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EDUCATION

Virginia student homelessness numbers near pre-pandemic levels

Youth homelessness, which is linked to chronic absenteeism, increases as pandemic protections expire

BY: **NATHANIEL CLINE** - MAY 10, 2023 12:04 AM



(NBC12)

As Virginia school divisions investigate increases in chronic student absences, data shows the state's homeless youth rate is returning close to pre-pandemic levels.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, Virginia recorded about 10,000 homeless youth in public schools annually. Those numbers dropped by nearly 3,000 students in the 2020-21 school year. Since then, however, they have steadily increased, reaching about 9,000 students, as pandemic-era protections and extra funding for programs like rental assistance and food assistance have expired.

School divisions and advocates are now swiftly

moving to address the rise in homeless students as relief measures unwind for students and families.

Homeless students in Virginia by year

2017-18 – 10,138

Barbara Duffield, executive director for the nonprofit SchoolHouse Connection, an organization that combats homelessness, said actual cases could be even higher than what school officials have identified.

2018-19 – 10,057

2019-20 – 10,268

2020-21 – 7,389

2021-22 – 8,006

2022-23 – 8,998

“It’s hard to know if a child is experiencing homelessness,” said Duffield. “But when children aren’t even in school or coming on a regular basis, then that really

Source: Virginia Department of Education

requires proactive outreach to the community – putting posters up in motels, talking to the service provider community, word of mouth, all of those things – to let families who aren’t in school know that they can come to school, and they can get the help to do that.”

Loudoun County, one of the [most affluent counties in the country](#), reported the highest number of homeless students in Virginia at the start of the 2022-23 school year, with 1,240 cases, according to the Virginia Department of Education. That equates to nearly one in seven homeless students in Virginia attending school in Loudoun County.

Dan Adams, a spokesperson for Loudoun County Public Schools, did not respond to a request for an interview. However, he said that 36% of the division’s McKinney-Vento students – a reference to the federal McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, which defines homeless students as those “who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence” – were identified as chronically absent during the 2021-22 school year.

Chronic absenteeism is defined as missing 18 or more days of the academic year.

“LCPS staff, notably the Office of Student Services, is working hard to address this concerning trend,” Adams said in an email to the

Mercury.

According to Virginia Department of Education data, Fairfax, Henrico, Prince William and Chesterfield counties round out the top five localities in Virginia with the most homeless students during the current school year.

Student absences have recently come under scrutiny in Virginia after the Board of Education decided to [resume considering chronic absenteeism](#) as a factor in school accreditation last month. The decision went against a request by Gov. Glenn Youngkin's administration, which had asked that a pandemic policy suspending consideration of the measure in accreditation reviews be continued.

Chronic absenteeism is one of [nine factors](#) the state looks at when determining whether a school meets the state's educational standards. Researchers with Virginia's Joint Legislative Audit and Review Commission have linked school accreditation and student academic performance.

The Board of Education previously suspended the use of the absenteeism factor due to the sharp increase in [respiratory illnesses among youth](#) and the COVID-19 pandemic. The absenteeism rate in Virginia schools has been more than four times higher in the 2022-23 school year than in the two years before the pandemic, according to a Virginia Association of School Superintendents survey.

Addressing the rate

Youth advocates said that nationally, almost 42% of students who were homeless were chronically absent from school in 2021, twice the chronic absenteeism rate seen among non-homeless students.

While many homeless students are accompanied by at least one adult family member, some are unaccompanied. In Henrico, for example, the number of McKinney-Vento students classified as unaccompanied reached a high of 18% in 2021-22, but has fallen to its pre-pandemic level of 13% this school year.

In Virginia, several programs are aimed at helping homeless students. [William & Mary](#), which administers Virginia's Program for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth for the Virginia Department of Education, tracks homelessness in public education, uses public awareness efforts to help improve homeless student attendance and success, and awards grants to school divisions.

Recently, Duffield said SchoolHouse Connection has been helping divisions determine how best to use COVID-19 relief funds to address student absences and learning losses. Fairfax County, for example, is looking to hire an attendance specialist to focus on connecting with families experiencing homelessness and help get their children to school regularly. And other funds can help with hygiene, clothing and other basic needs that can prevent a child from not coming to school.

“That money can meet some of these critical needs right now,” Duffield said.

