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CHESTERFIELD Observer

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JENNY MCGUEN

Waiting to walk

The final months of high school are a special time – one the class of 2020 won't get back

BY RICH GRISET STAFF WRITER

“Thomas!” yells a man off camera. “Dale!” shout back dozens of students from Thomas Dale High School’s stadium bleachers.

“Thomas!” “Dale!”

As the song “When We Were Young” by Lost Kings featuring Norma Jean Martine begins to play, the stadium tableau gives way to various scenes of teenage life in this homemade video. Basketball games and birthday parties. Dancing, double-dutch and general goofing around.

For Gabi Proctor, the 18-year-old creator of the video, the montage was intended to be a nostalgic look back at her senior year of high school. This past academic year, Proctor saved video clips and gradually edited them together, leaving the last 45 seconds blank to record school-related

happenings this spring.

But for Proctor and the other seniors in the video, experiences like these ended abruptly on March 12, when Chesterfield closed all of its schools in a public safety move to curb the spread of the coronavirus pandemic. Since then, Gov. Ralph Northam has ordered all K-12 schools in Virginia to close for the rest of the academic year.

Practically everyone has been affected at some level since the COVID-19 virus began making headway in the United States, but high school seniors are currently experiencing a unique pain. With the sudden closure, the traditions and expectations of their final year of public schooling have been dashed.

No prom. No yearbook signings. And while the class of 2020 graduation ceremonies in early

With COVID-19 closing schools everywhere, Gabi Proctor, Langston Jackson and Maddie Benson are among the many teens whose high school careers were just cut short.

See **SENIORS** on page 6

Budget in the air as pandemic worsens

County reworks spending plan to serve ‘core needs’

BY JIM McCONNELL SENIOR WRITER

Spirits were high as the Board of Supervisors and senior staff convened in a fifth-floor conference room at the county administration building for a March 11 work session on Chesterfield County’s fiscal year 2021 budget.

The local revenue forecast was aggressive,

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JENNY McQUEEN

June remain up in the air – on Monday, Gov. Ralph Northam announced a shelter in place order that extends to June 10 – school officials may explore other recognition options, including virtual ones, or postponing the ceremonies until later this year.

For Proctor, who is involved in roughly a dozen school clubs, including the National Honors Society and the Superintendent’s Student Advisory Group, the idea that she won’t be able to say goodbye to her friends and teachers is particularly upsetting.

“I’ve been with these students, the majority of them, since kindergarten ... and not being able to finish our year off correctly before I go to school 11 hours away, it just hurts a little, not to have the ‘lasts’ of our year together,” says Proctor, who will attend the University of Alabama this fall. “I’m completely heartbroken. It absolutely sucks.”

Maddie Benson, a 17-year-old Clover Hill High senior who is involved in theater, forensics and public speaking, had her senior musical, Rodgers and Hammerstein’s “Cinderella,” canceled. Senior theater students usually give their “senior speech” to their teachers and classmates before the curtain goes up on the last night of their spring musical. Benson, who was going to serve as the lighting technician on “Cinderella,” says that won’t happen now.

“We are just in the hallway, holding

hands in a circle. The teachers give their speeches to say how proud they are, and then we get to give our speeches,” says Benson, who plans to study two years at John Tyler Community College, then transfer to Christopher Newport University. “It’s a really good moment.”

She was also looking forward to “Senior Day” in June, a day when high school seniors go back and visit their elementary and middle school teachers while dressed in their graduation caps and gowns.

“My teachers really did shape me into who I am,” Benson says. “Now I won’t be able to say goodbye, and I won’t be able to thank them.”

Like a lot of theater students her age, Benson’s introduction to many of the tropes of high school, like prom and graduation, came from Disney’s “High School Musical” franchise.

“Now we don’t have that, and our senior year is looking more like the movie ‘2012,’” she says, referencing a disaster movie starring John Cusack.

