

Dear VA Dept of Education :

I am a parent of 3 children in Frederick County VA.

Thank you for everything that you do for our kids and our community!

I'm sure that you are overwhelmed with information right now, but I feel that it is my responsibility as a citizen to reach out to you about the upcoming year as we are getting closer to focus groups and decisions. And honestly, I've never done this before, so please forgive me if it's a little clumsy!

First, I am FOR public health and safety. If we can't be open, I understand. I believe if we all do our part to protect ourselves and our neighbors we can still safely live our lives with modifications right now. No, it's not going to be like it was, but honestly, it doesn't matter what it looks like! That's how time and life works. It can change in an instant, but, as one of my favorite cartoon fish always says, "just keep swimming!"

It's not the academics that I'm concerned about my kids missing out on. It's the rest of life that school provides for my kids. If they aren't going to be getting those things from school, we'll adjust and find a different way to get those things in still. (Arts, PE, music, clubs, socialization, etc).

In this situation, the society need is always greater than the individual need. Do what is best for everyone and mitigate risks. Totally, I get it.

Even if it's not the best solution for each person individually, it's the best choice as a whole for most people. Which, honestly, is always going to be the best solution in this situation.

It's apparent that some form of distance is going to be necessary no matter what throughout this year. (I'm personally preparing for even with a hybrid we'll prob be all virtual by Thanksgiving again due to seasonal illnesses in addition to covid). But if we can still get kids into classroom somewhat at all, I feel strongly that it would still benefit them greatly more than not going in at all, even if it's different and weird.

The guidelines on what is safe and not safe, who is essential and who has to stay home, etc has been and will continue to be super subjective and unclear. Every person in the world is possibly susceptible to this virus. Many people have underlying illnesses that they don't even know about. If you are a teacher, a grocery store worker, doctor, student, or a bus driver, you should still have the same opportunity at life as everyone else. And if you're a student in this country you should have the same opportunity for education as anyone else.

I am very CONCERNED about how school systems modifications will impact our society as a whole. I'm concerned about the loss of jobs that will come with school out of session with many support staff. I'm concerned with their potential loss of benefits through this.

I'm also worried for the kids that rely on school as their safe place. I'm worried about kids that are getting abused and are not seen right now. I'm worried about the kids who are going to be left

home alone for hours on end. I know that school is not a daycare, but at this point, most people are back to work and it's not something that can be ignored. If they have to find another way, they have to find another way, but closing schools to virtual only is going to add a ton of stress to families that are already struggling to get by.

Children, individually, are the responsibility of their parents, however, children as a whole are the responsibility of the society that they live in. Not offering classroom education is a disservice to our entire society.

My kids are going to be ok with whatever we have to roll with, but a lot of kids are not ok, and my heart is breaking for them.

I understand that this is a world health issue. I understand that this is a society issue. I understand that this is a personal issue.

The "we're all this together" isn't a just a mantra. It is the actual truth. Whether you have kids or not, this is a society issue at this point.

Parents are always THE MOST responsible for the children. But IT TAKES A VILLAGE.

Those aren't just words. We owe our children, as a society, more. In any capacity that that looks like.

I cannot even imagine what the teacher schedules will look like, essentially doubling their workload on 2 completely different sets of students/classes. And the extra stresses that they will now be facing with new childcare obstacles, new health obstacles, etc, should not be overlooked.

Generally viruses mutate over time. We have absolutely no way to know what is going to happen with it. But, no second is guaranteed to anyone, and you can go at any time for any reason. We haven't had all the answers about literally millions of viruses that we have been consumed with, and many have been fairly widespread (sars, swine flu, bird flu, etc) without denying our kids access to equal education.

Nothings going to be "the best." We just have to buckle up and hang on for a while longer. But knowing a little about how that will look right now would be a lot more comforting, so I'm looking forward to the decision and guidance from you as we move forward into this year.

I personally support FULL TIME SCHOOL, but I know that is not an option at this time. Many schools worldwide are back in session (or about to be) with some modifications. Washington Post article :

[https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/schools-reopening-coronavirus/2020/07/10/865fb3e6-c122-11ea-8908-68a2b9eae9e0\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/schools-reopening-coronavirus/2020/07/10/865fb3e6-c122-11ea-8908-68a2b9eae9e0_story.html)

I also support that if you don't feel that it's right or safe for you or your kids or your family, there are tons of options and that is totally your right.

I have kids with learning disabilities and without. I'm going to call out one of my kids specifically but only because I know she's cool with it. Sylvia (who is almost 12) actually excels academically in a homeschool environment. (Not at all in FCPS virtual from the end of last year, but we started our own version of homeschool when schools closed initially and then just kept it up through the school year in addition to FCPS virtual.) She excels personally and socially in a classroom setting however. I can teach her book crap at home. You can learn literally anything that interests you by studying it. But, she prefers school.

I can direct her into the direction that she wants to go, and help her, and she will be awesome. But I'm not going to be the one to challenge her creativity and thinking with a like mind. That's going to come from her classmates. I'm not able to be able to introduce new thoughts and interests by happenstance like the classroom setting might ignite.

And finally, and probably my most important point, It's our job as a SOCIETY to offer EQUAL OPPORTUNITY FOR EDUCATION. In a society in which it has been EXTREMELY apparent recently the damage that systematically denying groups of citizens the same resources can do to a society that will last LONG after the frenzy of this pandemic has died down, I am so frustrated and sad that the idea of segregating schools or denying kids the same opportunity to learn is even on the table right now.

Give people the OPPORTUNITY to use the services available to them and the FREEDOM (of which this nation was founded) that people are going to do what they think is best, but provide the services to all students with equal access and equal opportunity.

What is the best for most is going to win, and that will prob not be anyone's ideal situation. Your job is thankless right now for the most part, but I truly am thankful for you doing it.

Sincerely,  
Ashley Woods

I am emailing you the letter that I sent to my local school board here in Albemarle County. As we all make plans to return to school, I respectfully request that we wait to do face to face instruction until a time that we can protect the staff, the students and all of our families. I do not feel that school systems are prepared to do this at this time, financially and physically. There are too many unknowns, especially as the numbers rise here in VA. Thank you for your thoughtful consideration.

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My name is Jeannie Ballard. Currently, I am a 4th grade teacher at Cale/Mountain View Elementary. I have been teaching here since 1994 and have 36 years of teaching experience. I have seen many things during my tenure in the education field, but nothing compares to the difficulties facing us now during this pandemic. COVID19 has affected our communities in so many ways and though most of us are looking for a return to normal, sadly, I can't see that happening in the foreseeable future. I know in my heart that students learn best in person and school is a safe place for many. But I worry that now is not the time to open the buildings without well thought out plans and policy in place. As you prepare to approve the new calendar and begin preliminary reopening plans for the fall, I wanted to share a few of my thoughts.

First, thank you to the ACPS School Board for your service to our students, their families, and the employees of our school system. Thank you, also, to the ACPS Task Force for meeting this summer and creating a draft plan for the Fall 2020 Return to School based on guidance from the CDC and our Virginia's Department of Education, as well as input from our stakeholders. I know that this was a gigantic undertaking with many variables and unknowns. I have read the counties draft reopening document and I feel that there are a lot of good ideas based on "we will" but not enough substance of "how we will" protect the health and safety and well-being of our students, teachers, and staff. I do believe that our voices matter. Most of my questions and concerns center around safety and equity. I have more, but these seem to weigh heaviest on my mind right now.

1) How will the county decide the threshold for safe reopening? Decreasing levels of new cases in our area? What criteria will be put in place due to Covid exposures once we return to school? Will individual classrooms need to be quarantined? If I have to self quarantine because of exposure at school, will I have to use my personal sick leave?

2) How will the county ensure that all staff and students have proper personal protective equipment? Masks and facial guards seem to be a must and should be mandatory, except for documented health reasons. It should not fall to staff and families of lesser means to provide these as we return to school. I also have concerns about student masks that become unwearable during the day. Will the schools have disposable ones at the ready? What disciplinary actions, if any, will be in place for students that misuse their masks or put others at risk? What other safeguards are being put in place to protect those in the most public areas? \*The one set of protective plexiguard that was installed at one office desk in my school does not seem to provide much in terms of coverage. It makes me wonder how much planning went into its installation.\*

3) How will classrooms be rearranged to accommodate social distancing but still allow quality instruction? Is there a student per square foot ratio? During the age of "comfortable seating and choice," many of our desks went by the wayside. What plans are in place to ready classrooms? Will desks or tables have shields? How will the county provide learning materials for each

student, especially elementary age, since sharing will not be possible? Who exactly will be responsible for cleaning the classrooms daily or between cohorts?

