

Resurrecting an old mall, a forgotten industry, and the aspirations of Henrico adults who always wanted to ‘do more’

Liana Hardy



Henrico and elected officials cut a ribbon Aug. 22, 2023 to signify the official opening of the Henrico Schools Regency Center at Regency Mall. (Courtesy Henrico Schools)

Henrico's new Regency Center is unconventional.

It's an adult education facility, but it's not located in a school, or a church, or even an office building. It's located inside a shopping mall.

Not only that, but it's practically a mini shopping mall itself. The center is one long hallway inside flanked by different storefronts – but instead of showcasing shoes or dresses, each storefront represents a different industry that's hiring and a potential job offer.

“Here, you're shopping for opportunities,” Mac Beaton, Henrico's Career and Technical Education Director, said.

Inside one glass display are mannequins dressed as sheriffs, police officers, and firefighters next to a sign that reads “JoinHenricoPolice.com.” Across the hallway is a storefront with a large sign that reads “Become A Life Saver,” advertising fire sprinkler jobs. And next to that is the nursing wing, which displays hospital beds with mannequin patients and medical equipment behind the big glass windows.

The storefronts send a message to adult students, Beaton said: here, not only can you get your GED, you can get a job. You can get job training from the adult center classes or from industry professionals that will operate the storefronts, and you could be hired by contractors who are desperately looking for new recruits.

“It is re-envisioning adult education,” Beaton said. “You don't have to go back to the school you dropped out of and try to fit into your tiny old desk. It is much more attractive to an adult.”





Instead of storefronts, the newly redesigned lower section of Regency Mall now houses adult education opportunities. (Liana Hardy/Henrico Citizen)

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The center, which opened just last week on the bottom floor of Regency Mall in the Near West End, will serve about 3,000 to 6,000 adults each year – not just from Henrico, but throughout the region. Beaton said that adults of all ages have signed up for classes, with the youngest being 18 and the oldest being an 86-year-old working to earn her GED.

Transforming 48,000 square feet in only 10 months, Beaton and the CTE team (which included CTE high school students) worked to shift the underutilized mall space into a facility that echoed a college or community college environment. Classrooms are sleek and modern, with SMART boards and comfy rolling chairs. In the middle of the entrance hallway are chairs and sofas for students to take a break and socialize.

Beaton insists the center isn't a community college, however. It's an "in between" space for adults to figure out their 'what' and their 'why' – what they want to do with their future, and why they want to do it.

"How do you help that adult who may be working at McDonald's or Wawa, sitting there saying, 'I want to do more, but I can't,'" Beaton said. "You need your GED to move forward, obviously. But move forward into what? This is to help them see what that 'what' is and how to get there."

One of the most defining aspects of the new center is that the CTE world is interwoven throughout. From the beginning of construction, trades companies such as VSC Fire & Security, Howell's Heating & Air, and F. Richard Wilton Contracting donated time and resources to help flip the mall space into classroom space.

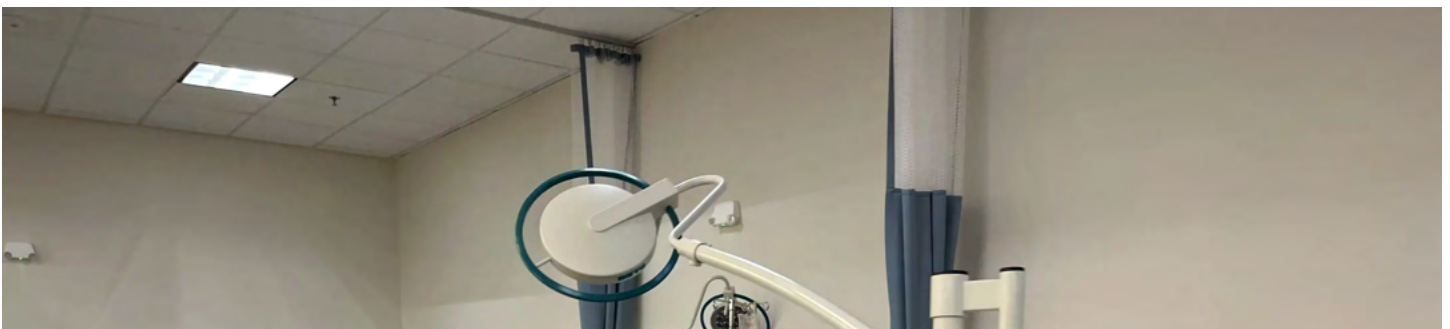
Jeff Lewis, vice president of inspections at VSC Fire & Security, said that 10 companies belonging to the American Fire Sprinkler Association participated in the Regency project, with three companies donating design time to relocate 216 sprinklers – \$65,000 worth of donated work.