Another impacted Clover Hill senior is Logan Parker. The 17-year-old says he’ll be fine digitally completing whatever schoolwork he needs in order to graduate and finish the information systems certification he’s been working on at CTC@Courthouse. What he’s more concerned about is missing the common staples of senior life.

“The real disappointing stuff is prom,

graduation, all that other stuff,” Parker says. “I was really looking forward to prom, because I didn’t go last year.”

At the time that school was canceled, Parker says he’d just asked his girlfriend to prom a couple of days earlier and planned to have dinner beforehand at Stella’s, a boisterous taverna in Richmond. For his graduation, family planned to travel in from out of town. “It kind of sucks for everyone. I was looking forward to all that stuff,” Parker says. “My mom said when this all clears, we’re going to throw a party, a graduation party, and if they do not make a prom for us seniors, that we will throw a prom at my house, basically.”

Mia Richards, a 17-year-old senior at the Specialty Center for the Arts at Thomas Dale High School, was preparing to serve as the director of the school’s spring production of “The Tempest.” Having previously performed in the show last summer as part of Quill Theatre’s Richmond Shakespeare Festival, Richards was hoping to reveal her own take on Shakespeare’s tale of magic, revenge and redemption.

“There were a lot of things that I was looking forward to, especially for this piece,” Richards says. “It’s hard right now, because I feel like all the work that I’ve done up to this point can’t be reflected, and it’s really sad for all of us.”

With many of her senior year plans canceled or postponed, Richards says it’s been difficult to take at times.

“I remember watching the governor make the announcement of the schools being closed. I shut down,” she says. “All of my friends right after got on a big video call. Our teachers were there, and I had to leave because I was just so sad and I was crying. I just had to take a minute to myself because it just felt like everything we had worked towards was just being stripped.”

While Richards has been accepted into two colleges and is waiting to hear back on a third, even that decision has been affected: “We can’t really go tour colleges because they’re all shut down and everything has to be virtual, and we’re making the biggest decisions of our lives virtually.”

Monacan High senior Langston Jackson isn’t so concerned about prom or graduation – events he says he can replicate in college – but the tuba player is bummed that he won’t be able to attend band events, such as his spring concert, playing in the pep band and attending the year-end band banquet.

If school had been canceled a couple of days later, Jackson would have been able to take part in two of the year’s biggest band events: undergoing the annual band assessment and performing in the pep band as the Monacan girls basketball team played Hampton High for the state championship on March 13 (the game was called off and the schools were declared co-champions).

Jackson says the assessment, in which school bands are graded on their performance, is a big deal for the musicians. In recent years, Monacan has received “Superior” marks, the highest possible.

“It means that we do not get graded for our season. It means that we will not get properly judged for the hard work that we put in for this year,” says the 18-year-old, who plans to attend

Christopher Newport University in the fall. “It’s basically our last showcase, and it means a lot to me,” he says. “I play my heart out on the stage, and I can’t do that now.”

Though it wasn’t exactly how she thought she’d finish her video, Gabi Proctor ultimately decided to complete it using other footage she’d captured this school year and share it on Facebook. More than anything, she hopes she gets a chance to say goodbye to her teachers and classmates.

“I’m very involved with Thomas Dale,” she says. “There are so many people in that school that have impacted my life in such a positive way. If I don’t get to see them again, I’d be super upset.” ■

“I remember watching the governor make the announcement of the schools being closed. I shut down.”

- Mia Richards, Thomas Dale senior



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ASH DANIEL

Supervisors investigate ‘bullying’ of teachers

CEA head: Allegations that members harassed educators is ‘laughable’

BY JIM McCONNELL SENIOR WRITER

At the behest of the Board of Supervisors, the county’s Internal Audit Department will investigate allegations that members of the Chesterfield Education Association bullied and harassed teachers who disagree with its stance on reopening schools this fall.

Leslie Haley, the board’s chairwoman, confirmed last Friday that she intends to request an audit to determine whether non-CEA member teachers were intimidated into silence ahead of the School Board’s controversial July 20 reopening vote.