4) How will schools ensure that classrooms have proper airflow and ventilation and air-conditioning? I can attest right now that my classroom does not. The air handlers in the hallway move more air than inside my room. My windows open to a courtyard that holds heat. I have to use a personal fan in the fall and late spring to move the air or it becomes stagnant. I worry that our students and staff will develop mask fatigue and heat exhaustion from sustained, continuous wear in warm settings.

5) How are schools going to plan for teachers who are high risk or have high risk family members? I have read that we as teachers have been encouraged to reach out to our individual principals to discuss these concerns, but how these responsibilities are distributed across the county's schools will be vastly different without a clear policy. How will teachers be chosen for virtual learning and others not?

6) If we open with a blended version of in-person and virtual learning, how will this be different from this spring? I had some students thrive in the environment of SeeSaw and Zoom, yet others were not engaged due to a variety of reasons...poor internet, sharing internet with others in the house, lack of parent/guardian supervision, limited time at home due to parent's work schedules, just to name a few. Synchronous learning seems a stretch for many students. What levels of accountability will be put in place? Teachers and staff at schools also had widely different responsibilities and duties this spring. I wonder how the workload will be shared with a blended model. How will workloads be distributed to manage both in person and virtual learning at the same time? I also wonder how we will be able to schedule fluid instruction given that the buses will be serving our students on some type of rotating schedule and the drop off and pick up of students will be staggered to account for social distancing.

7) How will the county support teachers who become ill? When a teacher becomes ill with COVID19, sick leave will become an issue. Many teachers who do not have accrued time will exhaust their options quickly. When one of us gets sick, we will most likely transfer it to one or all of our family members...hence more time off...I can't even begin to imagine writing lesson plans while struggling with the complication of this virus. Everything that I have read points to viral overload as one of the hazards. Teachers will be inundated with germs and more germs leading to decreased immunity, not even adding in the stress! All of the activities that are considered high risk for COVID infection are present in a school setting. I have read the ACPS document about the types of leave available to employees, but it is vague and leaves much to the imagination.

I have been in contact with the Albemarle Education Association to share my concerns. I have also talked a little bit with my principal about some of these issues and will continue to work with our administration as more plans are put in place. I realize that most of these questions will not have clear or definite answers as we really don't know now what the situation will look like in mid August or the first of September. I know that my family has been doing our best to stay safe at home. I worry that many in our community have not as I hear about summer vacations, the university's plans to reopen, and I continue to watch our infection numbers increase at the local, state, and national levels. Before I sacrifice my health and that of my family and my students and their families, what is our community doing to protect us? I do ask you to consider all the implications and have specific plans in place for everyone's safety. Just like inclement

weather closings, we have always said it is better to err on the side of caution. One life lost is one too many.

Thank you for your time and consideration. We are all in this together.

Jeannie Ballard

Dear President Gecker,

Earlier today I released a letter to the Governor asking that he defund the School Resource Officer program. Mr. Sean Perryman, President of the Fx Co NAACP, co-signed the letter. A number of citizen and professional advocacy groups signed on as well. The press release and the letter are attached for your information.

I believe that we must immediately temporarily halt the state-level funding of SRO's in our K-12 schools and evaluate the purpose and effectiveness of the program. National data shows that SRO's have become a disturbingly strong part of the school-to-prison pipeline. We are in serious health and economic crisis which has shone a public spotlight on institutional racism. We have a unique opportunity now to examine and eliminate, or redesign, the SRO program in Virginia, as a visible step towards combating that racism. The \$9.4 million allocated for SRO's in the biennium budget should be re-allocated to increase the number of mental health counselors K-12. Students returning from the unprecedented school closure of the past several months will need professional support to adjust socially and succeed academically.

I urge the Board of Education to be a leader in this effort.

I speak for all the letter signatories that we stand ready to work with you.

Sincerely yours,

Kaye Kory  
Member  
VA House of Delegates  
38th District

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PRESS RELEASE:



**FAIRFAX  
COUNTY  
NAACP**

For Immediate Release: July 7, 2020

Contact: Office of Del Kory  
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Naveed Shah, Chair of Communications  
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**Delegate Kaye Kory and Fairfax County NAACP President Sean Perryman  
to Governor Northam: No More SRO's**

Fairfax--Delegate Kaye Kory (38th District) and NAACP President Sean Perryman (Fairfax County) to Governor: Stop School Resource Officer Funding!

Delegate Kory and President Perryman led a letter to Governor Northam signed by over a dozen organizations across the Commonwealth requesting that he de-fund the School Resource Officer program in the upcoming special session.

Kory and Perryman urge that the \$9.4 million budgeted for School Resource Officers for FYI 2021 and FY2022 (\$4.7 million/year) be reallocated for K-12 mental health counselors.

"We have a unique opportunity in this health and economic crisis to remove law enforcement from our schools and add the mental health support our schools so desperately need. We must replace SRO's with school counselors now," Kory and Perryman stated.

Please click [here](#) for the full text of the letter.



Good Morning –

I am a Virginia parent who is concerned about the education of my children. If you are receiving this e-mail, you are in a position of influence to help the people of Virginia back to normalcy and get our education system back in place for our residents. The most critical aspect of our return to normal starts with public schools resuming full-time, in-person instruction.

The current Recover, Redesign, Restart 2020 plan seems to be formulated from a zero-risk perspective that makes returning to full-time, in-person schooling impossible. I do understand how our safety-focused society would give rise to this type of plan. However, life itself is not without risk. Take for example some of the following statistics reported by the CDC for leading causes of deaths in the US in 2017:

- Heart disease: 647,457
- Cancer: 599,108
- Accidents (unintentional injuries): 169,936
- Chronic lower respiratory diseases: 160,201
- Stroke (cerebrovascular diseases): 146,383
- Alzheimer's disease: 121,404
- Diabetes: 83,564
- Influenza and pneumonia: 55,672
- Nephritis, nephrotic syndrome, and nephrosis: 50,633
- Intentional self-harm (suicide): 47,173

Additionally the same report from the CDC states that in 2017 there were 22,335 infant deaths from all causes in the US.

The WHO lists the following additional estimates for global deaths in 2016:

- Drowning: 320,000
- Falls: 599,108
- Road Injuries 1,400,000

While all of these statistics are tragic in their own right, we cannot lose sight of everything else around us because we are fearful and hyper aware of new dangers. The point is that we need to give all situations proper context and nothing in this world is without risk. We must stop allowing fear to impede our ability to live. The fact of the matter is that our children are at more risk because of the reactions/restrictions put in place than they are of the COVID-19 virus itself.

- In my VA Health district (PWC) 67.3% of all COVID-19 deaths have been from the 70+ age group. There have only been 8 deaths total under than age of 50.

- ZERO kids under the age of 19 have died from COVID-19 in the state of Virginia according to data from the VDH website

- One study shows that a healthy adult has the same risk of dying from COVID-19 as dying in a car accident on the way to work.

Trust the raw data and facts, not untrustworthy media bias and uniformed social media noise. Now is when our commonwealth needs strong leaders and it's time to do the right thing and get VA schools back to in-person learning. The other option is to continue to cower in emotionally based fear and suffer unintentional side effects that may be far worse over the long term for our young learners. They are the next generation and we need to make sure their future is bright even if some of us are afraid.

Sincerely,  
John

To the Virginia Board of Education:

In history classrooms in the United States, African American and Black history is largely [underrepresented and misrepresented](#) (particularly when [whitewashed](#)). Perhaps most egregiously, [histories of enslavement](#) of Africans and African Americans in the United States have been misleading, ahistorical, and conveyed as if they were disconnected from the present. For example, the 2018 report "[Teaching Hard History](#)" details that two-thirds of high schoolers didn't know that a constitutional amendment had to be passed to formally end enslavement. Most Americans don't realize that, not only was a constitutional amendment required, but enslavement continued (see, for example, the reasons for celebrating [Juneteenth](#)).

What if secondary school history and/or social studies curriculum included more factual accounts of the Civil War era, Reconstruction, and beyond? What if the curriculum could include powerful case studies such as that of the [Clotilda](#)?

Why would we suggest teaching about the *Clotilda* in public schools? This historical moment shows that **there was a *de facto* continuation of the import of humans as property** in the United States. Not only do many American students not realize what legal strategies were required to prohibit enslavement in the 19th century, but many also take for granted the idea that when a law is passed, people will follow those laws. Legislation is just one step in the process of transformational action in society: **it is not enough to pass legislation**. Laws must be funded and enforced and social change must occur beyond the legal system. The laws themselves do not suddenly induce a transformation. **The *Clotilda* offers lessons on civic engagement, historical realities, and how culture and society interact with the government and its laws.**

In 1860, more than 50 years after importing humans as property became illegal in the United States, the *Clotilda* brought 110 humans to the shores of Alabama to be sold and gifted into enslavement. Both of the perpetrators Captain William Foster and Timothy Meaher knew their actions were illegal, not to mention immoral; however, they chose to send Foster and the ship to bring back enslaved people because it was cheaper than trading human lives on US land at that point. Meaher, his brother, and Foster were never convicted of crimes, as the courts could not "locate" the ship, which they had burned upon arrival (just last year the charred remains were [found](#) by archaeologists). When freedom came in the form of abolition in 1865, some of the remaining captives from the *Clotilda* bought land from Meaher and set up their own community called Africatown.

