



# INSIDENOVA

## PRINCE WILLIAM



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# Sunrise on a new school year



Students make their way into Osbourn High School on Manassas City Public Schools' first day Wednesday. The more than 7,000-student school system's start date is among the earliest in the commonwealth, and educators eagerly greeted it. "We really want to address all the structural needs of our students," Osbourn Principal Mike Pflugrath told InsideNoVa. Prince William County Public Schools begins Aug. 22.

JARED FORETEK | INSIDENOVA

**STORY AND PHOTOS, PAGE 4**



## Increased burnout, discipline challenges lead to staffing woes

» BY JARED FORETEK  
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With the first day of school on Aug. 22 fast approaching, Prince William County Public Schools leadership says the division has hundreds of teaching positions still vacant, and some teachers tell InsideNoVa that if things don't improve this school year, even more could exit the profession.



LATANYA MCDADE

In a message to the school system community last week, Superintendent LaTanya McDade said administrators are "working to fill 318 school-based instructional openings," but the system's

STAFFING » PAGE 3

## Parents protest more books No titles removed in Prince William

» BY JARED FORETEK  
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While Virginia Beach Public Schools is removing several books from school libraries after objections over sexual content from some parents, Prince William County Public Schools has thus far declined to do the same with any books over parental concerns.

But the local school system is seeing an increase in challenges to library books, something that comes as conservative parents are promising to maintain the new scrutiny on school libraries.

The school system fielded six challenges to library

BOOKS » PAGE 5



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regularly-updated online job board showed other needs as well.

According to the portal, the division is looking to fill 440 certified positions – a category that includes teachers, counselors, learning specialists and more. Of those 440, 110 of the openings are for special education. At this time last year, the school system reported having about 150 teaching openings. In the run-up to the 2019-2020 school year, there were fewer than 100.

“PWCS is looking forward to welcoming back more than 5,700 instructional staff and nearly 900 new instructional hires ... It is important to keep in mind that we have added more than 170 instructional positions to our Fiscal Year 2023 budget to better serve our students,” McDade said in her message.

“Our division’s fervent goal is to work resourcefully and diligently toward a highly qualified teacher in every classroom, and we continue to remain hard at work in filling our remaining vacancies in a highly competitive market amidst a national teacher shortage.”

The system’s budget features historic pay increases for almost every position, with teachers seeing an average 7% raise from last year. But so far those raises – matched by several nearby school divisions – haven’t translated into fully-staffed classrooms.

Some schools are missing more instructors than others. Fitzgerald Elementary School in Woodbridge, for instance, is looking to fill 17 of its 62 teaching positions and one PALS tutor, according to the job board. Many of the listings are for “temporary” 195-day assignments – the length of the school year – and list little more than a bachelor’s degree and “at least one year of successful experience working with students” as the necessary qualifications.

School staffing shortages, as they were at the start of last year, are far from unique to Prince William. School divisions around the Washington region have reported difficulties re-

taining staff and hiring for vacant positions. There is no up-to-date data on teacher openings nationwide, but reporting from across the country indicates that school systems are having a particularly difficult year in terms of staffing.

At the same time, nationwide job resignation rates are up across almost every economic sector.

Several Prince William teachers told InsideNoVa that they have seen an inordinate number of their colleagues burn out and leave the school system over the past year. The division has declined to provide information to InsideNoVa regarding whether teacher retention from previous years decreased or how many teachers declined to return for the 2022-23 school year.

Tom Darrow, a 17-year veteran of Unity Reed High School, said the mood among his colleagues at the end of last school year was “very, very depressed.”

“I’m feeling that too ... At the end of this school year, I was feeling so beaten down and disrespected that I’m toying around with ideas about going into other things. And a lot of other teachers are feeling that way too,” he said.

In particular, Darrow said, many students seemed as though they had forgotten how to stay active and engaged in class after more than a year of schooling through a computer. Behavioral issues increased, and there was a growing disconnect between teachers dealing with the day-to-day struggles that came with kids returning to classrooms and the academic, pedagogical concerns that often came down from the system’s central office.

