



September 12, 2023

Secretary of Education Aimee Guidera  
P.O. Box 1475  
Richmond, VA 23218

Superintendent of Public Instruction Lisa Coons  
P.O. Box 2120  
Richmond, VA 238218

RE: Position Letter - Budget Recommendations

Dear Secretary Guidera and Superintendent Coons,

The Virginia Public Education Coalition (VPEC) provides a unified voice in advocating for and improving K-12 education in the Commonwealth of Virginia. We believe that public education provides direct benefits to students and families, as well as society at large. Our interest in the budget process led us to provide you with our collective thoughts on budget amendments to recommend in the FY25 and FY26 biennium budget. After reviewing these recommendations, we invite you to join a VPEC meeting to further discuss these ideas and ways we might collaborate to advance shared budgetary objectives, including priorities to address learning loss and mental health.

Below, we list our top budget amendment recommendations and a rationale for each. We would be more than happy to expand and provide additional context, analysis, cost estimates, or examples of how these expenditures would ultimately improve student outcomes and well-being.

**Priority recommendations from 2023 JLARC report studying the Standards of Quality (SOQ)**

**Fully lift the Support Cap**

- *Rationale:* Lifting the Support Cap has been the primary goal of all of the major Virginia education coalitions, including VPEC, and advocacy groups for more than a decade. Although put in place as a temporary cost saving measure during the budget deficit years following the Great Recession, the persistence of this policy has stripped billions of dollars from Virginia schools, particularly our highest need schools, and deprived an entire generation of students of tens of thousands of critical support

positions that impact so many facets of their K-12 experience and learning outcomes. Only in the last two years has the state made progress on undoing some of the damage by partially lifting most of the cap. We ask you to be the champions in this upcoming budget who finish the 15-year recommendation to restore state funding for support positions.

#### Eliminate the Salary Linear Weighted Average (LWA)

- *Rationale:* Like the Support Cap, the LWA was implemented in the early 1990's during a major budget deficit as a cost saving measure. Since that time, the LWA's impact has grown in magnitude to further water-down prevailing salaries used in the SOQ estimates. Today, the LWA clearly contributes to a dramatic underestimate of actual prevailing salaries, contributing to inequities in competitive pay and vacancy rates across the state. JLARC has repeatedly recommended eliminating this distorting element of our funding formula since 2001.

#### Replace outdated free lunch estimates with the Identified Student Percentage (ISP) measure for At-Risk Add On and consolidate program under SOQs

- *Rationale:* We've known since 2014 when schools began applying for the Community Eligibility Provision that the free and reduced lunch estimates would become increasingly out of date as schools serve a large share of students from low-income households. Nearly a decade later, as poverty has increased in certain schools, especially in Virginia's rural school divisions, this free and reduced lunch estimate is often highly inaccurate. We believe that the ISP measure, as recommended by JLARC, represents a reasonable measure for approximating student need and should be used for allocating all At-Risk Add On funding. In addition, we and other education coalitions have been calling for the consolidation of At-Risk Add On funding under the SOQs for years and believe this will give school division leaders more trust in its permanency and willingness to use it for ongoing expenditures such as positions. It is clear that communities with a high-share of immigrant population have a statistically significant undercount in the ISP measure relative to the free lunch measure. This is likely caused by the chilling effect caused by the 2018 Public Charge rule change at the federal level. With a change to the measure used to proxy for poverty, we recognize that there are divisions who will see a decrease in funding due to the undercount in communities with a high-share of immigrant households, and should be held harmless so that no single division receives less funding as a result of the formula change.

#### Special education Add-On funding

- *Rationale:* Virginia has had decades of reports from commissions, including four major JLARC reports in 1988, 2001, 2020 and 2023, indicating our staffing ratios and funding for students with disabilities is far from adequate. Unfortunately, although these reports have provided reasonable options to correct for this inadequacy, they all recommend further study of the issue. With the state funding just 1/9th of the [recommended level](#) of special education aides and only 2/3rds of the needed special education teachers, it is abundantly clear that we are not in the ballpark of adequate support for our students with disabilities. Although switching to a completely new student weighted-model as proposed in Policy Option 4 of the report may not be feasible in the short term, providing an add-on for special education students similar to what is proposed in Policy Option 5 is a reasonable approach and could be built into a biennial budget in the near-term. There remain a handful of low- and no-cost reforms for special education policy from the 2020 JLARC report recommendations, but none of these will suffice for the gaping need in special education classrooms throughout the state for additional staffing. It's clear that our special education staff are overwhelmed and under-resourced, and Virginia must improve staffing ratios if we are to change this trajectory. We view an additional \$480 million add-on annually for special education students, as estimated in Policy Option 5, as a reasonable and conservative initial step to more adequately fund services for these students.

