BY **SCOTT BASS**

SMOKE

CULTURE WARS,

THE PANDEMIC AND

THE POLITICIZATION OF

PUBLIC SCHOOLS OBSCURE

THE BIGGEST PROBLEM

FACING K–12 EDUCATION:

UNDERFUNDING

SCREEN

ILLUSTRATION BY **DUNCAN ROBERTSON**

THE PAGES
WEREN'T BURNED,

pulled from school libraries or cast into the proverbial heap of puritanically censored sexually explicit literature. But when a research paper co-authored by Kimberly Bridges, assistant professor of educational leadership at Virginia Commonwealth University, was scrubbed from the Virginia Department of Education's website in February, it stung.

In 2020, Bridges and six co-authors offered policy solutions for a systemic, disturbing trend: In the decades following desegregation, middle-class neighborhoods began to hollow out. The rich were getting richer, and the poor poorer, which had led to increased segregation in Virginia's public schools.

In the years after Brown v. Board of Education, when the U.S. Supreme Court ruled state-mandated school segregation policies unconstitutional, white flight and the Massive Resistance movement that closed schools rather than integrate stymied desegregation efforts. In Virginia, where school boundary lines are drawn to get students closest to their homes in the name of "efficiency," access to housing was key. The race-centered zoning policies and mortgage lending practices known as redlining locked Black families out of higher-income, majority-white neighborhoods. While overtly racist zoning and lending practices were eventually outlawed, economic segregation — reinforced by a state funding formula that relies heavily on a locality's "ability to pay" for public schools, benefiting wealthier districts at the expense of poorer ones — continued.

Today, segregation of public schools has grown worse. Researchers at the Stanford Graduate School of Education and the University of Southern California recently found that "white-black" segregation within the country's largest school districts increased 35% over the last 30 years; between "poor and non-poor students," segregation increased 47% during the same period.

The income gap continues to grow, condensing wealth and poverty, and this is reflected in school demographics and academic performance. This is especially true in the South, in cities like Richmond, where a long history of restrictive housing policies prevented Black families from generational wealth-building, leading to ever-concentrating poverty in urban areas.

Schools play an integral role in reinforcing those patterns, Bridges says, something that becomes clear in the paper she co-authored, "School Segregation by Boundary Line in Virginia: Scope, Significance and State Policy Solutions."

"Widely disparate exposure to school poverty is a central predictor of achievement gaps between white and Asian versus Black and Latinx students," the authors wrote. "Largely because of difficult working conditions, schools serving high concentrations of students of color and students in poverty experience higher rates of leader, teacher and student turnover. These schools also offer students fewer opportunities for advanced coursework and receive inadequate funding relative to student need."

The research paper became particularly instructive during the pandemic, which exacerbated those achievement gaps, so much so that the Virginia Department of Education's Department of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion included the paper in its list of resources for addressing and closing "opportunity

VCU professors Genevieve Siegel-Hawley (left), Andrene Castro and Kimberly Bridges are among the co-authors of research paper "School Segregation by Boundary Line in Virginia," published in 2020.

"WITH **INEQUITY HIGHER THAN EVER** ... HOW IS IT THAT STATE LEADERS SEE EQUITY — AND THE TEACHERS AND SCHOOL LEADERS STRIVING TO ACHIEVE IT — AS THE PROBLEM?"

—Kimberly Bridges, assistant professor
of educational leadership at VCU

gaps" at public school divisions.

In late February, however, the paper was removed from VDOE's website, along with a multitude of other resources aimed at making schools more equitable. In the name of ridding public schools of "inherently divisive concepts," Gov. Glenn Youngkin's recently appointed state superintendent of public instruction, Jillian Balow, cited the research paper in a February report as an example of "critical race theory-based materials" that were being expunged.

"It is noteworthy that the rhetorical emphasis on equity coincided with the widened gaps in student achievement," Balow wrote in a follow-up report released in May, which in essence argues that a combination of lowered academic expectations and shuttered schools during the pandemic, along with "divisive" equity initiatives, hurt minority students disproportionately. "Decisions at the state level must correct those errors and reverse these disturbing trends."

The irony is dumbfounding, Bridges says. "With inequity higher than ever and now getting worse from the pandemic, how is it that state leaders see equity — and the teachers and school leaders striving to achieve it — as the problem?" she asks. "Our report was about how to address school segregation, how to actually stop separating kids. ... At a time when the school system is more diverse than ever before, and more segregated than before, those initiatives were ways to try to meet unserved needs for populations that have been historically underserved. So when you chill those efforts, you're actually undercutting the very thing that would do what everybody wants — which is help improve student learning."