But with that donated work came a new prospect for these companies: potential employees. Lewis said he hopes that the presence of VSC Fire & Security at the center, whether through the visibility of their storefront or the trainings they will hold there, will bring more people into the fire safety industry.

"The biggest thing for us is just getting the word out, because the joke about our industry is you bump into it or fall into it," he said. "Very few people set out and say, 'I'm going into that industry.' So this is now hopefully going to change our trajectory. When people actually see it and it's visible."

Twice as many people are retiring from the trades than entering them, said Tracy Parrish, the service manager of Howell's Heating & Air. Companies are struggling to fill trade labor positions, and with a shortage of experienced skilled workers, many contractors are beginning to recruit recent high school graduates and put them through training.

"It doesn't matter if you're 18 or 48. If you're looking for a career, we're gonna train you," Parrish said. "We carry at least two if not three apprentices all the time and train them, because that experience level may not be there, but we have guys that are retirement age. And if I can slip somebody into a truck and keep that truck on the road, it's huge."





The nursing wing at Regency Center includes hospital beds with mannequin patients and medical equipment. (Liana Hardy/Henrico Citizen)

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Along with GED and English as a Second Language classes, Regency Center will offer CTE classes such as Practical Nursing and Heating, Ventilation and Air Conditioning. As with the CTE programs in Henrico high schools, Beaton wants these classes to combat stereotypes about the trades and illustrate how dynamic and technologically advanced the industry has become.

“We’ve always been about how do you rewrite the narrative about what people think about the CTE world,” Beaton said. “Because it used to be, ‘that’s for ‘those’ kids,’ kids that weren’t gonna be successful – you stick them over there, maybe they can do something with their hands. But that’s not the way it is anymore.”

The center already has enticed people to explore CTE and take classes. Almost 100 people came to Regency to sign up for ESL classes on Aug. 16. And when the American Fire Sprinkler Association held a career fair at Regency, hundreds of students came – a huge increase from when the group held its first career fair in Henrico before the project began.

“Our initial career fair, we invited nine school districts and had 12 kids come. I’ll be honest with you, I was a bit demoralized over that,” Lewis said. “And if you would have told me from that date, roll the clock 13 months forward, that we would have completed this project and had a career fair here that attracted over 200 students, I would have been sending someone for a drug test.”

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The key to attracting new students is the physical space itself, Beaton said. The Regency Center is in a central area in Henrico, right on the GRTC bus line, and its location inside a mall provides an inviting atmosphere for adults, according to Beaton.

Incorporating the storefronts into the education center was another major component. Not only does the storefront design hark back to the nostalgia of when the mall used to be a “happenin’ place” back in the 1980s, Beaton said, it allows the center to showcase some of the best opportunities it offers its students.

“Why do car dealers rotate their fancy new cars up to the front of the line? So that you go back and turn your head and eventually you’re gonna pull into that car lot. Same thing with the storefronts,” he said. “You might walk by that nursing wing every single day and then one day you’ll think, ‘I need to go there and check it out.’ Next thing you know, you’re putting on one of those scrubs and joining a LPN program.”





Among those with a “storefront” at the new Regency Center are Henrico agencies, including the Henrico Sheriff’s Office. (Liana Hardy/Henrico Citizen)

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Before Henrico’s adult education program moved to the new Regency Center, it was located in Mount Vernon Baptist Church on West Broad Street. The Southern Baptist church had older, eight-person classrooms where the adult classes were held, Beaton said, and was not as suitable for adult learning. “It’s a whole different world,” he said. “When you walked in, it felt like a church. The bathrooms – 18-inch doors, you have to turn sideways to wiggle in. What’s inviting about that? It just wasn’t the place to be. So this was about building a place that would draw adults in.”

