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Celebrating the moment: Amherst graduates recall navigating COVID to reach milestone

Justin Faulconer

May 31, 2023



Graduates wait to walk the stage during graduation for Amherst County High School at the Vines Center on Friday, Paige Dingler, the New Era-Progress

Justin Faulconer



The 67th graduating class of Amherst County High School — whose educational worlds were turned upside down as freshmen during the shutdown from COVID-19 in 2020 and the lengthy aftermath — cheerfully walked the stage May 26 to receive their diplomas.

Principal Joey Crawford said the seniors worked incredibly hard to celebrate their milestone with friends and family at Liberty University’s Vines Center, praising their perseverance through unprecedented effects from the pandemic.

“Your freshmen, sophomore and junior years were hectic, chaotic and challenging, but once again, you persevered,” Crawford said. “You are here today because of your resilience and your ability to push through what was arguably the toughest time in the history of education to be a student. You are here because you are strong – and so are your teachers.”

Crawford, who is completing his first year as the high school’s principal and formerly served as principal at Temperance Elementary School, addressed the class’ collective journey through elementary and middle school to get to their high school graduation, a culmination of 13 years of work.

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“This school year has been different for all of you,” Crawford told graduates. “It was back to normal. You were able to have spirit weeks, pep rallies, dances and sporting events. You were able to be in our building full time. You were able to have a real senior year.”

Crawford asked seniors and the hundreds in attendance to observe a moment of silence for Myson Sylvestre, a senior who died in December over winter break.

Ruth Koshy, senior class president, said as a little girl she always wished to be older.

“We’ve been told our whole lives that time passes by quickly, but for me at least, it didn’t seem that way,” Koshy said. “As I look back I feel like I was just wishing time away until finally a new chapter began in high school.”

She recalled freshmen year bringing first-time experiences such as homecoming and sporting events. That year ended abruptly in March 2020 when students were sent home while COVID-19 raged across the nation and caused major disruptions.

“Two weeks off turned into an isolated summer break learning TikTok dances, binging Netflix shows and attempting to finish our online school work,” Koshy said. “We didn’t think we would make it through but we were able to overcome this challenge.”

Sophomore year brought face masks, hand sanitizer and social distancing in school with two days in person and two days remote through virtual learning, she recalled. Junior year sparked a year of hope as masks began to disappear and life started returning to normal as Koshy experienced new friendships, opportunities and passions, she said.

Senior year was the hardest and including “senioritis” but she finished with amazing memories and what she described as an awesome senior prank.

“A majority of us have had an amazing four years of high school,” Koshy said.

“Whether we want to believe it or not, people have told us that these would be the best years of our lives. We never wanted to believe that, but here we are looking back with smiles...”

She encouraged classmates to “live in the moment.”

“Take this time to look at the people around you and celebrate this moment because it’s about you and your accomplishments and the time you spent in high school,” Koshy said. “Celebrate what was learned... Complete one chapter before you move on to the next because we are all part of each other’s story.”

Jack Elliott Pitts, salutatorian, joked: “The years of corporate punishment have not been in vain.”

The graduation was a special opportunity to celebrate their accomplishments and putting in a “tremendous amount of work and dedication” into their education, he said.

“Life has given us the grand opportunity to live on our own, pay bills and finally accumulate some debt,” Pitts said.

He urged classmates to hold their diplomas high and try to not to cry while celebrating.

“We will forever remember this moment,” Pitts said.

Nathan William Neblett, valedictorian, adjusted his tone in humor while delivering his speech.

“In many ways we are thieves – thieves of knowledge,” Neblett said. “Whether teachers came to the realization or not, their job has been done beyond what they thought possible. We have taken their knowledge piece by piece until they have nothing left to give. The preparations, long and hard, are now complete for us to embark on our journey as a class. Our influence will be heard in every corner, every crevice of the world.”

He described the class as a “group of warriors skilled in a vast array of trades” who will break free to make their marks.

“The assembly tonight has the mountains, valleys and rivers of Amherst coursing through our veins,” he said.

Crawford encouraged students to remember family and relationships are important.

“I don’t know of any person who would tell you they have done everything on their own,” Crawford said. “You need people. It’s OK to need help. I ask for help all the time. More importantly, it’s OK to make mistakes. It isn’t the mistake that you make that’s important – it’s how you respond and how you react to that mistake. It’s how you learn and grow from that mistake.”

