



ARLINGTON BRANCH #7047
NAACP

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June 22, 2020

Francisco Durán, Ph.D.
Superintendent, Arlington Public Schools
2100 Washington Blvd.
Arlington, VA 22204

Dear Dr. Durán:

Welcome to Arlington Public Schools (APS). We are excited to have you for our new Superintendent and we are looking forward to forging an alliance with you to benefit Arlington students.

Literacy is one of our most important civil rights and is the equity issue of our time. While we are writing as an individual organization, we strongly support the organizations and individuals who are collectively requesting that APS consistently execute evidence-based reading, spelling, and writing instruction based on cognitive research throughout the district. We collectively agree that every principal, reading specialist, general education, and special education teacher must have an understanding of the science of how children learn to read to ensure APS is consistently implementing evidence-based literacy screenings, instruction, interventions, and accommodations that are grounded in decades of cognitive research.

Inequity in How APS Teaches Reading

Strong reading skills are the foundation of all academic success, yet Black students as a group score lower on most standardized tests than white students. In spite of the 2000 National Reading Panel's conclusions that students need direct, explicit instruction that teaches phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension, educational institutions are failing to implement the Reading Panel's findings. Despite the fact that rates of dyslexia, the most common cause of reading difficulties, are nearly even across racial groups, Black and Latino students suffer disproportionately when not taught to read using evidence-based practices based on the science of reading. One in six children who are not reading proficiently in third grade do not graduate from high school on time, a rate four times greater than that for proficient readers. Graduation rates for Black and Latino students who were not proficient readers in the third grade lag far behind those for White students with the same reading skills. It is critical that schools provide Black and Latino children with those same opportunities to achieve academic success as other children. Yet, the achievement gap between Black and Latino students and their White and Asian counterparts in Virginia is deepening.

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) highlights a consistent decrease in Virginia's reading test scores and reveals that by eighth grade, just before entering high school, two-thirds of Virginia students are not proficient readers. Black and Latino students fare the worst in these results and are disproportionately impacted. The NAEP report ranks Virginia in the bottom three states in which reading scores declined 4% for Grade 4 and 6% for Grade 8 in 2019, with the most vulnerable students (i.e., those with disabilities) losing the most ground and suffering the steepest declines.¹ We hope that your work on the VDOE has opened your eyes to Virginia's abysmally low reading standards and outcomes. While the performance of all children continues to decline every year, minority children are disproportionately impacted by this alarming trend.

These devastating results are not just happening elsewhere in Virginia, it is happening right here in APS. The 2019 Arlington Partnership for Children, Youth, and Families (APCYF) Annual Report indicates that "only White and Asian students have SOL scores above the Virginia average. Other students -- Black, Hispanic, ELs, SWDs, and those who are economically disadvantaged -- have lower pass rates than the Virginia average."² On a micro level, Black students in APS consistently perform 30 points below their white counterparts.³ With spending at over \$19,000 per student, this is unacceptable in absolute terms. APS has the resources and the moral obligation to develop early strong literacy skills and to ensure, as you so eloquently state, that "every child is known by name and need." Yet, the disparities amongst our minority students evident in all our data persist, revealing deep systemic inequities that can no longer be ignored. These pervasive inequities must be addressed with utmost urgency.

Absence of Evidence-based Instruction in APS

APS is still widely using a balanced literacy approach for reading instruction.⁴ Balanced literacy is an approach to teaching reading and writing that focuses on meaning and context while deemphasizing explicit phonics instruction. Forty percent of students learn to read seamlessly or relatively easily with the broad instruction of balanced literacy and are advantaged by a balanced literacy approach. However, it is essential that the remaining 60 percent receive code-based

¹ The [Nation's Report Card](#), 2019.

² See [2019 Community Report](#), page 45.

³ See [APS in Black](#)

⁴ "Balanced Literacy is a philosophical orientation that assumes that reading and writing achievement are developed through instruction and support in multiple environments using various approaches that differ by level of teacher support and child control" (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996). Although phonics, decoding, and spelling may be taught in word study lessons, the skills typically are not emphasized and rarely taught systematically (Spear-Swearling, 2019). Rather, students are encouraged to use word analogies and pictures or context to identify words. Balanced Literacy instruction is focused on shared reading (e.g., the teacher reads aloud to students and asks questions about the text), guided reading (e.g., students read texts at their current ability level and discuss them with the teacher in homogeneous groups), and independent reading (e.g., students self-select books to read on their own)." Iowa Reading Research Center, April 9, 2019, [An Explanation of Structured Literacy, and a Comparison to Balanced Literacy](#).

explicit, systematic, sequential, diagnostic instruction of structured literacy⁵ to enable them to develop appropriate reading skills at or above grade-level.⁶

Inconsistent Instructional Approaches in the District

The science is clear that effective K-3 reading instruction requires a strong core curriculum which must include explicit, systematic, core classroom instruction on phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. In addition, we should have instructional materials that are aligned to research; appropriate reading assessments (e.g., rapid automatized naming test); timely, intensive intervention; and high-quality professional development in each APS school.

