

MINUTES
ALBEMARLE COUNTY SCHOOL BOARD MEETING
Proposed FY26 Funding Request Public Hearing and Budget Work Session
Thursday, February 27, 2025
[Video Link](#)

ROLL CALL - UPON THE ROLL BEING CALLED, THE FOLLOWING WERE PRESENT:

BOARD MEMBERS - Dr. Kate Acuff, Dr. Rebecca Berlin, Ms. Judy Le, Ms. Ellen Osborne, Mr. Graham Paige, Ms. Leslie Pryor, Ms. Allison Spillman, and Student Representative Isabelle Wang

ABSENT – None

ALSO, IN ATTENDANCE - Superintendent Matthew Haas; School Division Counsel Josiah Black; Assistant School Division Counsel Erin Stone; Assistant Superintendent Clare Keiser; Assistant Superintendent Daphne Keiser; Assistant Superintendent Chandra Hayes; Assistant Superintendent Patrick McLaughlin; Chief Operating Officer Rosalyn Schmitt; Public Affairs and Strategic Communications Officer Helen Dunn; and Clerk of the Board Christine Thompson

AGENDA ITEM NO. 1.0 OPENING ACTIVITIES

Agenda Item No. 1.1 Call to Order - At 6:30 p.m., Chair Acuff called the Albemarle County School Board meeting to order.

Agenda Item No. 1.2 - Roll Call

Agenda Item No. 1.2 – Pledge of Allegiance

Agenda Item No. 1.3 - Moment of Silence

AGENDA ITEM NO. 2.0 APPROVAL OF AGENDA

Agenda Item No. 2.1 Approval of Agenda – Ms. Le offered a **motion** to approve the agenda. Ms. Spillman seconded the **motion**. **A voice vote was taken, and the motion passed with the following recorded votes:**

AYES: Ms. Pryor, Dr. Berlin, Ms. Osborne, Mr. Paige, Ms. Spillman, Ms. Le, and Chair Acuff

NAYS: None

ABSENT: None

Motion carried by a 7:0:0 vote

AGENDA ITEM NO. 3.0 PUBLIC HEARING

Agenda Item No. 3.1 Public Hearing on Proposed FY26 Funding Request

Kate Gerry, third-grade teacher at Broadus Wood Elementary School (White Hall District), spoke on behalf of the entire instructional staff at Broadus Wood, all of whom signed a letter opposing the proposed elimination of the Foreign Language in Elementary Schools (FLES) program. She expressed concern that the decision undervalues the program's impact and described the Spanish instruction provided by Senorita Shock as transformative. Ms. Gerry noted that the program enhances academic achievement, fosters joy and connection within the school community, and aligns with the Division's commitment to equity and antiracism. She urged the Board to reconsider the proposed cut, emphasizing the message it would send to students—particularly Spanish-speaking students—and the broader implications for the Division's values.

Mark Sicoli, White Hall District resident and professor of linguistics at the University of Virginia, addressed the educational and cognitive benefits of early second language acquisition. Citing recent research, he noted that elementary language learning supports executive function, vocabulary development, academic achievement across all core subjects, and long-term advantages such as higher earning potential and delayed cognitive decline. Dr. Sicoli emphasized that early childhood is the optimal period for language acquisition and warned that removing the FLES program would reduce students' readiness for future academic and professional success. He encouraged the Board to expand, rather than eliminate, the program.

Laurel Williamson, White Hall District resident and parent of Broadus Wood Elementary students, spoke about her children's positive experiences with the FLES program and the Spanish instruction provided by Senorita Shock. She described the program as highly effective, noting how quickly and enthusiastically students pick up language skills. Ms. Williamson highlighted the inclusion and pride felt by native Spanish-speaking families participating in the schoolwide language learning environment. She urged the Board not to abandon the FLES initiative and to recognize its deep and lasting impact on school communities and cultural fluency.

Rebecca Tichner, resident of the Samuel Miller District and speaking on behalf of the Family Council, expressed concern over the limited opportunities for public input on the School Division's proposed budget, noting only one opportunity for comment compared to 16 offered by the County. Mr. Tichner voiced support for several budget items:

- Yes, to full compensation for educators and staff, including customer service and English Learner teaching staff.
- Yes, to the instructional priorities outlined in the "Bell Letter," particularly in addressing student learning gaps and longstanding educator requests.
- Yes, to increased support for special education services, including compensation for teaching assistants.

