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# the **CROZET** gazette

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## *What Crozet Stands to Gain (and Lose) as a Town*

BY LISA MARTIN  
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An offhand comment by Planning Commissioner Rick Randolph at a January meeting on land use raised an oft-considered question: Should Crozet become a town? As Randolph tried to blunt citizen calls for more county-provided infrastructure to

support breakneck growth in Crozet, he suggested that a town designation could solve several problems.

“If Crozet sought to become a town,” said Randolph, “that would address a comment that the county should be doing more with road construction. The county is not a road department. With the taxing author-  
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# Town Status

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ity that a town would provide, then Crozet would be able to fund whatever it wanted to fund.”

Many Crozetians, especially recent transplants, might well ask, “Aren’t we a town already?” While it does feel town-like, Crozet’s more pedestrian official titles are “unincorporated community” or “census-designated place.” The town idea has sparked interest among citizens during the current Master Planning process, as it does every few years when Crozet growth issues come to the fore. But is town status the cure-all that Randolph suggests?

Some say yes. “It is extremely dumb that Crozet is not a town,” tweeted Keswick-based government technology authority Waldo Jaquith. “Crozet should have become a town 20 years ago. Add a penny to the sales tax, set up a government, and get on with it.”

Others are more skeptical. “I don’t think it’s the panacea people think it is,” said local public policy analyst Neil Williamson of the Free Enterprise Forum. “I think the machinations that would have to happen, along with the [town’s] surcharges on the tax rates, would be enough to prevent widespread support for the concept.”

## The pitch

Creating an incorporated town in Virginia is a non-trivial process. The state legislature must pass a law establishing any new town charter, so Crozet’s State Delegate (Chris Runion) and State Senator (Creigh Deeds) would have to introduce and endorse the legislation. The

criteria to become a town include a minimum population requirement (1,000), a petition signed by at least 100 residents, and a surveyed map of proposed town boundaries.

Most critically, a special state commission must determine that “the services required by the area seeking to be incorporated cannot be provided by the ... extension of existing services currently provided by the County.” In other words, Crozet must make the case that Albemarle County is unable to provide services sufficient to take care of Crozet’s needs. Coupled with a requirement that the petitioners show that “the general good of the community will be improved” by incorporation, Crozet would have to establish that it could run itself better alone than with the county’s help.

“We’d have to show that we don’t get enough police protection, don’t get water and sewer, don’t get firefighters,” said Crozet Community Association president Tim Tolson. “How are we going to prove that? Sure, you hear people argue that we need [more and better] roads, but the county doesn’t provide those—the state does.”

An even bigger hurdle, say long-time Crozet residents, would be agreeing on town boundaries. “It would all hinge on finding boundaries that would be acceptable to the county and the town,” said Bill Schrader, who spearheaded the fundraising effort to build the Crozet Library from 2010-2013. “If you used the Master Plan [development area] boundaries, we could not support being a town because we wouldn’t have the tax base. If instead you used the service area, which includes the areas



COURTESY NEST REALTY

where people live who come into Crozet to visit the pharmacy, the library, the grocery store, then you’re talking about annexing county land and the Supervisors will never go along with that.”

The community is currently in a protracted struggle with Albemarle County to define its own land use policies, which govern how much new development is allowed and at what density. Town status would give Crozet that power, but the need to raise revenue would be in tension with the desire to stay small. “I’m not sure that anybody would want to make Crozet bigger so that we could afford to be a town,” said Tom Loach, former Planning Commissioner and current CCAC member. “That would be counterproductive.”

White Hall District Board of Supervisors representative Ann Mallek remembers past town discussions clearly. “Around 2010 was the last time I heard anyone talking about becoming a town, out of frustration with the length of time it was taking to get projects done for Crozet,” said Mallek. She pointed to county-funded projects in the recent past such as the library

(\$11 million) and downtown streetscape (\$6 million), as well as those on the horizon such as the Crozet Elementary expansion (\$22 million) and the downtown Plaza and Square (\$4.2 million) as examples of the county’s dedication to supporting Crozet’s infrastructure.

“While I understand the frustration of being one group of citizens among 100,000 who do not see their priorities advanced, as I recall the discussion stopped quickly when people learned that they would be paying taxes to the county and then additional taxes to the town for law enforcement and local projects,” she said. “I do not think there would be revenue from the town sufficient to carry forward sidewalks and bridges without a crippling tax burden.”

## Talk of the town

There are currently 190 towns in Virginia, ranging in size from Clinchport (pop. 40) in the Southwest, to Leesburg (pop. 51,000) near Dulles airport, and there is no fixed template for town organization. While a few items are required of new towns by the state—a town council, a mayor or manager, and a financial record-keeper—the rest is left up to the community to arrange based on what it can afford. Most towns are on the small side; in terms of population, Crozet would be one of the ten largest in the state.

The General Assembly last chartered a new town 30 years ago, in what has become a cautionary tale. Castlewood (pop. 1,800) in Russell County incorporated almost 9,000 acres in 1991 to speed up construction of a new sewer system and to attract businesses to the area. Despite town real estate and

	Farmville	Ashland	Pulaski	Warrenton	Crozet
<b>Population</b>	7,846	7,875	8,714	10,027	7,159
<b>Number of households</b>	2,256	2,798	3,702	3,742	3,007
<b>Total town tax revenue</b>	\$6.1M	\$5.9M	\$5.8M	\$8.5M	

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Examples of existing towns similar in size to Crozet by size and budgeted local tax revenue (in addition to county and state tax levies on citizens). Data sources: Population and number of households: U.S. Census data as of the most recent 2019 estimates. Total town tax revenue: each town’s total 2020-21 budget for revenue from real estate, property, and other local taxes as reported on town financial statements. (This figure excludes other town revenue sources such as grants, state transfers, fees, rental property, investments, etc.). For Crozet, the census-designated area surveyed is similar to the current Growth Area boundaries. Town tax revenue is in millions (M).

personal property tax revenue, plus income from the profusion of speeding tickets issued by the newly formed police department, the town could not stay solvent. Amid citizen fury in 1996, a slate of town council candidates ran and won on a platform of dissolving their own charter, and the town was unincorporated in 1997.