The anthropologist and author [Zora Neale Hurston](#) (1891-1960) spent months interviewing the late Oluale Kossola (also known as [Cudjo Lewis](#), ca. 1841-1935) who was one of the last living survivors from the *Clotilda*. These interviews are chronicled in Hurston's book, which was recently released publicly for the first time: [Barracoon](#). The book, in fact, would be suitable for history, social studies, and other literature arts classes. But even if the book is not assigned, we believe the case of the *Clotilda* provides jumping off points for several important themes in history and social studies:

- Origins of racialized inequalities in the United States (and multigenerational impacts of enslavement and theft of life and labor)
- Memory making and community formation among Black Southerners from the early 20th c. to today (see here on the [significance of the \*Clotilda's\* discovery to the descendant community](#))
- Ethnographic study in the early 20th c.

- Differences between legal and cultural norms and attitudes in the United States
- The role of capitalism in incentivizing race-based enslavement
- Cultural and political diversity in Africa in the late 19th c.

We have linked the cited sources at the end of this letter, some of which are basic introductions to the concepts discussed here. We write to advocate for a secondary school curriculum that accurately and justly conveys the history of the United States and the enduring consequences of legal and cultural processes.

With sincere gratitude,

Kylie E. Quave, PhD, Parent of two Virginia public school students, Assistant Professor of Writing and of Anthropology, The George Washington University ([kquave@gwu.edu](mailto:kquave@gwu.edu))

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Saiming Wenger, Current Student at George Washington University ([Saiming\\_wenger@gwu.edu](mailto:Saiming_wenger@gwu.edu))

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To whom it may concern,

My name is Liz Harvey and I have been teaching in Loudoun County for 3 years. I am only 26 and have no underlying conditions. I started in third grade and transitioned down to kindergarten this past year at Forest Grove. Teaching kindergarten has always been my dream, but with digital learning it has been proving more of a nightmare. I appreciate all the things Loudoun county was willing to do during the time of digital learning (providing hotspots / internet, giving all 3-12 students access to technology, having everyone stay home and do whatever we could to continue educating students), but there needs to be big changes for next year. And they need to be talked about, considered, and put in place now.

There have always been problems within the education system. If you are unaware of the many issues, you shouldn't have any position of power within any school district. Unfair wages, overtime with no pay, lack of support, problems getting substitutes, shortage of mental health staff, over policing schools, lack of special education support, and so many more . . . that just scratches the surface. And we now have many more huge problems to add with Covid.

Frankly, I am outraged and appalled at the current situation. Leaving the secretary of education and the president's unhelpful threats aside, schools should not be opening in the fall. Giving us the "choice" of strictly digital learning vs. a hybrid approach is not an honest decision. Nobody wants to be put at risk, but everyone understands that making the choice to do digital learning only is not actually going to happen anyway. There are countless teachers at my school alone who I know are preferring to do digital only because of underlying conditions, and I am well aware that my choice is not going to matter as I don't have any. There absolutely needs to be a push to protect those who need it most but giving us the choice in the first place will only make it harder when we are forced to go into the school anyway.

I think it is incredibly important to remember that teachers are professionals. We are not babysitters, we are not day care providers, and we are not martyrs. How many people are you willing to put at risk in order to help the economy? To make parents happy? What about the teachers that are putting their families at risk to help other people feel better?

The fact that you are doing Zoom conferences to keep everyone at home safe during this incredibly difficult decision-making process speaks volumes. If you feel the need to do these conferences over Zoom to keep people safe and distanced, how can you honestly expect teachers to go back in to school? If your comfort level is reached when you could have 150 people in your conference room, imagine what we are thinking considering 350 students in our school.

As a kindergarten teacher, I can honestly say that digital learning was incredibly difficult. It didn't work for many of my students. Teachers were working 6+ hours for one lesson so that the students and families could understand what we were trying to teach. The technology that students needed wasn't provided, and honestly, only 8 of my students were able to even log in and see what we were doing. It was no walk in the park. It was countless hours of preparation, hundreds of dollars in materials and getting everything set up, and a complete disaster for the kids and teachers. We tried everything we could to make sure they were still getting the best education possible... and it still didn't happen. Although it was a train wreck, it is still the best possible option for going back this fall. As teachers, we are in the front of the battle and we will continue to fight for our students, no matter what. We have never done it for the pay, the fame, or the appreciation (because the good Lord knows we don't get that), and we will continue to be here for our kids. We learned a lot about the best ways to reach kids, and with the additional technology being provided for every student, we know that more participation will happen. Fighting for teachers to be pushed back into classrooms where we don't feel safe, we feel threatened, and feel even less appreciated or considered isn't going to help the situation.

If you are to continue with the decision making that you have been and push for teachers and students to be back in the school buildings, there are a few things you need to know and be willing to help teachers with:

- You need to provide all teachers with medical- grade disposable surgical masks that can be changed daily. They are much more comfortable and easy to use than cloth masks.
- You need to provide every teacher with face shields and disinfect them daily.
- You need to promise that every soap dispenser will be full every single day and that hand sanitizer is the strongest it can be and refilled daily, as well.
- Remember that all students get sick the first 6-8 weeks of school in general. Teachers are always getting sick at this time, too. Be patient with teachers. If they don't feel good, get them tested and get them home asap.

- Giving every teacher 2 weeks of PTO is an incredible idea. But. If a student in class gets Covid, the entire class has to quarantine for 2 weeks, right? So giving teachers only 2 weeks of paid time is unacceptable considering that everyone will have at least 2 classes per week. I expect that more than one student will come down with the virus (especially being in a title 1 school where most of the parents have been going to work every day being deemed “essential”) and that we will need more time than that.
- Find a way to make sure that a substitute will be provided no matter what for every teacher. Even before all of this, there have been countless times that a sub didn’t pick up my job and we had to split up classes to get through the day. It is completely unacceptable before covid, and now it is a serious problem. Make sure that they can be provided, no questions asked.
- If we are expected to put our lives on the line for our students, for God’s sake provide us with hazard pay. You already took away our raises for this year, but give us a little bit of self-worth by providing us with monetary compensation for putting our lives at risk.

As you have a major part and a major say in the state of Virginia, you need to be standing up for the teachers. The decision of whether or not to open schools should have been made by those who would be thrown up to the front lines and only them. Politics have no say in the well being of teachers. I have been trying to support whatever decision the county makes but honestly, I am starting to feel the weight of your decision pushing down on me more every day. My father has diabetes and my mother had breast cancer, making both of them high risk. My sister is pregnant. My grandmother is 90 and her health is declining. Are you saying that I should not be able to see my family for the remainder of this year because I could possibly bring this awful disease with me? That I shouldn’t be able to meet my nephew because I’m around other people’s children? I should not have to make a decision to pick my family or my students, to keep my job or see my grandmother for what might be the last time before she passes, to get a pay check or be able to hug my own mother on her birthday. All of these things need to be taken into account. And I don’t even have children or a spouse of my own to worry about.

There need to be changes. There is no other way. Help teachers feel safe and appreciated.

