BOARD OF SUPERVISORS
STAFFORD COUNTY, VIRGINIA,
MINUTES
JOINT WORK SESSION
APRIL 16, 2026

**CALL TO ORDER** – A joint work session of the Stafford County Board of Supervisors and Stafford County School Board was called to order by Deuntay Diggs, Chairman, at 5:00 p.m. on Thursday, April 16, 2026 in the ABC Conference Room, George L. Gordon, Jr. Government Center, 1300 Courthouse Road, Stafford VA.

**ROLL CALL** – The following members were present: Deuntay Diggs, Chairman; Maya P. Guy, Vice Chairwoman; Tinesha O. Allen; Pamela Yeung; Darrell E. English; Crystal Vanuch; Kecia S. Evans.

The following Stafford County School Board members were in attendance: Elizabeth Warner, Chair; Sarah Chase, Vice-Chair; Josh Regan; Wanda Blackwell; Susan Randall; Patricia Healy; Ta'Layah Davis, Student Representative; Safdar Qureshi, Student Representative.

Also in attendance were Bill Ashton, County Administrator; Donna Krauss, Deputy County Administrator; Andrea Light, Chief Financial Officer; Scott Mayausky, Commissioner of the Revenue; Rysheda McClendon, County Attorney; Sukhi Purewal, Deputy Clerk; Daniel Smith, SCPS Superintendent; Chris Fulmer, SCPS Chief Operating Officer; various staff members; and other interested parties.

**DISCUSSION**

ITEM 1. SCHOOL BOARD'S FY27 LOCAL FUNDING REQUEST

Daniel Smith, Superintendent of Stafford County Public Schools, said that the Board of Supervisors had already received the School Board's funding request and budget proposal, so his presentation today would briefly highlight some key points to facilitate a conversation around the budget needs of the school system. He said that they were one of the most efficient divisions in the state. He said that as of FY24, the latest rankings, they were funded 121st out of 131 school divisions in the state.

Dr. Smith said that to ensure they were being as efficient as possible, they had thoroughly reviewed their resources and funding. He said that he had provided the Board with copies of the presentation slides and the slides from the North Stafford High School Performing Arts edition, which the School Board had received an update on Tuesday. He said that they also had a copy of the enrollment accommodation plan, which was a bound document provided annually and was also available on their public website.

Dr. Smith said that the School Division was especially thankful for the funding supporting the new Drew Middle School, Hartwood Elementary School, and the North Stafford High School Fine Arts and Performing Arts Wing. He said that at Drew Middle School, they were finalizing the contract and mobilizing for construction, which had been approved by the School Board on

Tuesday. He said that at Hartwood Elementary School, the rebuild was currently out for bid. He said that at North Stafford High School, they were finalizing the design to get it out to bid this summer. He said that they were pleased to report that all three projects were on track and within budget.

Dr. Smith said that next, he would discuss the School Division budget. He said that the total budget picture reflected significant reductions that had already taken place. He said that before they began working on their funding requests, schools and departments had identified substantial cost savings through zero-based budgeting, resulting in a reduction of $3.7 million from the base budget. He said that additionally, $7.2 million had been cut, deferred, or scaled back from initiatives identified as important by departments.

Dr. Smith said that this did not include more than 60 positions that had been requested but did not make it into the proposal. He said that after completing the zero-based budgeting process, the School Board's funding request had been set at $18.6 million to cover essential growth-related positions for the opening of three new schools, support safety and security needs, and address rising health insurance costs. He said that this funding was also necessary to provide a compensation adjustment that was desperately needed.

Dr. Smith said that the County Administrator had proposed an additional $3.5 million in reductions in his proposal, which further widened the gap between their needs and available funding, resulting in a current deficit of $14.4 million. He said that at this level, the conversation was no longer about postponing enhancements or finding efficiencies; it was about the real and tangible impact on core services.

