

MEMORANDUM

DATE: February 2, 2023

TO: Members of the Alexandria City School Board
ACPS Budget and Finance Staff

FROM: Budget Advisory Committee
Nancy Drane (Chair); Ryan Reyna (Vice Chair); Bridget Shea Westfall (Secretary);
Selena el Hajji; Jenica Patterson; Bill Pfister; Lillian Vagnoni

SUBJECT: Community Budget Forum Recommendations

CC: Robert Easley, ACPS Director of Budget & Financial Systems & Reporting
Dominic Turner, ACPS Chief Financial Officer
Kathy Stenzel, Alexandria City Budget and Fiscal Affairs Advisory Committee

The School Board Budget Advisory Committee (BAC) applauds the efforts ACPS staff take each year to plan its annual Community Budget Forum. As reflected in its 2021-2022 report on communications and public engagement (available [HERE](#)) BAC is a strong proponent of community outreach and engagement around the division's budget. The Community Budget Forum provides critical information to the community about the budget process and key priorities, as well as enables community members to ask pertinent questions about those items. We are excited about the division's continued community engagement efforts regarding the budget and, as community representatives, would like to see even more community input. Beyond the recommendations provided below, we do encourage the School Board and division staff to reference our prior communications memo, as we believe many of the suggestions in that document are pertinent to this discussion as well.

As an advisory body of the School Board, BAC encourages greater School Board ownership of the Community Budget Forum. We would like to see members more involved in the planning and execution of the Forum as directly elected representatives of the community. The School Board can and should turn to this Committee to partner and support the Forum in more meaningful ways. We believe that through increased partnership, the division will receive more and more diverse input on the budget.

BAC is offering the following recommendations to further strengthen and expand the value of the annual Community Budget Forum. We hope that these recommendations can be fruitful for planning future budget forums. Our recommendations focus on the following three phases: (1) meeting preparation; (2) meeting execution; and (3) meeting follow up.

Meeting Preparation

With respect to the planning of preparation of future budget forums, we recommend:

- *Increase Forum Planning Time:* beginning the planning for the budget forum with BAC, and other relevant groups, in late Spring / early Summer can help the division meet its goals of increased community awareness and input into the budget, especially when the forum usually occurs fairly early in the academic year (October). Additional planning time will enable more

collaborative development of the meeting agenda and targeted outreach to key communities, both of which should contribute to increased meeting participation.

- *Develop the Agenda in Formal Collaboration with BAC:* as representatives of the community, BAC has a pulse on the type of information that community members are interested in hearing about and discussing with respect to the budget. It would be beneficial to the effectiveness of the budget forum for BAC and the division to work together to identify the appropriate agenda structure, length, and execution of the meeting.
- *Partner with BAC to Expand Community Outreach:* We were heartened to see additional outreach from the division through traditional and social media channels to spread the word about the Community Budget Forum in 2021 and 2022. We believe more can be done and want to be a partner in those efforts. In particular, we recommend that the division turns to BAC to leverage its individual and collective voice to connect with key communities that tend to be less represented in similar meetings, partner with PTAs and other community-based organizations to promote the meeting, and even seek feedback from the community about how they would best like to engage in the budget forum to inform the design of the agenda and execution of the meeting. Advance planning around the timeline of event-related communications would be beneficial to ensure community members have ample advance notice of the forum through the ACPS website, Express, ParentSquare, PTAC and PTA newsletters, and other communications channels. BAC would even be interested in officially co-hosting the event, similar to the Public Safety Forum that was co-hosted by PTAC, PSAS, and ACPS in October 2022.

Meeting Execution

To maximize the value of future budget forums, we recommend an approach that centers and increases a diverse set of community voices and allows for more of a two-way conversation, where the Board and division staff have the opportunity present *and listen* to those voices. In particular, we believe the outreach for participation and meeting discussion need to center on the “why” for all involved—namely, why participation in budget forums is critical and why community feedback on the budget is critical for establishing and executing on division priorities. We recommend the following:

- *Update the Meeting Format:* BAC envisions that future forums be scheduled for 90 minutes, with that time fully utilized to allow for a minimum of 60 minutes devoted to community questions and feedback. We support the division providing a description of the budgetary process and an update on current budget priorities at the beginning of the forum, with the information shared in non-technical terms to broaden engagement. We strongly support efforts the division has made to incorporate the perspective of an ACPS principal and a member of the central office staff. The Board Chair or a member of the Board might also consider providing a welcome to attendees to emphasize the Board’s interest in community perspective on the budget. Further, we recommend that the meeting itself is approached more as a conversation than mainly a presentation with follow up questions. We believe this will both increase the number of participants and the value of their feedback for the division.
- *Partner with BAC and PTAC to Facilitate the Meeting:* We recommend that the division partner with members of the BAC and/or PTAC to facilitate this community conversation, particularly the discussion portion. As representatives of the community, BAC and PTAC members may be able to draw out more robust feedback, and ease any apprehension community members may have about participating in the conversation, given power dynamics. Further, this can free up the division staff to listen to the discussion without needing to have a direct response on the spot to questions.

- *Provide Multiple Venues for Engagement:* We recommend that future forums are held with a hybrid approach. We could envision a Community Budget Forum that offers in person attendance at one central location (ACHS for instance), with a few satellite in-person events facilitated by BAC and/or PTAC members, and a virtual option for those unable or uncomfortable attending in person. This will certainly increase the logistical challenges, but we believe that the potential for increasing community engagement outweighs the burden. There should be clear procedures for those participating remotely or virtually to ask questions or provide comments in real time. Additionally, we recommend that the division work with BAC and other groups to collect community feedback (through surveys, etc.) prior to the forum to help guide the type of information shared and expand the ways that individuals can be heard.

Meeting Follow Up

When individuals give their time to provide feedback, they do so in hopes that it will help inform future decisions. As such, we recommend that the division produce a summary document after future Community Budget Forums that outlines key themes from the discussion and identifies ways that the division intends to incorporate the feedback, and answers questions posed during the discussion. We do not expect or anticipate that every piece of information shared during the forum will have a direct impact on current or future decisions; however, we do think it is important to show the community that the division is listening and values its input. Additionally, we could see the questions and discussions informing an updated FAQ regarding the budget that is populated on the division's website. Finally, we would encourage the division to clearly outline other ways that community members can be engaged in the budget process moving forward (i.e., providing comment at School Board meetings).