All the mandatory trainings weren’t helping, either, he said.

“There’s the academic stuff that I’m sure some of them are getting. But then actually applying the academic stuff, the teaching philosophy kind of thing ... there’s a big disconnect between taking the research kind of stuff and actually applying it in the day-to-day classroom,” Darrow said.

Another high school teacher who had been with the school system for more than eight years said the virtual and hybrid

teaching in 2020 and early 2021 wore her down. She said she reached her breaking point after a challenging year back in-person. She asked to remain anonymous because she will probably be applying for teaching positions in the future.

“Discipline was a real issue. There was more disrespect to me in the classroom than I’d ever seen before ... and nobody I knew thought the central office really knew what was going on or was going to help fix the problem,” she said. “I understand that we don’t want to suspend kids because that probably won’t make it any better, but it felt like behavior was getting worse and discipline was becoming less.”

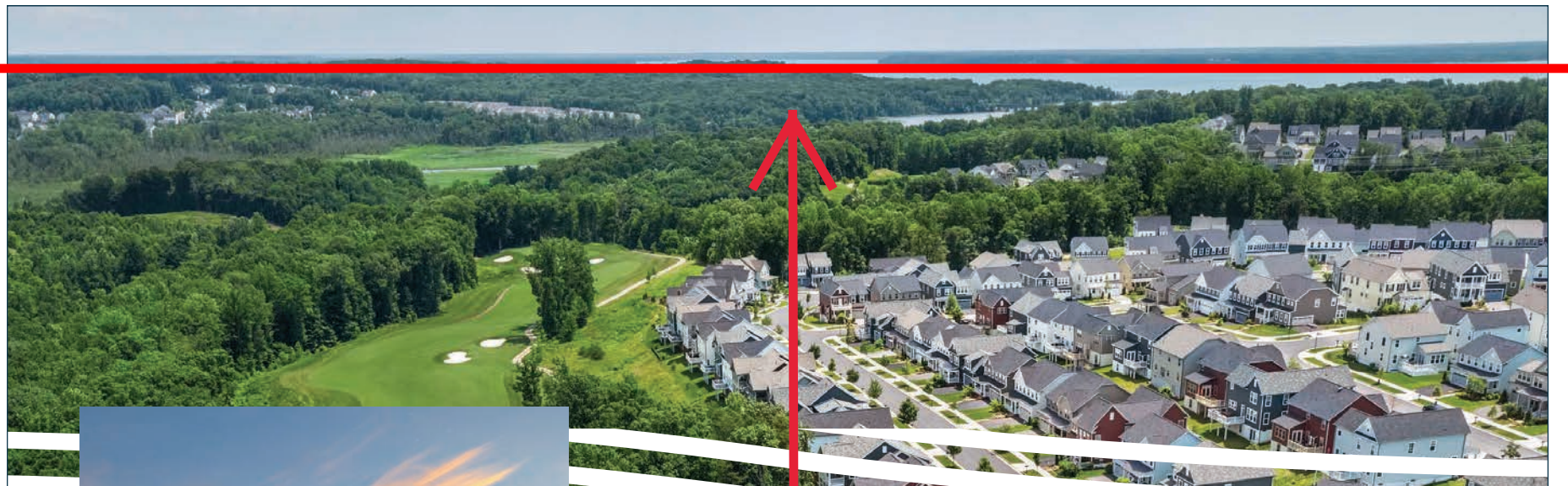
Staffing shortages also weighed on teachers and students heavily, she said, forcing the teachers to juggle more sections and supervisory duties with less prep time. Ultimately, she told InsideNoVa, she decided she could afford to take some time off, earn some money tutoring and will probably wind up working part-time for a nearby school system or maybe back with Prince William schools.

She said she can then go back to full-time teaching if she eventually feels like she wants to. The county school system contacted her over the summer about returning, she said, but for now she doesn’t want to go back.

“It’s not like I think these things are only happening in Prince William,” she said. “But I was just burnt out where I was.”

For Darrow, this year could be make-or-break in terms of whether he stays in a job he said he’s wanted since he was 12 years old.

