

Affordability for All Strategy Brief

Thank you for your leadership and commitment to Alexandria's children, youth, and families! As we begin to develop the next Children & Youth Community Plan (CYCP), we want to ensure that this plan reflects the real needs identified by young people and the strengths, expertise, and ongoing efforts of our community partners.

How We Got Here

Over the past year, we conducted a [Youth Needs Assessment](#), engaging more than 1,100 middle and high school students, as well as a week of follow up listening sessions with over 700 youth. Youth identified financial barriers that affect their access to basic needs, enrichment opportunities, and pathways to long-term stability, including housing, food, childcare, transportation, and the cost of participating in school and community activities.

Their voices shaped the Affordability Strategy Directions included in this packet. These strategies reflect the themes that emerged during youth listening sessions, related "[report cards](#)" made by students, and [Issue Brief](#) endorsements where students were asked to review the strategies recommended by last year's students and mark the ones they thought would make the biggest impact in their life.

Where We're Headed

The Children and Youth Community Plan is convening partners who are already working in these areas to review the solutions proposed in this brief and:

- Assess feasibility, alignment, and gaps
- Identify opportunities for coordination and collaboration
- Highlight strategies already underway across the community
- Draft concrete action steps for inclusion in the next CYCP

This is an opportunity to elevate what is already working and identify where partnership can strengthen impact.

Questions?

If you have questions or would like to learn more, contact CYCP Coordinator Chelsea Eickert at chelsea.eickert@alexandriava.gov or visit alexandriava.gov/YouthPlan.

Affordability for All Priority Area

What We Learned from Students: Experiences, Root Causes, and Ideas for Solutions

Through the Youth Needs Assessment and follow-up conversations, students consistently shared that the cost-of-living shapes nearly every aspect of their daily lives - from whether they eat lunch, to whether they feel stable at home, to whether they can fully participate in school and community life.

Students emphasized that cost-of-living pressures are not just financial; they affect mental health, belonging, academic engagement, and family stability. The sections below summarize how students experience these challenges and how they believe systems should respond.

Students Experience Food Insecurity as Daily Stress

Across schools, students described families struggling to afford groceries and students coming to school hungry or worried about meals.

“Some families can’t afford to pay for their kids’ lunch every day... some kids are hungry for the whole school day.”

“Food is expensive and not everyone can afford healthy food.”

“Even when having multiple jobs, the cost of living is so high that keeping a roof over your head and food in your fridge is a struggle.”

Students emphasized that food insecurity affects concentration, mood, and dignity. Many said hunger is normalized, hidden, or stigmatized, especially among peers.

Housing and Economic Instability Undermines Safety, Belonging, and Learning

Students frequently talked about high rents, displacement, overcrowded living conditions, and homelessness among peers.

“Families are being displaced because rent is too expensive.”

“Some kids don’t have a house. Some sleep in their car.”

“My parents have to borrow money from family to pay their rent.”

“Money can affect students’ ability to learn. For instance, a poor family might not be able to afford proper education or resources.”

“Some families can’t eat or live in peace because of money and students can’t get a good education.”

“Students get bullied for being poor.”

“They fight over money.”

Students see housing instability as a root issue that impacts attendance, academic performance, and emotional wellbeing. Many said instability creates constant stress that students carry into school.

Financial Stress Takes a Toll on Mental and Emotional Health

Students directly linked economic strain to anxiety, sadness, exhaustion, and burnout.

"Students come to school tired due to worrying about home issues relating to money or food."

"Not being able to afford basic needs can also lead to depression."

"Families are overwhelmed and stressed out."

"I want to take some of the stress off (my mom)."

"If you are a kid who knows your family is struggling financially, it takes a toll mentally and on your studies."

"If your parents are struggling, you are struggling."

Youth described balancing school with work, caregiving responsibilities, and family stress often without adequate support. Several students noted that adults underestimate how deeply financial stress affects young people.