However, Ms. Tichner also raised the following concerns:

- Frustration that the Family Council was not consulted prior to the release of detailed proposals that impact students and families the Council has long advocated for.
- Skepticism about structural changes to programs with very low current enrollment, and a request for clarity on projected enrollment figures before making significant decisions.
- Concern over the reintroduction and possible expansion of the School Resource Officer (SRO) program without public engagement or transparency.

She urged the Board to:

- Ensure any expansion of the SRO program is based on demonstrated need.
- Confirm that SROs are trained to support students with autism and mental health challenges.
- Reassure the community that SROs do not cooperate with ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement).
- Increase transparency and invite more community engagement in all aspects of the budget and program planning process.

Ashley Spinelli, parent of a student at Ivy Elementary School, expressed her gratitude that her daughter was part of the first cohort of the Foreign Language in Elementary Schools (FLES) program at Ivy. As a former military family with experience in multiple elementary schools, Ms. Spinelli shared that Ivy was the only school they encountered that offered a progressive and inclusive foreign language program. She praised the School Board for creating something “great” through this initiative, noting that it elevated the Division’s educational offerings. Ms. Spinelli expressed strong opposition to cutting the program, emphasizing that it is more than a line item—it is a “precious” asset that would be difficult, if not impossible, to restore once lost. Ms. Spinelli also responded to statements that the program only reached a “handful” of schools, saying that this characterization felt dismissive of the students and communities it serves. She noted that these schools already receive some of the lowest per-pupil funding in the county and cautioned against placing the burden of cuts disproportionately on smaller or lower-resourced schools. She urged the Board to:

- Protect the FLES program and its educators.
- Delay expansion of other programs or textbook purchases if needed.
- Strive for equity without sacrificing essential programs in underfunded schools.

Ms. Spinelli concluded by asking the Board to consider its legacy and to continue building alongside families rather than taking away a program that is deeply valued by students and communities.

Heidi Gilman Bennett, Samuel Miller District resident and Chair of the Family Council, spoke to share both support and concerns related to the proposed School Division budget. She opened by expressing frustration over the limited public input opportunities, noting that the School Board provided only one chance for public comment on the budget, compared to the 16 opportunities offered by the County. Ms. Bennett focused her remarks on the five “Learning for All” proposals in the budget:

1. Yes to Compensation and Staffing Support
 - Endorsed increased compensation for educators and staff.
 - Supported hiring of additional bus drivers and English Learner teachers.
2. Yes to Bellwether Instructional Priorities
 - Strongly supported the proposed investments in reading and math intervention.
 - Emphasized these have been long-requested by educators serving students with the greatest needs.
3. Support for Special Education Improvements
 - Supported improvements to the Intensive Support Center and increased Teaching Assistant (TA) compensation.

- Expressed concern that the Special Education Advisory Committee (SEAC) was not consulted prior to the rollout of the proposal.
4. Concerns About Scholars Studios Expansion
- Repeated long-standing concerns about the low enrollment in the program.
 - Questioned the significant investment in a principal and administrator for Center II, which is not yet open.
 - Urged the Board to review projected enrollment figures and reconsider allocating limited space, especially given severe overcrowding at Albemarle High School.
5. Concerns About School Resource Officers (SROs)
- Voiced deep frustration over the lack of transparency surrounding the reintroduction of SROs into schools.
 - Called for more public engagement and detailed justification for expanding the program.
 - Requested clarity on training for SROs—particularly regarding interactions with students with autism and mental health needs—and assurances that SROs do not cooperate with ICE.

Ms. Bennett concluded by urging the Board to provide greater transparency, detailed information, and authentic community engagement in all budget and program decisions.

ACPS Student Lillian Lessick, White Hall district, spoke in support of maintaining the Foreign Language in Elementary Schools (FLES) program. She shared personal experiences of learning Spanish over several years, highlighting how it has helped them better connect with peers, including a classmate who transferred from Mexico and previously struggled to communicate. She said that learning another language has been exciting and meaningful, and asked the Board to prioritize funding to keep the FLES program in place at the elementary level. She closed by urging the Board not to take the program away.

Emily Mathon, Rio District resident, addressed the Board to express concern over the proposed increase in School Resource Officers (SROs) included in the current budget proposal. Ms. Mathon referenced the July 2020 School Board resolution, which acknowledged inconclusive research regarding the effectiveness of police presence in schools and noted potential harms, particularly for students of color and students with disabilities, who are disproportionately impacted by school-based arrests. She emphasized the risks of contributing to the school-to-prison pipeline and reminded the Board of its commitment to the anti-racism policy and the equitable treatment of all students. Ms. Mathon voiced frustration that the reintroduction of SROs in high schools has occurred without public acknowledgment or community discourse. She urged the Board to:

- Consider the impact of SROs on marginalized students.
- Revisit questions about training, accountability, and oversight.
- Ensure transparency in decisions involving student safety and law enforcement presence in schools.

