

# 'There's no playbook': Amherst schools' chief reflects on pandemic, division's challenges and successes

Justin Faulconer

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Amherst County Public Schools Superintendent Rob Arnold (from left), Sen. Mark Peake, Principal Derek Adam and Del. Ronnie Campbell speak during their first stop in the cafeteria during a tour of Central Elementary School in Amherst on Dec. 14, 2020.

Kendall Warner, The News & Advance

**W**hen Rob Arnold started his post as Amherst County Public Schools' superintendent on July, 1, 2018, the county was in recovery mode from a tornado that devastated parts of the Elon community several months prior.

Just less than two years into the position, a new storm engulfed the division, county and country unlike any seen before: COVID-19. And the effects are still very much in play on a daily basis.

As the pandemic continues to disrupt everyday life in the county, Arnold is in a six-month stretch of preparing for retirement while keeping the division of nearly 4,000 students and roughly 700 employees as well positioned as it can be for his eventual successor.

"There's no playbook with what we dealt with the past two years," Arnold said.

Arnold recently announced his intent to step down July 1 after three decades in public education, including the past four years in Amherst County. In a recent interview, he said the Amherst community understands the value of good public education and supporting their children.

"You give a lot to public education if you're going to do it right," said Arnold of stepping away. "After three decades, it's time to do something else. I think it's the right time for me and my family."

## **An ‘unprecedented’ challenge**

One of Arnold’s most common words used in 2020 while addressing the community about the pandemic was “unprecedented.” In mid-March of that year, schools were ordered closed. The division set up a remote learning plan and bus outreach for meals to get children through while planning for the 2020-21 school year that consisted of a hybrid model of in-person and at-home learning, with the Amherst Remote Academy serving more than 30% of students.

The Amherst school division had national exposure on the Fox News channel in 2020 as Arnold appeared on a program explaining the school system’s digital response, challenges and solutions in a rural county. He held Zoom calls with the community and posted videos on social media explaining the schools’ plan while holding the position that in-person learning is the most effective way to serve students and should be strived for as much as possible while maintaining safety.

“Obviously the last couple of years have been hard on everybody and it makes education look a lot different and people have had to adjust and deal with that and they’ve done that well,” Arnold said. “I do worry moving forward about educators.”

In the first months of the pandemic that brought many changes, including the Amherst County High School’s “commencement in cars” graduation parade where students and families socially distanced in vehicles, Arnold said he asked anyone who listened about the need for grace in a difficult period.

As schools returned to full-time, five-day-a-week learning this year, COVID-19 cases continued to skyrocket and a whole new slate of pressures faced the division.

“In general, folks have lost patience with one another ... and I urge the community and remind folks educators are doing a great job and grace goes a long way,” Arnold said. “As far as community is concerned, I just thank them for accepting me and my family, being engaged in the process. One of my goals was to have the school system more engaged in the community. I think success in schools is reflective of the community.”

Before the pandemic hit, ACPS had put a comprehensive plan — a roadmap for the division — in place, and Arnold said efforts are underway to pick that back up. He said all he has done in the past few years has been to help children be successful, including pushing for more internet access availability and making learning at home more accessible.

“When they can’t come to school, I’m going to figure out a way to make school come to them,” Arnold said of recent strides made in broadband expansion. “That’s why I pushed so hard for that, because it benefits the kids.”

The division also has provided hotspots for families struggling with internet availability.

“That’s not a forever fix either,” Arnold said. “The real fix is fiber across the county and that’s just one of those things that takes a while because the work needs to be done.”

In February last year, the division also was instrumental in rolling out vaccines, first to division staff and later the entire community. Arnold said in an interview at the time the vaccine distribution was part of the county doing its part to in trying to get back to normal as much as possible.

While the return to full-time learning this year brought many challenges, Arnold said he is proud the schools have been open to children.

“We need to be in school,” said Arnold. “Everybody at this point recognizes we need to be open for children.”

Schools had to shut down for a week less than a month into the new school year as COVID-19 case counts became too much. Just more than a month earlier, the county’s school board approved a plan to make face masks optional this year as Arnold recommended having a trigger point in place to reinstate them if cases grew, which they eventually did.

