

Message from the School Board Chair

Stronger Than Before

Dear Chair Gallaway and Supervisors:

It is with a deep appreciation for your strong support of education in our county that I present our funding request for the 2021-22 School Year, a balanced request that in the words of our Superintendent, makes us *Stronger Than Before*.

When we turn the calendar back one year, our Governor had just mandated, literally overnight, the closure of all schools in the Commonwealth. We remember the great challenge from the pandemic that was thrust before us—to instantly construct and implement a new learning model. We recall the precipitous drop in revenues that downsized programs and services, eliminating such priorities as an expansion of our program that seeks to equitably serve the educational needs of all students.

Today, in large measure due to a rebounding state economy and, most particularly, your stewardship of our county's economy, the outlook for schools to be an even more powerful partner in our community's growth and prosperity is far brighter. The result is a funding request that meets the five goals we set at the beginning of our budget development process:

- Develop a budget that supports the school division's mission to establish a community of learners and learning, through relationships, relevance and rigor, one student at a time.
- Provide a salary/benefit plan that supports a competitive position and reflects market adjustments.
- Represent a responsive and systematic approach to operations that reflects best practices and ensures long-term financial stability.
- Align our budget proposal with the division's strategic plan and School Board priorities.
- Emphasize such metrics as logic models and performance measures as a management and decision-making tool during the budget process.

This \$205.8 million funding request represents a 6% increase in recurring funds beyond our current budget, but is still lower than the most recent funding request we approved prior to the pandemic. The \$12 million increase in revenues expected next year is supported by a forecasted increase of \$6.9 million in the local transfer and state revenues that should be higher by at least \$5.2 million.

As is typical each year, the bulk of our expenditure increase supports the quality of services we will deliver next year to the families of Albemarle County. Seventy-two percent, or \$8.6 million, will be devoted to an investment in our workforce, including a 5% salary increase for teachers and a minimum 2% increase for classified staff that will enable us to continue to recruit, develop and retain high performing professionals. Also included in this expenditure category is the implementation of a compensation commitment delayed by the pandemic—the provision of a \$15 per hour minimum wage for full-time regular employees. Nearly 20% of our employees currently earn less than \$15 an hour.

Our next largest category of expenditure increases—22%, or \$2.7 million—will support restoration of instructional and operational services eliminated a year ago due to the pandemic. This will make it possible to return to class size levels prior to the pandemic and to improve our support of the learning needs of special education students and English Learners.

A total of \$640,000, or 5% of our increase in expenditures, is being allocated to new programs. And while this is a relatively modest investment in terms of our overall funding request, it strengthens our ability to meet two of our most urgent needs—student safety coaches who will broaden our ability to enhance student mental

health and wellness, and an expansion of equity specialists to allow us to more quickly close educational opportunity and achievement gaps between all students.

It is fitting that a funding request that benefits from the economic recovery in our state and county also empowers a vigorous learning recovery program. This year has brought with it decreases in academic and performance test results among elementary, middle and high school students. We are proposing to devote \$6.1 million in federal CARES funding to reverse these declines, beginning with a tuition-less summer academic enrichment program open to all students in grades K-12.

Additionally, recognizing the social, emotional and fitness price that students have paid during the pandemic, the division will introduce a new program model this summer. Youth service organizations are being asked to respond to a request for proposal (RFP) devoting their program expertise and capacity to student activities that develop the social, emotional and fitness health of students.

In his message to our Board, Superintendent Haas, in explaining how we will be *Stronger Than Before*, pointed to several strengths that were developed by teachers and school division staff during the pandemic. These include dynamic and broad-based professional development in virtual instruction strategies and practices that will increase student options beyond the pandemic. They include the dramatic rise in community participation brought about by online technology, in which School Board and community meetings that once attracted a dozen participants now attract over 1,000. They include the substantial increases in collective efficacy within teachers and support staff that came together to put in place and enforce mitigation policies that have made in-school transmission of COVID-19 rare. And they include the increased focus, following the pandemic, of innovative and efficient fiscal management practices that spared the division significant reductions in staff or services.

It is the latter that has made it possible to raise the well-earned increase in teacher compensation from 3%, as originally proposed in February, to 5% today and to consider, if state revenues continue to climb, at least a modest increase for classified staff above the present 2% recommendation. We are mindful of the tradition of commonality between school division and local government classified staff. Yet, this is an unusual year, and all employees, including classified staff, have performed at an outstanding and, at times, even heroic level.

We are deeply grateful that the vision of Albemarle County embraces the provision of exceptional educational opportunities and that its values include diversity, equity and inclusion, as well as lifelong learning and personal and professional growth. These are commitments wholeheartedly shared by our school division and fulfilled in the funding request submitted herein.

On behalf of our entire Board, thank you for your continual interest and support of our families, students, staff and schools and for the collaborative partnership you have made possible as we pursue a future that lifts up all of our residents. I respectfully seek your approval of our 2021-22 Albemarle County Public Schools funding request.

Sincerely,



Graham Paige
School Board Chair