Stakeholder Feedback Synthesis

ACPS Strategic Plan Draft February 2025

Feedback Summary

Overall, stakeholders engaged through focus groups and the feedback form expressed appreciation and positive energy around the direction of the strategic plan priorities. As discussed more in each goal area, they also had specific ideas about what should be prioritized and how the division could address specific gaps in its current approach.

Creating a safe, welcoming, and inclusive school environment is essential to fostering student success. Feedback highlights the need for a cohesive approach that addresses safety, social-emotional wellness, and community involvement. Students expressed concerns about impersonal security protocols that make the school feel like a factory rather than a community. They want meaningful relationships with teachers and staff, more staff presence in hallways and lunchrooms, and unbiased disciplinary measures. Parents of younger students generally feel positive about school culture, but high school parents worry about physical safety, large school sizes, and a loss of individualized attention.

Staff and students both pointed out challenges in social-emotional learning (SEL) implementation. SEAL time is inconsistently integrated, often repeating lessons that do not engage older students. Staff emphasized the need for clear and supportive leadership, with opportunities to provide feedback on administrators without fear of retaliation. Teachers feel overwhelmed with meetings and administrative tasks, leaving little time for planning. There are concerns about discipline, safety, and ineffective weapons abatement programs, highlighting the need for a different approach to ensuring students feel safe. Family engagement remains inconsistent, with barriers for non-English-speaking families and limited opportunities for direct parent-teacher relationships in some schools.

Students seek more engaging, interactive, and flexible learning experiences with hands-on activities, discussion-based learning, and real-world applications. They feel disengaged when lessons rely heavily on technology or lack personalization. Parents and staff echoed concerns about curriculum quality, advocating for rigorous but developmentally appropriate instruction with less screen time. Teachers need professional development that is relevant and differentiated by experience level, with more peer coaching and mentorship. Staff capacity challenges in SPED and counseling impact student support, and large class sizes make individualized instruction difficult. Investing in teacher retention through competitive salaries, structured mentorship programs, and clear career growth opportunities is critical.

Improving communication and trust between ACPS leadership, staff, and families is a recurring theme. Parents feel disconnected from district leadership and call for more transparency and engagement. They want meaningful dialogue, fewer bureaucratic obstacles, and clearer, more concise communication. Staff and families suggest stronger partnerships with community organizations and local universities to recruit diverse educators and improve retention. Ensuring that leadership listens to feedback and prioritizes the well-being of students, teachers, and families will be key to fostering a more inclusive and effective learning environment.

Goal-Specific Feedback

Create a safe, caring, and inclusive school environment where students feel connected, supported, and respected.

Feedback calls for a cohesive goal that addresses safety, social-emotional wellness, and inclusive community involvement to create a nurturing educational environment.

Student focus groups:

Overall, students want a caring environment where their voices are heard and they receive meaningful feedback. Some specific notes related to this goal:

- More personalized/less impersonal school environment - security protocols currently make school feel like a "factory," not a community - e.g. having to show their schedule & passes, interfering with movement.
- Relationships with adults: Students appreciate authentic efforts to engage, but sometimes feel pressure and prefer simple, non-intrusive greetings. Students do want teachers to connect personally, understanding their individual aspirations.
- Students want more staff presence in hallways & lunchrooms, and particularly noted safety concerns in bathrooms like physical altercations and vaping. Students want staff to be unbiased, handling disciplinary issues individually 1-1 with students.

Family focus groups:

- Parents of elementary school students generally had a positive impression of school culture and safety. However, there can be stark differences between buildings, as one parent shared her experience transferring schools mid-year. She noted that at her child's former school, staff seemed eager to provide her with resources to support her child's learning. *"I felt like every teacher there believed in each and every student, they gave them that motivation and push."* At her new school, she said she has still not been welcome to develop a relationship with her child's teacher and the only forum for parent engagement seems to be through the PTA.
- Parents of high school students particularly expressed concern about physical safety - both teachers and students are "scared" in the high school, and have anxiety about attending.
- There is a sense that the high school and GW middle school are too large. Regarding the closure of the high school following violence this winter, a parent wondered, *"Closing the school for 5,000 students was the only option? That was really tough and punitive for kids who just want to go to class."*
- Parents perceive that the impact of the sizes of these schools is a loss of individualization of relationships and caring for their students. *"Middle school seems to be when all the students are treated more like statistics than individuals... the MS administrators make a huge effort, but it seems like the numbers are stacked against them."*

