



FY25 Mid-Year Report

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A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Paula Fynboh". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Paula Fynboh, Executive Director

Overview

Aspire is celebrating our 30th anniversary this year, as well as finishing the last year of our current three-year strategic plan (July 2022-June 2025). Halfway through our program year, we're pleased to announce that this has already been a year of growth and impact for Aspire. We have built on the long-standing work and partnerships that Aspire has established in the Arlington community, allowing us to serve more students than ever before with rich, engaging learning opportunities that grow their confidence and ability.

Last year, Aspire piloted afterschool program sites at Randolph and Drew Elementary Schools, two Title I elementary schools in South Arlington. Because of last year's success and the urgent demand for high-quality holistic academic programming available at no cost to students and their families, **Aspire opened an additional classroom at each of these school sites** with the support of new funding through the state of Virginia! These new sites are a big deal: they are a testament to Aspire's impact and innovation, and they are already making a critical difference for students in our community.

When we developed our current strategic plan in 2022, students and families told us to keep doing what we were doing, but do it for more students. **Aspire's enrollment this year has reached 140 3rd-8th grade students** across three sites, and we'll be increasing that number this spring. By the end of the school year, we'll be serving 160 students in our afterschool program. **That's double what we were serving this time three years ago, which is truly remarkable.**

Aspire is proud to be a hands-on, direct service, and grassroots organization with strong ties to our community. We're grateful to all of our partners who make this work possible. In the words of one student, "Thank you for making the fun stuff happen!"

Program Highlights

Summer Program (June 2024 – August 2024)

The theme of Aspire's 2024 summer camp was "Avatar: The Last Airbender," which engaged with students' interests and passions, as many of our students love the Avatar TV show. Our program team chooses and develops a new theme for summer camp each year so students who return year after year can participate in new projects, lessons, and activities. Through this year's theme, **132 Aspire students** learned about the different elements, the environment, and the world around them.

Students received robust academic support to reinforce foundational skills and prevent summer learning loss. Our curriculum and approach are informed by partnerships with students' teachers and Aspire's 30 years of experience providing afterschool and summer programming.

Examples of lessons and activities from camp included:

- Designing advocacy posters to practice their persuasive writing skills and convince people to protect oceans and sea turtles.

- Constructing models of the solar system to get a better understanding of the location and environments of different planets by creating clay representations.
- Spending time each week tending to their class's plot in Aspire's Community Garden, and then using the food to make recipes like pesto and pickles.
- Working with volunteers from Jacobs (an engineering company) to build mini electric cars, water filtration systems, and windmills. After each group finished, they discovered how their individual projects connected into a whole sustainable city.

Learning ROCKS Afterschool Program (Ongoing)

So far, Aspire has supported **140 students** across all of our sites. In addition to daily one-on-one homework help, tutoring, and other academic supports aligned with each student's unique needs, programming included the following highlights:

- Our weekly special interest guilds got students to try new things and explore new passions. Popular guilds from the fall included a Gardening Guild where students tended to our Community Garden and transitioned the summer plants to an indoor garden station; an Origami Guild that helped students develop fine motor skills in a fun way while also learning about Japanese culture; and a Nature Guild where students documented the different plants they saw on their nature walks to the creek and also participated in a trash cleanup.
- Part of our new Literacy Curriculum includes regular "read-alouds" to improve comprehension, practice active listening, and expand vocabulary. Students take turns reading a book out loud and then summarize and discuss the material as a class. The middle school class enjoyed listening to *The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes*, and elementary students are reading books that include *The Day My Butt Went Psycho* and *Harry Potter*.

Student Demographics

We are proud to bring together a diverse group of students. Among them, **99% are students of color** (58% Latinx, 14% Black-American, 10% African, 15% Other/Mixed Race, 2% Asian, and 1% Caucasian). Our students overwhelmingly represent low-income households (**98%**). 50% speak Spanish at home and **62% speak a language other than English at home**. Over half of students report that their parents are not able to help them with their homework due to working multiple jobs and barriers in education and language. By offering programming directly in students' communities at no cost to families, we are ensuring program access and honoring our racial and social equity and access values.

