

To the Anne Arundel County Council,

On June 17, 2020, the Anne Arundel County Public Schools (AACPS) Board of Education (BOE) voted to amend the FY2021 Operating Budget to reallocate \$745,100 in Transportation Department funding for seven (7) Full Time Equivalent (FTE) transportation positions to seven (7) mental-health related positions, specifically five (5) additional school counselors, one (1) additional school psychologist, and one (1) teacher specialist with specialization in restorative justice^[1]. This was in addition to the 9 school counselor positions already funded in the FY2021 Operating Budget. This action was controversial because the 7 new transportation positions were intended to ameliorate longstanding issues with transportation documented in the Prismatic Transportation Report earlier this year.

Recognizing that both safe transportation and access to mental health services are essential for our students, the NAACP Education Committee performed an independent assessment of the decision using the Maryland Association of Boards of Education (MABE) Equity Lens. We sought to weigh the equity impact of both potential allocations of the aforementioned funds. This statement will attempt to summarize our findings.

MABE Equity Lens

The MABE Equity Lens was developed by the Maryland Association of Boards of Education (MABE) to “assist member boards in developing a shared understanding and vision of educational equity.” The MABE Equity Lens consists of 5 questions:

1. Who are the under-represented groups affected by this policy, program, practice, decision or action? What are the potential impacts on these groups?
2. Does this policy, program, practice, decision or action worsen existing disparities or produce other unintended consequences?
3. How have you intentionally involved stakeholders who are also members of the communities affected by this policy, program, practice, decision or action?
4. What are the barriers to more equitable outcomes?
5. How will you mitigate the negative impacts and address the barriers identified above?

The NAACP Education Committee recognizes that not every individual or group shares the same equity lens. For this reason, our committee has made a commitment to share its application of the equity lens on all AACPS policies, regulations, and budget positions on which it provides testimony with the AACPS school board. Furthermore, the committee has requested that the Board of Education share its own application of the equity lens with community stakeholder groups so that the community may have an opportunity to provide further input.

Prior to performing its equity lens analysis, the Education Committee reviewed several source documents related to the board’s decision:

The 2020 Transportation Services Comprehensive Evaluation by Prismatic Services, Inc^[2] was commissioned by the AACPS Board of Education to evaluate its transportation operations. The report concluded that the school system “struggles with a lack of procedural guidelines, legacy ways of work and limited use of technology” and issued a series of recommendations to improve staffing, operating procedures, routing and contractor oversight. The 7 new transportation positions requested in the draft FY2021 Operating Budget were intended to address these inefficiencies. The report also identifies special student populations who rely on AACPS for transportation including special needs students, homeless students, and students that travel outside their home district to participate in magnet or charter programs. AACPS also transports 641 homeless students in which approximately 43% of them do not reside in their zoned school area, and 75 of these students live outside the county^[2]. Parents of these students have complained that they are often late to school because of AACPS’s unsuccessful bus routing systems. This directly affects the student’s access to education and their ability to learn. If we do not provide the support to directly address these transportation issues, we will further marginalize a group of students that are already disadvantaged.

The Transportation Report also stressed that our transportation software can be used more effectively providing that we hire a team specifically trained in its operation and use. We can only expect the transportation challenges to be greater with the likely modified school attendance issues, and we know the buses will be unsafely overcrowded at present usage (i.e., no social distancing)^[3]. The Maryland State Board of Education (MSDE) Maryland Together: Maryland’s Recovery Plan for Education provides comprehensive guidance to school systems for reopening schools safely in the fall in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. The report references Center for Disease Control (CDC)

guidelines to implement in order to protect students, teachers, administrators, and staff and to reduce the spread of COVID-19 ^[5]. MSDE and CDC guidelines recommend enhanced cleaning protocols for school buses. This would involve AACPS's transportation department developing a schedule for increased routine cleaning. As a result, this could lead to an increase in spending expenditures for supplies to ensure that buses are sanitary and safe for our children and staff.