Staff Focus Groups:

- Staff particularly noted that SEAL time is not well-implemented. It is not fully integrated & embedded, and lessons repeat - for example, 8th graders have already seen the lessons for the past two years and find some of the lessons "baby-ish" as they are geared toward 6th grade. *"The students who need [SEAL] are often not on the receiving end when it's only offered in the mornings when they are still not at school. It could be a great initiative if well-executed."*
- Administrators should spend more time in classrooms to improve school climate and culture.
- Staff discussed a need for better family partnerships, especially in secondary schools. Parents often exert strong influence over district policies, sometimes pushing back on rules like cell phone policies. Early childhood programs emphasize home visits and neighborhood engagement.

Feedback Form Responses:

- **Safety and Discipline**:
    - Concerns: Safety, with specific references to disruptive students and the need for better enforcement of disciplinary measures.
    - More security personnel and accountability for security personnel to ensure a safer school environment.
    - Concern: inefficacy of weapons abatement programs and their impact on the school climate.
- **Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) and Support Systems**:
    - Enhance SEL by providing ongoing training for educators and incorporating SEL into the curriculum. Suggestions included having qualified experts deliver SEL programs and providing specific SEL lessons tailored to classroom needs.
    - More counselors and mental health professionals. The current ratio of social workers to students is inadequate.
- **Family and Community Engagement**:
    - Need for greater family and community involvement, schools should implement targeted engagement efforts to reach all families, including those who are not native English speakers.
    - More community events and partnerships with community leaders to foster a supportive and inclusive school culture.
    - Better communication between the school district and families to enhance engagement, transparency/trust, and collaboration.

Engage and challenge each student, every day to achieve academic excellence.

Students want a more engaging, interactive, and flexible learning experience, emphasizing hands-on activities, personalized learning, and supportive teacher-student relationships, while also advocating for manageable workloads and meaningful assignments. Parents appreciate teacher engagement but note inconsistencies across schools, while staff stress the need for a balanced curriculum with less reliance on technology, rigorous academic standards, and differentiation to support all learners. Additionally, feedback highlights the importance of reducing school sizes, improving teacher support through professional

development, and ensuring a safe, well-resourced learning environment with real-world learning opportunities.

Student Focus Groups:

Overall, students are looking for a more dynamic, supportive, and interactive educational experience, with a strong emphasis on personalized learning and engagement both inside and outside the classroom. They say they learn best from teachers who are authentically interested and engaged with the content, and who seem to care about relationships with their students.

- **Interactive Learning**: Group projects, discussion-based learning, hands-on activities, games, and science experiments to make classes more interesting and fun. Students feel more challenged and engaged when they have the opportunity to choose their topics, as seen in events like the National History Day competition and Science fairs.
- Students discussed the pace of learning sometimes being too fast (especially in advanced courses) and the expectation to understand content immediately as being overwhelming.
- Large homework packets, particularly over breaks, and learning tools like Zearn and DreamBox that don't feel aligned with classwork contribute to disengagement. **Assignments should be meaningful and manageable to maintain student interest.**
- **Flexible Learning Environment**: More flexibility in the school schedule, particularly for online classes
- Internships & leadership clubs are valuable opportunities for students to explore their own path. Similarly, students appreciate after-school activities, clubs, and programs.
- **Rewards and Motivation**: The idea of using rewards, such as prizes and incentives like Kahoot, to excite and motivate students is popular among participants.
- **Teacher and Counselor Support**: Classes where teachers are energetic, engaging and can break down complex topics are more effective
    - Students suggested that teaching assistants could expand teacher capacity to personalize learning
    - Teachers should be more interested in the coursework and less self-centered/lecture-focused
    - Students feel disengaged when teachers show a lack of care, particularly through actions like not grading work, relying solely on worksheets, or displaying favoritism.
    - Teachers could provide 1-1 feedback conversations rather than relying on email or suggestion boxes to ensure student learning needs are being met
    - Counselors should actively encourage students, particularly students of color, to take higher-level classes and support immigrant students in learning English.

