

Why teachers leave

By Stephen Faleski

Staff Writer

Malaika Wainwright loved teaching at Smithfield High School, but when the city of Newport News offered her an administrative job in February with a significant pay raise the mother of three couldn't say no.

Isle of Wight County Schools' 35-step pay scale had placed Wainwright at a salary of just over \$50,000 based on her seven prior years teaching in Suffolk, but she ended up working a second job at Walmart to make ends meet.

She's one of 13 former Isle of Wight teachers to resign before the end of the 2022-23 school year, up from an average of seven midyear resignations for the previous four school years.

Isle of Wight, which participates in an agreement with area school divisions not to hire from one another after June 30, was only able to find three replacements who could start midyear to fill the vacancies, according to Human Resources Director Laura Sullivan. The other 10 classrooms have, for months, been staffed by long-term substitutes or Isle of Wight teachers who took on additional duties.

Despite the uptick in mid-year resignations, Isle of Wight was on track as of May to see less turnover by June 30 than it saw by the same date last year.

From the start of August in 2021 through the end of June in 2022, Isle of Wight County Schools saw 77 vacancies, including seven mid-year departures and another 70 end-of-year resignations. From June 1, 2022, through May 31, the school division had filled all but one of the prior year's unfilled teaching jobs.

From Sept. 6 through May 31, 56 teachers had sent Sullivan notice that they would not be returning for the 2023-24 school year. The total includes 11 retirements and the 13 mid-year resignations.

By the same date, Isle of Wight had hired 32 replacements, leaving 24 vacancies.

As of June 8, the number of vacancies had increased to 27, accounting for 6% of Isle of Wight's roughly 430 teaching positions.

According to the Virginia Department of Education's staffing and vacancy report, the statewide number of unfilled public school teaching jobs rose from 2,815 in 2021 to 3,574 in 2022, an increase of 758 vacancies or 26%.

The report is updated annually

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IWCS projects 1,000-plus new pupils

By Stephen Faleski
Staff Writer

A study projects more than 1,000 new students will enter Isle of Wight County's school division upon the buildout of 13 housing developments, putting four of its nine schools over capacity.

Smithfield Middle School, which opened in 2005, is already at 95% of its 634-student capacity according to local enrollment data. Its 176-student share of the influx from more than 3,000

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Students

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planned new houses and apartment units would push the school past its breaking point to 123%, according to a report by Ohio-based Cooperative Strategies.

Carrollton Elementary, a circa-1993 school with capacity for 674 students, is also already feeling the squeeze with 563 enrolled as of Oct. 31 and another 158 expected from new housing, as is Westside Elementary.

Westside, a 1960s-era building and the most populous of the county's five elementary schools, is currently at 87% of its 849-student capacity and is projected to be at 110% when its 188-student share of the influx arrives.

Smithfield High School, which opened its doors in 1980, already has 1,305, or 84%, of its 1,560-student capacity. It's projected to see an additional 339 from new housing, pushing it to 105%.

The report lists three proposed developments and another 10, all within the county's northern end where the four schools are located, that have already received rezoning approval. Some, such as the 179-home, 2005-approved St. Luke's Village subdivision slated for 128 acres off Brewers Neck Boulevard near St. Luke's Church, were rezoned decades ago but still haven't broken ground. Others, like the 776-home Bennis Grant development off Bennis Church Boulevard are well underway, with roughly 240 units largely consisting of an apartment phase yet to be occupied as of this spring when Cooperative Strategies completed its study.

Mallory Pointe, the largest of the listed subdivisions, will add 812 homes at the 500-acre former Mallory Scott Farm off Battery Park Road. It broke ground this summer. Cooperative Strategies projects Mallory Pointe alone will bring 277 additional students, accounting for just over one-fourth of the county-wide influx.

Isle of Wight County Schools was already projecting capacity issues at Smithfield Middle and Westside during Mallory Pointe's 2021 rezoning process, but the project's developer, Napolitano Homes, contended the School Board had plans in the works to replace Westside with a new middle school that would relieve overcrowding at both schools. Smithfield's Town Council approved the rezoning in a contentious 5-2 vote that same year.

The division's plans for Westside, estimated in early 2022 to cost upwards of \$66 million, are now on hold for lack of funding.

School Board Vice Chairman Jason Maresh, at the board's Nov. 8 meeting, called upon town and county officials to "start saying no" to developers "unless we know for a fact that we're going to grow facilities."

How certain are the projections?

Isle of Wight County Schools previously retained Cooperative Strategies in 2018, at which time the consulting firm estimated nearly 900 students would enter the school system within the next 13 years. Division officials estimated the same year that roughly one-third would arrive by 2022 – a projection that didn't come to pass.

