



# BUILDING RESILIENT INNOVATORS



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# ANNUAL REPORT

JULY 1, 2024 – JUNE 30, 2025

# FINAL REPORT



Organization Name:

Aspire Afterschool Learning  
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Reporting Period:

FY25: July 1, 2024 - June 30, 2025

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Paula Fynboh", is positioned above a horizontal line.

Paula Fynboh, Executive Director



## Summary & Overview

This has been a year of growth, impact, and resiliency for Aspire. We celebrated the organization's 30th anniversary and finished our three-year strategic plan (July 2022 - June 2025), having met all goals outlined in the plan. We continued to build upon the long-standing work and partnerships that Aspire has established in the Arlington community.

***"My heart will forever be thankful for every single teacher... kids don't see Aspire as just a place to be, it is HOME."***

**- Aspire Parent**

In September, Aspire opened two additional classrooms at Title 1 elementary schools in South Arlington (one classroom at Randolph Elementary and one at Drew Elementary) with support from new Virginia state funding. 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. As a result, we served more students this year than ever before. We also completed the build-out of a new Makerspace, which will allow us to expand our STEM programming and partnerships.

Unfortunately, Aspire was one of 1,000 organizations nationwide to have our **AmeriCorps funding cut in April**, and we were required to cease all AmeriCorps programming immediately. **While this has been an incredibly challenging time, we quickly pivoted programmatically, designed and implemented an effective fundraising and communications plan, and harnessed the energy and support of over 300 community partners, funders/donors, Aspire parents, former AmeriCorps members, local businesses, community leaders, and media partners to build awareness, raise funds, and support our families. This is a true testament to the role Aspire plays as a pillar of the Arlington community.**

Driven by a deep commitment to these students, our AmeriCorps members willingly returned as volunteers for several days to keep the classrooms open and continue serving students and families. We only had to close program for three days as our leadership team finalized a plan to bring back 15 of our 17 former AmeriCorps members on part-time, temporary contracts and pivot to an interim program staffing model.

We kept our afterschool program running at full capacity through the end of the school year, and are serving our planned 140 students through our summer programming. Looking ahead, we are still raising funds to fill the AmeriCorps cuts and are determining if we will need to reduce the number of students we serve for the 2025-2026 school year.

Aspire is a hands-on, direct service, grassroots organization with strong ties to our community. We are proud of our growth and impact over the past year, and are grateful for our partners and supporters. Even during these challenging times, we remain deeply committed to children and families in Arlington.





## Program Overview

### **Results from 2024 Summer Program (July 2024 - August 2024):**

Our no-cost summer camp provided robust academic support to reinforce foundational skills and prevent summer learning loss, while incorporating engaging activities that spark curiosity, introduce students to new topics, and connect students to their community. The camp theme was “Avatar: The Last Airbender,” which we picked because many of our students love Avatar. It served as an opportunity to reinforce crucial academic lessons with a theme that captured the students’ attention and imagination.

- We served **132 students** for six weeks (7 hours/day) of educational summer learning camp (106 in 3rd-5th grades and 26 in 6th-8th grades). Students’ average attendance rate was **72%**.
- Among students who participated in all six weeks of summer camp and had testing data from spring and fall 2024, **87%** maintained or improved their reading level over the summer break, and **65%** maintained or improved their math level over the summer break.
- 57 high school students volunteered to support Aspire’s summer camp. Among them, 13% were former Aspire students who returned to mentor the younger children.

### **Results from 2024-2025 Afterschool Program (September 2024 - June 2025):**

We provided the only daily, accessible, academic afterschool program for students in 3rd-8th grade offered at no cost to Arlington families. Programming included homework help, individualized tutoring, reading and STEM activities, social-emotional lessons, group projects, hands-on experiential learning, a daily hot meal, and more.

- We supported a record **154 students**, including 22 at Randolph Elementary, 30 at Drew Elementary, and 102 at Arlington Mill (76 elementary school students and 26 middle school students). Students had an average attendance rate of **70%**.
- Programming took place over 37 weeks (not including school breaks), with 162 days and 500+ hours of direct service.