Jennifer Buckett, White Hall District resident and parent of a first grader at Ivy Elementary School, spoke in strong support of the Foreign Language in Elementary Schools (FLES) program. Ms. Buckett holds a master's degree in teaching English and Spanish and currently serves as an assistant director at a local preschool. She shared her disappointment upon learning that the FLES program was proposed

for elimination, aligning with many other concerned parents and neighbors. Ms. Buckett highlighted the practical and cognitive benefits of early language instruction, noting that her son has gained confidence and enthusiasm through his Spanish learning—demonstrating new vocabulary at home and in public settings. Ms. Buckett cited research indicating that early second language acquisition improves memory, concentration, literacy, and academic performance in other subjects such as math and reading. She emphasized that early exposure is crucial, and delaying language instruction until middle or high school misses the optimal window for language development. She also addressed the broader cultural impact, stating that learning another language fosters empathy, respect for other cultures, and global citizenship. Ms. Buckett expressed concern about inequity, noting that only a few elementary schools currently have access to the program and that cutting it entirely would deepen disparities. She urged the Board to prioritize and expand the FLES program rather than eliminate it.

Donna Gray, a graduate of Albemarle High School (Class of 1969) and fifth-generation Charlottesville resident, shared her perspective on school safety, expressing concern about the increasing violence in schools today compared to her own experience growing up. She cited a recent violent incident in a school locker room and noted rising threats both nationally and within Albemarle County. Ms. Gray relayed firsthand accounts from parents whose children are afraid to use school bathrooms or walk down certain hallways due to safety concerns. She argued that these fears highlight the urgent need for more protection in schools. She emphasized the distinction between safety coaches and School Resource Officers (SROs), stating that the two roles are not interchangeable. According to Ms. Gray, safety coaches provide support after incidents occur, while SROs are trained to prevent violence before it happens. Ms. Gray advocated for allocating county property tax revenues to fund additional SROs, stating that the current level of funding should be sufficient to provide this protection. She urged the Board not to withhold a service that could safeguard students, emphasizing that the safety of children is a critical responsibility of the Division.

Meg Phillips, Director of Wildrock, a local nonprofit focused on nature-based wellness and learning, spoke in support of continued funding for the Visiting Field Experience (VFE) program. Wildrock partners with Albemarle County Public Schools (ACPS) to provide after-school programs, camps, in-school outreach, and nature-based field trips. In the past year, over 3,000 ACPS students have participated in Wildrock programs. Ms. Phillips emphasized the alignment of these programs with ACPS's strategic goals, particularly providing relevant and authentic learning experiences for all students. She expressed concern that eliminating VFE funding would create inequitable access to field trips. Without this support, schools would be forced to rely on inconsistent fundraising, disproportionately affecting students from lower-income backgrounds who would lose access to hands-on environmental and cultural learning. She also raised questions about the impact of the proposed cut on bus drivers, who often support mid-day transportation for field trips, and noted that teachers would be burdened by the loss of these enrichment opportunities.

Lisa Wittenborn, representing the Rivanna Conservation Alliance (RCA), also urged the Board to continue supporting the VFE program. She described RCA's field-based science programming, which engages students in hands-on investigations of local watershed conditions—including biological, chemical, and habitat stream evaluations. Ms. Wittenborn highlighted how these field trips reinforce classroom learning, support different types of learners, and provide memorable educational experiences. She shared that students frequently cite field trips as a highlight of their academic year and emphasized the importance of maintaining equitable access to experiential learning across the county. Both speakers emphasized that the elimination of VFE funding would significantly reduce educational equity and experiential learning opportunities for ACPS students.

Taylor Clements, School Security Assistant (SSA) at Monticello High School, spoke in support of maintaining the SSA position, which is proposed to be reduced under the current budget. Mr. Clements clarified that, while the role may appear similar to that of a traditional security officer, it extends far beyond that scope. He described the multifaceted nature of his work, which includes:

- Providing behavioral and mental health support to students.
- Assisting administrators in disciplinary hearings and student assessments.
- Acting as a liaison between students and mental health counselors.
- Intervening in high-stress or emotionally charged situations to de-escalate conflicts before they escalate into disciplinary actions.

