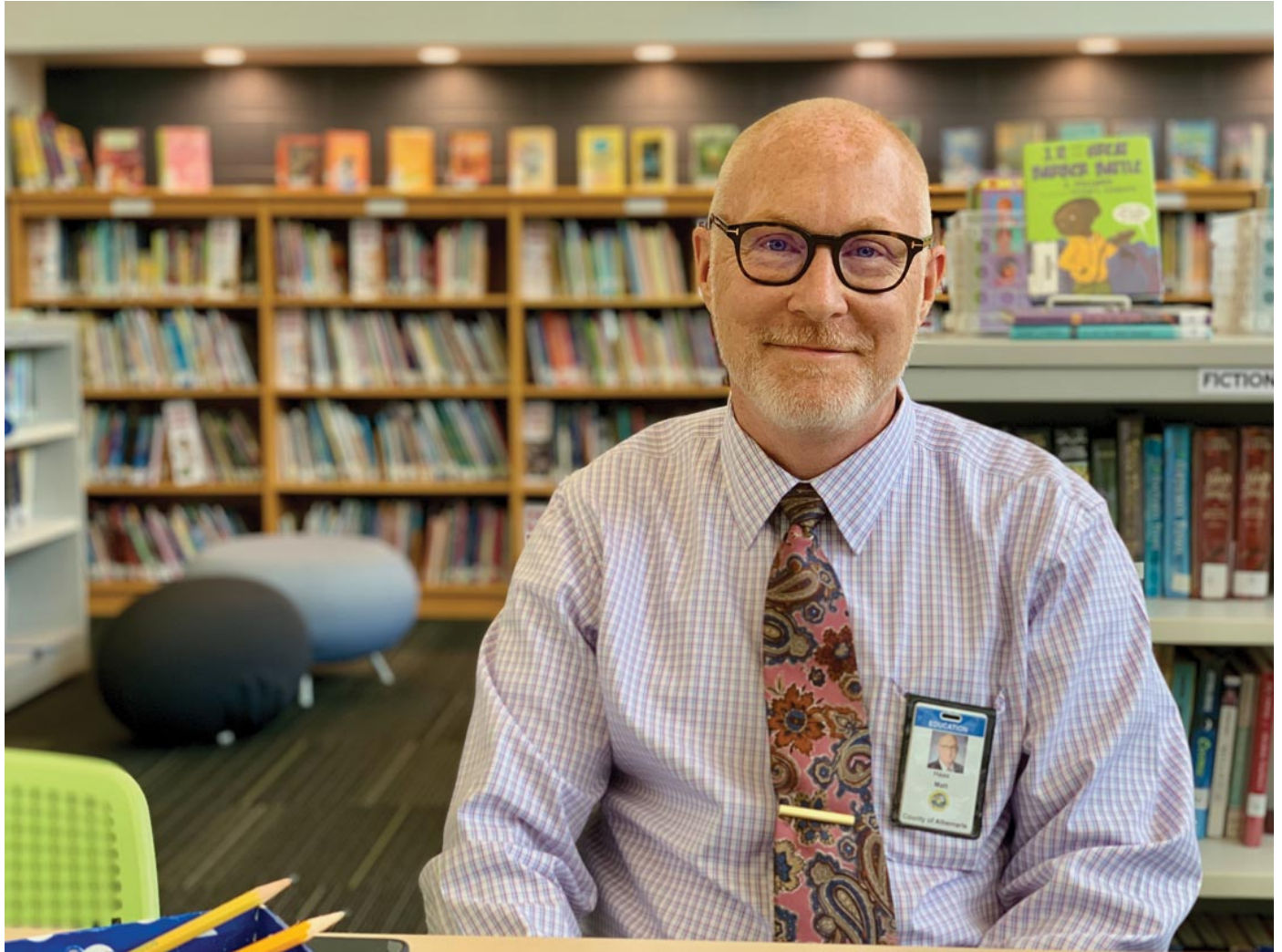


Albemarle Achievement Gaps Among Widest in State

October 5, 2023



Dr. Matthew Haas, Superintendent of ACPS. Photo: Lisa Martin

In September, the Virginia Department of Education released the results from the May 2023 Standards of Learning (SOL) tests—standardized exams given throughout the Commonwealth annually to measure whether students are achieving grade-level proficiency in core subjects. Albemarle County Public Schools (ACPS) announced that the division's scores showed small improvements in writing, math, history, and science, but noted that pass rates in reading dropped by a point to 74% and were only one point above

the state average. Math pass rates in Albemarle were equal to the state average, at 69%.

“While some pass rates were modestly higher this year, there’s no question that, overall, these scores are far off the mark when it comes to ensuring that all of our students are learning at their highest level,” said Dr. Chandra Hayes, assistant superintendent for instruction, in a press release.

Although Hayes noted that third grade is a time when reading comprehension becomes essential to understanding and mastering content in all subject areas, only 31% of Black third graders in Albemarle schools are reading at grade level, an eight-point decline from last year’s results.

Pat McLaughlin, assistant superintendent for strategic planning, presented this year’s data to the School Board on September 14. McLaughlin showed bar charts for all students in each of the five major test areas—reading, writing, math, science, and history, with subgroups broken out for student demographics—Asian, Black, Hispanic, Multiple Races, students with disabilities, economically disadvantaged students, and English learners. “Over all subgroups, we saw division-wide improvement in 30 categories, flat in two, and a decline in eight,” he said. (An error in the presented data, if corrected, would bring the actual tally to 29-2-9.)