Dr. Smith said that since budget adoption, they had faced other items outside of their control that had impacted their budget. He said that they were all feeling the effects, including at the gas pump, which was also affecting their School Division. He said that they projected a nearly half-million-dollar swing in fuel costs since their mid-year projections. He said that diesel fuel had increased by 71% since January, and gasoline had increased by 53% since January. He said that additionally, they were not expecting significant increases in their utilities, but their water costs were expected to rise more than usual, and electricity costs were unknown.

Dr. Smith said that to avoid a significant deficit for next year, they would need to address these additional increases in FY27, especially for fuel costs. It was important to note that these increases were not part of the original proposed budget and had not been previously presented; however, they had been recently identified as a need that they must address. He said that another significant pressure within their budget was the rising cost of health insurance. He said this year's expenditures were increasing by more than 28% as they worked to catch up on prior under-funding and ensure the long-term sustainability of their benefits program. Despite this increase, they had taken a measured approach to limit the impact on employees.

Dr. Smith said that the average proposed salary increase across all employees was approximately 4.75%, although premiums may rise as much as 47% depending on the plan selected. He said that even with these adjustments, the average impact on paychecks remained modest, about $19 per month for teachers, with service employees experiencing even less of an impact and some experiencing a deficit. He said that this reflected their deliberate priority of protecting take-home pay while maintaining affordable, competitive benefits. He said that in a highly competitive labor market, strong benefits were essential to both recruitment and retention.

Dr. Smith said that they also could not ignore that they were growing, particularly in their special populations. He said that their enrollment accommodation plan (EAP) aligned staffing with student enrollment, providing a framework for where they needed to either increase or decrease the number of staff in a particular building. While overall enrollment may fluctuate slightly from year to year, the number of students requiring additional supports continued to rise. He said that over the last decade, their percentage of English learners had tripled, and their students with disabilities or 504 plans had doubled.

Dr. Smith said that last year alone, English learners had increased from approximately 4,600 to 5,100 students, and an additional 500 students of English learners in a single year. He said that their students with disabilities had grown from roughly 4,350 students to over 4,500 students. He said that adding those students with 504 plans, which was not reported to the state or provided any funding in any way, represented over a third of their student population. He said that the Schools appreciated the position of Supervisors and understood the position they were in to build their budget, as they must also address competing priorities with their stakeholders.

Dr. Smith said that with that in mind, they had been strategic and intentional with their spending, and most of their expenses were recurring and necessary on an ongoing basis. However, they understood the current financial situation and were leveraging $2.5 million in carryover funds to address critical needs that could not be supported within the annual operating budget. He said that these investments were focused on three priority areas: safety, technology, and transportation.

Dr. Smith said that they had examined alternative funding sources and were using year-end savings to cover what should have been included in the annual operating budget. He said that approximately $1 million in year-end funds was dedicated to support technology upgrades, including teacher devices, boards, and essential classroom hardware to support instruction. Year-end funds were also being used to replace aging and broken transportation technology, such as bus camera systems, to improve safety and oversight.

Dr. Smith said that transportation remained a key operational need, as the current budget supported the purchase of 14 buses annually, but they needed to replace 20 buses on an annual basis. He said that the carryover funds allowed their Division to close this gap by purchasing the additional six buses needed. He said that safety was a high priority for their Schools and the County, and they were focusing on available funds to invest in security measures.

Dr. Smith said that high school administrators had identified the need for upgraded camera systems, which were old and difficult to access. He said that additionally, a recent pilot of weapons detection systems had received positive feedback and was recommended as a key safety and security need. He said that based on these results, they were recommending the purchase of two detection units per high school to support security during public-facing events.

Dr. Smith said that they were carefully accounting for and anticipating the potential impact of proposals from the House, the Senate, and the Governor, and there were key differences that would need to be reconciled before a final budget was adopted. He would like to outline a couple of the things they did know based on those proposals. He said that both proposals included a compensation supplement, though at different levels. He said the House proposed a 2% increase, while the Senate proposed a 3%. While the Senate provided more state funding overall, it also required a higher local match to access those funds.

