

Schools suffer \$1 million setback

Despite local lobbying,
bill to boost state funding
for county schools fails

BY RANDY RIELAND
For Foothills Forum

Rappahannock County Public Schools (RCPS) suffered a setback last week in its effort to boost the financial support it receives from the state.

The Virginia Senate's Finance and Appropriations Committee voted to shelve a bill that would have removed a cap that has restricted a portion of the school district's funding from the state. The same legislation, H.B.1443, had passed by a 100-0 vote in the majority-Republican House of Delegates.

The measure would have raised the state's contribution to the RCPS budget by more than \$1 million. But the Senate committee iced it by a 10-6 vote,

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ostensibly because the General Assembly is waiting for the results of an overdue study on the Local Composite Index (LCI), the complex formula used to determine how much money the state provides each public school district.

"I was surprised," said Superintendent Dr. Shannon Grimsley. "With the Democratic majority in the Senate really pushing for funding public schools, especially rural public schools, yes, I was surprised."

County Administrator Garrey Curry went so far as to follow up with the committee's chair, Sen. Janet Howell (D-Fairfax), asking her to reconsider the legislation. "This bill has a limited scope, does not rob Peter to pay Paul, and requires a relatively small amount of state funding," he said. But, to no avail.

CAPPING RAPPAHANNOCK

Grimsley, however, pointed out that RCPS could still receive the additional funding this year because it's been included in the House of Delegates budget. If the legislature's Conference Committee approves that budget, RCPS would get the money on a one-time basis.

But the cap, which dates back to 2008 and affects only Rappahannock County, will stay in place for now.

The funding restriction was dis-

covered in the fall of 2021 by a group of citizens working for the School Innovative Finance Taskforce (SIFT), a team appointed by Curry and Grimsley to more closely analyze the financial challenges facing the school district. During discussions with state officials, they learned that the cap had been imposed 15 years ago, apparently as a protective measure during a difficult economic period.

RCPS could still receive the additional funding this year because it's been included in the House of Delegates budget. If the legislature's Conference Committee approves that budget, the schools would get the money on a one-time basis.

That explained why RCPS, according to the task force's calculations, has been receiving significantly less money than it should in conjunction with a 2007 act meant to help small school districts which initiated cooperative programs with neighboring counties. RCPS has such an arrangement with Madison County Public Schools.

That legislation was meant to help school districts with small enrollments

(fewer than 1,100 students) that rely heavily on local property taxes. Rappahannock schools are funded 80 percent by property taxes. It also focused on those with a high score in the index that determines state support. Rappahannock's score skews high due to its elevated property values and its relatively high average gross income. To lighten the financial burden, the 2007 act allowed counties to use the lower score of the adjacent county with which they had a cooperative arrangement.

The schools' taskforce determined that only four counties in the state qualified for the additional subsidy - Rappahannock, Highland, Surry and Bath - and that only the first two have set up cooperative programs. Further analysis found that Highland County Public Schools, with an enrollment lower than 200 students, has been receiving a subsidy more than twice the size of what's provided to RCPS, which has more than three times as many students.

The reason is that the subsidy to Rappahannock was capped at the 2007 level while apparently, Highland was not affected because it had a cooperative program in place before the restriction was imposed.

RISING COSTS

Even if RCPS gets the extra funding to help short-term with the upcoming budget, Grimsley expects the county and school district to revive its lobbying effort to scrap the cap later this year.

"We're not done yet," she said.

"Maintaining the quality of education, That's what is at risk if we don't deal with this," said Eve Brooks, a member of the taskforce.

Grimsley pointed out that RCPS has been able to avoid financial hardship the past few years due to pandemic-related funding from the federal government. But that's no longer available. At the same time, there are new expenses stemming from the health crisis.

"The cost of educating students after the pandemic is more expensive," she said. "You now need a lot more services in place."

"Also, the state is coming out with a whole lot of strategies and implementations for public schools," she added. "And that takes training and staffing and materials. So while the state may be funding it according to what they're putting in their budget, when it trickles down, what school districts receive is still subject to the LCI."

Grimsley also cited rising health insurance costs, which she described as "completely out of whack right now"

"When we're looking at everything we have to do with just maintaining operations and teacher and staff compensation, that's going to eat up close to all of that million dollars," she said. "If we don't get that, we're going to really have to think about what positions mean the most to us. We may have to make some cuts, and we'll have to go to the county and ask for additional funding."