The CDC also recommends that school systems alter bus seating to reinforce social distancing. One of the examples they provide include seating one child per bus row and skipping rows in a school bus or other transport vehicle with as few as 13 students to a 77 person bus. This ultimately results in a reduced number of students riding on a bus during one bus trip. This would indicate that bus drivers will be making multiple trips to pick up students or that AACPS will have to provide more buses with different drivers. This will demand a robust, strategic, and precise bus routing schedule and plan for the upcoming school year.

Furthermore, in the Fall Reopening 2020 Survey distributed to AACPS parents, AACPS proposed potential school scheduling scenarios parents and students could encounter in the fall 2020 school year^[6]. These possibilities include but are not limited to students attending schools during either an AM or PM shift every day, students attending schools on alternate days, for example, attending some days in person and other days virtually or online, or students attending one week in-person and the following week online. Instituting one of these schedules will further complicate an already problematic bus routing schedule. There needs to be an adequate amount of funding available to accommodate these modifications.

The AAC-NAACP have solicited stories from the community and spoke with persons advocating for and against the proposed amendment, these include parents and several members of the school board. Although opinions of school board members are essential, a key stakeholder we must consider are the AACPS parents. Please review the statement submitted by an AACPS parent who describes her experience with her son attending the STEM Program of Choice at South River High School (SRHS).

“My son attends the STEM Program of Choice at South River High School (SRHS). Upon entering the program an agreement is signed regarding transportation to and from the consolidated bus stops. However, I had no idea that I would be required to go in a backwards direction to one of the consolidated bus stops. I go in the opposite of SRHS to have my son board a bus and literally, the bus goes directly pass our residence en route to SRHS. Because I blindly signed the agreement regarding transportation, it was held against me with AACPS stating they offer transportation as a privilege to the AACPS Districts.”

We have also received complaints from the Wallace family who reside in Churchton MD. Mr. Wallace explains the ongoing concern and lack of assistance he has received from AACPS:

The bus stop located on Deep Cove Road in Churchton, Maryland disappeared and was removed without any notification. The bus just simply stopped coming down Deep Cove Road where my children boarded the bus at the end of the driveway. I contacted Mr. Richard Wandres at the AACPS Department of Transportation. Mr. Wandres informed me that the bus would no longer be making a stop on Deep Cove Road due to the lack of students that were boarding the bus. However, my children are still available to board the bus on Deep Cove Road. I was informed that the bus stop was moved to an extremely dangerous location at the corner of Shady Side Road and Deep Cove Road. Mr. Wandres stated that he failed to update the information in the transportation database, and he has immediately added it after my phone calls and letters. This issue as of today 7/1/20 has not been resolved.

In exploring this proposition through an equity perspective, we considered how underrepresented groups will be affected by both the transportation appointments and the mental health positions. Reallocating the funding for transportation would negatively impact students and families in the Annapolis Cluster, magnet program students, homeless students, and students with special needs. Other children that would be influenced include those who already cope with exceptionally early bus departure times, long bus rides, overpopulated buses, and possess no alternative transportation to school. Students that reside in the Annapolis cluster have typically experienced unreliable bus services, and there is a significant portion of Magnet program, special needs, and homeless students that travel beyond their school district. These students encounter long bus rides which act as a further impediment to participation in

education. In addition to this, the number of homeless students is increasing under the COVID-19 recession resulting in more students being at risk of missing education because of unreliable physical access.

Based on the application of the Equity Lens, we conclude the following:

- Both transportation positions on one hand and the school counselor, school psychologist, and teacher specialist positions on the other have profound and severe equity implications.
- The equity impacts of not funding the transportation positions are potentially much broader and more severe than the equity impacts of not funding the school counselor, school psychologist, and teacher specialist positions.

We therefore ask the Anne Arundel County Council to take the following actions:

- Preserve the transportation position by rejecting the Board of Education amendment to transfer the funding to the school counselor, school psychologist, and teacher specialist positions.
- Find additional funding to restore the school counselor, school psychologist, and teacher specialist positions.