“A lot of people, myself included, are cautiously looking forward to the school year. We’re hopeful that we’ll be able to get back a lot of what was lost in terms of discipline and student participation and stuff,” Darrow said. “And I think a lot of people are in, like, a wait-and-see [mode]. If there’s improvement, then OK, we’ll stick it out. But if things continue more like they did last year, you’re going to have even more people quitting. I think there’s widespread acknowledgement that last year was a mess.”



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# Late changes included in Digital Gateway vote

## Final public hearing slated for Oct. 11

» BY NOLAN STOUT  
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The early-morning vote to recommend approval of the proposed PW Digital Gateway data center complex included several last-minute changes that soften restrictions put forth by Prince William County planning staff.

Shortly after 5 a.m. on Sept. 15, the Planning Commission voted 4-3-1 to recommend approval of changes to the Comprehensive Plan to serve as guidelines for the overall development.

The Board of County Supervisors will hold the final public hearing on the project on Oct. 11.

The hearing is on the request from dozens of landowners to designate 2,139 acres in western Prince William County for data centers. Specifically, it is to change the land in the Comprehensive Plan currently designated as agricultural/estate and environ-



ANN WHEELER

mental resource to technology/flex, parks and open space, county registered historic site and environmental resource overlay.

The project, which proposes 27.6 million square feet of data centers along Pageland Lane, has quickly become the most controversial and contentious local land-use proposal in decades. Opponents and proponents have launched personal attacks against each other, and it has spawned recall efforts against Gainesville Supervisor Pete Candland and Board Chair Ann Wheeler and a federal lawsuit

VOTE » PAGE 16

### LAST CHANCE TO SPEAK UP

» The final public hearing for Digital Gateway is set for Oct. 11. Sign-up for in-person participation at public hearings typically starts at 7 p.m. on the day of the hearing. The sign-up sheets are usually inside board chambers. People who want to provide virtual input must sign up by 5 p.m. Oct. 10 by visiting [pwcgov.granicusideas.com](http://pwcgov.granicusideas.com).

### PUPPY LOVE



County officials and community members turned out in droves Sept. 17 for the grand opening of the new Prince William County Animal Shelter. More than 40 pets, including Roy, pictured here, were adopted during the event. Humans Carrin Garity Thompkins, Stephen Mercy, Kayleigh and Ophelia joined a smiling Roy outside the facility.

TAVAN SMITH | FOR INSIDENOVA

More photos on Page 21 and at [InsideNoVa.com](http://InsideNoVa.com)

# Teacher shortage hamstrings special ed

## Parents praise educators; schools face challenges

» BY JARED FORETEK  
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Corie Mboh's son was referred to the Prince William County Schools Special Education program when he entered kindergarten.

He was having difficulty regulating his emotions and behavior, so teachers at his school agreed he'd be best off with an individualized education program, or IEP as it's commonly referred to, and a new school: PACE East, which has since been rolled into Independence Nontraditional School.

By first grade, Mboh's son was in a special education classroom at T. Clay Wood Elementary in Nokesville, and it was there, she says, that he made progress on

TEACHERS » PAGE 12

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his behavioral challenges. And she attributes much of it to one teacher: Catherine Dallman.

“Ms. Dallman’s effectiveness had a lot to do with her firm belief in that, ‘Tomorrow is a new day to make good choices,’” Mboh told InsideNoVa. “Because she taught my son for four years straight, she knew his triggers very well and what worked for his individual needs.”

“I think my son liked the fact that, because he had been with her since first grade, there were no ‘Meet the teacher’ anxieties that can often turn into a triggering situation.”

Mboh’s story is similar to those of numerous parents in Prince William schools. Stability and continuity, many said, have been key to their child’s success in special education programs. They told InsideNoVa that the difference a good teacher makes is immense, and they stressed the county’s school system has lots of good special education teachers.

But in almost every state in the country, school systems are facing a persistent shortage in special education professionals, something that’s continued for years but has worsened in recent years.

