

THE MAGAZINE OF THE  
VIRGINIA MUNICIPAL  
LEAGUE

## Get wise

... about the state of  
education today

### Inside:

Read the  
winning essays

Thoughts from  
Virginia's teachers

Minor league  
baseball comes  
to Fredericksburg

...and more!



Statewide Winner

Preston Lieu







## VRSA Recognizes Public Service

Public Service Week is recognized during the first week of May each year. This year, VRSA would like to take time to thank all of Virginia's local government employees for their contributions to the Commonwealth.

During this unprecedented pandemic, Virginia's local government employees continue to serve as administrators, law enforcement officers, firefighters and emergency medical services personnel, utility operators, educators, planners, and more to meet the needs of their communities.

For all that you do, we thank you. VRSA will continue to partner with our local government members to ensure they have the tools and resources they need to manage their risk while continuing to serve their communities.



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## ABOUT THE COVER

Hey, isn't that VML's 2020 "If I Were Mayor" essay winner, 7th grader Preston Lieu? It sure is! You can read Preston's essay, as well as all those from the regional winners, inside.

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# Silver linings to sustain us (and funding to bring relief)

**C**ONGRATULATIONS TO ALL of this year's "If I Were Mayor" essay contest winners! With schools recently closed and so much of our lives being changed for the worse back in late March, it was a rare moment of joy for VML's staff to be able to tell those kids and their teachers that they had won. Of all the events I get to participate in each year, one of my favorites is to present these awards to the winners in front of council. I remember at one of these presentations, the Mayor asked the child to ride on the parade float as the Mayor's guest. It was such a cool moment! As we were leaving, his mom said, "I will have to get my hair done!"

Of course, things like council meetings and even getting one's hair done has become much more complicated recently. I am so sorry VML staff couldn't hand deliver this year's awards. It doesn't mean we are any less proud of each of our winners and of all the amazing 7th graders and their teachers who took the time and made the effort to participate.

In addition to the winning essays, this issue of *Virginia Town & City* has wonderful stories about the angst, uncertainty and hopes of those who educate our children and young adults. Many of them were written by teachers of our winning 7th graders! I hope that you will take the time to read them. My teenage daughter is like most teenagers, completely addicted to her phone. On any given day, she communicates more electronically than in-person. Yesterday was her best friends' birthday and she actually asked to go buy tag board and stencils, which astonished me. We also picked up a slice of cake because who doesn't love cake? After we picked up the supplies, she spent hours making a sign for her friend and printing off pictures of the good times the two of them have had. Next up was figuring out how to covertly place the sign and small gift in her friend's front yard. Of course, her friend's dad was doing yard work when we pulled up! He eyed us carefully as we drove by slowly, and then drove by again. No doubt he was wondering "who are these strange people driving by my house?" But he smiled when we got out and placed a sign for his daughter in the yard – it was a special moment for all of us.


I can tell you that if these were normal times (whatever "normal" is anymore), my teenager would've sent a text, hugged her friend at school and considered the birthday properly celebrated. The time she spent making a sign is, to me, much more personal and maybe, just maybe, it's one of those silver linings we all need to look for during this confinement.

Another silver lining: Watching the large number of people come out and clap for our first responders and essential workers.

Another: Our whole street went out to watch the fly-by. It's all so inspiring!



I will admit to feeling less than inspired, and more than a little frustrated, working to find out how and when the CARES Act funding would be distributed to our localities. But, given the news of the past week, it looks like our efforts will finally be rewarded with the funding set to flow to localities where it can provide some much-needed relief. In the same vein, VML continues to work with the National League of Cities on additional, direct federal money for localities of all sizes. This important campaign is called "Cities are Essential" and we will provide updates as more tools, resources and information become available.

Thank you for all you do and stay well. 



Due to the affects of the COVID-19 outbreak, many events are going through a rescheduling process. To view the latest updates and changes, visit our on-line calendar at [www.vml.org/events-list](http://www.vml.org/events-list).

PEOPLE



Garvey demonstrates making a face mask

For anyone interested in learning how to make a cloth covering at home without needing to know how to sew, Arlington County Board Chair **Libby Garvey** has posted a demonstration video to YouTube. The production of the video followed new guidance from the Center for Disease Control, which now recommends wearing cloth face coverings in public settings where other social distancing measures are difficult to maintain (e.g., grocery stores and pharmacies).

James has served as acting director since January 2019, and has also served as stormwater operations superintendent, assistant administrator of stormwater, administrator of stormwater and acting assistant director of public works.

James has a bachelor's degree in business administration from Old Dominion University.

McLellan tapped as Loudoun assistant county administrator



- McLellan -

**Erin McLellan** has been appointed as an assistant county administrator in Loudoun County. McLellan most recently served as the county's chief financial officer as well as the director of the Department of Finance and Budget. McLellan began her service with Loudoun County in 2006 as a human resources policy and research analyst.