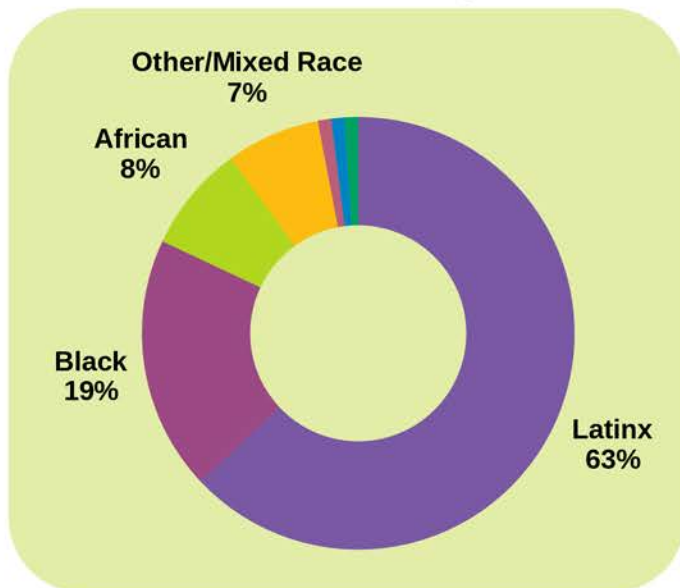




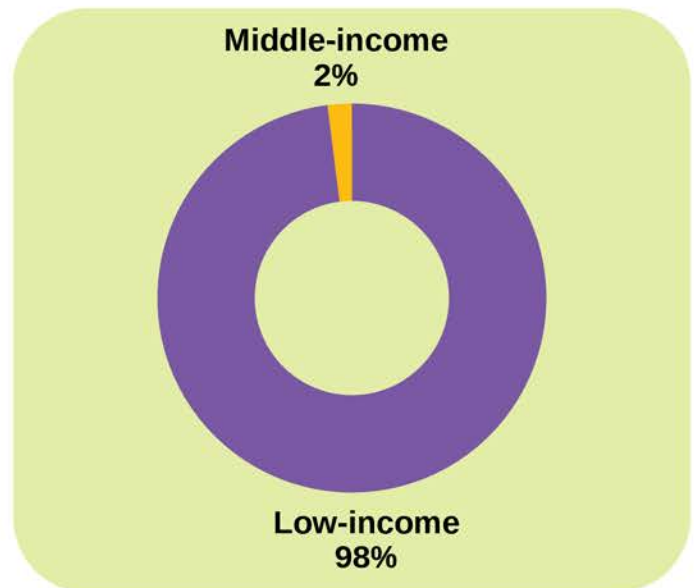
## Student Demographics

We are proud to bring together a diverse group of students. We served a total of 205 unduplicated students across all programming over the past year. Among them, **99% are students of color** (63% Latinx, 19% Black-American, 8% African, 7% Other/Mixed Race, 1% Asian, 1% Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, and 1% Caucasian). Furthermore, **98% represent low-income households**, **62% speak a language other than English at home** (our students collectively speak 7+ languages), and 23% are learning English as a second language, have IEPs, and/or have documented disabilities. Over half of students report that their parents are not able to help them with their homework due to working multiple jobs and/or barriers in education and language. By offering programming directly in students' communities at no cost, we build community connections and reduce barriers to participation.

