

September 6, 2021

LETTER from PARENTS OF VLP (Virtual Learning Program)

To: APS Superintendent Dr. Duran, APS School Board Members, Assistant Superintendent of Teaching and Learning Bridget Loft, Assistant Superintendent for Human Resources Dan Redding, and VLP Administrator Verlese Gaither:

We are a coalition of Arlington parents with K-8 students currently enrolled in the Arlington Public Schools (APS) Virtual Learning Program (VLP). We are grateful and appreciate that APS Superintendent Dr. Duran, the School Board, and APS have provided the VLP to protect vulnerable students and their families. We applaud the investment in the virtual program, and we want VLP to be a success for all current and future VLP students as we continue to navigate the Covid-19 pandemic. However, in light of challenges VLP parents and students experienced during launch of the VLP this week, we are writing to indicate our collective concerns and requests in the following areas:

Concern 1: Lack of VLP Teachers. The first week of school at VLP was mired with significant school start delays, a severe teacher shortage, non-existent substitute teachers, canceled school, and students lumped from various grades into multi-grade classes or “virtual waiting rooms” without teachers or classroom monitors. VLP parents and students even report incidents of online bullying between the younger and older unsupervised VLP students in mixed grade waiting rooms. This is not an appropriate educational practice, and it has created significant anxiety for VLP students and their families. Many have chosen to no longer log-in to unsupervised classes. Younger students report being upset and no longer enthusiastic about school. As we start the second week of school, the VLP program continues to lack teachers for several grades and classes (for example, to our knowledge, the following classes still have no assigned teachers: all of first grade, two-thirds of third grade, all of 4th grade, all of 6th grade reading, 6th grade advanced math, all of 8th grade math, and all middle school (6, 7, 8) English classes). These vacancies must be filled immediately.

Concern 2: Lack of VLP Administrative Staffing. Our understanding is that Ms. Gaither and two administrative assistants were the only VLP staff assigned to plan and coordinate the new program, which has more students than many elementary schools (700+). They also had to coordinate teachers and substitutes, communicate with parents, work with IT to address technical glitches, and revise schedules for all VLP students; in most cases they have understandably been unable to coordinate everything. Based on our observations, Ms. Gaither is answering phones, responding to parent and administrative emails 24-7, and filling staffing gaps as substitute teacher in many classes, all while serving as the administrator of the VLP Program. We appreciate Ms. Gaither’s efforts, but it is neither fair nor an effective or proper use of her time to shoulder so many varied responsibilities. APS must hire or reallocate additional professional staff to help run the VLP Program successfully, including a

communications professional who is bilingual in Spanish given that 43% of VLP students (as of July 12th) are Latinx.

Concern 3: Lack of Timely, Transparent, Effective and Clear Communication. During the August 25 VLP orientation meeting with VLP parents, VLP and APS staff told VLP parents to expect VLP students' classes and schedules to be accessible on their iPads effective the first day of school. However, on the first day of school, for many VLP students no such schedules or classes existed, and VLP staff did not provide any information until after the end of the school day. Subsequent guidance to reach out to the VLP program office for assistance was ineffective as staff did not answer calls nor return emails. VLP initially reported that delays were due to Canvas technology, but later acknowledged insufficient teaching staff is the cause. APS failed to acknowledge the challenges with, or even mention, the VLP Virtual Learning Program in the first APS "School Talk" released last week.

Concern 4: Lack of Services and Coordination with Home Schools. July 12th enrollment data indicates that over 80% of VLP students are BIPOC, 42% are English Language Learners, and over 21% are medically vulnerable, and/or are students with disabilities with IEPs & 504 plans. These VLP students are not receiving the federally-guaranteed equitable education and special education support services they are entitled to, especially when compared with in-person students. There has been inconsistent messaging, communications, and coordination on the relationship between VLP students and their home schools. Some home schools have dropped VLP students from their weekly communications emails, and other home schools have refused to accept VLP students in for special education services, as recommended by their IEPs, or other special or focused classes, including instrumental offerings. Immersion students who were told that Spanish Language Arts (SLA) instruction will start next week have received no information on how or by whom this service will be delivered, and students have not received links to separate SLA classes. This is inconsistent with what APS represented to families during the VLP orientation meeting, and must be resolved.

Concern 5: APS Prioritized In-Person Students over VLP Students. APS has prioritized in-person teaching needs, which has contributed to the VLP staffing challenges to the detriment of VLP students. APS provided many VLP elementary school parents the names of their students' teachers on August 21st (9 days before school started), yet by August 25th, these VLP-assigned teachers suddenly disappeared from the VLP roster. We have since learned that several of those VLP teachers were reassigned to teach in other APS schools in person. Now because of that reassignment and deprioritization, more VLP students are left without teachers, substitute teachers, or reliable monitors in their online classes.

The combination of these above concerns, coupled with the silence from the APS School Board and Dr. Duran, has left VLP Parents concerned, frustrated and unsatisfied. Most critically, VLP students are demoralized and distraught. We expect clear explanations regarding the following:

- APS's short- and long-term plans and the expected timeline to resolve the lack of qualified VLP instructors and need for more VLP staff.
- APS's short- and long-term timeline for VLP students to receive the quality educational and federally-mandated special education services they are entitled to receive.

We are confident that the VLP program can succeed with expeditious attention to the above issues, and appropriate allocation of resources to address them, including involving VLP students' home schools to a greater extent. We want to work with APS and VLP staff to solve these challenges without the need to seek additional remedies – and we have collectively developed possible temporary solutions for some - but we need to see APS step forward.

Thus, **we are requesting a virtual stakeholders meeting prior to the September 9th School Board meeting.** We request this meeting with Superintendent Dr. Duran, a School Board liaison to the VLP (and if one has not yet been appointed for VLP that it be immediately established), Assistant Superintendent of Teaching and Learning Bridget Loft, Assistant Superintendent for Human Resources Dan Redding, a Special Education Administrator, and VLP Administrator Verlese Gaither, so VLP parents can ask questions, provide thoughts and suggestions, and have a candid and productive discussion *in real-time* (e.g., not simply a Q&A answer session of pre-submitted or pre-selected questions). We look forward to working together with you to make VLP a success. We await your urgent reply to our official email address: parents-of-vlp@googlegroups.com.

Respectfully,

Parents of VLP

CC:

County Council of PTA's (CCPTA)

Arlington Special Education PTA (SEPTA)

Arlington Special Education Advisory Committee (ASEAC)

Arlington Branch #7047, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)