Wherever the graduates go, Crawford urged them to remember Amherst County is home. He recalled sitting where they were 20 years ago and not thinking he would one day become the school’s principal.

“I can tell you from personal experience that life moves quickly and it is constantly changing,” he said.

Crawford said they are Lancers and their choices affect others.

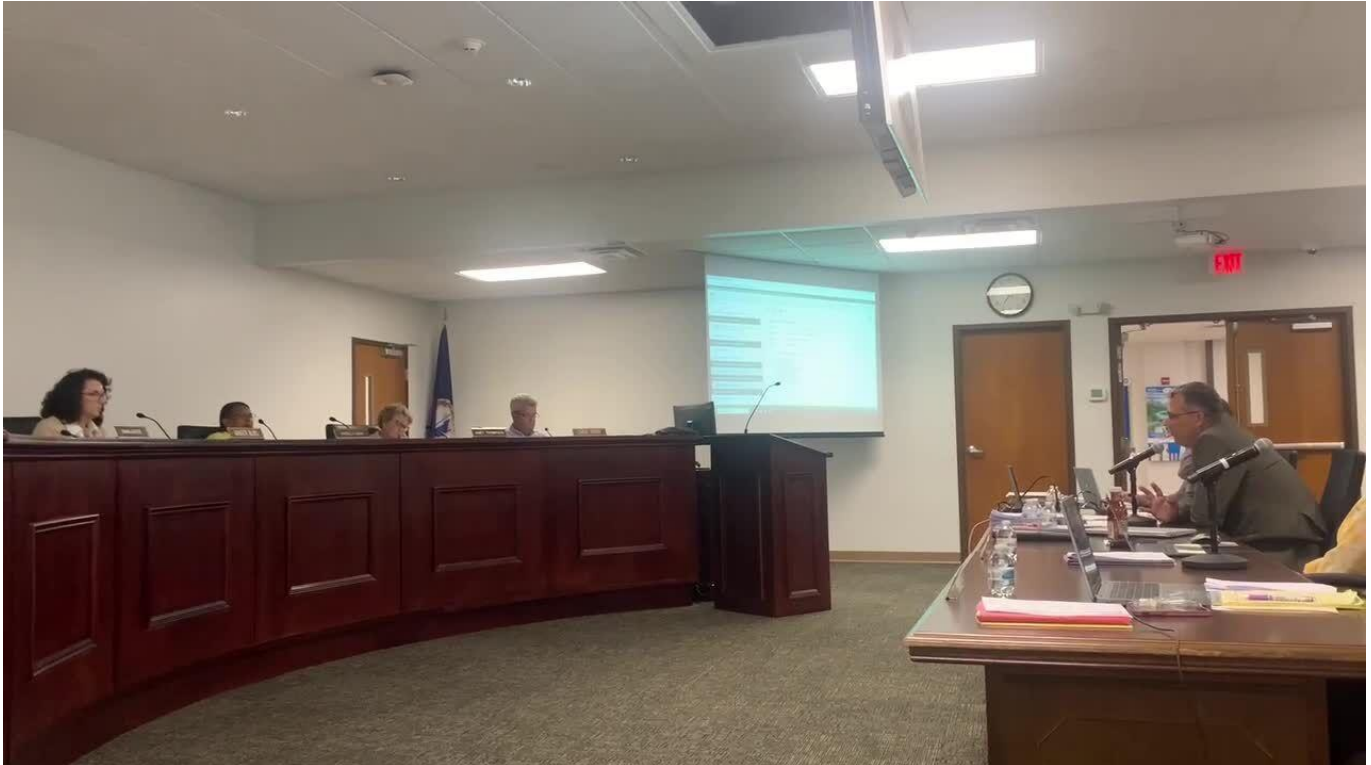
“In the words of my high school principal, Mr. Ernie Guill, make good choices,” he told the graduates. “Best of luck to each and every one of you — and congratulations.”

By Justin Faulconer

Schools chief: Major focus on engaging students more in 2023-24 year

Justin Faulconer

Jul 19, 2023



A key word to be used in Amherst County Public Schools this school year is “engage,” Superintendent William Wells said at the Amherst County School Board's July meeting.

Wells said based on recent feedback he’s had with students about how to make the school experience better a common response is they didn’t feel the classroom was engaging enough. The division is putting an emphasis this year on ways to engage students, families and the Amherst community, Wells at the July 13 meeting.

“We want them to show up and engage with us,” Wells said. “We want instruction to be engaging instruction.”

