

ALERT FEATURED

## Why Charlottesville wants to spend \$75 million to remake Buford Middle School

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From the Timeline: City schools seek to reconfigure middle schools series

### Editor's Note

Katherine Knott

First in a series. **Read part two here.**

Oct 30, 2021

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**F**or SETHAUN Nowell, moving from Walker Upper Elementary to Buford Middle School was a challenge. After two years of getting used to new teachers and a new building, he had to move to Buford and do it all over again, with the jump to high school only two years off. In all those changes, he saw his grades drop.

“As hard as I worked to get them back up, they just fell right back down, and I didn’t feel like I had enough strength to pull them back up by myself,” said Nowell, now a sophomore at Charlottesville High School. “I would be left reaching out to people left and right, and it was sad because I thought I could just do it myself.”

At Buford, the classrooms were cramped and the desks sometimes were too small, he said. In fact, Nowell said he opted to sit in the corner of a classroom so he could have a little bit of space around him. Nowell said he doesn’t learn like everybody else, preferring more interactive activities with small groups or one on one time with a teacher.

“It was very uncomfortable and very hard to learn,” said Nowell, who worked with local nonprofit Cultivate Charlottesville last summer as a food justice intern. He and other interns talked with The Daily Progress about their experience at Buford.

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Librarian Jami Curry leads a group of students during clubs Thursday, Oct. 21, 2021 at Buford Middle School in Charlottesville, Va. The library and other spaces in the main academic building at Buford will be heavily renovated to include more natural light and better HVAC equipment as part of a \$73 million expansion and renovation.

ERIN EDGERTON photos, THE DAILY PROGRESS

Charlottesville has a \$75 million plan that officials have touted as transformational to make the 55-year-old classrooms at Buford more comfortable and to improve the middle school experience for students by cutting out the Walker stop. The buildings themselves, which opened in 1966, are inadequate to meet the needs of students, officials and supporters of the plan argue. The current buildings have noisy HVAC units and inaccessible front entrances, get little natural light, and let in moisture, dirt and pollen.

Charlottesville-based VMDO Architects, **which is leading the project**, have said that building plans for Buford and Walker build on two decades of scientific findings about how buildings affect health, wellness and learning. A 1999 **study** that looked at 21,000 students from three school districts in three states found that students with the most daylight in their rooms progressed 20% faster on math and 26% faster on reading than those with the least. More **recent studies** have supported those findings.

**📄 Charlottesville seeks 'powerful' change with early childhood center**

Instead of having students attend Walker for fifth and sixth grade, the school division wants to add sixth-grade to Buford — giving students more continuity in the middle grades — and send fifth-grade back to the elementaries as part of the so-called reconfiguration project. The other prong of the plan includes consolidating preschool at the Walker campus.



Buford Site – New Building Entry **VMDO** 09.23.2021 School Board Info / Action Item 30

A proposed new entryway at Buford Middle School as part of the estimated \$73 million renovation and expansion of the school.

Provided

But that plan will be one of the most expensive capital projects the city has attempted in recent years, if not in its history. In addition to the \$75 million first phase, officials want to build a standalone early childhood center at Walker for \$22.3 million, which would be designed with young children in mind. Paying for the first phase will likely mean real estate tax rate increases, exhaust the city's debt capacity and limit the city's ability to start new capital projects for several years.

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### **Reconfiguration By the Numbers**

#### **First Phase: \$74.78 million**

- \$73 million expansion and renovation of Buford Middle School to bring the school's capacity from 533 to 1,050 students. 593 students currently attend Buford.
- \$1.35 million to turn Walker Upper Elementary into a temporary preschool facility.
- \$425,000 to buy furniture for fifth-grade classrooms at elementary

#### **Second Phase: \$22.3 million**

- Building a 48,600 square-foot early childhood center with 18 classrooms and space for support services

Walker will be turned into a temporary facility until the preschool center is constructed, which would cost about \$1.35 million for the temporary facility and go toward installing step-stools and bathroom sinks, adding outdoor learning areas and making exterior improvements to the building.

City Councilors are generally supportive of the project and agreed earlier this month to include \$75 million for reconfiguration in the city's five-year capital improvement program. City and school officials are pursuing a sales tax increase that would be

dedicated to school construction. If approved by the General Assembly and local voters, the city could levy a general retail sales tax at a rate of 1%, which would bring in about \$12 million a year, officials have said.

The multi-million project is the School Board's top priority, and a project several boards over the years have sought to complete it. The board initially voted to proceed with reconfiguration in October 2010 following a year of community forums and conversations about the grade set-up and school facilities.

City Councilors and the School Board have discussed the cost of the project and the implications of paying for it at several meetings over the last year with little public pushback against it. With the vote earlier this month, councilors signaled their support for it despite the funding challenges.



**Timeline: City schools seek to reconfigure middle schools**

Experts say the project would inject millions into two pivotal moments in a child's education — preschool and middle school — when children are experiencing a lot of physical change and brain development. For Charlottesville, the long-discussed and multi-pronged reconfiguration project would upgrade 55-year buildings and shake up a 33-year-old setup.

“... If you want to think about protecting your investments, this is how to do it,” said Nancy Deutsch, a professor with the University of Virginia's School of Education and Human Development, of the project. “Protect the investment you made in early childhood by investing in young adolescents also.”

### **Helping students**

The experts and architects have said that improving the physical learning environment would help improve student achievement.

“We know that our buildings are never neutral,” said Wyck Knox, the project manager for VMDO. “They're either working for us or against us. So the design and operation of building clearly has a big impact on student health, on cognitive function and on long-term academic performance. We know this. It's been documented. It's been studied well that air quality and daylight and noise have a huge impact on the learner. We don't need an academic study to tell us that here in Charlottesville because we can see it.”

At Walker and Buford, only 10% of the buildings have enough natural light that the lights can be turned off, according to the architects. VMDO's best practice is to design buildings where 55 to 75% of the spaces have enough natural light so that the lights can be turned off.

Additionally, noise from the HVAC units at both schools is about 60-69 decibels, which is at the level similar to a conversation, according to VMDO. The goal is about 34 to 39 decibels, which is similar to a quiet office.

“Our teachers are fighting that,” Knox said at a joint meeting in September.

The expansion and renovation at Buford would double the school's capacity and connect all the buildings on the site, ending the open campus model. Other changes include demolition of the D building, building a new academic wing in front of the school, moving the administrative offices up to the entry level and relocating the garden closer to the school. A design team made up of teachers, parents and administrators signed off on the design concept in September.

For the students interviewed, improving the building was a higher priority than moving the grades around.

"You don't even have to do all the reconfigurations, just renovate the building," Nowell said. "Change the bathrooms, make a few buildings nicer. If you need to knock down D building, knock it down."

Nowell and the food justice interns cheered the demise of D, which they said smelled bad, but they liked walking outside when they changed classes since they don't see a lot of sunlight in the building.

"I don't want to feel like I'm locked up," Nowell said.

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ERIN EDGERTON, THE DAILY PROGRESS Two student work with Legos in the library at Buford Middle School.  
Erin Edgerton

Over the years, the reasons driving the reconfiguration project have changed from capacity and efficiency concerns to expanding preschool programs, but limiting transitions between schools and the potential of an early childhood center have stuck around as selling points.

Over the next several months, Charlottesville-based VMDO architects will work with teachers and administrators in the schools to flesh out building plans from figuring out where classrooms and common spaces should be located to the furnishings needed. This schematic design process will yield more specific cost estimates before City Council is set to decide in late March whether to actually fund the project.

The school division wants to start construction in July 2023, with the first phase completed by August 2026.

Parents, school administrators and other supporters want to see this project actually done because it has been talked about for more than a decade and the school buildings are in need of investment in order to meet the needs of students.

“I’m confident that what’s being proposed is going to be transformative in such a positive way, again, beyond Buford and Walker, and it’s going to have ripple effects back to every elementary school,” said Michael Joy, a Charlottesville parent and architect with the University of Virginia. “... I have a hard time seeing how you could continue on with what we have right now.”



This rendering shows a three-story academic wing at Buford Middle School that would be built to accommodate additional students following the reconfiguration of Buford and Walker Upper Elementary School.

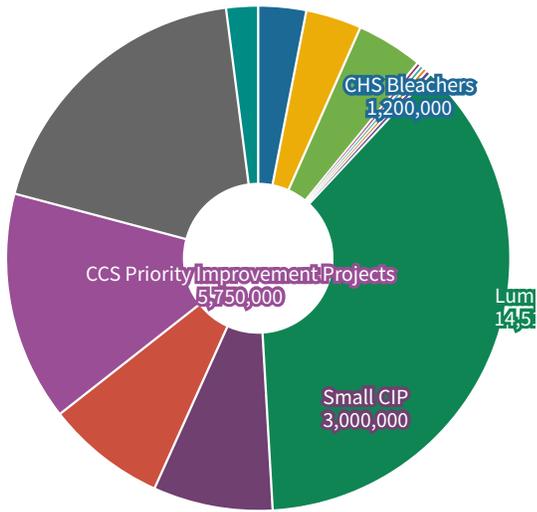
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Supporters also point to the fact that the city has not built a new school since 1974, when Charlottesville High School opened. For years, capital funding for school projects focused on maintenance projects and HVAC improvements.

Since 2009, 55.9% of the \$39.1 million allocated to the school division in the city’s capital budget was budgeted for such projects. The other funds went to upgrades at the elementary schools, which started in 2017, as well as the CHS track, among other projects.

