

Lee District School Tour Report

4/29/2014

Supervisor Jeffrey C. McKay

Introduction

On January 28, I presented a board matter outlining my plans to visit every school in Lee District, sit down with the principals, and hear, first hand, about their daily challenges and successes. I launched my tour at Hayfield Elementary, my own daughter's school, on January 29. Between that date and April 3, I visited the 19 elementary schools, 4 middle schools, 5 secondary schools, and 1 special center that serve the children of Lee District. I have been particularly focused on the needs of Lee District's Priority and Title I schools and this tour highlighted the important challenges these schools face. In some ways, these are our invisible schools and the ones where historically we hear from the fewest parents at budget public hearings.

I am the product of our Fairfax County Public Schools, have a child in school now, my mother is a retired teacher, and my sister is a public school teacher. I don't claim to know everything about our schools, but I do have a personal foundation and stake, as well as a professional one, in ensuring our schools are top notch. I want every child in the County to have the same opportunity to learn that I did, and that is the reason I embarked on my recent tour of every school serving Lee District students.

This report will discuss the 29 schools I visited, identify common themes, and indicate the next steps we must take to ensure that we attract and retain the best teachers so that all our students learn regardless of their background, income, race, gender, or zip code.

I'd like to thank Chairman Sharon Bulova, School Board Chairman Ilryong Moon, Lee District School Board member Tammy Kaufax, and County Executive Ed Long for taking time out of their busy schedules to join me on a few visits. I'd also like to thank Superintendent Karen Garza, Cluster 4 Assistant Superintendent Deborah Tyler and Director Evangeline Petrich, and Cluster 5 Assistant Superintendent Frances Ivey and Director Grace Taylor for supporting these visits and meeting with me to discuss some of the feedback I received. Finally, I'd like to thank all of the principals, teachers, and school staffs serving Lee District children who enthusiastically responded to my request to meet. I learned a great deal at each school, and I believe our mutually beneficial conversations will help us to work hand-in-hand for years to come.

Schools Visited:

Elementary Schools

- Hayfield Elementary School
- Forestdale Elementary School
- Franconia Elementary School
- Bush Hill Elementary School
- Crestwood Elementary School
- Garfield Elementary School
- Groveton Elementary School
- Hybla Valley Elementary School
- Island Creek Elementary School
- Lane Elementary School
- Rose Hill Elementary School
- Mount Vernon Woods Elementary School
- Riverside Elementary School
- Mount Eagle Elementary School
- Woodlawn Elementary School
- Clermont Elementary School
- Springfield Estates Elementary School
- Cameron Elementary School
- Lynbrook Elementary School



Touring Hayfield Elementary School with its principal, Jessica Lewis.



Chairman Sharon Bulova joined me at two schools, including Franconia Elementary School (above). Here we are with students and Principal Merrell Dade.

Middle Schools

- Walt Whitman Middle School
- Carl Sandberg Middle School
- Francis Scott Key Middle School
- Mark Twain Middle School

Special Centers

- Key Center School

High Schools

- West Potomac High School
- Mount Vernon High School
- Hayfield Secondary School
- Robert E. Lee High School
- Thomas A. Edison High School



Ilyong Moon, chairman of the School Board, joined me at Thomas A. Edison High School. We toured the school's animal science lab (above) along with Principal Pamela Brumfield.

Common Themes

What Do Principals Hear from Teachers?

Workload/Time

The number one point that teachers and principals wanted to get across was that there was not enough time in the day for them to accomplish the educational basics—from lesson planning to class instruction to preparing for rigorous state testing. The dedication of our teachers is evident; I heard many stories about instructors staying long after the end of the school day to prepare for the next day. No two schools are the same and with some schools in the high 80th percentile of free and reduced lunches, our teachers are helping our children not only in the classroom but also in their homes.

In almost all our Priority Schools (formerly Project Focus/ Excel schools) I heard that the loss of Monday instructional time and the 7 percent reduction in teacher pay when the program was dropped is having a negative effect on learning. Most troubling is that the biggest impact is on those children who can least afford to lose instructional time and on the schools that need our best teachers.

I also heard that our teachers are pressed for time when preparing for the numerous State-required tests. While our efforts to educate General Assembly members have had some success—beginning with the next school year there will be five fewer tests—much work remains to reduce standardized testing and make tests more meaningful and less time consuming. A single test should not and cannot adequately measure student learning.

Cost of Living

I heard that an increasing number of our teachers are commuting to Fairfax County from other jurisdictions, some as far away as Fredericksburg. The lack of affordable housing appears to be the main driver and it is negatively affecting some of our newest teachers.