Divisionwide enrollment, which had fluctuated between 5,500 and 5,600 students in 2019 and prior, dropped to just under 5,300 students at the start of the 2020-21 school year when Isle of Wight became one of the first Hampton Roads divisions

to reopen its schools following the nearly six-month state-mandated closure aimed at slowing the early spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. By the start of the 2021-22 school year, enrollment had bounced back to 5,487 students, but declined again to 5,481 in 2022 and 5,438 as of this September, according to enrollment data school officials shared in October.

According to division spokeswoman Lynn Briggs, the declines are likely tied to an uptick in the number of parents choosing to homeschool their children. According to the division's enrollment data, there were 231 homeschooled students in Isle of Wight during the 2019-20 school year. That number nearly doubled to 404 by 2020-21. It fell to 379 in 2021-22, but rose again to 386 last school year. As of the end of this September, the number of homeschoolers had surged to 471.

"You have to look long-range at the growth that's happening; you just can't look five years and say it's fairly flat," Briggs told the School Board at its Nov. 8 meeting.

Briggs said that when she taught at Smithfield High in 1993, the school had roughly 800 students enrolled. In the 30 years since, it's seen a 63% population increase.

Several of the developments Cooperative Strategies lists in its report are ones the county has deemed "dormant."

In addition to the stalled St. Luke's Village, another subdivision that has yet to break ground but could at any time is a 340-home "Timber Preserve" development slated for land near the Jones Creek Boat Ramp in Carrollton. According to The Smithfield Times' archives, Isle of Wight County's Board of Supervisors approved Timber Preserve in 1986.

Also dormant is "The Park at Battery," a 150-home development proposed for 18 acres off Battery Park Road behind Smithfield's Royal Farms gas station. The Town Council approved the subdivision in 2019 when Virginia Beach-based developer John Mamoudis proposed a series of condominium buildings. Mamoudis returned to the town's Planning Commission in 2022 with a proposal to swap the condos for 150 townhouses, which the commissioners frowned upon but took no formal vote to recommend approval or denial of the amendment.

Cooperative Strategies' enrollment projections for The Grange at 10Main, a mixed-use community slated for the western edge of Smithfield's historic district at Route 10 and Main Street, are based on a rezoning application developer Joseph Luter IV filed last December for 304 residences. Luter submitted revised plans in October that scrapped the fourth floor of controversial four-story apartment buildings and reduced the overall number of residences to 267.

It's also possible that Cooperative Strategies' latest projections reflect an underestimation. Not included in its report, which was completed this spring, is a 262-home subdivision Williamsburg-based Greenwood Homes proposed on Aug. 31 to build at the site of a reclaimed sand mining operation behind the Smithfield Tractor Supply. Plans for "The Promontory," as it's been dubbed, are currently under review by town staff and haven't yet gone before Smithfield's Planning Commission or Town Council for a public hearing or vote.

According to Briggs, county officials recently alerted the division that St. Luke's is again showing

signs of life, with a new proposal calling for up to 315 houses rather than the originally-approved 179. The updated count also was not included in Cooperative Strategies' report. The county did not immediately respond to The Smithfield Times' request for confirmation and details.

How can schools absorb the influx?

The School Board, in January, rezoned 75 Carrollton students to the newly built Hardy Elementary, which is designed to house roughly 900 students in preschool through fourth grade. The move reduced Carrollton from being at 93% capacity to 83%. It also reassigned to Hardy any prospective students from Mallory Pointe, the Grange and 225 unrestricted townhouses that would be built as a phase of the largely age-restricted, 615-home "Sweetgrass" development proposed behind the Sherwin Williams store just outside Smithfield.

Cooperative Strategies has proposed four options for again changing the grade levels housed within each school, and the attendance boundaries that determine which school children from the new and existing developments would attend.

The first would involve housing preschool through sixth grade in each of the five elementary schools. This would involve additions, and possibly replacing Westside with a larger school, or constructing a sixth elementary school somewhere in the county's northern end. The five or six elementary schools would be able to absorb the projected influx from the listed housing developments but just barely, reaching a collective 97% capacity.

The second option calls for Carrollton, Carrsville, Windsor and the newly built Hardy elementary schools housing preschool through fifth grade. Factoring in the projected influx, this would still leave them at a collective 110% of capacity, and would necessitate the construction of a new elementary school. Westside would join Georgie D. Tyler and Smithfield middle schools in housing grades 6-8.

The third option calls for Carrollton, Carrsville and Hardy to house preschool through third grade, which would put the three right at their collective maximum capacities upon buildout, and necessitate the building of another elementary school. Windsor Elementary and Westside would each become grades 4-6 intermediate schools under this plan, and would reach 93% of their collective capacity with the expected influx from developments.

The fourth option is the closest to what the School Board had proposed in 2021 for Westside. Under this option, Carrollton, Carrsville Elementary and the newly built Hardy Elementary would each house preschool through fourth grade. The move would collectively put the three schools at 106% of capacity under current enrollment, and 125% with the influx of new housing. Constructing a new elementary school would be required.