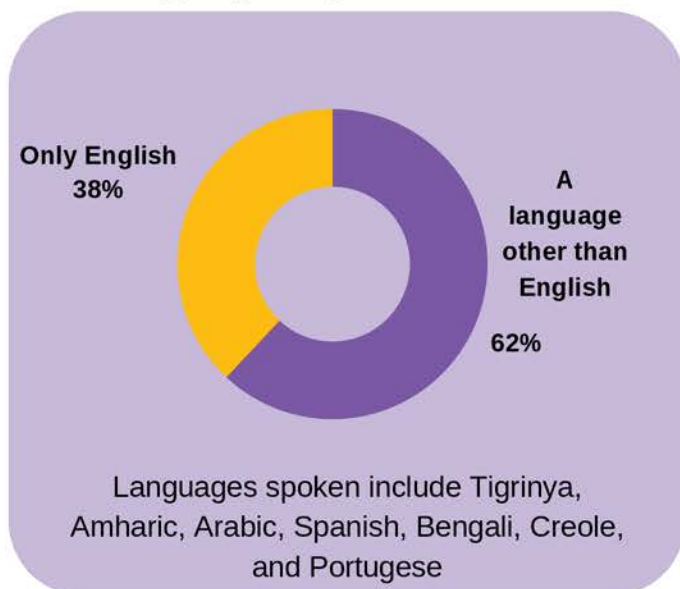
### Race & Ethnicity



### Low-Income Households



### Languages Spoken at Home





## Programming, Growth, and Impact

### Literacy

Literacy is a crucial skill, particularly as students transition from learning how to read to reading to learn. We provide at least 30 minutes of daily literacy programming, including read-alouds, literacy games, group activities/lessons, and independent reading, which helps students make connections with and between characters, make inferences/predictions, practice skills they learn in school, improve reading comprehension, and learn vocabulary. We use weekly assessments to gauge students' progress.

Research shows that a Structured Literacy method (which emphasizes phonics) is the most effective way of teaching students to read, including students who are learning English and students with dyslexia. After piloting our Structured Literacy curriculum in 2023-24, we made adjustments this year based on student data. We have now fully implemented this curriculum and are seeing strong student growth.

#### Impact and Outcomes:

- When students entered the program in Fall 2024, 87% tested one or more grades behind in reading and 62% were two or more grades behind. By the end of the year, **67% of students improved their reading level or tested at grade level.**
- We **doubled the number of students reading on/above grade level**, and doubled the number of students whose vocabulary knowledge was on/above grade level over the course of the year.
- We saw a 35% increase in students testing above grade level for phonics.
- We see the greatest growth in students who attend our program for multiple years. For example:
  - Among the students testing on or above grade level, **69%** are returning Aspire students.
  - One-third of our middle school students are reading at or *above* grade level, and **84% of middle school students improved or finished on grade level.** Our middle school students have typically been with Aspire for the longest.





## STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math)

STEM programming can spark students' curiosity, build their confidence, and help them build skills that are relevant to STEM-related high school, college, and career pathways. Aspire's STEM programming includes activities like Math Mondays, math relay races, hands-on building activities, science labs, and practice coming up with hypotheses and conducting experiments through our annual science fair. Based on our beginning-of-year testing, we saw that the majority of our students were behind in their basic math facts. To address this, we spent extra time this year memorizing multiplication tables and explaining algebraic thinking. Additionally, some students needed extra support with understanding place value and adding and subtracting numbers with decimals.

### Impact and Outcomes:

- When students entered the program in Fall 2024, 90% were one or more grade levels behind and 56% were two or more grade levels behind. By the end of the year, **56% of students had improved their math level or tested at grade level.**
- Over 50% of our middle school students tested on or above their grade level in math, which is up from 20% at the beginning of the year.
- Out of the 23% of students testing on or above grade level, **78% are returning Aspire students.**

***"You get to build it, test it, and see if it works."***

***"We learned that we needed teamwork to succeed."***

***"We get to do really creative stuff and it's interesting!"***





## Social-Emotional Development, Health, and Wellness

Aspire takes a holistic approach to student success, which emphasizes the well-being of the child, not just their academic success. We also integrate social-emotional learning (SEL) principles into our classrooms by facilitating daily SEL lessons to help students develop social-emotional skills and habits. Furthermore, we consistently create an environment for students to identify their emotions and build strong relationships, and we provide additional 1:1 support for students as needed. We have also continued our robust professional development program and provide training in trauma-informed care and diversity, equity, and inclusion to help our team respond to the needs of our students and care for each other and themselves.

To ensure the holistic well-being and health of our students, we also provide a free, nutritious daily hot meal, thanks to our partners at the Capital Area Food Bank and Kitchen of Purpose. Additionally, we incorporate physical movement and play through activities like soccer games during Free Choice time, Double Dutch, or a weekly sports guild.

Our beginning-of-year survey showed that many Aspire students did 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 and at school. Our work to mitigate this includes setting high standards, normalizing failure, and fostering curiosity alongside our reading curriculum, STEM projects, and hands-on lessons.