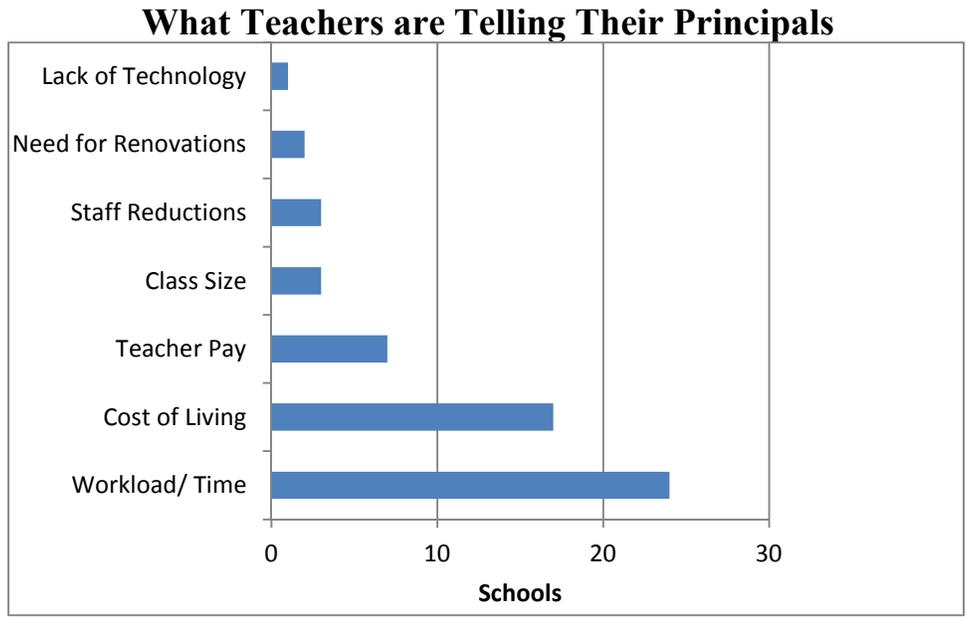
The online real estate database Zillow gives this comparison:

- Median cost of a three bedroom house in Fairfax County: \$499,000
- Median cost of a three bedroom house in Prince William: \$345,000

Our educators have the same day-to-day financial and family pressures as our county employees and residents. Fairfax County is an expensive place to live, and that is not limited to the cost of housing—it covers every aspect of daily life.

Other Concerns Raised By Our Teachers

- Pay
- Class Size
- Need for Upgraded Technology



Common Themes

What Keeps Our Principals Up at Night?

Staff Reductions

Many principals mentioned the importance of assistant principals, positions that have appeared on the cut lists of many superintendents over the years. Assistant principals, I learned, help administer some of the many State-required tests, among other duties. Their absence would mean pulling teachers from the classroom to administer the tests, further reducing instructional time. Additionally, in many schools, assistant principals work one-on-one with students and manage potentially volatile class changes.

I also heard that reductions could affect needs-based staffing and instructional assistants. In some Lee District schools, these positions are critical. Many kindergarten students are entering FCPS without mastering their native language, let alone English. They need the extra help that comes directly from these now at-risk positions. Studies show that this extra help gets results—we have the statistics to prove it. Needs-based staffing and instructional assistants aren't educational luxuries—they are directly responsible for remarkable results in some of our most challenged schools.

Support for Mental and Emotional Health

Many of our principals commented on the significant spike in student mental health and emotional support needs over the last few years. Our school system struggles to provide the sustained and costly counseling and intervention that many of these children need, adding significantly to teacher workload and requiring schools to shift funding from their staffing budgets in order to get full-time counselors and social workers.

Many principals commented that this is a worrisome and growing problem and one that does not necessarily correlate to income level. Principals in schools with a high military population conjectured that the years of frequent and lengthy deployments and numerous disruptive relocations across the country, coupled with family stress brought on by the recent deep recession and financial fragility, are taking a steep toll on the mental health of families. Military personnel have extensive medical and mental health services available to them but it appears that

some families are not using them, possibly fearing that the stigma of mental health issues could harm their military careers.

This is troubling on many levels, not the least of which is the impact on school staffing needs. Whereas previously schools were able to share counselors and social workers, they now need full time dedicated mental health professionals.

Renovation Needs and Impacts

Growing enrollment and aging facilities affect learning and many principals want to upgrade their facilities as quickly as possible. In some of our oldest schools, space is tight. One of our schools had to convert a closet into an office for its parent liaison.