Growth and Impact

Diagnostics & Testing

Aspire's evaluation plan includes: evaluating individual student outcomes with a focus on literacy, math, and social-emotional development; evaluating overall program effectiveness; and gathering student and family feedback. We use the "iReady" diagnostic tool to evaluate students in literacy and math at the beginning, middle, and end of the year. The tool provides granular data about students' strengths and areas for improvement, and ties directly to evidence-based indicators of long-term academic success, which helps us design personalized instruction plans. We distribute student and parent surveys to

measure social-emotional growth. In addition, we track student attendance and participation. All of this data informs future planning and program development.

Results from 2024 Summer Program:

- We served **132 students** for six weeks (7 hours per day) of educational summer learning camp (106 students in 3rd through 5th grades and 26 middle school students).
- Students had an average attendance rate of **72%**.
- Among students who participated in all six weeks of summer camp and had testing data from the spring of 2024 and the fall of 2024:
 - **87%** maintained or improved their reading level over the summer break.
 - **65%** maintained or improved their math level over the summer break.
- 57 high school students volunteered 1,700+ hours to support Aspire's summer camp, and we're proud of the fact that 13% were former Aspire students who returned to mentor the younger children going through the same program that they did.

The success of Aspire's summer learning time was also evident through positive feedback from teachers and schools as students returned to school this fall better prepared for the school day. One parent shared **"I also want to publicly thank you all for all that you guys did during the summer. It really proved successful according to our beginning of the year conferences, so thank you all!!!"**

Literacy

After piloting a new literacy curriculum last year that teaches phonics through Structured Literacy, our team reviewed the data and has refined the program to best meet the needs of our students. Based on their beginning-of-year testing and the domains where students show the most room for improvement, Aspire is focusing on phonics, the relationship between letters and sounds, especially combinations of letters such as diphthongs (combinations of two vowels in one syllable to create a single sound) and digraphs (combining two consonants to make a new sound in a single syllable).

We have also been working on prefixes to show students how common prefixes can help them understand the meaning of a word (such as re-, mis-, and dis-). At the same time, we try to address the students' biggest knowledge gap, which is reading comprehension. We do this through read-alouds and help students make connections with and between characters, make inferences and predictions, and learn new vocabulary.

Results from our beginning-of-year testing:

- **87%** of students are one or more grade levels behind in reading and **62%** of students are two or more grade levels behind.
 - These numbers continue to be significantly higher than they were pre-pandemic, when 49% of students tested below grade level.
- Of the **13%** of students who are on or above grade level in reading, **67%** of them are returning Aspire students.

STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math)

STEM skills are critical for our students to develop at a young age. Providing students with engaging STEM programming sparks students' curiosity, builds their confidence, and helps them build skills that are relevant to STEM-related high school, college, and career pathways. Based on our beginning-of-year testing, we've seen that the majority of our students are behind in their basic math facts. To address this, we are spending extra time this year memorizing multiplication tables and explaining algebraic thinking. Additionally, some students still need support with understanding place value and adding and subtracting numbers with decimals.

Results from our beginning-of-year testing:

- **90%** of students are one or more grade levels behind in math and **56%** of students are two or more grade levels behind.
- Of the **10%** of students who are on or above grade level in math, **100%** of them are returning Aspire students.

Social-Emotional Development

Additionally, our beginning-of-year survey showed that many Aspire students do not feel confident in their reading ability and overall academics, which mirrors what we see in the classroom. This lack of confidence spills over into their engagement in the classroom. We work to mitigate this by setting high standards, normalizing failure, and fostering curiosity alongside our reading curriculum, STEM projects, and hands-on lessons.

Results from our beginning-of-year testing:

- **68%** of elementary school students feel anxious when taking reading comprehension tests
- Less than half (**38%**) of middle school students feel comfortable about their study skills all of the time.
- If they weren't able to attend Aspire, our students most commonly say they would be watching TV, playing video games, or eating snacks.
- **57%** of elementary students and **91%** of middle school students report their parents cannot always help with homework due to working multiple jobs or having language/education barriers.
- When asked how they feel about reading, students shared that it can be frustrating because "I don't get the words right," "I have to ask for help with some words," "I don't like, it can be hard," and "Some words are hard or don't make sense."
- When asked what they like most about Aspire, students this fall shared that they liked "the nice, hardworking teachers," "having fun and learning," and "being with friends."