In her new position, McLellan will oversee the Departments of Parks, Recreation and Community Services, General Services, Information Technology and the Office of Mapping and Geographic Information.

McLellan is a graduate of the University of Alabama, having earned a bachelor's degree in history and a master's degree in public administration.

Clark appointed to state review team

Governor Ralph Northam has appointed **Megan L. Clark** to the State Child Fatality Review Team. Clark is the Commonwealth's Attorney for Prince Edward County. The team develops recommendations for prevention, education and improvement of child death investigations. Clark has served as the Commonwealth's Attorney in Prince Edward County since 2015. She holds an undergraduate degree from Longwood University and a law degree from the Marshall-



- Clark -

Wythe School of Law at the College of William & Mary.

James appointed director of public works



- James -

Newport News City Manager Cindy Rohlf has named **Frank S. James** as director of public works for the City of Newport News.

James brings over 35 years of progressively responsible public works experience to the position of director. He has worked for the city since 1984, beginning his career as an inflo/infiltration technician.

Quigley appointed Arlington deputy chief



- Quigley -

Arlington County Police Chief M. Jay Farr has appointed Captain **Adrienne Quigley** to the position of deputy chief of police, effective May 10.

Deputy Chief Quigley is a 23-year veteran of the Arlington County Police Department who began her career with the county as a patrol officer in 1997. She has held previous assignments in Operations, Community Outreach, Criminal Investigations, Personnel and Recruitment, Internal Affairs and a

## PEOPLE

2-year assignment as the acting deputy director of the Arlington County Office of Public Safety Communications and Emergency Management in charge of the Emergency Communications Center.

Quigley has a bachelor's degree in criminal justice from George Washington University and a master's degree in public administration from George Mason University. She is also a graduate of the FBI National Academy – Session 274, the Police Executive Research Forum's Senior Management Institute for Police – Session 58 and Leadership Arlington.

### Strasburg council member adds color to town

Strasburg Council Member **Barbara Plitt** is taking community service to a new level by using her own resources and talents to paint butterfly murals around town. According to an article in the *Northern Virginia Daily*, Plitt's favorite bumper sticker states that "The earth without art is 'eh'." She is doing her best to make sure that "eh" doesn't happen to Strasburg! So far, she has painted three murals in town and will paint more as business owners offer her the space. The article, including photographs of some of the murals, are available on the newspaper's website: [www.nvdaily.com](http://www.nvdaily.com).

### Tolbert named Chincoteague town manager

**Mike Tolbert** has been appointed town manager in the Town of Chincoteague. Tolbert currently is the chief of management and operations for Accomack Public Schools.

Tolbert has over 35 years of experience in engineering, construction, and project management, including 20 years with the Accomack school division.

Tolbert has a bachelor's degree in civil engineering from Virginia Tech.

## Movers and shakers

Do you know someone who's on the move? Send your announcements about new hires in local government, promotions, retirements, awards and honors to **Rob Bullington** at [rbullington@vml.org](mailto:rbullington@vml.org).

## In memoriam: Darryl Smith

**Darryl 'Smitty' Smith**, the first African American police officer hired by the Town of Herndon and a community leader known for his volunteerism, has died.

Smith was hired by the police department in 1973 as the first detection and youth crime prevention officer. He rose to the rank of captain in September 2004 and retired that year. He became the first African American elected to the Herndon Town Council in 2004, and he served as vice mayor from 2004 through 2006.

After his retirement, Smith served as the police chief of the Purcellville Police Department for nine years.

Smith founded Neighbors United, a volunteer after-school program to provide a safe haven for local youth. In 1998, the program received an achievement award from the Virginia Municipal League.



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Current yields posted daily at [VirginiaInvestmentPool.org](http://VirginiaInvestmentPool.org).*





## Herndon calendar competition goes digital

THE TOWN OF HERNDON has launched a digital campaign to collect photographs for the town's 2021 calendar. The purpose of the competition is to not only produce a beautiful calendar but to offer photographers, residents and students the opportunity to share their vision and talents.

The rules are simple: The photos must be of something in the jurisdictional boundary of the town. The deadline for submissions is June 12 through the town's website.

## Galax celebrates Building Safety Month over the airwaves

IN THE WAKE OF CLOSURES due to the coronavirus pandemic, building officials have scrambled to find new ways to celebrate Building Safety Month in May. James Moss, project manager for the City of Galax and president of the Virginia Building and Code Officials Association is no exception. Moss teamed up with two local FM radio stations to produce building safety month segments that will air throughout May as well as a special feature building safety program.

### What is Building Safety Month?

Building safety month is an international campaign spearheaded by the International Code Council that takes place every May to raise awareness about building safety. Each year the campaign focuses on four themes of importance to building safety. This year's weekly themes are Disaster Preparedness; Water Safety; Resiliency, Sustainability and Innovation; and Training the Next Generation.



