ACTL Early Childhood Subcommittee
January 2026 School Board Recommendation

Recommendation: Align tuition across APS early childhood programs by adopting the Community Peer PreK (CPP) tuition formula for Primary Montessori. Currently, all Primary Montessori three-year-olds without disabilities, and four-year-olds without disabilities whose gross household incomes exceed 80% of the Arlington County median income ($131,120 for a family of four) pay tuition based on a sliding scale (Table 1). To promote equity across APS early childhood programs, increase access, and reduce the financial burden on families, we recommend adopting the CPP tuition formula for Primary Montessori: (Family gross income × 0.05) ÷ number of children enrolled in fee-based child care, with a maximum annual tuition of $12,500.

Alignment to Strategic Plan
Priority: Student Academic Growth and Success
Performance Objective: Inclusion
Strategies: APS data and research suggest that expanding early childhood program participation among APS students is a key strategy for reducing achievement gaps that appear by kindergarten and continue across the school years.
Key Performance Indicators: Virginia Kindergarten Readiness Program (VKRP- Math, Social Skills, Self-Regulation), Virginia Language and Literacy Screening System (VALLSS), NWEA MAP Growth Reading and Math

Summary
In 2025, this committee recommended revising the APS early childhood tuition scale to more closely align with the US Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) early childhood program affordability benchmark of no more than 7% of family income. At that time, some APS families were paying twice—or more—than this benchmark. The existing tuition scale was also regressive, with higher-income families paying a smaller percentage of their income than lower-income families.

In response, APS revised the tuition structure for CPP students without disabilities beginning in the 2025–2026 school year (students with disabilities do not pay). This formula recognizes the additional expenses families incur outside of school (before- and after-care, school holidays, summer programming), as well as the financial burden of having more than one child in fee-based care in Arlington.

While CPP fees were revised, the Primary Montessori tuition structure was not updated. In fact, for the 2025–2026 school year, Primary Montessori tuition increased across all income brackets. Some lower-income families continue to pay over twice the level considered affordable, and the tuition scale remains regressive (Table 1). Aligning Primary Montessori with the CPP tuition formula would address these inequities and ensure consistency across APS early childhood programs.

Budgetary Implications

Due to variations in income levels and disability status among enrolled students, total Primary Montessori tuition revenue fluctuates year to year, generally ranging from $700,000 to $1,000,000 (This year, APS is charging tuition for 80 three-year-old and 34 four-year-old Primary Montessori students). Adopting the CPP formula will likely reduce both APS revenue and tuition paid by families. For comparison, in SY2024-25 when using the sliding scale, APS charged 62 CPP families a total of $634,722.50 with an average of $10,237.46 per child. In SY25-26, with the new tuition formula, 80 paying families were charged a total of $441,556.70 with an average of $5,519.45 per child.

Although changes in fee structures may decrease revenue, APS must weigh this short-term loss against the long-term costs of providing formal interventions for students without early childhood program experience. According to multiple measures (VKRP, VALLS, NWEA MAP Reading and Math), children with early childhood program experience enter school better prepared to access APS's kindergarten curriculum. Expanding access to early learning is an important strategy to decrease early achievement gaps and limit the need for costly interventions in the future.

Committee vote: 5 in favor, 0 opposed **Date: 1/7/2026**

Detail

Early Childhood Affordability Crisis in Arlington

Arlington is among the most expensive communities in the nation for early childhood programs, leading many families—both current residents and those considering relocation—to question the feasibility of raising young children in the county (Arlington Chamber of Commerce, 2025; Pipe, 2025). While APS provides only a portion of local offerings, it plays a critical role in early learning access, particularly for the county's most vulnerable families. Adjusting the Primary Montessori tuition structure presents APS with an opportunity to improve affordability and strengthen early learning access for Arlington families.

To assess the affordability of APS early childhood programs, the committee compared APS tuition rates to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) affordability guideline, which defines early childhood programs as affordable when a family's out-of-pocket cost does not exceed seven percent of household income (Arlington Public Schools, 2025c). Under this standard, only two of the 21 APS Primary Montessori income brackets meet the affordability threshold (Table 1). Families earning between $67,001 and $82,000 pay tuition that exceeds 19 percent of their income—nearly three times the level considered affordable. Moreover, the tuition structure is regressive. For instance, families earning over $200,001 pay 10.7 percent of their income in tuition, compared to 14 percent for families earning $46,000 to $51,000. Compounding these inequities, tuition increased across all income levels this year.