Costs Exclude Students from School and Community Life

Students described being left out of school, enrichment, and social activities because families can't afford fees for field trips, extracurricular activities, school supplies, PE uniforms, lunch, or transportation.

"My mom can't take me to dance class sometimes because she has to save gas for necessary trips and have enough money for rent and other expenses. So, I have to take two buses to get to dance class and the commute takes away from my homework time."

"To save money for more essential expenses, my mom let the phone bill to go unpaid so the service got disconnected."

Many students described embarrassment, stigma, or quietly opting out to avoid attention.

"Kids get bullied for things they wear."

"Some people can't afford their PE uniform."

"Some kids are bragging about being able to afford school trips while others can't go because they can't afford it."

Students See Rising Prices and Low Wages as Systemic Problems

Students consistently named the gap between wages and the cost of living as a core driver of hardship.

"Jobs don't pay enough to support a family."

"The barriers blocking us from success? Political resistance...The wealthy are skyrocketing while we are sinking, drowning in the damage they've left over."

"With health care inflating year by year and the jobs paying lower and lower, it has become a nightmare to balance eating food and healthcare, ultimately leaving you to choose between the two. With the rising costs of childcare and healthcare, it has grown increasingly harder for people to get the essential necessities for their kids, let alone themselves."

"I have a single mom who works for the school system, but she struggles financially to provide for our needs."

Students talked about inflation, low wages, and unfair pricing as problems that cannot be solved by individual effort alone. They expressed support for systemic solutions such as higher wages, direct aid, and fairer policies.

Many Families Don't Know What Help Is Available

Students said supports exist but families often don't know how to access them or feel discouraged from trying.

"People in need don't know what the City has available."

How Students Frame the Problem

From students' perspectives, cost-of-living challenges are driven by:

- Rising prices paired with stagnant wages
- Lack of affordable housing, childcare, and healthcare
- Inconsistent access to food and basic needs
- Limited awareness of supports
- Systems that place responsibility on families without providing relief

Drafted CYCP Strategy Directions for Affordability

Grounded in Listening Session Data & Issue Brief Endorsements

Strengthen Food Security for Youth & Families

Strategic Direction	Rationale
Ensure every young person and family can access enough healthy food at school and in the community without stigma or stress.	Food insecurity was one of the most frequently discussed issues and top-endorsed priorities. Students described hunger, stress, and embarrassment connected to food access.
Recommended Actions from Students	
a. Expand partnerships with ALIVE, food pantries, community gardens, neighborhood grocery efforts, and mobile food distribution so families can get food close to home.	
b. Expand free school meals and eliminate lunch debt so no student goes hungry during the school day.	
c. Increase access to healthy snacks and meals after school, especially for middle and high school students.	
d. Support youth-led food drives and pantry models that offer choice, dignity, and healthy options.	

Improve Housing Stability Through Coordinated Support

Strategic Direction	Rationale
Help families stay housed and stable by making housing more affordable, protecting renters, and prioritizing families most affected by high costs.	Students see housing stability as foundational to safety, belonging, and academic success. They shared examples of moving frequently, poor housing conditions, and peers experiencing homelessness.
Recommended Actions from Students	

a. Strengthen rental assistance and ways of preventing eviction for families with school-aged children.
b. Make it easier for schools and youth-serving organizations to connect families to housing services through simple referral pathways.
c. Partner with City housing agencies, nonprofits, and developers to build and preserve affordable homes, including mixed-income developments and no-/low-interest housing loan programs.
d. Prioritize investments in neighborhoods where housing costs hit families hardest and track youth-focused housing stability indicators (e.g., school mobility).
e. Expand access to emergency housing so families don't have to choose between unsafe situations and homelessness.