Ms. Clements emphasized that his position allows him to proactively address student needs, help them regulate emotions, and maintain a safe learning environment. He argued that when students feel safe and supported, they are more likely to be present in class and engage meaningfully in learning. He stated that the SSA role is one of the most cost-effective investments the Division can make in student well-being and safety. Mr. Clements urged the Board to consider the letters and testimonials from students who have benefited from his support and to weigh the value of the role in ensuring student success and campus safety.

Bridgette Rodgers, Rio District resident and parent of two elementary school students, addressed the Board regarding the urgent need to advance and fund the Division's \$500 million needs-based Capital Improvement Plan (CIP). She emphasized the importance of working closely with the Albemarle County Board of Supervisors to develop a comprehensive funding strategy for updating and modernizing school facilities. Ms. Rodger noted that the average age of school buildings in the county exceeds 50 years and that the need for modern, functional learning environments will continue to grow. She urged the Board to ensure that each project within the CIP is accompanied by specific, actionable descriptions and clearly defined impacts on students, staff, and the community. This level of detail, she stated, is essential for effectively communicating to the public why each project matters. She also highlighted that school facility funding has been falling short for many years, leading to a significant backlog of capital needs. Ms. Rodger encouraged the Board to explore funding mechanisms such as:

- A bond referendum,
- Public-private partnerships,
- Tax-based carve-outs for school infrastructure (as proposed in the County Executive's initial FY26 budget),
- And any additional funding strategies to support critical school facility improvements.

She concluded by thanking the Board for its dedication to the future of students and for considering these critical steps.

Megan Nabb, Scottsville District resident and parent of two students—one in middle school and one at Monticello High School—spoke on two topics: school health staffing and the Foreign Language in Elementary Schools (FLES) program. On school health services, Ms. Nabb expressed concern about a proposal referenced on page 267 of the budget document, which would replace a certified nurse position at Center I with a Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA). She shared a personal experience in which her daughter suffered a concussion on school grounds in October. Ms. Nabb praised the care and support provided by the current school nurse, who followed up after hours, helped the family navigate post-

concussion recovery protocols, and offered both professional guidance and emotional support. She emphasized that the complex health needs of students at Center I, including a high percentage of students requiring medical care, warrant the continued presence of a certified and experienced nurse.

Ms. Carolyn Kilday from the White Hall district spoke in support of the FLES program, Ms. Kilday voiced strong support for maintaining and expanding early world language instruction. She stated that the program offers students important exposure to diverse languages and cultures—particularly valuable in Western Albemarle schools that lack access to more comprehensive language programs. She aligned her comments with the Division’s own strategic priority to expand world language opportunities starting in early grades. Ms. Kilday cited the wide-ranging benefits of early second language instruction, including improved attention, creativity, emotional regulation, critical thinking, organization, and problem-solving. She referenced earlier testimony from Dr. Sicoli supporting the cognitive and academic value of early language education. She concluded by urging the Board to preserve both the school nurse position and the FLES program as critical components of student well-being and academic success.

Chris Dilbeck, resident of the Rivanna District and graduate of Albemarle High School (Class of 2005), spoke in favor of the continued presence and expansion of School Resource Officers (SROs) in Albemarle County Public Schools. Mr. Dilbeck shared a personal story from his time as a student, highlighting the positive impact of SRO Reed at Albemarle High School. He described SRO Reed as a consistent, supportive presence in the school—someone who offered advice, encouragement, and a sense of safety and connection for students facing challenges at home or at school. Mr. Dilbeck recalled that SRO Reed’s regular interactions, greetings, and availability made a lasting impression on students and contributed to a positive school environment. He also emphasized that early exposure to professional, ethical, and compassionate law enforcement officers can help counteract negative stereotypes or perceptions about police that students may encounter through media or online sources. Mr. Dilbeck argued that such exposure promotes healthy relationships between youth and law enforcement. He concluded by urging the Board to expand the SRO program, asserting that it benefits student well-being, school culture, and community trust.