Dr. Smith said that the House proposal included $2.5 million in additional special education funding, along with approximately $11 million in one-time funding. He said that the Senate proposal, on the other hand, focused more on targeted and restricted funding, including support for at-risk students, special education, and sales tax-based funding streams. He said that both proposals also included a standards of quality (SOQ) bonus, which would provide a one-time payment that could be issued in either FY26 or FY27.

Dr. Smith said that for their division, this was estimated at approximately $1,045 per employee, with both the state and local shares required. He said that participation in this bonus must be certified by May 1, 2026. He said that they were mindful of every dollar and any further reduction in funding would affect areas closest to students, including reductions in classroom teachers, support staff, and specialized positions. These were not abstract line items; they represented real people in their school, including teachers leading instruction, instructional assistants to support diverse learners, and counselors and specialists that addressed academic and social-emotional needs.

Dr. Smith said that reductions in these areas meant fewer adults available to support students each day, larger workloads for remaining staff, and less capacity to meet individual student needs. He said that it also placed an increased strain on their ability to recruit and retain high-quality staff as working conditions became more challenging. He said that as a result, the potential impacts became very real and very visible in their schools. He said that class sizes could increase, reducing the amount of individual attention each student received. Program availability may be limited, particularly in areas that provided enrichment, intervention, or specialized support.

Dr. Smith said that student services, including both academic and mental health supports, could be reduced at a time when they were seeing a great need in these areas. He said that as they considered the impact of reduction on positions, it was also essential to understand how budget decisions directly affected their ability to attract and retain people who made their schools successful. Staffing competitiveness was critical. Surrounding divisions were increasing their starting salaries, raising the bar for competitiveness across the region.

Dr. Smith said that current proposals showed starting salaries at $65,000 for Prince William County Public Schools, $55,059 for Fredericksburg City Public Schools, $54,902 for Spotsylvania County Public Schools, and $51,005 for King George County Public Schools. He said that in comparison, Stafford County currently sat below all of these at $50,600. He said that without a strategic investment, he risked falling behind further in an already competitive market. He said that it was worth noting that Spotsylvania Supervisors had already approved their budget and provided $8.4 million to their schools without any new schools, a similar amount to what Stafford Schools had requested without the cost of the new schools.

Dr. Smith said that this amount would allow Spotsylvania to further increase salaries as they were smaller and had fewer students and employees. He said that Stafford's School Board had taken deliberate steps to address this by approving step adjustments and market alignment to raise the bottom of the salary scale. He said that in addition, health insurance premiums had been adjusted to preserve the benefits while managing costs responsibly. He said that these actions were essential in preventing the loss of talented educators to neighboring divisions, improving retention, and providing greater stability within their schools.

Dr. Smith said that they had done everything they could, and now they needed the Board of Supervisors' help. He said that $10.6 million of their funding request was needed to support the opening of three new schools. He said that any further cuts would directly impact salaries, and they could not cut from other lines at this point. He said that he wanted to thank the Board for their time and their partnership.

Dr. Warner said that the most important factor in a child's academic success was the quality of the teacher in the classroom. She said that as they navigated a more competitive market with fewer people entering the teaching profession, they had focused extensively on salaries. She said that they had brought forward a proposal four years ago to bring their salaries more in line with those in neighboring counties.

Dr. Warner said that although they did not expect to match the Prince William level of salary, they must continue to strive for competitiveness to attract and retain high-quality staff. Unfortunately, they had not met their targets in previous years. She said that this year, they had focused on salary increases, which was the most critical factor for their Division, particularly with the opening of three new schools.

Dr. Chase said that since the School Board had presented their initial budget, they now needed to find an additional $1.8 million to complete the bonus that the County was offering. She said that this amount had not been included in the original budget they had presented to the Supervisors. She said that they had also experienced increased fuel costs, which amounted to approximately $500,000. She said that taking these factors into account, they were now looking at a previously unidentified need of approximately $2.2 to $2.3 million, which had not been accounted for in the original budget. She said that she wanted to ensure that the Board was aware of this updated figure.