### Impact and Outcomes:

- At the beginning of the year, 68% of elementary school students felt anxious when taking reading comprehension tests. But by the end of the year, we flipped that statistic – **61% of students never or rarely felt anxious about taking reading tests!**
- At the beginning of the year, less than half (38%) of middle school students felt good about their study skills. By the end of the year, **100% reported feeling good about their study skills!**
- Other highlights from our end of year student survey include: **94% of elementary school students feeling comfortable raising their hands in class, 94% getting their homework done on time, and 90% feeling ready for school.**
- Among our middle school students, **80% reported that they completed their homework on time** in our year-end survey and **90% said that they have a positive attitude about themselves.**
- **56% of students participated in one or more active movement guilds**, such as soccer, badminton, yoga, or touch rugby. This year, we offered 9 separate active movement guilds, all of which saw high levels of interest and engagement from our students.



## Family Programming

Aspire recognizes that our students are members of families and of the community. To ensure that we are holistically meeting their needs and setting them up for well-rounded success, we help connect students' parents and caregivers to the resources they need to feel empowered to support their children. This includes parent orientation meetings, which allow parents to meet the team working with their children and ask questions. We also provide 1:1 support on accessing resources like SNAP benefits, advocating for their child's learning needs, and navigating the school system. Additionally, we provide group programming based on parents' interests that provides parents with tools to navigate their child's education, connect them with community resources, and/or grow their professional development skills. This year, we partnered with the Healthy Community Action Team (HCAT), Thrive, Doorways, Arlington Public Library, and others to ensure our meetings met parents' interests.

### Impact and Outcomes:

- We reached 136+ parents across all of our parent engagement programming.
- We hosted 16 parent engagement programs/events.

## 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, ties directly to evidence-based indicators of long-term academic success, and 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.

## Community Stories

### Our Students

Our students are hardworking, curious, and ready to grow and learn. For example, in Fall 2023, we had a brother (3rd grade at the time) and sister (4th grade at the time) who started at Aspire speaking almost no English and testing at a kindergarten/1st grade level. Now, after two years of Aspire's intensive support, both are testing on grade level for reading and math! They have blossomed from shy students to social butterflies, both at Aspire and at school (as their parents and teachers have shared with us).

We saw amazing improvement in our middle school class. One of our 6th grade students started off the school year testing one grade level behind in reading and math. Thanks to dedicated support, daily homework check ins, and study skill practice, she ended the year on a 9th grade level in math and reading! That's 3 grade levels above her age!





## Our Families

When parents heard about the impact of Aspire cuts to AmeriCorps, many shared messages of support and compassion for our team, reflecting on their experience with Aspire and what a difference it has made to them. In their own words, they shared:

- “My heart will forever be thankful for every single teacher... kids don’t see Aspire as just a place to be, it is HOME.”
- Aspire is “a program that helps my children, a program that unites the community, and often is an oasis for parents that work and don’t have another place for their children to be safe.”
- “Our daughter attended program for the first time last year, and attended summer camp afterwards. This year at parent teacher conferences was the first time her teachers have ever told us, ‘whatever you’re doing with her right now is working, so keep doing it...’ You are really important to her and to us.”
- “At Aspire, my son improved a lot in reading, and math. More importantly, his self-esteem grew and now he knows that there are things that are difficult to learn, but Aspire gives him the extra support he needs to get ahead.”

## 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 stayed involved through volunteering. One 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.**”

## Our School Partners

Our expanded partnerships at Drew and Randolph Elementary Schools have allowed us to serve more students, align our programming more closely to the school curriculum, and partner with schools to plan enrichment activities and analyze the results of our programming. Local educators have shared what a difference Aspire makes for individual students and for the educational landscape in Arlington.

Dr. Emma Violand-Sánchez, former Chair of the Arlington Public Schools Board, shared that “For over 30 years, as an educator and School Board Member, I have admired Aspire... **Aspire is, and always has been, a critical part of our community, supporting our children in their learning and giving them the opportunity to dream and become.**”



Tracy Gaither, principal of Dr. Charles R. Drew Elementary School, shared that “**Aspire Afterschool Learning Program has been an essential support for students...** Their partnership with our school has created a space where students are not only excited to attend the afterschool program but are also deeply engaged in meaningful experiences. Through project-based learning, relationship-building, and dedicated homework support, **Aspire empowers our students to thrive academically and socially.** Our families rely on this critical extension of the school day, and we are proud and grateful that Aspire has chosen to invest in the Drew community. Their presence makes a lasting difference.”

