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The School Budget – Changing the Equation

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The School Budget - Changing the Equation

Our world-class schools are the number one reason businesses and families are attracted to Fairfax County. That quality carries a price. The school system accounts for more than half (54 percent) of all county funding. The County is facing a funding shortfall of \$650 million this year. Still, even in this difficult economic climate we need to ensure the quality of our schools. However, this does not excuse the school budget from the healthy scrutiny these tough times dictate. It is past time to change the equation on how we discuss the school budget.

The old equation repeated year after year is to exact pressure on the Board of Supervisors to give more money to schools by putting unpopular cuts and damaging reductions to children on the table. Every budget cycle, we go through the same formula: the School Board and staff warn that if they don't get the money they requested, teacher salaries will be cut, our competitiveness will be lost, class sizes will be increased, and a sport (pick one, it changes every year) will be eliminated.

It's time for a new equation, one that relies on fiscal transparency, accountability, and efficiency. We must direct resources to our students and their classrooms. We must be vigilant and evaluate administrative overhead and school operations to maximize money for teachers and classrooms. In trying economic times that are resulting in cuts to fire, police, and nearly every service supported by the County, the school system is asking for an additional \$25 million. Clearly, there is need for an open dialogue on how to fund our priorities without asking for more from taxpayers.

I believe this starts with having the School Board and staff make some tough choices in areas that have not been openly discussed in the past. These include the following:

- **Need Justification for School Population Increases** – The school budget currently includes \$40 million for a projected increase of 4,400 students next year. School staff cites “feelings” and “intuition” for its belief that more students will arrive from Prince William and that there will be

a shift from private schools. The increase in students moving into Fairfax County in response to policies implemented by Prince William County did create a one-time spike of around 2,500 students in the school population last year. But without any sound justification, schools have turned that blip into a trend. In fact, evidence shows that the migration has stopped. More disturbing, FCPS has not analyzed where the 600 new students joining so far this year came from. The consequence for the lack of diligence is potentially significant and could cost taxpayers \$40 million! That is a huge price tag for students who may never show up in our schools. And if the projections aren't accurate? Once this money is provided to the schools, it will never find its way back to taxpayers, classrooms or teachers' salaries.

- **Why Do We Have 17 Assistant Superintendents?** – We have 17 assistant superintendents who individually earn a six-figure salary. In addition, each attends to a related bureaucracy. Our need for such positions should be re-evaluated for efficiencies and cost savings.
- **Investigate the Assistant Principal to Student Ratio** – Fairfax County has a ratio of one assistant principal for approximately every 400 students. The average of surrounding localities, including Arlington and Montgomery Counties, is one assistant principal for every 566 students. Bringing our ratio in line with surrounding localities would save up to \$12million.
- **Consolidate School and County Resources** – I proposed last October to find efficiencies in our budget by combining resources between our county government and schools, like libraries, human resources departments, legal counsel, and financial systems. The Chairman of the Board of Supervisors has taken on this effort but has had only one meeting since I made my proposal in October.
- **Moving to a 21st Century Transportation System** – Transportation is a major cost of the school system yet we still plan our bus routes with paper, scissors, and envelopes. By in large, the effort is managed by 22 former school bus drivers. It is time we move into the 21st century and automate the process.
- **Transportation Fuel Cost Estimates** – While there has been significant price variability in energy costs in recent years, to say the school's funding request for transportation fuel costs seems excessive would be an understatement. Diesel prices that are now in the \$2.10 - \$2.40 range would have to reach the \$5.00 - \$5.20 price range in FY 2010 to justify the FCPS proposed budget. Adjusting cost estimates to be more in line with historical price change averages would result in savings of \$5 million - \$6 million.
- **Implement Lease Savings Identified in the Gatehouse II Proposal** – The School Board's proposal to build a new administrative building featured many cost-saving actions, like consolidating warehouse space and eliminating above market leases that expire this year that can still be implemented without the purchase of the building. The school budget doesn't currently reflect these potential savings.
- **Do We Need Twice the Administration?** – Since I attended our schools, we've grown from four "areas" to eight "clusters," doubling our school bureaucracy and the administrative needs associated with such a growth. The need for eight clusters needs to be revisited especially in light

of recent School Board initiated studies that propose to look at the school system based on four geographic areas.

- **Is the Division of Instructional Services Helping Or Hurting Our Teachers?** – Do we need 470 people in the Division of Instructional Services writing lesson plans that are basically ignored based on my conversations with teachers? We need instructors in our classrooms, not writing administrators writing lesson plans. How many of these positions could be eliminated and returned to the classroom?

Increased class sizes and having our teachers fall further behind other area schools in salaries is not acceptable. We need to begin an open and honest discussion about the school budget.

It is the aim of every public official in Fairfax County to ensure that Fairfax County schools remain the best in the nation. Unfortunately, we too often overlook common sense solutions to our problems. I hope we use the current economic and budget challenges to start a discussion on changing the equation of the school budget and usher in an era of fiscal transparency, accountability, and efficiency. It is high time to renew our focus on teachers and improving class sizes. Please ask your School Board member to change the equation. Ask for the money we need to ensure the continued success of our schools. But also put the tough questions to the School Board and administrators to make sure your tax dollars are being used wisely—for our students, our teachers, and our classrooms.

Restoring Capital Funding for Classroom Construction and Renovation

In the advertised budget, the County Executive proposed cutting school capital construction from \$155 million to \$140 million because we were bumping up against our self imposed 10 percent cap for debt repayment. The 10 percent cap is an important factor in keeping our AAA bond rating. During their push for Gatehouse II, the school system came up with a creative way to increase the funding available under the 10 percent debt cap. They pledged the operating funds they receive annually from the state for debt repayment. This increased the size of the number the debt cap is calculated on. The school staff justified this by saying the Gatehouse II proposal resulted in operating savings (a point I disputed in my opposition to Gatehouse II). From my conversations with School Board members, they were not aware the deal involved pledging these funds.

A world-class school system is built in the halls of our schools, not in the halls of administration. If pledging these funds was good enough for an administrative building – one would assume it would be good enough for desperately needed school construction and renovation. School construction and renovation save operating funds. West Springfield High School alone had over 3,000 work orders last year – the vast majority had to do with the age of the building. New HVAC units are vastly cheaper to operate than the units currently in our older school buildings. Our school construction and renovation needs are staggering. Langley High School, the high school at the top of this list awaiting renovation, will not have ground broken on for another decade based on current schedules. West Springfield High School, further down on the priority list, and many of our other buildings will be over 60 years old before they will be renovated.

Pledging these operating funds is not a decision to be taken lightly. The proposal needs to be fully vetted by the school board and the community. But it is increasingly clear—we need innovative solutions if we want to continue to strengthen Fairfax County’s schools.

The ***Herrity Report*** is a monthly publication from the Office of Supervisor Pat Herrity to keep citizens informed on the issues facing Fairfax County. Communication is important to Supervisor Herrity and he encourages your feedback on the items in the ***Report*** or other issues that concern you. Past issues of the ***Herrity Report*** can be found at <http://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/springfield/herrity-report-newsletter.htm> To sign up for the Herrity Report please go to <http://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/springfield>