“One thing that I think is important is where we are in comparison with state results,” said McLaughlin, “and we continued to be below the state averages in most results that we are sharing.” Indeed, ACPS pass rates were at or below state average rates in 32 of the 40 categories.

Board member Katrina Callsen asked a question about the subgroups presented. “Where would be the bar for someone who doesn’t identify as one of these groups?” she asked. When McLaughlin replied that tiny groups such as Asian Pacific Islander would be included in the “All” category, Callsen clarified. “No, I mean, like, white.”



Dr. Chandra Hayes, Assistant Superintendent for Instruction, ACPS. Photo: ACPS.

McLaughlin paused, and said, "That is not a membership group that is accounted for in accreditation purposes so we tend not to have that up there." Callsen commented that since the majority of division students are white, that group would represent a significant portion of "All" and it would be good to see how it compared to the other breakout groups. McLaughlin said he could add that data to his chart.

The board's discussion of the SOL results lasted about eight minutes, during which board members mostly looked to the implementation of [the Bellwether instructional audit recommendations](#), to improve future ACPS outcomes. The board next hears about progress on those fronts in October.

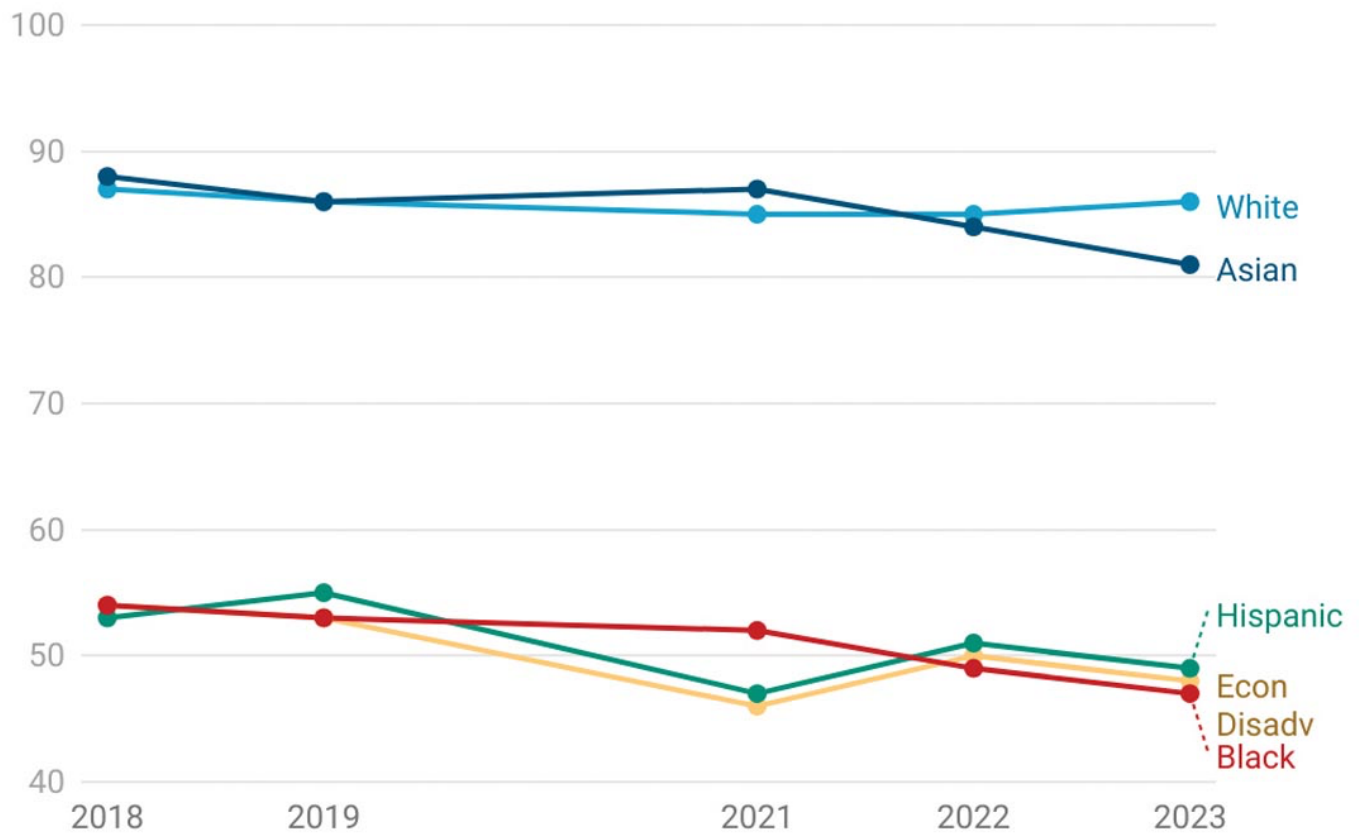
Mired in the Mission

ACPS's primary stated goal is equity: "to end the predictive value of race, class, gender, and special capacities for our children's success." The aim is for all students to end up with the same outcomes on achievement measures regardless of those factors. To monitor its progress, ACPS looks at "achievement gaps"—the differences between the SOL pass rates of various demographic groups within the county student population. Though the division has, for many years, grounded much of its policy agenda in efforts to close those gaps to achieve its mission, the divides have remained remarkably durable.

