

Where There's Smoke

A devastating fire at Fox Elementary exposes growing political tensions between the Richmond School Board, Superintendent Jason Kamras and City Hall | Photos by Jay Paul

BY SCOTT BASS MARCH 2, 2022



Fox Elementary parent Becca DuVal (left) organized and led a march to "fund safe schools" down Hanover Avenue on Feb. 26.

Two weeks after a fire incinerated the roof and gutted most of William Fox Elementary School in Richmond's Fan District, a group of parents and children gathered on Saturday, Feb. 26, in preparation for a rally to "fund safe schools." There are strollers and dog walkers, a few on bikes. Students sell baked goods on the corner. Maya Glaser, who lives two blocks away on Rowland Street, finds herself glancing up at her 8-year-old son's classroom window. It's a charred shell, with several panes blown out, but she marvels at a plant that remains perched on the windowsill.

As debate ratchets up over what to do about aging schools, funding deficits and the growing tension between the Richmond School Board and City Hall, the surviving fern serves as a subtle reminder: Fox wasn't just an irreplaceable, historic building, a 110-year-old anchor in this community of 20th-century homes along Hanover Avenue, it was a living, breathing space that bonded children, teachers and families.

"It's a cornerstone of our community," says Glaser, who watched the school burn from her kitchen window on Feb. 11. She knew the school needed repairs — there was persistent water damage from roof leaks, for example — but she admittedly didn't view the building itself as a *physical* danger that could, in an instant, go up in smoke.

Of course, all that has changed.

"This can't continue," she says of the school system's aging buildings. According to the Commission on School Construction and Modernization, created by the Virginia General Assembly in 2020, there are 20 schools in the city that haven't undergone extensive renovation in at least 50 years, the Richmond Times-Dispatch reported last week. Nine city schools haven't seen major repairs in more than 90 years. It's a problem that isn't limited to Richmond. A Virginia Department of Education survey of unfunded school renovation projects prepared for the commission late last year found that 322 schools in the state are in need of repair or replacement, with an estimated price tag of \$3.2 billion.

The fire at Fox has drawn significant attention to the issue. At the weekend rally, Glaser and dozens of RPS parents and community advocates took to the streets to

rally support not just for repairing or rebuilding Fox, but for aging schools citywide. The fire also has fueled calls to rebuild George Wythe High School, a project that is currently hung up in the political push and pull between the School Board, City Council and the mayor's office. Among the concerns is that Fox, one of the city's six majority-white schools, would jump the line of new construction priorities, pushing back Wythe, built in 1960, even further.

Following the School Board's decision in April of last year to bring design, procurement and construction in-house — it has long been managed jointly with city administration — plans to rebuild Wythe have been repeatedly delayed. The School Board prefers a smaller school for roughly 1,600 students, while the superintendent and the mayor both argue the school needs to be larger, big enough to accommodate 2,000 students, or the new Wythe runs the risk of opening over capacity.

The disagreement, which has led City Council to delay approving \$7.3 million in initial construction funds for the new Wythe, has pushed back the timeline for completion at least three years, from the fall of 2024 to 2027.

"Fox is not the only school that is burning," community activist Charles Willis tells the parents and advocates gathered outside Fox Elementary on Feb. 26. "There are other schools in Richmond that are burning." It's a need, he says, that stretches across the state.

The rallygoers are careful not to overlook Wythe. As they make their way down the sidewalk, they alternate chants between "fund safe schools" and "Wythe can't wait" as they head toward Monroe Park.



Dozens of parents, children and community advocates march down Hanover Avenue on the morning of Feb. 26 to rally support for funding new school construction.

Fox's burning also has exposed deep fault lines between the School Board and Kamras, who found himself fending off an attempt by some board members to gut his administrative team late last week. School Board Chairwoman Shonda Harris-Muhammed sent a directive to Kamras via email on Feb. 24, according to the Times-Dispatch, informing the superintendent that he must cut the chief operating officer position, currently held by Alana Gonzalez, and a vacant chief wellness officer position or the board would reject his initial \$362.6 million budget proposal. He was also directed to restore funding for the school's virtual academy and fund a new auditor position.

Faced with an overall budget gap of roughly \$22 million, which includes an expected reduction in state funding of \$7 million thanks to an archaic formula that penalizes the city for falling student enrollments and rising real estate values, the tensions rose to a fever

pitch at the School Board's budget meeting on Monday night.

Hundreds of parents fill the auditorium at the newly built River City Middle School on the city's South Side, near the Chesterfield County line, for the 6 p.m. meeting. Many hold handmade signs reading "Let Kamras Lead," demanding that the board not cut critical administrative positions at a time when the school system faces multiple crises: the ongoing pandemic, reduced funding and support from the state, and a host of capital construction needs.