In other words, Bridges poses a simple question: How can equity initiatives aimed at improving school diversity, which research shows leads to improved academic performance for minority and high-poverty students, be responsible for the achievement gap?

PARENTS WERE 'TICKED OFF'

On his first day in office, Youngkin signed an executive order banning critical race theory from public school curriculums, even though CRT, a collegiate field of study that argues racism is embedded in

Gov. Glenn Youngkin

our government and social institutions, isn't taught in the state's K-12 schools. He also created a tip line for parents to report teachers who continued to teach "divisive topics."

Youngkin, a Republican initially given long odds to defeat Democratic former Gov. Terry McAuliffe in last year's gubernatorial race, tapped into growing frustration among suburban families over masking policies and school closures at the height of the pandemic. He roped in the culture wars, leaning into the GOP's obsession with CRT and policies that protect transgender students, arguing that both stripped away parental rights. It's a strategy that worked.

"Their way to win the suburbs, or win back the suburbs, is through education, turning education into this wedge issue," says Richard Meagher, associate professor of political science at Randolph-Macon College. "They can stoke people's fears about race, transgender kids, learning loss. 'Let's blame the Democrats who closed schools [during the pandemic].' "

Youngkin, who won the governor's office by 1.9% of the statewide vote, latched onto "parental choice" as a primary campaign theme at a time when suburban parents were "eminently frustrated" with how school divisions handled the pandemic, says Bob Holsworth, a longtime political analyst and former ›

dean of Virginia Commonwealth University's School of Humanities and Sciences. Youngkin vowed to ensure that schools remained open while prohibiting statewide mask mandates.

"They had gone a year or more without their kids in schools, and they were ticked off," Holsworth says. Remote learning was disruptive as parents adapted on the fly to their children suddenly being stuck at home during school hours while districts struggled to navigate online learning and protocols. Schoolchildren were isolated socially and shut off from traditional educational support networks. "Youngkin provided an answer to that," Holsworth says. "The pandemic gave not only Youngkin, but Republicans more generally, a message on education that they had been lacking."

Indeed, there is consensus now that school closures during the pandemic left many students behind academically, in many cases dramatically so, as educators, administrators and government officials grappled with containing a once-in-a-century pandemic. The National Assessment of Educational Progress released a report in early September that found the largest gaps in educational achievement in more than two decades. And in Virginia, standardized test scores remain well below pre-pandemic levels, particularly in math and science. In the 2021-22 school year, the statewide pass rates for math and science SOLs were 66% and 65%, respectively, compared to the 2018-19 school year, when 82% of students passed the math SOLs and 81% passed the science SOLs, according to the Virginia Department of Education.

Across the country and Virginia, the most alarming drops in test scores occurred among minority and economically disadvantaged students. Test scores in math and science among Black, Hispanic and economically disadvantaged students across the state are still more than 20 percentage points below pre-pandemic levels. In metro Richmond, the numbers are even worse: During the 2021-22 school year, Richmond Public Schools trailed Chesterfield and Henrico students by 24 percentage points in reading, 26 points in writing, 30 points in history, 25 points in math and 33 points in science.

Youngkin has seized on the falling test scores as evidence that Virginia's public schools are in desperate need of reform. "This is a chance for our entire education system to work together to close the achievement gaps for economically disadvantaged and younger learners that arose during school shutdowns," Youngkin said on Twitter in August, shortly after the VDOE released statewide SOL results.

A HISTORY OF UNDERFUNDING
While few would disagree that the pandemic led to significant drops in test scores and academic performance, at least on standardized tests, the underlying issues that led to the growing achievement gap are decades in the making. The primary culprit, says Chad Stewart, a policy analyst at the Virginia Education Association, lies in how the state funds public education.

"I think we have to go back a bit and into Virginia's history, where we started creating a school funding formula that largely relied on local capacity," Stewart explains, referring to the local composite index, a formula devised in the early 1970s that determines how much state funding each school division receives by calculating the locality's property values and tax revenues, as well as overall student population. In theory, the approach seems reasonable: A locality with a wealthier tax base should be able to pay more for public schools, so it receives less state funding per pupil; jurisdictions with less should receive more.