Mr. Regan said that as a former teacher in Stafford County Public Schools, he had spent seven or eight years at Brook Point, where he ultimately left due to the low salary. He said that he had received an offer in Fairfax County for $38,000 more on the same step level. He said that as Dr. Warner had mentioned, they were unlikely to approach those numbers in Stafford. He said that however, the impact of losing experienced, caring teachers could not be overstated. He said that for his students, he was more than just a teacher - he was a safe space and a pillar of support.

Mr. Regan said that his ninth-grade algebra students knew they could come to him for guidance and support throughout their high school years. He said that when they found out he was leaving, 17- to 18-year-old students cried in his classroom. He said that losing good teachers was incredibly detrimental to their students' education and well-being. He said that it felt like he was forced to prioritize financial gain over the needs of his students, but he had to make a difficult decision to support his own family. He said that with four children, including two in college at the time, it was a hard choice to make. He said that their children deserved better, and they deserved to keep the teachers they knew and trusted.

Mr. Qureshi said that he was currently a junior at North Stafford High School. He said that his STAT Biomedical interventions teacher was a first-year teacher also teaching biology. He said that unfortunately, the former program had been discontinued. However, she was still teaching biology and had quickly become one of his favorite teachers. He said that it was not just her exceptional teaching skills that he appreciated, but also the way she created a safe and open environment where he felt comfortable sharing his concerns and struggles.

Mr. Qureshi said that he often stayed after class to discuss his schedule, emotional well-being, and mental health with her, and she provided him with valuable support. He said that what was concerning him was that she was considering leaving to Prince William County, as she was eligible for a higher salary despite being a first-year teacher.

Ms. Davis said that she was a junior at Stafford High School. She said that she would like to briefly touch on her thoughts regarding this discussion. She said that similarly to Mr. Qureshi, she was not just concerned about the qualifications of her teachers, as she took a lot of dual enrollment (DE) classes and had a diverse range of educators. However, the environment her teachers created for her to be herself and learn beyond the standard curriculum felt incredibly positive.

Ms. Davis said that what resonated with her was that some of these teachers were considering leaving or had already prepared their students for when they would not be returning next year. She said that good teachers were providing her with tools to use in life, which went beyond academics and had a significant impact on her overall well-being. She said that she believed that teachers knew their worth and would continue to strive to be compensated fairly.

Dr. Yeung said that she hoped that the Schools would commit to prioritizing salary raises for teachers, as they had sometimes diverted funds to other items in the past. She said that she hoped the School Division would find other ways to save money and create efficiencies with what they currently had available, which was essential when they had so many financial pressures. She said that she was fully supportive of funding their teacher salaries. She asked if the School Division planned to healthcare premiums on the employee side.

Chris Fulmer, Chief Operating Officer for Stafford County Public Schools, said that during the initial phases of their teacher pay scale implementation, the allocated money had all been put into the scales, but they had to make cuts, so even in last year's budget they were unable to proceed with the next phase of that implementation. However, the funds were primarily directed towards strengthening the middle of their scale, which was less competitive than the starting salaries. He said that after investing three and a half years in this effort, they now found that the bottom of their scale was significantly lacking, and this was where the other counties' salaries had surpassed theirs.

Dr. Chase clarified that funding was put toward every level of the scale; it was never solely allocated to one portion of the scale. She said that the starting salaries were increased by $1,000 last year.

Mr. Fulmer said that regarding healthcare premiums, the School Division was attempting to absorb some of the costs, so they were investing approximately $6.5 million to $7 million, and they were also asking employees to contribute more.

Ms. Evans asked if the School Division could discuss the state funding they anticipated for this year. She asked if they were still planning to receive $11 million.

