Mapping Opportunity

Examining the K-12 Policy Landscape in Greater Richmond

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Executive Summary

This landscape provides an overview of policy options for improving educational outcomes across the K-12 continuum in the Greater Richmond area. The overview serves as an introduction to a wide range of initiatives that have potential to help students find academic and career success and to break cycles of intergenerational poverty. The goal is to provide a comprehensive menu of policy opportunities the philanthropic community can explore with the understanding that further research is needed in each area to fully realize its potential.

Given the diversity of challenges and opportunities, we organize the policy options into five broad categories: (1) funding; (2) academic performance and accountability; (3) supports outside of the classroom; (4) school climate and diversity; and (5) career preparation and pathways.

This organization helps shape the landscape by classifying the policy options by the unique barriers that they help to overcome. While each category is distinct, the options complement one another and can be implemented simultaneously to help students get the wide array of services they need to be successful.

We further identify short and long-term opportunities to help differentiate between those options that could be pursued in the near-term and those which may take longer to realize. Across the five categories, we identify 17 short-term policy opportunities and 14 long-term opportunities. The following page lists all of these options.

In boxed text, we offer thoughts on where the philanthropic community could have potential for engagement in each policy opportunity.

$ Funding

**Short-term**
- Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) grants
- State funding for school construction
- State support for low-income students

**Long-term**
- Local tax revenues (property, meals, cigarette)
- Adequacy of state funding formula
- Equity of state funding formula
- Review local composite index

|| Supports Outside of the Classroom

**Short-term**
- Mentoring services
- School breakfast and lunch programs
- Coordinated transition assistance for students
- Positive behavior intervention services

**Long-term**
- State directed school suspension policies
- Specialized training in trauma care

| Career Preparation and Pathways

**Short-term**
- Career counseling programs
- Work-based learning opportunities

**Long-term**
- State support for school counselors
- Regional CTE centers

| School Climate and Diversity

**Short-term**
- Open-enrollment policies
- Workforce diversity and cultural competency
- Community engagement

**Long-term**
- Magnet schools to increase enrollment and diversity
- Controlled choice policies

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I. Funding

Adequate support is necessary for schools to achieve desirable educational outcomes, particularly in high-poverty communities where research has shown kids require additional services in order to thrive. In Richmond, where over 40 percent of children are living in poverty, funding is essential to provide educational and support services these children need.

This support has been limited in recent years by the financial strain of the recession as the state and local governments have drawn back support. State support for Richmond Public Schools (RPS) is down 16 percent since 2009, inflation adjusted, and it’s down 13 percent for public schools in Hanover, 12 percent for Henrico and Chesterfield, and 11 percent for Petersburg. These declines take into account recent efforts from state lawmakers in the recently approved budget to begin restoring support - showing just how large the initial cuts were to schools.

Local support has also declined during this time for both Richmond and Chesterfield. Both localities provided 6 percent less per student to their public schools in 2015 compared to 2009, inflation adjusted. These compounding state and local cuts have put schools in a difficult financial position and have resulted in reduced staffing levels. RPS had 447 fewer staff relative to student enrollment in 2014 compared to 2008, equal to an 11 percent decrease. These missing staff include 110 teachers. Similarly, Chesterfield had 500 fewer staff relative to enrollment including almost 200 teachers.

The situation is a slightly better in Henrico, where local support has actually increased per student by 12 percent since 2009. This added local support has helped the division stay fairly stable in its staffing levels - increasing by 26 positions since 2008 relative to enrollment.

The following list provides short-term and long-term opportunities for increasing support for schools in Greater Richmond and identifies options for the potential roles that the philanthropic community could choose to play in helping advance them. We’ve grouped them as short- and long-term, but efforts can run parallel with the short-term work laying the groundwork for the longer-term opportunities. Lessons learned from those short-term efforts can inform the strategy and tactics for the longer-term efforts.

Short-term opportunities

Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) grants

The philanthropic community could play an important role as a convener, provide technical assistance to state and local governments, and possibly considering providing funding to serve as a match, so that school divisions and local governments in the region make full use of innovative and flexible federal grants that would direct needed funds to Virginia schools for a variety of initiatives under the newly enacted federal law.

These initiatives include:

- Weighted student funding pilot: USDOE will provide support for up to 50 school districts to participate in the pilot in the 2017-2018 school year. Participating districts will consolidate state, local, and federal funding and allocate it by student rather than school using a weighted funding formula that targets “substantially” more to at-risk students.
- Teacher and school leader incentive program: Competitive grant for school districts to implement human capital management systems to make personnel decisions. This is a new Title II grant.
- Statewide family engagement centers: Grant for organizations to establish engagement centers statewide that assist parents in supporting the academic needs of their children and reduces barriers to family engagement.
- Innovative assessment pilot: Allows participating states to phase in new state assessments by piloting them in a subset of districts and eventually going statewide over a 5 year period and replacing the SOL exams in Virginia.

State funding for school construction

The state eliminated support in 2009-2010 for school construction grants. That cut about $60 million per year in support for school divisions across the state. While the state has eliminated this support, RPS facilities in dire need of renovations and replacement – 23 of the 44 schools are in need of either major renovation or complete replacement. The proposal from this RPS Facilities Task Force is estimated to cost $563 million to address these needs.

The philanthropic community could work with advocates at both the state and local level to formulate a strategy for securing additional state support for school capital needs. At the state-level, groups such as the Virginia Municipal League, Virginia Association of Counties, and Virginia First Cities could be engaged in an effort to develop a statewide coalition on it and to collect statewide information on the construction needs of Virginia’s school divisions. By combining the needs of the Richmond metro-area with other school divisions across the state, a winning strategy could be developed.