Students shouldn't be on their Chromebooks for an entire 45-minute period, Wells said, though adding it was necessary during the pandemic with virtual learning.

"But that's not how we need to instruct now," Wells said. "People need to look at each other in the face, eye to eye ... and have those conversations."

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A recent leadership conference session for the division was "technology free" for a few days to allow staff to come together and engage with each other without online distractions, he said. Engaging more will be a focus in his Aug. 7 convocation speech with staff, he told the board.

"We need to make them want to come to school," he said of engaging students more.

School board member Priscilla Liggon said children get bored more quickly than they used to.

"I like the word engage," Liggon said. "I'm glad you are stressing that. That's a two-way street. The school system can engage but we need the parents to engage and the children. I've always said in the classroom setting that should be just a known fact."

Vice Chair Abby Thompson said she appreciates the central administration office working with staff about how to engage with students more.

“We need to extend that to students ... we’re a team. We have to all show up, we all have to become engaged,” Thompson said. “The classroom may not be 100% what a student wants it to be but it’s their job to help make it what they want it to be and to become engaged and help make that difference and that change.”

The first day of school is set for Aug. 16. An open house for all schools is set for Aug. 9 and transition day for first-year students at each school is planned for Aug. 15.

Assistant Superintendent Dana Norman said the division is ahead of the game in registration for kindergarteners. At the end of the 2022-23 school year the school system had 293 students and as of July 13 there were 274 enrolled with an expectation for many more, Norman said.

“What that communicates to me is a confidence in your community and your school system, and parent confidence, and that’s really exciting,” board member Dawn Justice said.

Board member Ginger Burg during the meeting asked Norman how confident she is all schools will be accredited this year. Results of the schools’ most recent accreditation standing through the Virginia Department of Education will be disclosed in September, Norman told the board.

“They have not given us all the calculations yet. I can project pretty close where we concentrated and where we knew we had significant issues, specifically with elementary science, I know that we improved greatly,” Norman said. “I’m confident that where we focused this year we saw growth and our students saw growth.”

Burg asked Norman what tools the central administration needs from the board to meet the goal of accreditation for all schools. Norman said additional personnel is needed to allow for smaller classrooms, more one-on-one time with teachers and small group instruction would allow the division to better provide “high quality instruction.”

She said additional reading specialists, math specialists and instructional assistants are needed in schools. “They are very hard to find,” Norman said of reading specialists.

Wells said the division saw growth in working to meet accreditation benchmarks this year.

“There are some areas we didn’t grow as much as we wanted to,” Wells told the board. “In most areas we will see exceptional progress across the board. I think you will see growth across the division this year.”

Jim Gallagher, chief human resources officer, said the division also could use more mentor teachers if funding allowed.

“We actually have more qualified mentors in our division than we are able to fund and place in assignments annually,” Gallagher told the board. “We can place roughly 40 – most times we have up to 50 who are actually qualified if we were able to fund that and provide additional supports.”

Those in the mentoring program get a \$1,000 stipend and can get recertification points to go toward their licensure process, according to Gallagher.

“A lot of times they do it because they’re just awesome people and like to grow and develop and help the early career teachers become better,” Gallagher said.

Wells during the meeting reported there has been no advancement in receiving finalized state figures for the current fiscal year that started July 1. The Virginia General Assembly as of July 18 still has not passed a new state budget, which drew Burg’s ire during the July 13 meeting.

“I would like for our community, if they would please write their delegate, write their senator and tell them to get off their butts and start doing something,” Burg said.

“They have no problem passing right away unfunded mandates that we have to

provide money for, but they are not giving us money we need to actually run the school [division] right now. I'm very upset about that.”