Dr. Smith said that the $11 million that they had quoted was the estimated amount Stafford County Public Schools would receive from the House budget. He said that this figure only accounted for the House side of the budget. He said that the Senate side presented a significantly different scenario, resulting in the discrepancies they were seeing. He said that as a result, they could not rely entirely on this estimate. He said that if the House budget was adopted as presented, Stafford County Public Schools would have received $11 million in one-time funding.

Ms. Vanuch asked what percentage of their total teachers were making the first-year starting salary.

Mr. Fulmer said that he could follow up with that number. He said that from steps zero to four, it was around 20% to 25% of their total teachers, with the rest being spread across the scale.

Ms. Vanuch asked if they had an estimate of their carryover funds from 2025.

Mr. Fulmer said that he had provided a mid-year update, and they would be giving another update to the Finance and Budget Committee at their May Board meeting. He said that it had been a significant shift since the mid-year update, which was challenging. He said that they could not accurately estimate the exact amount, but he could say it would not be in the multiple millions of dollars.

Mr. Fulmer said that currently, they had exhausted almost all of their projected compensation and benefit savings to cover their health insurance overages for this year. He said that this was an approval they had made mid-year, which had recently been approved by the Supervisors to transfer those funds to their Health Benefits Fund to cover the overages. At the mid-year point, they were projecting close to half a million dollars in fuel savings, but that trend had now been reversed.

He said that if they were to estimate the full-year impact, they would need an additional $500,000. He said that given the current fuel prices, if they remained stable, they would need to consider additional funds for next year. He said that their Finance and Budget Committee had asked them to consider adding that to their budget when they had to reconcile. He said that in summary, there were not a lot of carryover funds this year.

Ms. Vanuch said that she had some rough numbers from last year when they were crunching the school numbers. She said that for the operating budget from 2021, she had numbers from $193 million for the 2021 budget and $303 million for the 2024 budget, which was a significant increase, including local and state increases. She said that she had done some rough math using their school enrollment numbers, which were approximately 30,473 students in 2021.

Ms. Vanuch said that to make the comparison fair, she used the 2024 numbers as well, which were 31,992. She said that this represented an increase of 1,519 students from 2021 to 2024, and a $110 million dollar increase in the budget. She said that breaking it down, that's a $72,000 dollar increase per student, not including capital costs. She said that she was concerned that this amount was not just for salaries and additional headcount, as it seemed substantial.

Mr. Fulmer said that 85% of their budget was allocated to compensation and benefits, which accounted for a significant portion of any potential increases. He said that one area they could easily examine was their cost per student. He said that they calculated this annually and reported it to the state, allowing them to compare it to the state's average.

Mr. Fulmer said that even with those increases, the numbers were not just applied to the students. He said that he was not sure if they could confidently state that their cost per student was $70,000. He said that their per pupil expenditure continued to decline when compared to the state, as other localities continued to invest more than Stafford was currently.

Ms. Vanuch said that she was still interested in understanding that $110 million increase, especially when it was not including their capital costs or 3R funding. She said that now, just on the baseline request with an additional $18 million, that would be a $0.07 increase on their taxes just to cover the school costs. She said that the Board understood the School Division's perspective, but it would be very difficult to swing a $0.07 increase solely for the Schools.

Ms. Evans said that she would like to add to what Ms. Vanuch said. She said that as Mr. Fulmer said, 85% of their budget went to salaries and healthcare, so if the per-student cost was $72,000, the remaining 15% would be around $10,800. She asked if that remainder was additional funding.

Ms. Vanuch said that she would try to clarify. She said that in 2020, their operating budget was $193 million, with an additional $21.24 million, not counting the increase from the previous year, which brought the total to $303 million. She said that this represented an additional $110 million in operating costs, with an additional 1,500 new students.

Ms. Vanuch said that in her mind, this translated to an additional $72,000 per new student. She said that she understood what Mr. Fulmer was saying, as the funding was divided among various expenses, including teacher salaries. She said that from her perspective, they had a very effective school division in 2019, and even during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, before these significant increases.