State support for low-income students

Virginia lags many other states in its support for students from low-income families. TCI analysis shows that in Virginia the state provides 14 to 19 percent more for each low-income student than for other students compared to the 29 percent boost provided on average by states with this support. Extra help is needed for these students because many face serious challenges such as hunger and frequently moving homes, and they lack resources outside of the classroom like private tutoring or participation in structured activities. Research shows it can cost two to two-and-a-half times as much to help low-income students reach similar levels of performance as students from wealthier families.
For example, increasing the state’s at-risk funding consistent with a policy we have designed that would have the state be closer to the national average in this area and not a lagging state (See our report “Weighing Support for Virginia’s Students”) would have increased state support for RPS by $10 million in the 2016-2018 biennium and by $5.4 million for Henrico and $4.2 million for Chesterfield public schools.

The philanthropic community could play a role in engagement efforts to continue to advance policy solutions in this area that increase the At-Risk Add-On to make it more in-line with other states. This work could include supporting research on determining total at-risk funding in other states by updating a 50-state survey last conducted by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities in 2002. This research would more clearly illustrate how far behind Virginia is in its support for low-income students by providing more up-to-date estimates.

Important windows of opportunity to advance this funding issue are through outreach and engagement with the state board of education as it considers developing changes to the state’s funding formula, the Governor’s office as it puts together the state’s next biennial budget in the summer of 2017 that will include re-benchmarking state funding for K-12 education.

**Long-term opportunities**

**Local tax revenues (property, meals, cigarette)**

Developing additional sources of local revenue to support long-term, targeted investments in K-12 education across the Richmond region is an important option worth considering. However, it can be politically difficult – although not impossible, as the meals tax recently adopted through referendum demonstrates – especially when it comes to certain potential revenue sources such as cigarette taxes, given the overall policy environment and significant employment base and corporate presence of the tobacco industry such as Altria.

**The philanthropic community** could consider ways to support the development of coalition partners with a shared agenda of pursuing revenue options to support K-12 education, fund research to design different options, and play a convening role for conversations that advance this solution to the structural funding issues facing communities in Greater Richmond.

It should be noted that both cigarette and meals taxes are regressive – disproportionately burdening lower-income families – and should only be considered if the revenues are targeted to high-poverty schools.

Specific options include:

- Adding/increasing cigarette or meals tax: In Virginia, cities can enact a tax on cigarette sales and meals taxes under their general taxing authority. The right to levy a cigarette tax by a county must be approved by the General Assembly and has only been granted to only two Virginia counties (Arlington and Fairfax). Counties may levy a meals tax if the tax is approved in a voter referendum.

Richmond could create a cigarette taxes to help restore support for their schools. Many localities in Virginia already have a cigarette tax – 29 cities and 2 counties – ranging in size from 10 cents to $1.28. This tax could bring in significant revenue for schools. Newport News whose cigarette tax ranges from 85 cents to $1.28 brought in almost $5 million in revenues in 2015. Newport News is slightly smaller than Richmond meaning this tax would likely bring in more revenue from the tax of that size.

Chesterfield could revisit the issue of implementing a sales tax on prepared food and drink - called a meals tax. It failed there in a referendum vote in 2013. As of 2014, 38 cities and 47 counties in Virginia have a meals tax ranging in size from 2 percent to 8 percent. Richmond has a meals tax of 6 percent and Henrico recently implemented a meals tax of 4 percent. Henrico residents approved the meals tax in the same vote in 2013 when Chesterfield voters rejected a meals tax. The tax is estimated to bring in $18 million in revenue in Henrico and the county has dedicated this revenue to their local schools.

Henrico County’s experience with the meals tax could be evaluated as a model for a renewed effort to urge Chesterfield to adopt one by demonstrating how the revenue from the meals tax has improved educational opportunities in Henrico public schools. Several groups supported the meals tax in 2013 could be brought to the table, including the local PTA, Chesterfield Chamber of Commerce, and the Chesterfield Business Council.

- Increase local property taxes - The largest revenue source for local governments in supporting schools are property taxes and even small increases to the tax rate can generate significant revenues. In Richmond, a penny increase in the property tax rate would raise $2 million in revenues. That increase would raise $3.1 million in Chesterfield and $3.2 million in Henrico.

The potential for raising property tax rate may be more limited in Richmond where they are currently at $1.20 for every $100 of assessed value compared to $0.96 in Chesterfield and $0.87 in Henrico. Only Chesterfield has recently increased property tax rate – raising the rate by one cent in 2014. Henrico and Richmond haven’t increased property rates since 1987.
**Adequacy of state funding formula**

The state made a series of changes to Virginia’s educational funding formula that reduced state support. These cuts reduced state support annually by $800 million, with $683 million coming from the state’s foundation formula called the Standards of Quality (SOQ). The largest cut involved the state putting in place a cap on the number of support positions that the state will help support. This cap is well below the number of staff schools actually need to operate - with only 5 school divisions that have less than 3 percent of Virginia’s students operating under the cap.

In November of 2016, Virginia’s Board of Education unanimously approved recommendations to the General Assembly instructing the state to eliminate the cap on support staff. The recommendations also included increasing staffing ratios in schools for other critical positions that include principals, assistant principals, school counselors, psychologists, social workers, and nurses. If implemented, the recommendations would increase state support for Virginia’s public schools by more than $600 million per year.

The philanthropic community could partner with statewide advocates on the Alliance for Virginia’s Students to advocate for the state to fix the formula so that it is reflective of the real cost of providing an education to Virginia’s students and implement the recommendations from the Board of Education.

**Equity of state funding formula**

Many states allocate additional support for high-need students in their foundational formula. Virginia’s main school funding formula doesn’t have a single weight for the higher cost of these students. Instead, support is spread across a series of initiatives like reducing class size or providing intervention and remediation for struggling students. Support for these programs varies from year to year and research at TCI indicates that overall it lags behind many other states. Adding a pupil weight in the SOQ formula for at-risk students, English language learners, and students with disabilities would help ensure that these students get the support they need every year.