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Madison Heights

Amherst schools bracing for county population growth

Justin Faulconer

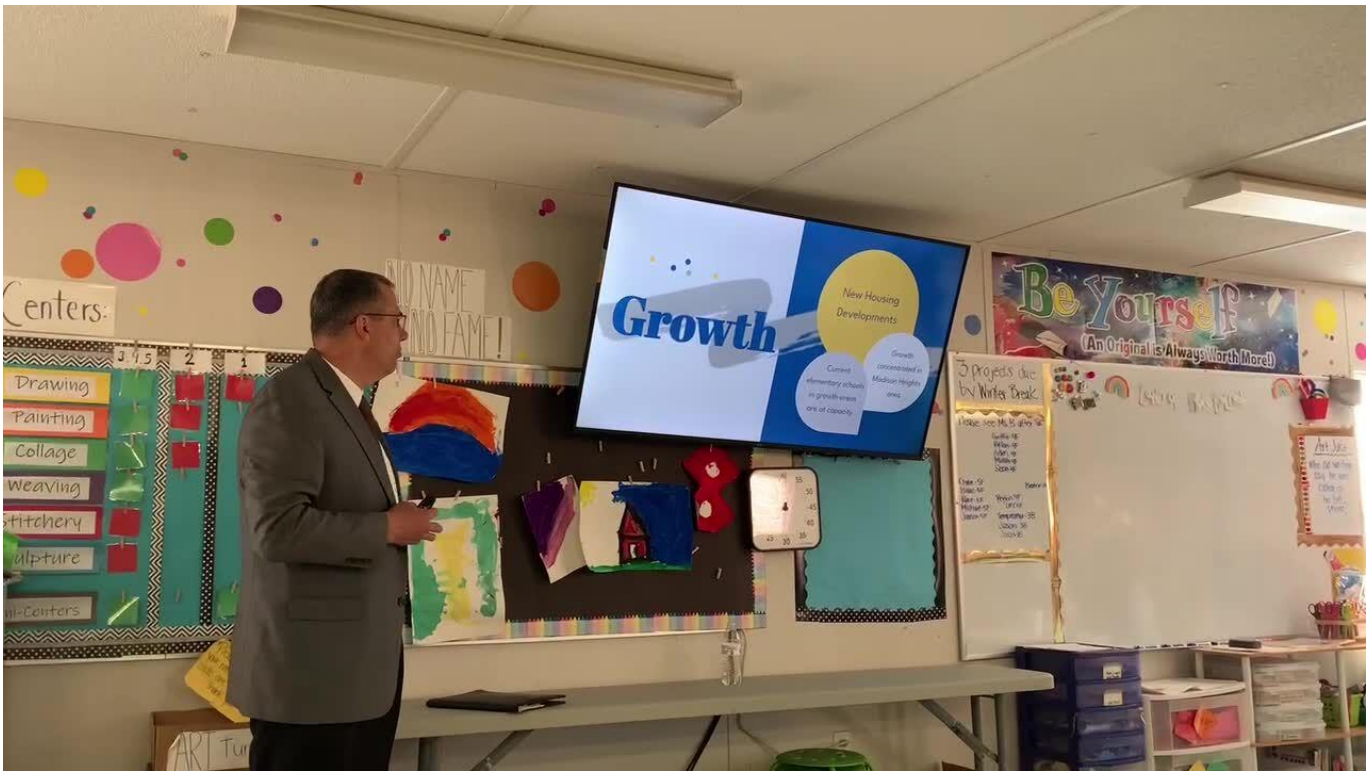
Dec 6, 2023



Amherst County Public Schools Superintendent William Wells discusses school infrastructure needs facing the division with state and local officials at Elon Elementary School.

Justin Faulconer, The News & Advance

Justin Faulconer



Development in Madison Heights is leading Amherst County Public Schools to brace for potentially needing a new elementary school in the next eight years.

Superintendent William Wells spoke about the pressing growth forecasts during a breakfast and tour of Elon Elementary School with state and local officials on Nov. 30. In attendance was Sen. Creigh Deeds, D-Charlottesville, recently elected to represent the Senate's District 11 that includes Amherst County and a veteran member of the General Assembly with service spanning more than 30 years.

Amherst County School Board members Chis Terry and Priscilla Ligon and three Town of Amherst leaders also were in attendance.

Wells said the county is expecting 2,000 new homes in the Madison Heights community through several residential development projects. He said the division has ample room at Amherst Elementary School in the town of Amherst to handle future growth but in the south end of the county in Madison Heights, the schools are at or nearing capacity.

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“We’re pretty much full in the south end schools,” Wells said. “There’s still going to be a need for a new school here, if those developments happen.”

Wells gave his presentation in a mobile trailer unit at Elon Elementary because the school is maxed on space, he said. The Virginia 130 intersection of U.S. 29 to the border with Lynchburg is where the anticipated growth is, Wells said.

The Madison Heights Town Center, a mixed residential and commercial development, recently started construction on apartments just south of the Town & Country shopping center on U.S. 29 Business in Madison Heights. The project will include hundreds of homes, including townhomes, and retail space, according to plans the Amherst County Board of Supervisors approved last year.