Please refer to the full version of our MABE Equity assessment below:

AA County NAACP's Application of the Maryland Association of Boards of Education (MABE) Equity Lens to the AACPS Budget Amendment to Transfer Funding from Transportation Positions to School Counselor and Mental Health Related Positions

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Anne Arundel County NAACP has applied the MABE Equity Lens to evaluate the equity impacts of the AACP Board of Education budget amendment to transfer \$745 million of Arundel County Council additional funding for transportation positions to school counselor, school psychologist, and teacher specialist for restorative justice positions instead. Details of our application of the MABE Equity Lens are listed below.

We recognize that different persons will see different impacts through the Equity Lens. With this summary and the associated testimonies, we share with the Board of Education, the Anne Arundel County Council, and the general public what we see through the Equity Lens.

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BACKGROUND

At the June 17, 2020 meeting of the Anne Arundel County Board of Education (BOE), the BOE voted to amend the FY2020 Operating Budget to transfer funding for seven (7) Full Time Equivalent (FTE) transportation positions to seven (7) mental-health related positions, specifically five (5) additional school counselors, one (1) additional school psychologist, and one (1) teacher specialist with specialization in restorative justice. This amendment is scheduled to come before the Anne Arundel County Council on July 6, 2020.

Anne Arundel County NAACP has asked the AACPS Board of Education to explicitly apply the MABE Equity Lens to all policy, regulation, and budget decisions. The Anne Arundel County NAACP has also committed to provide the Board of Education with our application of the MABE Equity Lens for issues on which we provide testimony.

The AA Co NAACP intends to provide written testimony to the Anne Arundel County Council and has commented publicly on the proposed budget amendment to transfer funding from transportation to mental-health related positions. We are therefore providing, in this document, the way the AA Co. NAACP saw through the MABE Equity Lens as we developed our recommendations, testimony, and position on the above issue.

Please note that several of the references we used in this analysis, especially the 2020 AACPS Transportation Services Comprehensive Evaluation by Prismatic Services and the Let's Talk Justice webcast, are programs that have already sought out and captured the community voice.

APPLICATION OF THE MABE EQUITY LENS

1. Who are the under-represented groups affected by this policy, program, practice, decision, or action? What are the potential impacts on these groups?

With respect to the transportation FTE positions, the unrepresented groups and the potential impacts on those groups include the following:

- Students and families in the Annapolis Cluster – the bus service is unreliable in this cluster in particular, placing an additional burden on already marginalized students and families.
- Magnet Program students who travel beyond their school district – the long bus rides act as a further impediment to participation in Magnet Programs for students who need AACPS transportation to get to the magnet school.
- Students already facing very early pickups, long bus rides, and overcrowding on busses – allowing these problems to continue, or to get worse under re-entry, will perpetuate and exacerbate a serious health problem.
- Any child who does not have a ride to school if the bus does not show up or is off schedule – these students may miss school if AACPS transportation is not available and reliable
- Homeless students – the disparate impact of the existing AACPS transportation program on homeless students is covered in the Prismatic report. The number of homeless students is increasing under the COVID-19 recession, and this means more students will be at risk of missing education because of unreliable physical access.
- Special needs students, who need special transportation and are sometimes transported outside the county for their education – this need is also addressed in the Prismatic report

With respect to school counselors, school psychologists, and the teacher specialist position, the unrepresented groups and the potential impacts on those groups include the following:

- Students who benefit from or need services provided by School Counselors and School Psychologists, including college and career advising, to get into the Centers of Applied Technology, magnet programs, etc. School counselors are critical in ensuring students are aware of and have full access to these opportunities.
- All students who need someone to recognize and sound an alarm when the student manifests mental or emotional mental health problems – School counselors and school psychologists are the go-to persons for those suffering and for their friends who are concerned about them.
- Children facing trauma as the result of the COVID crisis and intervening shutdown including students who are homeless and students who may have been subject to physical, emotional, and/or sexual abuse during the COVID shutdown. School counselors and school psychologists identify and refer these students for additional county services.

- Children with ethnic, cultural, racial, sexual differences specifically Black and Hispanic and LGBTQ+ youth who may require additional supports in light of recent national events.
- Children with social-emotional and behavioral challenges. School counselors provide important supports in social-emotional learning.
- Children with special needs including but not limited to autism, developmental delay, physical or mental disability, speech and language difficulties and vision/hearing difficulties. These children rely on the services of a school psychologist to determine eligibility for IEP or 504 accommodations under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).

