

New data: Reading gap widens in county schools

» BY JARED FORETEK
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The reading gap is widening in Prince William County elementary schools, according to new testing data obtained by InsideNoVa through a Freedom of Information Act request.

The fall 2020 semester saw a dramatic increase in elementary school students failing to meet the Phonological Awareness Literacy Screening (PALS), with the number failing to reach target benchmarks over the fall 2019 semester increasing by 16 percentage points and all but three of 59 elementary schools seeing their numbers rising.

When broken out by ethnicity, the numbers show a growing achievement gap. All groups performed worse on the assessment, but Hispanic students have fallen behind the most since the start of virtual learning.

For Hispanic kindergarteners, the percentage of students identified as in need of PALS intervention jumped 23 points from 2019. In first and second grades, the number rose by over 17 percentage points. In the fall 2020 semester, more than half of Hispanic kindergarteners and second-graders were identified as needing additional instruction.

Black students saw increases of between 6 and 11 percentage points across grades K-2. In fall 2020, the percentage of students needing intervention were 24% (kindergarten), 23% (first grade) and 31% (second grade). White students showed slightly higher increases in the numbers needing help, 9 to 12 percentage points, but still scored slightly better than Black students.

Meanwhile, the percentage of Asian students needing intervention grew from 13% to 26% in kindergarten, 10% to 18% in Grade 1 and 18% to 23% in Grade 2.

A feature of the state's Early Intervention Reading Initiative, PALS screening

is provided to school districts through a contract with the University of Virginia's Curry School of Education Development. For students identified as needing additional help, schools create PALS intervention plans.

Overall, significantly more students were tested this fall than in 2019, because testing isn't typically mandatory in the fall. Because of the change to virtual learning in the spring, the district wanted to test each student to set new baselines. Additionally, the testing window for kindergarten students occurred four to six weeks earlier than in a traditional year, according to a note from district staff attached to the data.

Kindergartners returned to in-person learning on a hybrid basis Nov. 10, and first graders went back to classrooms at the start of December. Second- and third-graders returned to some in-person instruction this week, although in all cases parents could opt out.

The division's communications office declined to make anyone available to speak with InsideNoVa about the PALS data, but the division-wide drop in scores was a topic of discussion at the first school board meeting of the year.

Nathaniel Provencio, the associate superintendent for Eastern District elementary schools, said PALS was one of a number of data points used to assess student development, though he declined to say whether the other metrics also showed an increase in students falling behind.

"The PALS data is one data point, a very important data point, but it is one data point that we utilize. Not only do we use that, we use [developmental reading] assessments to gain an insight on students' overall reading ability. We have writing assessments that we utilize," Provencio said.

Division Superintendent Steven Walts also read a message from Latiesa Green, principal at Potomac View Elementary School in Woodbridge. She said the

school's PALS tutor was working with small groups, using videos to guide reading instruction, and employing professional development strategies for teachers.

"The economic and linguistic diversity of our school population has always been an area of focus for us, especially in literacy development," Green's message read. "As a result of the pandemic and specific changes that have accompanied this challenge, the staff and I anticipated more struggles in this area."

Division staff also told the school board that the assessment was one thing, but the response to students needing intervention is just as important.

Provencio said his daughter was receiving PALS intervention and said he'd been impressed with the way her strengths and weaknesses were identified and addressed. Jarcelynn Hart, the associate superintendent for Western District elementary schools, called the PALS system in place in county schools a "well-oiled machine."

"I feel really good about the work that's happening with PALS in our schools," Hart said.

"I do think it's mindful of us to keep in mind that our youngsters left in March, so they didn't finish kindergarten. They didn't finish first grade. They didn't finish second grade," she added. "We can all agree that nothing will replace in-person teaching."

But Board Chair Babur Lateef, who has advocated returning students to in-person learning faster, said he wants to make sure the board is being kept apprised of what other assessments in reading and mathematics were indicating.

Lateef has pointed to the PALS numbers as evidence that children should be back in schools, calling them "very concerning."