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School district seeks big boost in county's financial support

Large drops in state, federal subsidies – plus the impact of falling enrollment and rising inflation – hit budget

BY RANDY RIELAND
For Foothills Forum

Rappahannock County Public Schools (RCPS) on Tuesday adopted a 2024 FY budget that would increase the county's financial support by almost \$550,000.

It would be the largest year-to-year bump in county funding in recent memory.

The proposed \$14.6 million budget, approved unanimously by the school board, is actually about \$862,000 lower than the current one. But a significant drop of almost \$1.6 million in federal and state subsidies – much of it related to COVID relief or funding for specific capital expenses – would place a heavier financial burden on the county.

Other factors driving the money crunch, according to Superintendent Dr. Shannon Grimsley, are a reduction in state funding due to the school district's declining enrollment – at 741, it's now more than 200 fewer students than seven years ago – and inflation's repercussions, such as an almost 10% increase in health insurance costs.

In an interview, she also noted that while the flow of COVID-relief money has largely stopped, there are ongoing costs that come with addressing the pandemic's impact on learning loss and mental health. That might mean providing more staff “intervention” to help students catch up academically, which could require special training for teachers, particularly those working with grade schoolers.

“Then, of course, there's the mental health piece,” said Grimsley. “Everybody experienced some level of trauma. And there are a lot of things we need to take care of before real learning can even take place. So we have to deal with anxiety we're seeing in students that we might not have ever seen before.”

But maybe...

There remains, however, a possibility that the big spike in the county's contribution to RCPS won't be neces-

sary. Last month, the Virginia House of Delegates unanimously approved a bill that would have removed a cap that has prevented RCPS from receiving more than another \$1 million in a state subsidy. The cap has been in place since 2008, and currently affects only Rappahannock County.

But the Virginia Senate's Finance and Appropriations Committee voted to shelve the bill, ostensibly because the General Assembly is waiting for the results of the long overdue study on the Local Composite Index (LCI), the complex formula used to determine how much money the state provides each public school district.

Still, while the cap remains in place, the House included more than \$1 million in “supplemental basic aid” for RCPS in its budget. It's still not known if and when that allotment will be approved by the legislature's Conference Committee. If it is, the county's contribution to RCPS will not increase in the upcoming budget, and instead stay at the current level of \$8.9 million.



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with the additional \$1 million, Grimsley said the first priority would be to raise salaries by 7% to keep pace with the goal set by the General Assembly.

Among 10 public school districts in the region, RCPS ranks next to last in the starting salary for a teacher with a bachelor's degree (\$45,000) and last for teachers with a masters (\$48,500).

Grimsley acknowledged that the school district's request for an additional half million dollars will likely bring more public scrutiny to both the proposed budget and RCPS itself.

“I'm sure that will happen. That's



BY LUKE CHRISTOPHER FOR FOOTHILLS FORUM

Rappahannock County Public Schools Chief Financial Officer Stacey Whitt, center, and Superintendent Dr. Shannon Grimsley at Tuesday's School Board meeting.

A tug of war?

The budget does reduce the staff by five and a half positions, puts off the purchase of two new school buses – at \$120,000 each – and drops any school construction expenses. Plus, school district employees would have to cover 20% of their health insurance costs, and 30% for coverage for their families.

The budget also includes a 5 per salary increase for RCPS faculty and staff. But that's lower than the 7% hike endorsed by the General Assembly, and considerably below the 13% hike given to Fauquier County Public School teachers for the current fiscal year.

If the state does come through

why everything is going to be very transparent and people can see every line of the budget,” she said. “This is one of those situations where I'll be in a tug of war because on one side, some of the staff aren't going to be very happy with the increase in health insurance costs for them, and not receiving the size of raises teachers in other counties have.

“On the other hand, the community is probably going to be mad that the school district is asking for so much more money than last year. So, on one side, I'm going to hear that I didn't do enough, and the other side will say I did too much.”

The school budget will now be submitted to the Board of Supervisors for its response.