In a recent study, the UVA-based Virginia Equity Center [compared reading SOL pass rate gaps from 2006-2019 across all 132 school divisions in the state](#), and ACPS' gaps were found to be among the very highest. The data showed that Albemarle's reading SOL pass rate gap between white and Black students has not been smaller than 30 points in the last nine years, and consistently ranks among the five worst divisions in the state by this measure, reaching the dubious number one spot in 2015. The Gazette updated the report's data to 2023, and this year's result—a 39-point difference in reading pass rates—shows ACPS has the third widest gap in Virginia.

Reading SOL pass rates: ACPS

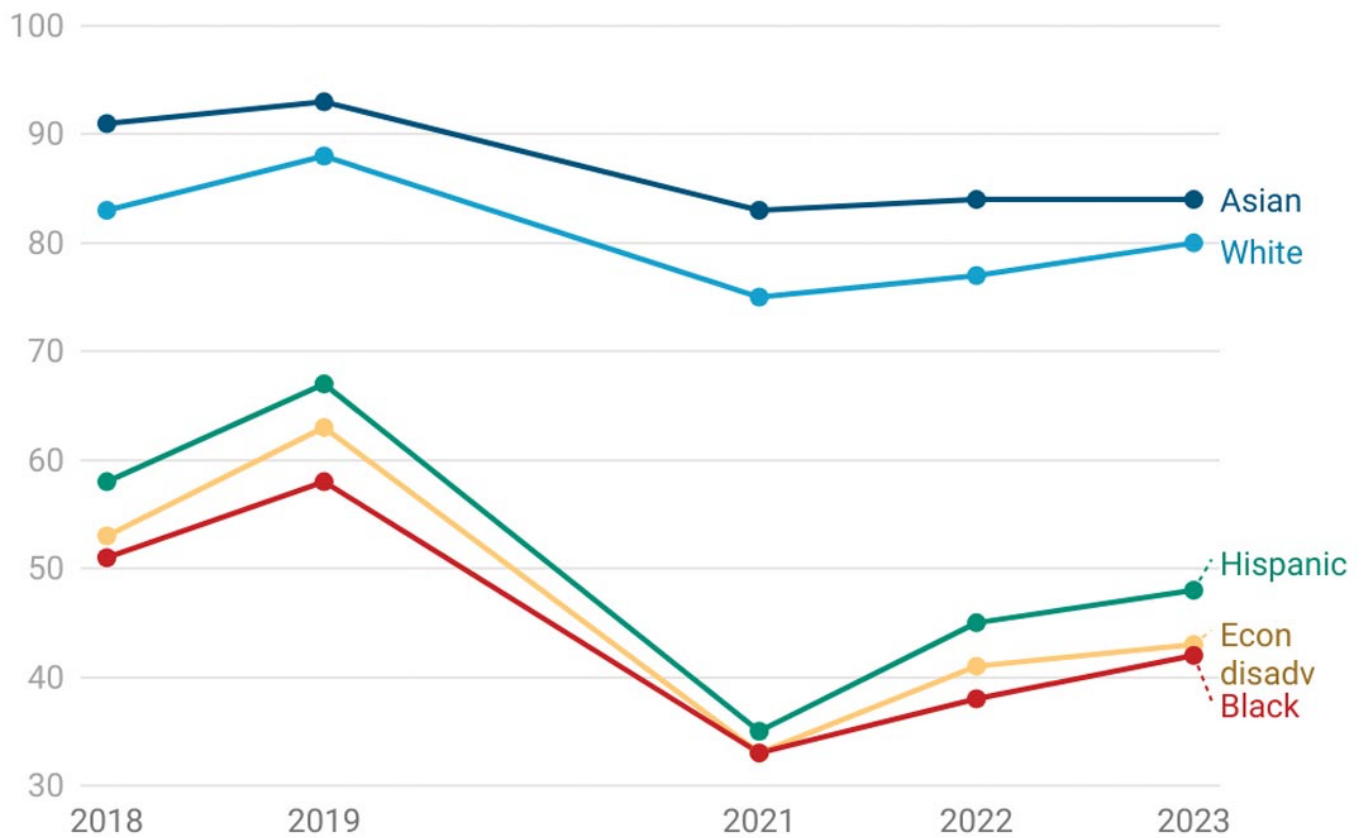
By student demographic group



All charts prepared by Lisa Martin for the Crozet Gazette.

