

Message from the Superintendent

Stronger Than Before

As often is the case in our nation, the most difficult challenges and their resolutions can be eloquently addressed through the creative arts. Amanda Gorman, our country's youngest inaugural poet, has written that "Being American is more than a pride we inherit, it's the past we step into and how we repair it."

This entreaty has universal utility, including today, when our community is combatting a devastating health crisis. Yet, at its most hopeful, history teaches us that adversity produces extraordinary acts of courage, dedication, resilience and, ultimately, triumph.

This school division funding request for the 2021-22 school year honors this truth.

No school division in our nation could have been fully prepared for the immediate and radical displacement of our school and family lives that confronted us in March of 2020. The price we paid was measured by the numbers of people affected by COVID-19, lives lost to the disease, and diminished economic opportunities. Almost overnight, we were forced to scale back our plan for the 2020-21 school year to align an appropriately conservative budget with revenue and enrollment uncertainties. Programs and services were scaled back, priorities were delayed, and such decent and compelling provisions as a \$15 minimum hourly wage for our lowest paid employees disappeared.

Less easily calculated were costs measured not in dollars, but in the economic, academic, social and emotional progress lost by students and families. It is during times like these that one is reminded of the words of Booker T. Washington—"There are two ways of exerting one's strength: one is pushing down, the other is pulling up."

Nearly a year has passed since schools were closed across our Commonwealth and nation. And here, in Albemarle County, it is obvious which of Mr. Washington's paths were chosen by our school community: We are rising, and we are pulling and being pulled up by the Albemarle community.

On the Frontline

Our choice to pull up is revealed in the 17 school nurses assisting with the COVID-19 vaccination program as members of the Emergency Medical Corps; in the countless visits to student homes by principals and teachers; in the hands that were raised by our Child Nutrition team members and bus drivers who volunteered to distribute student meals from schools empty of students; in the enthusiasm and commitment from a Technology team that brought internet service into the homes of thousands of our students across our 726-square mile county; in our Building Services staff whose job descriptions instantly broadened to become even more crucial to public health; and to all within our community whose devotion to our mitigation strategies, in the words of the health department, made our schools among the safest places in the community.

These are strengths that surely will outlive the pandemic and make more certain the fulfillment of our goal for students—that all become more successful throughout their lives as continuous learners, fully employed workers in careers that interest them, and valued contributors to their communities.

It will make us stronger than before.

Prior to March 13, 2020, online learning was a dormant resource for most K-12 public school divisions across our nation. This certainly was the case in Albemarle County; however, after their initial reaction to mandated school closures, our educators got to work and engaged in the necessary professional development to stand up a virtual school system where there had been none.

In this new learning environment, teachers and staff expanded the frontiers of creativity and engagement. And so did our families, who are often at the side of their children as they interact with teachers and engage with learning activities at home. Projects such as online art galleries to showcase student work, the use of computer modeling to conduct and display research, the distribution of mini-computers programmed by students in their homes, greater collaboration among schools, and newfound community partnerships have brought more learning resources into the homes of students of all demographic groups.

Much of what has been experienced and accomplished in a virtual learning world will be preserved and will springboard more innovative practices in future years.

We will be stronger than before.

In addition to the new capabilities, the innovative strategies and instructional practices brought to us by the online learning environment are the contributions from an engaged and thoughtful community.

School Board and community meetings that once counted 20 participants as a reasonable expectation zoomed to hundreds and even thousands of virtual participants when important decisions were being debated. With the valued assistance of our school administrators, and for the first time in our division, concentrated plans were put in place to specifically include the voices of community members historically underrepresented or absent as decisions were shaped and resolved. We conducted more surveys on more issues, heard from more families and employees, and received more insight than ever before on how to solve issues that continue to deeply impact family lives.

It is a collaboration that makes us stronger than before.

As the result of the critical decisions the pandemic demanded, we became more efficient and resourceful in matching operational and instructional needs to fewer resources. And a year later, as the result of better-than-expected economic results in our state and county, we are well-positioned to meet the highest expectations of our students and families and to restore greater competitive balance to our ability to recruit, develop, and support and retain exceptional employees.

