



Board-to-Board, February 2021

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

More Parents Would Have the Option to Choose In-Person Instruction for Their Child Under the Superintendent's Stage 4 Starting March 15—Following Albemarle County Public Schools (ACPS) Superintendent Dr. Matthew Haas's recommendation to the School Board that the school division begin expanding in-person instruction for all students, the board approved at their business meeting on February 11 a progression to Stage 4 of the division's Return to School plan. This will take full effect on March 15.

This move will give more parents the ability to choose in-person instruction for their child. Currently, in Stage 3 of the Return to School plan, approximately 2,500 students, primarily in Pre-K through third grade, can attend school. Stage 4 will allow all parents to choose in-person instruction for their child regardless of the student's grade level. Approximately 7,600 students would be eligible for in-person instruction, with nearly 6,000 other students receiving fully virtual instruction.

A move from Stage 3 to Stage 4 will require adequate planning and preparation time. On Wednesday and Thursday, February 24 and 25, schools will open to all elementary school students, including Pre-K. Also included on February 24 and 25 will be students in their middle or high school transition year, sixth- and ninth-grade students. Students in all other grades will begin in-person instruction on March 1.

In making his recommendation, Dr. Haas said, "I know I speak for all of our students and families when I offer our deepest gratitude to all of our school division's educators and support staff. They have carried the day through their grit and creativity to meet the learning and well-being needs of our children through mostly virtual and some hybrid instruction. I thank this world-class team for what they have contributed during the most challenging school year we have faced in our careers. You have held our community together through your valiant efforts."

Recently, the state department of education issued six guiding principles to all school divisions in Virginia for use when deciding whether to expand in-person instruction. They include support for in-person learning; prioritizing younger learners and those with disabilities or who are English learners; putting education first; focusing on prevention; consideration of community needs; and being flexible and innovative in the delivery of instruction.

While the health data understandably receives a great deal of focus, the Superintendent noted it also is important to consider all of the state's guiding principles. For example, the division's

youngest learners, students with disabilities, and English learners total 5,925 students, or 43 percent of all students in the division. In Stage 4, in-person instruction would expand for all of these students.

Despite the division's distribution of hot spot devices to homes without sufficient Internet access for virtual learning, only 60 percent of respondents to a division survey reported that the access they have at home enables them to fully participate in synchronous, virtual learning.

An informal survey of 16 child care providers in the county revealed that, at the current time, they have only 67 days care slots available to children between the ages of 5 and 12. At one urban ring elementary school, only six percent of students are in licensed day care.

"It's reasonable to assume that many of our families, without the adequate availability of affordable day care options, are requiring a parent to stay home to care for their child, often causing irreplaceable losses in family income," Haas said. "It's what the state guidance is referring to when it calls upon school divisions to consider community needs," he added.

In a statement earlier this week, CDC Director Rochelle Walensky said that there is increasing data to suggest that schools can safely reopen. Safe reopening does not suggest that teachers need to be vaccinated in order to reopen safely.

Director of Student Services Joining North Carolina School Division as Chief Academic Officer, Reflects on Strategies That Reached Students Often at Risk of Dropping Out—"No students are born to fail," says Dr. Nicholas King, the school division's Director of Student Services, who left the school division in January to relocate to his native North Carolina. King will become the Chief Academic Officer for Johnston County Schools in Smithfield, NC, a school division of 37,000 students.

Dr. King, who led the division's support services for students starting in 2015, and who was previously an elementary school principal in the county for five years, said it will be very difficult to leave a position that closely aligned with his strongest interest in education.

"I did my doctoral dissertation on alternative education, reaching students who often were at high risk of simply giving up on education, dropping out," he says. "For all of my professional life, I have worked to change those approaches that forced students to fit programs rather than the other way around. I'm grateful that Albemarle County Public Schools gave me the opportunity to shape square pegs without putting them in round holes."