## SWIFT donates 100 trees to Manassas

SWIFT IS A SECURE financial messaging services provider with an office in Manassas. In celebration of Earth Day, the company recently donated 100 trees to the City of Manassas to be planted in four city parks and three public schools. SWIFT will also be adopting Cavalry Run Park, a city park located near its office. SWIFT employees join a group of companies, community groups, teams, and individuals who have adopted parks and fields in the City of Manassas and help to spruce them up during regular clean-up events. Last year volunteers donated 1,515 hours to keep Manassas City parks beautiful.

Go to <http://www.manassascity.org/302/Parks-Culture-Recreation> for more information on the city's parks and park adoptions.

A ceremony recognizing SWIFT's contribution and the company's adoption of Cavalry Run Park was planned for this Earth Day on April 22 but will be rescheduled to a later date due to the coronavirus outbreak.

## Residents vote on mural for Buckroe Beach lifeguard building

CITY OF HAMPTON RESIDENTS had the opportunity to weigh-in on mural designs that have been prepared for the city's lifeguard building at 200 North First Street. Residents could log onto a Survey Monkey website from April 20-27 to vote on their favorite design. The city hopes to have the mural painted in May or June, but the timing depends on COVID-19 restrictions.



## Loudoun County creates residential traffic management guide

LOUDOUN COUNTY has created a Residential Traffic Management Guide to county programs that address community concerns related to vehicular speed and safety on publicly maintained roadways in residential areas.

The full guide and brochures on the county's residential cut-through program and traffic calming programs may be found at [www.loudoun.gov/TrafficManagement](http://www.loudoun.gov/TrafficManagement).



LOUDOUN COUNTY VIRGINIA

[loudoun.gov/TrafficManagement](http://loudoun.gov/TrafficManagement)

## MEPAV member utilities recognized

IN APRIL, TWO MUNICIPAL ELECTRIC Power Association of Virginia (MEPAV) members were recognized for their achievements by the American Public Power Association (APPA).

Harrisonburg Electric Commission (HEC) has earned the Reliable Public Power Provider (RP3) Gold Designation, for providing reliable and safe electric service. The RP3 designation, which lasts for three years, recognizes public power utilities that demonstrate proficiency in four key disciplines: reliability, safety, workforce development, and system improvement. Criteria include sound business practices and a utility-wide commitment to safe and reliable delivery of electricity. HEC joins more than 275 public power utilities nationwide that hold the RP3 designation.

Bristol Virginia Utilities Authority (BVUA) earned the APPA Safety Award for Excellence for safe operating practices. More than 335 utilities entered the annual Safety Awards, which is the highest number of entrants in the history of the program. Entrants

were placed in categories according to their number of worker-hours and

ranked based on the most incident-free records during 2019. BVUA earned first place in Group D. BVUA also received RP3 Platinum recognition.

About MEPAV and APPA

MEPAV consists of sixteen Virginia localities that operate electric utilities. APPA is the voice of not-for-profit, community-owned utilities that power 49 million people in 2,000 towns and cities nationwide. The Association advocates and advises on electricity policy, technology, trends, training, and operations.

To learn more about MEPAV or APPA please visit their websites:

- MEPAV: [www.mepav.org](http://www.mepav.org)
- APPA: [www.publicpower.org](http://www.publicpower.org)

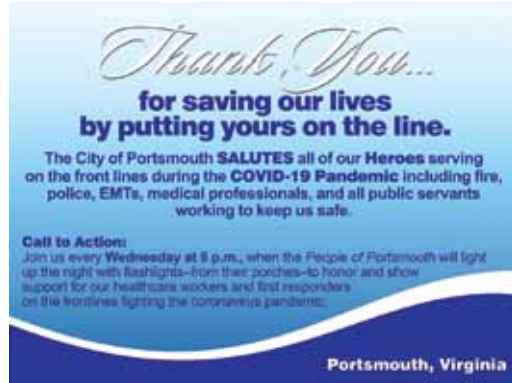






VTC is pleased to highlight actions localities are taking to overcome the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. If your locality has something going on you'd like to have featured in VTC please let us know by emailing the editor Rob Bullington, rbullington@vml.org. We also encourage you to nominate groups and individuals for our "2020 Local Champion" awards. Details are on page 32 or visit www.vml.org/local-champion-awards.

## Portsmouth launches thank-you campaign for COVID-19 first responders



THE CITY OF PORTSMOUTH has started a community-wide campaign to support and thank the city's first responders including its police force, fire and rescue personnel and all the public servants continuing to show up for work. These city employees provide critical services to keep Portsmouth's residents safe and provide the community with a sense of wellbeing.

The thank-you campaign will include a series of advertising in local newspapers, niche publications, billboards, street flags and other signage.

Also, as part of the campaign Portsmouth residents are asked to come out on their front porches and shine a flashlight to symbolically shine a light on the city's COVID-19 heroes.

