one or more areas, but who also have significant difficulty staying on task, completing assignments and knowing how to accomplish a goal. They can have difficulty transitioning from one activity to another, easily get stuck on one way to doing things or a particular activity, and connecting with others, picking up social cues, and understanding what's an appropriate response. Untrained teachers often misinterpret their behavior as rude, oppositional, or unpredictable; as a result, those teachers frequently respond in ways that are counterproductive or specifically contraindicated.

How does the program work?

The program is like a wise octopus – with the teacher at the head, and the assistants spread out through the school, helping the kids across all seven grades (6 - 12), in their general education classes throughout the day.

Often at the beginning and end of the day, students attend a contained social skills and/or instructional studies class instead of elective periods offered to the general education population.

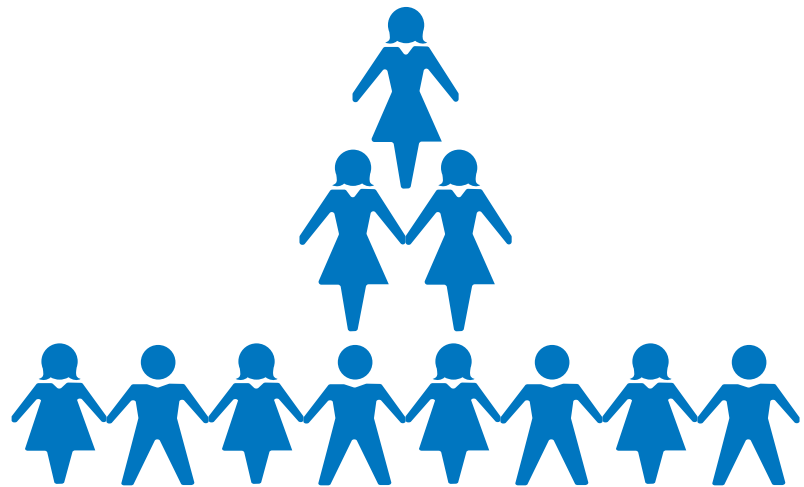
Students attend all of their core subjects in a general education classroom setting, following the course curriculum outline in the Arlington Public Schools Program of Studies with supplemental materials designed for students with autism as needed.

These "Asperger Program classes", focus on the development of social skills, organizational skills, and a challenging academic experience.

Students receive assistant support in designated classes as needed with a goal of fostering independence.

How is the program staffed?

The program was originally designed for 8-9 students, “with a highly qualified special education teacher and two assistants per No Child Left Behind.”² Most programs now actually support between 10-12 students. The Program Design was developed through extensive guidance from experts in the education of students with Autism, and input from parents and APS staff. The ratio of two assistants to 8-9 students has been an integral part of the program since it was developed. This ratio is driven primarily by the Assistants role in supporting the Asperger students in their general education classes throughout the day (for example, at Jefferson coverage of up to 80 different classes per day)



What do the Assistants do?

They carry lessons from the Social Skills class into the general education classrooms. Studies have shown that the ability to generalize social skills and executive function in a variety settings is challenging for the ASD population but critical to long term success.

They provide accommodations: take notes, test in small groups, review directions, organize work, work one on one, or facilitate student’s participation in group projects -- that can be very difficult for ASD students. They know the students and the disability well enough to modify and shorten as-

signments on the spot.

They allow for differentiation of instruction for each child, to enable them to participate in Advancement Placement classes that challenge the high intellect of many of the ASD students.

They prevent disruptive behavior in the general education classes by helping de-escalate meltdowns (which can happen on a daily basis). This benefits the teacher and all students, not only the ASD student.

“They are extremely important, helping me have eyes and ears in the possible 8 locations my students are at once.”

- Social Skills teacher

They decrease the emotional stress and damage that can occur on a daily basis with Asperger’s kids.

They advocate for the students and their needs (as ASD students can be frequently misunderstood and incapable of communicating their needs appropriately).

They fulfill IEP requirements, which call for accommodations to provide students with the least restrictive educational environment. Many students, without the assistance, would have to go into separate classes/ programs to receive IEP support. This would not satisfy the law for providing the least restrictive educational environment. Furthermore, the assistants enable students to participate in accelerated classes where a class that moves a faster rate is more appropriate for the student.

They gather data required for IEP reports, measure progress and help inform the teacher.