"We have a lot of students that are not hitting benchmarks they're supposed to be hitting," Lateef said at the Jan. 5 board meeting.

YOUR MONEY

BY JOHN FRISCH
ALLIANT WEALTH ADVISORS

How the latest Act of Congress may affect you

At 5,593 pages, the newly enacted Consolidated Appropriations Act (CAA) of 2021 is the longest bill Congress ever passed ... so far. Here are some highlights for individuals (not including relief for business owners).



Stimulus checks: A maximum of \$600 per adult (\$1,200 per married couple), plus \$600 for each eligible child. These amounts phase out beginning with 2019 income levels of \$75,000 if filing single and \$150,000 if filing jointly. As with the stimulus checks from last spring, if your payment was phased out, but your 2020 income was lower than in 2019, you may be able to report a credit on your 2020 return.

Unemployment benefits: An extra \$300/week on top of normal state unemployment.

Medical expenses: Permanently lowered threshold for medical expense deductibility from 10% to 7.5% of taxable income.

Charitable donations: The 2020 CARES Act created a \$300 above-the-line deduction for cash charitable donations for 2020 tax filers who don't itemize deductions. The CAA increased this to \$600 for married couples, and extended the deduction through 2021.

Tax ramifications of forgiven mortgage: If you receive debt forgiveness on your primary residence mortgage, you can now exclude this break from taxable income through 2025 (instead of only through 2020), but the maximum exclusion has been reduced from \$2 million to \$750,000.

Mortgage insurance premium deduction: Extended through 2021.

Qualified fuel cell motor vehicle AND residential energy efficient property credits: Extended through 2021.

Qualified disaster distributions: Regardless of your age, you can withdraw up to \$100,000 from a retirement account without incurring the usual 10% penalty if you resided in a qualified disaster area and were affected by the disaster. The distribution is taxed over three years, and can be repaid during that period. This provision is permanent.

Flexible spending accounts (FSAs): Your employer can elect to modify your plan to let you use any unused 2020 FSA balance in 2021, and any unused 2021 balance in 2022.

That's a one-page summary. With 5,592 pages left, we could cover a lot more, but these are the highlights for individuals. If you can, consult with a tax specialist to learn more.

To read my past articles please visit insights.alliantwealth.com and select the InsideNoVa library.

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Musical chairs? County board debates their seats

» BY JARED FORETEK
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For those hoping to see a new spirit of collaboration on the Prince William Board of County Supervisors after a tumultuous and partisan 2020, the board's first 2021 meeting probably only brought disappointment.

Within the opening 10 minutes of the meeting, argument over nothing other than a new seating arrangement broke out, with Republicans seated on the edges of the dais and Democratic Board Chair Ann Wheeler engaged in a familiar back-and-forth with Republican Supervisor Pete Candland of the Gainesville District.

The new arrangement, which Wheeler said she'd settled on and informed the board of before the meeting, placed Republican Yesli Vega (Coles District) on one end of the board with Candland and Republican Jeanine Lawson (Brentsville District) on the other, though Lawson was attending the meeting remotely. All five of the board's Democrats were seated together in between.

Candland quickly raised an objection to the seating chart, noting that the supervisors weren't seated in alphabetical order or seniority. Wheeler said she'd never heard of the board taking a vote on the seating arrangement and that previous chairs had done so at the start of each new year.

"All of those were done with unanimous consent. There wasn't an issue; there wasn't a concern. I've got a concern with the structure on how this is set up," Candland said. "It does seem like Republicans are being pushed to the side while all the Democrats on the board are consolidated and put in one group. I don't really see the rationale."

Wheeler didn't offer any particular reason for the positioning, saying that she wanted to "shake it up so we could start on a better foot this year."

Ultimately, though, two members of the board found the spirit of compromise, with Lawson offering her seat up to one of the Democrats for future meetings and Neabsco Supervisor Victor Angry taking her up on it, moving to the far-right end

of the board.