Including Castlewood, three towns have reverted to unincorporated communities in Virginia since 1997, melting back into their counties and relinquishing the duties of government. For towns that rely heavily on (restaurant) meals taxes and transient occupancy taxes (hotels, motels, Airbnbs), the COVID-19 pandemic was a crushing blow to their budgets in 2020. The town of Scottsville, for instance, which does not levy real estate or personal property taxes, has had to make adjustments.

Scottsville is Albemarle County's only town, incorporated in 1818. With a population of about 500, the town's staff is modest. There's a mayor and town council, a police chief and three officers, a maintenance technician, an administrator, a clerk, and an attorney. The town's \$700,000 overall

2020 budget tightened to \$540,000 in 2021 as tax revenue from meals taxes plummeted, and some capital improvements like sidewalks had to be postponed. However, the town maintains what Crozet envies—its own Planning Commission and Architectural Review Board (ARB).

"We are independent when it comes to deciding our land use decisions—the county's not involved," said Scottsville Mayor Ron Smith. "We are really lucky here because our commissioners and ARB and the council—everybody seems to be on the same page. We certainly encourage development, but we want it staked out in an orderly and reasonable manner."

Except for the administrator, the clerk, and the police force, no one in Scottsville town government is paid, which can lead to the same set of citizen volunteers doing most of the work. "We sometimes have a problem getting people to serve on the town council because it does take quite a bit of time and people have real jobs, too," said Smith, who served multiple terms on the council and planning commission before being elected mayor last year. "The challenge [for a new town] is, you've got to figure out how to fund all this stuff."

#### **Tax and spend**

The biggest myth among town proponents is that county taxes will be replaced by town taxes. Not so: town residents pay both in most cases. Though Scottsville taxes its citizens indirectly through levies on items like cigarettes, meals, and utilities, some of which are paid by out-of-towners passing through, the revenues from these sources in 2020 equated to an average tax burden of \$1,200 for each of the town's 238 households. Business license taxes, another major source of revenue for Scottsville, impact local business owners as well and may be passed along to town residents in rising prices.

Take, as a more Crozet-sized example, the town of Ashland (tagline: "Center of the Universe"). With a population of 7,900 and located twenty minutes north of Richmond, Ashland is similar to Crozet in that it's a commuter town with

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*White Hall District Board of Supervisors member Ann Mallek's review of Albemarle County infrastructure spending in Crozet includes the following (in millions):*

#### **Recent**

Library: \$11M

Jarmans Gap Road: \$15M

Downtown Streetscape  
Phases 1 & 2: \$6M

Wetlands: \$1.2M

#### **Coming**

Crozet Elementary expansion: \$22M

Lickinghole Bridge: \$6-8M county  
share (VDOT revenue-sharing  
the other half)

Downtown Plaza: \$3M

Square Improvements: \$1.2M

Western Park Completion: \$?

Rt. 250 Improvements (three round-  
abouts over 10 years): \$10-15M

WAHS Expansion: \$8M

# Town Status

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a railroad history.

The town operates on a \$10 million budget funded largely by a heavy layer of taxes on individuals and businesses—real estate, personal property, sales and use, meals, transient occupancy, cigarettes, machinery and tools, licenses, utilities. For instance, Ashland charges an additional 10 cents per \$100 of real estate property value, and another 77 cents per \$100 on personal property value, on top of Hanover County's tax rates, which are similar to Albemarle's.

The majority of Ashland's revenue is spent on paying its more than 60 employees in departments such as police and public safety, street and road maintenance, parks, economic development, planning, and tourism. Ashland's largest capital project is an \$8 million town hall building, currently under construction, which is funded through debt financing.

One significant difference between Ashland and Crozet is that Ashland's town boundary includes an I-95 interchange—complete with a half-dozen fast food outlets and several major hotels—which contributes significant tax revenue from meals, transient occupancy, and sales. The town is also the home of Randolph-Macon College. In fact, almost all Virginia towns of Crozet's population size or larger have access to alternative types of revenue sources—commercial strips of low-budget restaurants, lodgings, and shops—as well as other attractions such as a museum, small college, or regional airport.

Crozet (as currently bounded) is only about half the size (in square miles) of Ashland, and its “small-town feel” is zealously protected. Crozet residents have higher levels of income, education, and home values than similarly sized towns, but Crozet generates only one-tenth of those towns' retail sales revenue. While the wealthier parts of Crozet could likely absorb increased taxes, other sections may struggle.

“Obviously the demographics in Crozet have changed over the last 30 years, but there's still a strong contingency of older residents, and adding that layer

of taxation may be problematic for them,” said Loach.

## Service call

Crozet would have to establish ground rules with the county on a range of services it currently receives, and negotiate contracts for those it loses. Every decision would be a function of the town's agreed-upon boundaries, taxation choices, and intended level of independence. Crozet could get by with a minimalist town structure—which would allow it to control its land use decisions—if it was willing to cede control of most other operations to the county in its charter.