Helpfully, 22 percent of the \$12 million increase in expenditures in this funding request will be devoted to the restoration of learning resources and support that were lost to the pandemic. Separately, over \$6 million in federal CARES funding will be allocated for learning recovery programs, such as universal eligibility for robust, community- and school-based summer programming to support the social, emotional and physical health of students.

We are considering the issue of a request for proposals to the community of highly experienced youth and service organizations in our local community to provide these services, which will be funded by CARES monies.

Meeting our Commitments to Students

This request also makes good on our commitment to provide students with the highest quality of support and services by furthering our ability to recruit, develop, and support and retain a highly competitive educator and support staff.

Nearly two-thirds of the increase in expenditures next year will be used to provide well-earned employee salary increases. We also will reinstate our decision a year ago to raise all hourly pay scales to a minimum of \$15 per hour for all full-time regular employees.

Two other commitments are addressed in this funding request:

Early last summer, the Albemarle County School Board voted unanimously to depart from our long-standing School Resource Officer program. We have been working on plans to create a team of School Safety Specialists who will report to school administrators and our Director of Student Services. Focused on best practices for student, employee, and school visitor safety, this team will be housed across our secondary schools and available as a resource for all schools feeding into them. This program will be designed to improve our school climates, student attendance, and relationships with students. We have set aside \$557,000 for this purpose with a net cost to the school division of \$292,000, since we no longer will be transferring \$265,000 back to Local Government to offset the costs of the previous program.

We also are increasing our Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) program by \$356,000, which has proven that as the population of teachers earning credentials in CRT grows, so do the positive results for their students. Effective next year, all new teachers hired by the division will be required to complete a CRT micro-credential or earn their CRT certification within their first three years of service.

This past year, the division earned two highly prestigious awards for striving to close achievement gaps for minority students through evidence-based practices, including the federal government's Blue Ribbon School designation presented to Baker-Butler Elementary and the state's Mary Peake Award to our team of equity specialists.

For the second consecutive year, the division's funding request is balanced, with a projected increase of 838 students—the equivalent of adding a large middle school. While many of these students joining our rolls will be new to our county or to kindergarten, I look forward to welcoming back those students who will return to the division after being enrolled elsewhere this year.

Recurring revenue is anticipated to be \$205.8 million, a 6 percent increase over the current year. This improvement is led by a \$6.9 million increase (5.2 percent) in revenues received from Local Government. Total revenue from Local Government is projected to reach \$141.1 million. State revenues are showing an increase of nearly 10 percent, up from \$52.8 million in the current year to \$58 million for 2021-22.

The companion 6 percent increase (\$12 million) in expenditures includes \$7.7 million in employee compensation. The largest portion, \$3.9 million, will fund the establishment of the \$15 minimum hourly wage for full-time employees.

Other major components of this funding request's \$12 million increase include \$1.5 million to enable supports for student enrollment increases, including special education and students who are English Learners, and the restoration of instructional program reductions forced by the pandemic.

Albemarle Rising

The year ahead offers even more opportunities to prepare our students for lifetime success as we modernize our strategic plan; mature our non-profit foundation to generate private resources to extend innovation and equity; more fully align student learning experiences with real-world employment and post-K-12 education demands; and reach out to more families, partners and employees to attain the best possible decisions for our schools and community.

I am deeply grateful for our School Board's guidance in developing this funding request. In addition, I greatly appreciate our strong working relationship with County Executive Jeff Richardson's outstanding team, which has kept us closely informed of economic and financial trends in our county, region and state.

Challenging times can either pull a team—a community—apart, or pull it together through the creativity and grit of its individual members. I have witnessed the coming together of our students, employees and families throughout 2020-21, and I am very proud to be part of this resilient community. Because of this resilience and the determination, the years ahead will prove prescient, the title of our 2019 message—*Albemarle Rising*.

I am reminded once again, of the words of Amanda Gorman: “When this ends, we'll smile sweetly, finally seeing in testing times, we became the best of things.”

Stay safe.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Matthew S. Haas". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Matthew S. Haas, Ed.D.
Superintendent of Schools