The fourth option calls for Windsor Elementary and Westside to each become grades 5-7 intermediate schools. The town of Windsor's Georgie D. Tyler Middle School and Smithfield Middle School would each become grades 8-9 junior high schools that, with the projected influx, would become filled to over 90% of capacity. Smithfield High and Windsor High would house grades 10-12.

License revoked for Teacher of the Year

By Stephen Faleski
Staff writer

A former Smithfield High School Teacher of the Year has lost his teaching license but won't face criminal charges for an alleged sexual relationship with a former student.

Andrew Henson, who was honored by Isle of Wight County Schools as Smithfield High's top educator for the 2021-22 school year, resigned on Feb. 18, 2022, eight days after one of his former students told school administrators of the alleged affair.

A record of the Virginia

Board of Education's March 22, 2023, licensure hearing, which a source obtained via Virginia's Freedom of Information Act and provided to The Smithfield Times, states that the former student, who's now in college, gave the board screenshots, pictures and messages from her time as



Henson

an SHS junior during the 2019-20 school year to corroborate the "existence and nature" of the relationship.

A partially redacted inci-

dent report from the Isle of Wight County Sheriff's Office states the relationship may have begun as early as the student's freshman and sophomore years at SHS, where Henson taught world history and sociology.

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Teacher

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According to the same report, the Sheriff's Office's investigation concluded that "no felonious conduct" had occurred. Deputies' investigation into "potential misdemeanor violations" was "halted at the direction of the Commonwealth's Attorney's Office" due to the statute of limitations having expired, the report states.

Virginia limits prosecution of most misdemeanors to within one year of an alleged offense. For misdemeanor sexual abuse or consensual intercourse with someone underage, the statute is one year after the victim turns 18, or five years if the alleged offender is an adult more than three years older than the victim. This particular case "did not otherwise meet any of the other criteria with extended expiration dates," the Sheriff's Office report states. The most recent offense, the report states, allegedly occurred during the 2019-20 school year but wasn't reported until February 2022.

Isle of Wight County Commonwealth's Attorney Georgette Phillips told the Times by email on July 4 that she was "not aware" of any ongoing criminal investigation of Henson.

Henson did not respond to the Times' request for comments. According to his 2021-22 teacher of the year biography, Henson had been teaching for nine years as of 2021, seven with Isle of Wight County Schools. In addition to teaching at Smithfield High, he also coached the school's debate team.

The Times asked, but did not receive an answer

from Isle of Wight County Schools, about whether any parents or former students of Henson were notified after Henson's teaching license was revoked in March.

"The school division does not comment on specific personnel or student matters," said Isle of Wight County Schools spokeswoman Lynn Briggs.

According to the Board of Education record, Isle of Wight County Schools conducted its own investigation into Henson and provided a summary to the School Board by memorandum on April 21, 2022. Based on that memo, former Superintendent Jim Thornton filed a petition on May 16, 2022, seeking the revocation of Henson's teaching license.

Under state law, a petition must be sent by certified mail to the teacher, and the School Board must hold a hearing within 90 days of that notice.

Henson, according to the Board of Education record, indicated in correspondence with Isle of Wight County Schools that he "disputed the allegations" of Thornton's petition but offered to voluntarily cancel his license. State law, however, allows voluntary cancellation only when the license-holder does not contest the allegations of a petition.

According to meeting minutes, the School Board conducted a closed-session hearing on the petition on Aug. 11, 2022, by which time Thornton had retired and the school division was operating under the temporary leadership of acting Superintendent Chris Coleman. Eleven

days later, Superintendent Theo Cramer would assume his duties as the division's current leader. According to the Board of Education record, the Aug. 11 meeting resulted in the School Board accepting Thornton's petition and forwarding the matter to the state.

Five months later, a state investigative panel consisting of administrators from Norfolk, Charlottesville, Fairfax County and Prince William County public schools voted unanimously on Jan. 27 to recommend the Board of Education revoke Henson's license. Henson, according to the Board of Education record, was not present at this hearing.

According to Virginia Department of Education records, Isle of Wight County Schools has seen just two of its teachers lose or be denied a Virginia teaching license since 2000.

The second incident, which occurred on April 23, 2019, involved Sebastian Sebastian, a music teacher who'd joined Carrsville Elementary's staff in September 2018.

According to the Board of Education's record of Sebastian's hearing, the Department of Education received notice in October 2018 that Sebastian, formerly of Gwinnett County Public Schools in Georgia, had lost his Georgia teaching license after a law enforcement task force found child pornography on Sebastian's home computer, though he denied wrongdoing and allegedly told police customers of his private music lessons would sometimes use the computer.