

Making Virginia Stronger

Two years ago, Albemarle County Public Schools concluded a year-long study to update its strategic plan, meeting across the county with community and business leaders, parents, pre-K to college educators and government officials. The result of these in-depth discussions was agreement on a signal purpose—that schools should be all about preparing students to graduate having actively mastered the lifelong-learning skills they need to succeed as 21st century learners, workers and citizens.

In separate meetings with business leaders, their companion message was clear--high school and college graduates need to be better prepared to be immediate contributors when they are hired.

If Central Virginia is to grow and prosper by attracting the high quality, growth-oriented businesses forecast in the county's own targeted industry study, the K-12 public education system has to be able to produce the talent that will fuel that expansion.

Governor Terry McAuliffe, in a visit to Albemarle County's Agnor-Hurt Elementary School in October, took the first step towards re-invigorating the partnership between the state and local schools. The Governor said his budget for the next biennium will propose increasing the state's contribution to a strong and innovative K-12 public educational system.

The importance of just such an increase is magnified by a review of alarming trend data. In 2008, revenue from the state supported 31 percent of Albemarle County's per pupil investment. Since then, the state's support has declined in five of seven years and now is approaching 27 percent. According to a JLRAC study this year, Virginia's school divisions are spending nine percent less on instruction in real terms than they did 10 years ago, teachers in Virginia earn less than teachers in most other states and divisions have slashed support for facility renovation and construction by 30 percent. This approach, the study posits, likely will hinder long-term effectiveness and efficiency.

Education Week's 2015 financial analysis found that in Virginia, three percent of taxable resources are devoted to education, on a par with Texas and below the investments being made by Mississippi, Alabama, Arkansas, South Carolina, Kentucky, West Virginia and Wyoming. Virginia ranks more than 20 percent below Maryland. The analysis also noted that Virginia's per pupil expenditure, adjusted for regional cost differences, is nearly 20 percent below the national average.

This sharp reduction in state support for education has had two immediate and painful consequences. The more regressive property tax burden has increased and innovative programs designed to prepare children for success in the global economy, such as universal world language instruction in elementary schools, have not been affordable.

We urge you as representatives of our children and their families and as catalysts for our county and our state's economic competitiveness to support increased funding for K-12 public education and to begin to restore a healthy, historic and more balanced partnership that positions all Virginians for prosperity.

Our Priorities

Fair and Equitable Composite Index

The state's composite index is an effective measure for the distribution of revenues to school divisions since it is based upon a locality's ability to pay for public education. A large portion of the index's value, 50 percent, is derived from real property tax assessments within the locality.

In Albemarle County, the composite index counts as revenue received by the county and available to the schools, monies that functionally are neither. The county's land use conservation program assesses eligible undeveloped properties at a fraction of their real value. Yet the composite index incorrectly assumes that the tax revenue received from these properties is based on full market value.

We support reform of the composite index that would include a real property assessment component to reflect the real property tax monies actually received by the locality. This reform will enable the composite index for all localities to fairly and accurately reflect the locality's ability to pay.

School Bus Safety Cameras

Motorists who ignore safety regulations by passing school buses that are stopped in order to board or discharge students continue to pose a serious risk to children throughout the county. A study by the school division's transportation department concluded that there are as many as 6,000 such violations over the course of the school year.

One remedy to this risk to children is the installation of cameras on school buses to identify the license plate number of cars that illegally pass a stopped school bus. Data from other areas of the country demonstrate that such violations diminish following the installation of a school bus safety camera program. A recent opinion from the state attorney general's office reaffirmed the need for the General Assembly to amend Virginia Code Section 46.2-844 to allow for violation notice by mail, similar to the provisions now in place for the traffic signal enforcement program and as authorized by Virginia Code Section 15.2-968.1.

Accountability and Assessment

The Albemarle County School Board wholeheartedly applauds the General Assembly's initial steps in reforming the Standards of Learning (SOL) program through the removal of five SOL tests at the elementary and middle school levels. We urge the General Assembly to take the next logical step in this process by eliminating all SOL tests in grades 3-12 not linked to federal reporting requirements, consistent with Senate Bill 1020 filed in 2014.

The SOL testing program fits an instructional model no longer relevant or adequate to the development of lifelong learning skills basic to the success in higher education and in the workforce. Despite recent improvements, the SOL program compels educators "to teach to the test," with an emphasis on an instruction model that rewards drill, memorization and multiple choice decision making. These fit an instructional model under which public education operated during the bulk of the prior century.

We support assessment methods that reinforce the interdisciplinary instructional model of the current century by promoting problem-solving, critical thinking and analysis, creativity, collaboration and communication skills. We propose the General Assembly authorize a pilot program in which a

representative number of school divisions partner with the state Department of Education to develop and demonstrate authentic assessment and accountability measures that more closely align curricula with 21st century skill requirements.

Reducing the Property Tax Burden

Since the recession of 2008, per pupil reductions in state funds for K-12 public education in Albemarle County have exceeded \$30 million in cumulative real terms. As state support for education has declined, local property taxes have increased, shifting more of the responsibility for financing local education to the more regressive tax on real estate.

Earlier this year, Albemarle County empaneled a citizen's advisory committee to explore revenue enhancing alternatives both to protect the quality of education and to introduce more fairness in the method by which it is financed.

We join with the Albemarle County Board of Supervisors and the Thomas Jefferson Planning District Commission in urging the General Assembly to pass legislation that would give counties the same authority as cities now have to generate revenue across a broader, more progressive base.

Participation by Non-Public School Students in Interscholastic Athletic Competition

We continue to have concerns about HB 1290, filed and approved last year that permits homeschool students to represent their local high school in athletic competition. We support equalizing opportunities for students who are legitimately home-schooled to participate in extracurricular school community activities and programs but have concerns about the potential for abuse of current Virginia High School Athletic League academic and good conduct eligibility requirements. We urge that any re-introduction of this bill be amended to include safeguards that ensure a uniform set of standards and their applicability for all students who seek to compete in interscholastic athletic competition.

Primary Elections

We continue to support the movement of June primary elections to no earlier than the third week in June to avoid disruptions to school operations.

Charter Schools

Albemarle County is home to two of the five charter schools in Virginia. These schools have broadened both choice and opportunities in the division by offering students valuable alternative learning environments. An essential element to the success of these schools and their students has been a strong and sharing partnership between school board and charter officials and staff that have enabled the charter schools to benefit from best practices throughout the division. Earlier this year, the school board renewed the charter agreement for our Community Public Charter School for five more years.

We support the establishment of charter schools that have demonstrated community support and that preserve choice and that benefit from a collaborative relationship with local public schools.

We oppose any actions that would disrupt this relationship by permitting external authorities to establish a charter school in a community without local school board approval.

Standards of Quality

The current Standards of Quality (SOQ) were designed and instituted in some cases, more than 40 years ago. They reflect the instructional models and quality requirements of a prior century. Legislators need look no further than to the fact that every school division in the Commonwealth exceeds SOQ to understand that these standards are outdated and no longer adequately support a quality and competitive education for all Virginia students.

We urge the General Assembly to authorize a JLARC study, the first comprehensive study ever, of the SOQ with the goal of updating requirements to 21st century standards that adequately represent the quality of education that best positions Virginia's students for success in a contemporary 21st century environment.

We further request this study examine a reform of current state funding practices in which the state funds only a portion of the inflationary increases in SOQ requirements, which adds to the financial burden of local taxpayers for state-mandated purposes.

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