The center’s Aug. 23 grand opening was attended by all five Henrico School Board members, Superintendent Amy Cashwell, State Senator Siobhan Dunnivant, CTE leaders, students, and industry professionals. Beginning the project in June 2022 with the help of high school students from their summer programs, the CTE team finished work this past year with students from their school year CTE classes.

Student involvement was another achievement of the project, Beaton said. CTE students helped build new walls, set up fire sprinklers, redesign bathrooms, and worked alongside industry professionals during the entire process.

“How often would a kid, a high school student, ever be able to say, ‘Not only do I go there, I helped build that place,’” Beaton said.

The value of the project was about \$4.8 million in total, but the school system spent only a fourth of that projected cost because both CTE students and business partners donated their work throughout the process, according to Beaton. Several other Virginia counties have approached Henrico about the project, interested in replicating the center and refurbishing their own old malls for education space.

“You’re talking about a mall revitalized,” Taylor Brannan, executive vice president at F. Richard Wilton Contracting, said. “I mean, how many empty mall spaces are there around the country? This idea is totally scalable.”

Adult education has also been revitalized with the new center, Beaton said. With Regency, Henrico will foster the same ambitions and opportunities in its students that it does in K-12 schools.

“We want our high school students to graduate with a plan – to go to college, go to work, or go into

the military,” he said. “So you want to know what your ‘why’ is Same thing should be true for adults. Why are you here? And what are you gonna do with it after you get it?”

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Liana Hardy is the Citizen’s Report for America Corps member and education reporter. [Her position is dependent upon reader support; make a tax-deductible contribution to the Citizen through RFA here.](#)

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ELECTION 2023: Three Chopt District school board race has seen it all – divisive issues, fierce accusations, and some unusual funding reports

Liana Hardy



(From left) Three Chopt District School Board candidates Eleina Espigh, Madison Irving, Kristen Vithoukas

With Election Day coming up in less than a week, all eyes are on several key races in Henrico County – including the three-way race for the school board’s Three Chopt District seat.

Eleina Espigh, endorsed by the Henrico GOP; Madison Irving, backed by the Henrico Democrats; and Kristen Vithoukas, who has no party connections, are ramping up their campaign efforts. As the most partisan school board race – other races are uncontested or are between candidates backed by the same party – the Three Chopt candidates have been under increased public attention – and scrutiny.

Espigh, a director of enterprise data at Capital One and a parent of HCPS graduates, has been endorsed by U.S. Congressman Rob Wittman (R-First District) and Lieutenant Governor Winsome Spears. She has also campaigned alongside State Senator Siobhan Dunnivant (R-Henrico) and Republican Gov. Glenn Youngkin.

Espigh has said her priorities on the school board are to address COVID learning loss and the decline in SOL scores as well as social and cyber bullying in schools. In the past, she has criticized the school board for its decision to enforce mask mandates in schools, saying she “recently led the way to return schools to normalcy.”

“I saw what the COVID years did to our children, including my own. I watched the negative effects on learning, social skills, and mental health,” Espigh said in a video posted to her Facebook account. “Now more than ever before, our school board needs a responsive, experienced, and fearless leader – a proven advocate for our children. We can no longer afford complacency or inaction.”

Irving, a high school teacher in Chesterfield, has emphasized his focus on fixing the “critical staffing crisis” in Henrico Schools by providing more benefits and resources to teachers. He has been endorsed by U.S. Congresswoman Abigail Spanberger (D-Seventh District), U.S. Congresswoman Jennifer McClellan (D-Fourth District), and several organizations.

Irving has also focused his campaign on the importance of fostering welcoming school environments for students, speaking out against the Virginia Department of Education’s 2023 model policies regarding transgender students.

“Our LGBTQ+ students deserve to feel loved, valued and respected, and school board members are duty-bound to ensure every student’s safety, regardless of their identity,” Irving wrote on his campaign website.

Vithoukias, a school volunteer and parent of HCPS students and graduates, has focused her campaign on her history of volunteering within the schools and parent-teacher associations. She described herself as an “independent” and “moderate voice,” saying that her priorities are to listen to and include everyone when making decisions.

“I care about our kids. I want them to be safe, to feel supported, to be academically challenged, and to have opportunities,” Vithoukias wrote on her campaign website. “This isn’t about politics for me; it’s about our children.”