# Charlottesville Capital Budget Allocations FY 2009 to 2022

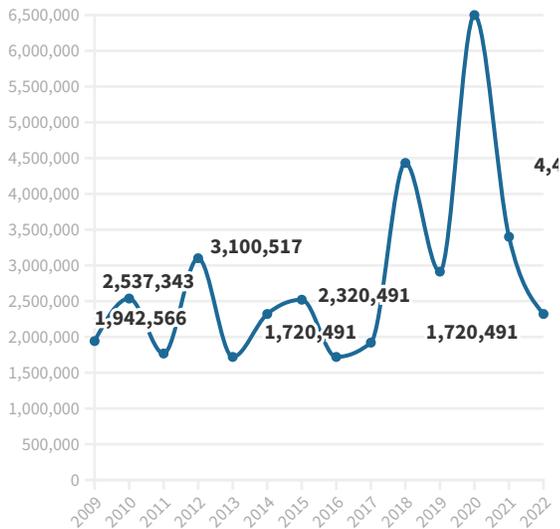
The city allocated \$39.12 million to school-related projects since FY 2009 (hover over chart for more details)



Source: City budgets; Daily Progress Analysis

## Charlottesville school-related capital spending year by year

Totals reflect money allocated to for school projects, not what was spent



Source: City Budgets

✿ A Flourish chart

Meanwhile, communities in the area have built new schools or expanded others. Additionally, the project represents a chance for the city to make progress on its goal to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 45% by 2030.

The highest level of renovations for Buford would include full geothermal systems and eliminate combustion of fossil fuels on site. Supporters of the project want to see Buford designed as a zero-energy building, which would mean solar panels on the roof and no electricity or gas bills.

“Climate change is happening; we’re feeling it now,” said Tish Tablan, a program director with Generation180, a nonprofit focused on the move to clean energy. “In our work, this is a critical decade for us to reverse the worst effects of climate change.

So we have to act now, and this is one way that we can invest in our city infrastructure that helps us get there.”

## Reducing transitions

From 1966 to 1988, Charlottesville had two middle schools — Walker and Buford. However, the attendance zones for the two schools led to de facto segregation of the schools, with more affluent and white students attending Walker and more Black and poor students going to Buford.

To address the disparities, the School Board at the time looked at redistricting before settling on the current set-up: a fifth and sixth-grade campus and a seventh and eighth grade one. The city allocated \$1.26 million in 1987 to fund the construction needed to make that change, which would be about \$2.92 million in today’s dollars.

A key reason that the Charlottesville School Board and others have wanted to reverse that setup since is because of the transitions that they say are disruptive.



ERIN EDGERTON, THE DAILY PROGRESS The "New Book" section in the library at Buford Middle School in Charlottesville, Va.

Walker and Buford are the only schools in Charlottesville accredited by conditions, a status in the state's accountability system that's based on gaps in student achievement identified in the the 2018-19 school year. The state has waived accreditation for the past two years because of the pandemic.

Before the pandemic, 65% of Walker students passed the state math assessments — 17 percentage points lower than the state average of 82%. In reading, 64% passed, which was 14 percentage points lower than the state average. Black students didn't meet the state benchmarks in English or math, and students with disabilities didn't meet the benchmark in English. About 43% of Black students passed the reading tests, and 41% passed the math assessments.

At Buford, 70% passed the reading and math exams. Similar to Walker, Black students, those with disabilities and from low-income households didn't meet all the state benchmarks in English and math. Among Black students at Buford, 45% passed the English exams and 49% passed the math ones. About 48% of economically disadvantaged students and 30% of students with disabilities passed the reading assessments.

Deutsch, with UVa, said that those transitions between schools do have a negative effect on a student's ability to learn.

"The research does show that the transitions into middle school and out of middle school are the times when there tends to be the steepest decline," she said in an interview over the summer. "Those transition points are tough for kids, so the more you can minimize those transitions, the better."

Deutsch is the director of UVa's Youth-Nex, a center focused on middle school and promoting effective youth development. She's also been part of the Buford design meetings over the summer and shared her research with the team during a gathering in August.

Although there's not a lot of research into Charlottesville's particular model where the same group of students moves from one school to another, the evidence she has seen shows that the city is not unique in that the transitions aren't good for students. She added that those multiple transitions have particularly negative effect on Black boys.

Changes are stressors for people of any age, Deutsch said.

"Every sort of change that a human has to adapt to puts stress on them emotionally and cognitively," she said. Every time you're changing a school, that's a stressor. You're learning a new routine; you're meeting a new set of adults; you're learning a new physical space."

But they may be heightened when those changes are occurring at a time for middle school students when their bodies are experiencing a lot of change.

"They're trying to navigate all of the changes that are happening in their physical and social environments, and that takes up brain energy and space," she said, adding that it leaves less brain space to do other tasks such as learning and engaging in the classroom. "... So, if you're sort of preoccupied, by trying to navigate these other changes, or these other systems, then you're going to have less time and attention to give to your academic work."

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ANDREW SHURTLEFF, THE DAILY PROGRESS The design team for the school division's reconfiguration project meets in the Buford Middle School cafeteria in August.

andrew shurtleff

Switching schools wasn't too bad for Hallie Goode, now a sophomore at CHS. Because of her time at Walker, she said she wasn't too anxious for her first day at Buford.

"I wasn't even nervous because I already knew the setup," she said. "I just had to figure out where my classes were. Actually, to be honest, going from Walker to Buford probably gave me a boost of confidence only because I already knew that school. Like right now, I could probably walk both schools with my eyes blindfolded."

Deutsch said there's no clear answer on the impact of grade configurations or what the best practice would be. Some school systems have moved to a K-8 model while others retain the more traditional approach of a 6-8 middle school. Others have Charlottesville's model.

"I think the hard thing about the configuration is that the data is so conflated with other factors that it's very difficult to separate," she said. Other factors include a school system's demographics and location. "... I want people to focus on what's

happening inside the classroom, regardless of what grades are housed in the building.”

That includes project-based learning and more individualized learning opportunities in which students can express themselves.

Joy, the UVa architect, said working through the transitions from elementary school to Walker and then to Buford require a lot of bandwidth for students. His son is currently in fifth grade.

“Those are some of the most challenging developmental ages,” he said. “Social pressures around puberty and everything. It’s a lot to sit there and have to relocate into these new environments with new classmates, new cohorts and into new campuses. Even the structure of the day changes where they start to have different choices and electives.”

After going through the Walker to Buford to CHS journey, Nowell said he was worried about his little sister who is starting at Walker.

“I just told her to find an adult that you trust and try to create a bond with an adult or teacher quickly,” he said of the advice he gave his sister. “As long as you have somebody in your corner, you can’t really go wrong.”



The library at Buford Middle School is one of several spaces that will need to be expanded in order to add sixth-grade to the school and double the capacity.

## Improving the learning space

To achieve the long-awaited reconfiguration, the school system could just install classroom trailers at Buford to accommodate the additional students. But officials have wanted to use the project to upgrade Buford, the only school south of Main Street that serves all students in the school system.

That renovation is something students and teachers want to see. Not all of the bathroom stalls locked while they were at Buford, they said, and the classrooms themselves feel cramped.

The design plans currently call for a heavy renovation of Buford, which would mean fully accessible gender-neutral bathrooms throughout the school; adding new lighting, ceilings and floors; bringing more daylight into the building; changing the

interior layouts of the main academic building; expanding the stage; full replacement of HVAC units; modernization of the kitchen equipment; and upgrades to the exterior walls.



This rendering shows proposed exterior renovations to Buford Middle School. The project also includes a new academic wing and gym.

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Bright spots in the Buford building are the engineering lab and renovated science labs, which opened in 2013. The \$1.4 million project was the only meaningful upgrade to Buford in the last decade and includes better wireless technology and furniture that can be moved around.

“The science part was really my favorite because it just looks futuristic,” Nowell said.

He liked the adjustable chairs in the classroom as well as the extra space. Other students agreed.

“It was comfortable, you know,” said Rosy Pori, a sophomore at CHS, of the science labs. “... What we’re trying to say is that we need a little bit more room.”

Interior projects at Walker and Buford such as major restroom renovations and ceiling and floor replacements have been deferred because of the looming prospect of reconfiguration. However, maintenance projects focus on health and safety and the structure of the buildings such as HVAC replacements and resurfacing steps have continued, according to the school system.

### **Reconfiguration Key Dates & Decisions**

- January 8, 2009: Efficiency study presented to School Board, calling for the closure of an elementary school.
- April 20, 2009: Then schools Superintendent Rosa Atkins presents four options to the community to kick off a series of community meetings about school facilities. Those four options were: staying the same, closing an elementary school, having two middle schools, or going to sixth through eighth grade middle school.
- Oct. 27, 2009: Community group narrows the options to the fourth one
- Oct. 21, 2010: School Board votes to proceed with the reconfiguration plan, citing the benefits of a centralized preschool
- Feb. 17, 2011: School Board votes to make Buford the middle school
- November 2011: VMDO Architects estimates the project would cost \$46 million
- January 2012: Plan abandoned because of cost and the economic downturn
- Fall 2015: Former Councilor Wes Bellamy asks for a plan to expand prekindergarten
- Summer 2017: VMDO capacity study released in response to rising student enrollment

- Sept. 26, 2017: School Board meets to review capacity study and reconfiguration and central preschool presented again
- Dec. 19, 2018: Board decides to proceed with reconfiguration plan, estimated to cost \$55 million with a range from \$60 to \$80 million.
- Spring 2019: City Council approves \$3 million for a reconfiguration design study to estimate cost
- Spring 2021: City Council includes \$50 million placeholder in CIP for project
- Spring 2021: VMDO receives contract for the design phase
- June 2021: Design meetings begin
- October 2021: City Council votes to swap out the placeholder for a \$75 million project, moving the project forward

Demetrius Brown, a freshman at CHS, and Goode said the classroom setup in the labs made it easier for students to see the teacher, regardless of where they were sitting.

“Everyone could see the teacher because no one was in the way with their heads,” Brown said.