Health and Wellness

At Aspire, we believe that healthy bodies support healthy minds. That's why we provide students with a free daily hot meal, thanks to our partners at the Capital Area Food Bank and Kitchen of Purpose. That's also why students participate in regular nutrition lessons on topics such as reading nutrition labels and learning about the different food groups. We're also committed to providing students with the

opportunity to move their bodies and get active, whether that's through soccer games during Free Choice time, a Double Dutch championship, or a weekly Sports guild.

Results from the first half of FY25:

- During Aspire's summer camp, we served 2,240 meals to students and 2,800 snacks.
- Across all three sites, Aspire has served a total of 9,000 meals during the first half of the 2024-2025 school year.

Community Stories

Our Students

Marta, a rising fourth-grade student from our 2024 summer camp, was thrilled to learn more about the different elements. One afternoon, she was in the Arts and Crafts room with an AmeriCorps member. As they made bracelets and sketched, she talked about her summer school classes in the public schools. "Summer school is nothing like Aspire!" she said. "The teacher just makes us sit down and get right to work! I prefer Aspire because we have Mat Meetings and time to play! Aspire's more fun!"

By making our lessons hands-on and incorporating some free choice time into the day, Aspire instilled a love of learning into Marta. After coming from their time at school, whether that be a morning of summer school or a full day during the school year, it's important for students to be able to engage in fun activities that encourage them to stay engaged in learning. By being that "fun" learning space for students, we ensure that Aspire is a place where they feel safe and able to try new things.

Additionally, we have seen great improvement with one of our 4th grade students, Alex, who joined our program last year. When he started at Aspire, it was the middle of the school year and he had just moved. Alex is an English Language Learner (ELL) student, and struggled with reading comprehension: he was at a kindergarten level during Aspire's testing. Now, at the beginning of this school year, he tested at a 3rd grade level! He improved three grade levels of reading in just a few months, thanks to Aspire's summer learning camp and afterschool program, and is continuing to make progress this school year.

Our Families

Aspire knows that learning doesn't stop at school, or even after school. For students to see true growth, they need to be supported in all aspects of their lives, which is why Aspire provides one-on-one and group programming for our parents. This programming includes providing parents with the tools they need to support their children (such as workshops on how to read a report card), as well as individual support in accessing community resources and navigating the school system.

So far this year, we hosted an orientation meeting at each of our three program sites, designed so that parents could learn about Aspire, meet the team working with their children, and ask questions. We also partnered with Carlin Springs Elementary School to host three meetings to provide parents with the tools to navigate parent/teacher conferences, understand report cards, and more.

Our Parent and Community Engagement Coordinator also shared how recently, a family came by Aspire. They had just moved, and weren't familiar with the school system here or how to get signed up. They didn't know which school their child was supposed to go to or how to get places in Arlington. Our coordinator worked with them for three hours, getting them registered for Aspire and the documentation they need to register for school, telling them where to go for different resources, giving them maps, and helping them feel prepared.

Our Volunteers

Aspire relies on volunteers to provide personalized support to students who can benefit from highly individualized attention. One of our adult volunteers shared, "The reason I volunteer is because I want to be able to pay forward the support, I've gotten throughout the years and give back to the community I live in. Growing up, many volunteers, teachers, and mentors supported me through my education and career. As a child of immigrants and a first-generation college kid, I want to be a rung on the ladder of the growth of the next generation."

Many former Aspire students who are now in high school have continued to stay involved with our program through volunteering. One of them shared, "What I like about Aspire is just how welcoming it is. It helped me grow. When you come here, you just turn into a different person. I choose to volunteer here to just help as people did for me, I try to be patient, be kind to them. I want to give back and help these little kids grow, just how they did for me in the past."

School Partners

Aspire is thrilled to deepen our partnership with Arlington Public Schools this year as we open an additional classroom at both Drew and Randolph Elementary Schools. In addition to allowing us to serve more students, we have also been able to work more closely with our school partners to plan enrichment activities and analyze the results of our programming.

Carol Sabatino, with Arlington Public Schools, said "Students who attend Aspire regularly are growing and we see at school their confidence is growing, specifically, because they're able to come here after school and receive help with homework, tutoring, enrichment experiences, field trips. Those all build their background knowledge, and they're standing a little taller, they're more confident in their reading skills."

