

Albemarle County Public Schools 2022 Legislative Priorities

Every school division in the United States has faced tremendous challenges since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, and Albemarle County Public Schools (ACPS) is no exception. From maintaining student and staff safety and wellness to experiencing hindrances in educating, transporting, and feeding students, our division is facing significant struggles and needs that continue to disrupt our division's day-to-day operations.

We are, as always, very grateful to our state and local legislators for the significant support that they have already offered the public schools in the Commonwealth, and we believe that with a few more strategic efforts, our burdens will be further eased and our pre-pandemic operations restored.

ACPS recently developed a new strategic plan in collaboration with community members, students, families, employees, and local leaders that centers around the four main values of our division: equity, excellence, family and community, and wellness. We have framed our legislative priorities so that each priority can fit within any of these four principles.

EQUITY

We remain indebted to our local legislators for the support they have provided to our Department of Transportation over the last several years. The assistance you have given to keep our buses operating safely and consistently both before and since the pandemic started has made a noticeable difference for our students. Still, our ability to recruit and retain bus drivers is, like in so many other school divisions across the nation, increasingly difficult for our school communities. If we are truly to achieve equity in our schools, we must be able to transport all students effectively without depending on our families' ability to make private arrangements.

To ease some of these difficulties, ACPS has three legislative requests related to transportation.

Our school division is a commercial driver's license (CDL) training center, expediting our ability to hire transportation employees and continue our bus service. We are grateful to have this option available, and would like to be able to extend the service to other school divisions that do not have training available.

Virginia code § 46.2-341.14:9 (B) permits skills testing by only the division that trained the individuals. This is not viable for school districts who lack the staffing to train and test individuals from outside of their division. ACPS would be glad to offer testing services to trainees from other divisions.

- We **request** that the legislature remove the requirement that our division must train them as well.

In the Commonwealth, new drivers are required to pass four tests in order to transport students. Virginia code § 46.2-332 creates a burden on our training program by requiring a fee for retesting within 15 days at our training location and limiting the frequency at which our trainees may retake tests when needed. These slow our training process and prevent us from getting new bus drivers on the roads at a time when we are experiencing terrible struggles to recruit and retain drivers.

- We **request** that General Assembly eliminate retesting fees and retesting frequency limitations for trainees.

EXCELLENCE

Two years ago, The Virginia Board of Education revised the Standards of Quality (SOQs). These minimum standards for high-quality public education include several staffing items that aim to improve our schools statewide. However, the support cap implemented during the Great Recession limits funding for many of the staff roles that the updated SOQs recommend, including school counselors and nurses, assistant principals and social workers. This support cap was meant to be temporary and to address funding issues that our state no longer faces.

- We **request** that the General Assembly remove the support cap and fully fund these support positions that would increase equity in our schools by offering the assistance that our students so desperately need—particularly during a pandemic.

Public schooling is the most important service that any nation or community offers. Investing in those who staff schools is necessary to maintain the high-quality education that turns students into the innovators, public servants and good citizens of the future. Our state is considered the best state in which to do business, but the average teacher salary is around \$8,000 less than the national average¹. Virginia is currently in a very good position fiscally to increase incentives for those who spend time with our state's children daily—particularly during the period brought on by the pandemic that is now known as the Great Resignation.

- We **request** that increased state funding be provided to each school division to help raise teacher salaries in Virginia to at least the national average of \$61,000 without increasing the local share of the cost.

Further, ACPS has begun to experience more difficulties related to recruiting teachers since the pandemic began. More flexibility in teacher licensure requirements would make it easier for us to address our local staffing shortages.

- We **request** that a study be done to review teacher licensure requirements to determine if there are any possible changes that might increase the teacher recruitment pool.

FAMILY AND COMMUNITY

When Governor Northam issued his 2020 Executive Order suspending certain provisions of the Open Meeting Law in order to allow public bodies to carry out their business while honoring public health recommendations related to COVID-19, our public engagement in school board meetings increased. The remote format removed participation barriers that had long interfered with the public's ability to attend Albemarle County School Board meetings. We do not want those newly-opened doors to close.

Thus, Albemarle County Public Schools has the following requests related to accessibility and the meetings of public bodies:

- We **request** that the General Assembly preserve remote access to meetings of public bodies.
- We **request** that the definition of a quorum for public bodies be revised to include virtual attendees with no prior approval.

¹ <https://www.veanea.org/?s=rank>

- We **request** that the General Assembly remove limits to the number of meetings that board members can attend electronically.

WELLNESS

We are grateful that both the General Assembly and the Virginia Board of Education have focused on the importance of providing social and emotional supports for students and employees; these have become more critical than ever in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and school closures. Further, they reduce student discipline problems, school violence, and the stresses that students face during uncertain and difficult times.

- We **request** that the General Assembly provide school divisions with the funding necessary to implement proven methods of preventing and responding to behavioral patterns that lead to suspension and expulsion.
- We **request** that the General Assembly fund positions by function rather than title or licensure so that we may increase our staffing for student-facing wraparound services that address student stress and behavioral issues.

We are also sensitive to the importance of increasing sustainability in our division's operations. In Albemarle County received a grant from the Virginia Department of Environmental Quality to fund two buses, which will be on the road in 2022. With more assistance from the state, we could acquire more electric buses for daily use, decreasing our carbon footprint in our community.

- We **request** more state funding for the purposes of acquiring electric buses.