Thank you for your time,

Liz Harvey



I have been hearing that schools, at least in Spotsylvania, are doing some sort of hybrid plan where kids are going to school 2 days a week. This makes no sense. Here are 3 studies that show that children are not spreaders of Covid-19. Here is one study: CORONAVIRUS: HUNTING DOWN COVID-19 Roger Highfield, Science Director, talks to Kari Stefansson, whose genetic sequencing project has revealed how the UK infected Iceland, that children don't seem to infect parents, and how to control COVID-19. Kari Stefansson is the CEO of the Icelandic company deCODE genetics in Reykjavík, which has studied the spread of COVID-19 in Iceland with Iceland's Directorate of Health and the National University Hospital. His edited answers are in italic to distinguish them from my commentary. WHAT DOES YOUR TESTING PROGRAMME TELL US? Because Iceland's epidemic is so well documented, we are able to provide the world with a large amount of information on how the infection was caught, the way it spreads, and how it mutates as it spreads. This 'molecular epidemiology' can reveal the geographic origin of the virus in every single case. First and foremost, other nations should look at how Iceland contained the pandemic because it is working. However, because the virus has spread to the extent that it has, unless we continue to test and isolate, track contacts, and quarantine, we are likely to fail in our efforts to contain the virus. WHAT PERCENTAGE OF ICELAND'S POPULATION HAVE YOU TESTED? We have already tested 12 per cent of the Icelandic population of 360,000 people. We not only test for the presence of the virus, we also sequence the virus. Sequencing the virus enables scientists to determine its precise genetic code, which is 'written' in a sequence of four different chemical 'letters', carried in the form of RNA, ribonucleic acid. Like DNA, RNA is a long, chain-like molecule, a nucleic acid, that encodes information in this sequence of letters. It is trivial because the genetic code of the virus is only 30 kilobases. These are the 30,000 'letters' of viral code that carry the instructions to make the virus's 29 proteins, such as the spike protein, S, used by the coronavirus to invade human cells; NSP3, NSP 4 and NSP6, which create virus-making bubbles inside infected cells; and NSP7 and NSP 8, which copy viral genetic code for new viruses. In mid-April we started to do antibody screening as well (this reveals if someone has already been infected). In attempting to carefully map the molecular epidemiology of COVID-19, we hope to provide the world with data to use in the collective global effort to curb the spread of the disease. Applied Biosystems 370A Prototype Automated DNA Gene Sequencer, by Applied Biosystems Inc., Foster City, San Mateo county, California, United States, 1987. Prototype Automated DNA Gene Sequencer, 1987. Part of the Science Museum Group Collection. HOW HAVE YOU MANAGED TO TEST A GREATER PERCENTAGE OF YOUR POPULATION THAN ANYWHERE ELSE? Iceland started to screen people at high risk and with signs and symptoms of COVID-19 for the virus at the beginning of February and had its first case on 28 February. On 13 March, deCODE started to screen the population in general, through volunteers who had signed up. We reported that roughly 0.8 per cent was infected earlier this month but now think the distribution is about 0.6 per cent and is decreasing, so the Government's containment efforts have been working. WHAT IS THE CONTAINMENT PHILOSOPHY IN ICELAND? We have taken a middle of the road approach, rather than lockdown. Elementary schools, childcare and stores are still open, for example, but we have banned gatherings of more than 20 people and closed theatres and concert halls. We have done it in a relaxed way but with three exceptions: we have screened more than anyone else to find the cases looming in society that have not been caught by the healthcare system; we have aggressively tracked people they have come into contact with; and we have equally aggressively put them in quarantine. This has worked. HOW DOES THIS COMPARE WITH OTHER COUNTRIES? I think it is inexcusable that the UK was not more vigilant, notably in using PCR testing. This is the basic test for the presence of the SARS-CoV-2 genetic code, though this in itself does not provide the genetic sequence of the virus. With America, it has amazing resources and actually taught us how to do the

screens we are doing now. They invented the technology but unfortunately were slow to apply it to their own people. I think this epidemic would have looked totally different if countries like the US, UK and other European countries had been more vigilant. Britain has been at the forefront of the molecular genetics revolution, from deducing the double helix structure of the genetic material DNA to developing DNA fingerprinting and genetic sequencing (by double Nobel prize-winner Fred Sanger, and creating the world's best-selling drugs. HOW DID THE INFECTION ARRIVE IN ICELAND? Screening those at high risk and who showed symptoms revealed the first cases came from Austria and Italy – people who were on skiing vacations in the Alps. The authorities in Iceland issued a warning to Austria that a large number of cases were coming from Austria to Iceland and they would have to do something about it. They ignored the warning. Those first cases were put in isolation and everyone they came into contact with were quarantined to contain the spread. WHAT DID YOUR WIDER POPULATION SCREEN REVEAL? We found that a large number of the original cases came from the UK. The spread of the virus was much greater in the UK early on than people realised. They might have even preceded those from the Alps. We don't know exactly, but these cases could be from as early as February. (See Table 2 in our paper). In the early targeted testing of those coming from high-risk areas in the Alps (Jan 31-March 15) there are almost no UK origin samples but that was because it hadn't yet been listed as a high-risk area. But as soon as the population screening started, it was dominated by UK-origin virus, so this was spreading quickly through the Icelandic population from February. The Austrian/Italian cases were from what is called the A2 clade (a clade is a group of viruses united by their descent from a common viral ancestor), while the UK cases were from the A1 clade. The original outbreak in Wuhan, China, is known as the A clade. We have also screened for mutations seen in the west coast of the US, the B1a clade. HOW MUCH DOES THE COVID VIRUS, SARS-COV-2, MUTATE? Even though the mutation rate is low (that is the rate at which the 'letters' in the genetic sequence of the virus change because of errors in the way the virus is copied in human cells) it infected so many people that we found a high diversity of sequences, an enormous number of mutations. We published the first data in the New England Journal of Medicine and you can see 528 mutations scattered though the genome, even in the receptor binding domain of the spike protein (this spike, which has been studied in huge detail, is one of the corona of protrusions around the virus that enables it to invade human cells). We found 291 mutations in Iceland that have not been seen elsewhere. However, there is no evidence of a different biology of the virus in A1 and A2 and so on. CAN WE SEE THE VIRUS EVOLVE? Yes. This kind of virus – an RNA virus – is known to evolve and mutate more quickly as they reproduce in a human host than, say, DNA-based viruses, such as adenoviruses (one of the causes of the common cold) and herpesvirus. These mutations occur randomly. Some are never picked up, because they disable the virus. Many have no effect. Others may but we don't know if they make the virus more or less lethal – as Kari Stefansson told me: That is a big question. Trees have been a central metaphor in evolutionary biology ever since Charles Darwin, whose idea of natural selection gave biology its central guiding principle, sketched his first evolutionary tree in 1837. Charles Darwin portrait image. A Carte de Visite photograph of Charles Darwin from the Science Museum Group Collection. Molecular epidemiologists use the genetic sequences to create a family tree of the virus and can figure out the rate of mutation (between two and two and a half changes in genetic letters per month, according to Kari Stefansson). They can deduce, for example, how the very first infection occurred in late November in Wuhan, China. The virus was natural, and not created in a lab, according to Andrew Rambaut of the University of Edinburgh and colleagues, and is closely-related to bat and pangolin (a scaly anteater) coronaviruses, perhaps even a blend of bat and viruses that emerged by a genetic mixing process, called recombination, in a bat, pangolin or another species. To visualize the

evolution of the virus, scientists construct a 'phylogenetic tree', where the trunk of the tree is designated A, the virus which originated in Wuhan (note, however, that the bat virus, although the closest non-human virus to SARS-CoV-2, is still extremely divergent and a study tracking the infection from Wuhan has been criticised for not taking this diversity into account). To help understand how the virus evolved the branches are categorised in arbitrary lineages or clades, each given a label such as A1, A2 and so on, where groups of viruses are similar and united by a common ancestor a few mutations beforehand. Genomic epidemiologists can work out who has infected whom as follows: if a virus sampled in the UK has three specific mutations and another infection sampled in Iceland has the same three mutations plus a novel mutation, scientists can infer the coronavirus was transmitted from the UK to Iceland. They can also estimate how long the virus has been circulating in a country by using the rate at which the virus is mutating, the number of mutations seen in local strains, and the genetic sequences from the country of origin. You can see the global phylogenetic tree here, created by Nextstrain, an open source platform to track disease agents, and the tree for Europe, which shows UK cases as early as January. When it comes to Iceland, see Figures 3B and 3C in Kari Stefansson's paper. Here's how to interpret phylogenetic trees.

**ARE SOME PEOPLE ARE MORE AT RISK THAN OTHERS?** The clinical diversity of COVID-19 is another big question. Some people describe it as a mild cold. Others end up on a respirator and die. Men are much more likely to become infected than women. If women get infected, they do not get as sick as men. Children under 10 are less likely to get infected than adults and if they get infected, they are less likely to get seriously ill. What is interesting is that even if children do get infected, they are less likely to transmit the disease to others than adults. We have not found a single instance of a child infecting parents. There is an amazing diversity in the way in which we react to the virus.

**HOW CAN WE ACCOUNT FOR THE RANGE OF SEVERITY OF COVID-19?** One possibility is that these mutations generate different strains of the virus that cause disease of different severity. Another possibility lies in the genetics of the patients, with some people being born susceptible to the virus and others resistant. Or perhaps some of us were exposed to a sufficiently similar coronavirus to give them partial immunity to COVID-19, what we call cross reactive immunity. This is what people all over the world are ferociously working on since it is the key to dealing with the pandemic intelligently.

**YOU ALSO HAVE THE GENETIC SEQUENCE OF INFECTED PEOPLE – WHAT DOES THAT REVEAL?** The first thing you check is the proteins used by the virus to invade human cells, called ACE2 and TMPRSS2. The SARS-CoV-2 virus requires two key proteins, called ACE2 and TMPRSS2, to enter human cells: the first is a 'receptor protein' that the virus attaches to, while the second is a so-called protease, an enzyme that activates viral entry into the cell. We found nothing in the ACE2 receptor – there is no sequence diversity in the receptor that sheds light on susceptibility. Nor TMPRSS2 either. No other clues have emerged yet.