The assistants spend almost all of their time in regular education classrooms working directly with students. Because students who are participating in the program are spread across many grades and classrooms, one assistant cannot support them. That is why it is so important that the District maintain the planning factor of two Assistants to 8-10 students. This is one of the key elements of the program that makes it successful.

These students get into jams – every day, in every class. The assistants get them unstuck, on track, out of trouble, and help them succeed, learn, and prepare for life.



PROPOSED CUTS

On page 180 of the Superintendent's FY15 Arlington Public School Budget, is a proposal that the number of these assistants be cut. Namely:

"The planning factor for the secondary school program for students with autism is changed from 2.0 assistants for 8-10 identified students to 1.0 assistant for 1-10 identified students."

This results in a **decrease of 7.0 assistant positions** (1.0 at Jefferson, 2.0 at Washington-Lee, 1.0 at Yorktown and 3.0 at H-B Woodlawn.)

The proposed budget would cut 7 assistant positions (more than half of the current assistants) from the Secondary Autism/Asperger's program.

The cuts would total \$271,859.

We, concerned parents of children in this program, urge the Board to:

- 1. Reject any cuts to this essential program**
- 2. Consider expanding the program**

There are five reasons not to cut the number of assistants in this program.

1. Assistants MAKE THE SYSTEM WORK.
2. Assistants HELP STUDENTS WITH ASPERGER'S.
3. Assistants HELP ALL STUDENTS IN A GENERAL EDUCATION SETTING who share classes with these students.
4. Assistants SAVE MONEY.
5. Assistants will help deal with AN EXPLOSION OF AUTISM DIAGNOSES that is predicted to continue in coming years.

In the coming pages, we take a hard-headed, data-based and financial analysis of this issue, and will show that the program as-is provides not only great benefit to our children, but great value to the taxpayer.

"The Program provides social tools I need in order to survive in this very social world."

- X.S., student

REASON #1

Assistants MAKE THE SYSTEM WORK

Specialized teachers don't have the time.

General Education teachers don't have the skills.

APS's own evaluation of services for students with special needs acknowledges that special education students face difficult problems in mainstream classrooms once they reach middle and high school:

"Differentiation is not as strong at the middle or high school level, and was more challenging for teachers as the content or SOLs increased in rigor."

-2013 evaluation by Public Consulting Group

The evaluation goes on to say that regular education teachers in secondary school are particularly ill-equipped to serve students with Asperger's without additional classroom support:

"In particular, there was concern that general educators teaching students with Asperger's syndrome do not consistently understand the nature of the disability and may enact discipline or otherwise react to behavior related to the disability."

Reportedly, professional development has been available to address this issue but given the voluntary nature of the activity, those with the greatest need do not tend to participate."³

This is exactly the challenge that the program design of one teacher and two assistants was meant to address.

Assistants are essential to fulfilling the terms of IEPs. If the IEPs specify that our Asperger's students attend General Education classes, they need accommodation in those classes.

"Just last week, a teacher grabbed a book my son was reading and threw it across the room."

- Parent of a student
in the program

This chart shows the schedule for 12 Middle School children across three grades. The dark blue classes are specialized. The light blue classes are General Education classes. This is a sample of a schedule that 2 Assistants would have to cover under the new staffing cuts.

		Period 1	Period 2	Period 3	Period 4	Period 5	Period 6	Period 7	Period 8
1	6 th grade boy 1	Social Skills	English	Math 7	Lunch	Science	Soc Stud	Instr. St.	PE
2	6 th grade boy 2	Social Skills	Math 6	Science	Lunch	Soc Stud	English	Instr. St.	PE
3	7 th grade boy 1	Social Skills	Math 7	English	Soc Stud	Lunch	Science	PE	Instr. St.
4	7 th grade boy 2	Social Skills	Science	Math 8	Soc Stud	Lunch	English	PE	Instr. St.
5	7 th grade boy 3	Social Skills	Math 7	English	Science	Lunch	Soc Stud	PE	Instr. St.
6	7 th grade boy 4	Social Skills	Science	Math 8	Soc Stud	Lunch	English	PE	Instr. St.
7	7 th grade boy 5	Social Skills	Science	Math 8	Soc Stud	Lunch	English	PE	Instr. St.
8	8 th grade boy 1	PE	Social Skills	Soc Stud	Science	HS Math	Lunch	Instr. St.	English
9	8 th grade boy 2	PE	Social Skills	Math 8	Soc Stud	Science	Lunch	Instr. St.	English
10	8 th grade boy 3	PE	Social Skills	Science	Soc Stud	HS Math	Lunch	Instr. St.	English
11	8 th grade boy 4	PE	Social Skills	Math 8	Science	Soc Stud	Lunch	Instr. St.	English
12	8 th grade boy 6	PE	Social Skills	Soc Stud	Science	HS Math	Lunch	Instr. St.	English

Asperger’s IEPs may call for support for up to 5 hours of the day - or 6 periods.