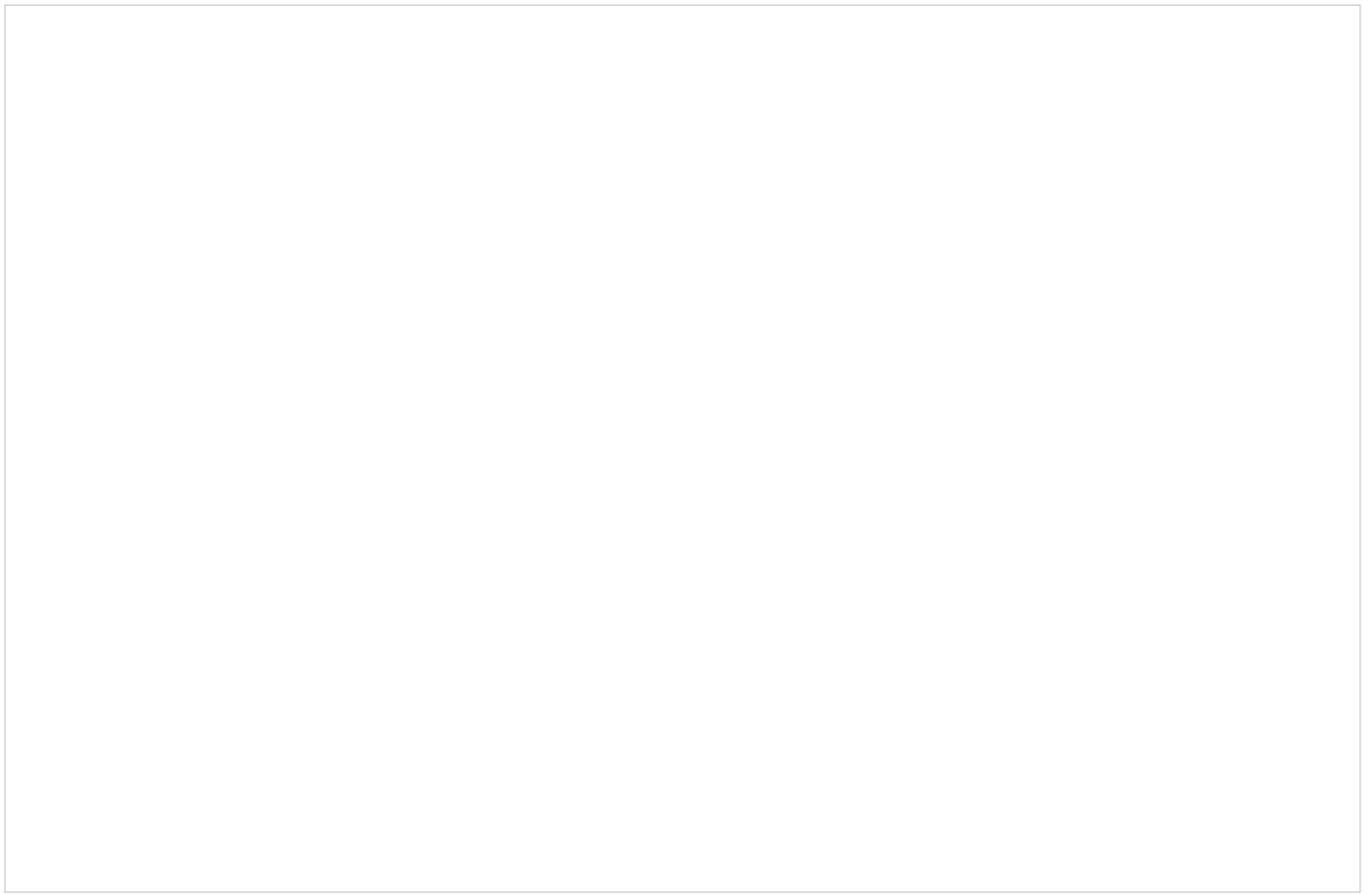
Math SOL pass rates: ACPS

By student demographic group



The division's socioeconomic achievement gap is just as bad. According to the Equity Center report, ACPS spent the years from 2014-2017 with the widest reading proficiency gap in the state between economically disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged students, worse than much poorer and more diverse counties. This year Albemarle's gap is a punishing 38 points, two points wider than last year and the second worst gap in Virginia.

The gaps in math achievement are no better for either demographic. Math pass rates for economically disadvantaged students are 39 points lower than those of other students this year, and the difference between white and Black students on math assessments is 38 points. The trend is dispiriting as well, as both racial and socioeconomic status reading gaps actually widened from last year to this.



In the fall of 2022, the School Board set a high bar for the future when they

established a set of achievement targets for various subgroups going forward. For instance, a target reading SOL pass rate for Black students was set at 57% for 2023, an aspirational seven-point improvement from the 2022 results. The target rates increased by an additional seven points in each of the following three years, up to a 77.5% pass rate by 2026. In reality, the 2023 actual Black student pass rate declined to 48%, and none of the other subgroups came close to reaching their targets.

Board member Callsen inquired about the targets at the September 14 meeting. "I vaguely recall that at some point last year we set target goals for what we wanted to see with SOL data," she said. "I'd like to see a slide of where we did and didn't hit the goals, and see that [achievement target] table getting filled in. ... I mean, how did we even set those goals?" Board member Berlin agreed that examining the targets would be good for "an open, transparent process." McLaughlin said he would send that data to the board, though he did not specify when or if he would present it in a future public meeting.

When asked by board member Kate Acuff how Mountain View Elementary was able to pull itself out of its tenuous conditional accreditation status from last year, McLaughlin said, "It's hard to pin anything on any one thing. If we could simplify it, then we'd do that everywhere, right? I think we wouldn't have seen improvement without strong leadership and teachers at that school ... but it's hard to be able to pin it to one thing."

Where Are They Now

Chronic absenteeism is a large and growing problem in ACPS schools, as it is across the U.S. Division-wide, almost 18% of students were "chronically absent" last year, meaning they missed 10% or more of instructional days during the school year, whether excused or unexcused. That percentage was 26% for Black and Hispanic students and over 30% for economically disadvantaged students.

According to the U.S. Department of Education, students who cannot read at grade level by the third grade are four times more likely to drop out of high school. Children who are chronically absent in preschool, kindergarten, and first grade are much less likely to read on grade level by the third grade. A student who is chronically absent in any year between the eighth and twelfth grade is seven times more likely to drop out of school.



