Arlington Public Schools Infrastructure Assessment of Diversity

FINAL REPORT & RECOMMENDATIONS

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Signed: s/ Julian R. Williams

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1 The contents of this report do not represent the views of George Mason University
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INTRODUCTION

In April 2018, Julian R. Williams was retained by Arlington Public Schools (“APS”) to examine, assess, and evaluate the diversity infrastructure within Arlington Public Schools and perform a GAP analysis as it relates to the division’s curriculum, professional development, policies/procedures/practices, and community engagement.

This assessment centers around “inclusive environments” and the extent that different groups of people represented within the school division perceive that they can bring their whole cultural selves to APS.

It focused on providing recommendations and action steps centered on increasing equity and diversity across the school division.

Diversity, as referenced in this report, is defined as “the meaningful presence and participation of individuals who differ and are similar by characteristics such as, but not necessarily limited to, race, age, ethnicity, gender, national origin, sexual orientation, religion, underrepresented populations, disability and various socio-economic backgrounds, as well as individuals with a multitude of ideas, attitudes and beliefs.”

This assessment took APS stakeholders through facilitated discussions designed to create and conceptualize their own definition of “diversity” consistent with the tenets above.

Community engagement – as defined, is a broad term that covers the interactions between APS and other stakeholders in the Arlington community. Community engagement allows community members to actively contribute to APS
decisions and actions by creating an environment in which community feedback is embraced, considered and acted upon.

This assessment also took APS stakeholders through discussions designed to define and conceptualize the desired state of “community engagement” around issues of diversity and explore avenues to sustain the desired state.

This assessment included conversations with the following stakeholders:

- Jennifer Endo, VP Community Relations, Arlington Housing Corporation Incorporated
- Reid Goldstein, School Board Chair
- Carolyn Jackson, Director, APS Office of Equity and Excellence
- Nina Janopaul, Arlington Partnership for Affordable Housing (APAH)
- Barbara Kanninen, School Board Member
- Dr. Patrick Murphy, APS Superintendent
- Dr. Tara Nattrass, Assistant Superintendent of Teaching and Learning
- Monique O’Grady, School Board Member
- Sarah Putnam, APS Director of Curriculum and Instruction
- Tannia Talento, School Board Vice-Chair
- Meg Tuccillo, APS Planning and Evaluation Consultant
- Nancy Van Doren, School Board Member
- Emily Vincent, County Council of Parent-Teacher Associations (CCPTA)
- Michelle Cottrell-Williams, APS teacher—2017 Teacher of the Year
OBSERVATIONS AND KEY THEMES

A theme that became readily apparent during this assessment is that there is a tremendous amount of optimism about APS’s capacity for positive growth within the areas of inclusion and diversity. This does not exist within every organization. There was an overwhelming sense that APS is primed to meet its desired goals in this area. This optimism was fueled by a number of factors:

- APS is fortunate to have financial resources at its disposal in order to make the requisite investments in its diversity infrastructure.
- Another factor is the vast diversity that already exists within the school division. Arlington is one of the most diverse cities in the metropolitan D.C. area and this diversity, if properly leveraged, presents numerous opportunities.
- The other more salient factor, was the “human capital” APS boasts, in the form of its educators, staff, and senior leadership. There was a strong sense of belief in the passion, sincerity, and intentionality that exists within APS.

This sense of optimism is an excellent starting point upon which to build upon. While optimism without strategy and vision will not lead to positive change by itself, it is very much a necessary component of organizational shifts in the area of diversity.

Another key emerging theme centered around the APS School Board (“Board”). It is my observation that, additional visioning and goal setting concerning diversity needs to be defined by the Board. Until some level of Board consensus is reached it will be
difficult for APS leadership and “ground-level” practitioners to craft a direction around key issues. Alignment is key. For example:

- What does the Board think is the ideal state of diversity and equity within APS?
- What are the key issues?

Reaching an agreed upon set of goals and values will not be easy work. It must be an iterative process that will require some difficult dialogues. This work will likely need to be facilitated by a third-party for optimal results.

The good part about undertaking this exercise at the Board level is that they would not be starting from scratch. Review of APS’s Strategic Plan and Professional Learning Framework reveals a great starting point for these dialogues. Using the Strategic Plan, for example, as a starting point for visioning should jump-start these conversations. While there was some divergence at the Board level as to what the issues were and how best to approach them, there did seem to be a forthright willingness amongst the Board members to tackle these issues.

