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## AFT Virginia Policy Priorities

Representing Fairfax County, Norfolk and Hampton, AFT Virginia is a union made up of thousands of educators across our state. AFT Virginia is affiliated with the 1.7-million-member American Federation of Teachers, AFL-CIO. We urge legislators to co-patron, prioritize and pass the following legislative priorities, to provide all families with access to quality public education in our communities.

### Fully Fund Virginia Schools

Virginia ranks among the bottom half of states for school funding.<sup>1</sup> This year, state lawmakers will have more than \$10 billion in general funds available to address chronic underfunding of Virginia schools.<sup>2</sup> We urge lawmakers to fully fund the Virginia Board of Education's revised Standards of Quality, the minimum funding standards to provide K-12 students an adequate education. But lawmakers shouldn't stop there. The COVID-19 pandemic has created demands on schools that weren't contemplated when the standards were created. As we discuss below, lawmakers should also make new investments to fully meet the unprecedented needs facing our communities.

### Lift the Cap and Increase Funding for Support Staff

In 2009, lawmakers added language to the budget creating a "cap" on support staff funding. This cut hundreds of millions in state funding for support staff, including school counselors, social workers, instructors of English learners and reading specialists. As a result, between 2009 and 2019, the number of support staff in Virginia schools declined by 2,800 positions, while student enrollment increased by more than 57,000 students. This has left schools ill-prepared to handle the immense social-emotional needs of students impacted by COVID-19. The Virginia Board of Education has repeatedly recommended lifting this cap, and lawmakers should act on this immediately.

### Make Bold Investments to Raise Educator Pay

Teachers in Virginia, according to the most recent reporting, were paid 67.3 cents for every dollar earned by similar college-educated workers, the largest wage gap in the country.<sup>3</sup> We call on state lawmakers to provide funding to school divisions to support a substantial raise for educators so that Virginia can reach the national average for teacher pay. Lawmakers should also ensure that all school divisions can take advantage of state money for educator raises by lifting the requirement that districts match the remaining amount of the state raise before paying the Local Composite Index-determined state portion. In a district like Fairfax County, where the LCI requires the local government to fund around 82 percent of school staff raises, the requirement to fund the remaining amount before receiving the state portion has meant that the district has not been able to access state money for wage increases.

## Invest in School Infrastructure

According to a report from the Virginia Department of Education, more than 40 percent of Virginia schools are at or above capacity, and half are more than 50 years old. One-quarter of schools don't comply with the requirements of the Americans with Disabilities Act.<sup>4</sup> Because the state doesn't provide sufficient support for school construction, counties and cities are on the hook for these costs. State lawmakers should address our school infrastructure needs during this legislative session, and state funding should prioritize ventilation and indoor air quality, particularly given the continued impact of COVID-19. Investment in public sector infrastructure can also help Virginia do its part to address climate change, while increasing the efficiency of public money. The state should fund energy efficiency audits in every school and fund a process to help determine whether particular schools are ready for solarization.

## Oppose the Shifting of Public Dollars Away from Public Schools

Private school vouchers go by many names, including “scholarship” programs, tuition tax credits and education savings accounts. Regardless of what they are called, they use public dollars to fund private schools, diverting scarce resources away from the education system that serves 90 percent of American children. With voucher programs, the dollars follow students from public schools to private voucher schools, but operating costs of those public schools remain. That is why some state voucher programs have resulted in multimillion-dollar deficits and tax increases. Studies of voucher programs across the country also show that vouchers do not result in better test scores for students, and in many states, have led to declines in academic achievement.<sup>5</sup> We urge lawmakers to oppose voucher proposals and instead support our neighborhood public schools so that students have inviting classrooms, well-trained teachers and needed support services.

## Ensure Revenues Lost to Tax Cuts Are Replaced with More Progressive Taxes

The governor has proposed repealing the grocery tax. While the state's tax on groceries contributes to an overall tax system that places a larger burden on Virginia's low- and middle-income earners,<sup>6</sup> the governor does not have a plan for replacing the revenues that would be lost if the grocery tax is repealed. This will negatively impact localities' ability to fund necessary public services, including education. There are several revenue proposals that lawmakers can support to replace revenues lost from repealing the grocery tax, which would also make our state tax system fairer. Lawmakers should:

- **Add new tax brackets and higher rates for the richest Virginians.** Currently, Virginia's millionaires are taxed at the same rate as Virginians with low and moderate incomes. Legislators should also impose a new tax on incomes over \$1 million.
- **Impose a tax on large estates and inheritances.** Some states place taxes on the largest estates and inheritances. A typical state with an estate tax exempts \$2 million to \$5 million per estate and applies a small tax to the remaining value of property. On average, fewer than 3 percent of estates—very large ones owned by the wealthiest individuals—owe state estate taxes.<sup>7</sup>
- **Institute combined reporting to counter corporate tax avoidance and ensure corporations pay their fair share.** In states like Virginia without mandatory combined reporting policies, corporations can easily shift profits to states where there is no corporate income tax or where corporate income taxes are lowest.

## Support a Statewide Literacy Plan for Virginia

Virginia does not have a comprehensive statewide approach for teaching literacy. This is one reason that children are falling below benchmarks on state reading assessments. COVID-19 has only exacerbated this issue, causing a near twofold increase in the number of at-risk K-2 readers.<sup>8</sup> We urge lawmakers to support Delegate Carrie Coyner's bill, which would create a literacy plan for Virginia that is aligned with the science of reading, a body of research outlining how schools can best teach and assess early reading, including the use of evidence-based practices to promote literacy.

### Endnotes

1. Based on analysis of U.S. Census Annual Survey of School System Finances, <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/2019/econ/school-finances/secondary-education-finance.html>
2. <https://www.fundourschoolsva.org/our-2022-legislative-priorities/>
3. <https://www.epi.org/publication/teacher-pay-penalty-dips-but-persists-in-2019-public-school-teachers-earn-about-20-less-in-weekly-wages-than-nonteacher-college-graduates/>
4. [https://studiesviriniageneralassembly.s3.amazonaws.com/meeting\\_docs/documents/000/000/979/original/Needs\\_and\\_Conditions\\_of\\_Virginia\\_School\\_Buildings\\_6.3.21.pdf?1622733329](https://studiesviriniageneralassembly.s3.amazonaws.com/meeting_docs/documents/000/000/979/original/Needs_and_Conditions_of_Virginia_School_Buildings_6.3.21.pdf?1622733329)
5. <https://www.epi.org/publication/school-vouchers-are-not-a-proven-strategy-for-improving-student-achievement/>
6. <https://itep.org/whopays/virginia/>
7. <https://www.cbpp.org/research/state-budget-and-tax/state-taxes-on-inherited-wealth>
8. <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1GqECg9POKdBrySvAFtpYd13gyVQHofD/view?usp=sharing>