The school board’s decision was later undone by then-Gov. Ralph Northam and is coming back up for discussion with Gov. Glenn Youngkin taking office and issuing an executive order to make masks optional for students.

After changes in the state legislature that tilted the majority to Democrat in 2020 and 2021, Amherst County School Board meetings felt the effects with more time spent discussing policies coming down from Richmond.

“It became much more politicized, and unfortunately it put schools in the crosshairs when schools weren’t looking for that,” Arnold said of policy matters and legislation the division has dealt with. “These were things that happened in Richmond and all we were trying to do is open the doors of schools and that was a frustration. Away from all of it, what we’re trying to do is educate kids. Regardless of political beliefs, we can agree we can work for best interests of children.”

Arnold has said the division doesn’t teach critical race theory, a hot topic during the gubernatorial election of 2021, and during a meeting with county officials in June spent much time defending equity and social justice lessons that were rolled out in schools. A majority of school board members felt more review and vetting of the material was necessary.

### **Strides made in budgeting, CTE**

Arnold’s tenure has marked a welcomed change: less contentious budgets. One of his goals has been a more smooth budgeting process and two factors positively affected it, he said: more students enrolled in the division and increases in state funding.

“The state last year got back to pre-recession dollars invested in public education,” Arnold said. “Now there’s a lot of catch-up that needs to be done in terms of that investment.”

He said often the conversation in budgeting is what a locality and its governing body can or can’t do with education, but he feels the state has not invested enough in recent years while its finances grew.

“We need to turn our attention to the state politics and demand the state invest in public education,” Arnold said. “I can’t state it any more clearly: Our future is relying on well-educated citizenry. And public education educates the most kids. And if you want to make an investment, you invest in those things. There’s an increase [in state funding] this year. It needs to be sustained.”

He said the teacher shortage in the county, Virginia and U.S. is magnified if salaries aren’t competitive. Each budget he has recommended in the past several years has had a pay increase and he will bring another one forward for board consideration this year, he said.

Another achievement he's proud of is the strides made in career and technical education, he said. The CTE Regional Academy started recently and allows local high schools to pool resources in partnership with Central Virginia Community College to give students more opportunities. It benefits the local workforce and helps students secure employment directly after high school, he said.

"When we can give them opportunities to work toward a legitimate career – these types of jobs are careers our students can access," Arnold said. "I can't stress enough how important it is and I'm very thankful for our work. Our partners at CVCC have been amazing to make this a reality."

Arnold won't be serving when an addition and renovation to Amherst County High School gets in full swing and reaches completion, but it is a project he is pleased is moving forward. The Amherst County Board of Supervisors has authorized financing \$19.4 million toward the project and Arnold is highly pleased.

"It's something long overdue," Arnold said. "... I certainly think our children and our staff in that building deserve that."

Abby Thompson, the Amherst County School Board's chair, during the board's most recent meeting publicly recognized Arnold for his service. Thompson said Arnold is appreciated and the board wishes him the best in his future endeavors.

"You dedicated your whole life to education," Thompson said to Arnold. "So thank you for that dedication. Thank you for giving of your time here in Amherst County."

# Board looks at teacher shortage trends

Justin Faulconer

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**T**rends on a declining pool of job applicants in Amherst County Public Schools, capital needs for the division's facilities and a breakdown of student enrollment and federal spending in response to the COVID-19 pandemic were highlights of the county school board's March 3 retreat.

More than half of the daylong meeting was focused on a deeper look at the division's proposed \$63.2 million budget for fiscal year 2022-23, which Superintendent Rob Arnold unveiled the previous week. The budget includes a 6.5% pay raise for all division employees and, if passed, the division still would need to pay 3.5% toward a compensation hike next year in meeting the state's raise for Standards of Quality-related positions.

Arnold said no school system in Virginia can operate solely on SOQ positions the state funds, so local matches are needed to make them across the board.

The budget planned includes level funding from the Amherst County Board of Supervisors, which is \$13.9 million, a figure the county has been paying since the 2018-19 school year.