#### AIMING FOR CONSISTENCY

According to the school system’s publicly available job openings, Prince William has over 90 special education teacher vacancies, about one for every school. At the same time, the system is placing an increased emphasis on its special education programs with its current budget, which funds 100 new special education teaching assistant positions.

While there is little consistent, up-to-date reporting on vacancies across all school systems, reports from other Northern Virginia school divisions indicate that the shortage is not unique to Prince William.

Lysandra Cook, professor and special education program coordinator at the University of Virginia School of Education and Human Development, agreed that for many special education students “consistency, routine, having a consistent person” are hugely important.

“Change is really difficult,” Cook told InsideNoVa. “Having a body in that classroom, whether it be a provisionally-hired teacher or a fully-licensed teacher, is definitely better than having a series of rotating subs.”

Superintendent LaTanya McDade acknowledged the challenges the county faces when it comes to filling special education positions.

“When you look at the vacancies, of course, there’s the ‘hard-to-staff’ positions. ‘Hard-to-staff’ positions are mostly going to be in special education, math and science, so these are areas that traditionally are hard to staff, and then you compound that with the national teacher shortage and you know, it just makes for a really tough situation,” she said about special education staffing on the the first day of school in August.

“And these are our students that have



Ruby Brennan entered her freshman year at Battlefield High School in August. PROVIDED

the highest needs, and so ... we have to meet every individual student’s needs. So it’s critically important that we have special education teachers, special education assistants, because when you don’t, you’re not able to deliver on those commitments and those priorities in an individual education plan,” McDade said. “We’re putting in an all-out effort to try to make sure that we have special education teachers.”

For Mboh’s son, things began to regress when he started fifth grade with a new teacher, breaking the continuity that had been so important to him earlier. Ultimately, he transferred to PACE West, the system’s nontraditional K-12 special education school. Today, he’s a freshman at his base high school.

Mboh credits a lot of his progress to the educators at PACE.

“They have amazing resources, amazing staff, and never once did I ever feel like they were just checking boxes,” she told InsideNoVa. “The entire staff cares for each and every student.”

#### A SPECIAL RELATIONSHIP

Renee Brennan said she feels similarly about the teachers who have worked with her daughter, Ruby, a “fun-loving” student with Down Syndrome currently at Battlefield High School.

One teacher in particular, Tanya Deyerle, a favorite of Ruby’s back when she was at Alvey Elementary, still checks in on Ruby and her friends regularly, Brennan told InsideNoVa. Deyerle will leave video messages on holidays, birthdays and first days of school.

“She genuinely loves her profession, and with her enthusiasm and love for her students, she inspires them to work hard and learn every single day,” Brennan said. “I feel like special education teachers have a bigger teacher toolbox, because they need to, their job calls for it. They’re dealing with behavior and issues that maybe aren’t seen in the general education classroom.”

Brennan added, “It feels like a typical parent-teacher relationship, but vaster and much deeper with heightened levels of



Renee Brennan and her daughter, Ruby, have had a good experience with Prince William Public Schools’ special education program. PROVIDED

communication and, at times, emotion.”

Every year, all 50 states and the District of Columbia report generalized areas of teacher shortages to the U.S. Department of Education. This year, 47 of them indicated a shortage in special education, including Virginia. And while the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act mandates that all students with disabilities have access to licensed special education teachers, school systems can use non-certified teachers to fill in for classes while they work toward certification.

It’s something many counties and cities, including Prince William, are doing, where applicants are being sought for the Teaching Professional on Temporary Assignment program. The necessary qualifications include a bachelor’s degree, a year of work with students and “successful experience working with students with special needs.”

Officials from the school system say the program is part of a response to the decreasing number of education professionals getting state licensure through graduate education programs. And those who are working toward special education licensure in graduate school are being recruited to take on jobs while finishing their schooling.

#### BUILDING A PIPELINE

Cook, of University of Virginia, said she sees firsthand the decreasing number of students in the pipeline.

Recently, the university started a grant program that offers 10 students \$12,000 apiece annually if they agree to teach for two years in special education after graduation. She said there hasn’t been a year where all 10 grants have been disbursed. Meanwhile, more school divisions are looking to recruit those students still working on their degrees.