Liza Burrell-Aldana, Claremont Immersion Elementary School Principal, said, “**Aspire has been an invaluable partner in our mission to provide students with opportunities that empower them as learners and leaders.** The care, structure, and commitment your team brings to our school community is felt deeply by our staff, students, and families.”

### **Volunteers, Partners, and Community Events**

During FY25, **242 volunteers donated an incredible 2,882 hours** of their time to Aspire. This number includes adult volunteers who donated their time on a consistent basis, high school volunteers, and community event volunteers who provided support like working with students 1:1 to practice their reading or wrapping gifts for the holiday party. **We're proud that across our afterschool and summer programming, 26% of our volunteers are former Aspire students.**

We also worked with a range of community partners to host special events and lessons, such as:

- Aspire's winter holiday party, which included a community potluck for students and families. **430+** presents were donated to children from their hand-picked wish list, and **85** families received groceries and grocery gift cards to support them over the holidays and school break. This was made possible thanks to individuals and organizations like St. Mary's Episcopal Church, Morgan Stanley, and Our Lady Queen of Peace. Students also participated in activities like Pin the Nose on Frosty, decorating cookies with Cake4Kids, and creating winter crafts.
- A Harvest Festival hosted by Marymount University at the Arlington Mill Community Center, where students had their faces painted, danced to a DJ, posed at a photo booth, and received balloon animals. Students loved dressing up and exploring 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. Aspire moved some of these plants onto mobile indoor garden carts during the winter months so that students could continue their learning.





Other partnerships included:

- Hands-on projects led by corporate volunteers from Jacobs, SAS, Nestle, Strategic Engineering Solutions, and other partners. These projects gave students the opportunity to hear about various career paths, and then work on projects like building an electric car, creating a vision board for their future career, and designing water filtration systems.
- A financial literacy session led by EagleBank to teach middle school students what it means to create a budget, balance expenses, and have a credit card.
- Volunteer Days with local businesses. Aspire participated in the Arlington Chamber of Commerce's Volunteer Day and welcomed volunteers from the Ritz-Carlton of Pentagon City, MasterCard, and the Arlington Community Federal Credit Union. We also hosted volunteers from Deloitte for their Impact Day, where they provided career coaching to our former AmeriCorps members and worked with middle school students on creating vision boards.
- A visit from Lead, a program for established leaders, organized by the Leadership Center of Arlington. During their Education Day, participants visited Aspire to hear from students about what problems they want to solve and help guide them into ways that they can take action.



## **Staff and Board**

### **New Program Coordinators**

This fall, Aspire was thrilled to onboard four new full-time program coordinators. Three previously served as AmeriCorps members in the 2023-24 school year/summer. This is a testament to our commitment to hiring from our community and creating career pipelines for diverse and talented people early in their careers. 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.



## Demographics

Aspire is proud to have a team that reflects the identities, cultures, races, and life experiences of students and families. For example: 55% of our permanent staff represent BIPOC communities, 45% are former AmeriCorps members, and 100% of our senior program staff are bilingual in English and at least one other language. Of our former AmeriCorps members (15 of whom are still employed in temporary contracts), 41% identify as BIPOC and 47% are local community members. Furthermore, our board members bring a variety of experiences, perspectives, and identities. For example, 58% of our board identify as BIPOC, 37% have lived experience with the educational opportunity gap, and 68% identify as women. Among board leadership, 50% identify as Black and 50% identify as women.

## New Initiatives

### Makerspace

Aspire is excited to announce that after several years of planning, design, and fundraising, our new 1,400 square foot “Makerspace” is officially open. After finishing construction, the space during our six-week summer learning camp. We are still furnishing and equipping the space, but the space will allow us to:

- Expand our STEM programming to incorporate science labs, coding classes, video/design projects, robotics demonstrations, structured play, and other interactive activities. In addition to being fun, these 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.
- Deepen partnerships and welcome presenters in fields such as healthcare, engineering, and more.
- Grow to support more students in the future (as funding allows) and have a meeting place for staff, students, and families.