"We rely heavily in Amherst County on state funding," Arnold said. "If we don't ask any more money, [the county] is in essence paying 10% more than required by law to do so."

As the schools budget increases and the county's stays level in regards to funding public education, Arnold said, the county is getting "dangerously close" to not meeting the local match. Next year likely will bring a request for more county funding toward the schools, he said.

"They might by law have to give us more money," Arnold said.

The 6.5% proposed raise is the highest compensation requested since at least the 2008-09 school year, the first year listed on an informational sheet presented to school board members during the retreat examining a history of pay hikes. In six of those years since 2008-09, no raises were given and the division has made up much ground in upping employees' compensation, Arnold said.

The board also looked at how the division's pay stands up against the surrounding counties of Nelson, Appomattox, Bedford and Campbell and the city of Lynchburg.

"We'll be much more competitive regionally from a salary standpoint," Arnold said of how pay stacks up in the region among divisions in 2022-23. "Quite frankly, 6.5% might not be enough for what we asked our staff to do over the past two years. I know money is not everything but it's something. We need to show them we value them."

Amherst County School Board Chair Abby Thompson said teachers have left for other localities because of better pay and Amherst has to come close to matching Nelson County, which has a higher starting salary range. Most teachers don't want to move and if the division is close to that range they have more of a reason to stay, she said.

Bus drivers in Amherst on average will get an 8.9% raise, according to Jim Gallagher, director of human resources. He explained drivers' pay will range from 6.5% to 14%. Cafeteria staff also is set to get a 12% raise, which is required because minimum wage is going up, according to Gallagher.

Gallagher also presented figures on the applicant pool trend for "hard to fill" positions in the past five years. Those positions include elementary, special education, secondary math, secondary English and secondary science. Overall, the division had 247 applicants in 2015-16 and consistently dropped each year to a low of 70 in 2020, according to the data.

The figure hovered just over 100 in the following two school years and heading into the 2022-23 year is at 12 as far as prospective applicants for those five areas, the data shows.

"We've not had a year like this," Gallagher said. "The applicant pool continues to trend downward."

He said the trend emphasizes the need to promote the school division and invest in raises.

Thompson asked what more the board can do to help attract more teachers beyond higher pay and noted the importance of valuing educators.

"I think we all have a role in making sure our teachers and staff feels supported," said Thompson.

She added of the current status of only 12 job applicants for the upcoming year: "This number is disturbing to me."

Arnold said with four months left before the new fiscal year he doesn't expect more than 100 applicants. He said the division has done a good job responding to the teacher and staff shortage, a trend that extends well beyond the county, and emphasized the need to stay ahead of the curve.

"The need is so much greater than what's out there," Arnold said. "It's crazy."

The draft budget also includes \$162,572 in support stipends for intensive positions and \$159,591 for three proposed added positions: a teacher to head a new cosmetology offering at Amherst County High School, an early childhood teacher and increasing a part-time Virginia Preschool Initiative post to full time.

Each year students request cosmetology when discussing career goals with high school counselors and the new program can accommodate 10 students in the 2022-23 with expanded offerings in upcoming years, according to school officials.

The budget is built on a projected enrollment of 3,838 students but Amherst schools will not lose money from the state if that figure isn't met. For the past two years during the pandemic the division has had "hold harmless" provisions that Arnold said serve as welcomed protection.

The board also looked at long-range capital improvement project (CIP) needs and ways to spend \$2.4 million for school construction that may come from the state, depending on what version of the final state budget is approved. The division is committing \$8 million toward a new auditorium and renovation project at the high school, with the bulk of that money coming from federal Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Stability (CARES) Act spending and \$1 million from the division's CIP. A full breakdown of CARES Act spending, including 25 contracted positions through that source of money, also was presented during the retreat.

"That's going to be a significant shift," Thompson said of preparing for when CARES Act money runs out.

Board member Eric Orasi voiced concern about rising gas prices in recent days and its fiscal effects on the division. Assistant Superintendent William Wells said the school system is bracing for higher fuel costs in the budget. Amherst schools also is set to receive two new electric buses in 2022-23.