Ms. Vanuch said that she was trying to balance her thoughts on what their taxpayers received for the $110 million invested over the last four years, excluding the increase from the previous year and the new schools. She said that this amount represented a substantial increase in teacher salaries, accounting for approximately 85% of their budget.

Dr. Chase said that she believed it was essential to examine the amount of funding allocated to the schools prior to 2019. She said that years of under-funding often necessitated a correction.

She said that following the recession in 2008, the funding was truly abysmal. She said that Stafford County had approximately 3% increases to the school system, whereas inflation had been significantly higher than that. She said that to gain a better understanding, it was worth noting that the $110 million increase could be seen, in part, as a correction for the lack of funding over the preceding 10 years.

Ms. Guy said that she agreed with Dr. Chase. She said that she also wanted to add that the $77,000 figure was not just for providing extra teaching services. She said that it was actually for infrastructure that had been neglected for a long time. She said that Ms. Vanuch had mentioned that they had an effective school system, but she liked to point out that since 2010, their SOL scores had been steadily declining by one or two points per year. She said that that was not effective; it was a school system that had been struggling.

Ms. Guy said that their teachers had been working overtime to keep their students on track, but it was not enough. She said that as a mom who had sent five children through Stafford County Schools, she could tell them that the burden had been too much. She said that the effectiveness of their school system was ultimately on the backs of their educators and students, who had been underfunded for far too long. She said that they had been relying on the goodwill of the Board, rather than a proper allocation of funds.

Ms. Guy said that as a parent, she still had to spend $4,000 to $10,000 per year on private tutors to ensure her children met the benchmarks, because Stafford County could not always provide the necessary support. She said that despite the educators, Superintendent, and School Board giving their best efforts, they still could not make it work. She said that she understood Ms. Vanuch's note of the increase in numbers, but she did not think she understood the importance of those numbers.

Mr. English asked what they were seeing in terms of utilities cost increases.

Mr. Fulmer said that since they had proposed a budget, they discovered that additional utility increases were anticipated. He said that they had proposed increases for public and water services, and Dominion's electric bills were initially 30% higher. He said that they now believed that these increases would be lower, but it remained to be seen.

Mr. English asked if the costs had increased in the past four months.

Mr. Fulmer said that he had not seen that in the current year, but they were anticipating them to increase within the next year. He said that it was not seen as a major concern at this time.

Mr. English said that he understood the starting salary for a new teacher with no experience was $50,600, but he would like to know what experienced teachers were paid in comparison.

Dr. Smith said that typically, there was usually a small percentage difference between each step on the scale. He said that the difference between step zero and step one was $51,865, a $1,200 increase. He said that for a teacher with ten years of experience, they would be paid $67,000. He said that the starting salary in Prince William was $65,000, so those experienced teachers were still paid significantly less in Stafford.

Mr. English said that Stafford would never be at Prince William's level.

Dr. Warner said that while they were not expecting to be like Prince William, they needed to address the issue of teachers leaving the Stafford School Division for higher wages in other localities.

Dr. Smith said that they were also falling behind King George, Spotsylvania, and Fredericksburg. He said that Stafford continued to fall further behind.

Ms. Randall said that the School Division was the largest part of the County's budget, but there were other segments of the budget that affected the tax rate as well. She said that she also wanted to note that in the past five years, their number of English as a Second Language (ESL) learners had increased, and that came with a staffing requirement for educators, which impacted their overall costs. She said that additionally, their fastest growing population was their special education students, which also had funding requirements and classroom requirements.

Ms. Randall said that according to their data, special education classrooms across every elementary school composed 86 level two classrooms with a one-to-eight ratio along with additional staff and services.

Ms. Vanuch asked how much state funding offset the costs of the ESL and disability programs.