For more information, contact the Department of Marketing and Communications at (757) 393-8000 or visit [www.portsmouthva.gov](http://www.portsmouthva.gov).

## Localities collect PPE donations, print equipment

LOCALITIES ACROSS THE STATE are collecting donations of personal protection equipment as well as monetary donations for PPE. Here's a snapshot of how a sampling of different localities are approaching the issue.

The **City of Fairfax** is accepting manufactured PPEs as well as handmade/homemade masks and other equipment for use by essential city government employees. Donations can be made daily and can be placed in containers in the atrium of the city hall.

**Loudoun County** is accepting monetary donations to be used to purchase PPE which will then be distributed to health care providers and facilities in the county. The county is also collecting PPE for the same purpose and has set up an online process by which health care providers can request PPE.



Also, the Loudoun County Public Library expects to produce 1,000 to 1,200 face shields per week using the Makerspace equipment at its Brambleton, Gum Spring, Rust and Sterling branches. The face shields will go to a variety of county agencies as well as long-term care facilities that have identified a critical shortage of this type of PPE.

**Arlington County** held a one-day collection at a local library for donations of PPE, cleaning supplies, and certain food to assist essential employees, nonprofits and community organizations with coronavirus response operations.

The **City of Virginia Beach** is collecting PPE donations for its emergency responders and other frontline employees. People wishing to donate fill out an online form and city staff arrange to collect the PPE.

Also, the staff at the Virginia Beach Public Library is printing about 21 face shields per day on the library's seven 3D printers. Staff monitors the printing, sanitizes the pieces and bags them for delivery to first responders. A conversation with the owner of a local 3D printing company sparked the idea for the library to put its 3D printers to use while its buildings are closed to the public.

The **City of Suffolk** Public Library used their 3D printers to print face shield head bands and first responders in the city have launched a campaign to solicit donations of PPE for the fire and rescue department and the police department.



# Localities act to help businesses, residents

LOCAL GOVERNMENTS HAVE DEVELOPED a variety of programs to help businesses and residents during the coronavirus pandemic. Those listed below are just some examples of the great work being done by all of Virginia's local governments.

The **Town of West Point** has established the West Point H.O.P.E. (Helping Our Pointer Economy) initiative. As part of the program, the town council will provide a booklet of vouchers with a total value of \$50 to each household in West Point. These vouchers may be spent at any participating business within town limits. The cost of these vouchers will be borne by the town's general fund, with no payment required from households or participating businesses. Council has enlisted the Chamber of Commerce to help implement the program, which is expected to start in June. Council also has approved a budget that includes a 6.6% reduction on real estate, machinery and tools and personal property tax rates.

The **City of Williamsburg** has created a grant program for small businesses to offset the financial burden of the pandemic. Eligible businesses must meet general criteria such as being locally owned and loss criteria including being forced to close or having reduced revenue. The city also deferred the payment of meals and lodging taxes.

**Loudoun County** has established a limited rental assistance program for households economically impacted by COVID-19. The Board of Supervisors re-allocated \$200,000 from the Eastern Loudoun County Home Revitalization Program to create the rental assistance program. The goal is to help ensure housing stability for low-income workers who have been furloughed, lost their job or have had to reduce their hours. The program will continue as long as the local emergency declaration is in effect and funding is available. Additional information is available on the county's website: [www.loudoun.gov](http://www.loudoun.gov).



**Arlington County** has allocated \$300,000 to Arlington Thrive to meet the increased demand for emergency financial assistance during the pandemic. Arlington Thrive is a non-profit organization that is the county's primary vehicle for providing emergency financial assistance. The organization can provide same-day money to residents, including low-income individuals, elderly and disabled residents on a fixed income, and people experiencing homelessness. The organization prioritizes families with children, and one-third of the people it serves are children. Learn more at [www.arlingtonthrive.org](http://www.arlingtonthrive.org).

The **City of Richmond** has launched the COVID-19 First Responder Meal Program to support both the local restaurant industry and the city's first responders. On duty first responders will be given options to order a meal from different local restaurants each day, ensuring that small businesses are given priority in nourishing these essential employees. The city has invited restaurants

within city limits that employ fewer than 25 employees (per location) to apply to participate in the program. Once a restaurant is approved to participate, the program administrator will assign the restaurant one or more dates when the program will pay the cost of the first responders' meals. Learn more at [www.rvastrong.org/first-responder-meals-program](http://www.rvastrong.org/first-responder-meals-program).

The **City of Hampton** has authorized a forgivable loan assistance program for small Hampton-based businesses. The loans of



up to \$10,000 are designed to give Hampton businesses access to needed cash until federal and/or state assistance funds arrive. The program will be administered by the Hampton Economic Development Authority and the loans can be used for payroll expenses, rent

or mortgage payments, utility expenses, marketing and other eligible business expenses incurred during normal operations. Applications will be accepted until available funds are exhausted or Sept. 30, whichever comes first. Alternatively, Hampton businesses may apply for an extension on local property and business personal property taxes; however, a business cannot receive both forms of relief. Businesses that apply and are accepted will have until Aug. 1, 2020, to pay their personal property, real estate, and business personal property with no interest or penalty fees. More information on both programs is available on the city's website: [www.hampton.gov](http://www.hampton.gov).