Pandemic's long lesson continues in county schools

Social worker Erica Jennejahn helps students cope with growing mental health needs

BY RANDY RIELAND

For Foothills Forum

Three years on, and yet Erica Jennejahn still sees ripples of the COVID-19 pandemic in the classrooms of Rappahannock County Public Schools (RCPS).

“What I see is that kids and parents alike have a hard time communicating their feelings, a hard time regulating

their emotions and a hard time resolving conflict face to face,” said Jennejahn, who just finished her first year as RCPS’s social worker.

“Those things that were already hard to do before the pandemic, as we’ve shifted into this world of virtual interactions, phones, social media, it’s now a

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Erica Jennejahn

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totally different way of navigating interpersonal relationships. And the pandemic didn't help us."

There's no shortage of evidence of COVID-19's impact on academic performance. National test scores in math are at their lowest level in 34 years, and in reading they haven't been this low since 2004.

The effect on the mental health of students, at all levels, has been harder to measure, but Jennejahn and the other members of RCPS's Mental Health Innovators Team have seen firsthand a swell of kids seeking help.

"There were times we were just so slammed my head was spinning," she said.

A GROWING NEED

As in many rural communities, mental health care options for children and teenagers in Rappahannock are limited at best. So the school district has had to scale up its role in responding to the growing need.

Before the recent school year, for instance, staff members were required to take Mental Health First Aid training, a program that's still voluntary in many school districts. It's designed to help teachers, coaches and others to recognize the warning signs of students struggling with emotional or social issues.



BY LUKE CHRISTOPHER FOR Foothills Forum

"We've had a large number of kids who are willing to say, 'I'm struggling and I need some help,'" says RCPS social worker Erica Jennejahn

"What they get out of this program is more knowledge and a few more tools to help them build relationships so that students feel safe enough to say

to them, 'I'm really feeling depressed.' And it teaches staff what to do with that information," said Jennejahn. "When kids trust you, they'll talk to you."

She said she hopes to make the training available to students in the coming year, adding: "We know kids don't listen to adults as much as they listen to their friends."

The school district's mental health team had a caseload of just under 100 students, according to Jennejahn – slightly lower than the previous school year, but still about 13% of the RCPS population. Another 28 students requiring more clinical treatment were referred to therapists with Health Connect America, which has a partnership with the district.

More than half of the students in the caseload were in the elementary school, where the pandemic's effects tended to play out in poor social skills and bad face-to-face interactions.

"It might be temper tantrums, crying, students refusing to comply with directions from the teachers," said Jennejahn. "We had a few kids who would just leave the classroom. It usually had to do with kids not knowing how to regulate their behavior."

At the high school, the counseling has been more about responding to student concerns regarding their mental health. "It's them coming to us and talking about their feelings of depression and anxiety, or feeling overwhelmed, and just trying to navigate social life as a teenager," she said.

On several occasions, Jennejahn recalled, students came forward and said that based on something a friend had said or posted on social media, they were worried about what they might do.

"The sense of community among our young ones is so strong that they notice the slightest changes in others. They notice all kinds of things," she

said. "What amazes me is how many kids think they're the only one going through something."

BUILDING TRUST

Jennejahn concedes that the mental health team still gets questioned by some teachers who feel disruptive students are rewarded with special treatment, such as being removed from class to take a walk with a counselor. They've also received some pushback from parents.

"You have these fidget toys that kids can use, and a parent will say, 'I don't want my kid to have toys. He needs to go to school to do his work,'" said Jennejahn. "But if he can fidget with this toy under his desk and use his other hand to do his work, he might be a lot more productive."

She hopes that in the coming school year she'll be able to engage more students in addressing the mental health needs of the community. One idea is to create a group of what she referred to as "youth mental health ambassadors" – students who discuss social and emotional issues and come up with ways to promote mental health wellness in the schools.

"The most valuable thing I learned this year is how resilient this community is," she said. "We have folks here who work really hard to keep it together, and don't know there may be other ways they could do things."

"We've had a large number of kids who are willing to say, 'I'm struggling and I need some help,' But we have a lot of things that don't get talked about in Rappahannock County. There's still this very strong feeling that what goes on in my home isn't anybody else's business."

"I respect that. But there are a lot of patterns and behaviors that occur behind closed doors that are hard for kids to navigate and that impact them daily. So for me, I need to earn my way in and keep building that trust."



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