

To the House Appropriations Committee and Senate Appropriations Committee:

As a City of Richmond tax payer concerned with critical issues in education, I do not currently have school-aged children. I raised three children who graduated from VA public schools; one has been a teacher in several VA public schools.

I support the legislative priorities of Fund Our Schools: fully fund the Revised Standards of Quality, lift the support cap limiting funding for school support positions, invest in adequate teacher and staff pay, invest in school infrastructure, and avoid cuts or repurposing of K-12 public school funding.

Children deserve the best learning environment and academic preparation we can provide. VA Board of Education recently sent recommendations to lawmakers updating Standards of Quality — the minimum funding standards to provide K-12 students an adequate education. I urge lawmakers to fund these recommendations.

Our schools have increasingly become centers to manage home and food insecurity, mental health concerns, family financial instability, domestic violence and other issues. As long as communities are not able to address these needs and students require support from school staff there should be no limit on the number of staff to meet the needs. No student can focus on learning if basic needs are not met. Between 2009 and 2019, support staff in VA schools declined by 2,800 positions while student enrollment increased more than 57,000 students. The VA Board of Education has repeatedly recommended lifting this arbitrary and damaging cap. I urge you to act on that recommendation.

The Economic Policy Institute states VA has the least competitive teacher salaries in the USA. We all know you cannot attract good teachers with non-competitive salaries. While pay has improved over the past couple of years, the pace is too slow in achieving competitive salaries. With our historic budget surplus, it's time for lawmakers to make bold investments to improve salaries to get us on track to reach the national teacher pay average over the next few years.

I'm shocked by the dilapidated and outdated school infrastructure in VA. This hampers student achievement and health, teacher retention, school overhead costs, and local property values. Since at least the 1980s, VA provided tens of millions of dollars in direct state aid for school construction grants and subsidized financing but this had been drastically reduced since the Great Recession. Today, the state has identified around \$24 billion in needed K-12 school infrastructure updates. With billions of dollars in budget surplus this year, it's time to reinvest in school infrastructure support and seize the opportunity to further invest hundreds of millions from remaining federal relief funds.

Research is clear that investing in public schools improves student outcomes, graduation and postsecondary enrollment. Investing in voucher or tax credit programs can result in a flight of students from public schools which only disintegrates the outcomes of public education. Monies

should go to improving local public schools to attract quality teachers and keep a balance in student body. Lawmakers should look to invest in evidence-based initiatives that our Board of Education and student-advocacy groups have promoted for years, like funding the revised Standards of Quality and lifting the support cap.

Thank you for considering my thoughts. Denise Kirchner