Gary Dillon, a former Crozet fire chief who has worked with law enforcement in towns across Virginia, described three options if Crozet (as a town) wanted its own police force. It could (1) allow law enforcement to remain as it is today with county officers assigned to the Blue Ridge district that serves Crozet, (2) contract with the county for officers specifically assigned to Crozet, or (3) hire its own police force, which would include paying for a facility, vehicles and equipment, insurance, training, civilian staff, and other costs.

“If I had to make a recommendation today based on everything I've seen,” said Dillon, “I would leave it the way it is and let Albemarle County provide the police services because they do a really good job and they are equipped. We've already paid for it or are paying for it through taxes.” But he, like other Crozet residents, wonders about a host of other considerations for a town, such as who provides and operates schools, water and sewer, fire and rescue services, and street maintenance.

Albemarle County schools would continue to provide public education for Crozet town children, as counties do for towns across the Commonwealth. Even behemoth town Leesburg relies on Loudon County for its schools. Similarly, VDOT and county funding would continue to pay for major Crozet road projects, as their price tags (e.g., \$21 million in total for the Lickinghole Creek bridge) are too steep for a town to afford. Local residents

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## Town Status

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could continue to transact with the Albemarle County Service Authority for water and sewer service, and would contract with private trash haulers as they do now.

Other charges, such as street maintenance—including snow plowing and curb and sidewalk improvements—would be Crozet’s responsibility because incorporated towns over 3,500 do not typically receive VDOT maintenance on local roads. County services such as land use and transportation planning functions could be taken over by Crozet, but would require hiring staff to do those jobs.

The all-volunteer Western Albemarle Rescue Squad relies in part on county funding and could operate as is, but only if the county agrees, as Scottsville recently found out. “We have a volunteer fire department, so that’s good, but we lost our Rescue Squad because Albemarle was supplementing our volunteer force and they just came in and took it over,” said Mayor Smith. “Right now, it’s still in litigation.”

### Playing politics

Beyond the financial and regulatory issues lie stickier notions of goodwill and collaboration between Crozet and the county that should also carry weight in Crozet’s decision. Williamson points out that there’s a delicate political balance between towns and counties, particularly in growth areas. “Albemarle County is pretty strong in the state legislature, and it is highly unlikely that the county would want Crozet to become a town,” he said. Since Crozet is an important part of the county’s

growth plan, Williamson reasons that the county would object to losing all control over land use decisions here.

“The county likely feels that it has invested as much or more into Crozet infrastructure—schools and other services—as it has in other places,” he said. “If you take that part of the growth area away from the county, then Crozet would be competing with non-growth areas for attention. What’s to stop the county from growing around the town, creating an urban ring around Crozet? They’d be within their rights to do so.”

Amid the ongoing Master Plan revision and the uncertainty that the change would involve, some Crozet residents advise proceeding slowly when exploring town status. “It’s complicated, and we shouldn’t rush,” said Tolson. “[The Crozet/county relationship] is like an intricately woven sweater and if you just pull a thread, now you’re neck deep in yarn trying to figure out how the heck do I make a sweater back out of this.”

“I think we should just wait and see how the Master Plan looks before we start to think about town status,” said Loach. “If you look at Scottsville, has it benefitted so much that it would make sense for Crozet? I think the answer is no.”

Mayor Smith thinks that a town the size of Crozet would need more paid staff and structure than Scottsville has to be able to take care of its citizens. “I can understand their frustrations, and if there was some way to just snap your fingers and become a town that would be great, but you got to pay for it,” said Smith. “As our town attorney often says, be careful what you wish for.” ❁

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Henley Middle School principal Beth Costa.

## Anti-racism Curriculum Divides Henley Parents

BY LISA MARTIN  
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A new curriculum addressing issues of racial and gender equity was piloted for all grades at Henley Middle School this spring, and its content has galvanized both supporters and detractors among the school's parent population. Spurred by the national unrest

following George Floyd's death last summer, and impelled by the county school division's anti-racism policy and Virginia's new LGBTQIA+ inclusion requirements, the program was built as a model for all county middle schools to use beginning this fall.

Henley's "Courageous Conversations About Race" [CCAR]  
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# Courageous Conversations

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program was launched during the students' Advisory period over the course of several weeks in May and June and encompassed four units covering topics such as identity, community, bias, discrimination, and social justice, with an emphasis on anti-racism as a unifying theme for eighth graders. Parents have attended recent school board meetings in droves to express their satisfaction or displeasure with the lessons.

While many parents, teachers, and students are pleased with CCAR thus far, others are concerned about an ideology called Critical Race Theory (CRT) that undergirds and informs anti-racism training, and which has been hotly debated in school systems across the country in recent months. Bills banning CRT-related topics from being taught in public schools have passed in five states and have been introduced in 17 more, as CRT has become a kind of shorthand for anti-racism curricula.

## What is CRT?

Critical Race Theory is an extension of Critical Theory, which was developed in the 1930s by German Marxist thinkers to describe a framework that examines how wealthy and powerful institutions profit at the expense of the poor and marginalized. Originally used to motivate revolution among workers oppressed by their overseers, Critical Theory was expanded by legal scholars in the 1980s to include issues of race. Modern-

day CRT posits that a class of mainly (European-descended) white peoples has organized society in the U.S. to exploit others and benefit themselves to the detriment of non-whites. As such, any racial imbalance in outcomes (e.g., educational achievement, law enforcement, social standing) is said to be the result of racism and discrimination.