Virginia’s Board of Education has requested that Virginia’s legislative research arm study the feasibility of implementing pupil weights, but lawmakers have not granted that request.

The philanthropic community could advocate for the state to undertake this study or they could support their own assessment. Researchers have used cost functions to estimate the higher cost of educating lower-income students, which have then been used to inform and adjust the state’s funding formula. These analyses have been done in California, Kansas, Missouri, New York, and Texas. An analysis in Virginia could be done to identify the exact weights the state should use for providing additional support to high-need students.

In the 2017 session, lawmakers introduced a budget amendment for the state to appropriate funds to the Board of Education to contract for an adequacy study that would examine “pupil weights” for students that are economically disadvantaged, limited English proficiency, and eligible for special education.

**Review local composite index**

The state and local governments split the cost of educating Virginia students based on a measure called the Local Composite Index (LCI). The LCI has become a controversial measure based on how it measures revenue capacity, student population, and taxable property. Many critics note that the City of Richmond takes on a larger share of their educational costs with the state than suburban neighbors of Henrico and Chesterfield. This places a greater burden on Richmond to raise sufficient revenues while also providing an education for students who have greater needs and higher costs.

Since the LCI is an index, a change to one school division’s LCI influences all the other divisions. It is therefore highly controversial and difficult to adjust. Given these challenges, the philanthropic community could support an independent review of the LCI. The objectivity of the reviewing organization is crucial and it will lend much credibility if it is supported by state lawmakers. The legislature’s research arm – the Joint Legislative Audit and Review Commission – would be a good candidate for reviewing the LCI as they have done so in the past. State lawmakers would need to approve this study.

Adequate support is necessary for schools to achieve desirable educational outcomes, particularly in high-poverty communities.
II: Academic Performance and Accountability

Student performance in Richmond Public Schools (RPS) is well below the rest of the state, and scores are even lower for Richmond’s minority and low-income students. Decades of research has documented the negative effects of poverty on student achievement and that these effects are particularly pronounced when concentrated in urban environments. These challenges are certainly present in Richmond Public Schools (RPS) where over 40 percent of children are living in poverty and 74 percent of students qualify for free or reduced price lunch.

Test scores show that RPS has not been successful in overcoming these challenges. Pass rates on reading and math SOL tests averaged more than 17 percentage points lower in RPS than statewide average with an average of only 60 percent of RPS students passing SOL exams in those areas in 2014-2015. The performance of low-income and minority students is even lower. On average, only 56 percent of economically disadvantaged students, 46 percent of Hispanic students, and 32 percent of Black students passed their SOL exams in these subjects. As a result of this poor performance, only 17 of Richmond’s 44 schools were fully accredited in 2015, while 22 were partially or conditionally accredited, and five had their accreditation denied.

While Chesterfield and Henrico are largely on par with state averages in overall performance, minority students appear to have similar struggles as those students in RPS. On average only 32 percent and 41 percent of Black students passed their reading and math SOLs in Henrico and Chesterfield respectively, compared a pass rate of 66 percent statewide for Black students. Pass rates for Hispanic students were similarly lower than statewide numbers.

The following list provides short-term and long-term opportunities for improving academic outcomes and combating achievement disparities in Greater Richmond. It also identifies opportunities for the philanthropic community to engage on these issues to advance positive outcomes.

Short-term opportunities

ESSA school quality indicators

The newly approved federal law – ESSA – requires states to incorporate non-academic factors into their accountability system to broaden accountability beyond standardized test scores. Possible measures of school quality that states could adopt include student engagement, access to advanced coursework, postsecondary readiness, or school climate that would be measured by a survey. These new indicators attempts to address concern that our current accountability system forces schools to “teach to the test.” This alternative strategy would begin to gauge how well schools are performing at other aspects of educating students such as preparing them for college or the workforce or engaging them outside of the classroom.

The Virginia Department of Education will be submitting their ESSA plan including measures of school quality in September of 2017. Prior to finalizing the plan, VDOE will be inviting public feedback into the plan during June and July.

Teacher recruitment and retention

Recruiting and retaining high-quality teachers is consistently identified as one of the most effective strategies for improving student performance, particularly in high-poverty communities like Richmond. Yet, these areas have difficulty recruiting teachers because the diverse challenges their students face can make teaching more difficult.

There are several strategies RPS could undertake to improve their teacher recruitment and the philanthropic community could support these efforts. Richmond has a successful teacher residency program called the Richmond Teacher Residency Program (RTR), which is a partnership between RPS and Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU). RTR trains teachers to work in a high-poverty, urban environment and supports them after their placement through peer mentoring. Started in 2011, the program has trained 60 teachers with 100 percent of graduates hired after residency and 91 percent still working in RPS after two years. Additional funding could increase their capacity for placing teachers in RPS and identifying mentors to support newly placed staff.

RPS could also apply for new state funds dedicated to teacher recruitment. In the 2016 session, state lawmakers approved $2.1 million for a teacher improvement fund in hard-to-staff schools. This competitive grant is available to schools that combine grant funding with performance-based compensation models and prioritizes school divisions with high percentages of free lunch students.

Opportunities exist for the philanthropic community to become a key community partner with RPS to help Richmond’s schools make more progress in using effective teachers recruitment strategies such as teacher residency programs.

Talent acquisition and management officers

Another strategy for improving teacher and staff recruitment and development would be for RPS, Petersburg, and Henrico, public schools to hire a talent acquisition manager. Each school division currently has a human resources manager and staff that help fill job vacancies and manage transfers. Yet, other school divisions in Virginia and across the country have taken a more proactive approach by filling talent acquisition and management positions. These positions are less focused on administrative processes and more so on strategic approaches for recruiting,
hiring, developing, and retaining teachers and staff.