A strong source of optimism at the Board level came from the June 2018, Board meeting about the Washington-Lee renaming. The type of Board leadership that occurred during this tense and emotionally-fraught meeting should serve as a guidepost for how to bravely approach future conversations around diversity and inclusion. During that meeting there were very strong, decisive remarks, and leadership by the Board with the incorporation of student and community voices. This should serve as a model for addressing difficult issues in the future.
Another theme that arose during Board conversations is whether value setting concerning diversity is the Board’s job? Regardless of how this question is answered, the Board will play a pivotal role in setting the tone at the top for the eventual APS diversity framework. 100% unanimity on all issues is not required, but a shared set of what the issues are and what the desired goals are is necessary. It is essential that APS and the Board reach consensus on the benefits of diversity and the approach to reach the desired state.

While it was consistently communicated during this assessment that participants felt that “diversity is our strength” within APS, it wasn’t as clear how this “strength” is being embraced and communicated more broadly. More work must be done to truly define what this phrase means to the school division and its stakeholders. Communication around values of diversity and inclusion will be extremely important for APS. As a “majority-minority” school division, division leadership must consider what this means for the division as a whole and must embrace this fact, and issue positive messaging in support. This fact must also be incorporated into decision-making and leadership philosophies.

The current salience of “history” became readily apparent during this assessment. Old battles are still being fought and old wounds are very much still open. Division-wide “reconciliation” of these open issues will be an ongoing and continuous endeavor. APS must invest time/energy in acknowledging and reconciling its history. APS’s history of segregation still plays an active role in how APS actions are perceived by some parts of the community. While I am aware that APS has held awareness events around
segregation in the past, I believe this will need to be a more regularized endeavor. This is a great opportunity to convene community partners, historians, and local churches, to discuss the legacy of segregation within APS, as well as the lasting effects that still exist to this day. APS’s history of school reorganization efforts further exacerbates this issue and highlight the need for continued acknowledgement and reconciliation.

Capacity building will be essential for APS in terms of how the essential work of creating and sustaining a diverse school division is shared. “Starts and stops” of previous diversity initiatives add to a level of skepticism that APS will be able to tackle the large and complex issue of diversity. Instead of leaning heavily on the practitioners in the Office of Equity and Excellence, diversity work needs to be “everyone’s responsibility” and that responsibility should be shared across the school division.

One theme that was stated repeatedly was the inconsistency from school to school in terms of how diversity, inclusion, and equity is prioritized and valued. While participants stated that some schools are taking strong steps in the form of professional development for teachers and staff, and support for students, other buildings haven’t been as enthusiastic. Establishing a more centralized and regularized framework for efforts to be more diverse will be essential for APS moving forward.

APS’s commitment to the ideals of inclusion and diversity must be better infused and permeated throughout all aspects of the division. There is a sentiment that APS leadership as a whole still needs to catch up with APS students in terms of comfortability with diversity. “Students are way ahead of us” is something that came up frequently in discussions. While this will always be the case to some extent, closing this
gap will be essential. The way to close this gap is by bolstering diversity and inclusion related professional development for division staff members as well as an increased focus on recruitment and retention of diverse staff and teachers.

In a lot of ways, APS is very much beholden to the issues facing greater Arlington and the region in general. Changing demographics of the greater Arlington area, cost of living, and issues relating to the lack of affordable housing and housing segregation are issues that heavily impact APS. It is important for APS to continue to partner with community organizations and perhaps lobby for structural changes that could improve access to affordable housing for community members.

Another recurring theme is stakeholder’s desire to expand definitions and conversations around “diversity” to include disability status. Traditionally we start discussions around diversity with consideration of race/ethnicity. The voices and experiences of students/staff with physical, developmental, or cognitive impairments must also not be lost within this work. It will be crucial for APS to support an expansive rather than a restrictive view of “diversity.”

APS will need to wrestle with still open “third rail” issues. Ensuring that all voices are represented in these conversations and not just the loudest and most fervent. Continual thinking about who is not at the table and how to incorporate those communities into the consideration and decision-making process will be crucial.

Some of these open issues include:

• Definitions and prioritization of “walkability” and what this means for members of certain traditionally marginalized communities.
• How to balance demographics and diversity within APS given the historical issues of income disparities and neighborhood/housing segregation.