Unfortunately, there is gross inconsistency with reading instruction throughout APS. APS leadership continues to permit the use of inconsistent literacy instruction, resources, interventions, and accommodations among schools, and even within the same school, with variations even among teachers. This is unacceptable and contributes to ongoing student performance issues. For example, only four elementary schools are using a structured literacy program (Wilson Reading System) as their core reading instruction. One of those schools, Arlington Traditional School (ATS), a lottery “choice” school, has successfully closed the achievement gap using an evidenced-based approach to literacy instruction. Our students’ literacy should not be dependent on whether they are assigned to the “right teacher” who chooses to use evidence-based instruction with fidelity, or to the “right school.” Our students should not have to win the school “lottery” to get a strong core curriculum based in phonics.

Moreover, the fundamental abilities to read, spell, and write well should not be dependent on parental ability to supplement APS instruction to keep their children academically afloat, or to hire advocates and/or attorneys to ensure their child is “known by name and need.” The few parents who can afford to do so only exacerbate the inequities because too many other families do not have the resources to cover gaps in curriculum and learning. Learning to read is a basic right for every child regardless of ability or means in our school system. To ignore the research and brain science of how to teach reading is a violation of students’ civil rights.

NAACP Position

The NAACP Arlington Branch was founded in October 1940 to specifically address education inequities in Arlington County. Over half a century later, the Arlington Branch remains committed to ensuring that all minority children are given an opportunity to excel academically. In a recent Consortium on Reading Excellence (CORE) webinar presented by Kareem Weaver of the

⁵“Structured Literacy instruction is the umbrella term used by the International Dyslexia Association (IDA) to unify and encompass evidence-based programs and approaches that are aligned to the [Knowledge and Practice Standards](#) (KPS; Cowen, 2016). IDA defines KPS as “the knowledge and skills that all teachers of reading should possess to teach all students to read proficiently.” Structured Literacy approaches are effective at helping students with learning disabilities in the area of reading, such as dyslexia, learn to read and write (Spear-Swerling, 2019). Put simply, Structured Literacy is explicit, systematic teaching that focuses on [phonological awareness](#), word recognition, [phonics](#) and decoding, spelling, and [syntax](#) at the sentence and paragraph levels.” Iowa Reading Research Center, April 9, 2019, [An Explanation of Structured Literacy, and a Comparison to Balanced Literacy](#).

⁶The Ladder of Reading, Nancy Young (updated 2019), [Ladder of Reading Infographic](#), International Dyslexia Association.

Oakland NAACP, the importance of structured literacy in teaching Black children and mitigating factors that contribute to underperformance was underscored:

Black students have historically received inaccurate attributions of racial inheritance to explain their academic success and failure. Structured literacy, taught explicitly and systematically by skilled educators, provides the widest pool of students with the opportunity to develop strong foundational reading skills. It also helps lessen the impact of racial attribution by replacing biases and assumptions with objective guidance. This leaves less room for expectancy effects, helps educators identify challenges, and allows them to intervene in a timely manner.⁷

Westand ready and willing to help you, and support APS' efforts to get back to the foundational basics to improve reading, spelling, and writing for all our students. Doing so will drastically reduce the amount of money the district will inevitably have to spend on special education. It is beyond time for APS to embrace a forward-thinking approach.

Sincerely,



Julius D. "JD" Spain, Sr.
President, Arlington Branch NAACP #7047



S. Symone Walker
Co-Chair, Education Committee



Sherrice L. Kerns
Co-Chair, Education Committee

Education Committee Members: Merrit Gillard, Emily Vincent, Mary Kusler, Dominique G. Jenkins
David Priddy, Adora Williams

cc: Bridget Loft, Assistant Superintendent of Teaching and Learning
Arron Gregory, Chief Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Officer
Lori Silver, Supervisor, Office of English Language Arts
School Board, Arlington Public Schools

⁷Webinar, Casualties of War: Reading Science Denial and Racism's Impact on African-American Children, Presented by Kareem Weaver, Member, Education Committee, NAACP, Oakland Branch (January 29, 2020), [On-Demand Webinar: Casualties of War: Reading Science Denial and Racism's Impact on African American Children](#).