If the whole building was like the science labs, that would’ve made a positive difference in their experience at Buford, the students said.

Deutsch said that overall she’s excited about the potential improvements at Buford from the increase in natural light to different spaces where students can gather.

“Middle schoolers still need opportunities for movement and play, and I think we’ve tended to often take that out of middle school,” she said. “... They need physical motion. They need cognitive breaks, and so thinking about the ways that those things

can be built into a day.”

Schools built in the 1960s such as Buford and Walker don’t feel open and welcoming, she said.

“I think that constructing buildings where you can use the physical space to create an emotional reaction that’s positive and results in kids feeling excited and engaged to learn, so that’s No. 1,” she said.

Joy and other parents like the plans proposed so far for Buford and Walker, especially the connections to the outdoors and the increase in natural light.

“My son is in a windowless classroom [at Walker], so it’s great to see that attention and that sort of thoughtfulness being proposed,” he said.

Joy applauded the teachers at Walker for their work to ensure students are having the best experience they can in spite of the environment.

“But they can’t change the actual built environments,” he said. “... They can’t change the lighting quality. They can’t change the air quality or the technology.”

For Joy, the status quo is the riskiest proposition.

“This stuff is long overdue. I think that you could have made a case that this would have been easier, if every decade there was some infusion of something, it probably would have been more cost effective. But by sort of opting to do nothing for so long, you do have to kind of then have a bigger lift to kind of bring things up to be competitive and to be compelling.”

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### By Katherine Knott

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## Charlottesville seeks 'powerful' change with early childhood center

From the Timeline: City schools seek to reconfigure middle schools series

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### Editor's Note

Nov 6, 2021

*Second and final part in a series about the Charlottesville reconfiguration project.*

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**N**early two decades ago, all preschool classes in Charlottesville City Schools were under one roof, and that was “marvelous,” said Eursaline Inge.

“Because the teachers could walk down the hall and say, I’m struggling with this, or I need this,” said Inge, who currently works as a family support worker for preschool. “And if you were struggling with a child, you could access a colleague or just encourage each other during the day.”

That ability for staff members to collaborate and share resources is one reason Charlottesville wants to go back to a center model. The city’s roughly 200 preschoolers are spread across the six elementary schools in 20 classrooms, according to division data.

The city’s preschool program took over the Jefferson School for several years before vacating the site in 2002 and moving the classes to the neighborhood elementary schools. Since moving out, the School Board has discussed on and off again a plan to bring all the preschool students and their teachers back together again.

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Now, Charlottesville is the closest it has ever been since 2002 to having all preschoolers together again after City Council voted last month to keep the so-called reconfiguration project moving forward. As part of the project's first phase, all preschool classes would be moved to Walker Upper Elementary School. A standalone \$22.3 million early childhood center would be built on the Walker campus in an eventual phase two.



Pre-K students play at stations together last month at Johnson Elementary School in Charlottesville.

ERIN EDGERTON, THE DAILY PROGRESS

The other parts of the plan include moving fifth-graders from Walker back to the elementaries and sixth-graders to Buford Middle School. Renovating and expanding Buford, which would cost an estimated \$75 million, is the first phase.

In the meantime, Walker would be turned into a temporary facility until the preschool center is constructed, under the current plan. The city wants to start construction on the first phase in July 2023 and wrap it up by August 2026, meaning students not born yet would likely be part of the first preschool class at Walker.



### **Why Charlottesville wants to spend \$75 million to remake Buford Middle School**

No specific timeline has been set for the construction of the early childhood center because how it will be funded is still unclear. School board members and community members have mentioned the possibility of private funding. Officials also want to raise the sales tax rate, the revenue from which would be dedicated to school construction. If approved by the General Assembly and local voters, the city could levy a general retail sales tax at a rate of 1%, which would bring in about \$12 million a year, officials have said.

City officials have said that the real estate tax rate would have to be increased by five cents in order to pay for the first phase.

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## Reconfiguration: By the numbers

First Phase: \$74.78 million

- \$73 million expansion and renovation of Buford Middle School to bring the school's capacity from 533 to 1,050 students. 593 students currently attend Buford.

- \$1.35 million to turn Walker Upper Elementary into a temporary preschool facility.

- \$425,000 to buy furniture for fifth-grade classrooms at elementary

Second Phase: \$22.3 million

- Building a 48,600 square-foot early childhood center with 18 classrooms and space for support services

## Why a preschool center

Over the years, school division officials **have** pointed to greater investments in early childhood as one way to address the persistent achievement and opportunity gaps in the school division. The preschool program serves 3- to 4-year-olds from low-income households, who have a disability or are at risk of starting kindergarten behind their peers.

From 2017-21, students of color made up 84% of the preschool program's enrollment, and 66% of students were economically disadvantaged, according to division data. In the overall school division this year, 60.4% were students of color and 45.9% were considered economically disadvantaged.

Centralizing preschool could take teaching and learning to a new level, said Sheila Sparks, the preschool coordinator for Charlottesville.

That's because all students would have all access to the same materials and experiences and their teachers would be able to share resources and support one another.

“It really will make teaching and learning more powerful,” Sparks said. “Having everybody speaking the same language and everybody pulling in the same direction, pushing for kindergarten readiness for everybody with the same plan, I think is really important.”



ERIN EDGERTON, THE DAILY PROGRESS Pre-K students play at stations together Thursday, Oct. 21, 2021 at Johnson Elementary School in Charlottesville, Va.

The center also would provide more continuity for students, so they don't have to change schools if their families move to another attendance zone.

Inge said she likes the idea of going back to a center in which everything in the building is focused on preschool.

“Sometimes that support for preschool is not there because everybody doesn’t get preschool,” she said.

As a family support worker for the preschool program, Inge helps families find transportation to doctor’s appointments and connects them to other resources in the community to find food or other resources. She and another support worker work with families at five of the six elementaries. Sparks takes care of Clark, Inge said.

Inge’s office is at Charlottesville High School, so she doesn’t see the families she works with every day.

“I miss a lot of that connection with parents,” she said.

With a center, she and the other support worker would work in one building where their families actually are, enabling them to better support students and their families.

“The earlier we can get children and nurture and encourage families, the better we are as a community,” she said.

More than 90% of a person’s brain develops before age 5, which makes early childhood a critical time for children. In preschool, young children learn essential skills such as working with others and controlling their own behaviors and emotions before they head to kindergarten.

“That brain development really happens through moving their bodies and exploring their environments in ways that really need to be facilitated by the design of that environment,” said Jessica Whittaker, a research associate professor at the University of Virginia’s School of Education and Human Development.

Sparks said preschool teachers are look at students’ language and communication skills as well as fine and gross motor skills in addition to reading and math.

“We look at all of those areas, and everything that we do, we try to make it engaging and disguised in play,” Sparks said.

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ERIN EDGERTON, THE DAILY PROGRESS Pre-K students play at stations together Thursday, Oct. 21, 2021 at Johnson Elementary School in Charlottesville, Va.

A four-year study **published in 2019** of an expanded Virginia preschool program called Virginia Preschool Initiative Plus found that two-thirds of students who participated entered kindergarten ready to learn. Additionally, those students “developed more than 15 months of mathematics skills and more than 20 months of literacy skills in a 12-month time frame” from when they started preschool to beginning kindergarten, according to the study.

According to the **Virginia Kindergarten Readiness Program**, “children from economically disadvantaged backgrounds are about 1.5 times more likely to be ready for kindergarten if they attend public preschool, compared to their peers who did not attend preschool.”

The city’s preschool program is one of several options for early childhood education in the area as part of the state’s system for funding preschool.

The recent conversations about the early childhood center come as the Gov. Ralph Northam administration has taken a greater interest in expanding access to early childhood programs. At the federal level, universal preschool has emerged a key policy priority for Democrats and could be funded in the Build Back Better Act.

“We’re in the sweet spot; we’re in the eye of the storm in early childhood, so to speak,” Sparks said.



Walker Site – Proposed Rose Hill Drive Entrance

**VMDO**

09.23.2021  
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18

A rendering of the proposed early childhood center from Charlottesville-based VMDO Architects.

## A long discussion

The prospect of having all the preschoolers at one location has been a driving force in the reconfiguration conversations, which began in earnest in 2009. Following a year of community forums and conversations about the future of school facilities, the idea emerged for a central preschool center as a way to make room for fifth-graders at the elementary level, according to board documents.