2. Does this policy, program, practice, decision or action worsen existing disparities or produce other unintended consequences?

With respect to the transportation FTE positions, the unrepresented groups and the potential impacts on those groups include the following:

- We know from the Prismatic report that we have problems already, that the software can be used more effectively, and that we will need skilled staff to figure it out. Failure to address these problems now will likely worsen the disparities and even deprive some of the most vulnerable and marginal students from access to education.
- We can expect the transportation challenges to be greater with the likely modified school attendance issues, and we know the busses will be unsafely overcrowded at present usage (i.e., no social distancing). This deepens the inequities for those who are dependent on the school transportation system and again puts their health at greater risk.

With respect to school counselors, school psychologists, and the teacher specialist position, the unrepresented groups and the potential impacts on those groups include the following:

- There are indicators of increased student distress in AA County. Students have spoken of their desire for more school counselors and the impact on them of not having mental health access.
- These are racially charged times with increased traumatic exposure both personally and through social media and the news for all students and families perceived as “different” or inferior. This means we will need more support for students in this racially charged climate (students of color, LGBTQ+, and those suffering from homelessness and other economic traumas). Insufficient staffing to recognize and address those students who are suffering from these traumatic impacts means more student less able to engage positively in the educational process.
- Fewer children with emotional trauma would be identified and provided critical social emotional support and referrals to appropriate outside services. The impacts are the same as for the above bullet point.
- Fewer children with ethnic, racial or sexual differences would be provided services. Having more staff available to recognize and address those students who need such services means more students would be able to engage positively in the educational process.
- Students without appropriate social emotional supports are at increased risk of poor learning, behavioral problems, referrals to law enforcement, and suicide.
- Children with disabilities – Fewer school counselor means fewer children with disabilities would be provided appropriate services as specified under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).

3. How have you intentionally involved stakeholders who are also members of the communities affected by this policy, program, practice, decision, or action? Can you validate your assessments in #1 and #2, having considered this stakeholder reaction?

- We have reviewed the references cited below, which include input from the vulnerable populations. We have solicited stories from the community and talked with persons advocating one way or the other.
- The timing of the introduction of amendment proposal to the Board of Education combined with virtual meetings of the Board of Education precluded public input to the Board’s vote. Therefore, it is possible that many of the decision makers were making decisions informed by their own understanding and experience and the persons with whom they have contact, including those who proactively came to them. This eliminates those who have less access to information about the proposed changes and/or are otherwise less empowered (either in fact or in effect) from engagement with decision makers.

4. What are the barriers to more equitable outcomes (e.g., mandated, political, emotional, financial, programmatic, or managerial?)
- Lack of money (real, likely)
 - Fear (an emotion that may lead to hasty, reactionary decisions seeking to protect us from an unknown future)
 - Making the budget decisions before having a full sense of how those most affected will be impacted and what they want for themselves and their children.
 - Sense of urgency – is it mandatory these decisions be made right now? Too much is unknown about next year.
 - Not allowing time to find other funding sources is a barrier.
 - Treating this as a mental health vs transportation decision is a psychological/emotional barrier and may be putting us into opposition when there is a unified approach that supports both.
 - Looking at mental health vs transportation may be a false dichotomy given the impact of transportation on the physical and mental health of students and on their school opportunities and performance.
5. How will you (a) mitigate the negative impacts and (b) address the barriers identified above?
- Avoid the trade-off of FTEs from one set of positions to the other; reject the Board of Education amendment and seek additional funding for the school counselor, school psychologist, and teacher specialist for restorative justice positions.
 - Do a deeper data analysis of the impact of adding or losing FTEs in either set of positions, using current data (e.g., AACPS data on rise in suicidal actions and ideation, Anne Arundel County Mental Health Task Force recommendations of findings as available, and the 2020 AACPS Transportation Services Comprehensive Evaluation by Prismatic Services. Some of these resources allow evaluation of impact by community, which tracks closely with some of the unrepresented groups).