Additionally, the Social Worker at one of our partner elementary schools referred a student to Aspire recently who was struggling with some behavior issues. She told us how much the school appreciates Aspire and how when they referred this student to Aspire in the fall, she was very timid and wouldn't participate in class. Now she talks all the time and is making friends. They shared that they're excited to see what progress one of their new students will make at Aspire as well!

Volunteers, Partners, and Community Events

Aspire's work is a true community effort, and would not be possible without the generous support of many local community members, organizations, faith partners, and corporations that enrich the opportunities we are able to provide to students.

Since July 1st, volunteers have donated an incredible **2,250 hours** of their time to working with students, providing them with individualized support, helping our AmeriCorps members in the classrooms, and ensuring every student receives a daily snack and the help they need to thrive. 17 adult volunteers have donated their time, as well as 89 high school volunteers. We also had 13 individuals attend one of our Community Volunteer Nights and provide students with the opportunity to practice their reading skills out loud, improve their vocabulary, and increase their confidence. In addition, 24 community members helped wrap gifts for students in December.

Aspire has worked with a wide range of community partners to host special community events and enrich the programming we provide to students and families. These include:

- Aspire's winter holiday party, which included a community potluck for students and families. **430+** presents were donated to children their hand-picked wish list, and **85** families received groceries and grocery gift cards to support them over the holidays and school break. The gifts, groceries, and gift cards were made possible thanks to generous individuals and organizations like St. Mary's Episcopal Church, Morgan Stanley, and Our Lady Queen of Peace. Students also participated in fun stations like Pin the Nose on Frosty, decorating sugar cookies with the assistance of volunteers from Cake4Kids, and designing winter crafts.
- A Harvest Festival hosted by Marymount University for students at the Arlington Mill Community Center, where students had their faces painted, ate pizza, listened to a DJ, posed in front of a photo booth, and received balloon animals and candy. Students loved the opportunity to dress up and explore all the fun stations.
- A community garden located at Greenbrier Baptist Church, where students carefully tended to their class plot, made new recipes with food from the garden, and learned about the importance of environmental stewardship. Once the weather turned colder, Aspire moved some of these plants onto mobile indoor garden carts so students could continue their learning during the winter months.
- A hands-on STEM project led by volunteers from Jacobs, an engineering company, during summer camp. This two-day project gave students the opportunity to hear from current employees about their career paths and decisions to enter the STEM field. Then, they got to work with these engineers to put their skills into action with different projects based on their interests. Examples included building an electric car to see how far it could go, constructing a windmill that really moved, and creating water filtration systems.

Staff and Board

New Program Coordinators

Aspire has been thrilled to onboard four new full-time program coordinators to our staff this fall. Of these four coordinators, 75% formerly served as AmeriCorps members and bring that deep knowledge of

our students to their work. This is a testament to not only the supportive work environment that Aspire provides but also our organization's commitment to hiring from our community and creating pathways for AmeriCorps members to become staff members.

These coordinators work at our school-based sites and will provide greater consistency to students year-over-year, increase institutional knowledge, and ensure that students at these sites receive high-quality, individualized support. Their duties include managing student/program data, leading classroom lessons, coaching AmeriCorps members, and coordinating with parents, students, and school staff.

Demographics

We are proud to have a team that reflects the identities, cultures, races, and life experiences of students and families. For example, 58% of our staff and 64% of our AmeriCorps members represent BIPOC communities, 42% of staff are former AmeriCorps members, 56% of our AmeriCorps members are local community members, and 100% of our senior program staff are bilingual in English and at least one other language.

Each of our board members also brings a variety of experiences, perspectives, and identities. 58% of our board identify as BIPOC, 37% have lived experience with the educational opportunity gap, and 68% identify as women. Among board leadership, 40% identify as Black and 60% identify as women.

New Initiatives

Makerspace

In 2024, we completed the first phase of fundraising for our 1,400 square foot "Makerspace" and submitted the permitting plans to Arlington County. Construction will begin this spring, and we have plans to open the space by the summer. We are currently fundraising for the supplies to furnish the space, such as workstations, tables, seating, and more materials to make the space a flexible learning environment for students. The space will allow us to:

- Grow to support more students and have a meeting place for staff, students, and families.
- Incorporate science labs, coding classes, video/design projects, robotics demonstrations, structured play, and other interactive activities into our programming. In addition to being fun, these STEM activities will introduce students to new skills and technologies that are relevant to STEM-related high school, college, and career pathways.
- Expand our hands-on project-based learning components.
- Welcome guest presenters in fields such as healthcare, engineering, culinary arts, and more.