Pamela Mierzwa, a fifth-grade teacher at Baker-Butler Elementary School and former student teacher at Broadus Wood Elementary, spoke in strong support of the Foreign Language in Elementary Schools (FLES) program. Ms. Mierzwa reflected on her time as a student teacher in a first-grade class at Broadus Wood, where she witnessed what she described as *unsurpassed joy and engagement* among students participating in daily foreign language instruction. That experience left such a strong impression that she made the decision to enroll her own daughter at Broadus Wood—despite teaching at a different elementary school—so her child could benefit from the same language program. She emphasized that her current school does not offer FLES and described the difference in student experience as significant. Ms. Mierzwa urged the Board not to eliminate the program, citing not only its academic benefits, including support for phonemic awareness and literacy development, but also the *emotional and cultural enrichment* it provides. She described FLES as a portal that helps broaden students’ understanding of the world and their communities, far beyond what a once-a-year cultural event can offer. She invited audience members who were present in support of the program to raise their hands in solidarity and closed with a heartfelt appeal to protect and expand a program that brings daily multicultural engagement and joy to elementary students.

AGENDA ITEM NO. 4.0 BUDGET WORK SESSION #1

Agenda Item No. 4.1 Budget Work Session #1 - This was the first Budget Work Session following the [Draft Funding Request presentation](#). Staff presented more detailed information about the Funding Request.

The Board took a break from 7:50 p.m. to 8:00 p.m.

Covered Topics

Revenue Updates and Budget Document Overview

Maya Kumazawa, Director of Budget and Planning

Health Care Fund Overview

Dan Redding, Executive Director of Human Resources

Andy Bowman, Assistant Chief Financial Officer (Albemarle County)

Dr. Berlin asked staff about the status of the Division's health care reserve fund, noting that it had been running dangerously low. She inquired whether the proposed \$6.9 million transfer into the fund would bring the reserve to approximately 14%, which she identified as close to the industry standard lower threshold. Staff confirmed that 14% is generally considered the minimum recommended reserve level in the industry and that the proposed transfer would help restore the fund to that baseline.

Mr. Redding acknowledged that the question of sustainability is an important one. He noted that the Division experienced an unusually high number of exceptionally costly claims in FY2024, which significantly deviated from historical trends. While these were somewhat unexpected, he also cautioned that the cost of healthcare is rising rapidly, with increases outpacing general inflation. He explained that while it is unclear whether such a high volume of costly claims will recur in future years, the overall trend line is steepening, suggesting that elevated costs may persist or grow over time. The Division will continue monitoring the fund and trends to determine whether further contributions or adjustments will be necessary in future budgets.

Dr. Acuff followed up on the discussion, noting that there are generally two primary strategies to address rising health care costs aside from improving employee wellness:

1. Pursuing different or more competitive stop-loss insurance, and
2. Increasing reserve levels.

Mr. Redding confirmed that both strategies have been actively reviewed as part of the Division's approach to managing the health care fund. He noted that these are ongoing considerations in efforts to stabilize costs and maintain fiscal health.

Dr. Berlin requested clarification on the minimum and maximum reserve levels related to the health care fund policy, specifically referencing the slide that displayed those benchmarks. She asked whether the policy is based on two months of expenditures from the prior year, and where exactly that calculation is derived from.

Mr. Bowman confirmed that the policy references two months of expenditures based on the plan year budget. For example, if the health care fund were \$100 million, a 17% reserve—approximately \$17 million—would meet the policy’s target. A maximum threshold would be double that, or \$33 million in the hypothetical example. He acknowledged that actual reserve levels are currently much lower than that example.

Dr. Berlin then requested a follow-up with specific figures based on current data, including:

- The minimum and maximum reserve targets based on the current plan year.
- The projected reserve balance at the end of Plan Year 2025, assuming the proposed transfer is approved.
- Context on how long the proposed fix is expected to be sustainable.

Mr. Bowman restated that, based on current projections, the health care fund would be within the 10–12% reserve range by the end of Plan Years 2025 and 2026, if the proposed transfer is made. Staff are committed to providing the exact dollar figures and detailed projections as a follow-up.

Dr. Acuff commented on her support for the Division’s newly opened employee health clinic, noting that she was present at its opening and believes it will help improve access to care. However, she raised a question about its potential for immediate or intermediate cost savings. She expressed concern that increased access could initially trigger the “woodwork effect,” where individuals who previously did not seek care begin utilizing services, potentially increasing costs. She asked how the Division might incentivize high-cost claimants to use the clinic for appropriate care, potentially reducing reliance on more expensive providers and generating long-term savings.