• School diversification (plan) vs. inclusive schools and classrooms.

Finally, this assessment revealed divergent opinions on what stakeholders felt like the most pressing issues were. Some felt as though school diversification was the most immediate and pressing issue, while others felt as though bolstering support for historically disadvantaged students and strengthening professional development centered around the creation and maintenance of inclusive classrooms was key. Instead of viewing this as an “either-or” problem it is very much a “both and” issue. Each of these issues as well as increasing development of culturally-relevant pedagogy must remain heavily in focus.

RECOMMENDATIONS

What became readily apparent during this assessment is that APS is primed and ready for sustained change in terms of how it creates and maintains its “diversity infrastructure.” This will require more than simply new programs and initiatives. Diversity and inclusion must be embedded into the division’s fabric, values, and decision-making processes at all levels. Instead of viewing the ideals of inclusion and diversity as separate and apart from the day-to-day work, these ideals must be considered at every step.

Sustaining momentum in this area will require constant attention, plus support and resources and strategic investments. The recommendations below are not meant
to be viewed as an exhaustive checklist, but are meant to provide perspective and hopefully, guide further conversations around strategic investment and prioritization of resources. To be clear, there is no ideal diversity framework, I recommend that APS continue to engage community stakeholders as well as internal/external stakeholders in the creation and maintenance of its diversity infrastructure.

**Recommendation #1: Division-wide diversity summit**

One central theme throughout this assessment is that there are still questions within APS on whether all communities of internal/external stakeholders are seen as “equals” within the conversations around diversity and inclusion. I recommend bringing these communities and stakeholders together for a day-long APS Diversity Summit. The diversity summit should be planned with enough lead time to allow substantial participation from those within APS as well as community members. The Summit would be designed to facilitate group visioning and collaboration. The vision is to bring the entire APS community into the conversation with the goal of building, strengthening, and sustaining an APS culture around diversity, inclusion, and well-being. Another goal would be the initial development of an inclusive-excellence framework for APS and the development of a common language for the diversity discussion within APS. Summit sessions would include time for participants to articulate the strengths they currently see within APS and the future they envision, as well as brainstorming opportunities and discussions about ways to transform ideas into action.

APS would also likely benefit substantially by revisiting the “courageous conversations” work that occurred at one time within the school division. Part of the
summit could brainstorm how to re-institutionalize this work. While “courageous conversations” may or may not be the most effective model to use this time around, I strongly believe that APS would benefit greatly from a similar division-wide engagement effort. Most participants in this assessment expressed high levels of satisfaction with “courageous conversations” and disappointment that participation in the initiative had waned in recent years.

**Recommendation #2: Creation of an APS diversity landing webpage**

Communication is key when it comes to effective and impactful diversity and inclusion efforts. While APS has begun to communicate some of its efforts and engagement attempts to the larger community, more must be done. I recommend pulling a division-wide working group together to craft an APS diversity landing webpage with resources/programming. This landing page could be an interactive site with the opportunity to interact and engage with APS, but its primary focus should be continuous information sharing around APS’s values of inclusion and diversity.

The page should include storytelling, narratives, and diversity success stories. The creation and publicization of these “success-narratives” are key. While it is true that there is always additional work to do concerning diversity, entities also sometimes suffer from a failure to effectively communicate all of what is happening within the organization. This can fuel a false narrative that nothing is happening or that inclusion/diversity isn’t sufficiently valued. I recommend that APS engage parents and community members to better tell these stories. On the landing page, highlight
programming, events, specific students and teachers that are advancing inclusion and diversity within APS.

**Recommendation #3: Division-wide climate survey tool in order to gauge APS stakeholder experiences on diversity**

In order to sufficiently quantitatively and qualitatively gauge internal and external sentiments as to the diversity climate within APS, I recommend utilization of a school division-wide climate survey tool for staff/students/parents in order to gauge APS stakeholder experiences on diversity. This quantitative measure will allow the division to fully capture, interpret, and analyze data concerning opinions on diversity and inclusion within APS.

Diversity-related climate surveys are widely available and online delivery and compilation would not be labor intensive. Delivery and accessibility of the survey is key. The survey would need to be available in Spanish, for example. In addition to online delivery to students/staff/parents, electronic “survey stations” could be set up in schools or division offices as well.