The Virginia Department of Education has waived student absentee rates as a factor in school accreditation for the 2022-23 and 2023-24 school year because it says absenteeism is "not necessarily an accurate indicator of the school's programs and efforts to engage students in attending school." Superintendent Haas said that research indicates that the drivers of absenteeism are pandemic-related, in that much of the historic emphasis placed on regularly attending school was sapped by the long period spent

not attending.

“During the pandemic there were a lot of messages around not coming to school—if a student had a temperature or wasn’t feeling good, don’t bring them to school,” said Haas. “We’ve got to start flipping that message, and some of that starts with school nurses. When do we want students to come? —we want them all the time. Another thing is that parents have kind of reevaluated life, and the growth in absenteeism is not necessarily related to kids doing poorly in school. The message they tell their kids is, ‘You don’t feel like going today? You’re stressed out? You should stay home.’”

ACPS is running a campaign to boost attendance this year. “It’s called ‘Every Day Counts, Every Minute Matters,’” said Haas. “We’re building in rewards at the school level, like attendance flags and rewards for the best attendance for the school, to try to promote positive attendance. You know, if you don’t come, there are other people there expecting to see you, like your friends, and if there’s a lot of absenteeism in a class, it brings the whole class down.”

School Renaming Process Denounced as Improper

February 3, 2023



Karen Waters, the ACPS director of community education at the School Board's January 12 meeting.

The Albemarle County School Board approved Superintendent Matt Haas' recommendation to change the name of Meriwether Lewis Elementary School to Ivy Elementary at the board's January 12 meeting. Karen Waters, the school division's director of community education who served as project manager for the name review committee, said during the meeting that "While we recognize that no one is perfect, we were not able to align the name ... with the [division's] values based on the information that was garnered from the committee's research as well as my own."

Though the School Board vote to implement the change was unanimous, the 12-member name advisory committee itself was strongly divided, and

several committee members have characterized the division's handling of the process as "disingenuous" and its final decision "unrepresentative." "There has been a lack of trust with both the committee and the community members in this process, with evidence of manipulation and a lack of transparency," said committee member Brandon Lindsey during the meeting's public comment period.



MLS is now Ivy Elementary

Though Lindsey told the board that committee members were "appalled" by Waters' treatment of them during their service, and that nine of the twelve members were "manipulated to achieve a desired end state," no School Board member inquired about his comments or asked Waters follow-up questions about the deliberation and voting processes. Meriwether Lewis School (MLS) is the fifth county school to be renamed out of eight reviews

over the last four years, with six more reviews yet to be conducted.

Protocol

Albemarle County Public Schools (ACPS) has a policy for the renaming of a school facility that includes instructions for the name review committee. The committee's tasks are straightforward:

1. send out an initial survey to elicit potential school names, including retaining the original school name, and briefly describe the namesake's contributions and attributes;
2. hold a public meeting to obtain public comments on any of the suggested names;
3. select five semi-final names;
4. send out a second survey asking for community preferences on those names;
5. hold a second public meeting for any further public comment;
6. narrow the list to three names and, if the original name is on the list, conduct research on that person's life and whether their conduct exemplifies the School Board's values;
7. considering all the information gathered, make a final selection of a name to recommend to the Superintendent, who then recommends a name to the School Board.

The policy states that "If the Committee is unable to make a final recommendation, the Superintendent shall select the final name to be submitted to the School Board from the three final naming candidates."

Waters served as the non-voting project manager for the MLS name review, a support role external to the committee. "The role is primarily to help provide guidance, and to make sure that the committee has all the information that they need so that they're able to adhere to the policy, and to help them with their timetable and things of that nature," said Waters. "Their

meetings were closed, so I was available by phone if they had questions."

The committee sent out its first and second surveys on October 24 and November 14, and held two public meetings on November 9 and November 29. Per the policy, they narrowed its list to three names and researched Lewis's life, consulting books, historical documents, and videos, and compiled what members learned into a shared Google document.

Seth Lovell, a committee member and parent of Meriwether Lewis students, described the process as keenly focused on community sentiment. "The Superintendent's staff really pushed the idea that we had to initiate and put together these surveys and encourage people to take them. It was all about the surveys and the public forum, and so our process and many of our conversations were wrapped up in that."

The two community surveys showed that 94% of polled respondents knew for whom the school was named or were familiar with his life and career, and 85% selected Meriwether Lewis as their first choice for the school name, with over 400 constituents responding to each survey. Of the 25 emails the committee received and the various comments from members of the public who spoke at the two forums, none were in favor of changing the name. A further school-wide survey of MLS students showed the name Meriwether Lewis Elementary was preferred by 160 out of 321 students, twice as many as the 77 who voted for second-place Ivy Elementary.

Recommendation

After a split vote, the committee recommends retaining the name Meriwether Lewis Elementary. These members stated this name embodies the values of Albemarle County Public Schools of **Equity, Excellence, Wellness, Family & Community** based on following:

- Meriwether Lewis treated all members of his discovery team which included enslaved and indigenous persons with dignity and respect.
- Meriwether Lewis was a lifelong learner and demonstrated the characteristics of courage, curiosity, resilience, perseverance, and determination which is what we desire for our students.
- Meriwether Lewis was a leader, scientist, explorer, veteran, writer and artist.
- A large number of school community and students indicated interest in retaining the name

Recommendation slide prepared by the Meriwether Lewis School renaming committee after its 9-3 vote to retain the school name.