**HOW LONG DOES IMMUNITY LAST?** We have screened 3000 people or so in the last week so we cannot yet shed any light on how long lasting the immune response is. We are working on the data but it is not going to be a simple story. I have been working on all kinds of common diseases over the past quarter of a century. Imagine, at the age of 71, having a disease falling into your lap where nothing is known about it, and no question has been answered. I am having a feast in the middle of the famine and I feel a little bit bad about it. The World Health Organisation said on April 25 there is currently no evidence that people who have recovered from COVID-19 and have antibodies are protected from a second infection.

**IS THE UK DOING MOLECULAR EPIDEMIOLOGY TOO?** Yes, a huge effort is under way. The £20 million COVID-19 Genomics UK (COG-UK) consortium is a network of labs created to deliver large-scale and rapid whole-genome virus sequencing to local NHS centres and the UK government. The consortium has already read the genetic sequence of more than 10,000 viruses in the UK and is aiming for a quarter of a

million. You can see their current analysis of worldwide COVID-19 lineages circulating in the UK. 'We are now the world's largest producer of coronavirus genomes,' says Nick Loman, Professor of Microbial Genomics and Bioinformatics, University of Birmingham. Researchers around the world are sharing their data on GSAID, the Global Initiative for Sharing All Influenza Data, an initiative started by the World Health Organization in response to the threat of bird flu. Although the percentage of Iceland's population that has been tested is much greater, 'Iceland has a very small population compared with us,' said Loman. The consortium gets the genetic sequence of the virus from samples identified as positive by testing efforts such as those in universities, public health laboratories across the UK and also NHS hospitals, along with the Lighthouse Labs in Milton Keynes, Alderley Park and Glasgow, which test thousands of patient samples each day for coronavirus, in what is the biggest network of diagnostic testing facilities in British history. 'The biggest hurdle for both testing and sequencing genomes isn't the laboratory aspect as much as the logistics, from getting the samples to linking the results back to an individual', said Loman. They can in some cases also link the virus genetic sequence that caused an infection with the patient's genetic sequence because the UK has major programmes to read the entire genetic sequence of its population. Notably through the efforts of UK Biobank to follow the health of half a million people, the 100,000 people studied by Genomics England, and a consortium called ISARIC, an open global community of scientists and doctors set up in 2016 to see how a patient's genetic make-up influences how they fare when infected. This will help understand if some people are more resistant or susceptible. Genomics can also reveal how, for example, a care home or ward was infected. Government Chief Scientific Adviser, Sir Patrick Vallance said: 'genomic sequencing will help us understand COVID-19 and its spread. It can also help guide treatments in the future and see the impact of interventions.' Fiona Watt, Executive Chair of the Medical Research Council, part of UK Research and Innovation, added: 'The UK is a leader in cutting edge genome sequencing science. The ambitious and coordinated response of our research community to the COVID-19 challenge is remarkable.' WHO WAS 'PATIENT ZERO' IN THE UK? 'We hate that term,' said Loman. 'If someone is unlucky enough to become infected, not show symptoms and spread COVID-19 around, they should not be blamed, like Typhoid Mary.' Moreover, the genomes so far show that there were many separate introductions of COVID-19 into the UK in late January and February, predominantly from other European countries visited by Britons around the time of February half term. The UK has hundreds of separate COVID-19 lineages, 'each of these represents an individual chain of transmission that needs to be halted'. However, there is an issue of sample bias, said Loman: to really understand how COVID spread from nation to nation we need to ensure truly random international sampling, since the results might be warped if we only test in the places where we are able to test. Loman explained: 'Not all countries are currently producing or sharing very much genome data, so transmissions to and from that country are simply invisible using this approach'. WHAT IS THE BEST TESTING STRATEGY? Lots of work is under way to determine the best strategy, for instance using information from computer models and new insights into how the virus spreads. Weekly screening of healthcare workers and other at-risk groups irrespective of symptoms, would reduce their contribution to transmission by up to one third, on top of reductions achieved by self-isolation following symptoms, according to a study of how testing can control the pandemic by Nicholas Grassly, Marga Pons-Salort and colleagues at Imperial College London. Another study revealed that more than half the residents of an American nursing facility who had positive tests were asymptomatic, underlining how symptom-free carriers play a major role in the transmission of SARS-CoV-2 and prompting calls for testing of asymptomatic people in care homes. A study of two hospitals along with public areas in Wuhan, China, reveals hotspots of airborne virus RNA, notably in areas prone

to crowding, whether aerosols carrying the virus have the potential to infect others was not studied by the researchers, who report their work today. CAN YOU TRACK HOW THE VIRUS ENTERS THE BODY? Yes. Scientists have used a cell atlas to show how the virus could be transmitted to the body. These vast atlases show which of the hundreds of different cell types in the human body are using which subsets of our 20,000 genes, notably the ACE2 and TMPRSS2 genes that encode the human proteins exploited by the COVID-19 virus to infect human cells. Scientists, including Sarah Teichmann at the Wellcome Sanger Institute near Cambridge, discovered that cells in the nose (known as goblet and ciliated cells) have high levels of these entry proteins. These two key entry proteins were also found in cells in the cornea. This suggests another possible route of infection via the eye and tear ducts. And they were present in the lining of the intestine, so it could be that faeces carry the virus too. The high transmission rate of COVID-19 could be explained by the study, which was conducted by the Sanger with the University Medical Centre Groningen, University Cote d'Azur and CNRS, Nice. WHAT IS THE STATE OF THE PANDEMIC? You can get the latest news on how far the pandemic has spread worldwide from the Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center or from the Robert Koch-Institute, Berlin, view the UK hotspots identified by an app, check the number of UK COVID-19 lab-confirmed cases and hospital deaths, and the overall number of deaths from the Office of National Statistics. There is more information in my earlier blog posts, from the UKRI, on this COVID-19 portal and Our World in Data. The Science Museum Group is collecting objects and ephemera to record the public health emergency for future generations. Roger Highfield is the Science Director at the Science Museum Group, a member of the UK's Medical Research Council and a visiting professor at the Dunn School, University of Oxford, and Department of Chemistry, UCL. He studied Chemistry at the University of Oxford and was the first person to bounce a neutron off a soap bubble. Roger was the Science Editor of The Daily Telegraph for two decades, and the Editor of New Scientist between 2008 and 2011. He has written or co-authored eight popular science books, and had thousands of articles published in newspapers and magazines.



July 17, 2020

Virginia Board of Education  
Virginia Department of Education  
P.O. Box 2120  
Richmond, VA 23218

Dear Ladies and Gentlemen of the Board of Education,

We, the executive board and members of the Virginia Association of Teachers of English, are writing regarding state accreditation of schools for the 2020-2021 school year based on standardized test scores.

Due to the closing of schools in March 2020, schools were unable to adequately close the school year and assess student learning. We support the assigned accreditation rating of “Accreditation Waived” to all public schools for the 2020-2021 school year. In the event that a federal waiver is not granted, we would disagree with not waiving accreditation to public schools.

This difficult time has shown concerns of equitable learning opportunities for all students without face-to-face classroom instruction. With the uncertainty of a full year of traditional instruction for students, we disagree with giving Standards of Learning assessments in the school year of 2020-2021. Any assessment data would run the risk of being invalid and inaccurate as students have not been provided the best opportunities to learn.

Many factors will negatively impact the validity and reliability of Standards of Learning assessment results if they are administered this spring. Beyond the immense impact of COVID19 on the 2019-2020 school year, alternative and hybrid student schedules for 2020-2021 will render any test administration insecure due to necessarily staggered testing windows. Furthermore, tests given in 2020-2021 are likely to lack the gravity of their former and future counterparts due to their utilization being for data collection purposes only.

Furthermore, we are opposed to requiring standardized testing in general due to the crudeness and unreliability of such measures, in addition to their tendency to reduce students’ whole persons down to numbers and statistics. We do, however, recognize the necessity of meeting federal requirements for funding public schools. As long as those requirements include standardized tests, we will continue to prepare our students to achieve success on those measures. We look forward to a future when better, more holistic measurements of students’ growth will be the rule rather than the exception.