In Virginia, both Fairfax County and Williamsburg both have talent acquisition and management positions. The superintendent of Chesterfield public schools indicated that while the position has a different title in Chesterfield it fills a similar role. Across the country, many larger school divisions employ these positions; including Baltimore, Houston, Denver, Nashville, and St. Paul.

Field interviews suggest that some board members enter office without broad knowledge of the school system or its needs. Given the broad authority granted to school boards, this lack of familiarity with schools or governance can result in problems with administration and oversight. Some superintendents have suggested that more extensive education and training programs for board members could be effective, particularly if their attendance were made a requirement for the position.

The philanthropic community could work with RPS, Petersburg, and Henrico to explore interest in hiring a talent acquisition and management officer or director to offer more proactive approaches to attracting and keeping the best teachers and school leaders.

**Governance training for local school boards**

Local school boards are given broad authority over many school functions and hiring decisions. For example, the bylaws for the Richmond school board is granted authority to “act upon the recommendations of the division superintendent in all matters of policy, appointment, or dismissal of employees, salary schedules, or other personnel regulations, courses of study and other matters pertaining to the welfare of schools.” This gives the school board the authority to approve or reject hiring decisions in RPS.

The philanthropic community could identify opportunities for further education and training of school board members, particularly in Richmond, to build leadership capacity.

**Instructional resources and technology**

The City of Petersburg’s recent financial crisis has severely limited the resources available to support its public schools for hiring staff and purchasing needed instructional resources. To help prioritize resources, the Petersburg City Public Schools (PCPS) is currently working with Cameron Foundation to develop a comprehensive long-range strategic plan for school improvement. The plan will serve as a blueprint for specific actions and resources needed to move PCPS forward. This plan could serve as a resource for the philanthropic community in identifying how they can plug-in and assist PCPS.

In the meantime, Petersburg’s superintendent has identified several instructional resources that are needed now to assist learning in the classroom. These resources include funding for purchasing new reading material and updating technology at the Peabody Middle School library. The library has not had funding in the past five years to update print and non-print resources. PCPS estimates a cost of $20,000 for these improvements. The superintendent of Petersburg also identified technology needs for its middle school and high school students. While students have some access to computers in the classroom, students do not have access to laptops outside of it. PCPS estimates a cost of $630,000 to increase availability of laptops for middle and high school students, although that investment could be scalable.

These training initiatives present another solid opportunity for the philanthropic community to engage with RPS in exploring strategies for implementing differentiated instruction, and there are a number of models that could provide an effective pathway. For example, an initiative could be modeled after the training program in Chesapeake Public Schools that uses student achievement data to provide differentiated instruction to students.

In addition, the Virginia DOE’s Office of School Improvement provides supports for low-performing schools called the Partnership for Achieving Successful Schools (PASS) Initiative. As part of these services the state provides onsite coaching and webinars on differentiated instruction.

**Public/private delivery options**

Lawmakers recently created the Mixed-Delivery Preschool Fund and Grant Program to support public/private partnerships in providing preK services to children eligible for Virginia’s Preschool Initiative (VPI). The grant is competitively awarded to applicants with priority given to communities who do not fully utilize their VPI allocation and can document unmet need. In 2015, Richmond, Chesterfield, and Henrico were three of only 13 divisions statewide that had over 100 or more unused VPI slots. This means...
each of these divisions would receive priority in the application process for this grant program.

The Virginia Early Childhood Foundation (VECF) has already awarded the first round of awards and the recipients do not include Richmond, Chesterfield, or Henrico. VECF has started the process for the second round of applications and will award up to six grants of approximately $250,000 each for a July 2017 - June 2019 project period. The deadline for the second round of applications is May 15, 2017.

The philanthropic community could collaborate with school divisions and community advocates, such as Bridging Richmond and Voices for Virginia’s Children, to identify opportunities for local organizations to participate in this opportunity to expand access to preK services.

District and school capacity for using data
Bridging Richmond has helped develop an education data project to provide schools and school divisions with real-time data to encourage continuous improvement and policy changes. As part of the data project, they have collected information on lagging indicators that monitor measures that will take time to change. Some information collected by Bridging Richmond includes kindergarten readiness, math readiness, third grade reading proficiency, high school graduation, and workforce readiness.

The philanthropic community could partner with Bridging Richmond and school division leaders to make sure that data is being appropriately used to inform school policy.

Reforms to the Standards of Learning
A common theme in outreach to instructors and experts are concerns that over-testing of students impedes overall development. These criticisms identify both the number of standardized tests and the content of the tests as a problem. The state has made efforts in recent years to reduce the number of SOL exams. In 2014, the state eliminated five exams reducing the total number of SOL tests to 29 from 34 across grades 3-12. This eliminated lower-level science, writing, U.S. history, and social studies exams.

This amount is still above the federal requirements for standardized testing that will be maintained in the Every Students Succeed Act (ESSA). ESSA requires the state to administer 17 exams for grades 3-12, which includes annual reading and math exams in grades 3-8, one exam for reading and math in grades 10-12, and three science exams in grades 3-12.

State leaders may be amenable to further reducing the number of SOL exams as they develop new high school graduation requirements that were approved by lawmakers this past legislative session. These new requirements emphasize the need for career exploration and work-based learning opportunities in later years of high-school as opposed to continued testing.

An opportunity exists around further reducing the number of SOLs by bringing together local school representatives with state leaders on the SOL Innovation Committee and the State Board of Education.

Opportunities also exist to support state and local leaders as they explore the possibility of revising the SOLs. The Innovative Assessment Pilot included in ESSA includes federal support to pilot new standards in several school divisions with the goal of eventually making them statewide. Criticisms of the SOLs suggest the examinations simply measure memorization as opposed to the development of skills and do not engage students in the subject material. Efforts to provide performance-based instruction and assessment have attempted to shift testing to measure the ability of students to apply knowledge in task-based assessments.