The board also tried to address the length of meetings and floated holding more meetings if they continue to run late into the night as they did at times in 2020. Wheeler proposed that once a motion is on the floor, each supervisor be limited to just two turns speaking. Initially, she suggested two three-minute slots, but Vega and Lawson suggested that they make each turn five minutes.

Candland said he would rather instruct county staff to cut down their presentations to the board, and Vega proposed that with significant land-use cases involving the Rural Crescent on the horizon, that land-use discussions be exempt from any limits.

Wheeler argued that land use was too often the subject of drawn out back-and-forths, while Woodbridge Supervisor Margaret Franklin said the public and the board would be better served if supervisors edited themselves.

Ultimately, Wheeler's proposal for 10 minutes of total speaking time for each supervisor passed by a 4-2 vote.



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REMEMBERING 9/11



A wreath was laid at the memorial fountain at the Prince William County Government Complex in Woodbridge last Friday for a 20th anniversary commemoration of the Sept. 11 attacks on the Pentagon and World Trade Center. Dumfries Mayor Derrick Wood (left) reacts to a poignant moment during the ceremony. PHOTOS BY PAUL LARA | INSIDENOVA

MORE ON PAGE 10:

- » Planning Commission chair was commanding ship in New York harbor on 9/11
- » Pentagon victim's daughter reflects on life without her mom

More photos from last week's memorial ceremony at INSIDENOVA.COM

Dumfries planners support The Rose

Gaming resort goes to council next week

» BY NOLAN STOUT
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Dumfries planners are backing Colonial Downs Group Inc.'s proposed gaming resort, saying it could transform the town.

The Planning Commission unanimously recommended approval of the company's rezoning and conditional-use permits during its meeting Monday night. The proposal will next go to the Town Council on Sept. 21.

"The project is, for sure, a great project for Dumfries," said Commissioner Lawrence Nickerson.

Colonial Downs, which runs a Rosie's Gaming Emporium in Dumfries, announced in February plans for the \$389 million gaming resort called The Rose.

The company wants to rezone 93.5 acres across 11 parcels at the Potomac Landfill from residential and neighborhood business to planned mixed-use development and obtain a conditional-use

THE ROSE » PAGE 17

School bus struggles continue

Driver shortage leads to complaints, delays

» BY JARED FORETEK
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Kids seated on the school bus floor on their way to a Prince William County middle school because of overcrowding. A confused driver in Manassas dropping elementary school sisters off half a mile from their home, leaving them to be shepherded home by a kind woman in the neighborhood. And delays, lots of delays.

These are among the stories parents have told InsideNoVa about the school transportation situation in the area during the early weeks of the school year. School division heads in Prince William County Public Schools and elsewhere have said that bus times and the transportation situation broadly have improved and will continue to do so as the year continues, but divisions all over the area

» INSIDE:

OmniRide plans service increases, despite hiring, ridership challenges, Page 8.

creative to attract new operators.

During the summer, the Prince William school system released a video showing School Board members packed into a

SCHOOL TRANSPORTATION » PAGE 8

have struggled to fill vacant bus driver positions and are getting

INSIDE

Baseball league supporters protest sale of fields to Micron

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How to vote early in gubernatorial, House races

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OmniRide moving ahead with service expansion

Operators facing driver shortages, ridership declines

» BY JARED FORETEK
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Area transit operators say the summer COVID surge will delay the wider return to work that they were counting on to boost ridership this fall, even though OmniRide still plans to expand its service closer to pre-pandemic levels by the end of September.

At a recent Potomac and Rappahannock Transportation Commission meeting, heads of Virginia Railway Express and OmniRide said they had revised projections for fall trips down slightly from before the latest spike in cases that pushed the District of Columbia to reinstate its indoor mask mandate. That potentially affects office reopening plans for some of the Prince William area's commuters.

But OmniRide is moving ahead with a plan to expand service on a number of commuter lines that were cut back after the pandemic began.