REFERENCES:

Maryland Association of Boards of Education Equity Lens Guidance

<https://www.mabe.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/2018-Equity-Lens-Card.pdf>

2020 AACPS Transportation Services Comprehensive Evaluation by Prismatic Services

<https://www.aacps.org/site/default.aspx?PageType=3&ModuleInstanceID=26201&ViewID=ed695a1c-ef13-4546-b4eb-4fefcdd4f389&RenderLoc=0&FlexDataID=53415&PageID=1408&Comments=true>

June 17, 2020 AACPS Board of Education Meeting (Transportation discussion from 1 hr 56-minute mark to the 4 hour 38 minute mark)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9cH2WU6Tohk&list=PL63heeIfctOvmiLEGOVLGnirscK9H2Dy&index=2&t=0s>

June 17, 2020 Let's Talk Justice AACPS Student Forum

<https://www.capitalgazette.com/education/ac-cn-anne-arundel-county-student-panel-20201606-20200617-qkney2ypx5da7bfadbqoem7zu-story.html> and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6UFTHeZu8WI>

June 18, 2020 Capital Gazette article on the School Board vote

<https://www.capitalgazette.com/education/ac-cn-school-board-budget-20201706-20200618-3bmdxr4hsbfvlnk14lrgp644-story.html>

June 24, 2020 Capital Gazette Op-Ed by District 6 School Board Candidate Joanna Tobin

<https://www.capitalgazette.com/opinion/columns/ac-ce-20200624-uxjknjppzvfnpdcqahain3cde-story.html>

Letter to the County Council from District 6 School Board Candidate India Ochs

<https://irp-cdn.multiscreensite.com/3929985c/files/uploaded/20200622.fundAACPStransportation.pdf?fbclid=IwAR2CSsvSisJ2W6-HxeEbzleqAKlxj2QR8z6ZewIP51E8tKMMbm4bDceiHbk>

June 27, 2020 Capital Gazette Op-Ed by Lisa Van Buskirk of Start Schools Later
<https://www.capitalgazette.com/opinion/columns/ac-ce-column-lisa-van-buskirk-20200627-24va3ehxqzcaxmvmwfxs6gz3vi-story.html>

Center for Disease Control (CDC) Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) Considerations for School Guidelines
<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/schools-childcare/schools.html>

AACPS Parent Fall Reopening Survey
<https://www.aacps.org/fall2020survey>

Revised MSDE Maryland Together: Maryland's Recovery Plan for Education
<http://marylandpublicschools.org/newsroom/Pages/COVID-19/PlanComment.aspx>

6/30/2020 MD Senate Education, Health and Environmental Committee briefing with State Superintendent Karen Salmon. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5dsq1XP6xbg>

^[1] The terms Transportation and Mental Health have been used as short-hand descriptions for the two categories of FTEs. The Transportation positions would include staffing to improve transportation in AACPS, including use of the transportation software and logistics issues to address bus schedules and routing. The term Mental Health refers specifically to five (5) School Counselor positions, one (1) School Psychologist position, and one (1) Teacher Specialist for Restorative Justice position.

^[2] The 2020 AACPS Transportation Services Comprehensive Evaluation by Prismatic Services served as one of the resources that the Anne Arundel County NAACP consulted in forming our position and preparing our testimony. The report highlighted the transportation systems impact on homeless and special needs children. NOTE: This and other references we used are cited at the end of this document.

^[3] Revised MSDE Maryland Together: Maryland's Recovery Plan for Education

^[4] June 17, 2020 Let's Talk Justice AACPS Student Forum

^[5] The Center for Disease Control (CDC) Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) Considerations for School Guidelines served as one of the resources that the Anne Arundel County NAACP consulted in forming our position and preparing our testimony. The guidelines provided recommendations on school bus safety tips for students and staff.

^[6] The AACPS Parent Fall Reopening Survey served as one of the resources that the Anne Arundel County NAACP consulted in forming our position and preparing our testimony. The survey included potential scheduling scenarios AACPS is offering in the upcoming school year.