We finished the fundraising for this space before learning about the AmeriCorps funding cuts, so the funds dedicated to this space had already been allocated for this specific project. We are excited for how we can expand community and corporate partnerships in this new space, which will be particularly important as we navigate the post-AmeriCorps funding landscape.





## Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

Aspire centers diversity, equity, and inclusion in all that we do and are deeply committed to living out our values. In addition to weaving these values into our programming and planning, we advance DEI through trainings and initiatives. This year, we built on the monthly DEI training program launched last year, focusing on cultural competency and highlighting systemic issues impacting Aspire families so our team can bring an ever deeper understanding and respect when supporting families. Topics focused on how our students celebrate religious and cultural holidays, the history of the educational opportunity gap, affordable housing, and more. In addition, Aspire launched a Values in Action Award program to further operationalize our values and recognize team members who are putting our organizational values of Growth, Connection, Equity & Access, Excellence, and Fun & Caring into action. Over the past year, we handed out over 60 awards. Furthermore, Aspire was one of seven participants selected to be part of Challenging Racism's DEI Capacity Building Program, a 9-month program providing frontline human services nonprofit organizations in Arlington with critical DEI capacity building through small workshops and 1:1 mentoring. Four team members participated and brought back the lessons they learned to the whole team to ensure that our organization is building on and improving our DEI efforts.



## Awards and Recognition

Aspire has been honored to receive several prestigious awards this year.

- Aspire won the **Arlington Chamber of Commerce's Best Nonprofit of the Year**. This award recognizes Aspire's leadership in the community, our long history of providing exceptional service to students and families, and our interest in and concern for the Arlington community.
- **Our Executive Director, Paula Fynboh, won the Leadership Center of Arlington's 2025 Torch Award for Ethical Leadership**, which recognizes a leader who "embodies ethical choices and behaviors in their professional career and community service."
- **Paula Fynboh was also 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 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.

In addition to these awards, Aspire has also been recognized in the community through media coverage (available at [www.aspireafterschool.org/media-coverage](http://www.aspireafterschool.org/media-coverage)) with **The Washington Post**, **The Washington Business Journal**, **PBS NewsHour**, **Virginia Public Media**, and more. Furthermore, Aspire was **named Arlington Magazine's Nonprofit Partner** for their Best of Arlington Party.



## **Finances**

Before the federal funding cuts to Aspire, we were on track to serve a record number of students while still contributing to our reserves to ensure our future sustainability. The AmeriCorps funding cuts in April left us with a significant, unexpected gap for the last two months of FY25 and going into FY26 (30% of our budget). Thanks to our strong leadership team, we were able to pivot quickly and have since raised over \$225,000 in just two months through a concentrated fundraising campaign.

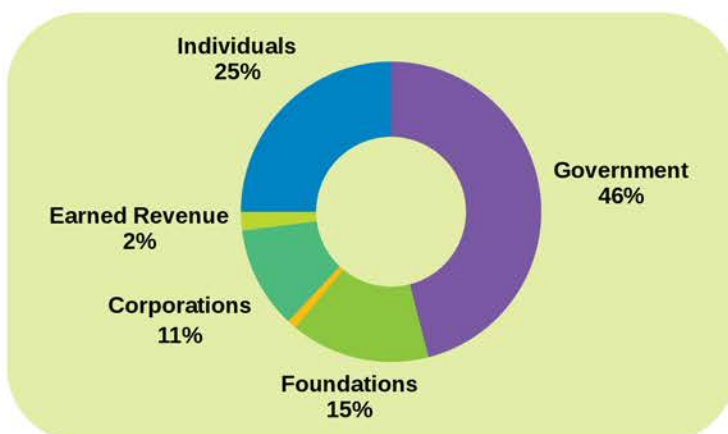
Because Aspire was planning to contribute to our reserves at the end of this fiscal year, we had a surplus of funds that our Board of Directors approved for emergency use, allowing us to bring on 15 of our 17 AmeriCorps members in temporary, part-time contracts. Thanks to these funds, and funds raised from the fundraising campaign, we were able to finish this school year and carry out our summer program at full student capacity. However, as we look towards the fall and next school year, we may have to reduce the number of classrooms that we are able to operate.