On Sept. 27, the service plans to add new trips on eight different routes between the inner Washington core and Dale City, Gainesville, Haymarket, Lake Ridge and Montclair. One new westbound trip will also be scheduled on the East-West Express. The operator is planning to reduce service on two Manassas-area routes, but all told the service changes represent the biggest increase in commuter

service since the pandemic reduced ridership dramatically.

While local OmniRide trips have remained relatively steady over the past year, commuter ridership has more than doubled since January, growing from just under 21,000 "OmniRide Express" rides to more than 56,000 rides in July. That number is still well below the 161,000 Express rides in July 2019, but Executive Director Bob Schneider said the agency had been planning on a steady increase through the end of summer and fall. Now, because of COVID's resurgence delaying some return-to-work plans, he's hoping for more modest bumps.

"We had a really nice climb in June and July," he said. "We thought August was going to be kind of a watershed point for us, but as we've all discovered things are very much in a static mode."

VRE Chief Executive Officer Rich Dalton said the rail service was anticipating a similar holding pattern after trip increases this year. VRE saw its biggest monthly ridership increase since the pandemic started in June, jumping from 35,232 trips in May to 49,437.

In July, the agency saw another jump to over 54,000 rides, but weekly ridership stayed flat and even dipped slightly in early August. Some of that drop was probably related to severe weather, but Dalton agreed that the fall didn't seem as promising as it once did, when many expected the return of school to prompt employers to invite workers back in bigger numbers.

Ridership is still down about 85% compared to pre-COVID, Dalton said. "We anticipate ridership to continue to increase post-Labor Day but ... at a slower pace than we previously anticipated."

For OmniRide to move forward with the full slate of planned service increases, it will have to contend with the same bus driver shortage that has plagued school divisions locally and around the country.

As of late August, Keolis, OmniRide's operating company, was still looking to hire five new drivers to fully staff the service expansion. Keolis General Manager Kim Murdock said the company had five drivers in training and was "about to hire" five others, but that recruitment hadn't been easy.

"Like most transit agencies, we are looking for bus drivers and having a hard time finding them. ... We're competing with all the transit agencies in the area for the same pool of candidates," she told the board.

Murdock said that an internal anonymous survey found that about 85% of OmniRide's drivers and technicians had received the COVID-19 vaccine and about 90% of the agency's administrative staff had done so as well. Schneider said the company had some unique challenges in hiring, particularly on commuter routes where drivers work the morning and afternoon rush hours but aren't on the clock in between.

Because of the company's seniority system for drivers, new hires got the last pick in terms of routes.

"We had a labor shortage prior to COVID in the transit industry. ... We have very big peaks, so you might start your morning at 5 [a.m.] and work for ... 3½ hours and have a five-hour gap in between, and then finish your day," Schneider said. "So that means you might have to spend 12-14 hours to earn eight hours of pay. So that's a big challenge and it's really hard for some people to do that."

SCHOOL TRANSPORTATION » FROM PAGE 1

school bus and Vice Chair Loree Williams behind the wheel calling for people to apply to become a driver.

In Fauquier County, meanwhile, the school division is holding an event later this month during which potential applicants can test-drive a bus on site. "Have you ever considered driving a bus but aren't sure it's for you?" the notice for the event reads.

Prince William school officials declined to comment on the incident with children on the school bus floor. And in Manassas, a School Board member told the parent of the two daughters who had been dropped off a ways from their home that the driver was being reassigned, which satisfied the parent's concerns. But early pick-ups and late drop-offs have persisted for many as some drivers are covering more than one route.

So far, the Prince William school system says 31 new hires have completed in-class driver training during the fiscal year that began in July. Of those, seven have completed their commercial driver's license permit, and the division still has 106 vacancies. The school's recruiting arm held a hiring event Friday at Lord Fairfax Community College in Warrenton.

Manassas City Public Schools, which is much smaller, has filled nearly all of its previous driver openings.

