

'That really wears on you:' Pay, challenges of poor districts are pushing Virginia teachers out of the classroom

By **Mechelle Hankerson** - March 31, 2019



Thousands of demonstrators rallied for better teacher pay and more public school funding during a January rally at the Capitol. (Ned Oliver/ Virginia Mercury)

After five years, Cody Sigmon is leaving his job as a teacher to become a behind-the-scenes IT employee at Ohio University.

Sigmon, 27, a middle school teacher in Chesterfield, helped organize thousands of educators across the state for several months, culminating in a [January march on the Capitol](#) to advocate for more money for public education funding.

“It makes me feel strangely like a fraud for trying to be at the forefront of the fight for better education funding and then just leave ... I feel like I’m going to be disappointing people,” he said.

The number of unfilled teaching positions in Virginia increased 40 percent from 2007 to 2017 and is a “crisis” specifically in high-poverty school divisions, according to a [2017 report from the Advisory Committee on Teacher Shortages](#).

It’s meant school leaders have had to bring teachers out of retirement to fill positions, some students have gone entire school years without a permanent teacher and some districts have [created programs with universities to feed new educators into their ranks](#).

Former Gov. Terry McAuliffe formed the committee after he had to send personal letters to ask retired teachers in Richmond and Petersburg to come back and fill empty positions, he wrote in a 2017 letter establishing the group.

“In recent months, I have increasingly heard more serious concerns about the future of our teaching workforce,” McAuliffe wrote. “It has become clear that Virginia needs bold, new approaches and fresh ideas in order to solve this complex challenge.”

In 2016, the last full school year before the report was finished, 20 percent of Middlesex County’s teaching positions were unfilled – a total of 20 positions.

Petersburg followed with 47 unfilled positions, or 13 percent of its teacher jobs. Danville had the same number of unfilled positions, but it was 10 percent of the district’s total positions.

The report concluded that becoming a teacher can be costly and there are difficult working conditions, especially for those in districts with more students with disabilities and English-language learners. It also touched on “limited earnings potential” and said teachers don’t feel valued or respected.

Recommendations in the report included creating high school programs that encourage or start students in education training; making the licensing process easier and more straightforward and expanding residency programs that commit college graduates to certain school systems. Also, districts should do more targeted recruitment with “flexible financial support” from the state, the report said.

The committee said improving pay across the board for all teachers would be “very costly” and the state has other options, like loan forgiveness programs or discounted child care, which could alleviate financial burdens on teachers.

Gov. Ralph Northam’s Secretary of Education Atif Qarni said pay was one of the most important aspects of addressing teacher shortages in the state. The current administration considers that and restoring support staff, like counselors, to be the biggest priorities in addressing retention issues.

The [General Assembly included Northam’s proposed five percent teacher pay raise](#) in the approved budget this year. It also included \$12 million for more school counselors, down from Northam’s proposed \$36 million.

In the 2017 school year, before Qarni was in his position, the state had about 1,100 unfilled teaching positions, he said. This year, it was just under 900. He said he plans to continue tracking those numbers and eventually see data broken down by district.

“I do feel that we are moving in the right direction to address teacher retention but we’re nowhere near there yet,” he said. “We still have a lot of work to do.”

Higher pay can mean higher retention

In Danville, it’s not all about pay, but that does help, said Superintendent Stan Jones.

Last year, the [school district spent \\$2 million to even out and create a more straightforward pay schedule](#) for teachers. Teachers got raises that ranged from five to 20 percent. The school system and city will have to find funding to sustain that pay, Jones said.

Danville now has a 97 percent “fill rate,” which measures how many teacher jobs are filled, Jones said. In the past, it’s been in the 80s.

“That investment has made a tremendous difference for us,” Jones said. “We have a lot fewer (substitute teachers), mostly licensed teachers and that will have an impact on our performance.”

Virginia lags behind the national average and state raises — when they’ve happened — haven’t kept up with inflation, said Robert Pianta, dean of the University of Virginia’s Curry School of Education at the [2018 Teacher Retention Summit](#).

Localities can increase teacher pay and education funding on their own, but the state is also partially responsible for local schools’ budgets.

In Middlesex, retention has improved in part thanks to [a big increase in local education funding](#), said Middlesex County Superintendent Pete Gretz.

The district has also put emphasis on things other than standardized testing — which can be “demoralizing,” Sigmon said of his own experience.

“We administer the tests, and we use the data for what it’s worth — but we invite and encourage our teachers to reach for something much bigger,” Gretz said in an email.

“The skills our economy demands today — collaboration, critical thinking, the ability to negotiate conflict while solving complex problems — those skills aren’t measured by the SOLs, and we encourage — in fact we insist — that our teachers create learning experiences and assessments that measure those skills, the ones that actually matter to student success beyond high school.”