To advance SOL revisions, an opportunity exists to facilitate a conversation with state and local leaders by bringing in policy experts from Stanford or Harvard to discuss incorporating the principles of performance-based assessments into the SOLs or replacing the SOLs.

Student performance in Richmond Public Schools (RPS) is well below the rest of the state, and scores are even lower for Richmond’s minority and low-income students.
III. Supports Outside of the Classroom

Students coming from families that struggle financially face serious challenges that can make success in the classroom more difficult and can prevent students from graduating from high-school. These challenges can include distractions in their home life, such as moving frequently, hunger, and parents coping with substance abuse. In addition, many do not have the luxury of outside resources, such as private tutoring, that students from higher-income families may receive. As a result, students from low-income families are more likely to drop-out of school and less likely to graduate.

Providing students sufficient supports to graduate from high-school is certainly a challenge in Richmond Public Schools (RPS). The graduation rate in RPS is ten percentage points lower than statewide with only 81 percent of students graduating on-time in four years. Similarly, RPS has a higher dropout rate with 12 percent of high-school students dropping out compared to 5 percent statewide. These numbers are particularly high for Hispanic students.

Henrico and Chesterfield fare better than RPS with on-time graduation rates and drop rates that are similar to the statewide numbers. However, students with limited English proficiency (LEP) perform much worse on both measures in those localities as well. The on-time graduation rates for LEP students was 34 percentage points lower than the division-wide total in both Henrico and Chesterfield with only 56 and 57 percent of LEP students graduating on-time respectively. This large gap shows that even in the better off suburban school divisions, there are significant subpopulations struggling to get through school.

The following list provides short-term and long-term opportunities for helping to provide the needed supports to help students stay in school and graduate on-time. It also identifies opportunities for the philanthropic community to engage on these issues to advance positive outcomes.

**Short-term opportunities**

**Mentoring services**

Mentoring is important to help students manage their day-to-day challenges, provide a positive role-model, and to let kids know that they are not alone. This is particularly important for children that come from low-income families that have to manage many challenges outside of the classroom that their classmates from wealthier families might not face. Research shows that school-based mentoring can increase grade promotion, attendance, and student achievement and they are even more pronounced for those students at-risk of academic failure.

RPS currently partners with the City of Richmond to provide some mentoring services through the Communities in Schools (CIS) of Richmond initiative. Within CIS, one of the more successful examples is the Carver Promise in which Carver Elementary School partners with University of Richmond, Virginia Union University, J. Sargeant Reynolds Community College, and VCU to provide weekly mentoring for their first through fifth graders. In the last year, 350 students received one-on-one mentoring through this program. While this program has had successes, TCI interviews from the field indicate that it is unclear how robust this model truly is. Further investigation of the program could help identify if the Carver Promise is a model for Greater Richmond to replicate in other schools.

Opportunities exist for the philanthropic community to become a key partner with RPS, Henrico, and Chesterfield Public Schools in identifying community supports to expand mentoring opportunities to more elementary and high schools in the region and could use Carver Elementary’s program as a model. Further research could also identify if there are other models in regions similarly sized to Richmond that have successfully implemented one-on-one mentoring across the entire district.

**School breakfast and lunch programs**

The Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) uses federal funds to reimburse schools for providing breakfast and lunch at no charge to students. The provision ensures that all students have access to nutritious meals and reduces administrative work for schools, because they do not need to determine eligibility for individual students. In addition, the federal government provides the vast majority of support for CEP making it a great deal for eligible schools. This program has been a priority of Virginia’s first lady Dorothy McAuliffe.

Entire school divisions or individuals schools can qualify for CEP if more than 40 percent of their students are identified as eligible because they qualify for a public assistance program or because they are homeless or in foster care. RPS as a school division is eligible and participates in CEP, because 62 percent of their students were eligible in the 2015-2016.

Henrico and Chesterfield do not qualify for CEP as an entire school division, but individual schools within both divisions are eligible that currently do not participate. In Henrico, 22 schools with almost 11,500 students are currently eligible for the CEP program that are not participating and in Chesterfield 8 schools with 5,350 students are eligible that are not participating. Instead, these schools are only offering free meals for those students that meet the income requirements for the National School Lunch Program, when they could be offering free meals to all of their students.

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The philanthropic community could work with community leaders and school officials to provide the necessary information to participate in CEP to ensure that all kids in these schools have access to free meals.

**Coordinated transition assistance for students**

School superintendents in Greater Richmond region identified student transience is a major challenge. Students...
are going back and forth across school division lines and administrators are struggling to keep track of these students. Coordination is important because relocating students are at high-risk of dropping out of school. Many studies have found student mobility associated with lower school engagement, poorer grades, and higher risk of dropping out – these findings are particularly true for students that have moved more than once.

The superintendent of Chesterfield County Public Schools expressed interest in partnering with neighboring school divisions to develop a better way to coordinate information sharing and transition support for students moving back-and-forth across school division lines. This type of coordination would facilitate information sharing and hopefully reduce the number of transient students that dropout of school.

The philanthropic community partner with Chesterfield County Public Schools and surrounding school divisions to develop a mechanism for sharing information and coordinating transition assistance for transient students.

Similarly, communication could also be improved between local governments and school divisions for students living in a family that has recently been evicted. When a family is evicted from their home or apartment a writ of possession is provided to the local Sheriff’s office. This gives the local government the opportunity to notify the school division that a student may become homeless or may be transferring schools or school divisions. This notice is important so that the student’s former school is informed on the student’s new status and can provide assistance to the family in the transfer of the student.