The division is awaiting final state figures and can adjust by spending more money if it is awarded or deciding what to remove. A percentage point of a salary increase totals \$390,000.

Arnold is scheduled to present the division budget to the board of supervisors March 22.

# Superintendent, schools' retirees honored for 'endless impact' on students

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Rob Arnold retired from his role as superintendent of Amherst County Public Schools after four years in the position. Among the highlights of Arnold's tenure is steering the county schools through the many challenges of COVID-19 from 2020 to 2022.

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Hugs, laughter and tears filled Sweet Briar College's Prothro dining room on May 19 as Amherst County Public Schools celebrated its staff retirees.

Superintendent Rob Arnold, who is stepping into retirement June 30 after four years of steering the Amherst school system, was among the honorees to take a seat in a rocking chair, a gift educators in the county traditionally receive when they leave. His 30-year career, most of it in Campbell County Public Schools, has included a gamut of teaching, coaching and administration roles that led to him taking on the Amherst superintendent role in July 2018.

Jim Gallagher, director of human resources for ACPS, said the division benefited greatly from Arnold's leadership and described him as the most child-focused leader he's ever known. Chief Academic Officer Dana Norman also recalled her first meeting with Arnold shortly after he was hired four years ago.

"I knew right then he was a man on a mission," Norman said.

Norman said he recalled Arnold's first statement to her in wanting her to become the best educational leader she could be and having a passion for learning, a love for students and knowing your "why" for being in education.

"He was like this squirrel. He could not sit still. I'm amazed he's sitting still now," said Norman, exchanging smiles with Arnold seated a few feet away. "He reminded me of a little kid who could not wait any longer to get started. He was already driving me crazy."



Arnold opens up opportunities for all around him and moves about 100 miles a minute with ideas constantly popping out of his head at a time, Norman said. She spoke of his “whiteboard moments” and following him around with Teresa Crouch, a retired chief financial officer for the division who also was among the honorees during the ceremony, in his first days of leading the division and thinking of the extensive work to make it reality.

“We’re just along for the ride,” Norman said of senior staff under Arnold’s leadership.

She spoke of Arnold’s extensive work in establishing a strategic plan for the division, including a half year of constant meet-and-greets in the Amherst community, developing the division’s first “every child, every day” podcast, live-streaming messages online and broadening the schools’ social media platform. Norman also praised Arnold’s work to bolster career and technical educational offerings and helping establish the CTE Academy with Central Virginia Community College.

“He led the charge because he understands the importance of preparing every child to be life-ready,” Arnold said.

Norman credited Arnold for four years of developing budgets for the division that were smooth compared to years prior and addressed the division’s needs without receiving additional funding from the Amherst County Board of Supervisors in each of those years.

School administrators also described Arnold as a leader of integrity who stepped up in a major way when COVID-19 hit and drastically changed education.

Assistant Superintendent William Wells, who is set to succeed Arnold as the next superintendent, said Arnold was well-prepared for the many effects of getting the division through school closures, remote learning, a hybrid school year in 2020-21 and being instrumental in setting up a vaccine distribution clinic at Amherst County High School that over the course of several months gave more than 5,000 vaccine doses to the community.

“The pandemic threw us all a curve ball that no one could have anticipated,” said Wells. “But through his leadership we came out better than many other school divisions.”

Arnold also worked extensively to expand broadband service to students during a time it was more needed than ever and appeared on Fox News channel programming describing in detail the division’s response to meeting the digital divide in a rural county.

Joshua Neighbors, director of student services, said it was amazing to see the clarity of the division’s path in such a trying time through Arnold’s focus that prioritized what was best for the students during the pandemic. The school system distributed thousands of Chromebooks, televised hours and hours of instructional learning through a partnership with WSET-13 and “made national headlines in the process,” Neighbors said.

The school system could not have navigated those times as successfully without Arnold’s leadership, Neighbors said. “There was a feeling in those first six months we were ahead of the game.”