Mr. Redding responded that wellness incentives are already in place and have been incorporated into the rollout of the clinic. Specifically, they noted:

- Employees covered by the Division’s health plan are encouraged to complete a Preventive Health Assessment (PHA), which includes:
 - A blood draw,
 - A health behavior and risk survey,
 - A general physical exam.
- Employees who complete the PHA receive a \$100 incentive and are eligible for targeted follow-up care, including referrals to a registered dietitian for support with health goals such as improving cholesterol levels. Mr. Redding also emphasized that early detection and preventive care can help reduce long-term medical complications and costs, particularly for chronic conditions like high cholesterol, and that these proactive health measures are one of the clinic’s key cost-containment strategies.

Budget Document Overview

Section A – Overview	Section E – Department Budgets
Section B – School Fund Revenues	Section F – Special Revenue Funds
Section C – School Fund Expenditures	Section G – Supplemental Funds
Section D – School Budgets	

Ms. Spillman asked for clarification on the 24% increase in health care premiums, specifically seeking to understand why such a significant adjustment is necessary. Ms. Kumazawa responded that the increase is directly tied to the need to replenish the Division's health care reserve fund, which has been drawn down significantly in recent years. The increase is intended to restore the reserve to a more sustainable level and ensure the fund can cover rising healthcare costs.

Ms. Spillman expressed concern about long-term sustainability, questioning how the Division can avoid returning to the same depleted position in another few years. She requested further clarity on what led to the current shortfall, noting that while the earlier presentation provided some context, she was not yet convinced that the situation would not repeat itself. Ms. Kumazawa acknowledged that while long-term healthcare forecasting relies on projections based on historical activity, it remains an imperfect science. She confirmed that current models anticipate high premium increases for the next few years, after which cost trends are expected to stabilize. However, she cautioned that projections remain subject to change based on claim activity and broader healthcare market trends.

Ms. Spillman raised several questions and comments during the budget discussion:

1. Planning Time and Specials Coverage - She requested clarification regarding whether teachers would still receive their planning time, especially if certain specials (e.g., FLES) are being removed. She asked how this coverage would be maintained if the instructional day structure changes.
2. Student Safety Coaches and Budget Transparency - Ms. Spillman referenced public comments and recent emails, noting they were worth consideration. She also questioned the presentation of the Student Safety Coach positions in the budget. While the document reflects a reduction of \$250,000, she noted that, according to staff, this is offset by a reallocation to fund School Resource Officers (SROs)—resulting in a net impact of zero. She expressed concern that the budget presentation is potentially misleading, as it gives the appearance of budget cuts when, in fact, it is a reallocation. She recommended clearer explanations of net changes and their actual impact on the \$7.5 million deficit.

Ms. Kumazawa responded to comments from Ms. Spillman regarding the presentation of the Student Safety Coach reductions and School Resource Officer (SRO) additions in the budget. She clarified that while the budget shows a \$250,000 reduction related to the elimination of Safety Coach positions, it also includes a corresponding \$252,000 cost tied to the addition of SROs. The intent of the current budget format is to display both the reduction and the increase separately, while providing an explanation of how the two are connected.

Ms. Kumazawa acknowledged that the presentation may be confusing and expressed openness to finding a clearer way to present such offsetting changes in future versions. She emphasized that staff have attempted to provide context and justification where possible to help the Board and public understand the budget structure.

3. FLES Program Elimination

- Ms. Spillman requested information on which schools will be affected by the proposed elimination of the FLES program.
 - She asked whether alternative programs were considered in place of FLES and requested data on any potential correlation between student test scores and the presence of a foreign language program in the school.
 - Ms. Osborne inquired whether the FLES program was launched prior to the adoption of outcome-based strategic planning. Staff confirmed that the program is considered a legacy initiative, launched without defined goals or tracking measures.
 - Superintendent Haas noted that in prior budget cycles, schools were offered the option to waive the FLES program to redirect funding to other instructional positions. Many schools opted out in favor of core instructional support such as reading interventionists or grade-level staffing. Only a small number of schools have retained the program.
4. Student Impact and Equity Concerns - Ms. Spillman asked for data on the number of students affected by the program cuts, emphasizing that the per-pupil spending at the schools retaining FLES is among the lowest in the Division.
5. Ms. Le added that earlier in the week, she asked for the cost to expand the FLES program to all elementary schools. Staff responded that such expansion would cost approximately \$2.5 million—\$1.8 million in additional funding on top of the current \$690,000 cost.
6. Ms. Kumazawa confirmed that the next budget work session will focus on both the proposed reductions and the Learning for All investments. Staff will be present to provide clarifying information and data in response to Board questions.