Lisa Ann Abernathy, a Henrico education specialist and school liaison for McKinney-Vento services, said students facing homelessness can develop trauma as a result of being shuffled around from place to place. Students can also develop a fear of being bullied and anxiety because of difficulties with hygiene or wearing the same clothes.

“All of the trauma can affect a child’s willingness, ability and preparedness – both their emotional and physical well-being – to be able to go to school, and that’s where the cycle of chronic absenteeism and homelessness go hand-in-hand,” Abernathy said.

Henrico reported 501 cases of homelessness at the start of the 2022-23 school year. However, Abernathy said staff identified about 1,100 students who are eligible for McKinney-Vento. She said about 200 students were already chronically absent before being identified.

‘Couch surfing’

Homeless students face a range of living situations, from emergency or transitional shelters to homes of relatives or family members to public places such as bus or train stations or abandoned buildings.

Experts refer to the constant movement from place to place that many homeless people experience as “couch surfing.”

For students facing homelessness, the lack of a fixed regular residence isn’t the only challenge. Transportation can be an issue getting to school. Duffield said federal funds

2022-23 Homeless student count

Loudoun – 1,240

have been used to provide gas vouchers and funding to repair cars.

School divisions can also have difficulty identifying students in need because they are moving around from different homes to shelters and, in some cases, are alone. Under federal law, children identified as homeless have the right to stay enrolled in the same school district even if they're living elsewhere.

Some districts are attempting to expand their aid to students in need as homelessness levels return to pre-pandemic rates. Starting in July, Henrico schools will have a full-time social worker who will focus on attendance and identify any barriers for families.

“We know that if a student completes high school, that is the number one factor that determines whether or not they're going to break out of homelessness as a young adult,” Abernathy said.

Funding and legislative efforts

Advocates fighting to address homelessness said one of the chief concerns moving forward is the end of relief funding for school divisions in September 2024.

“It has been a lifeline for schools,” said Rachael Deane, CEO of the child advocacy group Voices for Virginia's Children.

As more relaxed pandemic rules expire, families and students facing economic insecurity have also started to lose protections and assistance with rental relief, health coverage and food benefits. Advocates are also concerned about students, particularly those from economically disadvantaged homes and those who identify as transgender or nonbinary, in need of mental health services.

Fairfax - 887

Henrico - 501

Prince William - 433

Chesterfield - 424

Roanoke City - 347

Virginia Beach - 308

Spotsylvania - 301

Newport News - 293

Richmond City - 217

Source: Virginia Department of Education

“The funding is running out, but the challenges have not ended,” Deane said. “So we are very much concerned about schools having enough resources and the right resources to support students and families coming in through their doors.”

Duffield said SchoolHouse Connection is advocating for Congress to continue providing relief funding to support homeless children and youth.

In Virginia, the General Assembly passed [legislation](#) in 2022 allowing youth over age 14 to access shelter without a guardian. And in February, lawmakers passed [legislation](#) changing the state’s guidance on addressing childhood trauma to help schools manage students in need, including those who are homeless. However, [a bill](#) to require school divisions to make meals available to all students at no cost failed in a House subcommittee.

Voices for Virginia’s Children and others say they are monitoring the General Assembly’s decisions on budget amendments, including \$230 million in proposed behavioral health investments that would increase funding for school-based mental health services for students facing challenges including homelessness.

The group is also following a proposal to fund more nursing and psychologist positions to help with increased behavioral issues among students. Advocates say the instability surrounding homeless students is one of several factors contributing to the rise in disruptive behaviors in schools.

Lawmakers have not provided a timetable for when a budget agreement is expected to be reached.

Moving forward, Abernathy said people should drop any bias they have against individuals who are homeless.

“People’s lives can turn upside down in a heartbeat,” she said. “Homelessness is not a choice. It is real, and it’s the kids who suffer. Our idea is to put that bias away, pack that baggage somewhere else, and just focus on moving these children forward.”

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In Virginia, school boards will be the primary deciders on AP African American studies

Lynchburg City Schools to expand pilot program from E.C. Glass High School to Heritage High next school year

BY: **NATHANIEL CLINE** - MARCH 16, 2023 12:03 AM



📷 Virginia is considering the first advanced placement course on African American studies. Pictured are travelers at flower petal throwing ceremony in to honor Africans who passed away at sea during the Atlantic slave trade during the 2019 African Landing Commemorative Ceremony on August 24, 2019 in Hampton. The event marked the 400th arrival of the first African slaves to Virginia in 1619. (Photo by Zach Gibson/Getty Images)

Whether more Virginia students will be able to take the first Advanced Placement course on African American studies will come down to local school boards as contentious public debate over education continues in the commonwealth.