The **City of Virginia Beach** has suspended its meals tax for the months of May and June to help residents and restauranters during the COVID-19 pandemic; additionally, the city has waived late fees and interest for 60 days on meals taxes, as well as admissions and transient occupancy





taxes for April, May and June. The city also has waived late fees and interest on personal property taxes and real estate taxes, due June 5, until August 1. Finally, Virginia Beach has extended free parking to accommodate take-out and pick-up services provided by restaurants in the oceanfront area and has reduced parking rates at municipal garages and lots.

The **City of Danville** Office of Economic Development in partnership with the River District Association and Longwood Small Business Development Center (SBDC) has created new funding tools to provide financial relief to small businesses that are seeing a downturn in sales activity. The first is the Small Business Emergency Loan Program, which provides zero- and low-interest loans of up to \$20,000 that businesses can use toward working capital, marketing and inventory. The Marketing and

eCommerce Matching Grant provides up to \$500 to support those items. The Small Business Rent Relief Grant provides up to \$3,000 to cover one month's rent. Both grant programs are provided on a reimbursement basis. More information can be found on the city's website: [www.discoverdanville.com](http://www.discoverdanville.com).



The **City of Staunton's** city council has entered into an agreement with the Staunton Creative Community Fund (SCCF) to provide additional resources and support to local businesses. SCCF will establish and administer an Emergency-Disaster Relief Loan Program to complement the ongoing services provided by SCCF to Staunton businesses. Eligible businesses will be able to access up to \$5,000 in loans at 2% to 3% interest. Repayment terms will vary based on the borrower. Read more at [www.stauntonfund.org](http://www.stauntonfund.org).

## Localities set up hotspots to improve internet connections



WITH MORE PEOPLE WORKING FROM HOME and students participating in distance learning, localities are working to improve internet access for their residents. The **Arlington County's** public access Wi-Fi initiative leverages the county's information technology infrastructure to provide no-cost internet access in places where the community would typically gather. For example, coverage at libraries has been expanded to the parking lots so residents can work from their cars. Hotspots are also available in 8 county community centers.

**Loudoun County** is offering new Wi-Fi hot spots for residents in western portions of the county. The county has worked to amplify the Loudoun County Public Library's Wi-Fi signal so that it is available in the parking lots immediately adjacent to the Lovettsville, Middleburg and Purcellville libraries. Residents who have no reliable internet service are encouraged to use the free Wi-Fi to access information about COVID-19 and to complete any other essential online business, such as ordering groceries or household supplies.



# Get wise

*Education: That which discloses to the wise and disguises from the foolish their lack of understanding.*

- Ambrose Bierce (1842-1914)

## Education during the time of COVID-19

**O**N MARCH 23RD, GOVERNOR NORTHAM announced that all Virginia schools would be closed for the remainder of the year due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Since then, those of us with school age children have been feeling alternately wise and foolish. At the best moments, I feel wise because I know that while I can't possibly be a teacher just by snapping my fingers, I can try and help my kids follow their lessons. Since March 23rd, however, it has become crystal clear to me, (as it never was before), that teachers are among our communities' most valuable workers. My newfound wisdom has taught me that what they do cannot be replicated by the untrained on the fly. So, thank you to all the teachers reading this. We miss you!

I've also felt foolish (more so than usual) because I don't think I ever truly appreciated the importance of a school, the real, tangible physical space where learning happens. Sure, adults may have the discipline to learn remotely. In fact, so many of us are working remotely these days that whether we like it or not, we're figuring out how to cope (though, if you are like me, you are finding that your previously favorable opinion of remote work warrants some serious reconsideration).

For most kids, however, remote learning is hard. It just doesn't feel like school. Entering a school every morning means getting into the frame of mind to interact with your teachers and classmates. Beyond the learning that happens in a school, there is the sense of community built by all the social and sports activities. For kids, all these things vanished overnight and cannot be replicated online or under social distancing restrictions. And, to be honest, who really wants to replace the happy chatter and chaos of a school hallway between classes with the annoyance of logging into Zoom? Who thinks that senior prom would mean as much if everyone wore facemasks and stood six feet apart? And

what kindergartner benefits more from watching a pre-recorded story on a screen than from curling up on a rug with their friends to listen to their teacher read a favorite book?

But education has to continue, so, it's up to us foolish parents and care givers to take the wisdom of teachers (as conveyed online, in emails or handouts) and try to carve out a space and instill the discipline needed to learn.

