



Virginia Association of School Superintendents

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Remarks by Milton Liverman VASS President and Superintendent of Suffolk City Schools

**Senate Finance Committee
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My name is Milton Liverman and I am the President of the Virginia Association of School Superintendents and the Superintendent of Suffolk City Public Schools. I have come here to ask you to continue Virginia's investment in its most precious resource...our children. My request today, is only slightly different from past requests that I have communicated to the members of the General Assembly, the Administration, and the Board of Education. Instead of asking for significant increases in that investment, the Virginia superintendents and I are asking that the investments already made be protected from potentially devastating cuts. There can be no disputing the continued success within our schools in the past several years. Our students have led the nation in many performance categories. Our standards are among the nation's most rigorous. Yet as we assemble here today, that progress, that success is being threatened.

Perhaps our use of terms like: critical point, perfect storm, tipping point and crisis have been over-used in the past. Perhaps in our zeal to alert our stakeholders and legislative decision-makers of very real threats to the progress of education in Virginia we have de-sensitized them to our warnings. Perhaps by continuing to build one of the finest education systems in the country, even when we have been over-mandated and under-funded, we have given the impression that we can continue to do what we have always done in providing the very best to the students of the Commonwealth---the very best education, the very best preparation for college and the very best preparation for the world of work. If that is true, then we have done ourselves a great disservice because today, we truly are at a critical point.

All you have to do is look at the drastic actions being considered by the superintendents in the Commonwealth. Admittedly, this is early in the process so we all hope that some of the necessity for these cuts will be reduced but consider just a few of the items: between 84 and 99% of respondents to a recent VASS survey are considering staff cuts, nearly 50% of respondents are considering some form of salary reduction and at least 46% of respondents are considering cutting incentive programs (like class size reduction initiatives and programs for 4-year olds). None of us want to make any of these cuts but this is our current reality

One popular target for budget reductions is the "support staff ratio cap." There are over \$750 million dollars in cuts for support staff included in the proposed budget and without the proposed revenue enhancements, those cuts could go even higher. Our organization strongly opposes

this as a budget balancing strategy. Please don't miss the fact that our State Board of Education has recommended a comprehensive study of this issue. I would remind all of us that current SOQ staffing standards are not adequate to meet the mandates and expectations we currently face. Nearly every school division in the Commonwealth exceeds SOQ staffing standards. To build a support staff ratio based on an already deficient staffing standard simply confounds the error. To reduce support staff would be to remove the very people who have helped us achieve the level of success we currently enjoy.

Let me make this personal for a moment. Let me tell you my reality if the budget situation remains unchanged. Suffolk currently has 404 support positions supported by Basic Aid. We stand to see that number reduced by 158 in the budget proposal we have in hand. For us these are not numbers, these are people who have helped us achieve full accreditation for all of our schools. They are people in administrative, technology, clerical, operational, maintenance, instructional support and other support positions.

I have been fortunate to be a part of Suffolk Public Schools for over 35 years and know most of these people. Many of these people, I count as friends. I will have to face them and tell them I have no money to continue their positions. And for the ones who remain, I will have to face them and tell them that while I may be recommending reduced salary, they will have to do even more than they have already because we have been given no relief from any requirement or expectation.

I know many of my colleagues are in the same situation. But there is one more element to these reductions. We will reach a point where we will not have the staff to do the job we have been given effectively. It is not just about lost jobs, it is also about losing the resources to do the job effectively.

We recognize that now is not the time to ask for increases in support but everyone has to recognize that the transparent cuts have been made. Most of us have already reduced everything that does not have a significant impact on the classroom. We ask that budget decision-makers not make their decisions based on pre-supposed notions about school operations or a one-size-fits-all solution. We offer ourselves to be available for dialogue on this matter. We encourage lawmakers to provide local flexibility in matters of meeting Standards Of Quality requirements when budget reductions are made. We encourage lawmakers to resist the temptation to change the structure of SOQ funding as a means of meeting budget challenges.

Understand that there is no single perfect solution for this funding crisis and we should be careful not to sacrifice those things that have helped us improve in the interest of political expediency. I refer you to the attached survey summary of budget reduction strategies being considered by school districts across the Commonwealth. These are only considerations, but if the General Assembly and the Governor follow through on the proposed cuts or worse, they will become major negative impacts on the quality of public education. As educational leaders, we know what must be done. We recognize those challenges. Our current initiatives related to 21st century learning skills and our position supporting more comprehensive assessments are indicative of that vision.

I understand that these are circumstances that require difficult decisions. It is my highest hope, however, that those who are making these decisions understand the impact of those decisions. It is my most sincere prayer that we will all, educators and politicians alike, work through this situation to protect our progress, to protect our children and to provide the best for our children.

Thank you all for inviting me here today and for all you do to help make the Commonwealth of Virginia one of the best places in the country to educate children.

"SURVEY SUMMARY OF BUDGET REDUCTION STRATEGIES BEING CONSIDERED BY VIRGINIA SCHOOL DISTRICTS"

Responses:

51% of superintendents responded (68 out of 133)

Pupil : Teacher Ratios:

84% and possibly 99% considering increasing pupil : teacher ratio

Of those considering and possibly considering increasing pupil : teacher ratio -

65% considering increasing ratio between 1 and 3 students : teacher

80% considering increasing ratio between 1 and 4 students : teacher

Staff Cuts:

84 % and possibly 99% considering staff cuts

90% considering cutting teacher aides

88% considering cutting teacher positions

87% considering cutting support staff

78% considering cutting central office staff

75% considering cutting administrators

Salary Reductions/Increases:

24% and possibly 49% considering salary reductions

51% not considering salary reductions

Of those considering and possibly considering salary reductions -

49% considering reductions for contract employees

41% considering reductions for non-contract employees

7% and possibly 13% considering salary increases

85% not considering salary increases

Contract Days:

49% considering reducing contract days among instructional employees

47% considering reducing contract days among non-instructional employees

Early Retirement Incentives:

24% and possibly 50% considering offering early retirement incentives

50% not considering offering early retirement incentives

Incentive Programs:

46% and possibly 68% considering budget cuts in incentive programs

29% not considering budget cuts in incentive programs

Of those considering and possibly considering budget cuts in incentive programs -

37% considering and possibly considering budget cuts in Remedial Summer School

29% considering and possibly considering budget cuts in K-3 Class Size Reduction and Teacher Mentor programs

26% considering and possibly considering budget cuts in 4-Year Old, At-Risk Student, and VPSA Technology Grant programs

Other Instructional Programs:

41% and possibly 75% considering budget cuts in other instructional and non-instructional programs