Lynchburg City Schools has already added the course to its list of studies after its E.C. Glass High School was selected as one of 60 schools nationwide to pilot [the program](#), and the district plans to offer the class at another high school next year.

Other divisions have also [shown interest](#) in the course. But its future is uncertain following Gov. Glenn Youngkin's [request that the state secretary of education review the course](#) and how it relates to his executive order banning the teaching of “inherently divisive concepts.”

The College Board, the nonprofit organization that develops AP courses and exams, has said the course was created to offer an “evidence-based” introduction to African American studies that draws from disciplines ranging from literature to political science and the humanities.

Robert Vinson, who serves as director of the University of Virginia's Carter G. Woodson Institute for African-American and African Studies and has reviewed the AP course, said it is about more than slavery.

“I appreciate that course because it reminds us that the beginning of human history begins in Africa and that's not common-sense knowledge for most people, particularly young people,” Vinson said. “This to me is why it should be an option for anyone who wants to take it.”

Vinson said many UVA students' first encounter with formal education on Black history and culture occurs on campus in Charlottesville. He said there's demand for education in the field: More than 2,000 students have graduated from the African-American and African Studies program in the past 41 years.

Not everyone has been so positive. Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis has been the most outspoken of the critics, saying the course [lacks educational value](#) and is [promoting “a political agenda.”](#) Officials in states including Arkansas, Mississippi and North Dakota have also since launched [reviews of the coursework](#), claiming it has elements of critical race theory.

Ultimately, the decision of whether the course will spread more widely will come down to Virginia's school boards and the state Board of Education, which have control over which AP courses are included in their respective [lists of approved courses](#) to count toward graduation.

Lynchburg pilot

Under [state code](#), school boards in Virginia have authority over the development of their school system's program of instruction.

After the College Board selected E.C. Glass for the AP African American studies pilot, the Lynchburg City School Board faced a vote on expanding its list of studies to add the course.

The board went through two reviews of the proposal before [voting 8-1](#) to include the course on its list. The one member who opposed the move, Randy Trost, said he was concerned that the teacher who would lead the class hadn't yet received training and didn't know what materials would be needed.

School officials and fellow board members said Lynchburg used the same process it has previously followed to add new AP courses to its [list of studies](#).

But Trost was not moved.

"I don't care what the course is," Trost said during the Jan. 25, 2022 meeting. "If you're approving something that's not fully developed, for me, that's a cause for concern."

Gary Harvey, who was on the board last January, said he believed there was fear over the adoption of "unknown" coursework but questioned if replacing "African American" studies with "Irish American" or "Anglo-American" studies would have changed the discussion.

"I think there's a certain part of this that we need to trust both the College Board, our teachers and our students," Harvey said.

Samuel Coleman, chief academic officer for Lynchburg City Schools, said the program has been a "tremendous success" among students, and the division plans to expand the yearlong course to its Heritage High School next school year.

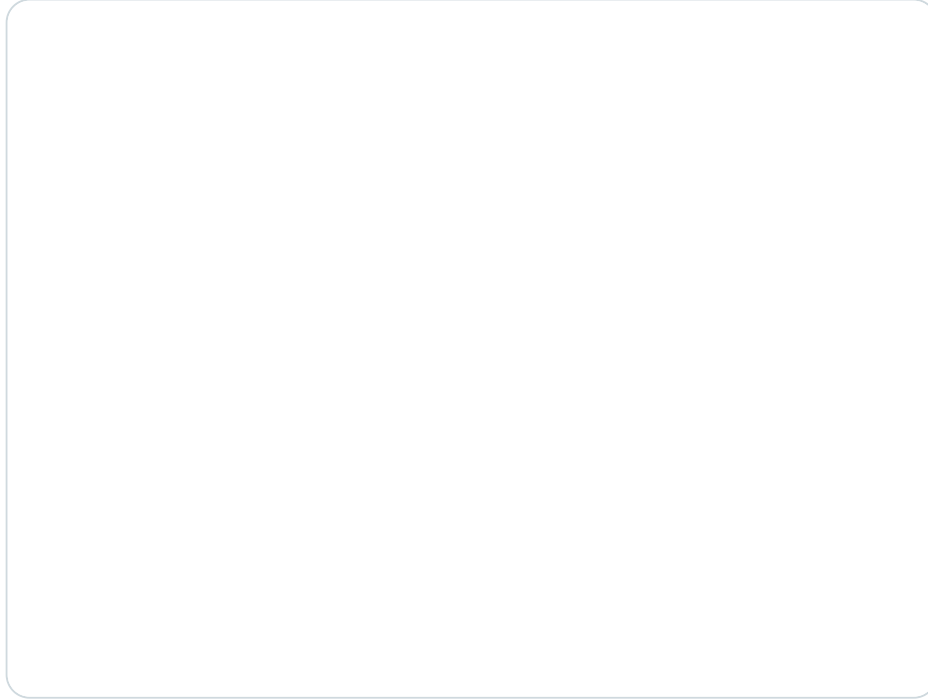
"We believe that it's important to provide rigorous course offerings that allow students an opportunity to learn about things that interest them, learn about topics that interest them and learn about society," Coleman said.

