

NOTE: What follows is a letter to the editor I sent to [ArlNow](#) back in January of 2014 as a response to a [community budget survey by Arlington Public Schools](#). Neither the letter nor the survey are available in their original locations, but in an effort to preserve a bit of history of community support of Arlington Community High School, especially in light of Amazon's recent offer to build a permanent site for the school, I am posting it here.

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## Oppose Institutional Racism in the APS Budget Survey

(Originally posted on ArlNow.com in January 2014)

The just released APS Budget Survey (<http://www.apsva.us/Page/20984>) presents an option to eliminate a program serving students 22 years of age and older who attend Arlington Mill High School. This proposal should be loudly opposed by all social justice seeking members of the Arlington community as a clear instance of institutional racism.

Institutional racism is "*the systematic distribution of resources, power and opportunity in our society to the benefit of people who are white and the exclusion of people of color.*" \* It is a useful concept for progressives, because it raises a standard by which to evaluate policy proposals of an institution - the impact they will have on social inequality within the institution. The proposal to eliminate educational opportunities for the Arlington Mill High School students will have an obvious negative impact on social equality in Arlington, since almost all of the over 200 students affected by the proposal are students of color.

The very fact that this proposal appears on the survey raises serious questions about the thinking behind the budget process. Why consider eliminating a program now that has been serving the Arlington community since 1929? Why propose the elimination of a program that directly serves the most economically vulnerable members of our community?

Arlingtonians who want to live in a just, caring, and diverse community should actively oppose eliminating support for the Arlington Mill High School program and insist that we continue to serve the valued members of our community who are over 22 years of age and still need to complete a high school education.

\* [Solid Ground's Definition of Institutional Racism](#)

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NOTE: What follows is the community comment that followed the post on the previous page.

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*altohexos:*

Hold on Mr Jeffelkner,

Let's tell the rest of the story before one smears the Arlington Public School system with having "institutional racism".

These students would not be "dropped" out of the school system and thrown to the wolves as you imply. The services provided the students are not being eliminated. Thus the basis of your argument is unfounded.

**Per the survey**, these students "*will be served by the Office of Adult Education in the Dept of Instruction*. Moving students from Arlington Mill enables the Langston Alternative Program to merge with Arlington Mill, saving the cost of some administrative and instruction stall at two locations."

Between you and me, jumping on the institutional racism bandwagon when referring to one of the most progression, open, and racially aware educational programs in the country, was well.....just plain idiotic.

*arl22204:*

It's important to acknowledge that the Office of Adult Education does not offer a high school diploma. Does Adult Ed offer coursework ( & SOLs) required by the VADOE to prepare students for post-secondary ed? Also, if we think of a GED as an alternative, is it my understanding that students would need to pass a proficiency test to enroll. That may be problematic for our immigrants whose children are enrolled in our schools. It would be "just plain idiotic" not to offer an ability to earn a high school diploma, as APS has done since (as jeffelkner states) 1929?

*altohexos:*

arl22204, I think the answer to your question(s) is "yes" per this Arlington Adult Education link. But, I readily admit this is not my field of (any) expertise.

<http://www.apsva.us/site/Default.aspx?PageID=1704>

Let me be clear. Education is critical and courses leading to GED need to be available. My issue with jeffelkner's post was his over-the-top diatribe about institutional racism and making that the topic of his thread. That is what is "just plain idiotic." Not whether the county should offer Pre=GED classes. Please do not confuse the two issues.

Be that as it may, I am not prepared to or interested in discussing the nuts and bolts of GED predatory classes. I was interested in setting the record straight such that the Arl Co Public School system wasn't smeared.

### *Dennis Jaffe:*

1. At the moment, I don't have enough familiarity with the program jeffekner wrote about for me to weigh in on the merit or lack thereof in the option to cut it.

2. jeffekner's closing statement made clear that he is not smearing the school system since he obviously believes that the specific program he is writing about would "...continue to serve the valued members of our society who are over 22 years of age..."

Arlingtonians who want to live in a just, caring, and diverse community should actively oppose eliminating support for the Arlington Mill High School program and insist that we continue to serve the valued members of our community who are over 22 years of age and still need to complete a high school education.

3. The second sentence in jeffekner's post, using the word, "instance," makes clear that he is singling out one budget option for criticism — that's hardly a reflection, by itself, of how the entire school system currently operates.

This proposal should be loudly opposed by all social justice seeking members of the Arlington community as a clear instance of institutional racism.

4. In fair, reasonable context, jeffekner's post is singling out for criticism one possible budget option and is singling out one program as being valuable. A smear that does not make.

5. I think the world of many people and organizations, yet I also find many of them engaging in things which I feel compelled to criticize — even strenuously. Good and/or smart people and organizations are quite capable of doing things I find to be bad, stupid or even occasionally both. I may not find the converse to be true quite as often, but nevertheless, I do find bad and/or stupid people to be capable of doing things I find meriting praise. Hey, it happens.

So, I'm sure that someone who is, in fact, as incredibly supportive of Arlington Public Schools, as is jeffekner, can find highly objectionable a budget option affecting one very particular program — and yet remain a stout supporter of and advocate for APS, and ne'er the twain of elkner and smear shall meet.