But we here at *VTC* bring a message of hope! For even amidst the frustrations, limitations and messiness of hundreds of thousands of young Virginians and their parents reorienting themselves for home schooling, lessons are being learned, teachers are bearing with us and parents are becoming wiser, and the wisest among us forgive ourselves and our children for a bit of foolishness along the way.

So, in the spirit of making the best of it all, here's what we've got for you this month:

**These kids are (more than) all right.** Check out the winning "If I Were Mayor" essays by 7th graders from around the Commonwealth. Special congratulations to our statewide winner, Preston Lieu from Falls Church!

**These teachers are learning.** Teachers may not be first responders, but now more than ever they are heroes too! We asked educators from across Virginia to tell us what the past few months have taught them about themselves, their students and their profession.

**This organization is creating civics whizzes.** Ali Mislowsky explains how the Virginia Public Access Project (VPAP) is bringing civics home.

**This program helps local governments help their staff.** Herb Miller from the Working Scholars program outlines how the right education benefits can help local governments develop their workforce.





## Statewide Winner

**Preston Lieu**

Mary Ellen Henderson Middle School  
Falls Church, VA



FALLS CHURCH CITY is a charming city with incredible schools, friendly people, and inviting spaces. Even though my community is exceptional, one glaring problem is the lack of bike lanes. I frequently bike around Falls Church City, as it is a fulfilling activity that brings me joy. Recently, I've noticed that it's hard to bike around the city; rushing cars and narrow roads make danger imminent. For my safety, I often have to bike on sidewalks, which is unsafe for pedestrians. This is a major problem, due to the fact that there are many people who care about their health, who want to commute to work, and who cycle with their families as a pastime. Worse, the few bike lanes that do exist always have cars clogging the path and preventing safe access.

I asked my mother about this issue and she told me that as a driver, it is not ideal for bikers to be on the road because of the amount of traffic they can cause. She let me know that drivers like her tend to get nervous when these bikers are on the road. Next, I asked my teacher, Ms. Phillips, about this issue. She said that though we have a great nature bike trail, there are too few bike lanes on our city streets. She says that more bike lanes would greatly improve safety and efficiency on the road. Lastly, a local community member named Soula says that more bike lanes would be a positive idea. She thinks that cars need to grow accustomed to bike lanes and that there should be a small fine if drivers disregard them. According to this information, it is clear that many residents of Falls Church City agree with me that more bike lanes are needed.

As Mayor, I would implement multiple solutions to resolve this problem. First, we must create additional bike lanes to the major roadways in town. Though there are some bike lanes, there still aren't enough, especially near the busy roads. Funding for new bike lanes would come from vehicle traffic violations in town. Moreover, I would propose a city raffle, where community members could win new bikes and safety gear. I would leverage my Mayor position to require all residents of Falls Church City to review an online biker safety presentation. Citizens would be expected to follow city biker rules, or there would be consequences. If a car is found clogging the bike lane, the car would be ticketed and a small fine would be given. Also, if a biker or pedestrian finds a car violating the lane, there would be an anonymous hotline available for reporting. With all these solutions, it is clear that our city can and should take action to add bike lanes for public health and safety.



## Region 1 Winner

**Josiah Krumtum**  
Virginia Middle School  
Bristol, VA



BRISTOL VIRGINIA, IT TRULY is a great place to live. However, everything can be improved. If I were mayor, I would try to make Bristol a better place to live one step at a time. Ending the majority of crime in our city is a key step. Our unruly crime rates are higher than 95% of Virginia's cities and towns of all sizes. This statistic can ward off travelers and potential residents, it can even possibly play a role in convincing current residents to move. This lowers the revenue our city needs, and damages it's wellbeing. Clearly this threat needs to be solved, but how?

My mother told me that the crime is not so much crime related, but instead more-so drug related. To hit this drug epidemic in the head we could offer affordable to free addict rehabilitation. Lisa agreed, stating Bristol's crime rate is consumed with many addicts, and that more affordable and easily accessible substance abuse counseling is a way to improve that. The third person I asked, my grandmother, said the police officers are very helpful. To reduce crime, she suggests more parenting classes and domestic abuse classes She finished by saying "You have to start with the children."

Now, to solve this problem I will look over all the information and conclude. Some things became more apparent throughout hearing their replies. In reality our crime is solely composed of drug-based offenses and only a small portion actually violent. So, in order to solve crime, we must go to its root, drugs. All the responses I received are very insightful; with that being said I would like to focus on the key

parts of how they responded. To reduce crime in Bristol, both my mother and Lisa Sizemore suggested some form of affordable to free substance abuse counseling; they agreed this would be a step forward. My grandmother added her input, saying that domestic abuse prevention classes along with parenting classes would achieve that. She ended with a wonderful quote "You have to start with the children." Also, we could ask the state to fund drug preventing projects. These tactics are great, and If I were mayor, I would implement all of them in my effort to solve our crime problem.