At times, the meeting is contentious, and the board chair, Harris-Muhammed, struggles to manage the room. There are disagreements between individual board members on stage, between Kamras and the board. A clearly irritated Harris-Muhammed explains that she was even threatened earlier in the day, which elicits chuckles from the audience. "This work is serious," she lectures. "We are not going to mistreat people because we do not agree."

For a public meeting, it's an odd juxtaposition. Most in the audience call for stability within the administration, voicing support for Kamras, some incredulous that the board would terminate Kamras' chief operating officer. Many see the School Board as acting irresponsibly.

Shannon Heady, a parent with a 10th grader at Thomas Jefferson High School and a fourth grader at Fox, chokes up as she pleads with the board not to undermine the superintendent.

"Removing a chief operating officer and the chief wellness officer in a pandemic, when children are in crisis, caused me to not sleep at all last night," she

says, addressing the School Board members. “I see smart, dedicated people. I see parents on this stage. And I am sick to my stomach. ... I am begging you to keep Jason Kamras and his team because you will cause massive chaos by dismantling his administration.”



Parents and community members line up to speak at the Richmond School Board's Feb. 28 meeting, which at times turned contentious.

Later in the night, the board would acquiesce. It approved a reduced budget proposal of \$356.6 million, keeping funding for the virtual academy and the chief operating officer and wellness officer, but the drama raises the specter of more conflict around the corner. The mayor is expected to introduce his fiscal 2023 budget on Friday, which will kick off another round of negotiations over the next several weeks.

Several board members said they were frustrated that Kamras didn't make budget adjustments as they

requested. Kamras, however, countered that he did the best he could.

“On the one hand, board members have implored me to craft a needs-based budget that asks for everything that we could possibly need. On the other hand, board members have argued for deep cuts. On the one hand, board members have suggested that we should further downsize the central office. And on the other, board members have proposed adding central office positions that report directly to the board. In short, I am not clear what the board desires,” he says. “Here’s what I do know: I cannot effectively serve as superintendent without a complete leadership team. Eliminating the chief operating officer simply belies common sense.”

He also spends several minutes defending Gonzalez, the COO, pointing out that she successfully managed the school system’s pandemic response, which included HVAC upgrades, the installation of “hospital-grade” air filters at schools, and the purchase of 250,000 KN95 masks and 50,000 COVID-19 tests to make schools safe for students during the pandemic, among other initiatives.

And in less than a year’s time, Kamras adds, she also hired “three construction team members” and issued a request for proposals for the design of a new George Wythe. “Because of Ms. Gonzalez, we now have a contract ready for board approval as soon as funding is available.”

LOCAL



EDUCATION

Stoking the Flames

The fire at Fox Elementary exposes an underfunded, politically disjointed city school system

By Scott Bass

The school two of her children attend burned down in early February, so, naturally, Becca DuVal helped organize a rally two weeks later to fund its replacement. But she quickly realized that the charred school — Richmond Public Schools' Willam Fox Elementary — wasn't the only problem.

There are 20 city schools that haven't been renovated in at least half a century. Meanwhile, the Richmond School Board is in the process of taking over school construction — it's long been managed by the city — while attempting to cut staff and other resources. And there are the political fights the board

has engaged in with Mayor Levar Stoney, City Council and, most notably, its own superintendent, Jason Kamras.

"People are just bamboozled," says DuVal, who lives on Hanover Avenue, four blocks from Fox. "I have serious concerns about our underfunded school district."

The last few weeks have been a whirlwind, to say the least. DuVal's "Fund Safe Schools" rally on Feb. 26, where dozens of parents and community advocates marched from Fox to Monroe Park near Virginia Commonwealth University, quickly morphed into a different rally two days later. After several members of the School Board called on Kamras to cut two key administrative positions, including >

his chief operating officer, during budget negotiations, DuVal was back in front of the School Board the following Monday, Feb. 28.

"I address you today as a concerned mother, concerned because my children have spent a quarter of their lives in a world of pandemic upheaval and sacrifices beyond our control. But learning in virtual limbo right now doesn't have to be one of them. Attending a school district in the throes of a disruptive, administrative shakeup does not have to be one of them," Duval, one of at least 50 citizens who spoke that night, told the board. "It is my kids without a school today, but it is all kids at risk by the political games being played now."

Indeed, the fire at Fox couldn't have come at a worse time. It's budget season, and the School Board's internal negotiations this year have been particularly contentious. Exactly why, however, isn't exactly clear. The School Board is taking a scalpel to its budget as the city experiences a surge in tax revenues. The mayor's fiscal year 2023 general budget proposal of \$836 million represents a marked increase in spending over last year, an additional \$51 million, thanks to rising real estate values and a local economy that's improving after two years of pandemic-related disruptions.

“

I have serious concerns about our underfunded school district.”