“I don’t know what it will lead to, but the message is out there that this kind of behavior won’t be tolerated,” Haley said. “People should always have an opportunity to speak their minds. Teachers who felt they were bullied deserve an investigation.”

Haley raised the issue publicly with Chesterfield County Public Schools Superintendent Merv Daugherty at the Board of Supervisors’ monthly business meeting last Wednesday.

Daugherty came before the board to answer questions about the decision to start the 2020-21 school year in a 100% virtual format – among them, why school officials are just now asking the county’s Risk Management Department to help develop a mitigation plan for safely returning students to the classroom, and why they still haven’t made a formal funding request for PPE and other items they’ll need to make such a return feasible amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

Toward the end of the nearly hour-long

At a distance

Under pressure from all sides, the School Board opts to reopen schools virtually this fall. So, what happens next?

BY RICH GRISET STAFF WRITER

Four months of shutdowns, shelter-at-home orders and pandemic-induced economic and political stress finally boiled over in the courtyard of the Chesterfield County government complex last week.

On July 20, under an intense late afternoon sun, more than 100 people divided themselves into two distinct groups: Parents, wearing mostly blue, demanded that schools reopen in the fall. Teachers, primarily in red, argued to keep schools closed for the health and safety of students, faculty and staff.

“Do your job! Do your job!” shouted the parents.

“When it’s safe! When it’s safe!” the teachers yelled back.

In a rare scene for Chesterfield, the two

Parents, including Ian Ellsworth, pictured, verbally clashed with teachers in the courtyard of the county government complex prior to the School Board’s vote for a virtual return to school this fall.

Parents verbally clashed ahead of that evening’s School Board vote on whether to reopen schools for in-person instruction this fall or continue teaching at a distance.

Before the board were seven options, including a 100% return to five-day-a-week, in-person learning, five hybrid models that would bring 50% of students into the classroom on alternating days, and a completely virtual model. In a 4-1 vote, the board opted for an all-virtual start to the school year, citing a dearth of leadership at the federal and state level and growing uncertainty over just how, or when, the coronavirus pandemic will be brought under control.

The fact that the can had been kicked to the

See **SCHOOLS REOPENING** on page 4

See **CEA** on page 8



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SCHOOLS REOPENING *from page 1*

School Board wasn't lost on them. Before the vote, School Board chairwoman Debbie Bailey expressed resentment, saying they lacked enough guidance to make the choice, and that she was "frustrated, because no matter what decision we make, there will be a tremendous amount of unhappy people."

"I am angry at our nation, and at our state's leadership, for passing this decision down to a five-member board consisting of three former teachers, an accountant and a midwife," she said. "We are not health experts. How did it come to pass that we have to make a decision about the health of 63,000 students and 8,000 teachers and staff with little-to-no guidance? How will we know when it's safe to return? What metrics are we using to open our schools, and what metrics will we use to close them?"

The local debate over how to respond to the pandemic has become a microcosm of the one taking place at the national level, and a decision that essentially revolves around health has become a surprisingly political one. School systems around the country are being tasked with figuring out how to educate children during a dangerous pandemic; locally, Richmond and Henrico have also opted for virtual-only models. In Chesterfield, the topic has yet again put the School Board and the Board of Supervisors crossways with each other.

In last week's Observer, Board of Supervisors Chairwoman Leslie Haley and Vice Chairman Kevin Carroll expressed incredulity at calls for continued virtual-only instruction in an opinion piece, saying it was "not a hard decision" to reopen schools. At their meeting last Wednesday, the supervisors grilled schools Superintendent Merv Daugherty about the School Board's decision (Daugherty had come out in favor of a virtual start to the year hours before the vote).

In response, Daugherty said repeatedly said that a return to 100% in-person instruction was "impossible," and that the logistics of reopening at half capacity – such as maintaining social distancing in class and on buses, as well as maintenance issues – proved too challenging. He also mentioned a University of Virginia COVID-19 model that predicts coronavirus cases will grow significantly in September and continue rising through the fall.