If Bristol VA city becomes crime free, then more people will consider living here. In order to make Bristol VA crime free we have to defeat drug and substance abuse. If I were mayor, I would offer substance abuse counseling and get federal or state grants to fund drug/crime fighting projects. If I were mayor not only would I tackle the drug epidemic, but I would also make sure our children grow up to be model citizens by having parenting and domestic abuse classes; this would solve domestic abuse crimes and give Bristol a better, brighter future. I say that if we can improve our city one step at a time then we should, and these are some pretty big steps to make.



## Region 2 Winner

**Ava Grant**  
Martinsville Middle School  
Martinsville, VA



MARTINSVILLE, I NEVER HEARD of it until I went to see my grandparents for the first time. All I knew was that Martinsville was a small town in Virginia right above the North Carolina border. When I go places, I always think what would make this area better? I wondered what I could do to improve Martinsville. If I were mayor what could I do to help?

Martinsville has pulchritudinous hills and mountains you can see from the distance. I love the environment and would like to help improve it in Martinsville. Your environment affects how you live, it can affect you positively and negatively. If you have a good environment it can help lift your mood. Enchanting meadows, trails and parks can bring out your true you. The environment can help with air quality, mental and physical issues.

I interviewed 3 people from Martinsville and asked them "How do you feel about the environment and how would you improve it?" I interviewed Dr. Holyfield, a local physician. He said, "It's generally good." "For the future I think walking and bike riding trails should be expanding towards Danville and NC." I also interviewed Abby, a close friend, who thought a little differently than Dr. Holyfield. She

gave Martinsville a 5 out of 10. To fix this issue she said to use cleaner energy. The final person I interviewed was Nora, a contributor to rooster walk and the Sam Smith river complex. She said "Martinsville is at the foothills of the mountains; it really has true beauty. Just keep our town clean and recycle."

Let's get to the question, If I were mayor? I would provide more dazzling parks, trails and meadows. I would make sure they are protected from building infrastructure. I would switch most of the use of our energy to hydropower instead of coal. If you donate a tree you get tax credits.

I never heard of Martinsville until I went to see my grandparents for the first time. It's just a small town in VA right above the NC border. If I were mayor of any town, I would look at the environment and make sure I was doing my best to restore the environment. Climate change has affected our world. The smallest things can make a big difference.





## Region 3 Winner

**Caity Campbell**  
Shelburne Middle School  
Staunton, VA



IF I WERE MAYOR I would try to stop poverty. This can affect entire communities. Amanda Campbell, a professor at Bridgewater College, says “There are a lot of layers to poverty, it’s complicated.” She says that it can’t be solved by one person, one group of people, or even with one approach. Everyone in the community has to care about the situation before we can even begin to solve it.

Poverty is often inherited, meaning that children who grow up in poverty, will most likely have kids that grow up in poverty, and so on. It’s extremely hard to break this cycle. She says that a way we could solve it is by having food pantries, and welfare. Employers need to pay their workers a living wage, not just minimum wage. Health care should be more accessible, and people need to be willing to support people outside of their inner circle. People in poverty are normally isolated from people who are wealthy. If we could have a more mixed community, people who aren’t living in poverty could see more of how big of a problem it is, and people who have the means could help people who don’t. Laura Lawson, who has experience with working at schools with kids living in poverty, says that kids living in poverty had lower test scores than people who don’t. She explains that the best way to bring people out of poverty is to give them money, even though some people are against this because they think they would use it irresponsibly. She also talks about raising minimum wages, just like Amanda Campbell. She says that wealthier people should pay

additional taxes that would go to people who don’t have enough money. She says that it’s unfair that professional athletes make as much money as they do, when there’s people who don’t even have enough money to live on. We should put extra tax on things we don’t need and things we do need should be more accessible with less tax.

I also interviewed Kimberly Love, who lives in Pennsylvania, and she also said that a solution to poverty is to raise the minimum wage. She thinks that we should provide job training and job placement programs. She explains that we should have affordable or free after school programs, ELL services, and we need to provide share-ride. We should provide access to healthier food through local farm share programs. Law enforcement to improve safety is also important, and we need community members to provide support programs such as professional clothing donations, shelters, and soup kitchens. Everyone had one answer in common: Raising minimum wages. I think that this is the best way to at least start to approach poverty. We may not be able to beat poverty yet, but we are able to take a stand as a community, and help each other. So, if I were mayor, I would do as much as I can to try to end poverty.



## Region 4 Winner

**Katelyn Prue**  
Central Middle School  
Charlotte Court House, VA



THERE MAY BE MANY PROBLEMS that Charlotte County citizens might want to change, but there might be one just bigger: The building of the huge and brand-new courthouse.

I talked to two of Charlotte County’s residents. They all agree that the money could have been used in a better way that would support and help the county more. The first young woman said this, and I quote “I think it was not the best move the county could have made. The money could have helped with maybe a food bank or food drive.”