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Along with several other school board races in Virginia, the Three Chopt race even has garnered some national media attention, which has spotlighted Espigh’s past comments to the school board during the pandemic.

Irving and Espigh were both mentioned in a Sept. 23 *Rolling Stone* article, “[Right-Wing Activists Are Trying to Take Over Virginia’s Schools](#),” that focused on efforts by the “right-wing ‘parents rights’ movement” to win seats on Virginia’s local school boards, as well as attempts to counter these candidates by progressive groups.

The article cited comments Espigh made via social media on her [Truth Social](#) account, describing herself as “[T]hat mom. Anti-mask, anti-vax, anti abortion...the school board’s worst enemy.” Espigh also posted on her account in April of 2022: “Virginia: time to take back the schools and school boards!”

Rolling Stone also cited comments Espigh made at a Jan. 27, 2022 [Henrico School Board](#) public forum, during which she spoke out against the Henrico Schools’ mask mandate saying her son, who she said had suffered chronic hearing loss, was a “political prisoner” and “unjustly quarantined” after he did not wear a mask to school.

“People have elected a governor who would free us from this unjustified discrimination and tyranny,” Espigh said. “HCPS and the administration are nothing more than paid bullies.”

Espigh told the Citizen she would only agree to be interviewed for this article if she were provided a list of all questions in advance and if she were permitted to review the article prior to its publication. The Citizen, in keeping with standard journalism ethical practices and its own policy, declined those requests.

Rolling Stone also mentioned that Irving had received an endorsement from the progressive organization Run For Something, which pledged to [spend \\$10 million](#) on school board races throughout the country over the next two years in order to counter efforts by conservative groups such as Moms For Liberty, a group that has fought to [remove several books](#) that it deems inappropriate from libraries and school instructional materials.

Despite receiving comments from people voicing their concern about the outcome of the Three Chopt race, Irving said he tries to not focus on his opponents and wants to keep his public comments positive.

“In terms of one of them, I’ve had a lot of people reach out to me and say that they’re very concerned about them winning,” Irving said. “But I’m not going to say personal opinions that I have one way or another.”

However, Irving did speak out against Espigh at an Oct. 6 school board candidate forum hosted by the Henrico Democrats, saying that beating Espigh is critical to move the school board in the “right direction.”

“I have an opponent who is a far-right MAGA supporter, and beating her and ensuring the school board is moving in the right direction rather than in the direction of discord and chaos is of the utmost importance,” Irving said.

Irving also said he believes that Espigh is aligned with Moms For Liberty.



“So I’ll handle the Moms For Liberty piece because my opponent is one,” Irving said in response to a forum question for candidates on how they will address book banning attempts from groups like Moms For Liberty. “These people are a minority movement. They only care that they can control what’s happening within our buildings because they are uncomfortable with the change that they are seeing.”

Though Espigh’s campaign account on Facebook asked followers this summer whether any had contact information for Moms for Liberty, follow-up posts from the account indicated that she was not familiar with the group and was merely seeking to learn more about it. The group has not publicly endorsed her and has only publicly endorsed one school board candidate in Virginia.

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According to Virginia court records, Irving was charged and convicted with a misdemeanor DWI in 2013 while he was attending Virginia Tech. He told the Citizen that he had learned from the incident and grown as a person in the years since.

“Over a decade ago while in college, I received a driving while impaired charge, which has been removed

from my record,” Irving said. “Since then, I’ve been very upfront about sharing that experience, learning from that experience, and I am now a dedicated parent, teacher, and advocate for our schools.”

On her [social media](#) accounts, Espigh has also accused Irving and his supporters of taking down and damaging her campaign signs.

“It’s abhorrent that my opponent’s campaign continues to steal and damage my signs, often replacing them with his, even on my property,” Espigh wrote on Facebook. “It’s nonstop. But I’m not deterred.”

Irving said Espigh’s comments were “baseless accusations” that he had tried to ignore.

“I’ve noticed my signs disappearing too, and while I understand how frustrating it is, I’m continuing to prioritize talking to voters, not making baseless accusations or pointing fingers,” he said. “I’m making my campaign about Henrico’s kids, not yard signs.”