Poverty is a major driver

Each year since 2005, about 11 percent of teachers in Virginia have not returned to their jobs, said Luke Miller, a research assistant professor in the University of Virginia Curry School of Education and Human Development.

He analyzed data from individual school systems to better understand why teachers choose to stay, leave or move around.

The number has been consistent, except during the recession when teachers stayed in larger numbers.

The best predictor of whether a teacher would come back appears to be schools' poverty rates, Miller said.

"That doesn't necessarily mean that the poverty is driving teachers out," Miller said. "There could be other things."

School buildings in low-income school districts are usually in worse condition than other places, he said. And there are fewer resources, financial and otherwise, to be dedicated to education.

Jones, in Danville, agrees that the effects of poverty are among the biggest influences in a teacher's decision to stay or leave.

Danville schools have one of the highest rates of poverty in the state, which often means teachers have to fill multiple roles that used to be handled by staff like counselors, school psychologists and nurses.

Cody Sigmon (left), a middle school teacher in Chesterfield County, will end his teaching career after this school year. He helped organize a teacher's march on the Capitol in January. His husband, Jan Huebenthal (right) marched with him. (Courtesy of Cody Sigmon)

The state capped the number of support staff it would fund during the recession. Localities had to cut those positions or pick up their tab on their own. State funding for those positions hasn't been fully restored.

Teachers in growing districts, like Chesterfield, also feel the pressure that comes from fewer resources, Sigmon said. He spends afternoons tutoring students in between planning lessons and organizing teachers across the state.

"We're not dealing with the structural stuff," he said. "We're just constantly dodging the train that's coming and that really wears on you."

Mechelle Hankerson

Mechelle, born and raised in Virginia Beach, is a graduate of Virginia Commonwealth University with a degree in mass communications and a concentration in print journalism. She covered the General Assembly for the university's Capital News Service and was among 12 student journalists in swing states selected by the Washington Post to cover the 2012 presidential election. For the past five years, she has covered local government, crime, housing, infrastructure and

other issues at the Raleigh News & Observer and The Virginian-Pilot, where she most recently covered the state's biggest city, Virginia Beach. Mechelle was with the Virginia Mercury until January 3rd, 2019.



Some school districts may struggle to find local match for proposed teacher pay raise

By **Mechelle Hankerson** - January 16, 2019



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Danielle Kinder has teaching in her family tree – her mom presides over a high school classroom down the hallway from her in Russell County and her sister used to be with them too before switching to elementary school.

But teaching in Russell County is difficult. It's the second lowest-paying county in Virginia for teachers and a 45-minute trip to Tennessee or a shorter ride to neighboring Washington County, where teachers make, on average, about \$10,000 more per year in either location.

“It's hard because you want to serve the community you grew up in,” said Kinder, who teaches at the same school she graduated from. “It's something I wanted to do, I wanted to give back to my community.”

Gov. Ralph Northam has proposed raising all teachers' pay by five percent, 3 percent more than what's in the existing state budget.

It's the largest single-year pay raise for teachers in 15 years, the administration said.

But it still leaves Virginia at the bottom of national rankings for teacher pay, making it hard to be competitive with surrounding states.

And some of the lowest-paid teachers in the state, who will see a smaller dollar increase in their paychecks, are among those who have the easiest commute to teaching outside of Virginia.

“Virginia ranks near the bottom nationally for teacher salaries and rural school divisions are at the bottom of Virginia’s salaries, so rural Virginia teachers are some of the lowest-paid teachers in the nation,” said Keith Perrigan, superintendent of Bristol city schools and member of the Small and Rural Schools Coalition. “An opportunity to adjust those salaries by 5 percent makes us more competitive with neighboring states. It’s certainly something for us to be excited about.”

Northam’s raise proposal isn’t guaranteed. It requires a local match, which could be difficult for districts that struggle economically, and lawmakers could still reject Northam’s proposal.

“It should come as no surprise that we have a teacher shortage in Virginia with more than 1,000 unfilled vacancies, given how poorly teachers are compensated for the important work that they do,” [The Commonwealth Institute wrote in a report](#) analyzing Northam’s proposal.

‘I want to do my best ... sometimes I just don’t have it in me’

About three years ago, Kinder missed out on a state raise because Russell County couldn’t come up with the money for the match.

This year, Russell County gave teachers a two percent raise, but also had to increase the cost of health insurance. Kinder uses insurance from her husband’s employer, but her mother pays for the school system insurance. It now costs about \$600 a month for a family plan.

“We have a lot of single mothers who work and have to have insurance for their children,” Kinder said. “Any raise we would even conceivably get in the future would barely cover it.”

Virginia’s spending on education decreased across the board during the recession and hasn’t recovered, [The Commonwealth Institute wrote in a report](#). The Richmond-based think tank has published several reports about K-12 education funding.