Ms. Spillman expressed frustration and concern regarding premature communication to staff and families about proposed budget changes—specifically the elimination of the FLES program and the expansion of the Intensive Support Center (ISC). She noted that emails have been sent out—both Division-wide and at the school level—stating that these changes are moving forward, despite the fact that the School Board has not yet finalized or approved the FY26 budget. She emphasized that this process is not a rubber stamp, and until the evening of the meeting, the budget remained over \$1 million out of balance. She stated that public messaging around unapproved changes creates confusion and the perception that Board approval is a formality rather than a requirement. She urged that communication about programmatic changes be withheld until formal Board action has been taken.

Regarding the ISC expansion, Ms. Spillman clarified that this is not a new program, as her own child currently attends ISC. However, she requested additional details on the financial implications of the proposed expansion, specifically:

- What has been the ISC budget for the last two years?
- What is the differential for taking on students from PREP (Piedmont Regional Education Program)?
- How long will it take to offset the cost of the expansion compared to tuition payments to PREP?
- What is the current and projected per-pupil cost for ISC with the proposed enrollment?

In response, Ms. Kumazawa directed the Board to page A-46 of the budget document, which outlines the net increase of \$648,000 for the ISC proposal. This includes the addition of 15.5 FTEs at a cost of approximately \$1.5 million, offset by savings such as the elimination of tuition payments to PREP, which is the largest funding source for the internal expansion. While the overall financial changes were outlined in the document, she acknowledged that per-pupil cost calculations had not been provided but committed to producing those figures as a follow-up.

Mr. Paige asked whether the Guaranteed Field Experiences included in the budget are directly related to the curriculum, such as in history or other academic subjects.

Ms. Kumazawa confirmed that the field experiences are curriculum-aligned and designed to support academic content areas. They further clarified that the program is intended to provide equitable access to experiential learning for all elementary school students across the Division.

Ms. Osborne asked whether there was any indication that the Local Composite Index (LCI) formula might be re-evaluated or reformed in the coming years, expressing hope that state representatives might be advocating for change, especially in light of increasing local concerns about funding equity.

Superintendent Dr. Haas responded, referencing the recent JLARC (Joint Legislative Audit and Review Commission) report, which included recommendations for improving education funding formulas in Virginia. He shared insights from recent discussions at the Virginia Association of School Superintendents (VASS) winter meeting, where Secretary Guidera and other state officials appeared reluctant to make substantial changes during the current administration.

Dr. Haas noted that, although the governor's budget proposed only minimal investment (approximately \$1 million) to continue studying the issue, there was some positive movement, such as a proposed revision to the state's support cap included in the crossover budget. That revision resulted in a small increase in state funding for the Division, which Dr. Haas described as encouraging.

Regarding LCI projections, Dr. Haas explained the difficulty of accurately predicting LCI shifts due to its relative nature. Since LCI compares jurisdictions statewide based on:

- Property values
- Adjusted gross income (AGI)
- Taxable retail sales

...any changes in other localities can affect Albemarle's standing. He cautioned that Albemarle's LCI is likely to continue rising, driven by:

- Increasing property values
- An influx of high-income earners relocating from Northern Virginia and other higher-cost areas during and after the pandemic

Currently, Albemarle ranks 14th in the state in terms of LCI. If trends continue, the Division could eventually hit the LCI cap of 0.8000, which would stabilize year-to-year fluctuations but also limit future increases in state aid.

Dr. Haas concluded by saying that meaningful reform to LCI and broader education funding formulas is unlikely without a significant philosophical shift at the state executive level. Until then, he anticipates only incremental adjustments.

Ms. Osborne expressed concern that, despite the valuable insights in the JLARC report, the state has not taken sufficient action to address inequities revealed in the findings.

Ms. Spillman inquired about the total amount of federal funding the Division receives and the potential local impact if those funds were to be lost or reduced.

Ms. Kumazawa clarified that:

- While some documents categorize special revenue by program type (federal, state, local, capital replacement), the actual federal revenue total across all special revenue funds is approximately \$11.5 million.
- This total includes programs such as Child Nutrition, which is a self-sustaining fund but receives significant federal support.
- If federal funds were lost and the Division chose to continue services at current levels, such as offering free student meals, local funding would be needed to cover the shortfall—approximately \$11.5 million.

Ms. Spillman asked why there is not an additional public hearing scheduled for the upcoming budget work session, given ongoing discussions and public interest.

Ms. Schmitt responded that the Division typically holds one formal public hearing during the budget process. However, the March 13th regular business meeting will still include public comment, even though the Board is scheduled to approve the funding request that evening.