PAYING DRIVERS MORE

The competition has also led to pay increases. Fairfax County Public Schools recently increased the hourly wage for first-year bus drivers from about \$19 an hour to almost \$23 an hour. Prince William is



Students in the Woodbridge area board a bus on the first day of school last month.

PAUL LARA | INSIDENOVA

advertising a starting rate of \$21.34 an hour on its website for drivers, while the driver posting for Manassas schools shows a starting rate of \$19.39.

It isn't just Northern Virginia in need of drivers. A nationwide survey by three school transportation industry associations found that the dearth of drivers spans the country. In the Northeast, 79% of responding school divisions said they had altered service due to a shortage of drivers, while 66% of respondents in the South reported the same thing.

"As school districts across the country return to in-person learning and COVID continues to have an impact on education in general and school transportation scheduling and logistics in particular, the shortage of school bus drivers has become conspicuous," said Mike Martin, executive director of the National Association for

Pupil Transportation Executive, in a news release. "But let's be clear – this is not a new problem. Nor is it easy to solve."

Industry experts have speculated that a number of forces are causing the shortage, such as the fact that many divisions furloughed drivers during the pandemic only to find that rehiring them wasn't as easy as they'd hoped.

Additionally, disruptions to many departments of motor vehicles made acquiring a commercial driver's license more difficult last year. And once someone obtains a commercial license, more lucrative opportunities may be available in shipping and mass transit.

MORE PARENT PICK-UPS

Neither Prince William nor Manassas furloughed drivers during the pandemic, but there was some disruption to the

normal pay schedule for bus operators last summer. According to Prince William School Board Chair Babur Lateef, a number of drivers rely on driving summer school students to maintain their income, and summer school was cancelled last year.

Delays aren't just a result of the lack of drivers forcing divisions to double or triple up on bus routes. Anecdotally, everyone seems to agree that more parents have taken to driving their children to school than before the pandemic, likely out of concern for the virus.

Prince William and other divisions have tried to ease fears about buses by highlighting that windows have been kept open for ventilation and masks are required to be worn onboard. But still, the additional traffic generated by parents has further delayed bus drop-offs and pick-ups.

"Our buses are moving better than before. Things are continuing to improve and we're having less email traffic about people unhappy about the pick-up times and the drop-off times," Lateef told InsideNoVa. "We are still having trouble getting in and out of buildings during the morning rush because so many parents are still wanting to drive their kids. That continues to be an issue."

Prince William is among school divisions in the state that have implemented a real-time bus tracking system for families to know when their child's bus is nearby. However, one parent told InsideNoVa that the system wasn't always consistent in its performance and at one point caused concern when it briefly suggested their child had been dropped off before he arrived.



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VEA steps into local union dispute

Education association subject to state oversight

BY JARED FORETEK
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The Virginia Education Association took sweeping oversight of its Prince William chapter Monday night, entering into a memorandum of understanding with

the Prince William Education Association's executive board that strips the local chapter of much of its autonomy.

As written, the memorandum gives the statewide teachers union wide-ranging

authority over the Prince William chapter's finances, bylaws and elections. Seven of the 12 PWEA board members agreed to the memorandum Monday night, but PWEA President Maggie Hansford insists the document is illegal unless the full PWEA membership and its building representatives agree.

Obtained by InsideNoVa, the memorandum details VEA's plan to install a trustee to oversee the local group's operations and mandates that local dues be used to cover 75% of the cost of the trustee.

"Specific concerns regarding the man-

PWEA >> PAGE 4

ELECTION 2021



PAUL LARSON | INSIDENOVA



PROVIDED

With polls showing the race for governor a virtual tie, both major-party candidates have been making appearances in Prince William County. Vice President Kamala Harris visited Dumfries on Oct. 21 to campaign with Democrat Terry McAuliffe (left photo), and Republican Glenn Youngkin campaigned earlier this month at a restaurant in Manassas.

WHAT'S ON THE BALLOT?

