

January 5, 2023

Honorable Members of the General Assembly:

I believe and have seen that our General Assembly and Executive officials, look to ensure that no companies or corporations have more tax break than they really need. The idea that these tax breaks will increase jobs, better paying jobs has not proved to be accurate. Even with the given evidence, here comes a budget that wishes to serve corporations over people. Is this who we really are? Is this what we want for Virginia? I hope not.

I have lost count of the number of times I have spoken to you, written to you, called you to remind you that your job is to serve the citizens of Virginia and to provide the services our citizens. 2023 is no different unfortunately. This budget again puts corporations over people, tax cuts over investments in Virginia.

One section of the budget demonstrating the lack of investment in public education where again we see the needs of our students and public education staff is ignored.

We have a teacher shortage. Nothing new there only it is worse. You have been told repeatedly this was going to worsen. There are five (5) basic ideas that you've heard, now but have a yet to implement.

1. **Fully funding the revised Standards of Quality** – this is making an investment in the future by having education students and ensuring we have future productive citizens. This is the minimum the state Board says is necessary to meet the state's constitutional duty to ensure a high-quality education for Virginia's students. It is now up to the General Assembly to adopt and fully fund these SOQs. You need to meet your full Constitutional duty to be a full partner in funding our public schools.
2. **Make meaningful investments in student supports** - Virginia students need more support, and a major part of that is more support staff. It's long past time to improve staff/student ratios for positions such as school nurses, support staff for English Language Learners, guidance counselors, and special education support staff. In addition to internal support, Virginia students are in need of infrastructure improvements so that every child has a safe, clean, and welcoming environment to learn, and safe, reliable, and timely transportation to and from school. One major step towards improving these ratios would be lifting the Support Cap, created in 2009, which limits state funding for school support positions. Between 2009 and 2020, support staff in Virginia schools declined by 1,660 positions while student enrollment increased by more than 62,000 students. The number of support staff that the state recognizes and provides funding to support has fallen even faster, dropping by 13,870 positions over that same period. The Virginia Board of Education has repeatedly recommended lifting this arbitrary and damaging cap. Learn more about why Virginia needs to remove the support cap for school support positions here.

3. **Funding wraparound services** - Student success in the classroom also requires a lot of support outside the classroom. To provide better support to Virginia's highest-needs students, we need to fund wraparound support services such as after and before school programming, free lunch, mental health supports for students and educators, community school models, services, and support for students and families learning English.
4. **Increase teacher and school staff compensation** - Teacher's salaries at national average, support staff earning a living wage. We cannot and should not continue to fund public education on the back of our employees. While pay has improved over the past couple of years, much more is needed. While the state passed a 5% increase, this is only the state's share of a 5% increase and only on positions funded in the old SOQs. For those positions not covered, it is up to the locality to fully fund that 5% and there is no guarantee that the locality can. So please be honest about how and what you fund for teacher and support salaries. All positions needed to provide a quality public education should be shared by the state. For Virginia to reach the national average teacher pay would need to increase 10.32%.
5. **Preventing the diversion of funding from K-12 public schools** – Tax dollars should be spent on public institutions. With students and schools still recovering from the setbacks of the pandemic, we can't afford to shift investments to voucher programs, tax credit programs that redirect public K-12 funding into private schools and have track records of hurting student outcomes, nor can we afford large tax cuts that would prevent Virginia from fully funding its schools. Research is clear that investing in public schools improves student outcomes, graduation, and postsecondary enrollment. Lawmakers should look to invest in evidence-based initiatives like funding the revised Standards of Quality and lifting the support cap. Learn more about how programs like vouchers and savings accounts undermine our students' learning and schools in our fact sheet here.

I leave you with the best piece of wisdom I've learned. If you want to know what a family values, if you want to know what your community values, if you want to know what the General Assembly values, look at their budget.

I urge you to look at this proposed budget and create a final budget that embraces, showcases, and supports the needs of the people of Virginia.

Respectfully,

Meg Gruber  
2919 Bayfront Way  
Midlothian, VA 23112  
804-338-5071  
Ursamg@aol.com