Discussing the criticism he'd received since the vote, Daugherty aimed for levity, saying, "The [only] thing I haven't



PHOTOS BY ASH DANIEL

Prior to the School Board's meeting on July 20, Del. Carrie Coyner, R-62nd, advocated for giving parents a choice in how their children would attend school in the fall.

the results of the survey factor into the decision?

According to the school system, there were problems with this survey. Even though 82% of respondents to the electronic survey said they would support in-person learning, CCPS staff says the survey link was shared on a Facebook page that advocates for schools to reopen around the state, and that it's unclear how many of the respondents were actual CCPS parents. In addition, the survey, which fielded 13,006 responses in total, took place from June 18 through July 2, which the school system argues was before the recent increase in coronavirus cases and positive testing rates. Since Virginia entered Phase 3 of Gov. Ralph Northam's plan to reopen the state on July 1, case numbers have been on an upward trend. According to the New York Times' COVID-19 database, Virginia has risen from a seven-day case average of 527 on July 1 to 1,034 on July 26.

A new questionnaire is in the works. The school system recently began asking parents through their ParentVUE portal about their support for in-person instruction, and what type of transportation will be needed for their children.

Not included in any presentation are the results of a teacher survey that CCPS undertook. The Observer requested a copy of those results last week; as of press time Monday, the paper had yet to receive them.

When will students return for in-person classes?

It's uncertain. The School Board didn't set a timeline for revisiting the topic, but Daugherty says the school system is convening a public health panel charged with providing guidance about public health metrics to better understand the local impact of the coronavirus, and will update the School Board monthly. This week, the Virginia Department of Health is expected to unveil school reopening dashboards with locality-specific pandemic data and ratings for when it's safe to return.

At the Board of Supervisors meeting last Wednesday, Daugherty assured Chesterfield's governing body that the school system's goal is to return to in-person learning, but only when it is safe. As part of that effort, he said, the county's Risk Management Department will come and walk through the school buildings to help create a mitigation plan for gradually starting to return to school.

As for whether opting for virtual learning was the right move for the start of the school year, Daugherty said time will tell.

"In the next couple weeks," he said, "we're going to be proven right or wrong." ■

been blamed for right now is starting the pandemic, and I'm sure that will [happen] by about Friday."

But despite being one of the biggest decisions in Chesterfield School Board history, last week's vote was only the beginning. Many more decisions lie ahead as school systems around the country plunge into uncharted territory. Here in Chesterfield, that means figuring out how to conduct online classes for more than 63,000 students, including some as young as prekindergarten.

School officials say they'll provide additional information when the School Board meets again on Aug. 11. Until then, there may be more questions than answers when it comes to what lies ahead for students, teachers and staff. But here's what the school system is saying in response to our questions thus far:

What will school look like for students this fall?

When the 2020-21 school year begins in September, students of Chesterfield County Public Schools will receive virtual-only instruction. Tim Bullis, CCPS spokesman, says this instruction will be very different from the spring, which he says wasn't "online learning" per se, but an attempt by the school system to unroll some form of instruction following the sudden closure of schools on March 12.

Unlike in the spring, attendance will be taken, a daily schedule will be set, and work will be graded and count as it does during a regular school year, Bullis says. The school system has also been in touch with licensed day care providers to determine their ability to support virtual classwork, and has offered training on the online platforms and applications that CCPS will use.

Every CCPS student, from prekindergarten through 12th grade, will have their own Chromebook, and internet services – such as the distribution of internet hotspots and Internet

Essentials from Comcast, a program for qualified individuals from low-income households – will be rolled out to students who lack it. Bullis says internet services have already been provided to hundreds of students through the spring and summer, and that the school system is prepared to deliver additional service to more students this fall.

What about SPED and ESOL students, and students with IEPs?