Anecdotal reports indicate that families earning less than 80 percent of median income with three-year-olds struggle the most to afford APS fees, as the total cost of enrollment—including before-, after-, holiday, and summer care, as well as transportation—can be prohibitively expensive and logistically burdensome. While data on why families did or did not apply or enroll in Primary Montessori are limited, applicant patterns suggest affordability may be a factor: there were fewer applicants from families earning above 80 percent of median income (n=177) than from those at or below 80 percent (n=239). Of the 45 families who registered but did not enroll, seven cited affordability as the reason, three enrolled in Virginia Preschool Initiative (a program for low-income families), and the remaining reasons are unknown.

Table 1

Primary Montessori Annual Tuition Fees for School Year 2025-2026

Adjusted Gross Family Income	Annual Fee ($)	Percentage of Income (Lowest Income in Range)
No income to $24,000	1,097	5.0% (highest income in range)
$24,001 - $27,000	1,495	6.2%
$27,001 - $30,000	1,940	7.2%
$30,001 - $33,000	2,572	8.6%
$33,001 - $37,000	3,281	9.9%
$37,001 - $41,000	4,214	11.4%
$41,001 - $46,000	5,264	12.8%
$46,001 - $51,000	6,431	14%
$51,001 - $57,000	7,715	15.1%
$57,001 - $62,000	9,311	16.3%
$62,001 - $67,000	11,047	17.8%
$67,001 - $72,000	12,929	19.3%
$72,001 - $77,000	13,846	19.2%
$77,001 - $82,000	14,829	19.3%
$82,001 - $96,000	14,899	18.2%
$96,001 - $110,000	15,041	15.7%
$110,001 - $125,000	16,163	14.7%
$125,001 - $150,000	17,363	13.9%
$150,001 - $175,000	18,646	12.4%
$175,001 - $200,000	20,016	11.4%
$200,001 and up	21,480	10.7%

APS Kindergarten Achievement Gap

Early Childhood Program (Pre-K) Access

APS data highlight which students have had access to early learning opportunities across the district (Arlington Public Schools, 2025b). For the 2025–2026 APS kindergarten cohort, Pre-K experience—whether in an APS or community-based program—varies notably across student groups and schools:

- **Pre-K Experience:** 11.7 percent of students entered kindergarten without any Pre-K experience, a welcome decrease from 15 percent in 2024–2025 (Table 2).
- **School Location:** Pre-K participation varies widely by elementary school. For example, 30% of kindergarteners at Hoffman-Boston (South Arlington) have no Pre-K experience, while 100% of kindergarteners at Tuckahoe (North Arlington) participated in Pre-K programs. Notably, four of the seven Title I elementary schools have more than 18 percent of kindergarten students with no Pre-K experience (Table 2).
- **Race and Ethnicity:** Nearly one-quarter of Hispanic kindergarteners (22.8%) and 17.7% of Asian kindergarteners entered APS without Pre-K experience, compared to just 4.7 percent of White students (Table 3).

Table 2

Kindergarten Student Pre-K Experience Data 2025-26

Enrolled School	Head Start	Public Preschool	Private Preschool/Daycare	Department of Defense Child Development Program	Family Home Daycare	Unknown	No Preschool Experience	Total	Percentage
Abingdon	5	37	28		1		25	96	26.0%
ASF	1	16	51	1			8	77	10.4%
Ashlawn		22	41				5	68	7.4%
ATS	4	42	42	1	1		6	96	6.3%
Barcroft		26	15	1			11	53	20.8%
Barrett	6	40	7				5	58	8.6%
Campbell	1	34	29				3	67	4.5%
Cardinal	1	9	86		1		1	98	1.0%
Carlin Springs	1	35	2				16	54	29.6%
Claremont	3	50	38				4	95	4.2%
Discovery	1	18	38					57	0.0%
Drew	1	35	6				10	52	19.2%
Escuela Key		31	40	1			25	97	25.8%
Fleet	3	69	15	8			3	98	3.1%
Glebe	1	27	50				8	86	9.3%
Hoffman-Boston	1	48	14				27	90	30.0%
Innovation	1	32	35				8	76	10.5%
Jamestown		7	44				3	54	5.6%
Long Branch	1	23	37				11	72	15.3%
Montessori PSA		53	4				4	61	6.6%
Nottingham		10	30	1			2	43	4.7%
Oakridge	6	23	34		1	1	15	80	18.8%
Randolph	2	37	16			1	13	69	18.8%
Taylor	1	15	54		1		3	74	4.1%
Tuckahoe		25	53					78	0.0%
Kindergarten Total	**40**	**764**	**809**	**13**	**5**	**2**	**216**	**1,849**	**11.7%**