Jessica Barger

@MsJBarger · [Follow](#)



Very excited to be sitting in on the very first AP African American Studies class here at [@ecghighschool](#) . We are the ONLY high school in Virginia and 1 of 30 across the COUNTRY to offer this course!!! Thank you [@AaronReid76](#) for bringing this opportunity to our kids!



9:25 AM · Aug 17, 2022



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An uncertain Board of Education stance

While school boards have the power to determine whether the new AP course should be part of their district's instructional program, the state Board of Education could ease the review process for smaller divisions with fewer resources to evaluate AP courses by adding it to the statewide list of approved courses.

According to Charles Pyle, a spokesman for the Virginia Department of Education, the state superintendent could recommend the course's inclusion to the Board of Education. Or the board could initiate that process itself.

Virginia currently lacks a state superintendent following the [resignation of Jillian Balow](#) earlier this month. And appointees of Youngkin, who has asked for the review of the course, hold a majority on the Board of Education.

Macaulay Porter, a spokeswoman for the governor, said Youngkin asked Secretary of Education Aimee Guidera to review the AP course in light of the governor's [Executive Order No. 1](#) to "restore excellence in education by ending the use of divisive concepts, including critical race theory."

"The governor and I are committed to having high expectations and taking the time to review and ensure that our course offerings prepare every Virginia student for success in life," Guidera said in a statement. She added the review will be conducted similar to how the state examines other programs and curricula to "ensure that our students are being taught how to think, and not what to think."

On March 9, the governor [said during a CNN town hall](#) that "inherently divisive concepts are taken directly, from the Civil Rights Act. And they're teaching children that they're inherently biased, or racist, because of their race, or their sex, or their religion. They teach that a child is guilty for sins of the past, because of their race, or their religion, or their sex. They teach that a child is oppressed, or a victim, because of their race, their religion, or their sex."

Those ideas, he said, show up in curriculum.

"Critical race theory isn't a class that is taught, it's something that is a philosophy that's incorporated in the curriculum," Youngkin said. "This is a chance to make sure that we're not pitting our children against one another based on race or religion or their sex, but teaching all history, the good and the bad."

Asked about the AP African American studies review, Youngkin said he didn't have "any specific concerns" other than the desire to ensure it didn't contain inherently divisive concepts.

"I have no reason to believe, given the changes that I know have been made to that course, that it won't be a fine course for Virginia," he said. "But I have to let our Department of Education do their job."

An official curriculum for the course released by the College Board in February [removed subject matter](#) that had appeared in the pilot

draft, including Black Lives Matter, Black feminism and the debate over reparations.

Pushback to review

Youngkin's review has raised eyebrows among some African American history teachers and a handful of school board members in Fairfax County, the largest school division in the state.

In a Feb. 21 letter to Youngkin and Guidera, five Fairfax School Board members said the review is part of an "alarming pattern of disregard for the academic needs of the commonwealth's students." They also pointed in the same letter to the administration's decision [to discontinue](#) Virginia's Black History Month Historical Markers contest and its controversial proposed changes to Virginia's history and social science standards.

Virginia has a "moral obligation" to teach students about the country's past and progress, the members wrote. "The AP African-American Studies course offers this important objective in a way that also provides our students with valuable college credit. We should applaud and support our students' desire to pursue rigorous curriculum offerings, not deny them these opportunities."

Robert Patterson, a professor of African studies at Georgetown University who served on the course's development team, said he's unclear why Virginia would proceed differently after supporting the College Board's work for several years.

