

Column Recurring Title: **Rooted and Growing: The Southampton Story**

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One of the things I have enjoyed most during my first few months as superintendent is getting to know the people who make Southampton County Public Schools special.

Every week brings something new to learn—sometimes a celebration, sometimes a challenge, and often both at the same time. Our September 14 School Board meeting was a good reflection of that. We celebrated educators, recognized progress, discussed challenges, and I was reminded of something I have come to appreciate deeply about Southampton: when there is a problem to solve, there are people willing to step forward and help solve it.

I want to share a few of those stories with you this week.

Celebrating the People Behind the Progress

One of my favorite parts of the meeting was recognizing the Pre-Kindergarten, Kindergarten, and Reading Specialist teams who worked together to make our early Virginia Kindergarten Readiness Program (VKRP) screening possible.

Our students completed their screenings on August 17 and 18, before the regular school year began. With approval from the VKRP office at UVA, this allowed us to complete one of the state's required screeners before teachers began the school year. We are currently the only school division in Virginia using this early screening process.

But what matters most to me is what this means for our teachers. By completing this work before school begins, teachers can spend those precious first days getting to know their students, building relationships, establishing routines, and helping children feel that they belong.

The beginning of a child's school experience matters. The way a child is welcomed into a classroom matters. And the way we support our teachers matters. I am grateful to these educators for finding a way to make the beginning of the school year better for everyone.

Strengthening Transparency

The Board also approved the beginning of our transition from BoardDocs to Diligent Community. Diligent recently acquired BoardDocs, and previous Board information will be migrated as part of the transition. We will continue to provide access to School Board information through our website. This may seem like a small operational change, but

transparency matters. Our families and community members should be able to see the work of their School Board and understand the decisions being made on behalf of our students.

Taking Care of Our Schools

There is significant work happening in our school buildings. The Board approved a contract for repairs at Nottoway Elementary related to February's sprinkler flooding, and that work is now underway.

We are also moving forward with projects made possible by the Southampton County Board of Supervisors' appropriation. At Capron, the rooftop unit replacement has been awarded for \$106,620, and the library mini-split is scheduled for installation October 15. At Riverdale, the boiler replacement has been awarded for \$112,175, with installation beginning October 5. Additional HVAC needs across the division are being evaluated.

I am very grateful to our Board of Supervisors for this investment. Clean, safe, comfortable, and well-maintained schools are part of creating an environment where students can learn and teachers can teach.

Accountability and Our Partnerships

We also provided an update regarding our facility maintenance and custodial services provider. After continued concerns about the condition of our buildings and summer cleaning, we formally notified the company of service deficiencies and initiated the contractual cure process.

Following additional meetings, the company presented a proposal that would have increased funding while reducing the expected APPA service level. We were clear that we could not support a reduction in cleanliness standards. We have therefore moved forward with the next step in the contractual process, including a 60-day cure period.

Our focus is not on conflict. Our focus is on accountability and ensuring that Southampton County Public Schools receives the level of service that our contract requires and that our students and employees deserve.

We are also preparing responsibly for the possibility of bringing these services back in-house. We have begun posting anticipated maintenance and custodial positions and are exploring the equipment and resources that would be needed. If you are interested in joining our team (or know someone who might be) we encourage you to look at our current openings.

Continuing to Strengthen Transportation

Transportation was one of our most significant challenges during the opening of school, and we continue to work on it.

On August 30, some bus routes communicated through social media contained incorrect information. That was a difficult day, but it also showed me something important about Team SCPS. When the information going out to families was wrong, people did not point fingers and walk away. They got to work to verify routes and communicate corrections to families.

We have also worked with Edulog to correct information in the Parent Portal Lite App, including bus numbers, driver names, and student stops. We still need two full-time bus drivers and a stronger substitute driver list, and we are acquiring additional assistive equipment for students with physical needs.

At Capron, we are working with County Manager Lynette Lowe and Sheriff Wyche and his team regarding the flashing reduced-speed-limit signs on westbound Highway 58. We are exploring a more comprehensive solution, and we are grateful to the Sheriff's Office for providing a deputy at Capron when possible during arrival and dismissal.

Transportation is improving, but we will continue strengthening staffing, training, communication, and our systems.

Grateful for Our Community

I would also like to extend a heartfelt thank-you to the Constantia Chapter, Daughters of the American Revolution, for including Southampton County Public Schools in their America 250! outreach. The chapter generously donated books to each of our schools to help our students connect with the people and stories that shaped our nation. We are grateful for their investment in our students!

Growing Together

When I look at these updates, I see much more than projects, contracts, repairs, and challenges.

I see people.

I see educators making the beginning of school better for our youngest learners. I see employees working through difficult transportation challenges. I see people tackling long-standing facility needs. And I see community partners investing in our schools.

We are not going to solve every challenge overnight. But we are going to keep showing up, listening, making improvements, and doing the work.

That is what it means to be **Rooted in Excellence, Growing Together**.

And I am grateful to be growing alongside all of you.