Dr. Warner said that the Local Composite Index (LCI) meant that they received approximately 60% of their funding from the state, so the County still had to cover the remaining 40%. She said that the teaching ratios were significantly different, and this also varied depending on the level of the classroom.

Ms. Vanuch said that she thought it was important to have the state funding and local share amounts for those programs. She said that she was wondering if there was potential to lobby the General Assembly to provide more state funding based on the costs of their special needs students on the locality. She said that if the locality was paying for those program requirements, it may be considered an unfunded mandate from the state.

Dr. Chase said that their legislative committee discussed this with their state representatives, and Delegate Carroll requested the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) to recalculate the LCI to take into consideration their loss of funds from the Disabled Veterans Tax Relief.

Ms. Vanuch said that the Board was well aware of that aspect, but she was referring to the special education and ESL program costs. She said that there was a local cost associated with delivering those programs, and it may be beneficial to ask for assistance from the state to offset those local costs. She asked if those costs could be provided to the Board.

Dr. Smith said that he would appreciate an opportunity to follow up on the numbers mentioned by Ms. Vanuch. He said that he would be glad to provide that information once he verified all of the numbers.

Ms. Vanuch said that she had been referencing their Board documents from last year.

Ms. Allen asked what each employee would be paying for their healthcare increases.

Mr. Fulmer said that the increase in health insurance premiums was a range, as it depended on the dollar amount and the previous rates. He said that the highest increase was for their employee-only plan, which was rising by 4% on a monthly basis. He said that it was about $20 extra per month.

Ms. Allen asked about the enrollment numbers provided. She asked, if Brook Point was meant to be decompressed, why was Colonial Forge getting so many kids from Brook Point?

Mr. Fulmer said that Forge would experience a slight increase in enrollment due to the loss of approximately 800 students to Hartwood High School. He said that it is worth noting that Hartwood High School would not have a senior class, and as a result, those seniors would need to attend Colonial Forge. He said that for the first year, they had to maintain Colonial Forge on the higher end of the enrollment spectrum, but it would eventually level off.

Ms. Allen said that as leaders of the community, their students expected them to provide what they needed. She said that it was concerning to have programs in their schools that were meant to bolster their workforce locally and throughout the state, only to have no teacher for the program because they could not survive off of the low salary. She said that she personally had two degrees, five years of experience as a nurse, and was making about $58,000 per year as a teacher. She said that in order to teach, which she felt was important, she had taken a $2,500 pay cut per month, and it did not feel sustainable because she now had to pick up extra hospital shifts to make up the loss.

Ms. Allen said that considering this, she asked that they consider how much more intense that financial pressure was for teachers that did not have two incomes. She said that she was thinking about the younger teachers who were stepping into adulthood and family life, and the County was asking them to make life decisions on $50,000 per year in northern Virginia. She said that it was near impossible to find a modest apartment with that income in their area.

Ms. Allen said that even with the significant investments made by the County in their school system in recent years, they remained underfunded and undervalued, which was unfair to do to people that the County expected to guide and support their children. She said that the fact that King George was competitive with a County much larger than they were was a serious concern. She said that when it came to making a living, they should not be surprised that people wanted to work in these other localities where pay was so much better.

Mr. Regan said that he would like to reiterate what had already been discussed. He said that someone had mentioned that they were losing educators in the 0-5 year range of experience to other counties. He said that he would also like to bring up the issue of administrator pay, which was inadequate compared to surrounding counties. He said that Stafford County had underwritten a cohort program to build a pipeline for aspiring school leaders, with the first class consisting of 20 teachers.

Mr. Regan said that he had maintained contact with all of them, and he believed that 12 had since moved into educational leadership positions at various levels of education. He said that only two of these individuals remained in Stafford County, while the remaining 10 had relocated to other counties. He said that this highlighted the issue that Stafford County was investing in a pipeline that they could not afford to retain, ultimately affecting the students.

