

Meeting Minutes

City Council/School Board Subcommittee

March 23, 2026

5:00 p.m.

ACPS Board Room

1340 Braddock Road

In-Person with Zoom Access

(Links to this meeting are posted on the [City and ACPS Websites](#))

City Council and School Board Member Attendees:

Mayor Alyia Gaskins

Councilman John Chapman

School Board Chair Michelle Rief

School Board Vice Chair Christopher Harris

Approval of Minutes

The first item of business was approval of the March 2, 2026 meeting minutes. The motion passed unanimously.

Early Childhood Education

Kate Garvey, the Department of Community and Human Services Director, and Robin Crawley, the Early Childhood Chief, presented the work of the Kids First Years Collective, the citywide partnership coordinating early childhood services. They explained that the collective recently completed a strategic planning effort focused on strengthening alignment, accessibility, quality, equity, and comprehensive support for families with young children.

A major highlight was the coordinated enrollment system, ALX Preschool, which brings together 16 public and private providers, including family day homes, Head Start, and ACPS programs. Garvey emphasized how significant it has been to have small private providers and public programs unify around a single intake and matching process. The demand for services continues to grow, with more than a thousand applications submitted annually for a limited number of slots. A full-time enrollment coordinator now manages this process.

Crawley reported strong outcomes for Head Start, which has served 253 children and has achieved notable stability, including zero turnover among lead teachers in the past year. Virginia

Preschool Initiative (VPI) participation remains solid, and many children entering through ALX Preschool ultimately enroll in VPI classrooms. Under the statewide Virginia Quality Birth to Five System, 381 Alexandria classrooms are undergoing regular class observations, curriculum approval, and quality monitoring. No programs in the city scored below standards, and several exceeded them. The city continues to expand its pool of trained classroom observers, aiming to reduce reliance on contractors.

Crawley also highlighted the inaugural “State of Early Childhood” event, which helped set a foundation for upcoming work, including fiscal mapping and expanded family engagement.

Council and Board Members raised questions around accessibility, family mobility, and unmet need. Staff described evolving barriers driven by housing instability, economic pressures, and family relocation patterns. DCHS plans to conduct geographic and needs-based mapping in the coming year to better understand where children live and which supports are most needed.

With roughly 1,000 applicants per year, waitlists remain long even though coordinated enrollment allows families to be routed to multiple types of care, including subsidized private options. Crawley underscored nationwide workforce instability and the chronic underpayment of early childhood educators.

Mayor Gaskins asked about federal Head Start funding stability, especially given recent shutdown threats. Staff reported cautious optimism, noting a small forthcoming cost-of-living adjustment and no current local under-enrollment issues. They also discussed the city’s fiscal mapping project, designed to blend federal, state, local, and subsidy funds more effectively, with an eye toward future large-scale grant seeking.

Mayor Gaskins also raised questions about private providers, many of whom are opening new centers but charge rates out of reach for many families. Staff described ongoing efforts to include private centers in mixed-delivery models but noted large gaps between state reimbursement and market tuition. They discussed incentives, shared training, and the challenges of bringing more centers into the state’s quality system. Family day homes, which form a crucial component of the ecosystem, were described as deeply engaged and frequently seeking professional development, though many are currently inactive because they lack enough enrolled children to qualify for state participation.

The conversation closed with an emphasis on future collaboration, particularly around legislative advocacy at the state level, potential zoning or policy supports, and alignment between the city and school district. Staff expressed appreciation for the city’s long-standing support and noted that the strategic plan will surface new priorities where council and school board engagement could be especially valuable.

Health and Wellness: Community Health Improvement Plan Update

Natalie Talis, Population Health Manager at the Alexandria Health Department, presented an update on the city's Community Health Improvement Plan (CHIP). She began by framing community health as a broad concept shaped by many aspects of daily life, housing, sleep, food access, safety, mobility, relationships, and access to care. Because so many factors influence health, she explained, the challenge is determining which priorities to focus on within limited resources.

Using maps and data from the most recent 2025 Community Health Assessment, Talis showed that Alexandria continues to experience persistent geographic disparities, with the Landmark–Van Dorn and Arlandria neighborhoods consistently facing higher levels of poverty, health vulnerabilities, and environmental burdens. These patterns have remained unchanged for years, as confirmed by long-term federal social vulnerability indices.

