

MEMORANDUM

To: Mayor Alyia Gaskins and Alexandria City Council

From: Alexandria City School Board

Via: Dr. Michelle Rief, Chair

Date: May 18, 2026

Subject: Request for Ad Hoc Committee on School Board Election Reform

Purpose

The Alexandria City School Board writes to request the formation of an ad hoc committee to develop a recommendation and timeline to implement the Board's November 7, 2024, [Resolution to Adjust the Alexandria City School Board Election Cycle](#) and initiate a City Charter amendment consistent with that resolution. Specifically, the Board seeks Council's partnership in advancing a charter revision by fall 2026, so that it may be considered during the 2027 General Assembly session.

We approach this request in a spirit of collaboration and shared responsibility for ensuring the stable and effective governance of Alexandria City Public Schools (ACPS). The Board recognizes that any change to the City Charter carries significant civic and political responsibility, and we make this request with respect for Council's role as steward of that process.

Background and Rationale

For several years—and across multiple Boards—the School Board has examined whether its election structure best supports continuity of leadership, effective oversight, and long-term student success. This work culminated in the Board's unanimous adoption of a resolution requesting two targeted changes to the City Charter:

- Transition School Board member terms from three years to four years; and
- Transition from concurrent elections to staggered terms, with one member from each district elected annually.

The Board's interest in this issue is well documented. As outlined in prior resolutions, work sessions, public engagement efforts, and supporting materials, ACPS has experienced unusually high turnover under its current structure. Since 1997, School Board elections have resulted in an average turnover of five members per cycle, including the January 2022 transition in which six of nine seats changed hands.

This pattern is not incidental. Under a nine-member board with concurrent three-year terms, wholesale turnover is not an anomaly but a predictable outcome. Analyses prepared for the Board demonstrate that the current structure produces a greater than 60 percent probability of majority Board turnover in a single election. This risk is substantially reduced under staggered term models.

This timing matters. ACPS is currently in a critical period with major instructional and operational initiatives underway to improve math achievement, graduation outcomes, attendance, and services for English learners and students with disabilities. These efforts require sustained leadership and policy coherence over multiple years to be effective. Another wholesale governance reset before these initiatives can reasonably demonstrate results would place those investments—and the students they are intended to serve—at unnecessary risk.

Alignment with Best Practices and Virginia Peers

The Board's request reflects widely accepted governance best practices and would bring Alexandria into alignment with the overwhelming majority of Virginia school divisions:

- Approximately 90 percent of Virginia school boards serve four-year terms; and
- Roughly two-thirds operate under staggered election cycles, including Arlington, Falls Church, Harrisonburg, Manassas, Loudoun, and Winchester.

Notably, ACPS is the only comparable Virginia division that retains concurrent three-year terms. Peer districts serving similarly diverse student populations—including those with high English learner enrollment—demonstrate that staggered terms support leadership continuity while preserving democratic accountability.

Among Alexandria's peers, the distinguishing factor is not geography or diversity, but timing. Comparable districts either stagger elections, use longer terms, or both. ACPS's combination of nine members, multi-member districts, and concurrent three-year elections is unusual and uniquely amplifies the risk of large-scale governance turnover in a single cycle.

The Board also notes that Alexandria itself has historical precedent for staggered terms: [archival records show that the City's first nine-member School Board, established in 1970, was initially appointed to staggered terms.](#) The proposed reform represents a return to a governance structure that has previously served the City well.

Equity, Stability, and Representation

ACPS serves one of the most diverse student populations in the Commonwealth, including a high proportion of English learners and economically disadvantaged students. Research consistently shows that sustained leadership and policy continuity—over a period of five or more years—are necessary for meaningful improvements in student achievement, particularly for historically underserved groups.

For students who require multi-year instructional supports—such as English learners, students with disabilities, and students experiencing economic disadvantage—governance disruption often manifests as delayed program implementation, shifting priorities, pauses in professional development, or changes in leadership expectations for schools. These disruptions compound over time and can widen opportunity gaps.

Staggered terms help mitigate these risks by preserving institutional knowledge across election cycles and ensuring that newly elected members are supported by an experienced majority. Importantly, the Board’s adopted resolution is narrow and focused: it does not propose changes to district boundaries, election timing, or Board representation. Rather, it addresses the single structural feature most directly associated with governance volatility—concurrent terms.

Board Size Considerations

The Board is aware that some Council members have expressed interest in reducing the size of the School Board. While the Board remains open to conversations about Board size, the research before us does not identify board size as either a primary driver of instability or student outcomes. Comparative analyses indicate that nine-member boards function effectively in districts similar to Alexandria when paired with staggered terms, and that reducing Board size without addressing the election cycle would not resolve the underlying issue of turnover.

Questions of Board size, composition, or district configuration warrant careful study and community engagement. However, addressing term length and staggering is a prerequisite to reducing governance volatility. Delaying this foundational reform until all related questions are resolved risks perpetuating the very instability the City seeks to address.

Requested Next Steps

Accordingly, the Alexandria City School Board respectfully requests that the Mayor and City Council work with us to move this important change forward through the formation of an ad hoc committee. The Board stands ready to work collaboratively with Council, City and ACPS staff, and the community to support this process, provide additional information as needed, and ensure transparent public engagement.

Closing

Decisions about election structure shape not only how we govern, but how reliably we deliver on our commitments to students over time. The Board views this request not as a response to any particular election or individual, but as a long-term investment in stability, equity, and effective governance—one that will outlast any individual Board, Council, or administration.

We appreciate the Council’s partnership and shared commitment to governance structures that best serve Alexandria’s students, staff, and families.