Serving a Diverse Community

Aspire is building on our existing training programs that focus on cultural competency and highlight systemic issues impacting Aspire families. This allows our team to bring an ever deeper understanding and respect when serving families. Using feedback from last year on which sessions were the most valuable and what topics people wanted to hear more about, we have so far had presenters discuss how

our students celebrate different religious and cultural holidays, the history of the educational opportunity gap and how reading is a civil rights issue, and lead a cultural competency training.

Aspire was also one of seven participants selected to be part of a 9-month program providing select frontline human services nonprofit organizations in Arlington with critical capacity building through small workshops and one-on-one mentoring on cultural competency. Four of our team members are participating in this program and bringing back the lessons they are learning to the whole team to ensure that our organization is building on and improving our cultural competency efforts.

Additionally, Aspire launched a Values in Action Award program for our team to recognize our members who are putting our organizational values of Growth, Connection, Equity & Access, Excellence, and Fun & Caring into action. Our staff and AmeriCorps members can be nominated to receive this award and receive a \$10 gift card for their work and contributions that demonstrate a shining example of our values. This program is designed to continue incorporating our values into our everyday work, as well as to lift up team members who are going above and beyond. We've already handed out 24 awards and look forward to sharing more about the results of this program at the end of the year.

Awards and Recognition

Aspire's Executive Director, Paula Fynboh, was selected to a leadership program at Georgetown University's Center for Public and Nonprofit Leadership, designed to strengthen the leadership capacity of individuals working in nonprofits.

Aspire also maintains a four-star (97%) rating on Charity Navigator and a Candid Platinum Seal of Transparency. These top ratings reflect our effective financial management and accountability, program impact, leadership, and culture.

Finances

Overview

Aspire has been honored to be the recipient of several highly selective grants this fiscal year, including from the Virginia State Assembly for our school-based sites and multi-year funding from the New York Life Foundation for our middle school classroom. Aspire also raised a record amount during our 30th anniversary fall fundraising event, with a total of 15 corporate and foundation sponsors and 4 new funding partners. Additionally, we have surpassed budget goals for our most recent individual giving campaigns.

While impressive, Aspire continues to have the largest student waiting list in our organization's history and many Aspire students are entering Aspire behind pre-pandemic cohorts and experiencing many mental wellness and systemic challenges that only appear to be getting worse. We have seen from our internal testing, Arlington Public Schools data, and nationwide trends that students right now are facing challenges in their academic performances. These challenges are even greater for the historically underserved students that Aspire serves. In addition to students testing further behind, they also need

more intensive support in a wider range of subjects, including STEM. This places greater demands on our program team to develop and update curriculum, train our team on the specific domains where students most need support, and recruit and retain team members with experience in these fields.

Our current funding will help support some of our growth goals moving forward, but it doesn't cover the full extent of our growth and our commitment to pay equity for our staff and AmeriCorps members. While we work in close partnership with Arlington Public Schools, we do not receive any funding from them. Our community and supporters have made it possible for us to reach this point, and as we continue into 2025 and beyond, we will continue implementing a fundraising plan that leverages a diverse stream of funding for different aspects of Aspire's programming. Our goal is to continue to grow to serve more students, but that requires up-front investments in staff, programmatic, and operational costs.

Looking Ahead

Aspire has many exciting activities and events planned for this spring, including implementing our three-month project-based learning curriculum for students, taking students on educational field trips, and planning for our summer camp.

Organizationally, our annual spring Coffee Chat series will have a new focus this year, with each of the three sessions honing in on a specific topic tying into Aspire's work, including a virtual panel on the educational opportunity gap, a discussion of the importance of STEM education, and a documentary screening and community discussion. We invite you to attend one or more of these events. More information can be found on the events page of our website at aspireafterschool.org/events.

During the rest of Aspire's fiscal year, we will be reviewing the results of our current three-year strategic plan and creating our new three-year strategic plan with feedback from and thoughtful listening sessions with our parents, students, alumni, staff, AmeriCorps members, and Board of Director/Board Emeritus members. We look forward to sharing this plan with our funding and programmatic partners in the summer of 2025.