“The number of students that we have ... that are approached to try to take on jobs is so much higher,” she told InsideNoVa. “We’re getting constant emails: ‘Please, do you have any teachers? Do you have any students that are close, can we hire any?’”

She said she has some reservations about the push from school divisions to recruit teachers from graduate programs, particularly when they go to work in special education classrooms.

“Of so much critical importance as a [special education] teacher is the relationships with the kids. You need to be able to slow down to really assist your kids, but it’s hard,” Cook said. “There is something really great about that practical experience, but we all say, ‘I don’t recommend it.’ But when you’re 22 and you have no money, you get offered that job ... it’s really hard to say no.”

According to Cook, prospective teachers go into special education knowing that it will require more specialized state requirements, training and legal understanding of the federal requirements. But many do so because they have a personal connection with special education students or teachers, something many young people simply aren’t exposed to when considering career choices. Many of the students she sees entering special education had a sibling with special needs or went to a school with more inclusive programming that exposed them to special education students.

Cook said there’s no silver bullet for attracting more prospective teachers to special education, but she believes undergraduate education programs should do more to ensure that their students are interacting with special needs students. Still, even for those students who are interested, she said they can be pushed toward general education because of the additional layer of regulations that come with special education.

“So many of our high-achieving students ... haven’t really considered or even had experience with special education, they just don’t think about it,” she said. “And when you think of what the job is like, they go and have a volunteer experience, a lot of those teachers and administrators tell them, ‘Don’t go into special ed, it’s so much more work. Wouldn’t you rather just focus on working with the kids and not all that legality and all the paperwork?’”

# Freedom HS parents voice concerns over security

## Community seeking better communication

» BY JARED FORETEK  
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Lenka Mendoza does not typically make the trek to the Kelly Leadership Center for Prince William County School Board meetings.

But she and other parents from Freedom High School were there Sept. 21, several with division-provided translators in tow, to tell the school system's leadership that they clearly were not being heard. The security situation at the Woodbridge high school is untenable, they said. And weeks after another gun-related incident sent the school into a three-hour lockdown, the school's administration isn't doing enough, they added.

"I am here with other parents ... because we are very worried about the high risks for the safety and security that is present right now within the school," Mendoza, speaking in Spanish through an interpreter, said during the meeting's public comment period. "It's only been two months ... and we've already had four really bad incidents. ... We don't want to continue with the anguish of leaving our kids at school without knowing if we're going to see them again."

According to the parents, the lockdown was a tipping point of sorts. On Sept. 12, police say that a call came in at 10:10 a.m. reporting a student with a gun. For the hours following, the school was put on a full lockdown as police scoured the building for the gun and ultimately brought in K-9 units to help in the search. Parents say that little information was shared while the lockdown was ongoing.

The gun was never found on school grounds, but two suspects were ultimately taken into custody, both 15-year old Freedom students. Police say one of the suspects allegedly showed the gun to a fellow student while in the bathroom before handing it off. Police say they also posted a photo of the gun on social media, showing it on school grounds.

Carlos Zuñiga, another speaker, said it was nice coming to the School Board meeting seeing several police officers and division security guards. "But when you go to schools, you don't see that presence," he said through an interpreter.

After the meeting's public comment period, a number of Freedom parents filtered out into the lobby to speak directly with school system officials, including Chief Operations Officer Vernon Bock and Associate Superintendent for High Schools William Bixby.

"You had parents standing out there upset because their kids are texting them 'I love you, I'm gonna miss you.' They're thinking they're gonna be killed," Shantell Rock, mother of two Freedom students and the chair of the county's Racial and Social Justice Commission, told school system officials outside the board meeting room. "...They did not know what was happening to their children. They didn't get any information."



Shantell Rock (left in red) and Lenka Mendoza (in black), as well as other local parents, speak to school division officials outside the board meeting room on Sept. 21. Among the division officials are Chief Operations Officer Vernon Bock and Associate Superintendent for High Schools William Bixby. JARED FORETEK | INSIDENOVA

Rock was one of more than a dozen parents pleading with school system officials to do more to secure Freedom and improve communication with parents.