A handful of schools that I visited were already under construction and some of our principals worried that the renovations would not resolve their space issues. As a result, even after renovation and expansion, many of these schools will still need trailers to accommodate all their students.

Losing Base Students

I was shocked to learn that at Walt Whitman Middle School (where I went to middle school), not one student walks to school despite the fact that it is surrounded by residential communities with abundant safe walking routes and infrastructure. The number of children who walk to school throughout Fairfax County is low and I learned that the main reason in many cases are poorly drawn boundaries and the ability of parents to request that their children be placed out of their base schools.

These placements present real challenges to the community. These include:

- Increasing the achievement gap in schools with a high number of base students transferring to other locations
- Spiking enrollment in certain schools
- Increasing use of Kiss and Ride lines, adding to traffic congestion and community safety issues
- Dividing communities and fostering a sense of haves and have nots
- Health issues as children ride rather than walk, adding to our obesity epidemic

- Skewing county staffing formulas at schools with center-based services
- Loss of community feeling where kids know each other and their neighborhood area

Poverty

The number of students receiving free or reduced lunches—families earning less than 130 percent of the federal poverty level are eligible for free meals; those with incomes between 130 and 185 percent of the federal poverty level qualify for reduced price meals—peaks as high as 88.64 percent at some schools in my district. Many principals believe those numbers may be higher because they suspect that many eligible families do not apply for or receive lunch subsidies.

Not only do many of our students not speak English as their first language, but often they have not yet mastered their native languages. I saw charts showing students who only knew a handful of the 26 letters of the alphabet and at each school I heard that this trend was likely to continue, underlining the critical need for pre-K programs. Without these basic skills, children begin their educational career primed to fail and our school system must use increasingly scarce resources to play educational catch-up. This in turn affects every student in every classroom.

This is not to take away from the teachers who are working in some of our most challenged schools. Principals often showed me progress charts for their struggling students, which highlighted that schools can improve student achievement by getting creative. For example, teachers at Hybla Valley Elementary School – a school with nearly 90 percent of students receiving free and reduced lunches – have improved math scores tremendously. Attachment A to this report shows the school’s math passing rate ranks highest among schools with an equivalent number of students receiving free and reduced lunches, and even rivals some schools with up to 50 percent fewer students enrolled in the program.

SACC Programming

The relationship between schools, the SACC programs that they house, and the waiting list varied according to location. For example, my daughter, placed on the SACC waiting list at Hayfield Elementary before she even entered school, is still about number 90 in line. Some schools, however, have no waiting list at all and in fact have slots open.

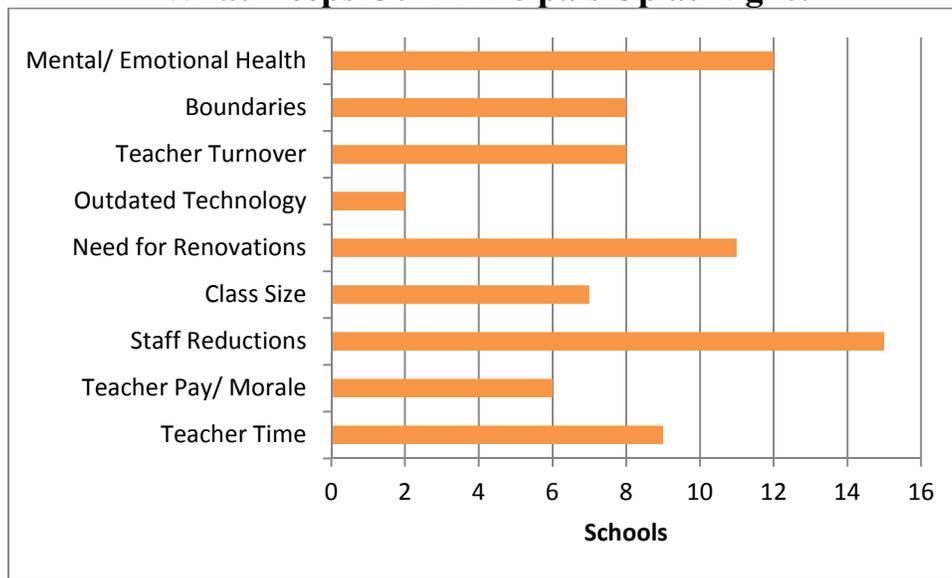
A few principals told me that they were willing to dedicate rooms, mostly art and music spaces used during the school day, to the SACC program. These principals would like to increase SACC enrollment because the need for the program in their communities is so great and because they recognize the enormous academic benefit of the program.