She also shared the results of extensive engagement with residents, including a comparative survey aligned with the previous 2018–2019 assessment. Mental health emerged as the top concern again, followed by substance use, violence, and chronic health issues. Youth respondents identified similar priorities, with substance use slightly outranking mental health. These consistent findings from both data and community input guided the selection of the CHIP's three focus areas: mental wellness (a term chosen intentionally to emphasize holistic wellbeing), the Landmark–Van Dorn neighborhood, and the Arlandria neighborhood.

Talis described the city's new approach to implementation, three community coalitions, one for each priority, composed of residents, nonprofit partners, city staff, and subject-matter experts. Decision-making in these groups is intentionally shared; residents and professionals participate equally in shaping goals and actions. Each coalition is responsible for setting its own vision, forming workgroups, analyzing root causes, and designing community-led solutions.

The Mental Wellness Coalition has already finalized its vision and identified five areas for action, including reducing access barriers, expanding safe spaces, building community connection, increasing early mental health screening for youth, and improving crisis services. Workgroups of 10–20 members are now mapping existing programs, identifying gaps, and designing projects.

The Landmark–Van Dorn Coalition is in the process of selecting its focus areas, with early themes emerging around third spaces for community gathering, support for small businesses, neighborhood-based health services, and safer mobility. Community members are voting on priorities in April. The Arlandria Coalition is operating on a more relationship-based model, using small, trusted conversations in partnership with local organizations rather than large public meetings. Early ideas include more green space, children's play areas, and free or low-cost clinics.

Talis emphasized that this work is happening alongside the city's broader “unified planning” efforts, coordinated strategic plans among the Health Department, DCHS, ACPS, Housing,

Planning & Zoning, and others. The goal is to reduce duplication, share data and community engagement, and develop shared outcomes across multiple city plans.

In discussion, Council and Board members asked how future policy decisions might incorporate the CHIP's priorities and whether Alexandria could adopt a "health in all policies" approach. Talis noted that some departments, including Planning & Zoning, are already integrating health considerations into their work. Members also asked about using mini-grants from the Partnership for a Healthier Alexandria to support grassroots solutions; Talis confirmed that future rounds of grants will prioritize projects aligned with the CHIP focus areas.

Questions followed about KPIs, geographic selection, school involvement, and coordination across city plans. Talis explained that measurable goals will be set once each coalition identifies root causes and proposed interventions. The two neighborhoods were selected because of longstanding and repeated indicators of inequitable health outcomes. She also expressed interest in partnering more directly with schools in these neighborhoods, though securing school space for meetings has been challenging.

Finally, members raised issues related to outreach, especially engaging property managers, businesses, and residents in areas lacking public gathering spaces. Talis acknowledged the difficulty of finding accessible meeting spaces, describing ongoing efforts to work with apartment complexes and small businesses and to build on relationships established through the city's Healthy Homes initiative.

The discussion concluded with an appreciation for the presentation and recognition that upcoming community-generated solutions will offer further opportunities for alignment across city and school planning.

Other Business

During the "other business" portion of the meeting, ACPS staff presented an update on the Link Club, the division's 21st Century Community Learning Centers program serving students at Brent Place Apartments and the Patrick Henry K-8 School & Recreation Center. Taneika Taylor Tukan explained that the program, launched in 2017, now supports about 60 students with free, high-quality after-school and summer programming focused on academic intervention and enrichment.

She shared that the Virginia Department of Education is shifting 21st Century grants from a three-year to a five-year cycle. This administrative change has unintentionally created a one-year funding gap in 2026-27 for the Brent Place and Patrick Henry sites. The gap is unrelated to program quality and does not affect other ACPS grant cohorts.

To maintain program continuity for families who depend on these services, ACPS developed several strategies to stretch resources during the unfunded year. These include scaling back spring 2026 paid enrichment vendors, offering a lighter summer 2026 program aligned with

ACPS summer learning (four days a week instead of five), and shifting Link Club to a four-day model next school year while still meeting the 300-hour minimum needed to remain competitive for the next grant cycle.

ACPS anticipates covering summer 2026 through grant carryover funds.

Adjournment

The meeting adjourned at 6:21 p.m.