Also crucial, will be how results are interpreted and communicated to the community. A climate survey is only as effective as its communication plan. Results would need to be communicated broadly. Working groups or action teams would also need to be formulated to address structural issues revealed by the survey.
**Recommendation #4: Creation of a diversity and inclusion council**

This assessment revealed that more intentional work must be done within APS to make diversity and inclusion “everyone’s responsibility” instead of just the specific persons and offices who are directly tasked with this crucial work. To address this, I strongly recommend the creation of a school division-wide diversity and inclusion council. Some of this could be encapsulated by reformation or the bolstering of the APS inclusive practices working group. It was unclear as to whether this working group is still active. If not, then it would be beneficial to APS to re-imagine this group in the form of a diversity and inclusion council with a possible direct reporting line to senior APS leadership. It will also be important that this group is authorized with the responsibility to make specific recommendations designed to improve the student/staff/community experience. Membership on the council should be broad and include a cross-section of staff, parents, board members, administrators, and community partners.

**Recommendation #5: Creation of APS diversity recruitment and retention plan**

While discrimination/EEO policies are solid and in line with best practices, time and energy must be invested in recruitment and retention efforts to further diversify instructional staff ranks. I recommend creation of a division-wide diversity recruitment and retention plan led by APS Human Resources. While it is well-discussed that serious deficiencies exist nationally in the pipeline of diverse teachers, I believe that APS has the capabilities to combat this issue over time. One possible solution to achieve this
recommendation is hiring a director of diversity recruitment within APS Human Resources assigned to create and execute the diversity recruitment and retention plan.

Another aspect of this plan designed to ensure that diversity work is recognized as a shared responsibility, is increasing accountability measures and incorporating them into annual performance evaluations for APS personnel.

Sample measures could include:

- What diversity and inclusion capacity building activities have you undertaken or been a part of? Please share any relevant involvement you’ve had this past year providing you with the opportunity to build capacity around diversity and inclusion such as:
  - diversity-related training;
  - workshop participation;
  - attending presentations focusing on topics enhancing intercultural understanding or inclusive teaching/pedagogy;
  - conference attendance that enhances your intercultural skills;
  - pursuing community engagement opportunities; and
  - program development impacting diverse communities.

The plan would also include more regularized and substantive use of exit surveys to learn about possible issues affecting teacher retention and re-formatting exit surveys to get more specific information. More understanding of the factors affecting teacher turnover will make APS more effective in its recruitment efforts to recruit diverse teachers.
Recommendation #6: Bolster diversity and inclusion focused professional development

APS must continue to be creative in bolstering professional development opportunities and “cultural competency” for instructional staff. I recommend the development of a cohesive professional development plan which incorporates unconscious bias and cultural competency modules as well as increased professional development for teachers and APS leadership on how to understand their own biases and how those biases impact their own work.

Recommendation #7: Creation of chief diversity officer position with APS

The largest and arguably most substantive recommendation stemming from this assessment is the final recommendation that APS seriously consider the creation of a Chief Diversity Officer (CDO) position for the school division. Unfortunately, in my opinion, the hiring/recruitment of a CDO by many organizations is a “band-aid” over much larger structural issues. Many times, CDO’s are hired in a knee-jerk fashion designed to appease stakeholders usually in the wake of a diversity-related crisis. Many times, the hiring entity hasn’t undergone the necessary analysis to sustain this person(s) success within the position. I’ve seen failures to properly align CDO work with the goals and values of the organization, so this is not a recommendation I make lightly.

That being said, I strongly believe in the value of an institutional champion for inclusive-excellence. I also believe that successful organizations must have a dynamic and strategic diversity thought-leader tasked with collaboration and execution of its larger diversity strategy. But, in order to maximize success, this component should only
be added within organizations that have the appropriate “capacity” for change and that have done the requisite work to analyze where that capacity exists and where it needs to be bolstered.

After undertaking this assessment, I believe that APS is ready for this step in the form of recruiting a CDO. While I am a firm believer that responsibility for ensuring an inclusive and diverse environment is “everyone’s responsibility”, the ideals of inclusion and diversity also require top-level leadership.