"Anti-racism" is a mandate that flows from CRT—a call to action that dismisses the civil-rights-era aspiration to be "not racist" and instead requires active participation in reforming society and tearing down oppressive systems and structures. Ibram X. Kendi, the nation's leading advocate of the activist path and author of the book *How to Be an Antiracist*, says that a person's intent is irrelevant—only the effects of actions matter—so that inaction against a racist policy is also racist. Kendi argues in his writings that "the only remedy to past discrimination is present discrimination."

While Critical Race Theory itself (as a legal and philosophical model) is not being taught at Henley, CRT's "oppressive system" framing motivates the anti-racist activism that is integral to Henley's program. CRT is the "why" to anti-racism's "how," and learning to define anti-racism and to become an anti-racist person are explicit goals of the lessons.

"After the death of George Floyd last summer, we [teachers and staff] wanted to make space and not shy away from talking with kids about these issues," said Henley principal Beth Costa. "We had used the Courageous Conversations initiative from [racial sensitivity

**Chunk: What is Dominant Culture?**

**The DOMINANT CULTURE is...**  
...the group of people in society who hold the most power and are often (but not always) in the majority.

**The DOMINANT CULTURE is...**  
...in the U.S.: people who are white, middle class, Christian, and cisgender

**The DOMINANT CULTURE is...**  
...in charge of the institutions and have established behaviors, values, and traditions that are considered acceptable and the "norm" in our countries.

Jewell & Durand - Frances Lincoln Children's Books - 2020

COURTESY ACPS

**Chew: What's in the Box?**

Neurotypical      Cisgender male

Black      Non-binary folk      Able-bodied      Transgendered      Educated

Cisgender male

White      Muslim

Cisgender female

Upper-middle class      Jewish      Youth

Brown      Neurodiverse      Queer

Buddhist      Atheist

Folx with disabilities

Indigenous people of color of the global majority

Folx living in poverty

Non-Christian folk

Athletic

**DOMINANT CULTURE**

Slides from "Courageous Conversations About Race" curriculum for 8th grade, defining "dominant culture."

trainer and outside consultant] Glenn Singleton among our staff, and throughout the school year our diversity resource teachers worked with their colleagues at the other middle schools to develop racism Advisory lessons." (Advisory is Henley's homeroom/sharing time.)

Costa said she gave families updates on the program's progress at every PTO and "Coffee with Costa" parent meeting during the winter and spring. "By April, the eighth-grade curriculum was ready, but it wasn't appropriate for the younger grades, so I ended up writing the sixth and seventh grade curriculum myself," she said.

The sixth and seventh grade

curricula introduce and discuss concepts of identity, community, inclusion, culture, bias, prejudice, discrimination, and social justice, while the eighth-grade materials guide conversations about dominant culture, white privilege, and racism and anti-racist action. Many slides ask open-ended questions—What is bias? What is privilege?—interspersed with video clips, so the tenor of each class conversation relies heavily on how the teacher chooses to frame the issues and guide the discussion.

(The CCAR slides for all units can be found on the Henley website under the "Parents" tab.)

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## Courageous Conversations

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As the lessons began at Henley, parents began to raise questions about several aspects of the plan, including the way it was rolled out, the resources used to create it, and the choice of content to include.

### Initial objections

Some parents were surprised to hear that the CCAR course had been launched late in the school year and that they had not been given an opportunity to preview the slides and other materials (as they have been for other sensitive topics such as Family Life Education). “We had never really shared Advisory lessons in the past, so I didn’t make that leap,” said Costa. While some of the sixth and seventh grade slides were posted on Henley’s website, the curriculum for eighth graders was not posted until the course was over in June, despite multiple parent requests.

Other questions were raised about which texts were used to develop the CCAR curriculum. “I sent out the ‘scope and sequence’ document with a list of available outside resources at the bottom, and people misunderstood that as being a bibliography for the lessons,” said Costa. “I did not base my part of the curriculum on those resources.” The list contained books by Ibram Kendi as well as *This Book is Antiracist* by Tiffany Jewell, which was used as a reference by the Henley staff members who put together the eighth grade curriculum.

Parents also asked whether parts of the lessons’ content were school-appropriate. “One of the slides used the word ‘cis-gender,’ and families said it seemed like we were teaching [gender concepts]—that was our first red flag,” said Costa. “We are not teaching gender. An important distinction here is that we’re not teaching, we’re simply facilitating conversations. There’s no glossary of terms or textbook.”

To some parents, however, presenting a curriculum of lessons—accompanied by a list of definitions for terms such as bias, discrimination, and dominant culture (as appears at the

beginning of the eighth grade program)—seems like teaching, and they took their concerns to the School Board.

“I would encourage every parent to examine the curriculum slides and to read Glen Singleton’s *Courageous Conversations About Race*, on which they are based,” said parent Fotini Burns at the June 10 School Board meeting. “One eighth grade slide states that it is racist to say things like ‘we belong to the human race’ and ‘there are two sides to every story.’ Instead of teaching kids to judge people based on their actions and character, this curriculum strips them of their individual identity and lumps them into categories based on the color of their skin, gender, and sexual orientation.”

Singleton received \$15,000 from the county for a one-hour, required-attendance presentation to Albemarle teachers and staff in March that was, by contractual provision, not allowed to be recorded. A nationally recognized authority whose agency “develops racially conscious leaders” in various sectors across the U.S., Singleton stresses examining the role of “whiteness” in society and holds that conventions such as scientific, linear thinking and prioritizing written communication are artifacts of white culture.