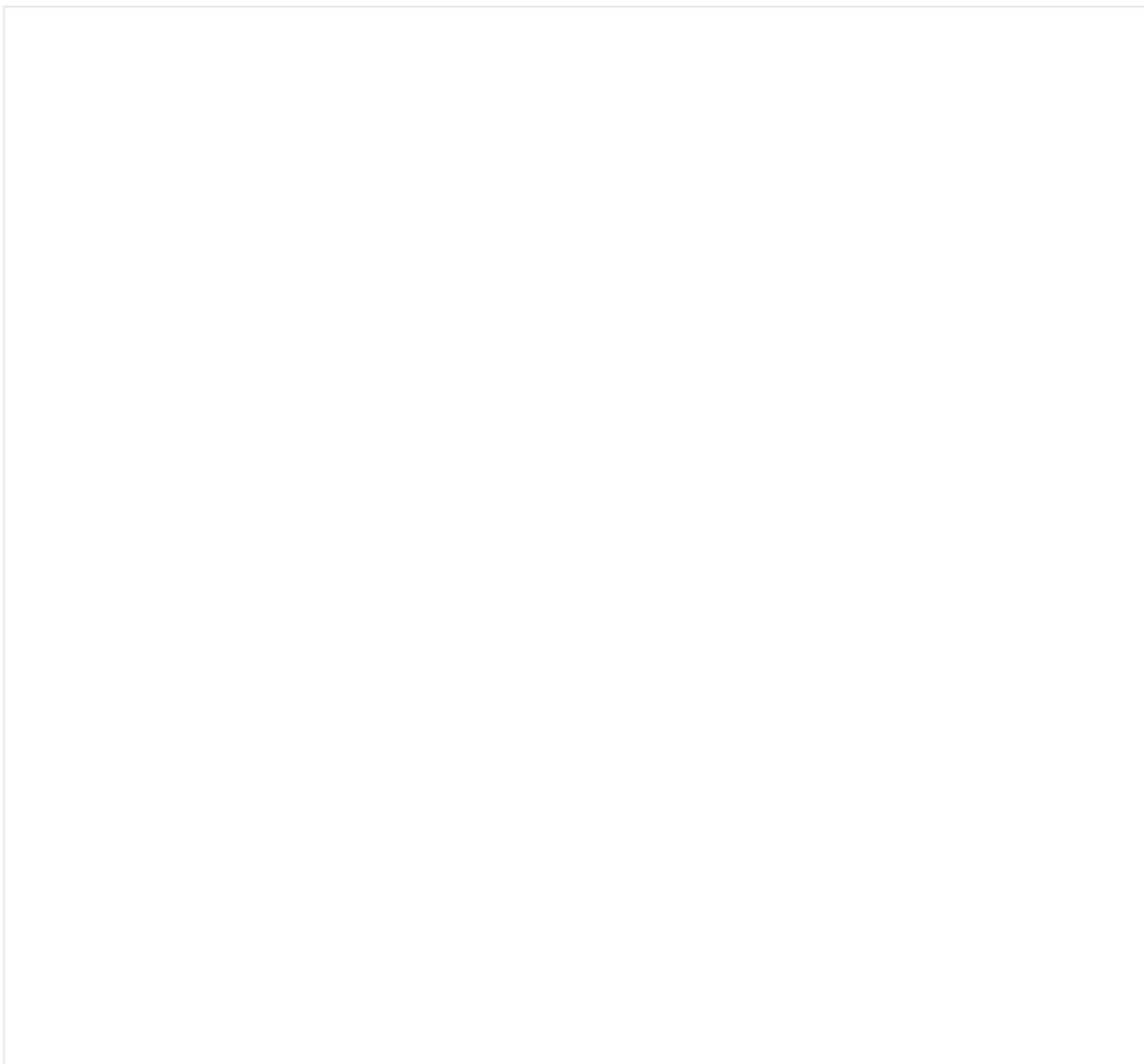
In fact, many board members who voted for the project in 2010 mentioned the early childhood center as a key reason for their vote, according to the minutes from the October meeting.

“The creation of the preschool center affords our children the opportunity to benefit from a consolidated program in a state of the art facility,” former board member Colette Blount said then. “Through collaboration with UVa and other early childhood education specialists, we have the chance to open the door to affecting early and long lasting positive work in the educational foundation of our children. ... I am primarily supporting Option 4 because of the preschool center. That is where we can have a very different and long lasting impact.”

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## **Timeline: City schools seek to reconfigure middle schools**

A timeline of the project talked about for more than a decade and that could be the division’s largest construction project since building Charlottesville High School in 1974.





### **Residents sound off on school setup**

Rachana Dixit | Updated Nov 20, 2020 |

### **Cost, savings estimates of city schools reconfiguration murky, some say**

Graham Moomaw | Updated Nov 20, 2020 |

### **Will school consolidation leave music program flat?**

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### **City schools reconfiguration estimate soars**

Megan Davis | Updated Nov 20, 2020 |

## **Budget woes stymie Charlottesville plans to reconfigure schools**

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### **City discusses forecasted schools shortfall**

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### **Council candidates weigh in on expanding pre-K, reconfiguration**

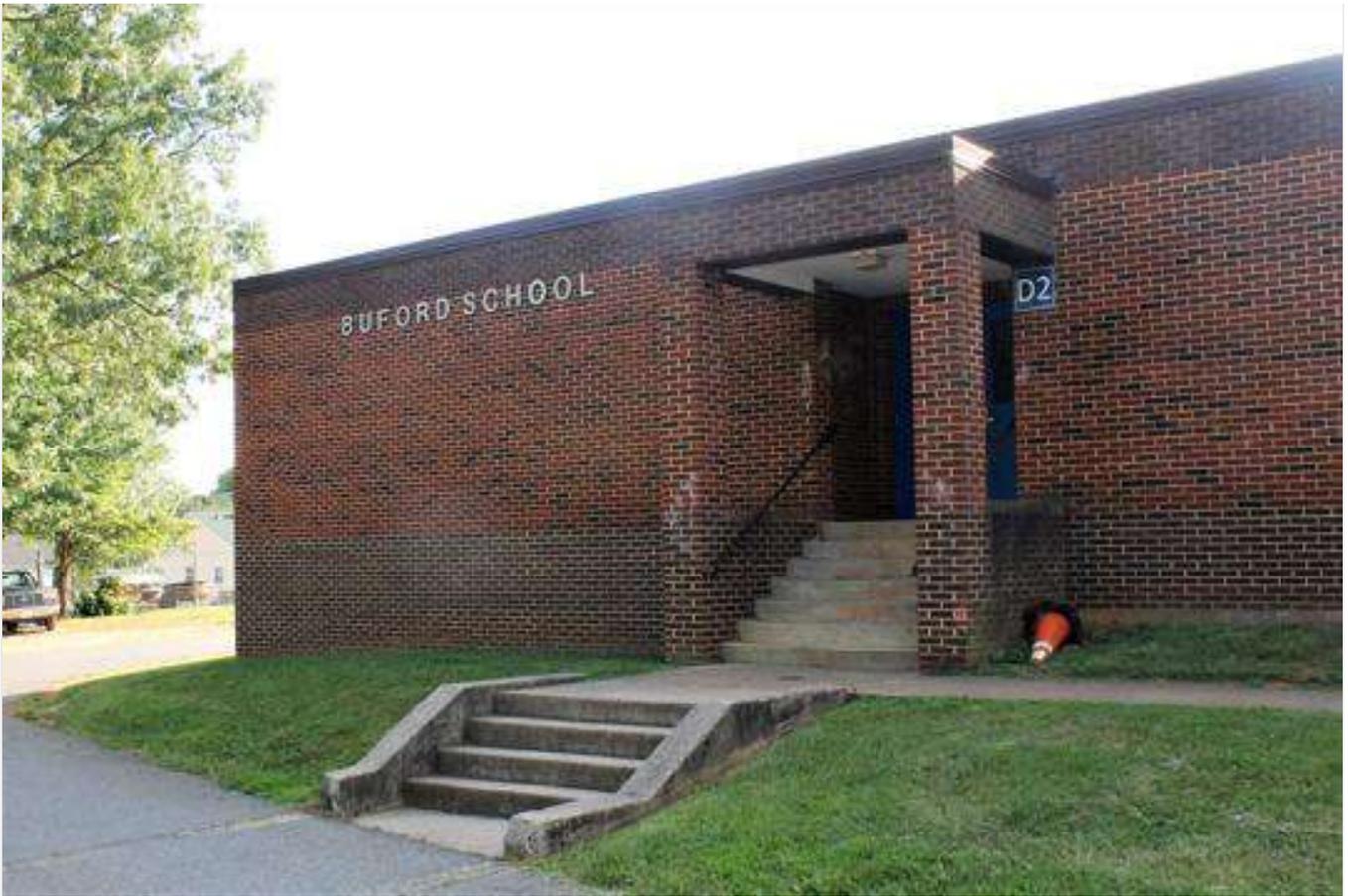
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### **City School Board further mulls reconfiguration, expanded pre-K**

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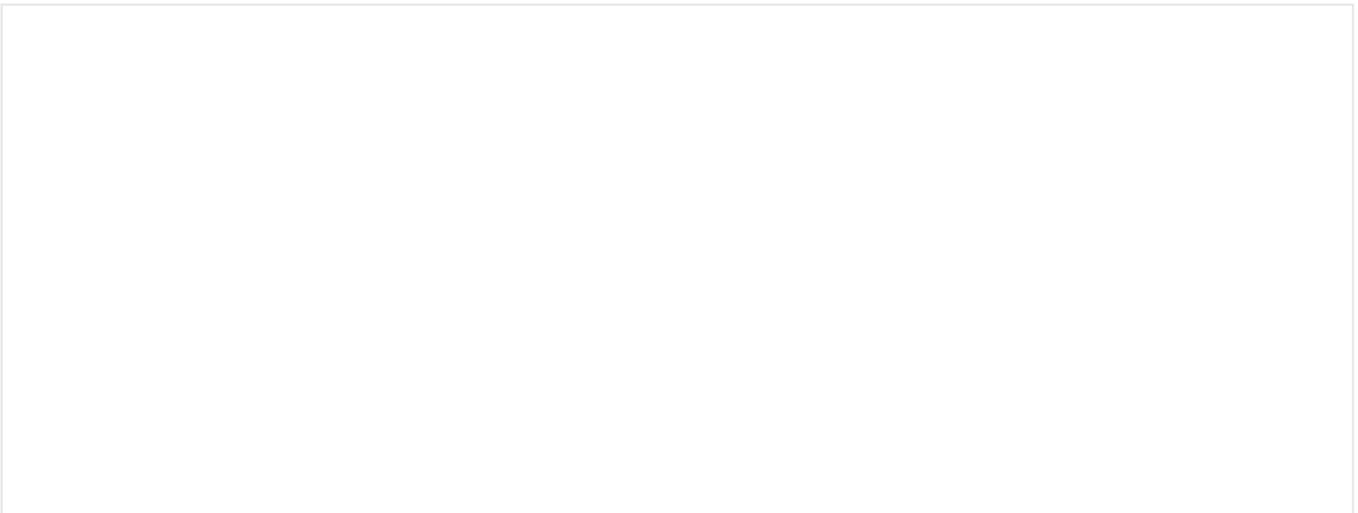
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**Opinion/Letter: Questioning city school plans**