—RPS parent *Becca DuVal*

The School Board's hand-wringing also led to missing the mayor's deadline for submitting its budget request. Still, the money is there. In his budget proposal, Stoney included an additional \$15 million for schools over last year's city allocation of \$185 million. The \$15 million, however, was placed in a contingency fund subject to approval from City Council during budget negotiations over the next month.

Kimberly Bridges, assistant professor

of educational leadership at VCU and a former Richmond School Board member, says budget battles with City Hall are hardly unique. School boards in Virginia are fiscally dependent, says Bridges, who has studied school board governance across the country, meaning they don't have taxing authority and must go "hat in hand" to ask for money from their board of supervisors or city council. During her time on the School Board from 2007 to 2012, Richmond was mired in a recession, and there was nearly constant pressure from the mayor's office to cut spending. It's unusual, Bridges says, for a board to "preemptively cut" the superintendent's budget prior to submitting a funding request.

"Now you've got a mayor who has been funding consistently at the level they are requesting. Every year, it's gone up," Bridges says. "In this case, the board is saying, 'We want to ask for less than what the person we hired says we need.'"

The last couple of years have put an enormous strain on city schools. Enrollment declined during the pandemic, which is expected to result in lower state funding this year. Virginia is the 10th-richest state in the country per median household income (\$76,456), but state spending on education is just \$5,488 per pupil, according to census data from 2019. Unlike surrounding jurisdictions, Richmond saw its tax base shrink after desegregation and white flight, which left RPS with fewer resources.

The fire at Fox was an unexpected tragedy, but it shouldn't overshadow other long-running needs in the district, says Genevieve Siegel-Hawley, associate professor of educational leadership at VCU. Bringing Fox back, for example, shouldn't take priority over another contentious school construction project — the rebuilding of George Wythe High.

"RPS, like school districts across the country, is reeling from an ongoing pandemic, and there are other school construction battles being waged in the district," Siegel-Hawley says. "I think it's important that we keep the larger picture in mind even as we attend to the needs of this one particular community." ■

SPORTS



TAKING THE FIELD

THE RICHMOND FLYING SQUIRRELS LOOK FORWARD TO A 'NORMAL' BASEBALL SEASON

Barring any "unforeseen occurrence," Richmond Flying Squirrels CEO Todd "Parney" Parnell expects the 2022 season to be back to pre-pandemic normal.

"We don't have final word yet [on protocols]; that will come from [Major League Baseball] physicians," Parney said at the end of February. "To say that we are excited is probably the biggest understatement of the day."

The Squirrels' season opens at The Diamond on Tuesday, April 12, with a game against the Altoona Curve.

The Flying Squirrels, a Double-A Northeast affiliate of the San Francisco Giants, have enjoyed a steady increase in popularity, at least when measured by fans. The 2019 season saw the team lead the Eastern Division in both overall and average attendance as the team welcomed its 4 millionth guest to the ballpark.

Parnell admits that in private he had speculated the 2020 season would be the team's biggest yet, only to see all games canceled due to the pandemic. "I've learned not to open my mouth with predictions," he says.

The 2021 season started late, but with enough excitement that the Squirrels' opening day festivities were nominated for the Moment of the Year award at the inaugural RVA Sports Awards.

Parnell says the Squirrels are anticipating not only a full season but seeing proposals for a new stadium as part of the city's Diamond District redevelopment plan. The city is currently evaluating proposals and expects to select a development team for the project, which includes a new ballpark and surrounding retail and residential housing, later this summer.

"A new ballpark isn't just a want anymore, it's a must-have," he says, adding that the city has done an "amazing" job of making changes incrementally.

The Squirrels, meanwhile, are ready to play ball.

"Last year, we dipped our toes in the water; this year, we're going all the way in," Parnell says. "People are yearning for normalcy, and the Squirrels are bringing normalcy back to Richmond. ... I think great things are in front of us." — **Paula Peters Chambers**

PARTING SHOT



NEARLY THREE MONTHS after a fire gutted their Fan District school, students at William Fox Elementary received a military-style saber salute as they entered their new temporary home in the Randolph community, Clark Springs Elementary, on May 9.

It was a small but important victory for Richmond Public Schools, beset by politics and infighting on the School Board over the last few months. RPS spent more than \$700,000 preparing the formerly vacant Clark Springs: fresh paint, roof repairs, landscaping, the addition of new classrooms. The work was completed in roughly four weeks.

"The building has really been brought

back to life," Dana Fox, director of school construction for RPS, said in late April during a walkthrough with School Board members. It's not perfect — the patchwork roof continues to develop leaks during hard rains — but the quick turnaround offered a glimpse of the school system's ability to handle construction projects. Fox is one of three new construction managers hired in the last year as RPS begins the process of taking over school construction and procurement.

Fox students will attend Clark Springs for the foreseeable future as the school division begins the process of rebuilding their charred school in the Fan. —**Scott Bass**



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