Supporters of the CCAR curriculum see the lessons as a moral imperative. “We’re faced here with a moral decision, a civil rights decision,” said Jared Govan, father of three children in division schools, “one where we either address our complicated feelings about race, gender and sexuality, and religion for the good of our whole community, or we accept the status quo at the expense of those who are just gaining a voice, for those who have always struggled to be heard.”

### A pitched battle

Tensions increased in late May and early June, when two articles in the online publication Breitbart denounced Henley’s curriculum and featured anonymous quotes from angry Henley parents as well as quotes that seemed to be attributed to Costa, though she was not contacted for either story. The June 2 article implied that the principal told a student not to use the terms “ma’am”



Slide from "Courageous Conversations About Race" curriculum for 8th grade, a definition of racism provided by the Anti-Defamation League.

and "sir" when addressing teachers "because it is identifying a gender." "That happened at another school and they made it sound like it was me," said Costa. "It was not me."

Henley parent and former teacher Sarah K. Harris and others moved to support Henley administrators and teachers by circulating an online letter and petition encouraging the School Board to approve the CCAR curriculum for division-wide use and expansion. The letter particularly emphasized LGBTQIA+ rights and pointed to statistics on the heightened risk of suicide and self-harm among transgender youth whose transition is not recognized in school by peers and teachers. The petition garnered more than 700 signatures from county parents, teachers, and students.

Though gender equity plays a smaller role than issues of race in the CCAR materials as currently written, class discussions about gender were a flashpoint for some parents. At the May 27 School Board meeting, Marie Mierzejewski said that her son had been "ostracized" and had received "a terrible email from another student" after he expressed his family's religious view that there are only two genders. "We have felt very discriminated against for being Catholic," she said. "The message has been that if you hold that position ... then you are not welcome here."

Harris called that meeting "super eye-opening." "Hearing the parents during the meeting, I started to feel like they were part of a larger national conversation that didn't have anything to do with CCAR or Henley or ACPS," she said. "I wondered, how pervasive are these people's thoughts? When you say 'God created male and female,' where

does that leave the people who are non-binary or transgender? It's one thing to say 'my religious beliefs are XYZ,' but that isn't going to then drive or influence the conversations that are allowed to happen in the classroom."

Beyond issues of transparency and appropriateness of content, debate has focused more recently on the perceived tone and implications of the curricula. At the June 10 School Board meeting, 15 attendees spoke in favor of the CCAR program and 16 spoke against. Parents in the latter group started their own petition, which had received over 350 signatures by that meeting. The board heard from parents, teachers, and students, and the rhetoric was pointed at times.

"There are people on the right that don't like this model, and they're egged on by media outlets that are literally fascist," said parent and CCAR supporter Nathan Moore. "These people think it's perfectly fine for some kids to feel unsafe, just not theirs; for some kids to experience discrimination, just not theirs; for some kids to be pushed out of the resources that our society offers, just not theirs. They know they can't say those things in polite society, so instead they go on and on about process."

Henley parent Dr. Carlos Ibanez, an immigrant from Central America, described his concerns about "indoctrination" in a letter to the board that was read aloud. His alarm related to slides in the eighth grade curriculum that showed a box representing the "Dominant Culture" surrounded by 24 traits such as "Black," "Cisgender male," "Non-Christian folk," "Neurodiverse," and "Able-bodied," and asked

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## Courageous Conversations

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students which are inside and which are outside the box. The dominant culture in the U.S. is defined (on a previous slide) as people who are white, middle class, Christian, and cisgender.

“These courageous conversations that want to label my children as victims who are subservient to a privileged or more dominant race are not accurate,” said Ibanez. “Labeling our children as such would be, in our case, racist in nature. The entire concept of placing fault or blame because of race or gender violates the premises of individual rights, equal opportunity, and individual merit that we highly coveted when we came here. We have seen and strongly disagree with the eighth grade modules—forcing those on our child would amount to indoctrination as we know it.”

At an April 22 “Coffee with Costa” online forum, parents asked whether they could opt their child out of the CCAR Advisory lessons. Costa con-

firmed that they could, though Henley’s Diversity Resource Teacher Chris Booz quickly added that the curriculum will be “woven through all the classes in Albemarle county.” Though about 20 families opted out of the lessons in the spring, Costa herself later signed the pro-CCAR petition, which specifically asks the school board to deny parents the choice to opt their child out.

“No, I don’t think they should opt their child out,” said Costa in mid-June. “I think we can get this to a place where parents agree with their child talking about [these topics]. Racism exists, so [we need to talk about] how do we work against it.”

### Measures of Success

County diversity resource teachers will convene this summer to evaluate the CCAR pilot and expand it to all county middle schools for next fall. “A measure of our success will be qualitative, based on the feedback we get from kids,” said Costa. “We’ll look at what they say to questions like ‘Did you learn more about yourself and about

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Slide from “Courageous Conversations About Race” curriculum for 8th grade, describing white privilege.

each other?’ and ‘Do you understand the terms racism and anti-racism?’”

Many parents have asked for a “pause” in the CCAR lessons process to be allowed input into the content. “Where is the inclusive community discussion, where are the town halls, the surveys and comment periods?” said parent John Bryce. “Why are you excluding the very community you are supposed to serve? We ask that you take a time-out in the rushed rollout of this program to communicate with us transparently, to give us a chance to weigh in on what’s best for our children.”

Costa says she has absorbed

the criticism from wary parents and understands their concerns. “Some families tell me that when we say things like ‘white privilege’ or ‘dominant culture’ it makes kids feel bad,” she said. “I get it—I have two white boys. But the part we are trying to clarify is that these things exist. It is not about feeling bad about them, but about understanding that if you are white, it is important to empathize with the person whose experience is drastically different from yours.”

