



**ARLINGTON COUNTY  
SPORTS COMMISSION**  
2100 Clarendon Blvd., Suite 414  
Arlington, Virginia 22201



April 1, 2021

The Honorable Matt de Ferranti, Chair  
Arlington County Board  
2100 Clarendon Blvd.  
Arlington, VA 22201

Dear Mr. de Ferranti,

The Sports Commission is charged with advising the County Board about sports programming and access, including relevant equity concerns. We write at this time to express concern about the equity impact of potential cost-saving options in the Arlington Public Schools (APS) proposed FY 2022 budget.

The Superintendent proposed a \$704 million budget that includes a shortfall of \$42.5 million. The School Board directed the Superintendent to present options for revenue and reductions to meet the shortfall. The budget includes three tiers of options to meet the shortfall, with Tier 1 options being recommended first, followed by Tiers 2 and 3.

Several options would impact middle and high school student athletes and sports activity:

- A Tier 1 option would create a Pay-2-Play model whereby students at the middle and high school levels would incur fees for each sport in which he or she participated. A fee would be charged for the first athletic activity and steadily decline for each additional activity; reduced fees would be available for students with financial need. As an example, the budget shows high school fees starting at \$150 and middle school fees starting at \$75. (Revenue, estimated \$30,000)

While Pay-2-Play models are used in neighboring school jurisdictions, the Sports Commission is concerned that adding fees will create a barrier for Arlington's less advantaged students, for whom school sports are often the only avenue to athletic participation. Fees will likely not significantly impact students with financial means, who will continue to have access to both school and non-school sports.

- A Tier 2 option would eliminate middle school academic and athletic stipends, which fund afterschool activities and sports. If the athletic stipend is eliminated, middle school

students will no longer have access to free, organized sports activities. This option would also unfairly impact disadvantaged students. (Savings, estimated \$300,000)

- Paired with the above, another Tier 2 option would eliminate activity and late buses for middle and high school athletics. The budget notes that these buses are underutilized, and that eliminating them would save on fuel, equipment, and staff overtime hours. However, for disadvantaged students these buses are often the only form of transportation they have to support their participation in organized sports (Savings, estimated \$800,000)
- A third Tier 2 option would eliminate funds for additional coaches to support no-cut sports (track, swim, cross country, ultimate). This would require schools to restrict student participation to the numbers that can be served with existing coaching staff. This funding cut would negatively impact less athletically talented students, blocking what may be their only physical activity and restricting healthy interactions with friends and classmates. (Savings, estimated \$20,000)

Alone or combined, these options would dramatically reduce if not entirely eliminate access to sports activity for (1) all middle school students; (2) middle and high school students who lack financial and transportation resources; and (3) middle and high school students who rely on the no-cut sports to participate in an organized physical activity after school.

While these cuts would not take effect until FY 2022, the Sports Commission is disheartened to see any funding options that, following a year or more of pandemic-induced isolation, would restrict student access to activities that help them stay physically active and bond with their fellow students. Indeed, as the Washington Post reported in December 2020, psychologists, coaches, parents, and other researchers have raised alarms about increased anxiety, depression, and even suicide among student athletes who have been prevented by the pandemic from engaging in the athletic activities that are so essential to their identity and mental and emotional well-being.<sup>1</sup>

Moreover, the proposed options would disproportionately impact disadvantaged youth in our community. Over the past several years, the Sports Commission has reached out to individuals and organizations that provide sports activities for underserved communities. All have stressed that one key component of reaching the children who participate in lower numbers is to provide the activity at the school. This solves the logistics of transportation, which is a barrier for many families. There are reports of health concerns for children gaining weight due to lack of exercise and children falling behind on social developments without the ability for group gatherings during the COVID pandemic. Cutting middle school sports will not have much impact on families and children with the means and abilities to find other ways to participate in

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<sup>1</sup> Stubbs, Roman. "A Hidden Crisis: As teen suicides rock local sports communities, concerns grow over athletes' mental health." The Washington Post, 16 Dec. 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/sports/2020/12/16/teen-athletes-suicide/>.

sports, such as joining a club team or playing in the county programs. However, the impact will fall on students who don't have transportation or face other barriers to participation, and these are the students most likely already suffering the most due to the COVID pandemic, school closures, and lockdowns.

The Commission recognizes the complexities associated with developing the APS budget and addressing a \$42 million shortfall. However, given the issues we raise in this letter, we recommend that the County Board closely scrutinize the proposed cuts that would adversely affect student athletes and ask the School Board and the Superintendent to make every effort to preserve students' access to athletic activities.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Shirley Brothwell".

Shirley Brothwell, Chair  
Sports Commission

Cc: Arlington County Board  
Mark Schwartz, County Manager  
Jane Rudolph, Director, Department of Parks and Recreation