The *Rolling Stone* article did not mention Vithoukas, who has been endorsed by current Three Chopt District school board member Micky Ogburn. Other than Ogburn, Vithoukas said she has not pursued any other political endorsements, saying she doesn’t want to pressure Democratic or Republican officials to publicly support someone outside of their party.

But Vithoukas said it has been “definitely intimidating” campaigning against opponents who have public backing from political parties.

“I notice the difference because there are a lot of benefits that they have that I don’t have,” she said. “I just don’t have the backing of a party like they do, so it’s a little more challenging when it comes to doing things.”

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Irving, Espigh, and Vithoukas all differ in their stances on several hot-button issues. When it comes to the VDOE’s 2023 model policies on transgender students, which would require school staff to refer to students by names only approved by their parents and for school services to be sex-segregated, all three candidates have expressed different views.

In a [Q&A with the Citizen](#), Espigh said she is in full support of the policies.

“The new model policy will hold HCPS accountable for ensuring a student environment free from bullying, harassment and discrimination, and I’m fully supportive,” she said.

Irving said that he would want the current HCPS Student Code of Conduct to remain unchanged, saying the new policies are not needed.

“We already have protections for our students and it’s about making sure that our students feel safe in their classrooms and safe in themselves and free to be who they want to be,” Irving said during the Henrico Democrats forum. “I have a pride flag in my room. It’s not something I discuss with my students, it’s just to let my students know that I am someone who is there to support you.”

Vithoukas has neither come out for or against the new policies, instead saying she would listen to all sides of the issue before making a decision.

“As a school board member, my job would be to listen to these different ideas and to represent every child,” she said. “The many legal questions surrounding policies such as these require thoughtful consideration and

the inclusion of all stakeholders.”

Book-banning has been the top issue Vithoulkas has heard about from voters, and one of the most polarizing issues in the Three Chopt District. She said she wants to look into solutions that address concerns from both sides, such as implementing a library system that would allow parents to restrict books their own children can check out without removing certain books from school libraries.

“It allows those parents to control what their child reads, but not affect the rest of the children’s choices,” she said. “And that is the type of reasonable solution that I’m trying to look at for other issues – how can we address each side’s concerns?”

Irving said he believes that Henrico Schools’ current review process of library and classroom books does a good job ensuring that all books are age appropriate.

“I’ve had some librarians actually talk to me about the process and it is very extensive and they really try to do their best to make sure that there’s nothing on the shelves that would be considered inappropriate,” he said. “When these decisions happen, we always focus on the one person who’s making the complaint and this is a very small group of people.”

However, both Irving and Vithoulkas have said that they want to refrain from making the school board a political arena for national issues.

“I always try to reiterate to folks that I’m trying to make school boards boring again,” Irving said. “I really want to just focus on those bread and butter issues of, you know, are teachers taken care of well enough that they don’t want to leave the profession? Do we have enough bus drivers to make sure kids get to and from school on time?”

“One of my biggest concerns and maybe some of the motivation for me running was to keep the school board from not being political, because ultimately we’re talking about our children here,” Vithoulkas said. “If we let politics get in the way of what we can do for them, we’re going to be hurting our kids.”

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[Campaign funding](#) for all three first-time candidates also has attracted some attention. Between Oct. 1 and Oct. 26, Espigh received \$9,236 in funding – with \$7,686 from the Middle Resolution PAC. She had raised a total of \$25,300 as of Oct. 26.

Irving had a large spike in funding between Oct. 1 and Oct. 26, receiving \$22,665 – with \$16,589 from We the People for Education and \$4,267 from the Democratic Party of Virginia. As of Oct. 26, he has raised a total of \$37,082 – which Irving said was also from contributions of more than 100 individual donors.

When it comes to funding, Vithoulkas is the notable outlier. She raised \$0 between Oct. 1 and Oct. 26 and a total of only \$3,361 as of Oct. 26, most of which she received from herself, her husband or her mother, with only two in-kind donations from other individuals.

But Vithoulkas said she actually doesn’t want to raise much money and has denied every donation request from individuals outside of her immediate family except for those two.

“When I said I didn’t want to raise money, people thought I was a little odd,” she said. “And I’ve actually turned down every other offer of cash for donations – respectfully, I mean I’m happy that people would like to support me financially, but I don’t want to be tied to any person or to anyone else’s agenda. I want to be able to do this truly as an independent.”