**Positive behavior intervention services**

Positive behavior intervention services (PBIS) is a popular framework used by schools for teaching positive social behaviors to students. PBIS has been shown to be effective at reducing disciplinary action, improving school climate, and improving behavioral and academic outcomes for students. In Virginia, school divisions implementing Virginia Tiered Systems of Supports (VTSS), which includes using PBIS, had a 46 percent decrease in in-school suspensions and a 21 percent decrease in out-of school suspension.

Many school districts across the country have implemented versions of PBIS including 61 divisions in Virginia. RPS, Henrico, and Chesterfield are among those divisions implementing PBIS, but none have extended the program to all of the schools within their division. RPS has implemented it in four schools – Maymont Elementary, Clark Springs Elementary, Overby Sheppard Elementary, and MLK Middle – and is in the process of implementing it for several other elementary and middle schools. Similarly, Henrico and Chesterfield have or in the process of implementing PBIS in some schools, but it has not been done across the division.

State and federal dollars are available in support of expanding PBIS. In the 2016-2017 budget, lawmakers approved $1 million in state general funds that were proposed by the Governor for expanding the use of PBIS in schools. These state dollars will be available by application from school divisions. In addition, VDOE continues to award federal dollars from the School Climate Transformation (SCT) grant program to schools for expanding and enhancing the use of PBIS. The Governor even made expanding PBIS one of his initiatives within his Classrooms not Courtrooms Initiative.

There is an opportunity available for the philanthropic community to work with school officials and leaders in RPS, Henrico, and Chesterfield Public Schools to pursue these available funds to further the use of PBIS the Greater Richmond area.

**Long-term opportunities**

**State directed school suspension policies**

School suspensions are a major issue across all of Virginia. A 2015 report by the Center for Public Integrity showed Virginia has the highest rate of students referred to police and courts in the entire country. A subsequent report by the Legal Aid Justice Center shows that Richmond has one of the highest percentages of short-term suspensions in the state and among the largest number of expulsions. The report also shows that the percentage of Black students suspended in RPS is over five times higher than the percentage of white students short-term suspended.

State lawmakers could approve legislation that would go a long way toward addressing this problem by reducing school suspensions. This past session, lawmakers rejected several pieces of legislation that would have limited expulsions or referrals to law-enforcement. For example, one bill would have required schools to consider “all feasible alternatives” before expelling a student or referring them to law enforcement. This bill would have made referrals to law enforcement a last resort and put considerable pressure on school divisions to change their policies. In the 2017 session, lawmakers approved a bill that directs the state Board of Education to establish guidelines for alternatives to short-term and long-term suspension for consideration by local school boards.

By partnering with advocates such as the Legal Aid Justice Center, the philanthropic community could help build support for improving school suspension policies at the state-level that would improve policies in the Greater Richmond area and across the entire state.

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**The philanthropic community** could help foster this communication between local governments and school divisions in relaying eviction notice to help kids in families facing eviction.
Specialized training in trauma care

It’s important that RPS trains teachers and administrators in how to care for and help the unique needs of students coming from poverty. Low-income students in urban environments are more likely to have been exposed to violence, maltreatment, or the loss of a family member or friend and these experiences impact the student’s development and behavior.

There are several models that RPS could adopt in providing their staff and administrators training in trauma-informed care to best help students with these experiences. Massachusetts public schools uses a “flexible framework” for trauma sensitive practices that includes training staff in strengthening relationship with students that have experienced trauma, identifying outside supports, and helping children regulate their emotions.

Alternatively, the “sanctuary model” is another strategy that works with teachers and administrators to change the school culture to better serve students who have experienced trauma. The training was developed by a researcher at Drexel University. If resources are too limited to implement these models that train all teachers and staff, RPS could consider using a “trauma committee” in which select staff are trained to provide trauma-informed care to act as the resident experts in identifying and assisting those students experiencing trauma.

The philanthropic community has an opportunity to partner with RPS to identify and advance the most appropriate model for providing professional development in trauma-informed care.

Other states have implemented a variety of models in providing professional development for trauma-informed care that could be adopted by RPS. In addition, the VCU Center for Society and Health is a local resource with expertise on trauma-informed care.

Students coming from families that struggle financially face serious challenges that can make success in the classroom more difficult and can prevent students from graduating from high-school.
IV. School Climate and Diversity

Virginia public schools are becoming increasingly segregated by race and income. Since the 2003-2004 school year, the number of public schools in Virginia with high percentages of low-income students and high percentages of students of color has risen from 82 schools up to 136 schools – that’s 60 percent growth. The number of students enrolled in these schools has more than doubled over that time period.

Richmond Public Schools (RPS) has the largest number of these high-poverty, high-minority schools. In 29 of the 44 schools in RPS, 75 percent or more of students are Black or Hispanic and 75 percent or more are from low-income families. That’s equal to two-thirds of the schools in RPS that are classified as both high-poverty and high-minority schools. Statewide only 7 percent of schools are both high-poverty and high-minority.

This is a concern because schools with high concentrations of low-income students face significant challenges in attracting and retaining high-quality teachers, overcoming the influence of low-achieving classmates, and providing sufficient resources for students. The unfortunate result is that students in these schools often receive a lower quality education that results in poor educational outcomes. Henrico and Chesterfield also have high-poverty, high-minority schools – although they account for a much lower percentage of their total schools. Henrico has seven such schools and Chesterfield has two. In Petersburg, six of the division’s seven school are high-poverty, high-minority schools.

The following list provides short-term and long-term opportunities for increasing economic and racial diversity and improving school climate in Greater Richmond public schools, each of which presents a number of pathways for the philanthropic community to consider engaging as a key community partner with RPS to improve the quality of education for Richmond’s kids.