"The committee had very little opportunity to have meaningful conversations, so when we got to the point where they wanted us to make a recommendation, we recommended keeping the name," said Lovell. He said that the committee checked with Waters as to whether the vote had to be unanimous, and she said it did not. On December 1, the committee voted nine to three to keep the Meriwether Lewis name, and forwarded that recommendation to Waters, assuming it would be sent to the Superintendent as prescribed by the renaming policy. (See above image of the committee's prepared recommendation slide.)

Portrayal

Instead of sending the committee's decision on, Waters held it and conducted her own research. "After the committee completed its work, I was compiling a report of their work," she said. "As I looked through their research information, I came across some things that made my eyebrows rise. In checking the references, I came across some information that was

not quite so flattering [to Lewis]." That information, rather than the committee's research, became the basis for Waters' report to the division.

The MLS naming decision was to be announced at the December 8 School Board meeting, but the meeting came and went with no announcement, and committee members asked what was going on. "We asked to see the presentation that was going to be given to the School Board, and when they sent us the draft, we were shocked," said Charles Timko, a MLS community member serving on the committee. "It did not contain the majority of the information that we spent a lot of time researching. Instead, what was included was completely unrepresentative of our work, very biased and one-sided, making Lewis seem like a tyrant or a monster."

The report highlighted Lewis' 1795 court-martial for drunkenness (for which he was acquitted), his family's wealth and ownership of enslaved persons, an outstanding debt he owed upon his death, and a quote from a UVA historian stating that Lewis and Clark statues are "monuments to white supremacy." The report left out most of the details of Lewis' life, such as the government offices he held, his relationships with indigenous Native American tribes, and the Corps of Discovery expedition for which he is most well-known.

Waters said her interpretation of the policy was that "if we don't have a unanimous vote, then we need three names [to send to the Superintendent]." But the policy's language makes no mention of unanimity and requires only a recommendation, which had been provided. Waters said she saw the committee's recommendation as insufficient.

"I guess the question is, in interpreting the policy, what constitutes agreement?" she said. "And when you have a committee and you have three people disagree, then you don't really have agreement, and so then there's not agreement on one name." Waters said that "three names weren't given, so we had to reconvene in order to get two additional name suggestions."

Pressure point

The committee was then called to attend a mandatory in-person meeting, though such a meeting was outside the provisions of the renaming policy. Waters and Superintendent Haas, along with Deputy Superintendent Daphne Keiser, were present at the meeting despite the fact that the committee would be asked to re-vote, and past meetings had been closed per division policy. At least four committee members were employed by the school system, and the administrators all held director-level positions above them.

Members said they were first shown a video TED-talk about “the power of stories” and asked how it made them feel. Waters then gave a lengthy speech about her own personal story and presented a slideshow about Lewis’s life, which members said portrayed him in an entirely negative light. Finally, Keiser, who was not introduced, read the school division’s anti-racism policy aloud to the committee.

Lindsey says that he and others on the committee were taken aback by the division’s tactics and felt they were being lectured to. “It was clear that the vote didn’t go the way they wanted,” he said. “We received a block of ‘re-training’ on diversity and anti-racism, and then were immediately told to re-vote. They basically tried to shame us into changing our vote without any opportunity to reconvene as a committee to discuss what we’d heard.”

The meeting, scheduled for one hour, stretched past two. Committee members were given blank ballots and told to re-vote, but one member left the meeting and another refused. With the administrators still present, three members switched their vote to support changing the name, and the committee was instructed to vote again on three names to be forwarded to the Superintendent.

“It was a sham,” said Timko. “Here you are, trapped in a meeting with people who are basically strong-arming you to ‘correct’ [your vote]. It was crystal clear that the intention was always to change the school name, [so much so that] they had to change procedure and bully us into it. It was upsetting to watch people being treated with such contempt by public officials.”

Waters said she was merely passing on supplementary information. "The purpose of that last meeting was to have them understand what some of the other additional research was presenting, and to give them another opportunity to be able to vote and perhaps offer additional names," said Waters.

"We did feel it was necessary for the committee to have an understanding of the anti-racism policy, because part of our research did uncover that Meriwether Lewis came from a family that enslaved individuals, and for many in the community, that's sort of a nonstarter in terms of whether or not that individual would fit into the value that we described as equity in our school policy," said Waters. "But there are many areas in which Meriwether Lewis didn't fit the rubric besides equity. He had no family to speak of but what he was born into, he didn't have children. He was a very transient individual. It was widely accepted and publicized that he had a number of health issues."

The Meriwether Lewis School renaming committee and public speakers at their November 9 public meeting over Zoom.

The Gazette reached out to six other members of the name review committee for their perspective on the renaming process, and each declined, did not respond, or would not speak on the record. The division's communications director, Phil Giaramita, did not make Superintendent Haas available for comment.

MLS principal and committee member Jennifer Underwood said, "The name Ivy Elementary School recognizes how important the community around us always will be to the success of our students. Moving forward, I am eager to build on this partnership, including finding new ways for our parents and our neighbors to be involved in our work." When asked about the concerns raised by the parents and community members on the committee, she said she had "nothing to add."

Post hoc

Lovell said the experience has left him questioning division leadership. "As a parent with children in the schools, we've had a very positive experience," he said. "The administration of Meriwether Lewis is phenomenal and the teachers have been wonderful. But what's disappointing for me is that I now really question the larger school district and its leadership, and honestly, I have some concerns about the School Board as well."