Sincerely,

/s/

Marynn Dause, President  
Dr. Paige Horst, Past President  
Heidi Branch, President Elect  
Ashley Walker, Vice President  
Cheryl Golden, Treasurer and  
Executive Secretary  
Kathleen Leigh, Media Chair

Enclosures

cc: United States Department of Education, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education  
National Council of Teachers of English  
Virginia Educators Association  
Virginia Professional Educators  
Virginia State Reading Association

Litia Turner  
2374 Chapel Hill Rd,  
Goochland, Va 23063

July 9th, 2020

Dear Dr. Lane, Virginia State Superintendent, and VDOE,

My name is Litia Turner and I am a rising junior at Goochland High School. I am on my way to becoming a first generation student in my family. I base my life around academic achievements to maintain a respected and presentable reputation. One thing I'm very passionate about is Black Culture as well as Black Excellence. In addition, I was just informed that the Governor of Virginia, Ralph Northam, is making Juneteenth a state paid holiday. I was extremely excited to hear the news, because my family and I celebrate the holiday in our household. Therefore, in honor of Juneteenth finally being recognized in Virginia, I am writing this letter calling on the VDOE to include Juneteenth in the academic curriculum. It has become inherently clear to me, through social media and conversations with many peers, that this holiday is not taught in schools all over the country. One thing Virginia is known for is honoring the past and its historical figures. This would put Virginia on the right side of history. It would mean so much to my family and I, if this important part of history were to be taught in schools. I believe Juneteenth should be taught in Virginia schools curriculum because history taught in school has become sugar-coated, students can learn the true history of an oppressed group, and to recognize the impact of African American history.

Often in history classes, students are told a version of the past that is less gruesome or disturbing to know. Some people think the reason for it was to protect elementary school kids from a disappointing past or simply they are just too young to fathom the truth. In addition to other peers believe it was just an attempt to gloss over the dark and unsettling truth of the past. I am not ignorant to the fact that if teachers were to be more straightforward with their students about the earlier years of this country, and the effects it had on people of color, it would raise many questions. However, in order to move forward the past must be recognized in some way or fashion no matter how uncomfortable it may be. Being informed at a young age about our country's true past will help students understand the conflicts and bias in the world. Ultimately, we are teaching the youth to fix and help this country advance further in society when the time is ready. I believe it would be best to teach 4<sup>th</sup> graders about Juneteenth because they already have had exposure to African American history by then. The grades that can be taught about this are Virginia's 2nd graders who have been taught about major holidays, 4<sup>th</sup> graders who are taught about "Virginia Studies," or 5<sup>th</sup> graders who are learning "US History to 1865," therefore incorporating Juneteenth would be perfect. This should not just be a one time thing either. This topic should be revisited in classrooms as the kids get older. My ideas to see this through



include: Black History Month, extra credit assignments, and mandatory projects considering other courses that mention African history in later grades.


For thousands of years people of color have dealt with disadvantages, in particular, Black People. Sometimes I feel as if the accomplishments of Black People are overlooked in the classroom. Juneteenth is an open topic to have discussions about and learn from the past. All my years in school and I have always found learning about African Americans to be very limited. I do not hold anyone specifically accountable for that, but I do blame anyone who would willingly take part into a system designed to belittle my heritage without fully knowing the history behind it. Learning about Juneteenth shouldn't just incorporate the specific day and whoever was involved. Black leaders, events, inventors, scientists, and artists that were left out in history classes and even English as well as Art classes should be mentioned. It concerns me that I've learned more about oppressed people's history through social media apps than school. There has to be a reason why I learned about Martin Luther King instead of Malcom X. Why was I taught that Rosa Parks was the first African American to boycott a segregated bus but not Claudette Calvin who was actually the first? Why is 9/11 "never forget," but Black Wall Street is approaching the dust of history? Why was a discriminated against group like the Tuskegee Airmen taught, but not the Black Panthers? During all the snickering in elementary school I heard from kids about what George Washington's teeth were made out of, why did I never hear a teacher bring up that one of the possibilities was from enslaved people? Until this day, I still don't understand how Columbus Day is taught to elementary schoolers to honor that day for his "discoveries," but Indigenous Day has failed to be reserved? The hidden truths and untold history from people of color have become acceptable in the education system and that needs to change starting with Juneteenth.

Black Culture is one of the most popular and unique styles to have influenced our society. It's on the news, televisions, magazines, clothes, and hairstyles. We are surrounded by it, so why not teach the actual day we reached liberation? It embarrassed me to say that I have just learned about Juneteenth only two years ago. I was in the presence of some very fine young individuals I met in Louisiana for a summer program. It was established for Black Students with the passion to be in the field of law, giving us an opportunity to work on a case. What I am saying is, it took me to go to a whole different state and talk to people I've never met just to learn the truth about my ancestors. While I was there I got to learn the history of Africans before slavery even started. Why is the history of Black people before slavery had happened not mentioned in school? According to "Virginia's Introduction to History and Social Science for Grade 3," Ancient World countries like Mali are mentioned. We could always expand on that and Juneteenth could easily be the outlet for an open lesson about it. After I was informed about Juneteenth I have since then educated my family and we celebrate it every year. Not just for one day, but all week as well. During the week we buy from Black owned businesses, have cookouts, watch historic Black movies, and listen to popular Black musicians. Frankly, I am tired of only learning about my

people when we are trying to overcome oppression or external struggles. My house should not be the only place I learn about black history.

I believe Juneteenth should be taught in Virginia schools curriculum because history taught in school has become sugar-coated, students can learn the true history of an oppressed group, and to recognize the impact of African American history. In no way or form am I bashing the education system, but I believe the curriculum should be revisited. There are many keywords that can be taught to help fulfill many unanswered questions we have in this world. Teaching high school kids about Redlining, Housing Discrimination, and Systemic Racism can give kids a better understanding of our society. Parents, teachers, and students may say learning about this may cause many to feel uncomfortable, which is understandable. However in reality, people of color have always been taught to make sure that people that don't look like them feel comfortable. We have always had to accept learning history the way it is taught for the benefit of others. We are told to act accordingly, speak properly, and stay silent on topics that could cause controversy in the classroom. What is so wrong about teaching our students that things haven't and still aren't perfect? It doesn't make sense. I can personally testify to this, especially being a student of color in a predominately white school. A couple of days ago when I first attempted to write this letter I felt extremely discouraged. I know I don't have the money, voice, popularity, or power to change the world, let alone a state. That same day I stumbled across a word I saw in a quick presentation from my college advisor in a program I'm in called Partnership for the Future. The word was "Philanthropy." Along with a definition there was also a quick video on Youtube about the word. After watching it I realized I may not be able to change the world, but I can change something. I can live with that. Please allow this letter to inspire you for the better and be the change you want to see. I am not the only one who wishes to see this change. I asked a couple of peers and teachers to sign their signature below for moral support after they read my letter. Please make history by being one of the few states to teach our students about Juneteenth.

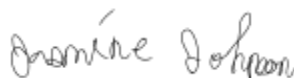
Sincerely,



Litia Turner



Chandler Grant



Jasmine Johnson



Addisyn Winston



Callie Burdette



Leighton Vermont



Rachel Jacobsen (Teacher)



E. Claiborne Coddington (Teacher)



Josh C. Rooke (Teacher)

Mrs Wood

Amy Wood (English teacher at GHS)



Andrew Hover (History Teacher, Goochland High)

alex gerkin

Alex Gerkin (History Teacher at GHS)



AJ Nash (History Teacher, Goochland High School)

Olivia D. Exum

Olivia Exum (World Languages Teacher, Goochland High School)



Rebecca Johnson (Teacher)

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Amanda Tolson", is displayed within a light gray rectangular box.

Amanda Tolson (Teacher)

I am a Virginia parent who is concerned about the education of my children. If you are receiving this e-mail, you are in a position of influence to help the people of Virginia back to normalcy and get our education system back in place for our residents. The most critical aspect of our return to normal starts with public schools resuming full-time, in-person instruction. The current Recover, Redesign, Restart 2020 plan seems to be formulated from a zero-risk perspective that makes returning to full-time, in-person schooling impossible. I do understand how our safety-focused society would give rise to this type of plan. However, life itself is not without risk. Take for example some of the following statistics reported by the CDC for leading causes of deaths in the US in 2017:

- Heart disease: 647,457
- Cancer: 599,108
- Accidents (unintentional injuries): 169,936
- Chronic lower respiratory diseases: 160,201
- Stroke (cerebrovascular diseases): 146,383
- Alzheimer's disease: 121,404
- Diabetes: 83,564
- Influenza and pneumonia: 55,672
- Nephritis, nephrotic syndrome, and nephrosis: 50,633
- Intentional self-harm (suicide): 47,173

Additionally the same report from the CDC states that in 2017 there were 22,335 infant deaths from all causes in the US.

The WHO lists the following additional estimates for global deaths in 2016:

- Drowning: 320,000
- Falls: 599,108
- Road Injuries 1,400,000

While all of these statistics are tragic in their own right, we cannot lose sight of everything else around us because we are fearful and hyper aware of new dangers. The point is that we need to give all situations proper context and nothing in this world is without risk. We must stop allowing fear to impede our ability to live. The fact of the matter is that our children are at more risk because of the reactions/restrictions put in place than they are of the COVID-19 virus itself.