Before the vote, some School Board members mentioned the need to prioritize in-person learning for special education and English as a Second Language students. It's not known at this time if or how that will happen, but Bullis says the school system is committed to bringing them back as quickly as possible.

As for students with Individualized Education Plans – custom plans created for students with disabilities that explain the services and resources that need to be provided to support their education – Bullis says school-based IEP teams can begin to meet with families to plan for appropriate services now that the board has made a decision.

With students not returning to school, will this mean more CCPS employees will be furloughed?

This spring, the school system furloughed hundreds of employees. Those employees remain furloughed, and Bullis says future furloughs remain undetermined.

In a news report on WRIC-Channel 8 last week, Sonia Smith, president of the Chesterfield Education Association, said she had spoken with Daugherty and that no CCPS employees would be furloughed as the school system goes virtual.

Asked about this, Bullis said that the Chesterfield Education Association does not speak for the school division or the superintendent.

In an online survey sent to parents, more than 80% of respondents said they would send their child to school in the fall if CCPS moved to full-time, face-to-face instruction. How did



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PARKER MICHELS-BOYCE

Recovery high school?

Bill aims to help student addicts

BY RICH GRISET STAFF WRITER

If a bill that's swiftly making its way through the General Assembly is ultimately signed into law, a new high school focused on substance abuse recovery for students will likely open this fall in Chesterfield.

Sponsored by Del. Carrie Coyner – who served two terms on Chesterfield County's School Board before winning the 62nd House District seat last fall – House Bill 928 would fund a pilot for the Virginia Recovery High School, a specialized school that would help 25 students from across the region deal with the early stages of recovery from substance use disorder or dependency. The bill, which passed the House of Delegates on a 94-to-4 vote and is now being considered in the state Senate, would see the state pay \$1.75 million to establish the two-year pilot. It would be the first regional recovery high school of its kind in Virginia, and would be placed in an existing school building within the school system, though

the location has yet to be determined.

"There's a reason for everyone to want to support this school model," said Coyner, who's "cautiously hopeful" that the bill will pass the Senate. "If we want to reduce our costs as a society on incarceration, if we want to reduce our teen deaths from suicide and overdose, this path with this recovery high school is a much lower cost than incarceration, and it sets our young people up for long-term success."

The effort to found a recovery school began when Superintendent Merv Daugherty came to Chesterfield County Public Schools about a year and a half ago. Daugherty had started working to create a recovery school at his previous school system in Delaware when he was hired by CCPS. Soon after he arrived, he was approached by Sheriff Karl Leonard, who proposed an afterschool

See **RECOVERY HIGH** on page 6

County to schools: Expect an extra \$10M, but no more

BY JIM McCONNELL SENIOR WRITER

Chesterfield County Public Schools Superintendent Merv Daugherty spent the past week hosting town hall meetings in each of the county's five magisterial districts, rallying support for a budget that calls for nearly \$100 million in new school spending.

"I almost know it by heart now," he said with a laugh at the start of his presentation last Thursday evening at A.M. Davis Elementary.

Daugherty, who insists the dramatic increase in funding is needed to address some long-standing issues and head off emerging problems

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Haley delivers '2020 Outlook' for Midlothian

BY JIM McCONNELL SENIOR WRITER

Board of Supervisors Chairwoman Leslie Haley touched on a variety of topics in her "2020 Outlook" address to the Midlothian Business Alliance last Thursday, most notably a series of public infrastructure projects that will serve a growing population on both ends of the Midlothian District.

In eastern Midlothian, the Chesterfield Police Department is planning to construct its first permanent substation near the Stonebridge mixed-use development. More than 2,000 new apartment units have been approved on and around the former Cloverleaf Mall site, as well as an upscale hotel and conference center by Shamin Hotels.

The police department currently conducts operations in leased space across the county,

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MIDLO OUTLOOK *from page 1*

including a building on Buford Road. But Haley noted that Col. Jeffrey Katz, the county's police chief, wants to have a more prominent public presence closer to the Chesterfield-Richmond line.