She has also considered the potential for unease among students identified as not part of the dominant culture. “We’ve

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# Courageous Conversations

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thought about what it would be like to be the one black student in Advisory talking about these things, and we have reached out to families to ask about this. When we talked to students of color about these lessons, their reaction varied from ‘I can’t wait to tell my story’ to ‘Have you thought about having [separate] Advisories just for students of color?’”

This prospect of increased self-segregation also concerned Crozet parent Sam Parks as he posed hypotheticals to the school board. “Will the students formed by this curriculum be more likely to treat others as unique individuals or instead see others as stand-ins for an identity group?” said Parks. “Will minority students emerge more ennobled and enabled to participate in American civic life or will they have had the expectation reinforced that the odds are stacked against them? Will teaching our white students that their skin color corresponds with privilege and [oppressor status] make them less or more vulnerable to the seductions of white nationalism?”

But others, like Harris, believe that not talking about differences in race and gender gives kids the impression that those topics are taboo. “To teach that we’re all the same, we’re all part of the human race, we’re colorblind—that is sending a really mixed message to children,” she said. “They do see differences, and we’re saying it’s okay to notice them, point them out and celebrate them, and that will lead to a better

understanding for these kids than trying not to talk about them.”

Albemarle School Board White Hall District representative David Oberg said he hadn’t heard about the Henley pilot until May when parents began to complain. “I’ve been appalled at the [ad hominem] attacks on board members and teachers, and I wish [parents] could give us a little bit of grace here,” he said. “It seems to me that there are much bigger fish to fry in a post-pandemic educational system—we’re just trying to keep our heads above water. Yes, I was irritated that I couldn’t find the [curriculum] online and I do think some of the slides are more provocative than they need to be, but this curriculum is not teaching that white people are oppressors.”

“Going first and going by ourselves [with the pilot program], of course I was going to make mistakes,” said Costa. “I just hope none of the mistakes were a deal-breaker for the good work that could come out of this pilot. I really want the middle ground—for groups on either side to meet in that perfect spot in the middle where you each feel safe saying what you believe.”

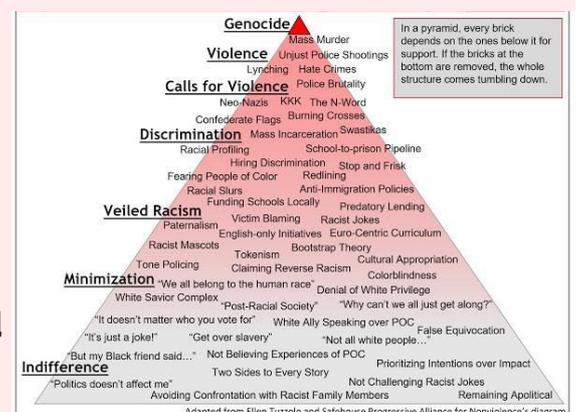
The opening slide for the eighth grade CCAR lessons features a quote by Kendi, which reads in part, “I want us to understand and recognize that our children are either going to learn racist or antiracist ideas. In other words, if we don’t actively protect them from this dangerous racist society, what do you think they will be taught?” For Albemarle county parents, both the premise of and the answer to this question will surely inspire further debate. ❁

COURTESY ACPS

Chew

**This list shows how our personal bias and our inaction toward racism can uphold a racist system.**

**Racism is not just the big things. It is the little things, too!**



Slide from Henley Middle School’s “Courageous Conversations About Race” curriculum for 8th grade.

# Missing the Mark: K-12 Enrollment Lower than Expected

BY LISA MARTIN

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At the September 9 School Board meeting, Albemarle school officials announced preliminary enrollment figures for the current school year that showed 622 fewer students have enrolled than were expected. “Our total enrollment is about 4% less than what we projected,” said division Chief Operating Officer Rosalyn Schmitt, as student enrollments did not bounce back to pre-pandemic levels. “We were assuming more students would return, particularly at the lower grades, but ultimately those assumptions did not pan out.”

The statistics generated no apparent interest among either the attendant board members or the Superintendent during the brief presentation—none asked questions or made comments. One question from the data might have at least elicited curiosity: where are those hundreds of children attending school now? Division officials have no clear response.

David Oberg, White Hall District School Board representative, gave his best guess after the meeting. “I know we had a lot of kids not register for Kindergarten because you can delay enrollment depending on when your birthday is, so a lot of them are distance learning,” he said. “I think middle school students [who dis-enrolled] went elsewhere or are home schooling. Look, we live in an area where people can afford private tutors and private school.”

One reason for the speculation may be that many parents

are not officially asked why they are leaving the public schools or where their children are going instead. “The reaction by the School Board to the data on the [dis-enrolled] kids leaving is really disconcerting,” said Chad Ciesil, parent of a current fourth and sixth grader whom he pulled from the school system this year. “We had nice conversations [about alternatives] with our children’s teachers at Brownsville, who were wonderful, but nobody from the larger school system inquired [where we planned to go]. The emails they sent in the spring only asked, are you coming back or not, yes or no?”

Is the division responsible for finding out where previously enrolled students have gone, and whether they are now being adequately educated? “I honestly have no idea. I can’t tell you,” said Oberg. “I mean, if a kid doesn’t show up, I suspect that the principal will call the family.”