- In my VA Health district (PWC) 67.3% of all COVID-19 deaths have been from the 70+ age group. There have only been 8 deaths total under than age of 50.

- ZERO kids under the age of 19 have died from COVID-19 in the state of Virginia according to data from the VDH website

- One study shows that a healthy adult has the same risk of dying from COVID-19 as dying in a car accident on the way to work.

Trust the raw data and facts, not untrustworthy media bias and uniformed social media noise. Now is when our commonwealth needs strong leaders and it's time to do the right thing and get VA schools back to in-person learning. The other option is to continue to cower in emotionally based fear and suffer unintentional side effects that may be far worse over the long term for our young learners. They are the next generation and we need to make sure their future is bright even if some of us are afraid.

My name is Darrison Haftarczyk and I am a current student at Millbrook High School, located in Frederick County Virginia, I am writing to you today to provide a possible solution to reopen school amidst the Coronavirus outbreak. Recently, I was tasked to write and deliver a persuasive essay and quickly decided to persuade my audience on a way to better reopen schools in Virginia and I would like to share my research here with you today. During my research I found my way to a paper titled Recover. Redesign. Restart. which members of the school board such as most possible yourself and other education leaders of Virginia wrote. What I read shocked me though as all of the possible schedules resulted starting school, like normal, in mid-August, but with staggered schedules of varying degrees. Only staggered schedules. On the surface this sounds great, but as I dove further and further into my research I developed a way to open schools that is on par with the safety of staggered schedules, but without the harmful results and that is to open schools full time starting in September. Before I get to how my plan works I would like to inform you about what harm a staggered schedule has on both students as well as teachers. According to an article written by Paul Von Hippel, a professor at LBJ's school of Public affairs, titled "What does research say about staggered school schedules" written for PACE in May, 2020, staggered schedules in previous models used caused teacher to leave work due to scheduling conflicts with other duties they had. This information is extremely concerning due to the fact that the coronavirus has resulted in massive unemployment nationwide and even though many people are returning to work in the advent of many businesses reopening we must do everything in our power to help those with jobs stay employed. According to the same article students at schools who followed a staggered schedule saw lower scores than their peers at schools who followed a standard model and these students also scored a whole percentile lower on their standardized tests. Lower grades often result in an increased amount of stress and this increase in stress due to the results of a staggered schedule will harm students more than a staggered schedule will help them. In a survey done by Best Colleges over the time period from early March to late April and it was revealed that an entire 81% of students surveyed experienced stress related to the coronavirus. Stress from the coronavirus, a new schedule, and lower grades can be detrimental to a student's health and at a time when health is of the utmost importance does the increased stress that a staggered schedule produces seem like the best possible option. I believe that there is a better way to open school that can reduce stress in students, keep teachers on the job, and to create a sense of returning to "normalcy" and that is by opening schools full time in mid-September. Trends related to the number of cases of coronavirus have shown that cases rose from March to April, fell mid-May to June, and began to rise in July. If this pattern continues then it is most likely that coronavirus cases will be the lowest in mid-September when school should start again. In addition, information that the Center for Disease Control(CDC) has released to the public shows that ages from 24 and below are the least likely to contract the coronavirus which includes the ages of most school children. This means that school age children are the least likely to contract the disease. Pair this with starting school at a time when Coronavirus cases can be predicted to be the lowest than you have a very low risk factor when considering having school begin full time. Also in the unlikelihood the coronavirus cases should spike again starting school in September also helps to take this in account. The increased amount of time before school starts can help local school boards to prepare ahead of time whether school should be full-time in school or full-time online. Thank you for taking the time out of your busy schedule to read my email as I hope to have convinced you that there are many other possible options for reopening school other than just using a staggered schedule. I wish you the best and I hope that you have a good day.

I have some questions for each of you. Why would any reasonable person think that opening schools for in-person learning is a responsible thing to do at this point? Are we not watching other countries? If schools needed to be closed last March to stop the spread, then whatever would make you think now that we have surpassed 130,000 deaths from COVID-19 in this country, with cases rising, that it is magically safe to open back up? You may argue that this virus affects children less than adults. By doing so not only do you devalue the lives of the teachers, administrative staff, educational support staff, and bus drivers, but also, you devalue the lives of the entire community they all live in. Do you think these children go home to an empty house, devoid of all grown-up supervision? Do you think each teacher, bus driver, administrative assistant, and aid lives in a vacuum? I should hope not. What makes you think that since kids are generally asymptomatic it is safe for the community to send them back to school? Seriously, I really want to know. Some are arguing that it would be better for the children to "socialize". I'm sorry- sitting facing forward at desks 6' to 10' apart, unable to get up and move around and interact to learn, unable to play with their friends, unable to leave the room and sit at tables for lunch- that is NOT socialization. What happens when a child has an accident, gets sick, or falls and skins their knee? When a young student starts crying, and a teacher cannot give developmentally appropriate care as they cannot come within 6' of the student- is that not harmful to the child's development? This whole situation will quickly begin to border on dystopian child torture that you only see in the worst science fiction offerings, and that literature is intended to be a warning not a model. What we had at the end of Spring 2020 was NOT virtual learning, it was a crisis intervention. While you meet as a school board or other group (virtually, I might add) and discuss how you can "get everyone back in the classroom", not only do you look very hypocritical, you are wasting everyone's time. If you cannot safely meet in person to discuss bringing children and teachers back into the schools, it's too soon to do so. If you stop discussing possibilities that you will not be able to complete in the fall, and put your full support behind teachers and support staff right now, you can give them the time to plan for actual virtual learning instead of the crisis intervention they were doing, and localities can start working now on equitable access, getting wifi to neighborhoods where students are less likely to have internet access, and making sure that there is one device per student in each household rather than one device per family. As a Norfolk taxpayer who makes their living in the entertainment business, all of our gigs have been cancelled since last March, with no end in sight. I was "lucky", I happen to have a part time essential job with an office in Norfolk General Hospital. (Unluckily, it doesn't pay all the bills, and because of it I was not eligible for unemployment or PUI, so I have had no assistance during this shut down.) Many of my friends who are not so lucky as to have an essential gig are saving their "extra" unemployment to live off of for the next year, as their eligibility runs out in July, and there is no extension in sight. When you insist that things need to open, that things need to get "back to normal" before the virus is under control, you spit in the face of the sacrifice made by myself and thousands of my colleagues who are gladly giving up our livelihoods at the moment for the good of the community. Do you not think we would rather be back working in the careers we love? We know and accept that we cannot go back until the virus is under control- for the greater good. With every inane suggestion that schools have to continue "as usual" or "as close to normal as possible", you insult those of us who are essential workers, and those of us who have given up our careers to keep the community safe these past four months. I hope you consider remaining cautious, just like the arts organizations in your community have been, when making decisions about the upcoming school year. Remember, whatever happens, the responsibility for the health, safety, and lives of our community - not just the school children - are in your hands.



I am respectfully asking you to open Virginia schools for face-to-face instruction in the fall. In an effort to remain succinct and to respect your time, I believe the following reasons are important to consider reopening school for face-to-face instruction. I am not linking articles to each of my points but trust you can find the data to support my assertions with a simple google search if interested in learning more.

1. Mental health. Remote learning has isolated students and has increased depression, anxiety, and mental health issues among our students. Social interaction with peers is critical for emotional wellbeing and virtual education will continue to erode student mental health the longer it is allowed to continue.
2. Lack of interaction in the classroom decreases engagement, hinders teambuilding skills and collaborative learning, and disrupts learning about diverse perspectives. Working together in the classroom allows students to work together in real-time, without the option of "logging off" or "checking out" during a virtual presentation or workgroup. It encourages critical thinking in a group environment to solve problems collaboratively.
3. Many classes cannot be experienced adequately without hands-on opportunities. For instance, my son is a trombone player, and band has been quite difficult for him on his own. He learns pieces of songs by himself and then records them for his teacher. As a support instrument that doesn't play the melody, it has taken a large part of the joy and engagement of working together with a band. He is not able to see how he contributes to the whole of the band experience. In addition, I have two students taking STEM classes. Instead of building circuits and doing other projects that would be dangerous doing at home on their own to learn certain skill sets and education modules, they have spent a lot of time viewing YouTube videos and *watching* STEM instead of *doing and engaging* in STEM.
4. Virtual education has given the students the option to "skip class" by allowing them to miss scheduled interaction times on Zoom meetings and instead watching posted recordings later. Many times the recordings are not even watched. There is also a wide span of engagement/disengagement of teachers. Between my 3 current students, we have teachers that engage with my student a few times a week to teachers who post items only once every 2-3 weeks. Granted my students are middle and high school level, and are more independent than younger students, but in some cases, it has felt like my child was doing an independent study rather than engaging with a class, the teacher, and the material. This is NOT adequate for most students, and especially not for any great length of time.
5. All COVID-19 data points to virtually no risk of serious illness or death to people under age 20. In addition, despite restrictions being lifted in many areas, COVID related illnesses and deaths are trending downward. The potential crisis for hospital overload is over, and it makes no sense to keep our students chained to their devices and stuck in their homes for school fall. Our students deserve better.
6. Virtual learning puts an incredible burden on low-income, single-parent, and dual working-parent families, especially those with students in the earlier grade levels. Virtual learning will require parents to pay for childcare or will leave children and students home alone and without the educational support measures needed to ensure success. In many cases, students will be left unmonitored and unaccountable, except in the grade book. This scenario will not encourage students to reach their full potential by any measure.
7. For those families who prefer to keep their students home at this time because of health risks or vulnerable family members, they should be allowed to choose to continue virtual learning arrangements. However, for the vast amount of families who are ready to return to school, that option should also be provided. It is time to stop allowing fear to dominate our decisions, and to instead move forward in providing the face-to-face instruction students need for their overall academic and mental health. A lot has been learned in the past few months to allow for our students the chance to return to some