It was clarified that:

- The final budget approval deadline is May 9, allowing for additional discussions and adjustments throughout April.
- The Board will have multiple opportunities to engage in further budget review and receive community input before final adoption.

Ms. Le asked whether the School Board's funding request must be balanced or if it can be needs-based. Ms. Kumazawa responded that, under state requirements, the School Board must submit a needs-based funding request. The budget process includes two stages:

1. The Draft Funding Request, and
2. The School Board's Approved Funding Request.

Both stages are based on identifying the Division's educational and operational needs, not necessarily a balanced budget constrained by available revenues at the outset. Staff also noted that all related materials and documentation discussed during the budget process are publicly available.

Dr. Acuff asked whether there is any information available on how neighboring jurisdictions are addressing market compensation for educators and staff. Ms. Kumazawa responded that this information is being compiled and will be presented at the next board meeting, where comparative data from surrounding divisions will be shared as part of the ongoing budget discussion.

Ms. Wang offered a student perspective on the Foreign Language in Elementary Schools (FLES) program, sharing that although she did not participate in the FLES program specifically, she attended an elementary school that offered second language instruction.

She acknowledged the commonly held view that young children are well-equipped to learn a second language, but emphasized that language proficiency depends on the depth and consistency of practice. Drawing on her own experience learning a second language at home, Ms. Wang noted that daily conversational use was key to developing strong skills.

She expressed interest in knowing the quality and depth of instruction provided through the FLES program—specifically, whether students are receiving repetitive surface-level content (e.g., songs and weather vocabulary) or are building functional, conversational language skills over time.

Ms. Wang suggested that the Division track longitudinal outcomes for FLES participants—such as how many go on to enroll in advanced language courses (e.g., AP or Level 4+) in high school—to evaluate the program's long-term academic impact.

AGENDA ITEM NO. 5.0 OTHER BUSINESS

Agenda Item No. 5.1 Personnel Action – Mr. Paige a **motion** to not appoint employee A. Ms. Le seconded the **motion**. **A roll call vote was taken, and the motion passed with the following recorded votes:**

AYES: Dr. Berlin, Ms. Le, Ms. Osborne, Mr. Paige, Ms. Pryor, and Chair Acuff

NAYS: None

ABSENT: None

ABSTAIN: Ms. Spillman

Motion carried by a 6:0:0:1 vote

Agenda Item No. 5.2 Other Business by the Board Members and the Superintendent

Superintendent Dr. Haas addressed concerns raised earlier in the meeting by Ms. Spillman regarding premature communications sent out to staff and families about the proposed elimination of the FLES program and the expansion of the Intensive Support Center (ISC).

Dr. Haas apologized for the misstep, acknowledging that while the intention was to be proactive in communication, the messages failed to recognize that both proposals are subject to final approval by the School Board through the budget process. He stated: "I have no excuse. I just got hung up in the content and the desire to be proactive and failed to acknowledge that these are both items the Board will ultimately need to approve."

Dr. Haas extended his apology to Board members, families, and the community, and committed to doing better in the future.

Superintendent Haas offered a [clarification](#) regarding a recent public statement about eighth grade math achievement in Albemarle County Public Schools. Addressing a narrative recently published in a local newspaper, emphasizing the need for accurate context and interpretation of student performance data.

Dr. Acuff shared that she and Mr. Paige had the honor of representing the School Board at the groundbreaking ceremony for Center II earlier in the week. She noted that this marked the second school groundbreaking in February, both of which are scheduled to open in August 2027. She highlighted that Center II will include approximately 132,000 square feet of flexible, modern educational space, designed to support innovative learning. She added that while the construction site may currently appear bare, the community can expect to see a transformative new facility taking shape over the next 18 months.

Ms. Wang provided an update from Albemarle High School, noting that the school is currently wrapping up Black History Month. Our BSU team have organized a variety of engaging events throughout the month. Highlights included a recent visit from Jihamba dancers, who not only performed but also taught members of the school community traditional dance steps. In addition, the AHS robotics team, Firefly, is preparing to compete at the state championship this weekend, marking a significant achievement for the team and the school.

Agenda Item No. 5.3 Closed Meeting – none.

Agenda Item No. 5.4 Closed Meeting Certification – none.

AGENDA ITEM NO. 9.0 ADJOURNMENT - At 9:22 p.m., hearing no objections, Chair Acuff adjourned the meeting of the Albemarle County School Board.



Clerk



Chair