The day after the board meeting, Prince William County Schools Communications Director Diana Gulotta told InsideNoVa that on the day of the lockdown, "multiple communications" were sent to guardians.

"On the day of the lockdown at Freedom High School, multiple communications were sent to keep parents/guardians informed of the evolving situation. An after-action review was conducted by our Risk Management team to review what happened the day of the lockdown and make suggestions for improvement. Security improvements will be made," Gulotta said in an email.

Gulotta also said that the school's first-year principal, Chevelli Smith, held a "Principal Advisory" meeting following the incident, and that "all families were invited."

But the parents who spoke at the School Board meeting told InsideNoVa they received no such invitation and that they had come to the board meeting because the school hadn't reached out to hear their questions and concerns.

"The Division will also reach out to those families who spoke at last night's School Board meeting about this situation," Gulotta said.

### UPTICK IN VIOLENCE

Since last school year, the Woodbridge high school has been the site of several high-profile incidents, including a shooting at a football game last August that injured two and a hallway fight during school hours earlier this year that landed a 15-year-old in the hospital.

But even aside from those incidents and the lockdown, parents said the school environment feels increasingly unsafe and difficult for their children to learn in.

"My son ... said 'Ma, that day that that

gun was found, if they literally would have done a shakedown, you would have found guns and you would have found drugs in Freedom High School," Rock told administrators Wednesday. "That's coming from the children. That was very disheartening to hear. ... That has to change."

The parents who spoke at the meeting asked for more security within the school building, more resources for the students and better communication with parents and guardians.

Bock, the school system's COO, told parents outside the meeting room that the division would be reaching out.

"We're committed to working with you. I'm interested in sitting down with you to hear your concerns," he said..

Earlier this month, Superintendent LaTanya McDade announced the hiring of additional security employees for the system's elementary schools and said that hiring for similar positions in the high schools and middle schools – to assist the school resource officers from the Prince William County Police – was ongoing.

But Rock and another parent told InsideNoVa they were disappointed that, so far, they've heard nothing from McDade or School Board Chair Babur Lateef on the lockdown or other security issues within the school.

Even after parents spoke about it during the public comment period, only one School Board member – Jen Wall from the Gainesville district – directly addressed the parents and their concerns.

"They should have reached out to us to have a meeting," Rock said of the school administrators. "They did not do that, and they can't say that they did. They've lacked empathy, sympathy, compassion, from the administrators to Dr. McDade to the school board."

After the meeting, Rock and Woodbridge School Board Member Loree Williams had a back-and-forth on Rock's Facebook page. Williams suggested on

Facebook that parents pressure legislators for more school funding and stricter gun control measures, and that they "pressure county leaders for more resources and opportunities for kids so they don't feel the need to pick up a gun."

Williams told InsideNoVa that the school division was regularly seeking ways to improve its security systems, and that the school had updated parents on the lockdown situation as it was happening. The School Board, meanwhile, was doing what it could to communicate and work with families.

"It's important to understand, for the community at large, how the board operates, and that we're not like an individual congressperson where this is our full time job and all that we do and we can appear at any moment. ... That's not how a School Board operates," Williams said. "Speaking for myself, I can say that the past eight years that I've been on the board, security has always been a topic and it's always been something that has been a priority of the division."

One parent said to InsideNoVa that what's happening in the school is a reflection, in part, of what's going on outside of it, where shootings in the county and on the eastern side of the county in particular, are on the rise. Many students in Freedom also face significant challenges in and out of school. In June of 2021, 77.8% of Freedom's students were considered economically disadvantaged, the highest of all the system's 14 high schools. The school was also about 100 students over its planned capacity.

Speaking to administrators, one parent said the school and the parents needed to work together to improve the situation.

"We can get the Spanish community, we can get the African American community ... and we can all come together and try to get a solution for this," she told the officials. "We don't want to wait for something to really happen."