How can one teacher + one assistant cover all that blue, which is required for the IEPs?

“I personally find it highly unwise to disperse staff that have been of great use up to this point; it is essentially cutting out many of the gears a machine needs to properly function.”

- A.D., student

REASON #2

Assistants HELP STUDENTS WITH ASPERGER'S

Assistants help students:

Access their education more easily

Achieve differentiation of instruction (enable them to access academically appropriate classes that challenge them)

Decrease the emotional stress and damage that can occur on a daily basis with Asperger's kids.

Here is the example of the despair that can result from not having help:

A study ("Teaching Strategies for Asperger Students") at Johns Hopkins found that "minimizing the stress and worry AS students face is crucial to education":

"If asked to design an environment specifically geared to stress a person with AS, you would probably come up with something that looked a lot like a school. You would want an overwhelming number of peers; periods of tightly structured time alternating with periods lacking any structure; regular helpings of irritating noise from bells, schoolmates, band practice, alarms, and crowded, cavernous spaces; countless distractions; a dozen or so daily transitions with a few surprises thrown in now and then; and finally, the piece de resistance: regularly scheduled tours into what can only be described as socialization hell (a.k.a. recess, lunch, gym, and the bus ride to and from school). It's a wonder

*that so many children with AS manage to do so well."*⁴

These assistants enable our children to be learning effectively across their education experience in APS in a "least restrictive environment" (LRE). LREs are identified in the U.S. Individuals with Disabilities Education Act as one of the six principles that govern the education of students with disabilities and other special needs. By law, schools are required to provide a free appropriate public education (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment that is appropriate to the individual student's needs.

"Least restrictive environment" (LRE) means that a student who has a disability should have the opportunity to be educated with non-disabled peers, to the greatest extent appropriate. Asperger's students are ideal candidates for participating in regular education classrooms, because with support, they can succeed in these environments.

"It has always been useful for me to see a familiar face from the Program in one of my particularly stressful classes to ask questions towards and to receive other kinds of support from."

- X.S., student

REASON #3

Assistants HELP ALL STUDENTS IN A GENERAL EDUCATION SETTING who share classes with these students

Given that one of the core elements of the Asperger Program is that participating students will receive their core curriculum in a general education setting, the Asperger Assistants can support both the ASD diagnosed student as well as others in the classroom.

In this manner, the Assistants can:

- ⚡ Diffuse a potentially disruptive situation before it occurs and affect other students
- ⚡ Enable these situations to be learning opportunities for the ASD student
- ⚡ Help educate the general education teachers regarding the ASD population so that they can handle these situations better when aides are not present
- ⚡ Enable the teachers to focus on teaching the entire class without the specialized direction and organization needed by some ASD students
- ⚡ Assist other students in the classroom that may have organizational challenges or distraction issues and benefit from this help

Per research by the Center for Autism Spectrum Disorders at Children's Hospital, NIH, and the Ivymount School of Autism, in order for the student with ASD to truly master flexibility and the goal-directed life, they have to be taught these skills and then practice them over and over in the real world.

That requires having enough staff fully trained in the unique neuroscientific basis and strategies for children with ASD – and the ability to intervene when needed. They also are in a position to use teaching opportunities when they present themselves.

This is time-consuming and labor intensive. These are not skills that your regular general education teacher or even special education teacher possess or have the time to teach, while serving the needs of the other 23 children in the classroom.

“One of the assistants helps me in many of my classes, a great help that I very much appreciate.”

- A.D., student

REASON #4

Assistants SAVE MONEY

Currently, many of the IEPs require anywhere from **1.5 to 6** hours of service daily in the General and Special Education setting.

With **72** children presently in the program, an average 3.75 hours accounts for **1,350** service hours weekly.

Without assistants to support these IEP requirements, if even just **10%** of the students required one-on-one aides provided by APS, it would exceed the APS projected budget savings;

Or an even worse scenario would be the need for private placements.

