

For the Good of All, the Poor Come First

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Arlington Public Schools (APS) is a public school system serving Arlington County, Virginia. It has approximately twenty-seven thousand students (Arlington Public Schools, 2025c) with a staff of about five-thousand employees and a budget of over eight-hundred million dollars (Arlington Public Schools, 2025b). It is among the wealthiest (Wikipedia contributors, 2025) and most educated counties (Blain, n.d.) in the United States, yet about a fourth the school system's students receive free and reduced lunch benefits (Arlington Public Schools, 2025a), indicating a high level of inequality among the student population.

As a school teacher for over thirty years, I have always felt that my job as a public servant in a public school system is to serve the educational needs of three groups of people: my students, their parents and guardians, and the broader Arlington County community that funds and maintains the school system. I have also felt that, while not without some ambiguity and contradiction, these three groups are listed in decreasing order of obligation, with students coming first, families second, and the broader community third. This view is of practical necessity rather than from some abstract moral principle, since as front-line care givers, educators can not effectively do what they are meant to do without earning the sincere trust of the students and then families they serve, and they can not do that without being able to honestly put the interests of those they serve at the forefront of what they do.

I was delighted when a web search for "customers of public school systems" yielded an article titled *Customer service in K-12 education* on a website from a company named K12 Insight whose business is consulting with schools about customer service

(K12 Insight, 2025) with the same three "customers" listed in the same order as those whom I have always felt it was my job to serve, and to see their customer support needs listed as "accessible communication, transparent processes, responsive support systems, and meaningful opportunities to engage with and influence their local schools" (K12 Insight, 2023). I was almost equally delighted to see in the same article teachers, administrators, and support staff listed as "internal customers" who "require professional respect, timely support, clear communication, professional development, and access to the resources they need to do their jobs well" (K12 Insight, 2023).

APS puts a good deal of effort into measuring satisfaction with its performance from students, staff, and community, and it performs quite well on these assessments overall (Arlington Public Schools, 2022). There is no information in these surveys that correlates survey responses with socio-economic status, and I can not say for sure what the correlation would look like, but what I can say with confidence is that the level of service APS provides students and their families does vary with socio-economic status, and that as is so sadly the case with our society at large, in the words of the Ray Charles song, "them that's got are them that gets" (Charles, 1962).

I have long been aware of this "customer service problem" involving both responsiveness and quality. Back in 2014 for a course titled Social Justice & Consciousness in Higher Education at George Mason University, I wrote a paper which looked at the inequity facing students in the school where I worked at the time, the Arlington Career Center (Elkner, 2014). Since I still work there today, and since so much has changed in the past eleven years, this paper provides an opportunity to revisit what I

previously observed and reflect on how service to our students has been impacted by the development of a newer program serving higher socio-economic students.

In 2014 students at the Career Center did not have access to a music class, a gym, or a clinic with a school nurse. At another school with a similar concentration of low income immigrant students, Arlington Community High School, a similar situation existed. In stark contrast, an equally sized program serving wealthy, white, North Arlington students, H-B Woodlawn, had all of these resources (Elkner, 2014). Music, physical activity, and health care were all identified by our Professor, Paul Gorski, as elements of what he called the "opportunity gap" faced by low income students of color. He argues that by denying low-income students access to music, healthcare and physical activity, our institution is failing to provide victims of inequity with a socially just environment in which to learn (Gorski, 2013).

In an earlier paper on the same issue, I wrote hopefully that the then new dual-enrollment focused Arlington Tech program, housed at the Career Center, could provide an opportunity to "turn deficit model remedies into a program that challenges institutional racism head-on" (Elkner, 2013).

More than a decade later I would have to conclude that my optimistic hope has been largely unfulfilled. There is very limited cross-over between the previously existing alternative programs and Arlington Tech, and most of the experienced, highly trained staff that back in 2013 taught in multiple Career Center programs, myself included, now teach almost exclusively in the dual-enrolled program at Arlington Tech. While APS continues to make diversity, equity, and inclusion a goal of the system, the urgency of

closing the achievement gap is not what it was then. Given our current political climate nationally, it seems unlikely to become a front burner issue again in the near future.

One of the favorite slogans of the Fourth Transformation in Mexico (Gutiérrez, 2025), originally used by President Andrés Manuel Lopez Obrador, and now eagerly embraced by his successor, Claudia Sheinbaum, is "Por el bien de todos, primero los pobres", which translates to "For the good of everyone, the poor come first" (Granados Ceja, 2023). If APS is going to meet its obligation to serve all of its students equitably, it will need to embrace this idea. Only when the needs of those with the least are put first can equity hope to be achieved.

I have not given up on doing what I can to move toward that aim. I am working to introduce a new social and economic justice oriented entrepreneurship program at our school next year. The A.S. in Computer Science program in which I have been teaching for the last decade has a student population that is wealthier and whiter than our student population at large. Entrepreneurship is a liberal arts class which can be made available to all our students. This is only one tiny part of what needs to be a much larger effort if we truly want to meet our obligation to those whom we serve.

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