The problem? The formula is blind to differences in "student need," treating all students, regardless of socioeconomic status, equally. Ample research suggests that students from low-income households require between 40% and 200% in additional funding support — for reduced teacher-student ratios, additional counselors, administrative staff, etc. — to have equal access to educational opportunities. In practice, treating all

SOL Pass Rates, 2021-22					
	Reading	Writing	History	Math	Science
Chesterfield	71%	63%	64%	62%	64%
Henrico	70%	61%	64%	61%	65%
Hanover	81%	61%	79%	80%	74%
Richmond	47%	36%	34%	37%	32%

Source: Virginia Department of Education

State Funding Per Pupil (adjusted for inflation)			
	2008-09	2021-22	Difference
Chesterfield	$7,089	$6,694	-5.6%
Henrico	$6,776	$6,533	-3.6%
Hanover	$6,518	$5,806	-10.9%
Richmond	$8,789	$8,045	-8.5%

Source: The Commonwealth Institute

Chad Stewart, a policy analyst at the Virginia Education Association

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students the same ignores the realities of educating students who have limited access to resources at home, such as transportation, technology and other family supports.

The LCI calculates a locality's ability to pay, but the cost of educating students is determined by another metric, the state's Standards of Quality. Laura Goren, director of research and education policy at The Commonwealth Institute, says the SOQs are also flawed.

"The state Standards of Quality as approved by the General Assembly doesn't actually encompass what it costs to actually provide a high-quality education in Virginia," Goren says, pointing to the fact that for decades, localities have paid above and beyond what the state formula says is required for schooling. In

the 2020-21 school year, for example, the state's total share of public school funding was 43.5%, while localities kicked in 46.9% (federal funding, 9.5%, makes up the remainder). In an analysis released in August, The Commonwealth Institute found that during the 2020-21 school year, Virginia localities have spent $4.2 billion above what is required by the state's funding formula. "Local governments are going well above the required amounts of the LCI in order to make up for the weaknesses of the LCI," Goren says.

While nearly all school divisions pay more than is required, the additional cost of educating minority and low-income students leaves many urban and rural districts disproportionately underfunded in the state formula, resulting in fewer educational supports and opportunities for students who need it most. For example, state funding per pupil in Richmond, adjusted for inflation, has decreased by 8.5% since the 2008-09 school year, compared to a 5.6% drop in Chesterfield and a decrease of 3.6% in Henrico, according to Commonwealth Institute data.

In a November 2020 report by The Commonwealth Institute, an analysis of data from the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights found that Virginia high schools with 75% or more students of color were less likely to offer calculus and chemistry classes, and just 77% of those same high schools offer at least one advanced placement course.

There's also a stark difference in student performance. When you consider where the state's unaccredited schools are located — accreditation is denied when a school's student population falls below certain thresholds on state tests and other student-achievement metrics — there's a distinct pattern, Stewart says.

"The last time we saw the state do accreditation in 2019 [accreditation standards were put on hold during the pandemic], there were 132 schools in the state that were not fully accredited, and the ›

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vast majority of them were located in not just cities that have been historically Black in the state of Virginia, but actually in the specific neighborhoods that were segregated by state-sanctioned policy through insurance mapping," he says. "So there's a huge overlap in correlation between our past with segregation and the entrenchment of poverty in certain neighborhoods, and where our not fully accredited schools exist today."

Thanks to the state funding formula, those schools also receive fewer resources.

"Our schools that are not fully accredited, at least the last time we did the rankings, received less state and local per-student funding than our schools that are fully accredited," Stewart says. "Not only do these schools face a lot of additional barriers, have higher poverty rates, but we also give them less funding per student."

While the state funding formula accounts for differences in jurisdictions' relative wealth — localities' ability to pay — those higher-income districts are also underfunded by the state. In fact, Virginia ranks among the worst in the country when it comes to supporting public education with funding, ranking in the bottom 20% of states for per-pupil spending, according to U.S. Census data.

Unexpected disruptions to education, such as the pandemic, only magnify those funding discrepancies, Stewart says, leading to disproportionate impacts on students.

"I think while we're in the pandemic, and coming out of it, there's been a consensus amongst a lot of national experts who study education, and that's that it would take sustained effort over many years to help students recover from lost learning time," Stewart says. "A core component of that is resources, and you can look at the achievement gap report that the Youngkin administration put out in the spring. If you search for a dollar sign in that report, you can't find it. There's

no recommendations for putting additional resources into our schools."