Letter to the Editor | Oct 8, 2017 |





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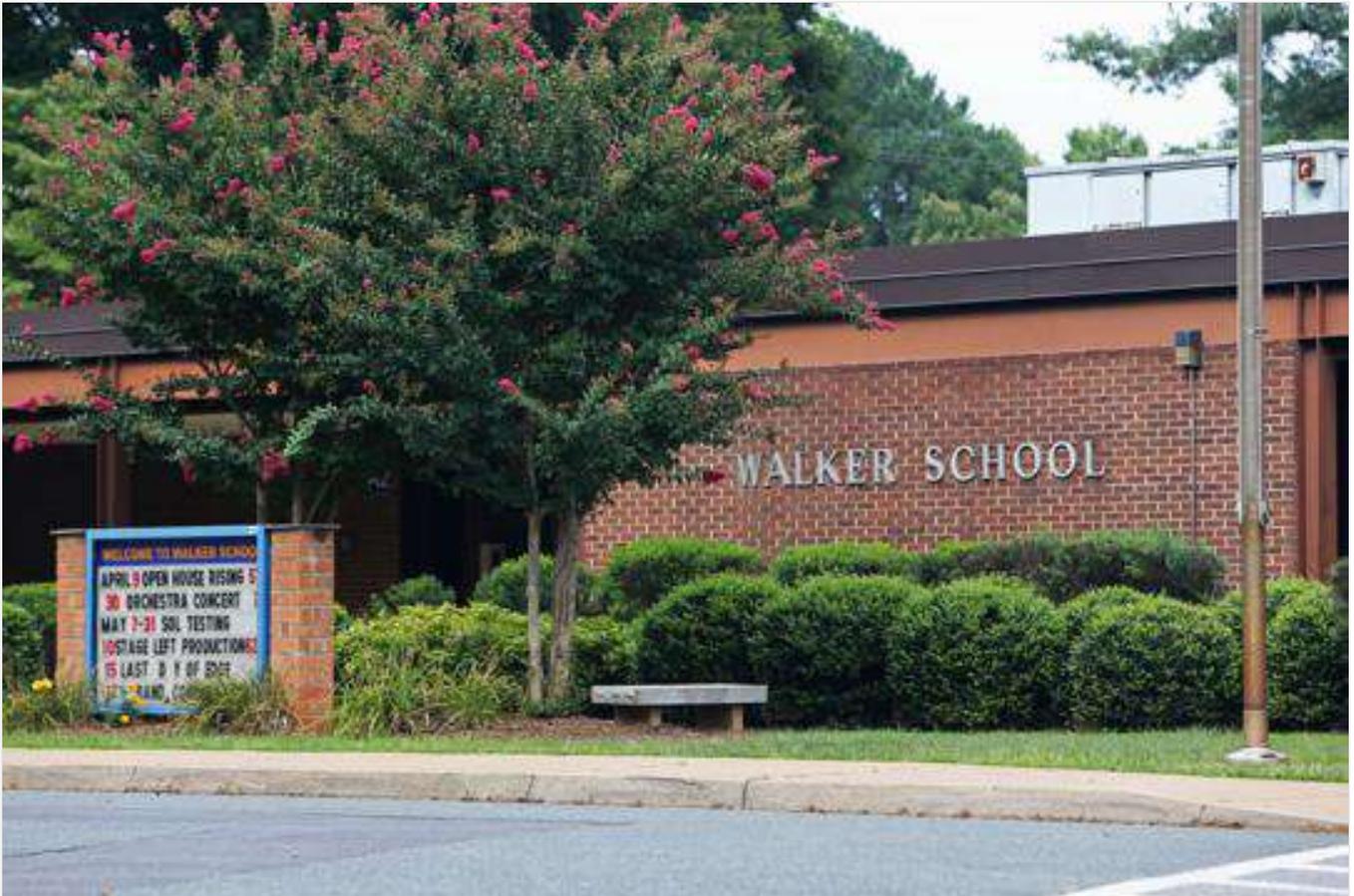
**Additional \$55M floated for city schools plan**

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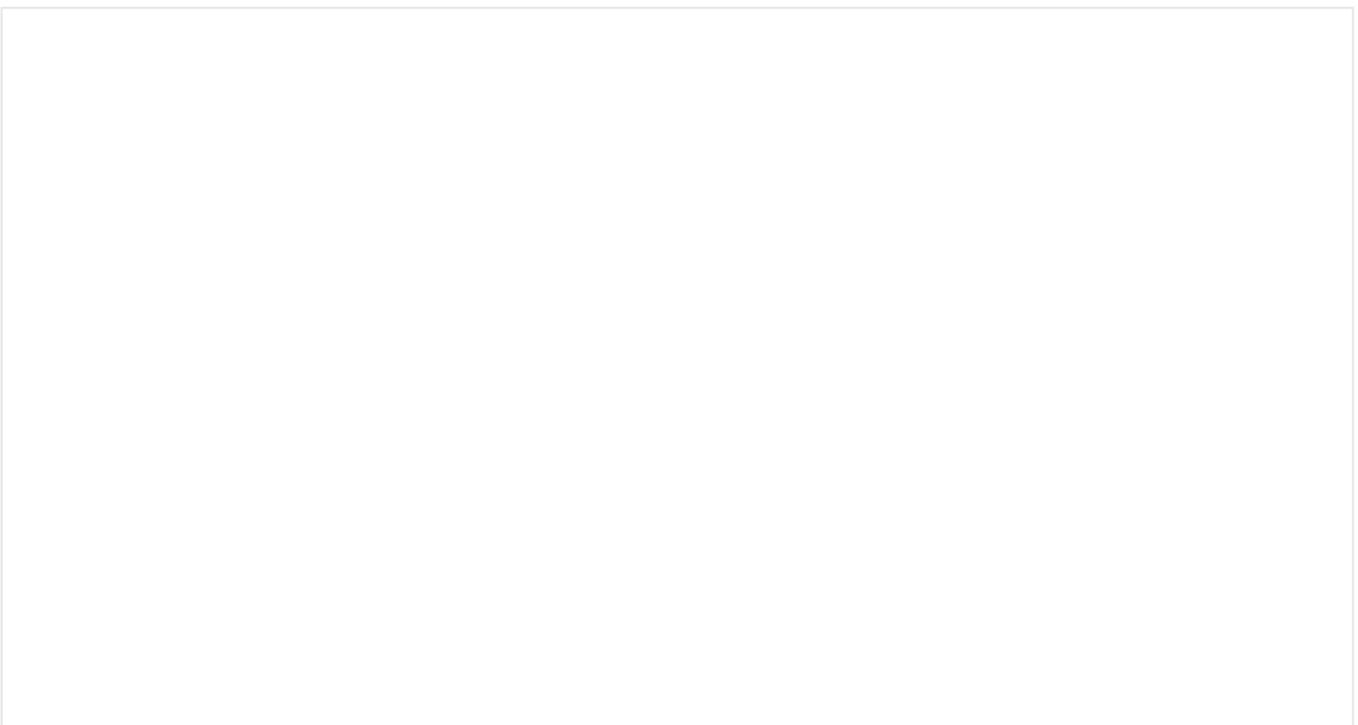
## Albemarle HS principal headed to city for Buford Middle School job

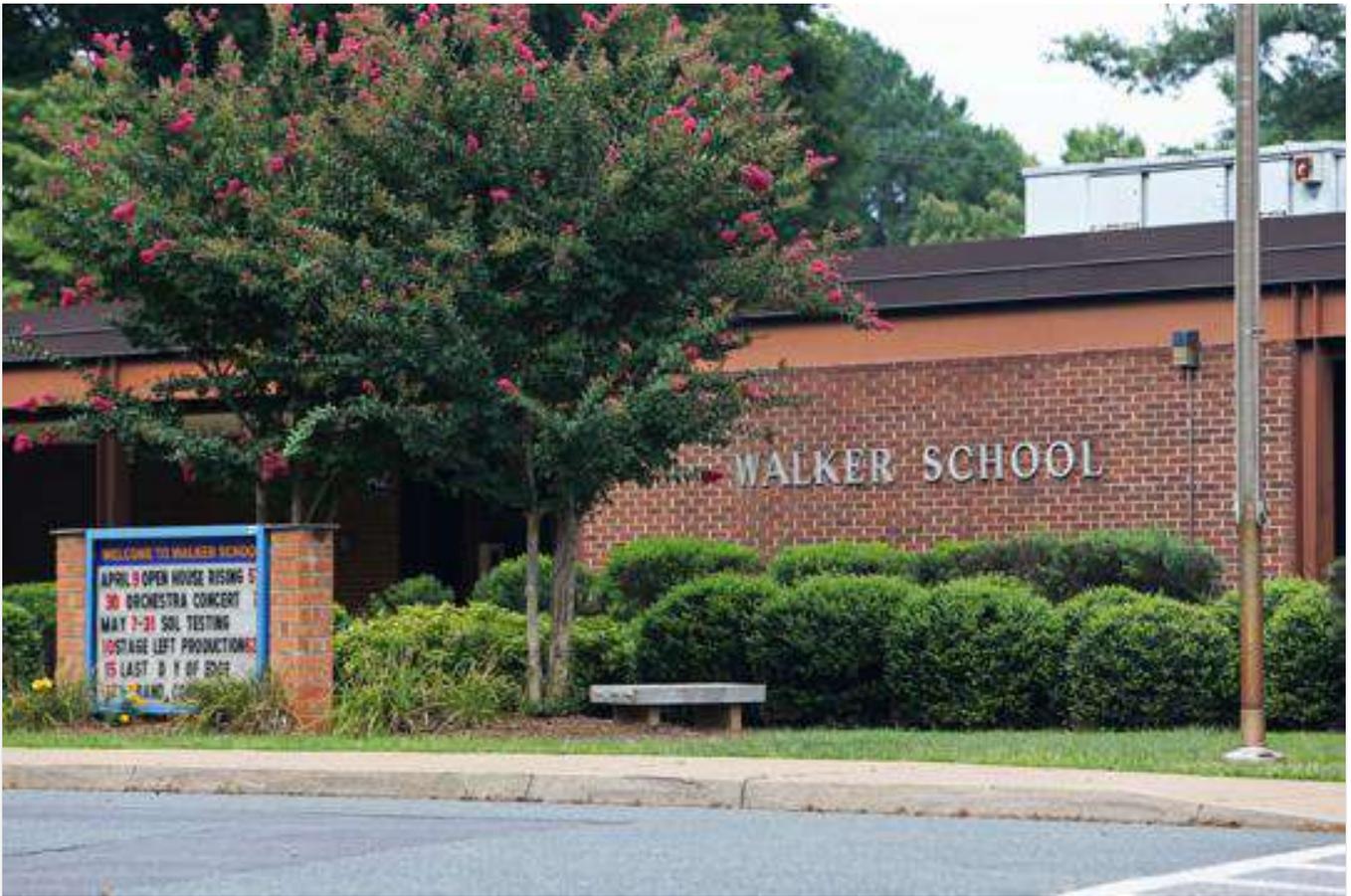
Katherine Knott | Updated May 21, 2019 |