**Short-term opportunities**

**Open-enrollment policies**

RPS allows parents to send their child to a school outside of the zone where the family lives. Openings are awarded by lottery when they exceed the openings available. This policy – called open-enrollment – initially included free transportation for the students that were placed outside of their zone. However, due to the financial strain of the recession, RPS eliminated the support for transportation across zones in 2008. Last year transportation was only provided for Binford Middle School. Other students enrolling outside of their zone must find their own transportation to their hub where they can catch a bus. This resulted in what some experts have characterized as a “perfect storm” in school choice policies by enabling wealthier students – who have access to a broader set of transportation options and more information about how the policy works – to transfer to better schools in the city, while leaving those with more limited means in their neighborhood school.

By working with key stakeholders to identify support for cross-zone transportation and more extensive outreach, the philanthropic community could help make the open-enrollment policy a real option for kids who need it most.

Chesterfield and Henrico Public Schools do not currently have any open-enrollment policy. This means that students must attend the public schools within their zone, unless they qualify for regional program, which can result in very disparate student populations between schools in the same division. For example, the student population in Tuckahoe Elementary in western Henrico is 93 percent white, 4 percent black, and 4 percent free or reduced lunch, while Harold Macon Ratchiffe Elementary in eastern Henrico is 1 percent white, 96 percent black, and 76 percent free or reduced lunch. Similar differences exist across schools in Chesterfield as well.

By implementing open-enrollment policies with public transportation provided at no cost to the student, both school divisions could break-up the pockets of poverty that exist in certain schools and promote more diverse schools.

**Workforce diversity and cultural competency**

Interviews with school division superintendents found that school divisions have had difficulty recruiting teachers of color and teachers with experience instructing in schools with high percentages of students from low-income families. Superintendents in Richmond and Chesterfield identified that many of the new hires in their more challenging schools struggle to connect with students and lack cultural competency. They also expressed concern with not having sufficient role models for students of color in their classrooms.

As a potential solution to these challenges, the superintendent of Chesterfield proposed using a scholarship program to attract students in the local community and students of color into the teaching profession. Under this model, students would receive scholarship to pursue a degree in education if they commit to returning to work for their local school division for an agreed upon amount of time. Superintendents indicate they have better success retaining teachers from their local area as they have personal connection and commitment to the community. The program could also be targeted for minority applicants and could be modeled after the federal Teacher Education Assistance for college and Higher Education (TEACH) grants.

The philanthropic community could collaborate with Chesterfield and Richmond public schools to identify local sources of funding to support the creation of a teacher scholarship program to improve diversity and cultural competency of teaching staff.
Community engagement
Several school division superintendents expressed interest for increasing engagement with their local community. Henrico County Public Schools recently created a Director of Family Engagement to provide outreach to family members with a focus in high-poverty areas of the county. Chesterfield County Public Schools is currently looking for funding to support a similar type of position that the superintendent called an Equity Coordinator. This position could provide outreach to families to engage them in school activities and could be a resource for families to voice complaints or concerns that they have. This type of a position could also be useful in other school divisions like Richmond or Petersburg.

Superintendents indicate that seed funding to staff the position for a couple years could demonstrate the value of the position to local governments to build the political will to support the position long-term. The philanthropic community could work with school divisions and local governments to identify support for family engagement and equity coordinators, or could consider providing seed funding for these positions.

Long-term opportunities
Magnet schools to increase enrollment and diversity
Many cities and counties across the country have used specialized schools with a focus in a particular area of study to draw students across school zones. These schools – called magnet schools – also exist in a variety of forms in Virginia and include Governor’s schools for gifted students, STEM academies focused on the sciences, and career and technical education centers. By pooling from a larger area, these schools can increase diversity. This is particularly true if these schools use a lottery system or weighted lottery to award positions for oversubscribed schools.

There are two Governor’s schools in the Greater Richmond area: Maggie L. Walker School for Government and International Studies located in Richmond and Appomattox Regional Governor’s School for Arts and Technology located in Petersburg. These programs draw students across school zones and divisions. However, Governor’s Schools do not use a lottery system to award slots. Rather, they each have an application process that awards positions based on student achievement.

But not all students will meet the academic standards to attend these Governor’s schools, and it’s particularly challenging for those that do not have outside supports to pursue these options. An opportunity exists to engage with key stakeholders at RPS, and in Henrico and Chesterfield, to explore opportunities for expanding on existing magnet schools and specialty programs and creating new lottery-based programs in schools that currently do not have a specialty program.

Controlled choice policies
To help schools achieve specific diversity goals, school divisions would need to take a more proactive approach to student enrollment. They can do this by promoting school choice and diversity standards under a model called controlled-choice. This model allows parents to select the public school in their division that they would like their child to attend – similar to open-enrollment. These choices are then balanced with diversity factors such as socioeconomic status or race that help break up concentrations of poverty. The goal is to simultaneously promote choice and diversity.

School districts around the country have implemented versions of controlled-choice and they have been effective at increasing racial diversity in public schools. Cambridge Public Schools in Massachusetts were the first to use controlled-choice in the U.S. Since implementing the program in the early 1980s, they went from having six schools comprised mostly of minorities and five schools that were almost entirely white to having no predominantly white schools in 2000-2001 school year. Cambridge has recently shifted their controlled-choice policies to target economic diversity rather than race. Cambridge also uses magnet schools in their public schools and could be used as a model for how you could pair controlled choice policies with magnet schools.

While Richmond RPS has an open-enrollment system, flawed as it is, it does not have a controlled-choice policy, and neither do surrounding localities in the Greater Richmond region. An opportunity exists to educate key stakeholders on this approach to address the concentrations of economic and racial segregation in Richmond area schools.

Virginia public schools are becoming increasingly segregated by race and income.
The numbers in the Greater Richmond area show a similar story in Virginia. In Richmond Public Schools (RPS), less than one-third of graduates and completers left high-school with an advanced diploma in the 2014-2015 school year. And it’s even lower for Black and economically disadvantaged graduates and for students in Richmond’s five comprehensive high schools. These percentages are well-behind the state as a whole in which over half — 55 percent — of graduates and completers receive an advanced diploma.

