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## Note to School Committee re: Semester 2 Thoughts

3 messages

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**MrBOrNotToB - Justin Bourassa** <bourassj@gmail.com>  
To: Karen Fitzgerald <kfitzgerald@arlington.k12.ma.us>

Thu, Dec 10, 2020 at 9:44 AM

Hi Karen,

I spoke briefly at Monday's listening session and sat in on yesterday's listening session for the students. I'm unsure if I'll be able to speak this evening due to the meeting timing, but wanted to send along this note to the School Committee if possible.

Thank you in advance!

Warmly,

Justin

Dear School Committee Members:

This is my twelfth year teaching English in Arlington, with a brief 2-year layover as an exchange teacher in our sister city in Nagaokakyo, Japan. I've coached more than fifteen separate seasons of AHS Athletics, including a multiple-time state and national champion, and multiple All-Americans; I've advised a class 5 times, planning dances, proms, cruises and fundraisers; I've advised multiple clubs and led multiple international trips. I love Arlington High School and being a member of the English department. My wife, eighteen-month old son, and I rent an apartment in town; she teaches 7th grade in a different district. We adore everything about the opportunity to live, work, and raise our children in Arlington. This year, I volunteered to become a union rep in spite of all the chaos; today, however, I can only speak/write on behalf of myself and my experience in the classroom since this school year started.

Since my son attends the daycare on the first floor of the high school building, while my students are learning remotely, I'm teaching from a classroom every day by choice. I am also slated to coach three seasons this school year through the running program, so I saw students three days a week after school and for competitions throughout the fall, and, according to current restrictions, will continue to do so for winter and spring track.

In the current model, my attendance is up. My pacing may be off, as we're still getting used to the semesterized schedule, but I'm covering the material and most importantly, the students are developing and mastering the skills for a normal course and year, even in Advanced Placement. I have the same assignments and the same points in the gradebook. I'm forging personal connections with more students in ways I haven't been able to before with the longer class times, increased participation, and the ability to utilize some of the technological tools we've introduced. With three senior English classes, I'm working with so many students applying to college in these unprecedented times. Writing conferences - for the college essay or our formal writing - are different, and while it's still early, wildly more effective. My office hours attended and informal opportunities to chat with students are increased due to the ease of jumping on a Zoom call, even between classes. My students are engaging and not simply participating for credit - they actively contribute to discussions.

I can't speak for every single student, of course, but after walking them through the potential starting points for the Semester 2 options, if our current model, which has brought many, many benefits to my students, is not an option for the second semester, the only model that would seem to strike a clear balance of maintaining guided, shared instructional time (my job) and the students' mental and emotional well-being (my priority) would be the Departmental Shift.

I can't and won't speak on behalf of other teachers' successes in the classroom. But I know their preparation time is through the roof. And the product remains unchanged: the excellence we've come to expect from APS. Setting aside the fact that a different schedule would run the risk of making a teacher feel like the hard work is for

nought, potentially even requiring a second rebuild of materials within a year, I worry about the dramatic drop-off in time spent with students in any other model in the spring. The other two models offer students far less instructional time with their teachers and peers, and limit them to seeing and interacting with the same subset of students in the other models. There is no guarantee splitting cohorts alphabetically would yield even numbers across the multiple cohorts for every class; class offerings would be potentially limited as well. You know all this already, though.

This year has not been perfect. But we are having rich discussions. We are writing. We are being creative. We are even still having fun (I am having fun). And we know it's temporary. We know it isn't a substitute for "normal school", even though "normal school" may not work for as many students as it seems in the first place. The departmental shift allows for the option to not make students and teachers alike learn - and plan for - a new schedule. I think about everyone sharing class time still getting into the swing of things now. And it's working. The departmental shift would allow for the easiest transition between mostly/fully remote and in-person learning. Should the metrics become safe, it wouldn't require another (third) schedule for this school year; we could simply attend classes since the schedule is familiar and it works, whether we are remote or in-person.

In closing, I often consider my responsibility as an educator, what my studies have led me to but also what the community has asked me to do. I think about how we use content to introduce and open discussions on the most important thing: the skills. Departmental shift planning would not require a skills-based learning curve once classes change over after February 5th; only the content would change. The other two models ask everyone - teachers, students, and even families alike - to learn a new set of skills while they learn new content, even though we've demonstrated success by almost every measure under the current model. As someone who is in the building every day, as someone who sees students/athletes at least three days a week, as someone whose partner is facing students in a hybrid model in another district every day, and as someone whose own child is in the building every day, I see the most potential for keeping the amazing things we have working right now and actually building on the ever-important social and emotional needs of the students happening most clearly, most abundantly, and even most regularly, via the Department Shift model. I will make any of these options work, of course. The thrill of working in the district is not one I would soon give up. I can see the most potential for return in both breadth and depth in following the current schedule, and if that's not possible, introducing students to the Departmental Shift model for the second semester.

Thank you for your time and consideration. If I can be helpful in any other way, please don't hesitate to contact me.

Warmly,

Justin Bourassa  
English Department  
Assistant Cross Country Coach  
Head Track and Field Coach

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Sent from a mobile device. Hoping to have avoided any hilarious auto "corrections".

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**Karen Fitzgerald** <kfitzgerald@arlington.k12.ma.us>

Thu, Dec 10, 2020 at 9:54 AM

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**Karen Fitzgerald**

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**Karen Fitzgerald** <kfitzgerald@arlington.k12.ma.us>  
To: MrBOrNotToB - Justin Bourassa <bourassj@gmail.com>

Thu, Dec 10, 2020 at 9:55 AM

Thank you, Justin. I have shared your comments with the full committee and included them in the record of tonight's meeting.

Take care,  
Karen

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