Governor

In an election that's being watched nationally, Democrat **Terry McAuliffe**, who was governor from 2014-18, is seeking a second term against Republican **Glenn Youngkin**, former co-CEO of the Carlyle Group. A third-party candidate, **Princess Blanding**, is also on the ballot.

Lieutenant Governor

Democrat **Hala Ayala**, a member of the House of Delegates from Woodbridge, is trying to become the first Prince William County resident since 1788 elected to statewide office. She's opposed by Republican **Winsome Sears**, a businesswoman from Winchester.

>> PREVIEW, Page 12

Attorney General

Democrat **Mark Herring** from Loudoun County is seeking re-election to a third term. He's being challenged by Republican **Jason Miyares**, a member of the House of Delegates from Virginia Beach.

House of Delegates

Prince William area voters will choose delegates for two-year terms in eight districts that include at least parts of the county and the cities of Manassas and Manassas Park. Statewide, Democrats are trying to hold onto the majority they won in the 100-member House in 2019.

>> PREVIEWS OF LOCAL HOUSE RACES, Page 12-14, 16

Manassas City

Manassas voters are electing a City Council member, a treasurer and a commissioner of revenue.

>> PREVIEW, Page 15

HOW DO I VOTE?

- Election Day is Tuesday, Nov. 2. Polls are open from 6 a.m. until 7 p.m.
- Early in-person voting is available through Saturday, Oct. 30, at select locations.
- For polling places and early-voting details, visit pwcvotes.org

WHO'S VOTED ALREADY?

In Prince William County, 41,133 ballots had already been cast in-person or by mail, as of Tuesday. That's nearly three times as many absentee ballots as were cast in 2017, the last gubernatorial election, and represents about 13.5% of the county's registered voters. Statewide, about 788,000 Virginians have already voted. Experts project total turnout of 3.1 million to 3.3 million voters.

WHERE CAN I GET RESULTS?

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Maggie Hansford



Riley O'Casey



Chuck Ronco



Oveta Scott

PWEA » FROM PAGE 1

agement and government of the PWEA have risen to the level where abuses or the perception of abuses must be addressed, so as to ensure that no state or federal laws are violated, or ethics are impinged," the memo reads.

In an interview with InsideNoVa, Hansford said the memorandum isn't legal under the union's bylaws. The VEA did not respond to multiple requests for comment Tuesday.

"The memorandum of understanding says that the [VEA] trustee advises and consents to any change in the PWEA bylaws, and that breaks our bylaws because our representative assembly has that power," Hansford told InsideNoVa on Tuesday. "Our board signing this memorandum of understanding does not have the power to take away representative assembly power."

When asked whether she would pursue legal action regarding the dispute, Hansford declined to comment.

The memo – and the PWEA board's decision to turn over authority to the statewide union – is the latest development in an ongoing saga between Hansford, who was elected president in 2020, and the association's board, several current and previous members of which tried to unseat her in two recall votes over the summer.

The dispute also could derail the union's coming push for collective bargaining, now allowed under state law for local government employees.

PWEA is a private organization, so its meetings are not required to be open to the public. InsideNoVa could not independently verify the exact results of the two recall votes, but a majority of the union's school building representatives voted to keep Hansford on as president in the face of allegations regarding financial mismanagement and a harsh working environment at PWEA offices. Several board members who backed the recall effort argued that Hansford shouldn't have been able to oversee her recall effort.

Hansford declined to comment on the specific allegations and the recall attempts, saying that doing so would harm the union's ongoing efforts surrounding teacher compensation and collective bar-

gaining.

"What happened last night is that we came together, we were unable to follow the established norms that our board voted on ... so seven people signed a document that they had no power to and they left the building," Hansford said of the PWEA board members who agreed to the memorandum. "I'll continue to work for membership and our number one goal of collective bargaining."

Among the allegations, several board members accused Hansford of increasing her pay without necessary approval last year. Former PWEA President Riley O'Casey said board members had filed a police report in the city of Manassas – where the organization has its headquarters – but the case number she gave InsideNoVa came back to an unrelated investigation with no connection to Hansford or the PWEA. The Manassas City Police Department said it didn't have a case file on the matter.