## City schools make security upgrades ahead of new year

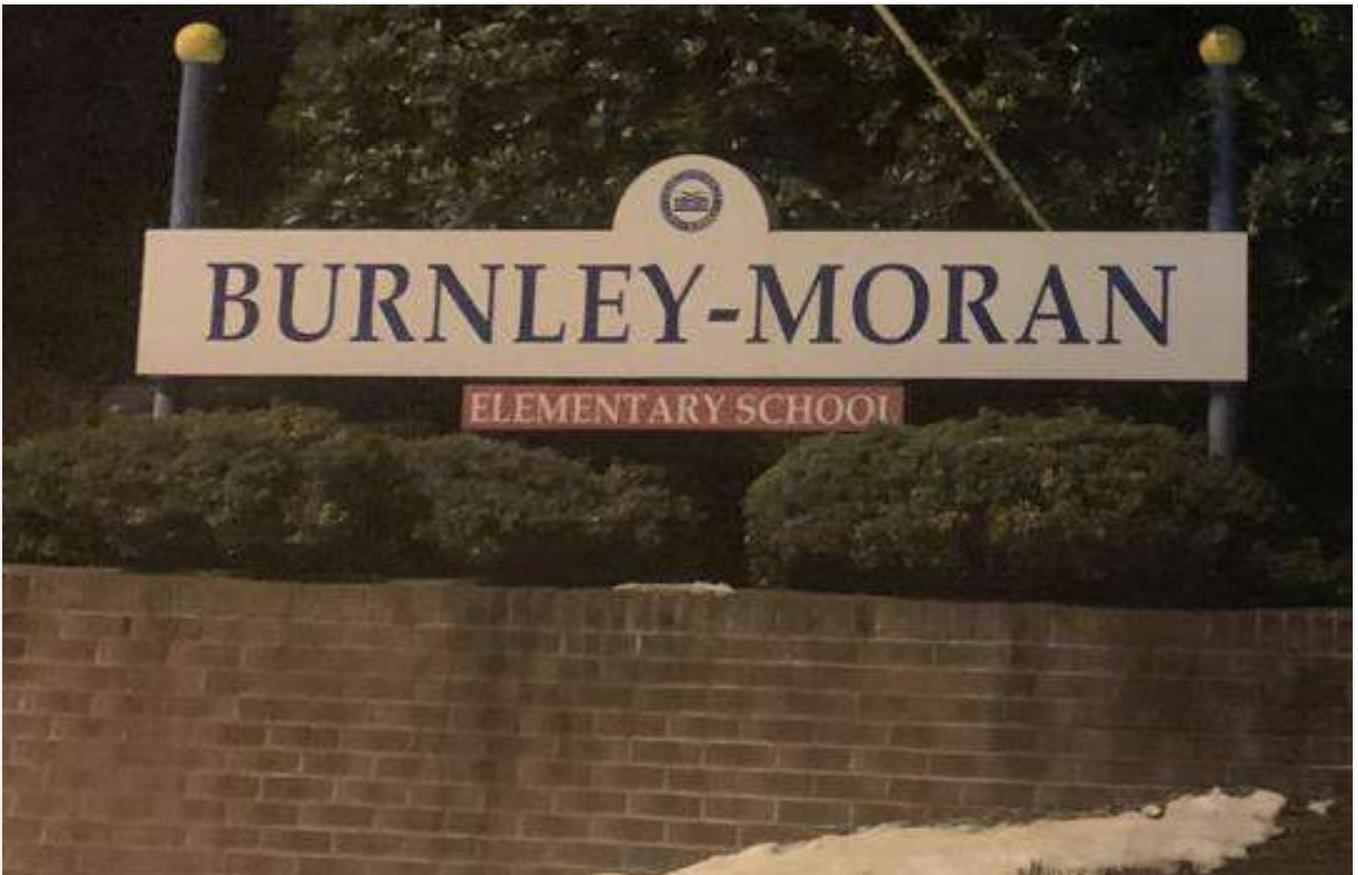
Katherine Knott | Aug 5, 2019 |





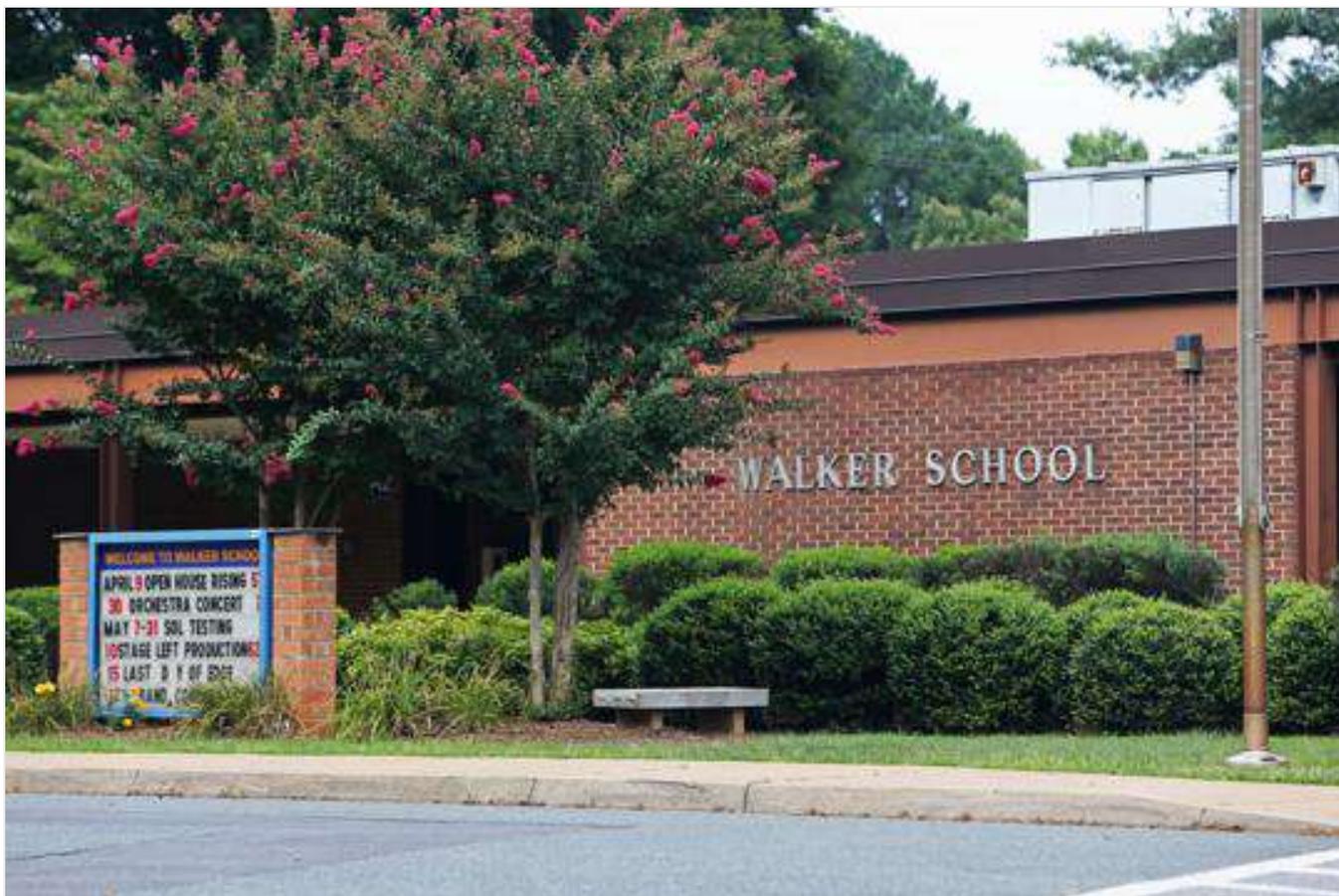
## Charlottesville takes next step in Buford/Walker reconfiguration