Despite this need, some principals said they had heard from parents who were not aware of the sliding fee scale for the program. Many families just assumed they could not afford to enroll their child in the SACC program.

Other Concerns Worrying Our Principals

- Class Size
- Need for Upgraded Technology
- Turnover

What Keeps Our Principals Up at Night?



Funding Issues

Fairfax County is a donor jurisdiction, sending far more dollars to the state than it recoups. In recent years, for every dollar Fairfax County sent to the State, it received approximately 21 cents back on average. (This is actually an increase over what was previously a return of 19 cents, partially due to declines in the County's Local Composite Index (LCI) during the housing crisis, which increased funding to Fairfax County schools.)

While FCPS receives 15.7 percent of its funding from the state, the average state funding share for school divisions in Virginia is 48 percent, calculated according to the LCI. When State sales tax is added (one and 1/8 cents of the State sales tax is returned to local school divisions based on school aged population) the funding increases to 21.6 percent, leaving 69.8 percent of funding to the County transfer (FCPS also receives small amounts of other funding, including 1.7 percent in federal funding).

Over the past several years, the State has made deep cuts to K-12 funding. Statewide, cuts amounted to \$841 million in FY 2011 (down from the FY 2009 level), and funding remained below the FY 2009 level in FY 2013 and FY 2014.

FCPS receives per pupil funding well below that of other Virginia localities. In FY2012, Fairfax County received \$2,764 per pupil from the State while the County provided \$9,905 per pupil in local funding. By contrast, Prince William County only provided \$4,812 per pupil in local dollars while receiving \$4,813 per pupil from the state.

Cuts to the Cost of Competing adjustment for K-12 support personnel in Northern Virginia resulted in a loss of \$10.2 million to Fairfax County over the FY 2012-2014 biennium.

In sum, the State's overall cuts to K-12 in recent years have left per pupil funding below the FY 2009 level and K-12 funding policy changes adopted by the General Assembly since the 2008 session have cut approximately \$1.7 billion per biennium from K-12. Those are huge cuts and their impact is even greater as they occurred during a period of rapidly increasing needs.

Pensions are one of the largest FCPS cost drivers. FCPS participates in the Virginia Retirement System (VRS) that has been underfunded for years. To mitigate state budget reductions, in FY 2011 the General Assembly adopted a lower than actuarially recommended VRS rate and deferred employer contributions for school divisions. In order to meet this future obligation, FCPS set aside \$45 million in recurring VRS savings in a reserve. Recurring funds available in FY 2012 were added to the VRS reserve bringing the total to \$60.6 million. Reserve funds were used to pay the VRS rate increases in FY 2012 and FY 2013. The remaining \$16.9 million will be spent in FY 2014.

Beginning on July 1, 2012, the State mandated that new employees must pay the 5 percent employee contribution to the VRS. For existing employees, Virginia school systems and localities could shift the full 5 percent employee contribution to employees or phase in the mandated shift over five years. To offset the impact to employees, the state required that that FCPS (and all other school divisions) increase salaries to cover the implemented increase in employees' contributions. This year alone, \$37.5 million of the FCPS budget shortfall can be attributed to the State's retirement mandate.

Other Costs

In addition to the school transfer, the County also picks up the costs for Head Start, school nurses and health aides, school resource officers, crossing guards, after school programming, field maintenance and recreational programs, and SACC, accounting for an additional \$72.6 M from the General Fund. Additionally, two thirds of the County's bond program goes to the schools. Beginning in FY2016, the schools will receive an additional \$13.1 million to offset expenses currently covered by school bonds for facility infrastructure replacement and upgrades.

Conclusion

We live in a time of economic and political change. Institutions, programs, and community cohesion that we've long taken for granted are changing. In spite of these changes, the perception of many outside of Northern Virginia and especially in the General Assembly is that Fairfax County is wealthy enough to provide for all its needs.

The roots of our school funding crisis lie in Richmond. It will take the sustained and committed efforts of both the County and Schools to persuade the General Assembly to provide our fair share of educational funding. We must educate the General Assembly and help members to understand that the current funding formula no longer works. Not only must the State return a larger proportion of the dollars that we send to Richmond, but it must create a separate funding formula that recognizes the special needs of high poverty schools and funds them accordingly. When looking at the Prince William County funding figures cited earlier in this report, two things are very evident.

First, Fairfax County makes schools its highest priority with local dollars. Second, the existing funding formula skews the real need that exists at some schools. These schools simply get lost in the larger county figures for income, achievement, and other benchmarks. I look forward to working with the School Board on a joint initiative on this subject, a topic that was highlighted in the Board of Supervisors' Budget Guidance document for FY 2015.