We leverage a diverse stream of funding to make our work possible, including public and private grants, individual donations, corporate and community sponsorships, and fundraising events. The following corporate and foundation funders contributed \$25,000 or more to Aspire this year: Amazon, the Washington Forrest Foundation, the Morris & Gwendolyn Cafritz Foundation, Morgan Stanley, the John Edward Fowler Memorial Foundation, and the New York Life Foundation. We further rely on in-kind donations, partner resources, and volunteers to offset costs and bring more services to students.

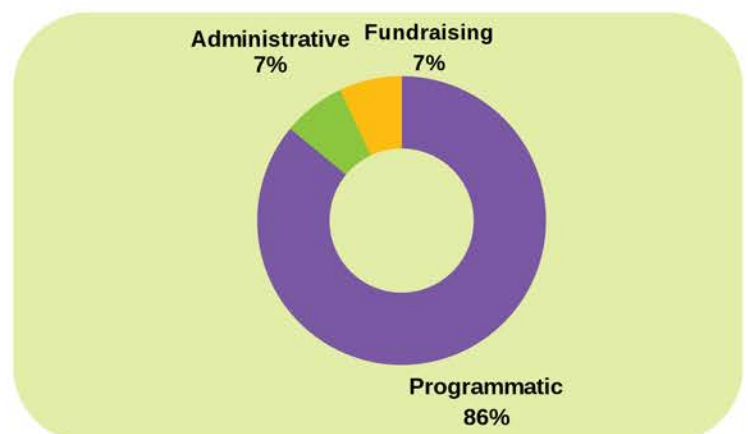
### **By the Numbers:**

- Total revenue: \$1,735,015; total expenses: \$1,505,035.
- This difference is attributed to an aggressive fundraising and community response, as well as shifting staffing after the federal funding cuts in May - June.
- Due in large part to that campaign, we surpassed our individual giving goals by over \$170,000 and our corporate revenue goals by more than \$5,000, allowing us to set aside most of our favorable variance into our reserve account to help bring greater sustainability over the next two years.
- This revenue also includes a record-breaking fall fundraising gala.
- 100% of our Board contributed financially to Aspire.
- The AmeriCorps funding cuts left us with a \$135,279 gap in our AmeriCorps funding for FY25.
- We brought in 10 new funding partners during the year and were awarded several highly selective grants, 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.

### **Revenue**



### **Expenses**





## Looking Ahead

Our board has approved a FY26 (July 2025 - June 2026) budget, and plans to reassess the budget and our 2026-2030 Strategic Roadmap during a retreat in August. At that time, we will evaluate our progress toward filling the AmeriCorps funding gap and determine if we need to reduce the number of classrooms that we are able to operate in FY26, which would result in us serving fewer students, thereby increasing our waitlist. While this may require us to take a step back in the coming year, we know that this is only so we can take two steps forward in the future. Several of our key priorities over the next year will include:

- Deepening our social-emotional/mental health and STEM programming, while maintaining our strong focus on literary and other crucial areas of academic and personal development.
- Deepening our parent engagement programming and support for students' parents and caregivers, which is crucial at a time when so many families are facing acute challenges.
- Exploring new staffing and funding models now that our AmeriCorps funding has been cut. We are thinking creatively and holistically about how we can staff our programs in a way that is financially and programmatically realistic and sustainable, ensures that our programming continues to be high-quality and impactful, ensures that our students continue to receive personalized support from caring and qualified individuals, and meets broader community needs and effectively engages partners. We believe this will likely present opportunities for Aspire to create workforce development opportunities and career pipelines for people in the Arlington community. Over the next 6 months, we will be exploring these ideas with existing and new local partners, organizations in other regions who have implemented similar programs, pro-bono strategy consultants, and funders who understand the landscape and could potentially support the testing and implementation of new staffing models.

Even in these challenging and uncertain times, Aspire is committed to providing our students with a joyful, safe space where they can go to imagine new possibilities, new futures, and new horizons. Thank you for being part of that community.