Though Lovell had spoken at length to his district's School Board representative, Graham Paige, about his concerns before the School Board meeting, Paige did not bring up those concerns to his fellow board members during the meeting. "Why did none of the School Board members raise the question of why there was not a single representative from Meriwether Lewis Elementary School [at the meeting], as there has been in other renaming announcements?" said Lovell.

Reflecting on the process, Lovell wishes there had been more substantive and interactive discussion about the name change throughout the committee's tenure, as well as better transparency from the division. "It's clear that the Superintendent's office had a very strong opinion about the history of Meriwether Lewis and about how having a school named Meriwether Lewis stood in opposition to their anti-racism policy," said Lovell. "So, if they were going to essentially tell us, 'No, that's not the right answer,' then I wish they would have said that from the start."

"The [renaming] process is disingenuous to the community that it is supposed to serve," said Timko. "It signals to those who spoke at the meetings and to the hundreds that completed the surveys that their opinions mean nothing. It demeans the good intentions of committee members by treating them as props. Ultimately, when the organizers realized they weren't getting their preferred outcome, they abused their position of power. It is truly unfortunate that the voices of the community we were tasked to

represent were silenced and discarded so callously."

At the School Board meeting where the name change was announced, several suggestions were made by both Waters and board members to "tweak" the name review policy going forward. Waters suggested that votes must be unanimous or the Superintendent will make the decision, that there be one committee to handle the remaining six reviews, and that research on the namesake's life be compiled in advance by division staff and given to the committee up front, along with anti-racism information.

Board member Kate Acuff suggested that no description of the namesake be given on the first community survey, and Ellen Osborne said the policy needed to be clear that the board preferred place, theme, or value names. While the board and Haas seemed perplexed as to why survey respondents said they preferred "place" names for schools but then later voted to keep school namesakes, none of them noted that "person" is not offered as an option on the survey question.

"Having something named after a person would be the exception, the rare exception," said Osborne, who suggested changing the policy "so that people who are on these committees don't assume that keeping the name is the default choice."

The county namesake schools still to be reviewed are Agnor-Hurt, Stone-Robinson, Baker-Butler, Walton, Burley, and Henley.

County Middle Schools Trade Core Instructional Time for Electives

August 5, 2023



Henley Middle School Principal LaRuth Ensley

A multi-year effort to coordinate county middle schools' schedules and coursework will be complete this fall when the last few schools fall into alignment, according to Albemarle County Public School's (ACPS) Director of Secondary Education Jay Thomas. A key element of this project is the requirement that all middle schools offer eighth grade core math and English classes solely on an every-other-day schedule.

"When I started in this position six years ago, the middle school principals

got together and said they were all over the place on things like bell schedules and course offerings and they wanted to be consistent, which makes sense," said Thomas. "We wanted to have guaranteed viable opportunities, experiences, and curriculum regardless of which school you attend. The principals went back and talked to the teachers and they decided on an A/B [every other day for the whole school year] schedule for all schools."

English and math classes had been taught differently between middle schools, and several (including Henley and Walton) have taught one or both of these core subjects in a "double blocked" format, meaning students currently attend those classes for 90 minutes every day for the whole year. The exceptions are high school classes offered in middle schools—such as algebra I, geometry, and world languages—which have been taught every other day to more closely map to high school pacing.

To achieve uniformity among all middle schools, division staff and school officials decided to mandate an every-other-day schedule for all eighth grade math and English classes, effectively cutting in half the direct instructional hours for those classes that had been double-blocked, like Henley's.

"The principals got together and all agreed that we needed to have commonality," said Thomas. "They considered the curriculum maps and pacing, and that's where they landed." He said the division's middle school program is driven by operating principles and philosophies, one of which is that "middle school should be about experiences," and he explained that the now-open alternate blocks in student



schedules will allow for more elective choices. "[When] we're double-blocking

*Albemarle County Public Schools Director of
Secondary Education Jay Thomas*

English and double-blocking math, the kids have no choice in their schedule. They say, 'you're pulling away the fun parts of my day.'"

Voices

Some middle school teachers have voiced strong concerns about the shift to every-other-day instruction, and their objections center on what students lose in the tradeoff. "This year [2022-23] I taught English every day—three sections, unleveled classes—all year long," said Henley eighth grade teacher Andrew West. "I felt I had a lot of success, mostly because I am able to really know my students. I see them every day, check in with them and circle back if they're having trouble. I'm not allowed to grade homework or really to even assign homework, so that daily contact is important to make progress."

"Most middle school students do not have the executive functioning to prioritize the practice needed to be successful in an every-other-day class," said Tory Selmer, eighth grade math teacher at Walton, where math 8 will be switching to every-other-day in the fall. "In our Culturally Responsive Teaching training, they say that research shows that once a student learns a new skill, they need to practice it again within 24 hours for retention. Isn't that applicable to math and English?"

Thomas objects to the characterization of the new standard as a reduction of instructional time. "Taking math from every day to every other day sounds like I'm getting half the amount of math, but it's the same curriculum being taught [under either schedule]," he said. In his view, the extra time spent in an every day schedule is redundant. "It's just class time spent doing more and more of the same thing. When we look at researchers like Karin Chenoweth and people who write books and look at these issues, they say that more is not better. Just teaching the curriculum for twice as long is not going to move the needle."