Katherine Knott | Dec 20, 2019 |



## **Burnley-Moran up next for school renovation**

Katherine Knott | Jan 9, 2020 |



## **City Council considers funding for school reconfiguration project**

Katherine Knott | Nov 20, 2020 |



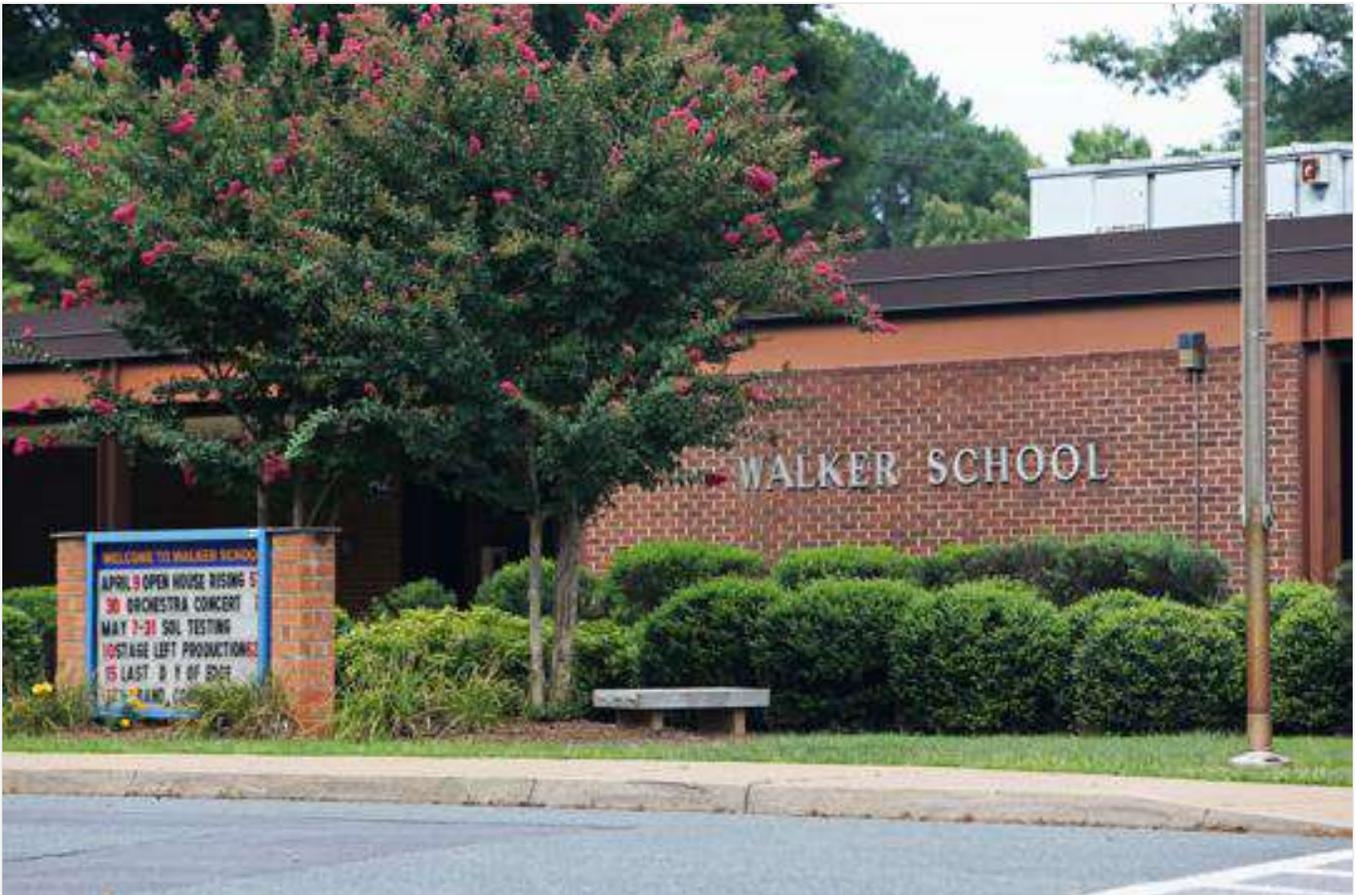
## **Decisions loom for City Council on capital projects**

Katherine Knott | Feb 4, 2021 |



## City planners endorse \$35M capital budget

Allison Wrabel | Feb 9, 2021 |



## VMDO Architects selected to design city schools reconfiguration project



**Charlottesville School Board gets first look at what reconfiguration could look like**

Katherine Knott | May 21, 2021 |



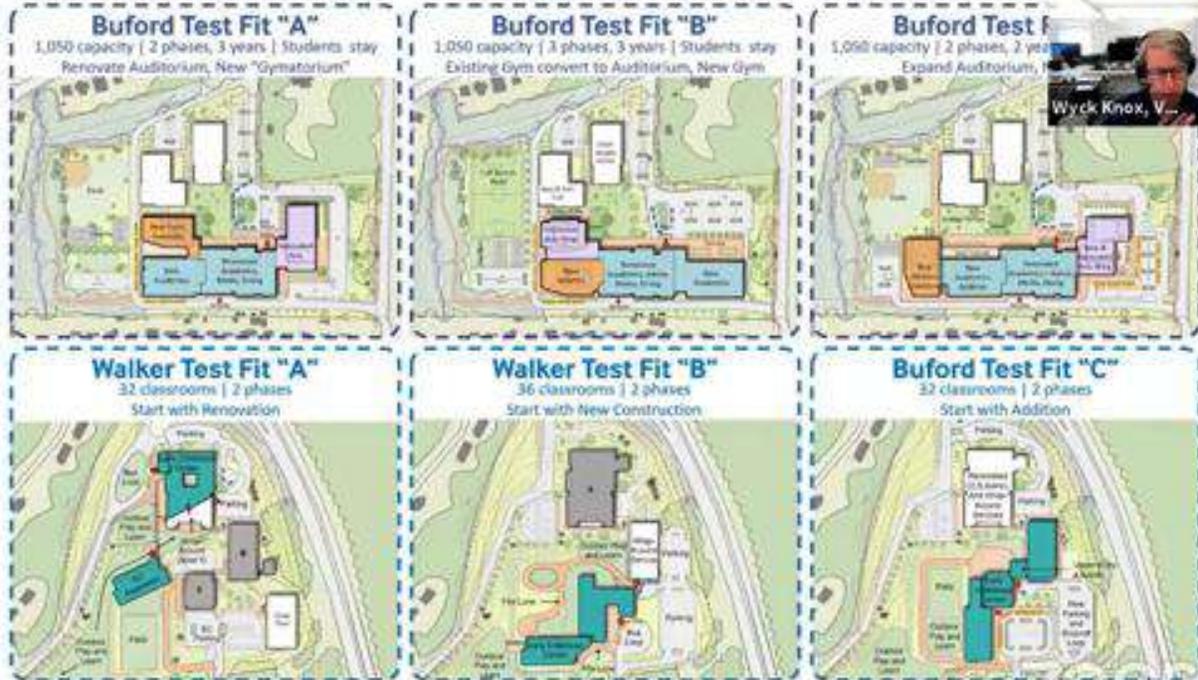
## Charlottesville City Council, School Board weigh cost, financing of reconfiguration

Katherine Knott | May 26, 2021 |



## Design process for city schools reconfiguration project kicks off

Katherine Knott | Jun 2, 2021 |



Test Fits: June 2021

VMDO

07/20/2021  
Community Design  
Team Meeting #1

24

## City schools reconfiguration project focused on prioritizing wants and needs

Katherine Knott | Jul 24, 2021 |



## City adjusts reconfiguration plan after high cost estimate

Katherine Knott | Jul 27, 2021 |



## Team meets at Buford to ponder reconfiguration options

Katherine Knott | Aug 4, 2021 |



Option 3 – Build in the Bowl

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09 02 2021  
School Board  
Meeting

35

## Cost estimates for city schools reconfiguration reviewed

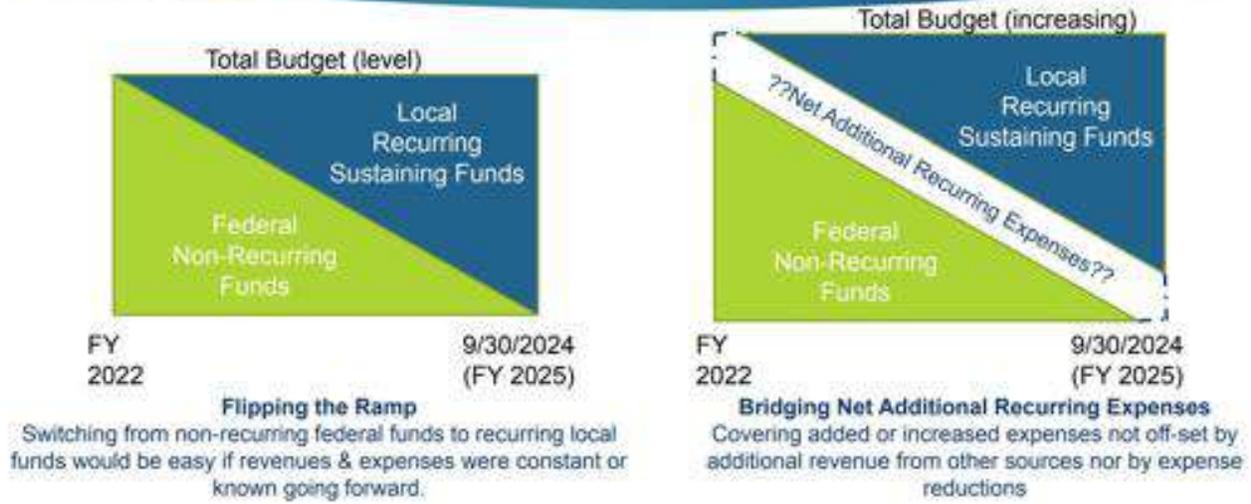
Katherine Knott | Sep 6, 2021 |



## First phase of city schools reconfiguration to cost \$75 million

Katherine Knott | Sep 17, 2021 |

# Budget Ramps & Bridges



## City School Board ponders budget trade-offs

Katherine Knott | Sep 21, 2021 |



Buford Site – New Building Entry

VMDO

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## City school board approves reconfiguration plan

Katherine Knott | Sep 23, 2021 |



Buford Site – New Building Entry

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School Board  
Info / Action Item

30

## Councilors 'all in' for city schools' \$75 million reconfiguration

Katherine Knott | Oct 5, 2021 |



## Why Charlottesville wants to spend \$75 million to remake Buford Middle School

Katherine Knott | Oct 30, 2021 |



## **Charlottesville seeks 'powerful' change with early childhood center**

Katherine Knott | Nov 6, 2021 |

Option 4 was the reconfiguration option that's still being considered today.