When adjusted for inflation, education funding from the state is still down 9 percent per student from a decade ago, [the institute wrote](#).

Shelly Yarber has taught kindergarten for 14 years in Russell County after switching from doing secretarial work. She has a master's degree — and the debt to go with it — and makes about \$40,000 a year.

She's accepted that she'll probably never pay off the loans she took out to get her master's, but she tries anyway, working at an after school program for extra pay and working shifts at the local Walmart on the weekends.

In the past, Yarber used her associate's degree in accounting and would pick up work during tax season for extra money.

"When I'm tired from working so much ... sometimes (the students) don't always get the best that I can give them," Yarber said. "I want to do my best for them. Sometimes I just don't have it in me to give it at that time."

While some teachers struggle to stay afloat financially, Kinder said she has trouble not being drained by her job because a lot of her students are affected by extreme poverty and the opioid epidemic.

Students have slept through her class because they spend their weekends working jobs out of state and many of the students at her school don't live with their parents, who may be addicted to drugs or in jail, she said.

"It's kind of emotionally draining, because you have to be 'on' so much," Kinder said. "You have to be so encouraging all the time, because you might be the one adult that day that is encouraging."

Finding the local match

Russell County isn't the lowest-paying locality in the state for teachers. That's Tazewell County, about 35 miles away, where teachers make an average of \$37,128 a year, according to data from the Virginia Education Association.

Earlier this year, Tazewell County had to cut \$2.9 million from its budget, which affected how much it was able to give to the school system.

Tazewell's schools leaders considered closing schools, cutting sports programs and implementing a meals tax to try to cover the shortfall.

They did none of those and retained the same number of staff, but [had to scale back on their plans for teacher pay raises](#).

In Southwest Virginia, local funding for education fell along with the collapse of the coal mining industry, said James Puckett, a Russell County teacher and district president for the Virginia Education Association. He oversees a region that

includes teachers from Lee County, at the border of Kentucky and Tennessee to Smyth County, about 60 miles from Radford.

Low teacher salaries aren't limited to one region. In West Point, the average salary is \$41,285 a year and in Lexington it is \$41,192 a year. However, seven of the 10 lowest-paying districts are in Southwest or Southside Virginia.

"The counties are stretched very thin, they're trying to patch many things together to take care of their things," Puckett said. "Of course, whatever we get we're very blessed."

Puckett doesn't see why Russell County teachers won't get a raise this year. He said he hopes it's a priority, because he knows plenty of teachers and staff look elsewhere. Yarber said, if not for owning her home, she would've left the county a long time ago.

"It's just like dangling a bone in front of them," Puckett said. "They're going to take the higher offer."

But there are other considerations for school district leaders when it comes to offering pay raises.

Northam's proposal, like most state-initiated raises, will only cover standards of quality positions, or jobs the state has determined a school needs. Often, schools have more staff than the state has allocated.

If local districts picked up the cost of extra positions, localities have to find all the money to offer those teachers and staff a raise. It's possible that Northam's separate proposal to add \$35 million to the at-risk add on – additional money given to schools with high concentrations of poverty – can be used for other initiatives, like smaller classes, and support staff, like nurses, psychologists and specialists, Perrigan said.

"It'd be very hard as superintendent to recommend a budget to the school board without giving a raise across the board," he said.

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'My community doesn't have a voice': Are Virginia schools meeting the needs of an increasing Hispanic population?

By **Mechelle Hankerson** - September 16, 2019

Over the last five years, Jimmy Trujillo's stepdaughter has moved through elementary and middle school in Richmond with average grades but below-average and stagnating English skills.

His daughter, now in high school, can only read, write and speak a handful of English words, according to her standardized language test results.

Without a better grasp of the English language, Trujillo knows his daughter's chances of graduating are low.

The family's experience is one of the most pressing concerns for schools with large and ever-growing populations of Hispanic and Latino students: accessing English-language education and navigating an unfamiliar system complicated by language barriers.

In schools with large populations of Latino and Hispanic students that dynamic is especially apparent: Students and parents might not know how to ask for language services, impacting students' success.

E.S.H. Greene Elementary in Richmond, where Trujillo was PTA president, has a student body that is 86 percent Hispanic, the highest concentration of Latino students in the state.

Eleven schools in Virginia have student bodies that are more than 75 percent Latino or Hispanic, the threshold the U.S. Government Accountability Office's uses

to define segregation. Greene Elementary is the only one outside of Northern Virginia.

“The same things that happen at black schools happen at Latino schools,” said Patricia Gandara, a researcher at UCLA’s Civil Rights Center, which studied [school segregation in Virginia in 2013](#).