#### English Learner (EL) Student Support Add-On

- *Rationale:* No student group that we measure lost more ground on SOL pass rates than EL students in the two years following the pandemic. Despite this loss, and continued [reports](#) showing Virginia has the

lowest state effort in the country, by far, for resourcing these students, we've seen no additional state funding. The JLARC report offers a conservative recommendation in Policy Option 5 for additional EL student funding, which is derived from taking the midpoint of what the state currently spends and a composite weight of adequacy studies from other states. To be sure, this midpoint weight is arbitrary in design and deliberately watered down from what would be an adequate amount to provide a lower cost estimate. While inadequate, it does represent a conservative starting point that would represent meaningful progress to move Virginia out of the bottom tier of states for supporting EL students.

Increase the state share of SOQ salary increases by 8% to get to national teacher pay average in FY25

- *Rationale:* Since the 1970s, Virginia has had various statutory goals to get to the national teacher pay average. In all of that time, Virginia never has, despite emerging as one of the richest states per capita in the country. While nearly a dozen Virginia governors have pledged to get to the national teacher pay average, our hope is that this administration finally achieves that goal. With the 7% state raise in the second part of FY24, average teacher pay in Virginia will still be far below even pre-pandemic levels when one adjusts for inflation. With a worsening teacher shortage between the 2021-22 and 2022-23 school years in Virginia, despite an improvement nationally, Virginia's highly uncompetitive teacher pay is neither incentivizing nor retaining workers at a sustainable rate. Pay is the top interest in every survey for workers considering entering the profession and for teachers who are considering leaving it. Although advertising and new pipeline initiatives may attract a relatively small percentage of total teachers to the field, these initiatives can't distract us from the essential task of meaningful progress towards pay increases and getting to the national average. In a high cost of living state like Virginia, this should be our minimum goal.

### **Double the size of the Office of School Quality**

*Rationale:* In a [2020 JLARC report](#), only half of school divisions that worked with the VDOE Office of School Quality indicated the support offered for their improvement plan was effective (schools that are not fully accredited by the state must create an improvement plan with this office). Staff at the Office of School Quality and within school divisions described the improvement plan process as "largely a compliance exercise," according to the report. The report also found that similar offices in North Carolina and Kentucky had much lower ratios of office staff to schools on improvement plans, meaning these neighboring states had more capacity to support schools with technical advising beyond basic compliance and monitoring requirements. Unfortunately, the compromise state budget from last year's legislative session [removed the new funding for the Office of School Quality](#) included in the introduced budget. This funding would have doubled the size of the office and offered regional support positions throughout the state that could have provided more responsive and proactive coaching and advising of schools in need of improvement. We recommend filing this amendment once again. The new funding would significantly scale services within the office to provide more responsive advising and training to schools with high student needs.

### **Expand Community Schools model funding and build into the SOQs for the coordinator position and per pupil program budgets**

*Rationale:* Community Schools Models offer integrated health and social supports, expanded and enriched learning time and opportunities, active family and community engagement, and collaborative leadership and practices. With decades of implementation in other states and clear evidence of improved student outcomes, Virginia is well positioned to expand these innovative models in the upcoming biennium. Virginia studied Community Schools at length with a committee of experts and released a [start-up guide](#) in 2019. Building on the current budget's \$10 million pilot grant, Virginia should bolster this fund and create a VDOE office to provide technical advising to support Community Schools models. We can look to states such as Florida and Georgia that offer robust state support for starting and certifying Community Schools. Other states such as Oklahoma, New Mexico, and Maryland are scaling their ongoing funding efforts to prioritize developing

Community Schools models in their highest poverty settings. Vermont has prioritized supporting these models in rural communities, where they tend to yield among the strongest positive outcomes for students and families. Virginia could take a middling approach and provide SOQ funding for a community school coordinator in the 20% of schools with the highest ISP share, and then provide an operating budget ranging from \$300-\$650 per student for programming and leveraging community resources. This investment would be less than states like Maryland, New York, and California, which provide multiple positions in their Community Schools and larger program budgets, but slightly more than lower resource states like New Mexico and Oklahoma.