Table 3

Kindergarten and First Grade Students by Pre-K Experience and Race/Ethnicity

Grade	Ethnicity (Strategic Plan)	Has Pre-K Experience		No Pre-K Experience		Unknown		Total Students
		Number of Students	Percent of Students	Count of Student ID	Count of Student ID2	Count of Student ID	Count of Student ID2	
Kindergarten	Asian	157	81.8%	34	17.7%	1	0.5%	192
	Black	168	91.3%	16	8.7%		0.0%	184
	Hispanic	420	77.2%	124	22.8%		0.0%	544
	Other	153	95.6%	6	3.8%	1	0.6%	160
	White	733	95.3%	36	4.7%		0.0%	769
	Kindergarten Total	**1,631**	**88.2%**	**216**	**11.7%**	**2**	**0.1%**	**1,849**
Grade 1	Asian	154	77.8%	25	12.6%	19	9.6%	198
	Black	206	82.7%	19	7.6%	24	9.6%	249
	Hispanic	410	70.6%	131	22.5%	40	6.9%	581
	Other	150	78.5%	17	8.9%	24	12.6%	191
	White	690	84.2%	47	5.7%	82	10.0%	819
	Grade 1 Total	**1,610**	**79.0%**	**239**	**11.7%**	**189**	**9.3%**	**2,038**
K-1	Asian	311	79.7%	59	15.1%	20	5.1%	390
	Black	374	86.4%	35	8.1%	24	5.5%	433
	Hispanic	830	73.8%	255	22.7%	40	3.6%	1,125
	Other	303	86.3%	23	6.6%	25	7.1%	351
	White	1,423	89.6%	83	5.2%	82	5.2%	1,588
	K-1 Total	**3,241**	**83.4%**	**455**	**11.7%**	**191**	**4.9%**	**3,887**

Achievement Trends

Trends in APS data align with findings across the county, showing that while the achievement gap evident at kindergarten entry narrows slightly over time, it persists through third grade and beyond, with lasting implications for academic success (Hutton & Allen, 2023). Student performance data from 2025–2026 suggests that Pre-K enrollment may be positively associated with student achievement (Arlington Public Schools, 2025a). Across multiple assessments, students without Pre-K experience generally demonstrate lower performance in math, literacy, and self-regulation compared to students with Pre-K experience. Data on Pre-K experience for students in first grade and above are incomplete; therefore, an "unknown" category is included in the data.

Kindergarten

- **VKRP:** Kindergarteners without Pre-K experience were more likely to score below benchmark—and less likely to score above benchmark—across self-regulation, math, and social skills. The largest difference was in math: 41.3% of students without Pre-K scored below benchmark, compared to 8.7% of students with Pre-K experience.
- **VALLSS:** Among kindergarteners without Pre-K experience, 48% were identified as high risk for literacy and language, compared to 13% of students with Pre-K experience.

Early Elementary

- **VALLSS (Grade 2):** Among current second graders, 35.8% of students without Pre-K experience were identified as high risk for literacy and language, compared to 16.3% of students with Pre-K experience.
- **NWEA MAP Growth – Math (Grade 3):** Among third graders, 17.1% of students without Pre-K experience demonstrated low proficiency in math, compared to 8.3% of students with Pre-K experience. For students with high proficiency, 45.6% of students had Pre-K experience, compared to 31.4% of students without Pre-K experience.
- **NWEA MAP Growth – Reading (Grade 3):** Among third graders, 26.4% of students without Pre-K experience demonstrated low proficiency in reading, compared to 12.4% of students with Pre-K experience. At the highest performance level, 39.1% of students had Pre-K experience, compared to 22.1% of students without Pre-K experience.

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