

# Needed funding for public schools

In this era of bitter partisan divide in Richmond, moments of consensus on important priorities should be celebrated.

This is especially true in the realm of public schools, which have become a battleground in national debates over racial justice and gender identity. Some of the angriest voices have suggested that parents abandon public schools entirely, and even that legislators use the threat of defunding as the stick for rooting out divisive instruction in the classroom.

Quite the opposite is happening. Gov. Glenn Youngkin and legislative leadership in both parties are proposing historic investments in school construction and teacher pay, both sorely needed if Virginia is to remain competitive with other states in educating tomorrow's workforce.

Some details will need to be negotiated in the weeks ahead, but significant funding for both school construction and teacher pay raises appears certain.

House Republicans, who form the majority in that chamber, have proposed \$2 billion over the next two years for a school construction loan rebate program that would cover the cost of 80 new school buildings statewide. That's four times more than even former Gov. Ralph Northam included in his two-year budget proposal in December.

House Republicans also have recommended 4% salary increases for teachers and staff each of the next two years, plus a 1% bonus. Northam's proposal, favored in the Democratic-controlled Senate, calls for 5% raises each year.

Youngkin is on board with both school construction funding and teacher pay raises, which would help close a current wide gap between what Virginia K-12 teachers earn and the national average.

Debates over equity and inclusion will surely continue, but on more important priorities, both parties have sent clear signals that they are more committed than ever to first-rate public schools. We applaud them.

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# **Class of '22 shows spunk**

**M**artin Luther King and Mahatma Gandhi would surely be amused by the cause, but we give some disgruntled high school seniors in Suffolk Public Schools credit for organizing to express their displeasure.

In case you missed it in Wednesday's edition, four Lakeland High School students were miffed because administrators reneged on a pledge to honor a longstanding tradition of letting seniors wrap up classes a week earlier than underclassmen. This year, that would have been June 3.

Instead, seniors were told they'd need to keep attending classes through June 10, the day before they receive their diplomas.

So they started an online petition that quickly garnered 700 signatures from students and their supporters.

"We want to show that we have been wronged for not having the same opportunity as other seniors," Lakeland senior Alexa Snyder told the News-Herald's Rachel Austin.

We commend their spunk, even as we doubt their odds of success.

Anthonette J. Ward, community engagement officer for Suffolk Public Schools, explained that SPS' accreditation by the Virginia Department of Education could be jeopardized if seniors don't complete a required 990 "clock hours."

Administrators aren't likely to lose accreditation to avoid hurting students' feelings.

Even as we applaud the petitioners for making their voices heard, we confess to a chuckle when the students said they were motivated by lessons on "civil disobedience" in government class.

Every generation thinks younger generations is too "soft," and some old-timers in our readership have to be shaking their heads over the Class of 2022's source of outrage. After all, their great-grandparents walked five miles to school – uphill both ways, as the joke goes. Today, high-schoolers are whining over an extra week of classes before they can get on with the rest of lives.

It's not exactly as noble as protesting world hunger or systemic racism, but we agree with Ward, who said administrators "applaud our students for advocating for themselves."

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# Crime wave is a crisis

Suffolk Police Chief Al Chandler is new enough to his post that he doesn't bear full or even primary responsibility for the rash of violent crime and death that has engulfed the city in 2022.

In fact, we give him credit for several important actions that, in time, should help restore order.

That said, the rookie chief must choose his words carefully during what is, by any measure, a crisis for Suffolk, especially its downtown area, which is on the cusp of greatness but could blow that potential if the current crime wave continues much longer.

Chandler, a veteran lawman but new to his role as a community's top cop, will learn quickly that leadership requires earning and maintaining the confidence of the citizenry you serve. That means

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owning a problem, not minimizing it.

In a recent interview, Chandler seemed to downplay the surge in violent crime this year, when homicides are on pace to more than double the six recorded in each of the last two years.

"We've always had gun violence as long as I've been here," the chief told a reporter. "We are seeing it at a higher-than-normal level, definitely, but I guess I try to be careful not to sensationalize it because the more people hear about it, the more people look to hear about it. It's the topic of the day."

He continued: "The numbers are higher, but it's not earth-shattering. But, of course, any life that is lost is a tragedy."

Actually, the current crisis is quite shattering, both for the families of those killed or maimed and, significantly, the many law-abiding residents who are living in fear, scared to leave their homes lest they be robbed or walk into the path of random gunfire.

We were struck during the last City Council meeting by the heartfelt words of a downtown resident, a recent transplant who sang Suffolk's praises for attracting her here in the first place but added that safety concerns might soon drive her family out. She, like we, noted the less-than-comforting words from the city's police chief, who's essentially telling the citizenry to chill out.

Chandler would be better served to accept the crisis for what it is and speak forthrightly to the community about solutions. He's got much to talk about, including installation of portable cameras in hot spots like the intersection of Saratoga and West Washington streets, gunshot detection technology, and special cameras that capture images of the rear of vehicles. We commend his proactiveness.

To his credit, he's also been quick to talk candidly about challenges, including the enormous time officers are having to devote to mental health calls and a broader manpower shortage due to unfilled patrol slots.

We encourage Chandler to continue to beat the drum for changes, likely by the General Assembly, in the way government and society manage the growing mental-health crisis. The current burden on police proves again that the state is treating mental health as a criminal problem, when the solution is better and more widely available treatment.

The chief must also press the City Council for better wages, benefits and incentives for his officers in a difficult labor economy that shows no signs of waning.

We continue to have high hopes for Chandler in his important role. Aligning his words with his actions will position him to not just endure the current crisis but make Suffolk safe again.