### **Reach the national best practice standard for the student counselor ratio at 1 to 250**

*Rationale:* Since 2019, the Virginia Board of Education has recommended meeting the national best practice standard of 1 counselor to every 250 students. For students to receive the full benefits of a comprehensive school counseling program, the school counselor caseload shouldn't exceed 250 students. But since the 2007-2008 school year, student enrollment in Virginia schools has grown by more than 60,000 students, while staff available to meet the instructional and support needs of these students has decreased. As a result, the average student caseload for school counselors in Virginia grew from 300 to 361 students over the decade, with caseloads in some schools reaching more than 1,000 students per counselor. The General Assembly-approved investment has Virginia heading in the right direction and brought the ratio back down to 1 counselor for every 325 students in 2022. That being the case, Virginia counselors remain oversubscribed and less able to do their jobs than in the 2000's. With student mental and emotional health needs, and behavioral challenges, substantially increasing since the pandemic, now is the time for the state to commit to funding these frontline workers who can head off major disruptions to learning and keep students on track.

### **Implement the 1 to 400 recommended ratio of assistant principals to students**

*Rationale:* For many years, the VBOE has recommended reaching a better ratio of assistant principal to students because research shows that these positions have an extremely high return on investment for improving student outcomes and reducing behavioral referrals. In a recent [comprehensive review of 79 studies on assistant principals](#), researchers at Vanderbilt University and Mathematica found strong evidence that assistant principals play an outsized role in school cohesion, culture, graduation rates, and test outcomes. Meeting this ratio would add approximately 1,500 additional assistant principals to Virginia's public schools, ensuring that the vast majority of schools have at least two administrative positions. House Republicans included funding for this recommendation in their 2022 proposed budget, and unfortunately it was not included in the final biennium budget that year.

### **Do not supplant rebenchmarking funding in the upcoming budget or count towards total new investments for K-12; consider returning to prospective inflation adjustment**

*Rationale:* Virginia stopped using prospective Consumer Price Index inflation adjustments during the early 1990s as a cost-savings approach during a major budget deficit. Since then, Virginia state basic aid does not keep pace with inflation and is two years behind because only official certified Consumer Price Index Urban (CPI-U) data is used. In the upcoming rebenchmarking process, much of Virginia's K-12 aid will be updated with two years of very high CPI-U growth, yielding an unusually large upwards adjustment. While it may be tempting to conceptualize this as new state K-12 funding, it simply represents the state catching up to higher inflationary costs that localities and divisions already incur. This adjustment is not made to increase the spending power per student of any division, but rather to keep pace with inflation and changes in student enrollment. To that end, we know that with larger fluctuations in inflation, the state will periodically fall behind in adjusting for raising costs. It would be most responsible for keeping state-funding level to account for the recent years of missed inflation and begin using the Congressional Budget Office 10 year quarterly estimates

to account for prospective adjustments in the biennium fiscal years. This is a logical approach for the state to keep pace with real time costs for divisions.

**Increase the National Board Certification Teacher stipend to \$7,500 annually**

*Rationale:* Attaining a National Board Certification (NBCT) is a rigorous professional development program for teachers that builds skills, recognizes excellence, and helps retain educators. Adjusting the annual Virginia stipend from \$2,500 to \$7,500 would bring us in line with neighboring states to incentivize our best teachers to undertake this endeavor and stay in the classroom. The NBCT and certification process are closely aligned with Virginia’s Teacher Evaluation Standards and Performance indicators. Its individualized nature allows for educators to focus on areas of their own professional growth that will benefit the students they serve. Numerous studies indicate that students taught by NBCTs make greater learning gains compared to their peers which is particularly pertinent when many students have experienced pandemic-related learning disruptions. North Carolina pays a 12% supplement for their NBCT teachers and Maryland pays a \$10,000 stipend annually to NBCT’s and then an additional \$7,000 for those working in title 1 schools.

**VDOE Medicaid navigators for school divisions to leverage new federal rules**

*Rationale:* School divisions will need both technical advising and personnel to maximize the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act changes to Medicaid rules. Positions within VDOE to help schools bill Medicaid for point-of-use service at school sites would be helpful to fully leverage the new flexible rules and prevent students from having to leave school for services.

The below signed organizations are prepared to serve as a source of input on any and all decisions affecting the education of Virginia’s students moving forward.

Respectfully,

*Virginia Association of Colleges  
for Teacher Education*

*Virginia Association of  
Elementary School Principals*

*Virginia Association of School  
Superintendents*

*Virginia Association of  
Secondary School Principals*

*Virginia School Boards  
Association*

*Virginia Association for Supervision and  
Curriculum Development*

*Virginia Counselors Association*

*Virginia Education Association*

*Virginia Middle School Association*

*Virginia Congress of Parents  
and Teachers*

*Virginia School Counselor  
Association*

*Virginia Professors of Educational  
Leadership*

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CC: Virginia Board of Education  
Assistant Secretary of Education  
Department of Planning and Budget Director