Natalia Cecil, Arnold's assistant and clerk of the Amherst County School Board, has been a springboard for Arnold and his "Diet Pepsi supplier," Neighbors said. Cecil praised Arnold for his vision, passion and love for children who removed barriers to their learning.

"He goes above and beyond to do what is best for students," said Cecil, adding: "His drive is contagious...he truly embodies his 'why.'"

She said though the division only had him four years, he served during a time when it needed him most and personally thanked him for helping her discover the power of her voice as an educator.

"You have been an integral part of our educational journey," Cecil said to Arnold.

Abby Thompson, the school board's chair, said all the retirees honored are a special group of people who made a meaningful contribution to Amherst schools who through various roles all touched the lives of children differently.

"Your impact is endless," Thompson said.

In looking across the room she said educators and staff serving four years to 43 years who built relationships that will be remembered for a lifetime.

"That's a large range of difference," Thompson said, referring to combined years of the retirees' service to Amherst.

Each retiree made Amherst an effective and dynamic division every day, especially during the past two years that she described as some of the most difficult in public education and society.

"Thank you for helping us through those tough times," Thompson said.

She thanked the retirees for their patience, perseverance and positivity.

"Each and every one of you left Amherst County Public Schools better than when you found it," Thompson said.

The following includes all Amherst schools' retirees who were honored during the ceremony.

### **Vicki Owen**

A certified nursing assistant instructor for Amherst County High School, Owen was honored by Derrick Brown, the school's principal. Brown said he has a long history with Owen, who did his parents' Lamaze class and also taught it to him when he was ready to become a parent.

"She's had a huge impact on our community," Brown said. "This woman really does love kids."

Brown said in jest Owen helped the school's tardy numbers go up because students just wanted to be around her. Owen said it took just more than seven hours to take down photos of students on her wall.

"All those represent a life that was impacted in a way," said Brown. "She's always gone up and beyond to help our students."

Brown said Owen even blew out a knee dancing at a pep rally.

"This nurse will do anything for kids," he added.

He thanked her for being a beautiful, uplifting colleague and jokingly asked her to take it easy on her knees with the dancing in her retirement.

### **Elizabeth Mays**

A child nutrition program assistant, Mays retired after 42 years at Amherst Elementary School. Kim Klein, supervisor of child nutrition, said Mays started as a substitute cafeteria worker.

“Her love of children was evident if you ever went to Amherst Elementary School to observe her in the cafeteria,” said Klein. “It was her love for them that kept her going.”

Klein said Mays on a regular basis, during extreme heat, made sure students had access to meals when schools were closed during the pandemic.

“There’s not a job in the cafeteria she wouldn’t do,” Klein said.

### **Cheryl Peters**

An Amherst Elementary teacher, Peters was in education for 23 years, 15 of them in Amherst County schools, said Jennifer Crews, principal of Amherst Elementary.

Crews said Peters is the true definition of selfless, has had profound impact on the community and provides an uplifting smile when it’s needed every day.

“I’m better for knowing her,” said Crews. “Her friendship has meant the most... She builds bridges in her profession. She possesses a true gift for seeing what a child is and recognizes what they can be.”

Crews thanked Peters for embodying the mission of every child every day with the utmost sacrifice.

### **Arlene Mays**

An instructional assistant at Amherst Middle School, Mays was honored by Kelly Holmes, the school’s principal. Holmes said Mays made others feel appreciated, loved and leaving the impression, “I just met an angel.” A student one day told him out of nowhere, “I love Mrs. Mays,” and it’s a testament to the wonderful person she is, he said.

“To have a student say that about you is the ultimate accomplishment, the goal we all have,” said Holmes. “She’s done amazing things at Amherst Middle School.”

### **Renee Dolder**

A reading specialist at Central Elementary School the past six years, Principal Derek Adam said Dolder taught remotely in the 2020-21 school year.

“In a world where everything flipped like that, Renee was the kind of person that ran with it,” said Adam. “She pushed out of her comfort zone to help students. She was always willing to challenge herself to learn and to grow. She was always pushing the envelope for herself and her students.”