The lack of sufficient affordable housing is a big factor in the high cost of living in Fairfax County and it is not limited to teachers. To combat that, I am working with our County housing department and school officials to identify the best way to address the affordable housing need. Whether it's expanding the County's Magnet Housing program or creating something new, I am committed to alleviating some of the financial burden placed on our teachers and allowing them to live close to the schools in which they teach. I recognize that many choose where they live for reasons beyond cost, but we should have specific programs targeted to our teachers who financially may qualify.

We need to take a hard and a critical look at school boundary lines and evaluate equitable programming in all of our schools. No school should be viewed more favorably than another and the first step to fixing this is by addressing our programming discrepancies. Today, FCPS-acceptable reasons for children to attend schools outside of their boundaries (Regulation 2230) cover a wide range, including child care hardship, medical, emotional, or social adjustment, child of FCPS employee, high school curricular program, siblings, and the like. Student transfer applications are approved for only one school year, must be renewed annually, and do not include FCPS transportation unless they have been granted through a School Board-approved boundary phase-in. Even so, the impact of Regulation 2230 on both school and community can be significant.

We need to both expand and better advertise SACC. The program is of great importance to many working families and I hope we can further promote it and our sliding fee scale, something that many families do not know exists. I believe that we need to make adjustments to current fees—currently on a sliding scale based on adjusted household income (gross household income minus \$3,900 for each child under the age of 18). Under the current fee schedule, there is no difference between the fees paid by a family with an adjusted household income of \$52,000 and one with a higher income. That does not make financial sense, nor is it fair to any of the families at any level. We need to differentiate between the \$52,000 a year income and, to give just one example, the \$200,000 income.

SACC is a much needed and very popular program and many of our schools have long wait lists. Currently, fees cover only about 80 percent of the program, leaving the County to subsidize from \$9-10 million. That's not sustainable in this economic environment. I was pleased that the Board of Supervisors' budget guidance encourages expansion of the program by addressing its large waiting lists, reviewing the current fee schedule, and adding additional tiers between the current top tier of \$52,000 in adjusted household income and high incomes.

I encourage those involved in the facilities planning process to take a second look at the use of trailers for classrooms. One of the advantages of modulars is that they accommodate such classes as art and music and include restrooms, thus minimizing lost classroom time when children in

trailers must return to the main building, especially just to use the restroom. That same planning should be incorporated into building new schools—it makes little sense to open a new school only to have to add trailers. I found this was the case at several recently renovated schools and even those still under construction.

In positive news, my colleagues on the Board of Supervisors and I recently adopted a plan to allocate \$13.1 million annually in County funding for the Schools' Capital Sinking Fund. Starting in FY2016, this will free \$13.1 million/year to be used by the Schools in bond funding for renovations at both County and school facilities. This will be particularly helpful for some of our older schools. I was proud to work with Supervisors Cook and Foust, as well as School Board members Kathy Smith, Patty Reed and Sandy Evans, who initially made this recommendation. Through the joint School Board – Board of Supervisors Infrastructure Financing Committee we served on, we were able to recommend several creative ways to improve infrastructure.

Mental health issues are a concern in the classroom and beyond—they affect our entire community. I have asked Congressmen Gerry Connolly and Jim Moran to specifically investigate how our military facilities are handling their families' mental health needs and I encourage the schools and military to open a dialog on how to best address this growing need. Recent events, including the shooting at Fort Hood and the Pennsylvania school stabbing, demonstrate the importance of rapidly combatting this growing trend.

As a member of the Successful Children and Youth Policy Team (SCYPT), I've seen the synergies that take place when our schools and our community work together. I have also seen that we have an enormous way to go in helping our challenged youth succeed. That being said, I was pleased that the Board of Supervisors adopted guidance last week to continue working on a comprehensive plan to boost achievement at our neediest schools. This guidance comes as a direct result of SCYPT, on which I serve with Supervisor Hudgins and School Board members Megan McLaughlin and Jane Strauss. I look forward to continuing the progress being made through this joint School Board – Board of Supervisors committee.

This school tour has been a learning experience for me and what I saw and heard reinforced my belief that our educators deeply care about our children.

I am proud of our Lee District schools, their teachers, administrators, and staff. I am proud of the children and youth. These children depend on us to give them the support and tools they need in order to learn and achieve. We have challenges given our changing schools and community, but with those challenges come enormous opportunities. I know we can meet those challenges if we continue to tackle the tough issues and ensure that every child is given the chance to learn regardless of school, race, gender, religion, or economic status.

