



Board-to-Board, January, 2023

A monthly report from the Albemarle County School Board to the Albemarle County Board of Supervisors

New reading curriculum recommendation— At its January 11 meeting, the Albemarle County School Board received a recommendation from school division staff for a new reading curriculum for its kindergarten through fifth-grade students. The recommendation, [HMH Into Reading Virginia](#), comes after a 2022 state law required all school divisions in the Commonwealth to improve literacy outcomes for students, beginning with a newly-adopted curriculum for the 2024-25 school year.

HMH Into Reading Virginia program information and materials are now available for public review and comment at the County Office Building. The board will vote on the recommendation at its February 8 business meeting.

This recommendation comes from an adoption committee made up of more than 60 Albemarle County Public Schools (ACPS) teachers, administrators, academic coaches, parents, and community partners from across the school division with diverse backgrounds and lived experiences. They convened for the first time in September 2023 and subsequently vetted each state-approved program according to its quality, relevance and fit. Additionally, the materials for these two programs were sent to all 15 of the division's elementary schools for further review by teachers, staff, families, and community partners. The committee received responses from 85% of its teachers and heard from over 200 caregivers of ACPS students.

The timing of this recommendation is of particular significance given the school division's current desire to close achievement gaps among students. While results from the state's most recent Standards of Learning tests showed that the overall pass rate in reading for the division was 74%, slightly above the state average, pass rates for Black and Hispanic students, students with disabilities, students from economically disadvantaged homes, and English Learners were lower.

When giving survey feedback, families and teachers cited such positive attributes of HMH Into Reading Virginia as its letters to family, which are written in 10 different languages, and the strong home and school partnership materials that it offers.

Once a reading curriculum has been approved by the school board, all programmatic materials will be procured and related professional learning delivered for instructional staff in time for the 2024-25 school year.

2024-25 Academic calendar approved—The Albemarle County School Board approved the [proposed 2024-25 academic calendar](#) at its January 25 work session. This calendar reflects a preference from the calendar committee to have a later start date in order to allow for necessary professional development related to the new elementary reading curriculum. It also includes six non-student professional development days throughout the year that are in addition to the traditional teacher workdays. Those will allow for continued education for the reading curriculum throughout the year.

New Public Affairs and Strategic Communications Officer— Dr. Helen Dunn has been appointed Public Affairs and Strategic Communications Officer for ACPS, effective immediately. Dunn has served as the interim communications officer since mid-December, following the retirement of Phil Giaramita.

Dunn joined the Office of Strategic Communications in 2018 as the division’s Legislative & Public Affairs Officer, and in 2022, became the division’s first Deputy Public Affairs and Strategic Communications Officer. During her time with ACPS, Dunn has been a staunch advocate for legislation that benefits public education, including successfully lobbying for legislation allowing the installation of stop-arm cameras on school buses, a long-awaited win for the safety of the school division’s bus riders. Over the last five years, she partnered with now-retired communications officer, Phil Giaramita, to build a robust public information strategy resulting in as many as 200 annual media interviews describing school division policies, programs, accomplishments, and public participation opportunities. Dunn has served on multiple division-level and community-based project teams, tackling such critically important work as strategic planning, equity and inclusion, crisis communications, school safety, and teacher recruitment. She also played a significant role in organizing and launching the Albemarle Foundation for Education, the school division’s first-ever foundation committed to raising supplemental funds specifically to support ACPS students, educators and families.

As Public Affairs and Strategic Communications Officer, Dunn will be responsible for the division’s overall communications strategy, including public information, media and marketing, legislative affairs, social media, web services, and video and digital media production. As a member of the Superintendent’s Cabinet, Dunn will work with the superintendent and other school division leaders to support and advance the priorities of the Albemarle County School Board and the ACPS strategic plan.

Prior to joining ACPS, Dunn was the Assistant Director of Global Programs and Program Manager, M.S. in Global Commerce, for the University of Virginia’s McIntire School of Commerce from 2015 to 2018. From 2004 to 2015, she taught both undergraduate and graduate courses in French grammar and literature at the University of Virginia, including five years (2010-2015) as an instructor for the university’s School of Continuing and Professional Studies, where she taught beginner-level French to Community Scholar students, and a year (2010-2011) as Assistant Director of the UVA in Morocco study abroad program. Dunn also served as an adjunct professor of French at James Madison University from 2013 to 2015.

Dunn earned both her Ph.D. and a Master of Arts in French Language and Literature from the University of Virginia. She double-majored as an undergraduate, completing a Bachelor of Arts in French Studies and in Psychology, at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

APCS Partners with Scripps National Spelling Bee—Beginning this year, ACPS is partnering directly with Scripps National Spelling Bee.

In past years, each elementary and middle school in the division held a school-wide spelling bee, the winners of which would then compete in a division-wide bee for their grade level to earn a chance to be tested at the Regional Scripps Spelling Bee. However, by directly partnering with Scripps National Spelling Bee, all school-level winners will advance to the Scripps Regional Online Test Qualifier for a chance to make it to the Scripps Regional Spelling Bee, rather than just the two division-wide bee winners.

Despite the changes to the process, ACPS will still hold a division-wide spelling bee on **Tuesday, January 30**, beginning at **5:30 p.m.** in Lane Auditorium. A reception with refreshments for spellers will begin at 4:30 p.m. Elementary spellers will take the stage first, followed directly by middle school spellers. The winners of the elementary-level and middle school-level bees will be crowned as ACPS Spelling Champions.

School spelling bee winners will be able to take the Scripps Regional Online Test Qualifier during the school day with their designated bee coordinator between Tuesday, February 5, and Tuesday, February 12. The Scripps Regional Spelling Bee will be hosted on Zoom on **Saturday, March 2**, at **9 a.m.**