Vithoukaskas said the money she has raised went to only a few things – some signs, bookmarks, business cards – but she was able to minimize most of her expenses by relying on word-of-mouth and by using public spaces at no cost for her campaign events.

As Election Day approaches, Vithoukaskas told the Citizen she wants to remind voters of her dedication to Henrico Schools as a longtime volunteer.

“Look at my history. I’ve been volunteering almost full time in the schools for 20 years. This is a job that I have kind of naturally grown to,” Vithoukaskas said. “I’ve been very excited about all that I could do for our schools.”

Irving emphasized to the Citizen his focus on promoting student- and teacher-centered policies and involving parents “in as many positive ways as possible.”

“I’m not really interested in the culture war issues. I’m not interested in banning books. Not interested in bringing in this rhetoric that tries to pin teachers and parents against each other,” Irving said. “Because as a high school teacher, I very much believe that we should be partners in the students’ education and working together in positive ways is only going to benefit the kids.”

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Liana Hardy is the Citizen’s Report for America Corps member and education reporter. [Her position is dependent upon reader support; make a tax-deductible contribution to the Citizen through RFA here.](#)

Henrico Schools' weapons scanners cause delays, mixed reactions from community

Liana Hardy





A Godwin High School administrator checks the time as students file through the school's weapons scanners Aug. 22, 2023. (Liana Hardy/Henrico Citizen)

It's a little past 8:30 a.m. on a Tuesday, and the line of students outside Mills E. Godwin High School is beginning to grow exponentially, wrapping around the side of the building, with hundreds of students waiting to pass through the new weapons detection scanners placed at the main entrance.

Getting a student through the scanners takes only a few seconds, but the alarm goes off almost every minute, activated by items such as laptops, water bottles, phone chargers, three-ring binders, and even spiral notebooks. Several students set the alarm off multiple times and have to be pulled aside by administrators to have their bags searched one-by-one.

Godwin Principal Leigh Dunavant tries to hurry up the process, ushering students – some still a little confused – through the scanners or to the side tables for bag searching.

“Come on through! Come on through!” she says. “Let’s keep it moving.”

“Take your binders out from now on, put them on the table,” she says as the alarm keeps going off.

The scanners had been implemented at all Henrico high schools the day before, on the first day of school, and some students at Godwin were a little more than 10 minutes late as a result. But at another Henrico high school, Highland Springs, parents reported that students arrived [30 to 40 minutes late](#) after the first bell because of the long lines caused by the scanners.

But Dunavant says this process is the most efficient security protocol tested by Henrico Schools this past year. It's supposed to be quicker, easier, and take less adults to operate each set of scanners – with one set at Godwin's main entrance and another at the bus route entry.

With the newness of the scanners, however, Godwin students and administrators are still adjusting to the change. Dunavant points out that the administrators operating the scanners, standing in for school security officer positions that have not yet been filled, have never done anything like this before. Neither have most of the students.

Though delays have occurred so far at the county's high schools, the process will get easier and much quicker throughout the school year, according to HCPS Assistant Director of Communications Ken Blackstone.

“We're still ironing out the wrinkles,” he says. “As expected with such an adjustment, the new safety

protocols did slow down arrivals. The delays varied by school, but students arrived safely and efficiently made their way to their classrooms.”





A long line of students wait to enter Godwin High School Aug. 22, 2023. (Liana Hardy/Henrico Citizen)

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[Henrico Schools officials](#) announced Aug. 9 that weapons detectors would be placed at certain entrances in all high schools by the first day of school and that they'd be implemented later in all middle schools and then all elementary schools at some point during this year, although those dates have not been set.

The decision came amid “strong community support for such measures,” according to HCPS officials, but some students are apprehensive about the new protocol.

“It’s a waste of time,” says Cole, a Godwin student, as he waits in line. “Godwin is a safe school. It’s not doing much.”

“My opinion is negative,” says Carly, another Godwin student. “I’m sure it brings safety, it just sucks.”

“We’re going to get into the school later than the starting bell,” says Madison, stuck in the middle of a long line in front of Godwin. It’s 8:45 a.m. and the first bell rings at 9 a.m.

“I don’t feel that it’s productive at all,” Madison’s friend Issac chimes in.

Some Henrico parents also are frustrated with the delays caused by the scanners.