normalcy, in an environment that challenges them academically, grows them socially, feeds them emotionally, and refreshes them physically. Important growth metrics and many opportunities were lost this spring by Virginia's students, and it's time to work towards helping them make great strides forward again in their education.

Dear Dr. Lane and Board Members,

Last summer I spoke to the Board during public input to encourage you to consider micro-credentialing for teachers as a path to recertification. I've attached a copy of my comments from last July here.

Undeterred and with grant funding from Jobs for the Future, we trained a cadre of designers in May and began to design a set of micro-credentials that align with VASCD's Profile of a Virginia Classroom. The project is progressing nicely and we expect to have 15-20 micro-credentials ready for pilot testing in September. Our intention is to make these micro-credentials available to Virginia teachers for their professional learning at no charge, only assessing a fee in the event they would like us to provide an external assessment of their submissions (i.e. VASCD badging).

We remain convinced that micro-credentialing is an excellent professional development option for teachers any time, but especially helpful when they are unable to attend in-person conferences and classes. Micro-credentialing enables teachers to personalize their learning and emphasizes proficiency over seat time.

I appreciate the conversations I've had with Dr. Lane and Ms. Pitts about micro-credentialing in Virginia, and I'm hopeful that as you examine licensure and recertification options in the future, VASCD can provide micro-credentialing information and resources that will be useful. If you would like more information about our fall pilot or would like to see samples of our micro-credentials, I'd be glad to hear from you.

Best,  
Laurie

Laurie McCullough  
Executive Director, VASCD

## VASCD Micro-credentials for Fall 2020 Pilot

<b>Micro-credentials Related to Creating Culture of Respect</b>	
<b>Title</b>	<b>Target Skill</b>
Facilitate Respectful Student-to-Student Conversations	Support students' ability to engage with each other in respectful conversation.
Connect with Students through their Interests	Capitalize on students' interests to build teacher-student relationships.
Use classroom structures to build community	Use multiple grouping patterns and resources to help students interact successfully with a variety of peers.
Teaching about and Through Empathy	Design instructional strategies that support students' understanding of empathy
Demonstrate and Model Empathy with Students and Peers	Model and name empathetic responses as a way to understand others.
Create Opportunities for Students to Cultivate Empathy	Design and implement activities that cultivate empathy within and among students.

<b>Micro-credentials Related to Planning for Deeper Learning</b>	
<b>Title</b>	<b>Target Skill</b>
Plan with Authentic Community Problems	Integrate authentic problems as entry points to the curriculum. Facilitate the development of student-generated community problems.
Plan from Driving Questions	Develop driving questions that encourage student inquiry
Create and communicate clear learning goals and success criteria in student-friendly language.	Implement clear learning goals and success criteria, with emphasis on student engagement with and understanding of the learning goals.

<b>Micro-credentials Related to Implementing Quality Instruction</b>	
<b>Title</b>	<b>Target Skill</b>
Student Choice	Implement models for student choice based on understanding of student needs.
Model and encourage thinking out loud	Model and scaffold ways for students to describe their thinking.
Use questions to elicit student thinking	Elicit student thinking at higher cognitive levels through questioning.

<b>Microcredentials Related to Feedback and Assessment</b>	
<b>Title</b>	<b>Target Skill</b>
Feedback	Give students qualitative feedback that leads to further learning.
Formative Assessment Analysis	Examine the results of formative assessments in order to determine learning needs of students.
Design a culminating performance/project	In progress

<b>Microcredentials Related to Redefining Teacher and Student Roles</b>	
<b>Title</b>	<b>Target Skill</b>
Build Students' Questioning Skills	Teach students to formulate open-ended questions and use them in conversation with peers about their work.
Incorporating Peer Review & Feedback	Develop and implement structured protocols for peer-to-peer feedback and review
Student goal setting	Design opportunities for students to set personal learning goals related to course content

## **Micro-credentials for Virginia Teachers: What, Why, and How**

Laurie McCullough, Virginia ASCD

Presented to Va. Board of Education July 31 2019

### What is Micro-credentialing?

Micro-credentialing is a competency-based approach to documenting learning. Those of us who grew up in Boy and Girl Scouts are familiar with the process of earning badges. We learned background information and applied it to a skill. We practiced that skill and then demonstrated it to earn our badges, which signified our proficiency. Badges are now popular with professionals in a variety of areas, where resumes include digital badges signifying particular skill sets.

Micro-credentials for teachers work in much the same way. The teacher identifies an area of interest or need, chooses learning opportunities in that area, applies the new learning in the context of professional practice, and submits evidence of skill acquisition. In Virginia, where performance assessment is bringing needed relevance and engagement to assessment of student learning, it seems only right to offer professionals the same opportunity. As with other forms of performance assessment, evidence of learning is examined by trained assessors who compare the evidence to a set of criteria described on a rubric. Feedback is provided on each aspect of the work, and in areas where the criteria are not met the teacher is invited to resubmit additional evidence. If and when all criteria are satisfied, the micro-credential is awarded. In some systems, multiple micro-credentials may be “stacked” or “bundled” together to indicate competency in a broader skill area.

### Why Now and Why in Virginia?

A high-quality system of micro-credentialing supports professional learning in several ways:

- Personalization and choice in learning. Unlike traditional professional development activities, micro-credentialing is individualized, allowing teachers to develop competencies based on their learning needs and interests.
- Credit based on performance rather than seat time. Each teacher brings background knowledge and existing skills to the classroom, and these combinations of knowledge and skill vary. Likewise, the amount of study, preparation, and practice time needed to be ready to submit evidence of competency varies widely among individual teachers. Micro-credentialing systems recognize that evidence of professional learning resides in teachers’ actual practice rather than the number of hours they attend a class or conference session.
- Focus on transfer into practice. Educators expand their professional knowledge in numerous ways, from graduate degree programs to twitter chats. Gaining deeper understanding of teaching and learning is worthwhile, but classic research (cite Joyce and Showers here) indicates that these experiences alone seldom transfer into practice. Micro-credentialing systems regard research, study, and other knowledge acquisition not as ends in themselves, but as avenues into enhancing professional practice.

- Opportunity to advance the Profile of a Graduate. In Virginia, efforts are underway to support teachers and school leaders as they align their practice to the goals in the Profile of a Graduate. It seems reasonable, then, to endorse and support a set of micro-credentials that align with the competencies needed to make this important transition.
- Accessibility and cost advantages. The learning activities required for micro-credentials are most often asynchronous and self-paced. They may include but seldom require face-to-face trainings or coursework, an advantage for teachers from rural or high-poverty schools who may not be able to travel to a University or a professional conference.

#### How Might We Approach Micro-credentialing in Virginia?

There is nothing currently preventing Virginia teachers from earning micro-credentials and using them towards their recertification. Option 8 in the Virginia Licensure Renewal Manual allows the use of a variety of professional development activities (including those that would lead to a micro-credential) to be counted towards recertification. However, the way that these activities “count” is by clocking the number of hours spent, rather than by certifying the evidence of transfer into practice.

If the Commonwealth wished to endorse specific micro-credentials that support current professional learning needs, quite a bit of existing material is available to provide a starting point. The NEA, [MISIC Iowa](#), CODEVA, Digital Promise, and other entities have designed micro-credentials that are available. Additionally, a cadre of Virginia educators could use existing design tools to create micro-credentials that target areas of specific professional learning needs.

VASCD supports and is willing to contribute to a pilot program that would substitute a “micro-credential stack” based on the Profile of a Classroom for the traditional counting of recertification points. We are keenly interested in working with the Virginia Department of Education, the VEA, and other stakeholders to provide a modern, competency-based model of recertification as an opportunity for Virginia teachers.