"That's where a lot of our crime is coming from. The message [to people looking to commit crimes] is 'Stop, you're in Chesterfield, don't enter here. Go away,'" she said during the MBA's Feb. 6 luncheon at Salisbury Country Club. "We're a safe community and we're going to keep that first and foremost."

The proliferation of four-story multifamily construction in the western Route 60 corridor also has prompted a response from Chesterfield Fire and EMS, which is building a new fire station with a bay large enough to accommodate a ladder truck. It currently has to deploy ladder trucks from other stations – increasing response times – because the existing Midlothian Station 5 is too small to house such apparatus.

The new fire station will be located at the intersection of Midlothian Turnpike and Charter Colony Parkway. According to Deputy Fire Chief Jim Fitch, the building project is going through the county's site plan process; the department hopes to solicit construction bids in July and break ground in September.

In addition, the county plans to replace the Midlothian Library with a larger, modern building on its current Coalfield Road site. And the school system wants to replace the aging A.M. Davis Elementary School as part of a potential November bond referendum, although Haley acknowledged that's "up in the air" while county officials weigh the cumulative effect of various tax increases under consideration by the General Assembly.

"It's kind of volatile downtown and some of these bills that potentially could get passed could have significant impact on us as a county and you as a citizen," she said. "Conversation is floating out there about



Chesterfield Fire and EMS is building a new, larger fire station in Midlothian, expected to break ground in September. The existing station in the village, pictured, is too small to accommodate needed ladder trucks and other equipment.

a meals tax [referendum], but how do we even consider that when we don't know the financial impact of whatever the General Assembly does?"

The county has endorsed one piece of tax-related legislation, House Bill 1541, which would create a regional transportation authority and generate millions of dollars in new funding for transportation projects in Chesterfield and eight other Richmond-area localities.

The bill, sponsored by Del. Delores McQuinn, D-Richmond, passed the House of Delegates last week by a 66-32 vote. It now moves over to the Senate, where it likely will face opposition from Chesterfield's own state Sen. Amanda Chase, a fiercely anti-tax conservative Republican. Chase said recently that she will not support any bill that increases taxes.

Clover Hill District Supervisor Chris Winslow, who attended the MBA luncheon and joined Haley at the podium to answer questions from the membership, pointed out that transportation is primarily the state's responsibility.

"The whole concept of having a regional transportation authority, in some ways, is really the state going 'Uh, you guys [in local government] figure it out,'" Winslow said. "OK, we're willing to do that. We've seen Northern Virginia and Hampton Roads be successful with it. But if we don't start now we're going to be so far behind in a decade or two, we won't be able to catch up. We have to make some of these big projects happen."

By far the biggest, at least in Chesterfield, is the long-planned extension of the Powhite Parkway to connect with U.S. Route 360 west of the Magnolia Green subdivision. The 10.2-mile roadway is expected to include several bridges across wetlands and cost at least \$500 million.

It is considered vital to the county's efforts to relieve vehicle congestion in the Route 288/360 interchange and could spark development of a large swath of commercially zoned property that is effectively inaccessible without the Powhite extension.

"When you start to think about the size of this project, this is the funding

mechanism to get it done," Winslow added, noting the county could easily generate enough revenue from the regional transportation authority to finance any debt issued.

Creating access to the commercial portion of the sprawling Magnolia Green development could be a boon to the county government, which continues to aggressively pursue projects to diversify the local tax base and reduce its disproportionate reliance on residential real estate revenue.

"We've been pretty successful recently in attracting commercial development. We're starting to see some of that come in and the anticipation is that we'll see more projects come online in the next couple years," Haley said.

Midlothian also has two major multifamily developments coming through the county's zoning pipeline: one near the intersection of Midlothian Turnpike and North Woolridge Road and another on Coalfield Road.

The projects are slated to be heard by the Chesterfield Planning Commission in February and March, respectively. They're the first new developments considered in the village of Midlothian since the Board of Supervisors approved the new Midlothian Community Special Area Plan last December.