"The issue here is not African American studies per se, but the issue is that they don't want anything taught that is historically accurate, historically sound, that brings into view the way that white supremacy and anti-black racism among other -isms have shaped the American narrative," Patterson said.

Anything that draws attention to this view is "supposedly divisive," he said, even though the course isn't mandatory.

"This is a lot of hoopla for an optional course," Patterson said. "This is not a required course. This is a course that students can opt to take. So if you feel like your child is going to be exposed to some 'divisive concepts' and don't want them to take it, then they just wouldn't take that course."



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Uncertain timetable on budget puts Virginia schools in tight spot on hiring

Proposed budget amendments include an additional 2% salary increase for teachers

BY: **NATHANIEL CLINE** - APRIL 27, 2023 12:04 AM



(Getty Images)

Virginia lawmakers' lack of a timetable for [finalizing state budget amendments](#) has left public school leaders uncertain about their own budgets.

Some division heads say they are uneasy about their ability to hire and retain teachers because of the lack of clarity on state funding for the next school year. Under the existing two-year budget, teachers will receive a 5% salary raise for the upcoming school year. Both the House and Senate are proposing amendments to provide an additional 2% raise, increasing the salary total to 7%, but with

negotiations still ongoing, divisions are uncertain about what they can offer teachers.


“Nothing is final until we have a final meeting and it is printed,” said House Appropriations Committee Chair Barry Knight, R-Virginia Beach, in an email to the Mercury. “We have 5% this year and maybe another 2% on top of that, but with the uncertainty in revenues and the banking situation and the volatility in the markets, nothing is final.”

Localities are now considering whether they should increase their own budgets to accommodate the expected salary changes before hitting state deadlines.

Local governments, which appropriate local funds to the school divisions, are required by state law to approve their annual budgets by May 15 or within 30 days of receiving estimates of state funds. School divisions then can adopt their budgets and distribute teacher contracts for current and potential teachers.

“We’re stuck with what specific amount is going to be on teacher contracts,” said John Gordon III, superintendent of Suffolk Public Schools.



 A Dinwiddie County school bus outside the Virginia Capitol. (Sarah Vogelsong / Virginia Mercury)

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, Virginia schools were struggling with shortages of teachers for several reasons, including concerns over wages and a lack of interest in teaching. The

commonwealth [ranked 32nd](#) among states on K-12 teacher salaries in 2019, according to a 2021 report by the state's Joint Legislative Audit and Review Commission. Schools also lost experienced teachers to retirement or other industry opportunities.

In 2021, more than 15% of teachers told JLARC they were “definitely leaving” or “likely to leave” the industry after the 2022-23 school year.

Researchers said low pay and increased behavioral and mental health issues among students are some of the contributing factors, according to the [November 2022 report](#) by JLARC.

Virginia has sought to minimize the impact of teacher vacancies after a nearly 1% increase over the past two years by [hiring provisionally licensed teachers](#). According to the Department of Education, special education has seen the highest teacher vacancy rates at the start of the past two school years.

Knight did not provide a timetable for when lawmakers would address the budget amendments, but said the team of Democrats and Republicans involved in negotiations are all in communication.

“We want to get it right, especially when it comes to ongoing expenses,” he wrote. “We will get the amendments to the budget. We just need another month or so to be more certain of our revenues. It will get done.”

The ‘skinny’ budget

The stopgap budget adopted by lawmakers in February appropriated millions to Virginia's public schools to fill a funding shortfall caused by a miscalculation from the state's basic aid calculator tool, which projects funds school divisions will receive from the state.

The temporary [spending plan](#), also known as the “skinny budget,” included \$132.7 million for the current school year and \$125.8 million for the following year to support teacher recruitment and retention, school maintenance and learning loss remediation.

As Virginia budget negotiations drag on, here's what hangs in the balance



In normal years, Virginia's budget plan is supposed to be pretty much done by April except for any late changes recommended by the governor. But for the second year in row, the politically split General Assembly is heading into spring under a cloud of uncertainty over when the budget will get

done and what will ... Continue reading

 Virginia Mercury

“No school system for the state of Virginia will get less money this year than they got last year based on the skinny budget, and when we come back for amendments, we’ll put more money in schools then also,” Knight told the Mercury during the April 12 veto session.

In December, education officials determined a flaw in the calculator had not accounted for a provision of state law holding localities harmless from Virginia’s elimination of the state portion of the grocery tax.