6. My view is that as common as I believe institutional racism can still be — and I'm talking generally here — I consistently have long found it to be way more prevalent that institutions make decisions that adversely affect those who are unempowered socio-economically. Yes, indeed, communities of color have higher percentages of poverty than communities of plain, white folks. But I don't think any can credibly argue with the assertion that wealthy people of color have more power and advantages over poor white folks. And, again, I believe that indifference or worse toward poor people is more prevalent than indifference or worse toward people of color. Put the two attributes together and you really have some issues meriting redress.

### *Jeff Elkner:*

Actually, aldohexose, the use of the term institutional racism was not intended as a smear at all. I learned to use this term in the same cultural competency training I attended that introduced me

to the need to hold courageous conversations about it if we are going to reduce its pernicious effects.

I can't imagine that any honest and well informed person could fail to see this proposal for what it is: an attempt to save money by reducing benefits to a marginalized and politically weak group.

That is the very essence of institutional racism – institutional practices that have the effect of extending the privileges of the powerful white majority at the expense of the oppressed minority. I have confidence in both the intelligence and good will of my fellow Arlingtonians, so I felt a moral duty to start this conversation so that those of us who consider ourselves anti-racist can oppose this harm being proposed to the members of the largely immigrant community that make up the adult student population of Arlington Mill High School.

It is my hope that these valued members of our community are not as politically marginalized as might be thought, because a large number of Arlingtonians will stand in solidarity with them.

*altohexas:*

jeffekner, my apologies. After reading Dennis Jaffe's post (and yours) I realized that I misconstrued part of your message, and placed emphasis where you had not intended it. I also wish to withdraw any indication that you were smearing Arl Co schools. Instead you were mostly pointing out this one option as being a bad one. (I hope I have that correct). I mistakenly thought you were knocking the school system for considering such an idea. Which I guess you are, but not in the way I had first thought.

Thank you for responding to my post and clarifying my initial interpretation.

And for what it is worth. I am only me. And, jeffekner and dennisjaffe are in real life two different people. As for arl22204, can I google you under a different name? :-}

*Jeff Elkner:*

altohexas, I can assure you that arl22204 is not me, though she or he may very well be one of the several people I emailed this morning to let them know I was making this post. If so, I'm honored they took me up on my request that they join the conversation

*arl22204:*

To clarify, students in Adult Ed are not able to earn a high school diploma.

*Hyde:*

So if 22 is too young to essentially kick someone out of high school, what age would you consider to be more appropriate Jeff? I'd think after being held back 4 years over the course of 13\* years of education, it'd be a safe bet to say 99% of those left either: 1) Aren't interested in actually graduating, or 2) Have some sort of learning disability that wouldn't keep them in regular classes anyway. Should we consider allowing them to continue until the age of 45? You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make it drink.

\*12 years of school plus Kindergarten

*Jeff Elkner:*

Hyde, most of the over 22 year old students in Arlington Mill High School are immigrants who for various reasons did not have the opportunity to complete high school when they were younger. I've taught evening classes in the program and have found the students to be highly motivated. Almost all of them work long hours at one or more jobs and they are then taking classes (one or two at a time, mostly) in an effort to further their education. They pay a fee to take the classes, but it is kept small enough to make the program a real option for low income students.

Our community benefits greatly by helping community members achieve a higher level of education. It is a testament to the wisdom of the Arlington community that we have a program like this, and it would indeed be foolish to eliminate it. While [income inequality](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Income_inequality_in_the_United_States) in the United States continues to grow, we have the [highest incarceration rate](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_States_incarceration_rate) in world by a wide margin. Dedicating resources to education is a social good that benefits all members of the community.

It is important to think about the broad implications of any social policy. There is a wide body of research available establishing the harmful social effects of lack of educational opportunities. The [Princeton is cheaper than prison](http://www.publicadministration.net/resources/comparing-costs-prison-vs-princeton/) just how affordable education really is when you look at the big picture.

Please permit me to explain why I used the term "institutional racism" and why despite the fact that many of the forum readers took issue with it I still maintain it was the right term to use.

For over a decade now Arlington Public Schools has had as one of its strategic goals to eliminate achievement gaps. As part of the effort to achieve this strategic goal, APS employees participated in a program called "Cultural Competency Training". It was through this training that I first came across the concept of "institutional racism".

I recently read a wonderful book by Dr. Robert Smith and five other participants in the APS effort to address the achievement gap. Titled "Gaining on the Gap", the book defines institutional racism as encompassing "racial disparities that result from institutional structures and operations." It says that institutional racism is "entrenched, intractable, and not easily eradicated" because it results from the cumulative actions of multiple people usually not aware they are perpetuating it. The authors of Gaining on the Gap make confronting institutional

racism the focus of their effort to eliminate the achievement gap, and see this as the most effective way schools can address this challenge.

I've been inspired by both the cultural competency training and the book. What troubled me so deeply about the APS Budget Survey was the inclusion of the rather innocuous sounding "Move adult students to Adult Ed". The lessons of our proud work on cultural competency and addressing the achievement gap were clearly missing from the process that led this to be included in the survey. How were uninformed members of the Arlington community supposed to know what moving adult students meant in the lives of the more than 200 people affected as they dragged around blocks getting numbers to add up to a desired goal?

I hope we can recapture the courage and wisdom reflected in cultural competency and our efforts to eliminate achievement gaps by providing more and better educational services to students who need them most. At the very least I hope we can oppose any effort to balance a budget at the expense of these same students.