

Charlottesville, Albemarle schools await guidance on Governor's budget
written by Newspark Team | December 24, 2018

Though Gov. Ralph S. Northam's proposed budget promises substantial funding increases for schools statewide, it is unclear how the increase would affect Charlottesville and Albemarle County.

Northam's budget proposal includes an additional \$88 million to fund a 2 percent increase for teachers that would result in a total 5 percent raise for the 2019-2020 school year.

In an address to the Joint Money Committees of the General Assembly last week, Northam said that Virginia is losing teaching talent to neighboring states that offer better pay.

"A good teacher can turn a child's life around, and we should pay them enough so they don't have to take a second job just to get by," Northam said.

According to the National Education Association, Virginia ranks 32nd nationally for teacher pay with an average salary of \$52,995.

Albemarle schools spokesman Phil Giaramita said the 5 percent average raise in Northam's budget applies only to positions recognized by Virginia's Standards of Quality. Albemarle and Charlottesville use local funds to support teacher-student ratios that are lower than the state's requirements.

"It is possible there will be a negligible benefit for us if the guidelines prioritize those school divisions that have a higher ratio," Giaramita said.

Northam also has proposed \$36 million for additional school counselor positions — the first installment of a three-year, phased strategy to reduce counselors' average caseloads to 250 students across all grade levels statewide.

"If Charlottesville doesn't receive funding in the first year, I would expect that we would benefit over the course of the roll-out," city schools Superintendent Rosa Atkins said in an email.

The state currently funds a student-counselor ratio of 425 to 1. As with teachers, Albemarle and Charlottesville use local funds to improve upon that ratio.

In the city, school counselors have average caseloads of 324 students at elementary schools; 294 students at Walker Upper Elementary and Buford Middle School; and 234 students at Charlottesville High School.

In Albemarle, school counselors have average caseloads of 420 students at elementary schools, 250 students at middle schools and 240 students at high schools.

Del. R. Steven Landes, R-Weyers Cave, has introduced a bill which would require school counselors to spend at least 80 percent of their staff time during normal school hours in the direct counseling of individual students or groups of students.

"School counselors are vital to reducing conflict in our schools and guiding students through emotional and behavioral challenges," Landes said in a statement. "School counselors all across the state [say] that too often they are required to do so many administrative tasks that they are spending less than half

of their time actually counseling students.”

In addition to school counselors, Albemarle and Charlottesville provide access to mental health counselors in coordination with Region 10.

“Being proactive with our children’s mental health and social-emotional growth benefits our entire community,” Atkins said.



Gov. Ralph Northam (right) and Del. David J. Toscano, D-Charlottesville, attended a meeting at the Focused Ultrasound Foundation on June 5. Credit: Credit: Josh Mandell, Charlottesville Tomorrow

Northam’s proposed budget would direct an additional \$70 million in Virginia Lottery proceeds over two years towards funding pools for local school divisions. It also includes an \$80 million deposit in the state’s Literary Fund, which provides low-interest loans for school construction.

“I do not have a crystal ball about whether these initiatives will be funded, or ... how they will be allocated,” Atkins said. “There is good synergy and support for these proposals among my colleagues across the state, and we applaud the governor for being bold.”

Albemarle currently projects state education revenues to increase by 3 percent next year. Giaramita said that Northam’s recent budget announcements did not change that projection.

“We probably will not have an intelligent forecast until early next year,” he said.

State funds make up less than 26 percent of Albemarle and Charlottesville’s education budgets for this year. In 2009, the state contributed 30.8 percent of school funding for Albemarle and 29.4 percent for Charlottesville.

Per-pupil funding from the state has declined by about \$400 for both school divisions since 2009, after adjusting for inflation.

“[2009] is the high-water mark that we always want to see if we can get back to,” said Kim Powell, Charlottesville’s assistant superintendent for finance and operations.

Austerity measures by the General Assembly are partly responsible for the decline. However, state funding formulas also have shifted funding for education to poorer areas of Virginia due to the growth of local tax revenues for Albemarle and Charlottesville.