Among King's earliest responsibilities was overseeing the division's Center for Learning & Growth, which supported up to a dozen middle and high school students at a time who were struggling to succeed in conventional classrooms. Students attend the center on a temporary basis and eventually return to their base schools. "Those early and mid-teen years can present difficult emotional issues for students, and if the system in place is not meeting individual needs by addressing those issues, the disconnect can show up in inappropriate behavior," King said.

King also is a strong supporter of the division’s alternative to out-of-school suspensions, known as STEP for short-term education program. Instead of being suspended out of school for days or weeks for behavioral violations, students are assigned to a classroom during that time where they complete their academic assignments under the supervision of an educator.

School safety was another high-profile part of King’s responsibilities. Among his accomplishments was the division-wide introduction of *Anonymous Alerts*, an online reporting system that allows students, parents and employees to confidentially report safety concerns to school administrators. “The most effective safety tool is access to information,” King noted. “We were interrupted a bit by the pandemic and we’ll need some time, but this system has tremendous potential. It can and has provided actionable information to prevent unhealthy situations in a school,” he said.

For King, it was difficult to say “goodbye” to the Albemarle County Public Schools community. “For me and my family, this has been a terrific place to live and raise our children. Education clearly is a community value. I have had the privilege of benefitting and growing from so many outstanding personal and professional relationships. It is very difficult to leave.”

Overwhelming Percentage Favor Keeping V.L. Murray Name for Elementary School in Most Recent Community Survey—More than 92 percent of local school community residents responding to an online survey said that the current name of V. L. Murray Elementary School should remain the same. The survey was conducted by the school’s Community Advisory Committee as part of their review of the school’s name.

On February 10, beginning at 6:30 p.m., the committee hosted a public meeting to hear from community residents about the [online survey](#), which drew 458 responses. While the large majority of survey participants supported retaining the school’s current name, the most popular suggestion for a new name was Ivy Elementary School, a reference to the school’s location in the western part of Albemarle County.

V.L. Murray Elementary School is the fourth school in the division to have its name reviewed following the School Board’s 2018 decision to have Superintendent Dr. Matthew Haas evaluate all schools named for individuals. Of the division’s 25 schools, 14 are named for individuals.

Committee members were chosen from those who expressed interest in serving, and the committee consists of school and division staff, parents, community members who do not have children who attend the school, and four school alumni. Additionally, two committee members are leading a parallel student committee that is working closely with the advisory committee and is intended to ensure that student voices factor into the name review process. The student committee designs activities to keep students informed of the advisory committee’s progress and elicit name suggestions.

Updates regarding the [Murray Elementary School Naming Review](#) are accessible on the school division’s [School Naming Review website](#), along with current information on all school naming reviews.

The committee's recommendation on a school name will be provided to Dr. Haas, who, in turn, will make a recommendation to the School Board. The School Board will make the final decision, which will take effect on July 1 if the name is to change.

List of Names Topping Survey for New Charter School Has a Common Theme: Community; Public Meeting Next Monday to Help Narrow the List to Three Finalists—Community was an overwhelming theme in the results of an online survey to help select the name of the school division's new charter school. The online survey was completed recently and generated nearly 618 replies. The school currently enrolls 158 students in grades 6-12.

In addition to Murray Community School, which was preferred by 59.9 percent of survey participants, the Community School of Albemarle was supported by 33.2 percent of those responding. Other names in the top five included Lab School of Albemarle (30.1 percent); Community School of Innovation (21.7 percent); and Rivanna Community School (20.2 percent).

The survey was conducted by the volunteer community advisory committee that will recommend a school name to Dr. Matthew Haas, the division's Superintendent. Dr. Haas will make a recommendation to the School Board, which will make a final decision on the school's name.

The advisory committee conducted an earlier online survey of its school community, including parents, staff and students, to generate naming suggestions and selected 10 of those names for the community's consideration.

The advisory committee includes parents of current students, parents from feeder schools, local residents who do not have children enrolled in the school at the present time, teachers, and staff and students. Information on the community advisory committee, community survey results, and news reports can be accessed on the [School Naming Review: Murray High School](#) web page.

The new school was formed last year when the School Board approved the merger of the charter middle and high schools to form one school, serving students in grades 6-12.