The answer, legally, appears to be yes. Virginia state law (sections 22.1-260 and 261) requires that each public school must report to the division superintendent both the enrolled and “not enrolled” children for that school’s jurisdiction, along with the name and address of each student’s parent or guardian, within the first ten days of the school year. The division’s attendance officer must then use these lists and other sources to compile a master list of students who are not enrolled in any school and are not exempt from school attendance, and follow up with each student’s family.

When asked about this data



Albemarle school officials announced preliminary enrollment figures for the current school year that showed 622 fewer students have enrolled than were expected.

for Albemarle County Public Schools (ACPS), the division’s Strategic Communications Officer Phil Giaramita demurred. “We are only required to keep [records of] the homeschool enrollments and requests for religious exemption,” he said, “and there really is not a division-wide attendance officer.” The School Board’s attorney, Ross Holden, did not respond to a request for comment about the legal requirements.

## Where Are They Now

“Missing” students are a nationwide issue, and state education departments polled by the industry publication Education Week reported a loss of more than 1.4 million enrolled students during the 2020-21 (pandemic) school year. Virginia was among 15 states with the largest drop—a -3.5% enrollment change (-4.7% in the elementary grades not including kindergarten). In Albemarle County, total actual

enrollment dropped by 824 students during the pandemic last year. As county schools reopened this fall with in-person instruction for all grades, school officials predicted that enrollment levels would fully rebound, but the division netted back only 19% of the deficit.

“That projection was made in October of last year,” said Schmitt, “and we had to do some unique things given the circumstances. But then we didn’t go back to school in Stage 4 until March, and we didn’t make a commitment to return to five days [for this school year] until May. So, we’re hearing anecdotally that a lot of students who were in private school last year had to commit in January and February, and there was still some uncertainty about what our delivery method would be,” so those children stayed away.

Schmitt gave other explanations for the projection miss.

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# Enrollment

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“Homeschooling still seems higher than usual, and I think there are a couple of reasons for that,” she said. “Some families that elected to homeschool last year really liked it, so they are continuing. Others, I think, are still cautious because of the pandemic. So yes, we anticipated there would be a bounce back, and we still do—I just don’t think it’s happening as quickly as we thought in October of last year.”

Asked about the student data required by law, Schmitt said it’s available. “It’s just not in one place,” she said. “Each school has that information of who went where, and we will do that analysis when things settle down a little bit. I think as we turn the corner toward next year’s budget season and those projections, we are going to need to know where kids are right now. Last fall we sent a survey to those [families who] left the division to try to get a sense of whether they were planning to come back, but it’s hard to get a good response rate when they’re not with us anymore.”

## Going Private

“You’d think they’d want to know where are our kids going, and why,” said Brandi Clifford, parent of three school-age kids in Albemarle’s western district. “I’ve heard that from lots of parents—it’s like nobody even missed us.” Clifford and her husband decided to send their middle schooler to Covenant School this year, and have been surprised at the lack of division interest in the reasons for their (and others’) exit. “I don’t think they really care—they’ve got bigger fish to fry at this point.”

In Albemarle, kindergarten enrollment was 12% below projections, which division officials say is due to families delaying their children’s start by a year (though kindergarten registration is required for kids who are five years old by September 30 unless their parents request an exemption). Grades K-2 saw steep declines from projections, followed closely by sixth and seventh grades with -7.6% and -7% variances, respectively. Among western district schools, Brownsville Elementary was -14% below projections, and Henley Middle School had the largest decline among county middle schools with a -7.4% difference (down 67 students).

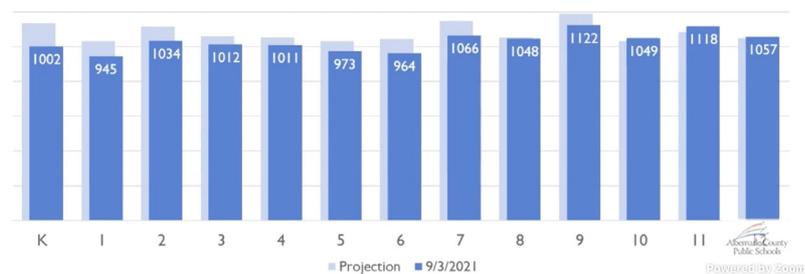
Clifford says that last year’s fourth and fifth graders got the short end of the return-to-school stick last spring when the K-3 students went back four days per week and grades 6-12 had synchronous or in-person instruction four days per week. “Through the entire school year, our fifth grader averaged only 12 hours of education a week,” she said. “Our schools have gotten so far away from having any sort of traditional curriculum in terms of just having textbooks, that my husband and I would constantly be trying to help her at home but, literally, we had no materials to reference.

“Our students missed out on so many learning opportunities, and I didn’t feel confident that Albemarle had a plan for how they would make up the learning loss in important areas like grammar, reading, math—skills that they need for life,” said Clifford. At that point they decided to try Covenant, as did at least seven other families from Henley Middle School’s district. “My husband and I are products of public school—never has private school been a