“As many of you have already said, the early childhood development center is something that I think given our proximity to UVa is a golden opportunity to really be a game changer in the early years of our children’s’ lives,” former board member Kathy Galvin said during that meeting.

A year after her vote, Galvin was elected to City Council and started her term in 2012.

The project was shelved in early 2012 because of funding concerns. But after former Councilor Wes Bellamy asked for a plan to expand early childhood programs, reconfiguration was pulled off the shelf. The School Board sought once again to make the project a reality in late 2018 following capacity concerns.

## Reconfiguration Key Dates & Decisions

- January 8, 2009: Efficiency study presented to School Board, calling for the closure of an elementary school.
- April 20, 2009: Then schools Superintendent Rosa Atkins presents four options to the community to kick off a series of community meetings about school facilities. Those four options were: staying the same, closing an elementary school, having two middle schools, or going to sixth through eighth grade middle school.
- Oct. 27, 2009: Community group narrows the options to the fourth one
- Oct. 21, 2010: School Board votes to proceed with the reconfiguration plan, citing the benefits of a centralized preschool
- Feb. 17, 2011: School Board votes to make Buford the middle school
- November 2011: VMDO Architects estimates the project would cost \$46 million
- January 2012: Plan abandoned because of cost and the economic downturn
- Fall 2015: Former Councilor Wes Bellamy asks for a plan to expand prekindergarten
- Summer 2017: VMDO capacity study released in response to rising student enrollment
- Sept. 26, 2017: School Board meets to review capacity study and reconfiguration and central preschool presented again
- Dec. 19, 2018: Board decides to proceed with reconfiguration plan, estimated to cost \$55 million with a range from \$60 to \$80 million.

- Spring 2019: City Council approves \$3 million for a reconfiguration design study to estimate cost
- Spring 2021: City Council includes \$50 million placeholder in CIP for project
- Spring 2021: VMDO receives contract for the design phase
- June 2021: Design meetings begin
- October 2021: City Council votes to swap out the placeholder for a \$75 million project, moving the project forward

Current plans call for a two-story early childhood center with 18 classrooms that would be built on the lower end of the Walker campus near Rose Hill Drive. The school's gym would be demolished to make space for the new facility, which would be connected to the arts building. That building and the auditorium would be repurposed.

The center could eventually be expanded to 32 classrooms.

The facility would also include space for community services that families could utilize. What those wraparound services will be has not been determined, Sparks said, but will be based on what families need. They could include a food pantry or clothing closet, among other ideas.

"I see it as a conduit to get them in touch with the right people," she said.



Walker Site – Connector Between New & Renovated Areas

VMDO

09.23.2021  
School Board  
Info / Action Item

22

A rendering of the proposed Arts Center, which would be part of the new early childhood facility on the site of Walker Upper Elementary School.

Gail Esterman, the director of early learning for ReadyKids said the wraparound services would be a “wonderful” asset to the center. ReadyKids is a nonprofit that provides a range of services to the community such as counseling and professional development for early childhood teachers.

If families need support or have concerns about their child’s development, she said that it can be cumbersome for families to access the necessary resources.

“I’m supportive of anything that expands the opportunity for young children to get a high-quality early childhood experience,” Esterman said of the proposed center.

The VMDO team is working with preschool teachers and administrations to determine the specific designs for the center before the City Council makes a final decision regarding funding in March.

Walker was built in 1966 and designed for middle school students. Instead of renovating the site to meet the needs of small children, the city’s architects recommended constructing a new building. That option also leaves Walker available

for central office staff or a potential new elementary school down the road.

During the first phase of the project, the academic building at Walker would be turned into a temporary preschool facility until the center is built. That would entail installing step-stools and bathroom sinks, adding outdoor learning areas and making exterior improvements and cost \$1.35 million, according to VMDO.



A rendering of the early childhood center's exterior entrance off Rose Hill Drive.

Before the pandemic, 235 students were in prekindergarten, according to state data. Currently, 221 students in the city's preschool programs, which include community options such as the YMCA and Barrett Early Learning Center. About 201 preschoolers are in city schools' classrooms.

“The biggest thing that I think that I’m most excited about, which won’t affect me directly or my children, is the idea of a dedicated preschool,” said Tammy Sutton, a Charlottesville mom. “It’s just another step toward equity.”

Officials have said over the years that the preschool center could open the door to expanding the program. Sutton said childcare in the Charlottesville area is expensive and expanding access to preschool could help families who have to choose between

working or sending their child to daycare.

“This is important and investing in our children is the most solid investment in our future,” she said.

According to Child Care Aware Virginia, the city has 41 child care programs for young children — 25 of those are licensed. Looking at licensed capacity, there are 1,763 spots at child care centers, preschools and family child care homes.

For children ages 2 to 3, the average cost of full-time child care in Charlottesville is \$274 a week, which would come out to about \$14,222 for a full year. For children ages 4 to 5 who aren't in school, the cost is \$229 a week or \$11,882 a year.

Providers in Charlottesville and Albemarle account for 75% of all licensed providers in the area for young children as well as those who are school-aged, according to an analysis of Child Care Aware data.

In Albemarle, the average annual cost of full-time child care for those ages 2 to 5 is \$10,504, according to Child Care Aware Virginia.

## **Spaces designed with young kids in mind**

Teaching 3- and 4-year-olds requires a different approach compared to teaching older children, Sparks and others said. The younger children learn through play, have nap time during the day and need to move around.

Because small children learn differently, it is important that they learn in spaces designed for them, said Whittaker with UVa.

“They learn by moving their bodies, they learn by playing, they learn by exploring,” she said. “Classrooms have to be set up in a way that really allows for that sense of play in order to incorporate a lot of the learning that they do into their play. So it's just a very different environment that facilitates young children's learning than older students, and that needs to be accounted for in any type of redesign.”

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ERIN EDGERTON, THE DAILY PROGRESS Pre-K students play at stations together Thursday, Oct. 21, 2021 at Johnson Elementary School in Charlottesville, Va.

Whittaker studies the association between teacher-child interactions in early childhood and children’s academic and social-emotional outcomes. She said studies have highlighted the importance of high-quality interactions for young children.

“We know that the environment can be really supportive of high-quality interactions if there’s space for children to play, if there are spaces for them to be able to calm their bodies when they get upset, if there’s enough room for them to interact with peers, if there’s cozy corners for them to have interactions with their teachers,” she said.

Whittaker said that young children need to be able to go outside and to use the outdoors as part of their early childhood experience.

“So they really need to be able to go outside and to use the outdoors as part of their learning environment,” she said. “You can imagine with a group of four-year-olds, that it’s a lot harder to get them outside than it is, for example, a group of fifth-graders, so having that accessibility to the outdoor learning environment is really key.”

The team at VMDO focused on ensuring that teachers can easily take their classes outside as part of the initial designs. For example, the classrooms are at the same level as the outdoor play and learning spaces.



Walker Site – Proposed Play & Learn Courtyard

**VMDO**

09.23.2021  
School Board  
Info / Action Item

21

Renderings of the early childhood center on the Walker campus showing the outdoor learning areas.

Access to the outdoors whenever they needed it was a perk of the Jefferson School center, Inge said. The school had a playground and a dedicated area for tricycle riding along with an indoor gym.

Teachers didn’t have to work around the schedules of older students for time in those spaces. Plus, if one student didn’t want to take a nap, another teacher could help out.

“I remember there were kids that didn’t nap and there might be one of the teachers say, ‘Oh, I’m gonna take your two kids that are not napping and my four outside and they can ride bikes or swing on the swing,’” Inge said. “Those are the kind of things that as a center, we were able to do.”

A space designed for young children also means having the sinks, toilets and furniture at the right size, and that makes a difference for all involved, several people said.

“I think it is really going to be exciting to have things that are kind of at their level, and it’s going to be focused on their development and what’s really important in early childhood,” Sparks said.



A teacher supervises children last month at Johnson Elementary School in Charlottesville.

Whittaker said that it is important for people to keep in mind that the center would affect the most marginalized learners in the schools.

“Because it’s our most vulnerable children who are in these programs,” she said. “We’re designing a high-quality learning environment specifically for early childhood. That hasn’t happened because right now they’re sitting in classrooms that are designed in elementary schools. So the ability to design a space specifically for the development of young learners is really exciting.”

She’s hoping that momentum behind reconfiguration can continue after the first phase is done.

“I have some concerns that momentum will get lost once that redesign happens because there just aren’t as many advocates in the early childhood arena as there are for older students,” she said.

Overall, Sparks said a new early childhood center could help the school division provide professional learning support over preschool providers in the area along with student teachers.

“This program has historically been very well respected across the community and across the state,” Sparks said. “... We want to really take that lead and take it to the next level.”

She’s hopeful that the city and school division will be able to take next steps to make the center a reality.

“Because it really is for generations to come and for the children who aren’t even born yet, that’s who this is for,” she said.

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IN THIS SERIES

## **Timeline: City schools seek to reconfigure middle schools**

Updated Nov 20, 2020

**Residents sound off on school setup**

Updated Nov 20, 2020

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By Katherine Knott

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