“It took 40 minutes for my student to get inside the school this AM through the metal...I’m sorry, ‘weapons scanners,’” says a Highland Springs parent, who asked to remain anonymous. “I am not really happy about the scanners.”

But Dunavant says that with past incidents of students bringing weapons into Godwin, and into schools across the county, weapons scanners are now a necessary safety measure.

“We do have kids bringing guns to school, so we gotta do what we gotta do,” she says. “Definitely have had some dangerous things happening in every high school across Henrico over the past few years.”

A Godwin student was arrested for bringing a handgun to school in [February](#) of last year. Several incidents of students bringing guns to school also occurred at Highland Springs in recent years,

with an incident in [December](#) of 2021, another in [November](#) of 2022, and an incident involving two students later that [November](#).

Blackstone also says that HCPS received positive feedback from the community on the plan to implement weapons scanners in schools. After field testing that occurred this year from February to March, which implemented weapons scanners or metal detectors in certain Henrico schools, [75% of parents surveyed](#) and 60% of staff surveyed agreed or strongly agreed that metal detectors are an effective way to reduce weapon violence in schools.



In Godwin specifically, which implemented metal detector wands to be used on a certain number of randomly chosen students, 74% of parents and 67% of staff surveyed said they agreed or strongly agreed that metal detectors are effective.





Godwin High School administrators work to usher students through the school's weapons scanners Aug. 22, 2023. (Liana Hardy/Henrico Citizen)

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But feedback from those field tests families and staff brought up several concerns: students being significantly late to class, not every student being scanned when entering, and the process being labor intensive and time consuming. Another issue was the impact on mental health: only 29% of Henrico parents and 30% of Henrico staff surveyed said they felt that the metal detectors positively impacted the mental health of students and staff.

Student responses or feedback were not included in the survey results.

Godwin student Issac says that the security practices implemented at Godwin during field testing last school year made him uneasy. Administrators would select every tenth student or every seventh student that walked in (the number would change every day) to be scanned by a metal detector. Issac feels that it could have led to profiling.

“It makes it so susceptible to discrimination,” he says. “Because if someone comes in and it’s like, ‘oh, you can pass, you can pass, you can pass’ and then this person is also supposed to be able to pass but they deem them like not safe enough. And they can easily be like, ‘oh, I’m gonna scan you, you were the next person in line.’”

He worries that similar situations could happen with the new weapons scanners protocol.

Dunavant says she made sure to communicate with students and families about how the security protocol would work during field testing and about the anonymous system they could use to report discrimination.

“We didn’t have anybody go forward and say that they felt discriminated in that process,” she says. “But I talked to many kids that had questions like that, like ‘are you picking out kids? Are you targeting kids?’ And I would say ‘No! We’ve been talking to you about this,’ you know.”

Dunavant also says she held an online Q&A session about the new scanners last week open to all Godwin community members.

The weapons scanners now process all 1,800 students at Godwin every day, instead of the 200 or so students who were randomly selected each day during the metal detector testing. While Dunavant

says only three adults are needed to operate each set of scanners, Godwin still has 17 staff members, almost all administrators, working the scanners.

Henrico Schools officials hope to have school security officers working the scanners: officials added 75 new SSO positions for this school year, which means that each high school will have an additional SSO. But 47 SSO vacancies remain, according to HCPS officials, which means that for now, administrators will be in charge of operating the scanners.





Godwin custodian Thomas Threatt watches as lines of students file into Godwin High School Aug. 22, 2023. (Liana Hardy/Henrico Citizen)

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Godwin custodian Thomas Threatt is also helping with the process. He greets students at the main entry and is in charge of locking the front doors once all the students are inside.

“It seems slower today than yesterday,” he says. “But the kids have been cooperating good. Everything’s been smooth.”

By 9 a.m., when Godwin’s first bell rings, the long lines still trail outside the school building. Dunavant and the other administrators begin to pick up the pace, trying to instill a sense of urgency into the students waiting behind the scanners.

And suddenly, the line gets shorter and shorter, until the last student walks through the scanner only ten minutes later.

“9:11! 9:11!” Dunavant cheers. “Woohoo!”

That’s one minute faster than yesterday, which is enough for Dunavant and Godwin staff to celebrate after a long and tedious process, until it starts all over again tomorrow.

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