Wells said the division is in discussions with Sam Patel, who is developing the Madison Heights Town Center, and he is willing to give the division land for a new school near that development on about 180 acres.

“We’re looking at working those details out right now,” Wells said, adding more information would be forthcoming at the school board’s Dec. 14 meeting.

According to Wells’ presentation, Virginia Department of Education data indicates a new school serving 600 to 800 students would cost from \$30 million to \$55 million. In 2017, an elementary school in Loudon County serving 1,000 students cost \$26 million to build and, this year, that same scale project is projected to cost \$49 million, the report shows.

While a new school is projected eight years out, Wells noted the renovation and addition at Amherst County High School, which kicked off this month, will have taken six to seven years from start to finish. That \$32 million project is slated for completion in late 2025, Wells said.

“It’s not something you can wait until 2030 and say ‘hey, we’ve got to build a school next year,’” Wells said. “It’s a process to it.”

The high school renovation and addition, which includes a new auditorium, a revamped cafeteria area, a fieldhouse for softball and baseball with concessions and restroom and a slew of renovations to existing space for more career and technical education offerings, is the division’s largest scale-construction project since Madison Heights Elementary was built 34 years ago.

Wells said the division is seeing an 80% to 90% increase in overall costs related to school construction since the COVID-19 pandemic. What would cost \$15 million five or six years to build ago now is estimated at \$25 million to \$30 million.

“It’s ridiculous how much inflation has hit us,” Wells said. “That’s an issue for us because where does the county find the funding to build a new school?”

One potential funding source is state sales tax through a referendum on a general election ballot. So far, that has failed to gain traction among Republican state legislators representing Amherst County but on the Senate side, Deeds is supportive of getting that measure to voters to decide.

“Put it on the ballot and let the voters decide,” Deeds said. “That’s nonpartisan as it gets.”

Deeds said he is confident that, with the Democrats gaining a majority in the Senate and House of Delegates as a result of the Nov. 7 election, they will get a bill to Gov. Glenn Youngkin that lets him look at the sales tax referendum measure.

David Pugh, a Republican who serves on the Amherst County Board of Supervisors, also has mentioned a sales tax referendum as a potential funding source. The board of supervisors recently voted to raise the county's meals tax 2% to help pay for the high school project.

Wells said it would be great for the division if more state money for schools construction needs was available.

"That's my big ask," Wells said of the state sales tax measure. "Every locality should have the citizens decide if they want to do it or not. Right now, the only way to raise funds is through property tax. Nobody wants that."

Wells said Amherst schools get about \$50,000 per year from the county for capital improvement needs and much of that type of spending comes from carryover money from the previous fiscal year. An influx of money from a state source would be much needed, he said.

Most of the division's elementary school buildings are nearing 80-year lifespans in the next few decades and school officials must determine in upcoming years if renovation or rebuild projects are needed, Wells said.

"The older the buildings get, the maintenance costs just continue to go up," he said.

Wells also discussed other funding challenges facing the division, including the burden on localities in regard to the Standards of Quality (SOQ), a funding formula for how the Virginia General Assembly fulfills its constitutional obligation to seek and maintain a high-quality public school system.

The formula estimates how many staff positions are needed for each school division and applies cost assumptions to estimate the cost of K-12 staff needed in each division, according to the state's Joint Legislative Audit and Review Commission (JLARC).

The cost is then apportioned between the state and each local government using the local composite index, a formula for state funding to counties and cities for public education, the JLARC data states.

Wells said it would be nice for all SOQ positions, more than 400, to be fully funded from the state so the burden is not placed on the locality. Virginia school divisions receive less funding per students than other states and funding models estimate state school systems need 6% to 33% more funding, according to data Wells presented from JLARC.

Deeds said the state wants to invest in the commonwealth's children, open them up to better opportunities and have the best schools in the country. He added the reason for opposing Youngkin's proposed tax cuts is to make sure money is available for important areas such as public education at a time when federal relief money to respond to the pandemic is coming to an end.

"The reason we didn't want permanent tax cuts is because we're getting ready to go back into a regular budget year," Deeds said. "The federal money has run out. Things are going to be tight this year, really tight. And that's why you don't cut your revenue streams off."

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Clarification

The story has been updated to clarify that Superintendent William Wells said costs related to school construction (not overall school spending) have gone up 80% to 90% since the pandemic.

By Justin Faulconer