By not preparing students with advanced diplomas, RPS is not positioning students to pursue higher education. The consequences are evident with only 45 percent of students enrolling in a higher education institution within 16 months of earning a high school diploma compared to 65 percent statewide. Henrico and Chesterfield Public Schools do better – performing similar to statewide trends overall – but some subgroups such as economically disadvantaged and Black graduates and completers have lower levels of achievement. Only 34 percent of Black and 28 percent economically disadvantaged graduates in Henrico received an advanced diploma and 46 percent and 37 percent received one in Chesterfield.

The following list provides short-term and long-term opportunities for improving career pathways to help connect graduates to higher education institutions and employers. It also identifies opportunities for the philanthropic community to engage on these issues to advance positive outcomes.

**Short-term opportunities**

**Career counseling programs**

Mentors and counselors can play a vital role in guiding students toward higher education by providing information about college preparatory courses, financial aid, and by walking students through the application process. Yet, school staff indicate that caseloads are too large for counselors to provide needed one-on-one career guidance. State data backs up these concerns. Since 2008, RPS has lost 22 school counselors and librarians relative to student enrollment and Chesterfield has lost 18 counselors and librarians. The need for additional counselors will be increased as the state redesigns its high-school graduation requirements by requiring additional career exploration.

One way to increase counseling opportunities is to expand existing programs, such as the Partnership for the Future that provide counseling and career guidance to students in RPS and Henrico Public Schools. The partnership includes higher education institutions such as Virginia Tech and James Madison along with community and corporate sponsors. Working together, the partnership provides one-on-one mentoring, SAT prep classes, overnight college visits, assistance with financial aid and college applications, internship opportunities, and matching funds up to $2,000 for college tuition.

RVA Future Centers is another important organization that helps secure support for enrichment activities and counseling to help prepare students for success in college, career, and the community. The program is active in all five of Richmond’s comprehensive high schools and is about to begin its second year.

**An opportunity exists for the philanthropic community to work with the Partnership for the Future and RVA Future Centers to look for opportunities for expanding membership and support to increase the number of students served and to potentially partner with schools outside of RPS.**

**Work-based learning opportunities**

To help prepare graduates for the workplace, high-school career and technical education (CTE) programs incorporate a variety of work-based learning opportunities. These opportunities allow students to gauge their interest in different areas, connect to employers and career pathways, and build skills that are difficult to learn in the classroom. Some examples of work-based learning opportunities include internships, apprenticeships, mentoring, job shadowing, and cooperative education.

These important opportunities are not universally available in high-school CTE programs. A report by the legislature’s research arm found that job shadowing opportunities were only available in half of school divisions, internships in only 37 percent of divisions, and apprenticeships in only 12 percent of divisions in 2014. The report also identified that no school divisions in the central Virginia region provided the full-range of work-based learning opportunities.

**Long-term opportunities**

**State support for school counselors**

This past legislative session, lawmakers and the governor approved legislation for the Virginia Board of Education to design new graduation requirements that emphasize core skill sets in early years and
established multiple paths toward college and career readiness in later years which includes internships, externships, and credentialing. The Board of Education is currently in the process of designing these new requirements by developing a “profile of a Virginia graduate.” The new requirements will take effect for incoming freshman for the fall of 2018.

At public hearings, the Board of Education has expressed interest for increasing the number of state supported school counselors in schools to help implement the new graduation requirements. Currently, the state’s Standards of Quality (SOQ) requires one full-time counselor for every 500 students in elementary schools, one for every 400 students in middle school, and one for every 350 students in high school. By increasing state support for these positions, local schools would have the resources to hire additional counseling positions to provide more individualized support and career counseling for students.

Working with the Alliance for Virginia’s Students and other state advocates, the philanthropic community could explore advocacy options at the state-level for improving the SOQ to support additional school counselor positions.

Regional CTE Centers
Career and technical education (CTE) is offered in grades 6 - 12 in Virginia to provide students with technical expertise and credentials that can lead to employment upon completion of their high school degree. These programs are offered in a range of fields including manufacturing, information technology, and the health sciences with the curriculum developed in collaboration with industry leaders.

A recent report from the legislature’s research arm has identified that resource constraints have limited the ability of these programs to offer courses in-demand from employers, particularly in STEM-IT and the health sciences. This past legislative session, the Governor proposed and lawmakers adopted an additional $4 million from lottery proceeds to help school divisions update their CTE equipment to industry standards. While this one-time appropriation will help some school divisions update equipment, it is unlikely to meet the needs of all of Virginia’s school divisions. Another strategy that appears promising in the Greater Richmond area would be for school divisions to pool resources to offer a regional CTE program.

CodeRVA is a great example of these types of regional partnerships. Led by Chesterfield, twelve school divisions have come together to form a regional CTE program located in Richmond with a focus on computer science and coding. A notable feature of the program is that selection for the program will not be purely competitive-based application. Instead, to “address racial, economic, and gender inequities in STEM-related education,” the school will incorporate a lottery-based admission with the goal of offering services to a diverse, balanced student population. Participating school divisions include Chesterfield, Colonial Heights, Dinwiddie, Hanover, Henrico, Hopewell City, New Kent, Petersburg City, Powhatan, Prince George, Richmond City, and Sussex.

While CodeRVA is a cost-effective model and classes will begin this year, several school divisions superintendents have indicated that coordination has been challenging.

The philanthropic community could coordinate with school divisions and leadership of CodeRVA to make sure that the administration of the program runs smoothly in this first year and could help identify resources for growth.

Schools in high-poverty areas often lack resources to provide advanced studies courses that help puts students in good position to pursue higher education or a desired career.
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