Family Focus Groups:

- Parents of older students feel that their children are very well prepared for college - and attribute some of that to teacher engagement.
- Parents expressed that teacher engagement is classroom and school-dependent. *“Some are very willing to bend over backwards to help my kids out, others less so.”*

Staff Focus Groups:

- Staff flagged that SPED services are particularly in need of improvement. Short 15-minute blocks for SPED services *"feels like more of a check the box than delivery of services."* Collaboration between SPED and general education teachers, and SPED Instructional Assistants would improve student support. For example, SPED instructional assistants being part of IEP meetings would improve service delivery, as some students receive services only from the instructional assistant.
- Staff feel they have little input in PD selection, often finding sessions repetitive or irrelevant. Many trainings seem to be about "checking a box" rather than offering valuable support. Teachers want the ability to opt out or tailor PD to their needs, especially new vs. experienced educators. Educators gave two examples of PD they had found immediately applicable; otherwise they described leaving sessions feeling frustrated, demoralized & overwhelmed. The two examples they gave of useful, applicable PD:
    - "Talk/Retalk/Write" - ELA session with a very clear application, "I left the session immediately ready to put it into my lesson plan."
    - High school teacher showing Middle school teachers how to infuse AP English strategies earlier in MS classes - this was also immediately applicable.
- Instructional coaches are frequently pulled to cover classes due to staffing shortages, limiting their ability to provide coaching. Some schools successfully integrate coaches into Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), but others struggle. Curriculum implementation is inconsistent, with schools sometimes purchasing incomplete materials, leaving teachers to fill gaps.
- Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) and Collaborative Learning Teams (CLTs) function differently across schools, with varying structures and effectiveness. Some prioritize planning and student connections, while others lack clear purpose. Teachers stress the importance of having input into how PLC time is used.

Feedback Form Responses:

Feedback focused on the need for a **balanced approach** that combines **rigorous academic standards** with **supportive, well-resourced teaching environments** that can **address the diverse needs of all students.**

- **Curriculum and Instructional Practices:**
    - Need for a more content-rich and rigorous curriculum that is developmentally appropriate, especially at the elementary level.
    - Less reliance on technology and screens, more hands-on, interactive, and project-based learning opportunities. For example, one comment suggested, *"Train all teachers to teach without relying on just technology as the fastest method to teach."*
    - Differentiation to cater to varied student abilities, both to challenge high achievers and support students who need additional support.
    - Overall, feedback agreed with the need to ensure materials are culturally relevant, however folks flagged that this must come along with adequate professional development for effective implementation (per below).

- **Support for Teachers and Professional Development:**
    - Invest in teachers through professional development, emphasizing the need for continuous improvement and support for educators. Respondents suggested more partnerships with colleges for teacher development.
    - Instructional coaches: create systems to allow for focus more on coaching rather than administrative tasks.
    - There was a concern about teachers being overburdened with administrative tasks, which could impact their ability to engage effectively with students.
- **Classroom Environment and School Structure:**
    - Reduce class sizes and school sizes to facilitate more individual attention for students. Smaller classes were seen as essential for effectively engaging and challenging students daily.
    - Safety and discipline in schools: more security to ensure a safe learning environment. Need for accountability and consistency in behavior management within and across schools.
    - Enhancing real-world learning experiences, such as field trips, and improving the overall school environment to make it more conducive to learning.

Recruit, develop, and retain a diverse team of talented professionals by fostering a supportive and growth-oriented workplace.

Staff expressed concerns about inadequate support staffing in middle and high schools, particularly a lack of counselors and social workers to assist students. They emphasized that staffing allocations should be based on specific school needs rather than an equal distribution model. Staff also called for extending new teacher orientation, providing clearer career growth pathways, and addressing salary disparities to retain experienced educators. There is a need for strong, responsive leadership, with more transparency and communication from central office administrators. Professional development should be purposeful and differentiated, with greater opportunities for peer coaching and mentorship.

Staff Focus Groups:

- Staffing is inadequate. In the Middle & High schools, there are not adequate support staff (like counselors and social workers) to help students navigate their choices and communicate with families. Given this gap, the district could support teachers to address low-level mental health needs, which currently feels like “extra” work for overwhelmed teachers.
- Staffing is inequitable - staff perceive that budgeting and support staff placement is “equal” but not equitable and based on the needs of specific populations of a building.
- Staff suggest strengthening partnerships with local universities (GMU, GWU, HBCUs) for recruitment and internships. Diversify recruitment teams by including educators, not just HR, to provide classroom insights. Address barriers like reimbursement for travel costs. More structured mentorship programs, including ACPS-wide cohorts, would help new teachers feel supported and encourage retention.
- Staff flagged the need for better support for new educators. Extend new teacher orientation into a year-long experience, fostering a sense of community. Create an ongoing Canvas course with supportive resources (not additional expectations). Provide clearer career growth pathways, emphasizing opportunities for free and paid PD, grad school cohorts, and leadership roles.

