

Albemarle County Public Schools

2021 Legislative Agenda

Since March of 2020, **Albemarle County Public Schools (ACPS)** has faced unprecedented challenges in accomplishing its **mission of establishing a community of learners and learning, through relationships, relevance and rigor, one student at a time.** Efforts to ensure the safety of students and staff during the COVID-19 school closures meant that the ways we build those relationships were changed in significant and undeniable ways.

Our students, staff and families have adapted to those challenges and changes with creativity, flexibility and dogged perseverance. Our teachers have continued to provide our students with a world-class education virtually. Many have done so with their own children in their laps or with their parents at home, depending on them for care during lockdowns. They have done this without knowing what the next day holds in store for them both at work and in life—all while knowing that the pandemic economy would eliminate the biennial raises that were allotted by General Assembly in 2020 session. Our students have worked to master new skills on all-new learning platforms. Our families have helped to facilitate their children's virtual learning, becoming tech troubleshooters and tutors in addition to maintaining their normal day jobs. We remain grateful to them and proud of them for continuing their great work under difficult circumstances.

While managing education amidst the uncertainties of a pandemic, ACPS has simultaneously fought in the battle to **end the predictive value of race and ensure the success of each individual student and staff member** during a period of social unrest in our community and society. We have worked to examine the opportunity gap that exists in our division so that we can eradicate it and build a system that works for everyone in our strong and diverse community of learners. Our Anti-Racism Policy Steering Committee has led the division in a book study on how to engage in productive conversations around race, and our educators will deploy the lessons it generates in the classrooms and hallways of our schools. This work will also help us all learn to understand difference and respect and champion the diverse life experiences of all members of our community.

**We are so grateful** to the Virginia General Assembly for its support for public education both over the years and during the 2020 special session. We have seen how you make public education a large part of the conversations that you have around legislation and funding. We know that you have made schools a priority during the pandemic crisis, and we have worked to do our part in keeping our ACPS community strong as we push through this unusual moment in time.

A lot is being done to keep our ACPS families strong.

- Our Transportation and Child Nutrition Departments have taken advantage of an FDA waiver that allows ACPS to deliver meals to our students. Every day, 7,000 meals are delivered to over 3,500 students by 62 busses. This ensures that our students have nutritious meals and an opportunity to engage with their schools.
- We have established a COVID-19 hotline that will allow us to provide any available resources to those in need due to the pandemic. We are also expanding our mental health services—including training members of our staff in Mental Health First Aid—so that we can help lift the emotional burden that COVID has caused in our community.

- Our Extended Day Enrichment Program mobilized to create a child care program for ACPS employees. Currently, there are more than 40 students enrolled in this program, and we are extending it as we further open our school doors to accommodate more of our employees.
- Over 1,000 hotspots have been provided to our students and employees in order to facilitate virtual learning for those who do not have reliable internet. These were provided at no cost to recipients.
- We have implemented a book study on Glenn Singleton's *Courageous Conversations about Race* for our school board and Leadership Team members. This work will help us ensure that our educators can help the division eliminate the predictive value of race in our school division.

**State Budget.** As a result of the COVID-19 crisis, school divisions have experienced major funding issues in order to provide educational services to students.

- Accordingly, **we request** that the 2020-2022 formula-based rebenchmarking be maintained without any negative changes for the biennium.
- **We request** that the 2019-2020 March 31 ADM be established as a floor for basic aid and school divisions held harmless for any changes.
- **We request** that additional funding be provided by the state to assist schools moving from in-person to virtual instruction and vice versa.
- Given the changes that are currently taking place in school divisions across the Commonwealth, the timing is good for a new perspective on how we define certain dimensions of school accreditation. **We support** the creation of a commission that could review the meaning of attendance in schools with regard to school accreditation.

**Social Justice and Anti-Racism.** The pandemic has further demonstrated in stark reality the inequities that exist in some parts of the Commonwealth.

- **We request** that the General Assembly authorize and fund an independent adequacy study to determine the appropriate level of resources needed for school divisions to meet state accountability requirements. The study should examine particular challenges for schools, such as the effect of concentrations of poverty, accelerated growth and declining enrollments, and identify the funding required to meet the Standards of Learning, Standards of Accreditation, and Standards of Quality.
- **We request** that the General Assembly provide school divisions with additional funding needed to implement proven methods of preventing and addressing misbehaviors that lead to suspension and expulsion (i.e., Virginia Tiered Systems of Support, restorative justice, regional programs, virtual services, and community-based/wrap-around services).

**Mental Health.** The General Assembly and the State Board have identified the importance of providing added social and emotional supports for students in reducing student discipline problems, school violence and the stress students face in a changing world. The need for this support has only grown during the pandemic crisis. Funding provided in the current state budget will not meet the new school counselor ratios passed the General Assembly during the 2020 Session nor will it enable school divisions to meet the requirement that 80% of counselor time be spent in delivering direct services to students.

- **We request** that the General Assembly add the necessary state funding to increase counseling and behavioral assistance to students in our schools.

**Shortage of Qualified Teachers.** The pandemic crisis has magnified the teacher shortage issue both in terms of the number of staff our school division has available and, subsequently, the need to provide greater flexibility for what teachers can and cannot teach.

- **We request** that the General Assembly work to restore the full 4% biennial teacher salary raise.
- **We support a** long-range plan to raise teacher salaries at or above the Virginia income ranking of 33rd<sup>i</sup> if the teacher shortage crisis is to be successfully addressed.

**Local Authority. We believe** that that state should provide full funding for all mandates passed by the General Assembly and required by the Virginia Board of Education. We also believe that local school boards should have primary authority in the implementation of these mandates and how resources from State Government are utilized at the local level.

**Unfunded Mandates. We believe** that any new training requirements imposed on school divisions (i.e. seclusion and restraint of students and school safety training) should be accompanied by state funds to assist at the local level to implement these new state requirements, as they have a local cost and create a heavy financial burden for localities.

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<sup>i</sup> See: <https://www.nea.org/sites/default/files/2020-10/2020%20Rankings%20and%20Estimates%20Report.pdf>. The national average salary for a public school teacher is \$62,304, while in Virginia it is \$53,267.