Earlier this month, O'Casey took to Facebook in an attempt to drum up support for another national teacher's union, the American Federation of Teachers. "This is another option for PWCS employees," O'Casey wrote.

Hansford's supporters told InsideNoVa that when the information was presented to the board and union membership, it showed that there was a misunderstanding about her salary because she was no longer on the county school system payroll, but that she hadn't intentionally done anything wrong.

A petition launched Saturday in her defense has gained the signatures of nearly 400 members, according to a PWEA committee member who asked not to be named for fear of retaliation.

"Our important work has continued, despite the constant witch-hunts and removal attempts, and we will continue to be represented thoroughly and appropriately by a president who has consistently delivered during this pandemic," the petition reads.

Oveta Scott, one of the board members behind the recall effort, told InsideNoVa that she and Vice President Chuck Ronco took the allegations to the VEA

and asked only for the state group to provide a parliamentarian for future disputes – such as those that arose during the recall votes.

Instead, she said, the VEA decided to step in with parliamentary oversight and much more. Ronco, who also serves on the VEA board, declined to comment Tuesday and instead directed questions to VEA communications staff, who did not respond to InsideNoVa's requests.

"Basically, President Hansford wants full autonomy over everything. And if she doesn't have her hands on it then nobody else can do it," Scott told InsideNoVa. "President Hansford, in my opinion, is not a team player. She doesn't abide by parliamentary rules, bylaws, structure and protocol. ... If a president can control her own recall and have proxy votes during her own recall... I know my election in the spring will be biased. I know it will be something shady."

But Hansford's backers say she has support of the union's rank-and-file membership, which members said has grown faster than any other Virginia chapter recently because of her efforts to grow interest in the organization. They say that push, the influx of new members and growing attendance at meetings has threatened a small group of more senior members, many of whom have been on the executive board for years.

"It was member-driven, and I think that was the whole difference between this kind of new school of people ... versus the people who have been on it and recycled through it for the past 15 years," PWEA building representative Amy McCarthy told InsideNoVa. "And I think I can speak for a majority of members that are just angry. We know that this interference, despite what they say, is going to stop the momentum of everything."

During Hansford's tenure, teachers received a 5% raise in the 2021-22 county school system budget, and Superintendent LaTanya McDade announced earlier this month that staff members would be compensated for non-contract hours spent in school buildings waiting for buses to pick up students.

But those wins could pale in compari-

MORE SCHOOL NEWS, PAGE 10

- » County schools plan to hire tutors, math coaches to overcome learning loss
- » School Board approves gender-identity policy

son to gaining the right to collective bargaining. In 2020, the General Assembly repealed the state's prohibition on collective bargaining by local government employees, but unions must first win the agreement of their governing bodies – in this case, the Prince William County School Board.

During Monday's meeting with the VEA, Ronco took control of the meeting and called for the vote after Hansford said the proceedings were out of step with union bylaws.

A letter signed by the PWEA board and addressed to members on Tuesday called the board issues "irreconcilable" and said that Hansford herself violated procedure Monday night, forcing Ronco's hand.

"We want to be clear: This MOU is not a 'takeover' by the VEA. This MOU does not negatively impact collective bargaining. A large amount of misinformation has been circulated to vilify those members of the Board who support this trusteeship, but it only serves to prevent the kind of behavior that occurred on Monday night," the letter reads.

Multiple board members who voted against the memorandum on Monday told InsideNoVa that they didn't know about or review the letter before it went out.

And a number of members who contacted InsideNoVa on Tuesday said the move put collective bargaining in jeopardy.

"What we found out last night is that [PWEA board members] couldn't care less about what membership's opinion is. ... It's appalling, the lack of concern for membership," said Cynthia Gault, one of the board members who voted against the agreement. "The reps turned out not once but twice, and voted twice to put the whole recall to bed. And once that happened, this memorandum of understanding suddenly appeared."