ACPS

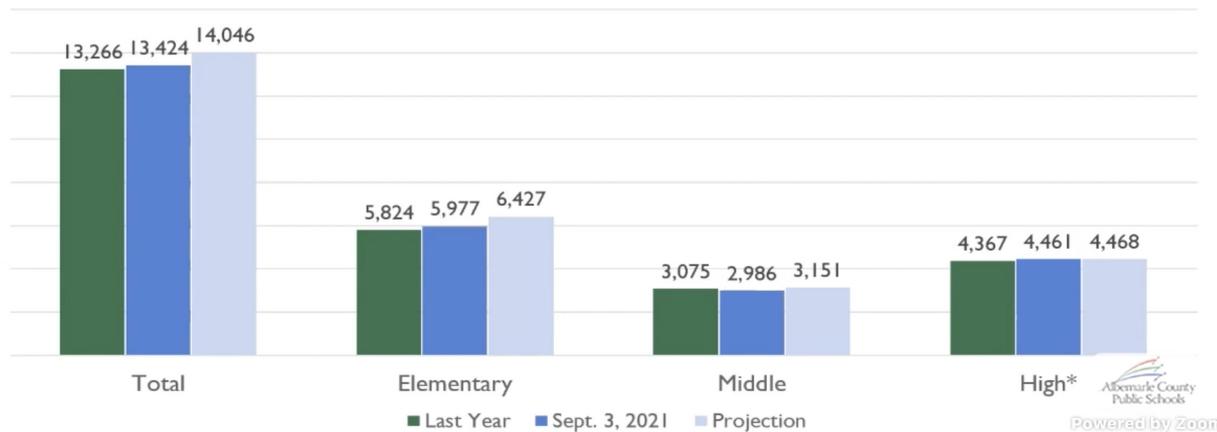


10<sup>TH</sup> DAY ENROLLMENT K-12 BY GRADE LEVEL



ACPS Chief Operating Officer Rosalyn Schmitt presents data on reduced enrollment this year by grade level and by school type (above right).

ACPS

10<sup>TH</sup> DAY ENROLLMENT K-12 SUMMARY

consideration for us. This isn't something that we thought we'd ever do."

### Close to Home

According to the division homeschooling data, the number of students who are formally homeschooled (which requires filing annual notifications with ACPS) jumped 17%, from 661 last year to 773 this year. While 90 students from last year's pool are no longer homeschooling, 202 of the 773 are newly homeschooling this year. Religious exemptions (included in the total) increased from 22 to 32 this year.

Megan Bailey, who has taught music at CHEC, the Charlottesville-based Community Homeschool Enrichment Center, for the last five years, said that she saw several dozen families join the ranks of homeschoolers during the pandemic and that interest remains high. "Many people came to us last year because they couldn't stand the virtual instruction, and decided to homeschool because they were already doing it anyway, right?" she said. "But one of the big things that many of the new families who are sticking around this year have said is, 'I had no idea it was going to go this smoothly.' They are amazed at what their kids are able to learn."

Beyond the registered homeschooling figures, ACPS cannot say for certain how (or if) the rest of the dis-enrolled students are being educated, and the likelihood of those students returning is difficult to estimate. Division officials suggested that the Gazette could survey private schools to find out whether their enrollments have increased due to the public school exodus. While local private schools declined to provide information

publicly about applications and admissions this year, Field School Head Charles Skipper said his school predicted an uptick in interest and was prepared for it.

"We did add some additional staff and a couple of extra classrooms," said Skipper, "so that we could maintain distancing and enroll a few more kids. We're at our historical high for enrollment right now." He said it seems unlikely that local private schools could have absorbed hundreds of the students who dis-enrolled last year. "I can't speak for the other private schools, but I think most of us were pretty close to [maximum enrollment] already." He also suggested that there might be a significant group of students who liked aspects of online education and have decided to simply stay home via state or national online programs, again under the radar of ACPS observation.

Beyond concerns over academic learning loss and return-to-school arrangements, families voiced opposition last spring to elements of a new division policy on transgender student treatment and an anti-racism curriculum introduced at Henley. Parents like Ciesil say that frustration with the school administration has been an ongoing issue, apart from the challenges of COVID, that has driven them to consider other options.

"I believe we all share the same overall goals, but a large percentage of parents feel that their concerns are being disregarded," said Ciesil. "We see a School Board that has no interest in truly having a conversation about these significant policy issues. It's hard to even characterize it as resistance [from the School Board and administra-

tion], it's just a wall of not even wanting to hear us, and it's really troubling. You end up losing confidence, you lose trust. The monolith of opinion on the School Board, the fact that there's no actual diversity of thought, is also disconcerting."

School Board member Oberg does not believe that parent anger over the division's handling of policy rollouts has anything to do with lower enrollment numbers. "No, I don't believe that," he said. "What I can tell you is that there were a number of parents who showed concern, but that number was extraordinarily small compared to the size of Henley. Is it possible that there were a lot of people who were [concerned but] not talking? Sure. But the more logical answer [for lower enrollments] is the correct one—it's Covid."

### Diminishing Returns

A significant portion of the county school division's budget is provided by state funding on a per pupil basis, and in a typical year those funds would be cut in the fall based on declining enrollment. However, Virginia inserted a "hold harmless" clause into this year's budget that allows school systems to keep all budgeted money, even though the current year allocations were based on pre-pandemic enrollment levels. School systems are hoping the state will do the same next year. "It's my understanding that many divisions are in a similar position [as Albemarle], and so all will be advocating for the extension of that clause [for next year's cycle as well]," said Schmitt.

Division officials like Schmitt and Oberg believe that, no matter their reasons for leaving, families will soon transfer their

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## Enrollment

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students back. “I suspect that next year when kids are inoculated and we’re getting back to some semblance of normalcy, those numbers will go back up,” said Oberg. “I think people are leaving because of Covid, and when Covid solidifies, and it will, we’re going to figure out a new normal.”

Ciesil is more circumspect. “We gave our decision [to move our children to a different school] an incredible amount of thought,” he said. “There are so many pieces to it—the academics, the community, their friend groups, the social/emotional element—we didn’t make the decision quickly or reflexively. The same process would have to happen for us to decide to come back, and a lot of things would need to change.” ❁