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VIA ELECTRONIC MAIL

December 16, 2024

The Honorable L. Louise Lucas
Chair, Senate Finance and Appropriations Committee
General Assembly Building, Room 1404
201 North 9th Street
Richmond, VA 23219

The Honorable Luke E. Torian
Chair, House Appropriations Committee
General Assembly Building, Room 1223
201 North 9th Street
Richmond, VA 23219

Dear Chair Torian and Chair Lucas,

On behalf of the Virginia Association of Counties (VACo), I am writing to you to urge the General Assembly to take critical steps in the upcoming 2025 legislative session to address the significant funding challenges that Virginia's K-12 schools continue to face. While we appreciate the efforts the Commonwealth has made in recent years to improve K-12 funding and support the work of the Joint Subcommittee on Elementary and Secondary Education Funding, significant funding gaps remain that continue to place pressure on local governments and school divisions. We look forward to working with you to implement the recommendations of JLARC's landmark 2023 report on K-12 funding where they coincide with local prevailing practices. As you weigh further investments in K-12 education as part of your work to revise the 2024-2026 biennium budget next session, we encourage you to prioritize three critical areas identified by JLARC: elimination of the cap on recognition of support positions, recognition of prevailing K-12 staffing practices, and use of a more accurate method for calculating teacher salaries. These items would enhance state support for all school divisions, reducing pressures on local budgets as in FY 2021, local governments invested $6.6 billion more than the state funding formula indicated was needed. This would also help ensure that all Virginia students are equipped to succeed in a global economy, as well as ensuring continued strong economic development by demonstrating to prospective new businesses that Virginia schools and students remain world class.

Eliminating the Support Cap
One of the most pressing issues is the need to restore pre-recession-era funding levels by eliminating the support cap, which has severely limited the state's financial contributions to essential school positions for almost two decades. We are grateful for recent investments by the state to partially restore support position funding; however, this cap continues to place an undue burden on local governments, forcing them to bridge the gap in funding for critical staff positions that the state fails to fully support. We strongly urge the General Assembly to build on the progress made in recent sessions and eliminate this cap entirely.

Aligning Staffing Practices with Local Needs
Moreover, the state should provide its fair share of funding for all K-12 staff positions. As you are aware and according to JLARC's July 2023 report, "Virginia's K-12 Funding Formula," the state recognizes only two-thirds of actual positions employed by school divisions under the Standards of Quality (SOQ). This funding gap leaves localities to cover essential positions such as teacher aides, placing additional strain on already stretched local budgets. By fully funding all school positions, not just those currently recognized under SOQ, the Commonwealth would help ensure that all students receive the support they need to thrive.

Reforming Teacher Salary Calculations

In addition, we call on the General Assembly to reform the method used to calculate prevailing teacher salaries. The current use of a linear weighted average does not adequately reflect the actual salaries being paid by school divisions. By shifting to a calculation based on the actual average teacher salaries, the state can better align funding with the true costs of delivering quality education in Virginia and better assist localities achieve the Commonwealth's goal for competitive teacher salaries at or above the national average.

Virginia's state share of overall per-pupil funding remains below that of neighboring states like Maryland, Kentucky, and West Virginia. This funding disparity not only hampers our ability to recruit and retain high-quality educators but also places our students at a disadvantage compared to their peers in other states.

As you prepare for the 2025 legislative session, we respectfully request that you prioritize restoring pre-recession funding levels, full sate support for actual staffing needs, and revising the methodology for calculating teacher salaries. These actions are essential to ensuring that all students across the Commonwealth, regardless of locality, receive the high-quality education they deserve.

Thank you for your time and consideration of these important issues. We look forward to your continued leadership and partnership in strengthening Virginia's K-12 education system.

Sincerely,

Ruth M. Larson
VACo President

CC: Members, Virginia Association of Counties Board of Directors
        Members, House Appropriations Committee
        Members, Senate Finance and Appropriations Committee
        Members, Joint Subcommittee on Elementary and Secondary Education Funding
        Members, Virginia General Assembly
        Members, Virginia County Administrators
        April Kees, Director, Senate Finance and Appropriations Committee
        Anne E. Oman, Staff Director, House Appropriations Committee
        Wendy Kang, Legislative Analyst, Senate Finance and Appropriations Committee
        Zachary L. Robbins, Legislative Fiscal Analyst, House Appropriations Committee