- Address missed salary steps to ensure veteran teachers feel valued. Tackle disparities in class sizes and caseloads across schools, especially in SPED and co-taught/EL classes. More funding is needed to hire and retain high-quality staff, particularly in high-demand areas like science and special education.
- Teachers want strong, responsive leadership at both the school and district levels. Some administrators provide great support, but central office communication is inconsistent, leading to frustration when new initiatives are unclear. Teachers desire more transparency and opportunities to give feedback. Staff discussed inconsistency in leadership expectations across buildings, with some schools reporting micromanagement and lack of administrative support. Teachers need a way to provide evaluative feedback on school leadership without fear of retaliation.
- PD should be purposeful, relevant, and differentiated based on experience levels. More peer coaching and mentorship opportunities would help teachers learn from one another.

Feedback Form Responses:

Feedback reflects a shared concern for **improving teacher retention** through **better compensation, structured support systems, and a commitment to diversity and inclusion** within the ACPS staffing strategy.

- **Competitive Compensation and Benefits**
    - Offer competitive salaries and benefits to attract and retain teachers, especially compared to compensation offered by neighboring districts like Arlington and Fairfax.
    - Restoring steps and ensuring consistent cost-of-living adjustments (COLA) to reward and retain existing staff.
- **Enhanced Onboarding/Orientation and Support Systems**
    - Improve onboarding/orientation processes and provide ongoing support for new and existing staff.
    - Develop mentorship programs, increase planning time. Create a structured support system similar to Fairfax's "Great Beginnings" program.
- **Focus on Diversity and Inclusion**
    - Hire a diverse teaching staff that reflects the student population.
    - Cultivate partnerships with universities, including HBCUs, to recruit diverse candidates.
    - Ensure that recruitment processes prioritize skill and experience while promoting diversity and inclusiveness.

Cultivate trust by engaging and communicating clearly with our community to achieve our vision.

Families feel a disconnect between central office leadership and daily school operations, citing a lack of transparency, genuine engagement, and clear communication. Many believe equity and accountability goals are not being met, with leadership relying on buzzwords rather than addressing systemic issues. To improve trust, families suggest streamlining communication, establishing regular forums for dialogue, and fostering stronger partnerships with community organizations to ensure all voices, especially marginalized groups, are heard.

Family Focus Groups:

- Parents expressed feeling a significant disconnect between central office leadership and the realities of daily school operations, with concerns about transparency, community engagement, and responsiveness to parents and school staff.
- Accountability and equity goals feel out of reach, with leadership often perceived as using buzzwords and public relations tactics rather than addressing systemic issues directly.
- There is a need for more direct engagement from administrators, better communication with families and messaging that is more streamlined - the number of messages at different levels (district, school, classroom) can be overwhelming and sometimes are irrelevant, making it hard to know what the important information is for an individual.

Feedback Form Responses:

- **Need for Genuine Engagement and Transparency**:
    - Genuine engagement with the community; frustration over feeling ignored or unheard. "*Stop having meetings and surveying the community if you're just going to ignore us."*
    - Concern that decision-making processes are not transparent (the division does not share enough details about the "why" behind decisions) and that "open-door" policies for staff are in-name-only.
    - Suggestions include establishing regular forums for dialogue and ensuring that decision-making processes are transparent and inclusive. There is a call for ACPS to *"actually listen to parent and community feedback instead of treating them like the enemy."*
- **Improving Communication Channels and Practices**:
    - Concerns with current communication methods: overload of messages and the ineffective use of platforms. For instance, one respondent suggests streamlining communications and providing clear, consistent information. Another highlights the need for communications to be "timely and accessible," using multiple platforms like emails, newsletters, and in-person updates.
    - Specific recommendations included ensuring simple, streamlined website navigation, providing clear and concise communications, and ensuring that all voices, especially those from marginalized groups, are heard.
- **Building Trust and Partnerships within the Community**:
    - Build stronger partnerships between ACPS and the broader community, including local organizations and non-parent residents.
    - Actively collaborate with community members, with one suggestion to "partner with community groups that represent all our students." Another recommendation is to hold community events that foster inclusivity and engagement, ensuring that all demographics are actively involved.