Advance Economic Justice & Income Supports for Families

Strategic Direction	Rationale
Make living costs more manageable by helping families earn more, access direct financial support, and reduce everyday financial pressure.	Young people repeatedly named low wages, limited job opportunities, and rising prices as core drivers of stress. They also suggested direct financial aid, fairer taxes, and debt relief to help families stay afloat and avoid homelessness.
Recommended Actions from Students	
a. Expand access to living-wage jobs, paid internships, and job training especially for youth, caregivers, immigrants, and families with limited English proficiency.	
b. Advocate for fair pay and family-friendly work policies so people can afford to live where they work.	
c. Connect families to direct aid, including rental support, cash assistance, financial aid, and low- or no-interest loans that prevent crises.	
d. Support pilots like guaranteed income that reduce financial stress and help families stay stable.	
e. Work with City and state partners to reduce financial pressure on low-income families, including tax, fee, and cost-reduction policies.	

Reduce or Eliminate Cost Barriers to Student Participation

Strategic Direction	Rationale
Make sure cost is never the reason a student can't participate, belong, or succeed.	Students repeatedly described being excluded from opportunities like field trips, sports, clubs, school supplies, lunch, and even daily attendance because of cost or transportation barriers.
Recommended Actions from Students	
a. Establish a "No Student Left Out" policy for field trips, clubs, sports, PE uniforms, and other school-related fees.	
b. Develop a citywide Participation Equity Fund to cover activity costs for students whose families are struggling.	
c. Provide universal or targeted school supply support at the start of and throughout the school year.	
d. Pilot activity vouchers or scholarships for middle and high school programs.	
e. Partner with ACPS and regional transit agencies to reduce transportation barriers (e.g., maintain free DASH for youth, explore reduced-fare student Metro cards and bikeshare, and ensure bus routes/stops are close and reliable).	

Strengthen Resource Navigation & Communication

Strategic Direction	Rationale
Make it easy for families to find help, understand their options, and feel welcome asking for support.	Many families don't know what supports exist or how to access them. Students and caregivers talked about complicated processes, language barriers, and stigma that keep people from seeking help.
Recommended Actions from Students	
a. Create one easy, trusted place (online and in-person) where families can get help with food, housing, healthcare, childcare, and financial support.	
b. Share information clearly and often through schools (i.e. morning announcements), ParentSquare, community partners, and trusted messengers.	
c. Train youth as Resource Ambassadors who can help spread the word about services and resources in youth-friendly ways.	
d. Host regular resource fairs and drop-in support at schools, libraries, recreation centers, and community spaces.	
e. Ensure all information is culturally responsive, multilingual, and welcoming to immigrant and mixed-status families.	

Expand Access to Affordable Healthcare, Early Care, and Family Supports

Strategic Direction	Rationale
Make healthcare and childcare affordable, accessible, and responsive to every family's needs while supporting the people who provide that care.	Students see healthcare and childcare costs as major drivers of family stress. They want families to access quality care (physical, mental, and developmental) without going into debt or having to choose between medical bills and basic needs.
Recommended Actions from Students	
a. Help families get insured and understand their healthcare options, including Medicaid and CHIP.	
b. Expand access to mental health supports for youth experiencing stress related to housing, food, and finances.	
c. Pay early educators fairly and grow the early childhood workforce through scholarships, paid training, and partnerships with colleges.	
d. Make early learning easier to find through one centralized, multilingual application and referral system.	
e. Invest in childcare centers, home-based providers, and public spaces to expand slots, especially for infants and toddlers.	

Support Youth-Led Initiatives that Engage them in Community Giving and Long-Term Change

Strategic Direction	Rationale
Support young people as leaders in caring for their community and shaping long-term solutions.	Students want to be part of the solution. They proposed food drives, clothing closets, toy drives, and fundraisers that ensure their peers are cared for with dignity and respect.
Recommended Actions from Students	
a. Support student-led food drives, clothing closets, toy drives, and donation efforts that prioritize dignity and choice.	

b.	Create permanent community donation hubs in schools and public spaces.
c.	Provide mini-grants and staff support so youth can lead mutual aid and community projects.
d.	Connect youth-led efforts to broader City and nonprofit initiatives so student ideas help drive lasting systems change.