POLITICIZING THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP

Youngkin is fond of saying that this year's state budget includes record spending on public education, and he isn't wrong. The biennium budget the governor signed in June includes an additional $3.4 billion in state direct aid for public schools over the next two years.

In a state that historically underfunds education, however, it's not enough, Stewart says. Virginia is still playing catch-up from previous budget cuts, including capping additional state funding for support staff — such as janitors and counselors — during the last major recession more than a decade ago. Some

of that funding was restored in the current budget — $272 million — but it's roughly $500 million short compared to 2009 levels of funding for school support staff, Stewart says.

The budget also includes 10% raises for public school teachers — 5% over the next two fiscal years — but teachers unions say it's too little, too late. Rising inflation will likely negate those raises in a state that already pays teachers below the national average, Stewart says. (In the 2020-21 school year, teacher pay in Virginia averaged $58,506, according to the National Education Association; the national average is $65,293.) With school districts already struggling with record numbers of teacher vacancies — in metro Richmond, there were more than 1,600 job postings for teaching posi-

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tions from Aug. 10-11, according to a statewide analysis by the VEA — and the increasing politicization of public education, some worry the shortage will only get worse.

"Education drives so many things. It drives where families live, it drives the health of communities. It requires actual policymaking instead of creating fake bogeymen," says Del. Schuyler Van-Valkenburg, D-Henrico, who also teaches government at Glen Allen High School. "My fear is that politics is always going to trump policy. The ease of the political attack is going to overcome the hard work to create education policies that lead to better outcomes."

He's also concerned that the governor's prescription for lagging academic performance — a full-court press for "school choice," or charter and lab schools — will draw funding away from those urban and rural schools that are already struggling.

"I'm worried that they are using the achievement gap [to win support] for vouchers and the privatization of schools," VanValkenburg says. "We're seeing that from conservative movements across the country."

One of Youngkin's signature wins during this year's General Assembly session was carving out $100 million to help fund lab schools in partnership with the state's colleges and universities. Democrats in the state Senate, however, were able to push through legislation that prevented lab schools from diverting per-pupil state funding away from local school districts. More sweeping charter school legislation introduced this year, none of which made it through the Democratic-controlled state Senate, would have either diverted state funding away from local school districts or allowed the state Board of Education to approve and oversee charters instead of local school boards.

Making it easier to fund and establish charters — in Virginia, there are only seven such schools, which must be approved and overseen by local school boards — has long been atop the conservative agenda.

The research on the effectiveness of charters, however, is a "mixed bag," says Genevieve Siegel-Hawley, associate professor of educational leadership at Virginia Commonwealth University and author of "A Single Garment: Creating Intentionally Diverse Schools That Benefit All Children" (and a co-author of "School Segregation by Boundary Line in Virginia"). If the momentum for school choice is building thanks to concerns over test scores and the effective politicization of public education, Siegel-Hawley warns, ample research shows that charter schools would likely increase the growing gap in student achievement.

"Without question, charter schools exacerbate school segregation," she says, "and they do so because they are so often not designed with equity guardrails in mind. Things like making sure everybody knows about the choice. Things like providing transportation to every family, admissions policies based on the interests of the family instead of the academic or behavioral screens. All of those things significantly influence who actually attends charter schools." Typically, Siegel-Hawley says, charters wind up enrolling children from higher-income families with more resources.

"When you layer market-based ideology on top of an already segregated and under-resourced public school system," she says, "you end up either illuminating achievement disparities in the case of the Standards of Quality or exacerbating segregation and inequality in the case of school choice."

Whatever one thinks about charters or lab schools, it's difficult to see how such initiatives, which take years to implement, would help existing students lost in the growing achievement gap in the near term. In districts where the biggest gaps persist — such as Richmond — the crisis is now.

Bridges, a colleague of Siegel-Hawley, says that the politicization of education couldn't have come at a worse time.

"Yes, schools were in the hardest possible position they could be in over the pandemic. You have a lot of demoralized people, and a lot of people under a lot of stress. You had people losing family members. You had actual loss of lives," she says. "And so just to be in an environment now where it's almost like, in some places, political leaders are kicking folks while they are down, this is the time when we need to be lifting up our school systems and really giving them support and help.

"Where's that coming from at the state level right now?" ▣