At a cost of roughly **\$55,000** per student, only **5** students across the county would eliminate the projected cost savings.

Furthermore, students without adequate support are more likely not to succeed academically and consequently are more likely to need additional support later in life, paid for by APS, Arlington County, and society. This cost to the APS population and their families **cannot be expressed in dollars.**

"After years of struggling at different schools with different approaches, my son is finally happy at school and improving amazingly, all due to the Asperger's Program. I can't imagine how he could make it without all the help he receives."

- Parent of a student
in the program

REASON #5

Assistants will help deal with AN EXPLOSION OF AUTISM DIAGNOSES that is predicted to continue in coming years

It makes no sense to reduce funding for the Secondary School Autism program when the projections for the population are increasing at such a fast pace.

Autism is the fastest growing developmental disability. The CDC just recently released data indicating that 1 in 68 children has been identified with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). In one decade, the prevalence has more than doubled, from 6.7 to 14.7 per 1000 children.

Please look at the fourth column below.

IDENTIFIED PREVALENCE OF AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER

ADDM Network 2000-2010

Combining Data from All Sites

SURVEILLANCE YEAR	BIRTH YEAR	# OF ADDM SITES REPORTING	PREVALENCE PER 1,000 CHILDREN (RANGE)	THIS IS ABOUT 1 IN X CHILDREN...
2000	1992	6	6.7 (4.5-9.9)	1 in 150
2002	1994	14	6.6 (3.3-10.6)	1 in 150
2004	1996	8	8.0 (4.6-9.8)	1 in 125
2006	1998	11	9.0 (4.2-12.1)	1 in 110
2008	2000	14	11.13 (4.8-21.2)	1 in 88
2010	2002	11	14.7 (14.3-15.1)	1 in 68

CDC⁵

The Virginia Department of Education has reported a 669% increase in students identified with ASD since 1998, or a 51% increase annually.

- Based upon current APS data on the number of students with ASD we can expect the population to potentially exceed 1000 by 2016.

It is difficult to rationalize a reduction to a highly successful program for such a rapidly growing population.

CONCLUSION

We want our children to learn to cope and succeed in the mainstream. Assistants make this possible. With the help and the lessons that they learn in General Education classes, these students have a better chance of succeeding in life.

As parents with children in the Autism program we know that these talented assistants have been an important part of the success of the program.

Young people with Asperger's are each unique. They are often very engaged intellectually, but can have trouble staying focused and organized, following the norms of the classroom. It is important for people to understand that the assistants spend much of their time outside the Autism/Asperger's social skills/instructional support room, working with students and supporting teachers in different classrooms.

It is clear to us that the program not only works well for the students participating in the program. But it benefits all of the students in the school who have a better classroom experience because the Asperger students in their classes are supported and successful, versus potentially disruptive and distracting.

ALTERNATE CUTS

Instead of cutting \$271,859 from this program, we put forward the following sources of savings:

- ± \$9.4 million from the Arlington County Board for one-time use
- ± Possibly more than \$6 million in better-than-expected tax revenue
- ± "PR firm" cost of \$100,000 to help with "more seats - more students" effort
- ± "MCOMM" funds -- minor and major capital improvement funds.

A CALL FOR EXPANSION

We feel that the District should consider expanding the program across other Secondary Schools and potentially into the Elementary Schools, rather than cutting it.

SOURCES

¹ FINAL REPORT: Evaluation of APS Services for Students with Special Needs by the Public Consulting Group, January 2013. P. 72 <http://www.apsva.us/cms/lib2/VA01000586/Centricity/Domain/3169/APS%20Sped%20Final%20Report%201.18.pdf>

² ARLINGTON PUBLIC SCHOOLS, Secondary School Program for Students with Autism (Asperger's) - PROGRAM FRAMEWORK, http://www.apsva.us/cms/lib2/VA01000586/Centricity/Domain/56/Program_Framework.pdf

³ FINAL REPORT: Evaluation of APS Services for Students with Special Needs by the Public Consulting Group, January 2013. P. 67. <http://www.apsva.us/cms/lib2/VA01000586/Centricity/Domain/3169/APS%20Sped%20Final%20Report%201.18.pdf>

⁴ <http://education.jhu.edu/PD/newhorizons/Exceptional%20Learners/Autism/Articles/Teaching%20Strategies%20for%20Asperger%20Students/>

⁵ <http://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/autism/data.html>