“Generally the school is much, much poorer and they have little access to opportunities. Parents are usually immigrants so parents can’t navigate the school system and no one knows because they’re all in the same boat.”

“Hispanic” refers to people of Spanish-speaking origin. “Latino” refers to geographical origin — from Latin-American countries. Some people interviewed for this story use the terms interchangeably, [as has the U.S. Department of Education](#).

Conversations about school segregation have [historically focused on black students](#), but the issue is just as relevant for Latino students. Black students tend to attend schools that are in the process of desegregating, while white and Latino students are more likely to attend schools that are already segregated, [according to a UCLA report](#).

Most of Virginia’s school systems are no longer under racial desegregation orders ([Suffolk has an outstanding order](#)). Recent federal orders in the state have focused on English-learning services, a resource most commonly used by Spanish-speaking students.

Trujillo, who moved to the United States 21 years ago from Colombia, said it’s hard to get the Richmond school system to listen to Latino families. He’s become a de facto representative for most of Richmond’s Latino and Hispanic families because many don’t know English or worry that a school official will report them to federal authorities because of their immigration status, Trujillo said.

“My community doesn’t have a voice. They don’t listen to us. We don’t get nothing. Nothing. My fight isn’t only for Greene, it’s for Boushall, it’s for Reid, it’s for Wythe,” Trujillo said, listing Richmond schools that have large concentrations of Hispanic students.

In Richmond, a [citywide school rezoning process](#) would redraw some boundaries for schools with the highest Hispanic populations, mostly in an effort to ease overcrowding. In some of the options, the reconfiguration would cut the percentage of Hispanic students at one school in half.

Integrating Latino students in school districts requires careful consideration, Gandara said.

School leaders may want to keep a “critical mass” of Latino and Hispanic students in one school to respect natural communities and make sure short-staffed districts can get an appropriate number of specialized teachers assigned to students, Gandara said.

“Research isn’t totally clear on this ... but in places where you have more of these children, the districts are able to serve the kids better if they have a limited number of bilingual teachers or people trained for English-learners,” she said.

Gary Orfield, another researcher at the UCLA Civil Rights Center, said segregation of Latino students has been increasing since the 1970s, mirroring the growth of the Latino population.

Virginia’s Latino population was about 631,000 people, or 7 percent of the total, in 2010, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. In 2018, the census estimated that the population had grown to 816,000, or nearly 10 percent of the population.

‘There were a lot of students who fell through the cracks’

Even though only one of the schools with the highest concentration of Hispanic students in the state is in Richmond, the district has had notable challenges with English-learning services.

Of school systems that reported dropout data for student demographic groups, Richmond’s Hispanic students have the third-highest dropout rate in the state (60%), behind all of Richmond’s students learning or who have recently learned English (65%) and Fredericksburg English-learners (66%).

Jennifer Blackwell, the current English-learning specialist for Richmond schools and a former counselor at Huguenot High School in the city, acknowledged system-wide shortfalls for English-learners.

“Richmond is a unique situation because we had our big boom of immigrants come in 2015 and with that the district was completely unprepared,” she said. “There were a lot of students who fell through the cracks so we are definitely still feeling the effects of all of that.”

This school year, Richmond officials [didn’t count 800 English-learning students](#), meaning the state didn’t give the city funding for additional teaching positions. The city will have to find money to fund those positions unless the state is willing to adjust its budget.

That doesn’t mean students aren’t receiving English-learning services, Blackwell said, but it could be better with more teachers.

At the end of last school year, Richmond had 3,051 students who required English-learning services. The school district has 48 English-as-a-second-language teachers and are hiring for three more, Blackwell said.

If all three positions are filled, it fulfills the state's Standards of Quality, which require 17 ESL teachers for every 1,000 ESL students.

Other school systems with high concentrations of Hispanic students have faced similar challenges when it comes to delivering English-learning services. [Prince William County](#) and [Arlington](#) were parties in recent federal complaints about inadequate English-learning services.

It's not clear if the complaints were filed by a Spanish-speaking family. Those details are confidential.

In Arlington, Spanish-speakers make up most of the students learning English, but the district also has large numbers of students who speak Arabic and Mongolian, said district spokesperson Frank Bellavia.

[Arlington](#) agreed to a number of changes after a complaint was filed, including properly identifying English learners, training middle school teachers so English learners can understand content and properly monitoring the effectiveness of English learning programming over time.

Arlington already offers most of their parent information programs in Spanish and have started using the WhatsApp messaging app to share information with Spanish-speaking families (the app is [particularly popular among Spanish speakers](#)).

Prince William County agreed to similar actions, according to [the settlement agreement](#).

"Students are resilient," Bellavia said. "For parents, anytime you move to a new country, the institutions are difficult because they're different. The idea of going into a government building or school is intimidating if you don't have a strong command of the language."

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