

To Whom It May Concern:

I'm a bit different than several of the commenters who have voiced support for this bill.

I wasn't raised in Virginia; I don't have children (probably never will) and I'm not a public school educator.

However, I am a product of public schools and my mother was my fifth grade social studies teacher. Therefore, I have learned early on what makes a good bill and what constitutes as a bad one.

HB 531 is a **great** bill, and I support this bill, which will allow all counties and cities to use a 1% sales tax to pay for the construction of new schools.

Much like the school district of my rearing in Corsicana, Texas, Richmond City needs this additional revenue to build new schools and modernize facilities to improve the learning experience of its students.

According to the Virginia Department of Education, more than half of the state's school buildings are more than 50 years old. Unfortunately, my community is home to several of these outdated buildings including George Wythe High School and Swansboro Elementary School.

Students and teachers are placed in unsafe environments that may have leaky roofs, windowless classrooms, mold, poor ventilation, and broken HVAC systems. It is not helpful to the learning environment and development of children to attend school in buildings that harm their health and well-being.

I know firsthand how dilapidated and unsafe school facilities can eat away at a child's confidence and personal safety. For example, in Corsicana ISD, the most modern campus districtwide at the time of my public school education was the high school, which was constructed in 1970 when our school district was forced to integrate. I attended intermediate school in the former all-white high school that was constructed in 1921. There were days when the water wouldn't work in the cafeteria and we were forced to eat cold sandwiches or have class in the hallways and auditorium because there wasn't enough classrooms. To this day, these campuses are still in use and lack several necessary modern upgrades needed to educate a 22nd-Century workforce.

Having the sales tax as an option will give us the opportunity to fix Richmond City's crumbling schools, especially in south Richmond, where a high number of our children are immigrants or come from varying socioeconomic backgrounds. I am afraid if the General Assembly doesn't pass this bill, another generation of students will be forced to sit in outdated, 50-year old classrooms that are woefully inadequate for what students need today.

Do what Corsicana and Texas have never been able to do for its children, and prioritize public education and the future of our commonwealth by taking this necessary step to invest in our schools, our students, and our community.

Our future literally depends on it and our children deserve better.

Sincerely,

J. Elias O'Neal
Richmond City Resident