Dolder cared about students, wanted them to decide and Adam said he knows parents will miss her.

“It takes people like Renee that I will always learn from to help me become a better educator,” said Adam, adding to Dolder: “You kept it real. I will argue I can never replace my Renee.”

### **Carolyn Tyree**

An instructional assistant at Central Elementary, Adam said Tyree has been with the school 32 years, a year more than he's been alive. He said he will miss her jams, jellies and prayers.

"It struck me how much students love you," Adam told Tyree. "You have left a legacy at Central."

### **Veronica Tuggle**

A teacher at Elon Elementary School for 24 years who previously taught for more than a decade in Lynchburg, Tuggle wanted to follow in the footsteps of family members by teaching, said Kim Scott, Elon Elementary principal.

Scott described Tuggle as a seasoned educator, a survivor, a champion in so many ways and the epitome of an educator.

"This lady is like a Superwoman," Scott said.

### **Michelle Barnes**

A Madison Heights Elementary School teacher, Barnes worked tirelessly the past 30 years to build relationships with students, parents and colleagues and touched countless lives, said Jeremy Hutchinson, the school's principal.

Barnes has a "no-nonsense, yet loving" approach to education, spent the past 15 years at Madison Heights Elementary and colleagues describe her as compassionate and student-centered, he said.

"And I could not agree more about Michelle," Hutchinson said, adding students have said of her: "She will always help you when you need it and she always expects you to give your best effort."

Marvin McGinnis, supervisor of innovation and learning who previously served as the Madison Heights school's principal, said Barnes would always rise to the occasion and she recalls the first thing she told him as "let us know what we have to do."

She definitely made a positive difference at the school, McGinnis said.

### **Jack Holte**

A mail courier who worked in the division's maintenance department, Holte was honored posthumously as he died Oct. 1, 2021. Holte worked for the division 13 years, was well-known and respected by everyone he met, said Assistant Superintendent William Wells.

"He was willing to do whatever was asked of him," Wells said.

Holte was cheerful and held a special place for those he daily interacted with, Wells said. "I can say Jack was one of those good people I was fortunate to have known."

### **Mark May**

An agricultural science teacher at Monelison Middle School, May was honored for a 43-year career in the Amherst school division.

"He is truly a special person," said Leah Gray, the school's principal.

Assistant Principal Lantz Martin said Monelison administrators couldn't have asked for a better vocational teacher.

“Your presence was known without you ever having to say a word,” Martin said. “Your students may not remember all you taught, but they remember you.”

Martin said in the more than 10,000 students May had in more than four decades, he never once asked to have one removed. “They always seemed to find a home in Room 130,” Martin said. “Trust me when I say you will be dearly missed.”

### **Gail Ellinger**

A bus driver, Ellinger spent 12 years of service in Amherst County and called students her “babies,” said Rhonda Campbell, supervisor of transportation.

A leader who touched so many, Campbell said it was an honor to get to know the driver of Bus 46. “We all recognize and all appreciate all you’ve done for our students,” Ellinger said.

Scott said Ellinger was a teacher on the bus who kept students engaged.

“She’s not just a bus driver, she’s a caregiver,” said Scott. “She’s a nurturer... We didn’t want to let her go.”

### **Teresa Crouch**

The Amherst school division’s chief finance officer when she formally stepped down in late 2021, Crouch has served in a variety of roles in the finance department. She started her career in Amherst schools in the business office as a clerical secretary in 1989 and later became a payroll technician and finance manager.

Arnold said when Crouch became the division’s chief financial officer in 2007 and the Great Recession hit she had to spend the next 10 years developing budgets with constant shortfalls. “That was quite a feat,” said Arnold. “She had to deal with superintendents and teach each one of them what a budget was.”

Arnold said he appreciates Crouch’s patience over the years and complimented her work of tracking a heavy influx of federal stimulus money in response to the pandemic. Crouch looked beyond the numbers and saw children and what was best for them in their education, said Arnold.

He also praised her warm personality and welcoming demeanor.

“If you spent any time in Amherst, you could be kin to Mrs. Crouch,” Arnold said with a smile.