



## Enrollment Forecasts/Demographics Subcommittee of the Long-Range Educational Facilities Plan Work Group

### Enrollment Research Topic

#### School Reputation Influence on Student Enrollment

### Background

This research element provides a qualitative snapshot of the perception of school quality in Alexandria. It's important to note that this information does not in any way assess the actual quality of the school system, but rather identify some of the perceptions that residents and potential residents have about ACPS, and how those perceptions could impact school enrollment going forward.

### Methodology

City planning staff conducted two focus group sessions with Alexandria-based Realtors from McEneaney & Associates, and Long & Foster. The topics of discussion ranged from housing choice trends of families buying and selling in Alexandria, to the role and weight of school reputation in the residential real estate market. The discussions were limited to the home ownership market, so the findings do not necessarily reflect trends in the rental market. In addition to the focus groups, planning staff researched school ratings from [greatschools.org](http://greatschools.org) to gauge public perception of all Virginia public schools within a 10-mile radius of Alexandria.

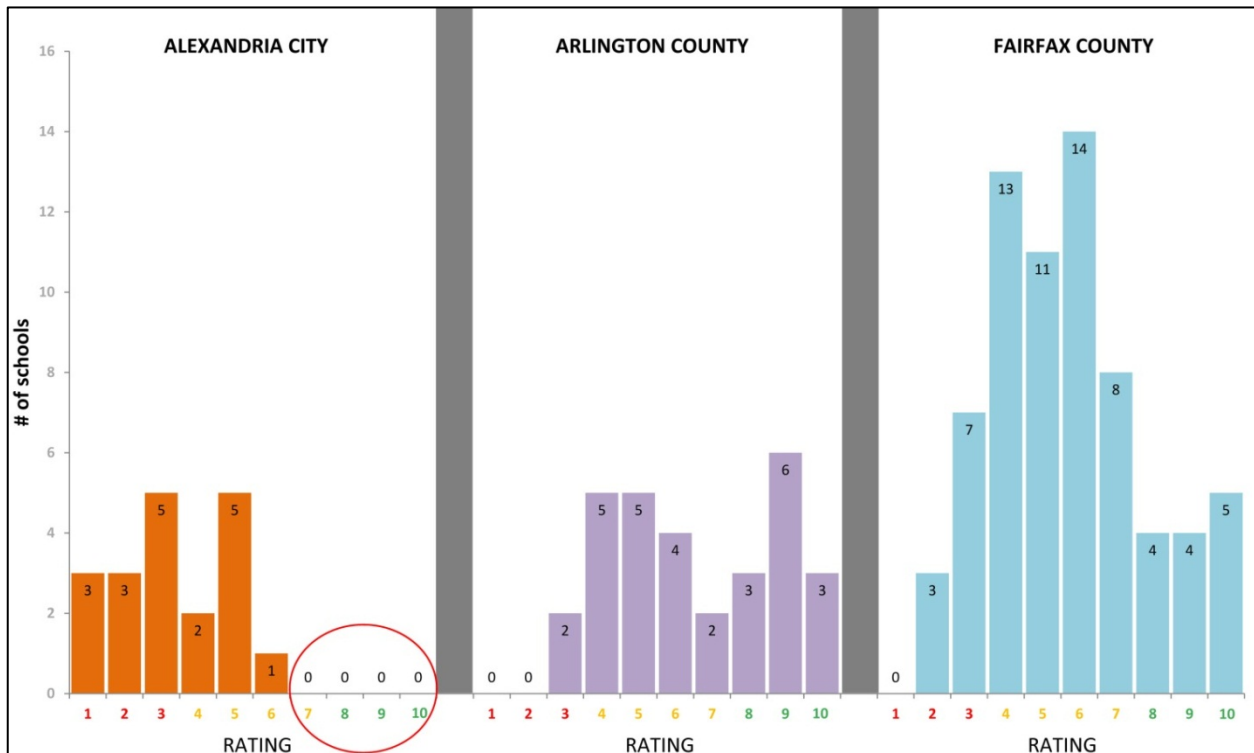
### Findings

There were four key takeaways from the focus group discussions and online research:

1. **Growing urban preference:** There is a growing interest in urban lifestyle for families with children. Alexandria's urban profile and amenities are a major draw for this demographic. Many areas within the City are in a position to capture some of this demand along with other inner-suburban and inner-core neighborhoods in the region.
2. **Importance of school reputation:** Despite this urban preference, school reputation often plays a larger role in the real estate decisions of families, and currently, this is working against Alexandria. In general, families perceive schools to be better in neighboring jurisdictions, and many are choosing not to buy a home in Alexandria, or are selling their existing home in Alexandria, to move to other jurisdictions based on these perceptions. There are a few exceptions within ACPS, particularly among the elementary schools. The Realtor's group noted that families are willing to pay a premium, as much as \$100K – 150K more to live in the more desirable school districts within Alexandria.

3. **Alexandria schools are likely better than perceived:** The Realtor's noted that most of their clients with children rely on various websites that rate individual schools. The website [greatschools.org](http://greatschools.org) was one in particular that is widely used (their ratings are displayed on [zillow.com](http://zillow.com)). Interestingly, the rating system used by [greatschools.org](http://greatschools.org) puts a heavy emphasis on individual student test scores. Communities like Alexandria, which have a diverse population, and high level of mobility, are at a disadvantage under this rating system because many students who are just starting to learn English do not perform as well on the standardized tests. In addition, the Realtor's felt that there are many positive aspects of ACPS that are not widely known, and that the school system should focus on getting this message out to the community.
4. **There are many schools with higher ratings outside Alexandria:** An examination of [greatschool.org](http://greatschool.org) ratings supports Realtor observations about the perception of Alexandria schools. There are currently no schools within ACPS that have a [greatschools.org](http://greatschools.org) rating higher than 6 on a scale of 1 to 10. Figure 1 illustrates how Alexandria schools are perceived relative to schools in neighboring Arlington County and Fairfax County. The fact that there are so many options for highly regarded schools proximate to Alexandria but outside of its borders will likely have a dampening effect on school enrollment. An improvement to the reputation could shift this trend and put upward pressure on enrollment. However even with a better school reputation, there is a limit to the number of families Alexandria could capture because the proportion of single-family homes is much lower than neighboring jurisdictions and is not likely to increase.

**School Ratings within 10 Miles of Alexandria** (scale: 1 = lowest rating, 10 = highest rating)



Source: [greatschools.org](http://greatschools.org)