Henley principal LaRuth Ensley is an advocate for student “choice and voice” in the form of electives. “The goal [in switching schedules] is to make sure that students have more options to prepare them for high school and beyond, because high school is an every-other-day schedule,” she said. “We want them to be able to do some of the things they want to do, whether it’s photography, yearbook, arts, guitar, journalism, creative writing. Middle School is a time of exploration.”

But teachers are concerned that those choices won’t be available for many students. “Part of [the division’s] rationale is that students will choose to take electives that are, say, ‘writing-heavy,’ where they can learn real world things that will supplement the Language Arts content that they won’t be getting in English class,” said West. “But a lot of students don’t get their first choice because the classes fill up quickly, so they end up getting placed in other electives with no connection to core classes.” Worse, he said, is what happens to kids who can’t keep up with every other day pace.

“Yes, [this policy change] offers many students electives, but the struggling kids will not get to choose anything,” said West. “Their elective is a remediation course they’ll be required to take. Often those are our more disadvantaged kids, and that is in no way equitable.” Teachers worry that the every-other-day schedule will lead to a return of what they call “tracking,” or separating students into groups by academic ability. “Instead of the unleveled classes we have now, we’ll put all of the kids who are struggling—who often end up having behavior problems as well—into one remediation class, and they’ll be trapped there. It’s very frustrating.”

Thomas said that a system of extra help is integral to keeping every-other-day instruction on track. “If a child is struggling in math, we don’t need to slow down the curriculum for everyone,” he said. “We will hold kids accountable to the [grade level] standards and give them the support they need, teachers will teach the curriculum, and every school has some sort of intervention program where a child who is struggling can go for 45 minutes

each day to get help." There will also be remediation classes, called Core Plus, available for such students that will meet on the opposite or "off-day" from their instructional period. Students can attend Core Plus for all or part of the year, as needed.

Ensley estimated that, based on a variety of metrics, between 50 and 70 students would be recommended for remediation, which is 25% of the eighth-grade population. She said that in preparing for the upcoming school year, her team has been "very strategic" in its master scheduling for electives. "We have been able to honor children's primary or secondary elective requests, for the most part," she said. "So, most children who requested something are typically going to get their first or their second choice, and that's pretty good."

Choices

At a more fundamental level, teachers must decide what to pull out of their curriculum to move to every-other-day instruction. "I'm going to have half the amount of class time next year, and I'll have to decide what to teach and what to drop," said West. One item likely to be excised is Henley's year-long "Change Project" for eighth graders, which challenged students to use several different research, communications, and language arts skills to produce a tangible plan to make a change for the better in their community. "That project took a ton of time and pulled in lots of skills in a hands-on way, but there's not enough time now with every-other-day instruction. It's more time efficient for teachers to just teach to the [SOL] tests."

Anticipating the change to every-other-day change coming in 2023-24, Selmer and her fellow math teachers sped up the pacing of their classes last year to see if they could be reasonably completed in half the time. "We were able to cover it all in about three quarters, but that was a pretty tight pace," said Selmer. "Now they want us to adopt a revised curriculum, which inherently takes more time, at the same time they're cutting our time in half, with no choice?"

To be able to offer a variety of electives, teachers will have to develop and teach more classes each semester, which requires additional preparation and planning time. For example, in addition to teaching his English classes next year, West will teach two sections of a debate elective plus a Core Plus class. Yet Thomas sees upside potential here, too. "It's going to be different work, not necessarily harder," he said. "Some teachers may want to teach a different prep that they're excited or passionate about, and that keeps the teachers rejuvenated as well."

Selmer voiced her concerns at three School Board meetings this past spring, and wrote letters to division officials asking for data or other evidence supporting the switch to every-other-day instruction. "They sent me one research paper and I wondered if they'd even read it, because it supported my position, not theirs," she said. "The research showed there was a significant positive difference for seventh graders who did math every day compared to every other day, and a smaller but still positive difference for eighth graders. So, there's your math data, and they have not supplied any data for ELA [English and Language Arts]. More to the point, they have not supplied any data that shows offering multiple electives for middle schoolers to prepare them for high school is beneficial."

The lack of research to bolster the policy has left teachers wondering how it was approved, and why they were not consulted about the switch. "There's also a piece of the puzzle that has been talked about very little, which is what do the teachers need?" said Selmer. "At my request, the division sent out a survey two years ago to teachers but then never did anything with the responses. We never saw data from other schools about whether it works or not, and it was never discussed in a public meeting by the School Board."

Henley has taught its math 8 classes in an every-other-day format for the past two years (though its ELA classes will not make the switch until this coming year). Principal Ensley said that math scores for its membership groups such as Black and socio-economically disadvantaged students have

shown “a decent amount of growth” in recent testing, but official data is not yet available. “We have to be flexible and agile with teaching and learning,” said Ensley. “We have to be intentional about what we look to modify to best meet the needs of a 21st century learner.”

Selmer has begged the board to consider offering both formats—every-other-day instruction for advanced learners, and at least an option for every day classes for those who need or prefer them. “I started speaking up as both a teacher and a parent because I want to know that when I send my kids to school, they are getting the entire math 8 curriculum, not just having pieces of it picked out. To me, that’s a change to the curriculum, so the School Board could have put their foot down and said ‘no.’ They didn’t. Now I’m just hoping that someone comes to their senses and realizes that forcing all kids to have the same experience is not the right choice.”