As a result, the calculations had provided inaccurate estimates for the following two years, leading to a statewide shortfall of \$201 million – \$58 million for the remainder of 2022-23 and \$143 million in 2023-24.

The Virginia Education Association, the state’s largest teacher’s union, and the nonprofit Commonwealth Institute for Fiscal Analysis said the skinny budget did not fully resolve the \$201 million shortfall.

“By using money that would have gone to schools anyway and deceptively changing the goalposts, Republicans have sought to mislead the public into believing they have made schools whole for

the \$201 million mistake,” said VEA President James Fedderman in [a March 1 statement](#). “Only the Democrat-proposed Senate budget offered a complete fix to this careless mistake, and we need lawmakers to come back to the table and fully fund our schools.”

Laura Goren, research director at the Commonwealth Institute, said the stopgap budget only provided \$16.8 million toward fixing the error and then relied on money from funding formula updates that adjust funding based on changes in enrollment and sales tax projections. Goren said the December budget already included the updates to the state’s funding formula.

“The ‘fix’ is only for the current fiscal year and doesn’t address the upcoming school year at all,” Goren said in a statement to the Mercury.

Thomas Taylor, superintendent of Stafford County Public Schools, said he credits Gov. Glenn Youngkin’s administration and the General Assembly for addressing the shortfall for school divisions. However, he said the school division is at least \$4 million short for the upcoming fiscal year.

“The governor did direct the legislature to start addressing the calculation error, and they have made inroads in addressing the fiscal 2023 issues so that school divisions are not absolutely stuck three-quarters of the year with a shortfall that they had planned on,” Taylor said. “But there’s a big question mark with fiscal 2024, and certainly no school division had planned on that type of a revenue shortfall going into budget season.”

Hiring and retaining teachers

Several school superintendents said they are concerned that lawmakers’ potential inability to agree on state budget amendments will cause complications for local divisions in adopting provisional budgets and offering contracts to current and potential teachers and school support professionals.

Under the [current budget](#), Virginia allocates money for the state’s portion of a 5% salary increase for all eligible public school teacher and support positions in the 2023-24 school year. To access the funds, localities must have provided at least a 2.5% salary increase through a local match in 2022-23 and must do so again in 2023-24. The state will pay the remainder.

However, depending on the size of the locality, school divisions may be left between “a rock and a hard place” if they cannot match the offer, Gordon said.

On Monday, the National Education Association released its [annual report](#) on average teacher pay. The data shows that Virginia increased its average teacher pay by 1.2% from the 2021-22 school year to the current school year, or from \$61,367 to \$62,104, which is below the estimated national average of \$68,499.

In Hanover County, the school board included an additional 2% salary increase for all eligible faculty and staff in its budget for the 2023-24 school year, creating a 7% increase in line with House and Senate budget proposals under negotiation.



We recognize that the continued work of the General Assembly may impact the final content of our budget

- Mike Gill, Hanover County Public Schools superintendent

Mike Gill, superintendent of Hanover County Public Schools, said in an email to the Mercury that the school division felt it was safe to recommend the action after deliberations.

“Still, we recognize that the continued work of the General Assembly may impact the final content of our budget,” Gill said. “We are monitoring the state budget process closely and planning accordingly. Should there be a need to make technical amendments as a result of any final state budget decisions, we will work with our county counterparts to make such adjustments.”

Another factor for superintendents is that if lawmakers don’t return to make any budget adjustments until June, [as reports](#) have indicated is expected, schools will be closed, and current and potential teachers could be lost due to the delay.

“Not only will it be a hindrance because the majority, if not all, of the instructional staff has already gone for the summer, but it also runs up against the ‘gentleman’s agreement’ deadline [for] anyone who wants to take new roles in other school divisions,” Gordon said,

referring to a regional understanding that unless there's a promotion, school divisions don't sign staff members from other schools after June 30.

Taylor added that the delay in addressing the budget amendments puts some school divisions at a disadvantage in retaining teachers.

If lawmakers don't agree to a budget until June, school divisions must readjust their fiscal plans and reissue contracts after the school year has ended.

"This labor force has choices, and staying in public education and staying in competitive areas for teachers like Northern Virginia, I can tell you that it is a struggle," Taylor said. "There are many school divisions that are better fiscally advantaged than others, and we really are clamoring for every dollar in terms of our recruitment and retention strategy. So the timeliness of issuing contracts with the right dollar figure does make a big difference to us."



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