I believe the right CDO would bring value to APS by improving APS’s institutional climate, culture, and capacity to attract, retain, and leverage the diversity in the Arlington community. A CDO would be crucial in forging a shared sense of responsibility among students, staff, and community partners and leading APS in meeting its larger diversity goals. The CDO could also be possibly responsible for execution of the diversity recruitment and retention plan and play an active role in the previously discussed APS diversity council. Possibly as its chairperson.

It is crucial that sufficient investment be made in supporting this position as well as ensuring thought be given to which unit(s) are placed under the CDO. It is also crucial that this person be a senior member of the Superintendent’s leadership structure. Many of the recommendations laid out in this report would fit nicely into the portfolio of a CDO. I also believe that a Chief Diversity Officer position within APS would attract a number of high caliber diversity practitioners as potential applicants.

**POTENTIAL JOB DUTIES/COMPETENCIES FOR CHIEF DIVERSITY OFFICER**

- Create a strategic plan for inclusion, diversity and equity, taking into consideration the academic and social support needs of the community.
• Develop recommendations to ensure a healthy and collaborative educational environment that encourages and supports inclusion for all students.

• Serve as a resource and provides guidance on issues related to inclusion, diversity and equity.

• Align strategic plans to prioritize inclusion and drives new programmatic activities to meet the needs of all students.

• Create professional development and learning opportunities regarding the importance of equity and inclusion.

• Collaborate with various departments and school leaders to ensure that best practices for equity and inclusion are reflected in all educational opportunities, including course content and materials.

• As a part of the Superintendent’s executive leadership team, assists other designated executive staff members in the implementation of school board policies and procedures.

• Respond to questions from schools, administrators and citizens about programs, directing inquiries to appropriate individuals.

• Organize and manage special projects according to APS needs.

• Keep abreast of current local, state, and national education development in the areas of school effectiveness and reform.

In addition, it will be integral that this person be proficient in the use and application of cross-cultural communication skills as well as demonstrate commitment to the goals of inclusion, diversity, and equity and possess a very strong working knowledge of school system policies and administrative procedures, including outstanding skill in educational leadership.

Many of these above-listed programmatic areas of potential responsibility are already in place within APS. I envision the CDO as the link that ties many of these efforts
together, and the person who holds APS accountable in this area. Recruitment of a proven collaborator will be important for success.

CONCLUSION

APS is at a crucial moment in its evolution as it relates to inclusion and diversity. While there is certainly substantial work to do in creating the ideal environment, the capacity for true change exists. This is fueled by an overwhelming sense of optimism that is embedded within APS’s fabric. This optimism and intentionality within APS senior leadership are strengths that can be further leveraged in order for the school division to meet its diversity and inclusion goals. While it will take time, I believe APS is well-positioned to be a leader amongst its peers in this area. It has been an absolute pleasure performing this assessment on APS’s behalf. I remain more than willing to assist the school division in an advisory capacity moving forward.

BIOGRAPHY

Julian R. Williams was appointed as the Vice President for Compliance, Diversity and Ethics for George Mason University in June 2015.

In this role he provides leadership to the University’s Compliance, Diversity and Ethics division, which includes the Title IX and ADA coordinators, University Ombudsman, and Assistive Technology Initiative. He serves as the university’s executive-level compliance, diversity, and ethics strategist and champion. He also advises University leadership on compliance policies and procedures. He leads the University’s efforts to ensure a diverse student body and workforce.
Previously, he served as the Director of Equal Opportunity and Title IX Officer at Vassar College in Poughkeepsie, N.Y. In that role he was the primary liaison to President, Board of Trustees, government officials, and others in the campus community on incidences of sexual misconduct and claims of discrimination or harassment.

He earned a Bachelor's of Arts degree in English from the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor and a Juris Doctorate from Michigan State University College of Law.

He has also served as the Director of the Office of Equity and Diversity at Monmouth University in New Jersey. He has worked as a civil trial attorney in the state of Michigan on cases involving discrimination, harassment, and violations of the Family and Medical Leave Act. He also served as union-side legal counsel in disputes between Michigan public school employees and public-school divisions.

He has served on the executive board for the American Association for Access, Equity, and Diversity, a national non-profit association of professionals working in the areas of equal opportunity and diversity dedicated to the promotion of policies designed to fulfill the nation's promise of equal opportunity for all individuals.

Julian is also a member of the National Association of Diversity Officers in Higher Education (NADOHE) and currently serves as Chairman of the Mid-Atlantic Association of Diversity Officers in Higher Education (MADOHE).