"You're going to see some different [housing] models come through," said Haley, who insisted the board is not trying to "imitate what's happening in Short Pump" by approving multifamily projects that increase population density.

While county officials know they need housing diversity and additional residents to transform Midlothian into a connected, pedestrian-friendly village, the Midlothian plan calls for much less density than existing multifamily development in western Henrico County.

"I know any version of multifamily makes people nervous," she added. "But we are trying to make certain that we address the entire spectrum of housing needs." ■

RECOVERY HIGH *from page 1*

recovery group for students. Leonard had previously brought the idea to the School Board five years ago, but Coyner says they didn't yet have the right people in place.

"It's just something that we need to do," Daugherty said last week. "It's a second, maybe third chance for kids, and we shouldn't give up on them. With the right counseling and academic support, these kids are going to be successful."

The pilot, which would accept students from 15 localities in Central Virginia, would be state funded and include a program administrator, five teachers/academic facilitators, two counselors, one psychologist and one nurse. To qualify to attend the school, students would either have to have a history of substance abuse and be referred by a school official or have a history of disciplinary offenses tied to substance abuse.

The school would work to treat its students for substance abuse and meet their psychological, social-emotional and academic needs; it would also offer medical monitoring, group therapy and one-on-one therapy.

"There's a need that the data has shown

us. We've had students in the school system and within the region that have had a history of substance abuse," says Thomas Taylor, deputy superintendent for CCPS. "This has been a topic that's been murmured about in some other localities as well."

Taylor says they can begin taking applications as soon as they receive funding, and that they hope to have the school operational by the beginning of the new school year this fall.

Leonard, who founded Chesterfield County Jail's addiction recovery program HARP (Helping Addicts Recover Permanently), says most HARP participants began using substances while they were in middle and high school.

"They didn't start as adults. They started as youths. They started in schools," says Leonard. "We've got to start helping out people early on [with] addiction before they get into the criminal justice system."

As Chesterfield continues to deal with the national opioid epidemic, Leonard says a recovery high school would help address a need that continues to grow. In 2019, the Chesterfield County Jail took in an average of 56.33 detainees a month who reported opioid addiction, up from 44.75 the previous year; 2020, he says, "is already

off to a bad start."

Regina Whitsett, executive director of Substance Abuse Free Environment Inc., a nonprofit coalition dedicated to preventing substance abuse, agrees with the aims of the pilot program.

"A recovery high school would provide students in recovery with a place to continue or finish their education without the exposure to other students who might be experimenting with substances," Whitsett says. "This would increase long-term recovery rates among those students."

According to the 2018 National Survey on Drug Use and Health, an estimated 681,000 adolescents ages 12 to 17 had an illicit drug use disorder with in the last year.

School officials say they would likely place the recovery school within an existing school, but are mum on which one that may be.

Andrew Finch, an associate professor at Vanderbilt University and cofounder of the nonprofit Association of Recovery Schools, says that while collocating a recovery school at an existing site is cost effective, "it's also probably one of the most risky ways of doing a recovery high

school," as these students may mix with a population engaged in substance use.

"Just folding it into a school, you're recreating the exact reason why the recovery high school was necessary in the first place," he says. "The point of having the recovery high school is to have an environment where the kids aren't confronted all day long by actively using peer groups, that they actually have an ecology that is protected of sorts."

To combat the mixing of student populations, Finch says schools can maintain separation by having them on different schedules and locating them in separate parts of the building.

According to CCPS spokesman Shawn Smith, the pilot program would be located in a separate location in a school building and on a different schedule in alliance with the recommendations of the Association of Recovery High Schools.

So far, Taylor, CCPS's deputy superintendent, said he hadn't heard any negative feedback regarding the pilot proposal.

"A lot of that might be determined based on what school we choose to house it in, and what facility, and we're just not there yet," Taylor says. "It's a little too soon to say." ■