Dr. Warner said that it was part of their budget to have increased the administrator pay. She said that over the past several years, their administrators had been watching as salaries had been improved for many other levels, but the principals had not received these raises. She said that this year, the budget included adjustments to the scale to make it more competitive, as well as to recognize their years of service.

Mr. Fulmer said that he would like to clarify the numbers for the zero to four steps. He said that according to the data, there were 670 total teachers at those step, which accounted for approximately 25% of the total teachers. He said that this year, they had 90 teachers at step zero, the starting salary.

Ms. Fingerholz said that she understood that they could go through every single one of the numbers, and their staff had indeed done that in the past, year after year. She said that they had worked diligently to ensure their budget was accurate, often down to the $100 mark to assert where funds were going. She said that the fact remained that they were 121st out of 131 other school districts in their state in terms of funding per child.

Ms. Fingerholz said that they were extremely efficient, and their educators, families, and fundraisers had all been working hard to make ends meet. She said that she would like to point out that their staff was comprised of dedicated professionals who were willing to put in the time and effort to ensure their district ran smoothly. She said that they had been fortunate to have a strong team in place, and she believed they had been doing a great job of managing their resources. She said that she would like to emphasize that they were not just talking about being efficient; they were talking about taking care of their most vulnerable population - their children.

Ms. Fingerholz said that as a constitutionally mandated responsibility, they were bound to provide for their education and well-being. She said they needed to find ways to allocate their resources effectively, even if it was painful. She said that she knew that staff would take the time to review the budget with the Board in more detail if they wanted to, but they already knew that their budget was accurate.

Ms. Healy said that the increase in health insurance costs was a deliberate move by the School Board, as part of their decision to increase the pay for all employees. She said that they took $3.5 million of additional funding intended for health insurance and reallocated that across all salaries. She said that they also saw that their employee contribution to health insurance was significantly less than the County government and surrounding jurisdictions, so they tried to address that in this budget.

Ms. Healy said that she had asked their Finance and Budget Committee to address that each quarter to continue to address the health insurance issues they were seeing. She said that they were not the only ones facing this issue; the state was also having serious deficiencies in the area of health insurance. She said that she also wanted to note that a major reason why Stafford was unable to compete with northern Virginia localities was because they only received 25% of the cost to compete adjustment (COCA). She said that if the state legislature gave them more funding with the COCA, they would have millions dollars more for their school system.

Ms. Healy said that the issue of teachers leaving the school system for better pay was a longstanding concern, and they continued to look into what they could do to prevent that from happening. She said that she also wanted to note that the teachers in the zero to five steps on the pay scale were not only leaving for different teaching jobs, they were leaving the profession altogether. She said that it was a very demanding, difficult profession and the pay was so minimal that teachers chose to go into another profession.

Ms. Vanuch asked if Schools staff could provide the total budget numbers, including local share, state share, and other categories.

Mr. Fulmer said that the total request this year was $529 million. He said that for the state, the total was approximately $322 million. He said that the County transfer would be $196 million, and federal funds would be around $4 million. He said that other funds totaled approximately $6 million, and they carried over $1 million in funds from each prior year.

Dr. Warner said that she could confirm that their schools were doing more with less; they were providing the absolute best they could for their children with substandard compensation. She said that they deserved compensation commensurate with their education and the level of work they were doing. She said that they worked hard to create a salary scale that was sustainable in recognition of the problem the County had. She said that for so many years, they had been unable to do it, but their teachers deserved to have salaries that could allow them to live and raise their own families in Stafford County.

Dr. Chase said that she wanted to thank the Board of Supervisors for the funding they had provided in the past four years, the new schools, and all the other support.

Mr. Diggs said that he wanted to thank everyone for attending today's work session and for those serving their children in their schools. He said that education was important and the Board had tough decisions to make. He said that he appreciated their conversations and doing everything they could to be efficient and effective.

**ADJOURNMENT**

The Board adjourned its meeting at 6:05 p.m.

William H. Ashton, II
County Administrator