The second lady I talked to was very willing to share her opinion. She started by saying this “I disagree over the fact that this was a big need for this. The judge who even wanted there to be a bigger courthouse left to another county. He’s probably not even caring about how much time and money it took to build the gigantic thing. We could have been using it to help our schools, school sports team, food banks, boys’ and girls’ homes, or even help small churches stay open.”

The last person who I talked to is very special to me, my great grandmother. She joined the American Red Cross and helped many soldiers in the battles they faced, which is why she thought the money would have gone to a better purpose if it went to schools so the nurses could get the medical equipment they need to keep students healthy.

I thought the money could have gone better to all these which is why I think the next time something like this is going to be made we should stand up. There could be many opinions on this topic, but this is mine. If you have something going on in your community you should talk to your community leaders or adults.



## Region 5 Winner

**Samantha Grooms**  
Mary Ellen Henderson Middle School  
Falls Church, VA



I LIVE IN FALLS CHURCH CITY. An issue that I noticed in my community is that our school buses do not have enough seats to fit every student safely. This year the number of sixth graders increased because of this growing city. Sometimes students have to sit three people to a seat. Another thing that I noticed about our school bus system is that the majority of our buses do not have seat belts. These problems both seem like safety issues that we should address.

I talked to three people about our school bus system. The first person that I talked to was Letty Hardi, a member of the city council. She has a son in sixth grade who she said agrees that there are a lot of people all crammed into the school buses. In my conversation with Letty Hardi she mentioned that a possible solution to the overcrowded school buses is making it easier to use different types of transportation, like biking or walking. Falls Church City is a smaller city, around 2 square miles, which means it should be easier to just bike to school. However, currently there are not enough crosswalks or bike paths, and the roads are always very busy. This makes it harder for students to walk to school every day. If we add more crosswalks and bike paths, we can make it easier to walk and bike.

I also talked to a couple of seventh graders at Mary Ellen Henderson Middle School. One seventh grader I talked to was Bethany Micheal. She agreed that when she used to ride the bus it was always crowded. She even said that sometimes she had to sit three to a seat.

After hearing all of these ideas about how to improve the Falls Church City school bus system, I have a solution of my own. Falls Church City should buy more school buses to make up for the increasing number of students. While I understand that this would cost money, it would be a good chance to modernize our school buses. We could buy school buses with seat belts. Letty Hardi explained that another way to modernize the buses is to buy electric buses, so they are more environmentally friendly. If Falls Church City does buy new buses so that there are enough for all of the students, modernizing would be a huge improvement.



## Region 6 Winner

**Elle Crosley**  
Culpeper Middle School  
Culpeper, VA



IN CULPEPER, AS WITH ANY COMMUNITY, there are a lot of drug addicts, people who are mentally unstable and want to commit suicide or hurt others, homeless people, and a lot of very abusive and violent people. Others have more controllable and common problems, like not being able to organize their homes or having too much clutter. There are those with anxiety or stress, depression, school-related problems like bullies or grades, and low confidence. These problems don't just affect that one individual, but also the community around them. My plan would impact nearly everyone in the community, either directly or indirectly and the people in the community will be a lot safer and happier.

I talked to my aunt, who lives in Culpeper. She thought counseling or therapy would help some of the problems in our area. She agreed that if everybody had a counselor, things would improve greatly. I discussed the subject with my grandmother who lives in Culpeper County too. She thought counseling would help some of her older friends who don't have family close by and no one to share their problems with. I talked to my good friend, Emma, about it and she said that there should be more access to counselors in the school. She agreed with the idea of making counselors more easily available to everybody.

Emma thought it would be a good tool for a lot of people.

If I were mayor I would want to help with a range of different things to improve the mental stability of the citizens in our community. My plan is to offer multiple types of free counseling to anyone who needs it. Each person would get a certain number of tokens they could use toward the counseling of their choice. They could use these tokens at any of the current local counseling facilities, and we would also add more counselors provided by the county that would have better hours for those who work during the day.

Overall, I think that therapy and counseling could drastically help those in our homeless population, those with addiction issues, issues with violence, or those with depression. It could help not only people who have glaring issues, but those of us who don't take the time to realize and address our own issues. It will help decrease crime in our community and help everyone to have a more positive outlook on life.





## Region 7 Winner

**Amya Seaborne**  
Saint Joseph Catholic School  
Petersburg, VA



MY NAME IS AMYA SEABORNE and if I were mayor of the beautiful city of Petersburg, I would consider it an honor and a privilege. When I started working on my essay, I asked some of my family members, friends, church members, and teachers: “What did they feel like the biggest problem facing our city is and how would they fix it?” Wow! I received some very interesting and insightful thoughts on this topic.

One of my teachers, Mr. McMichael, said that our city has a high level of crime and poor schools. He thought, to help fix these problems we need to increase the overall tax base of the city by seeking out businesses and cutting the tax rate. My Aunt Bartina feels like the lack of jobs and the amount of crime negatively affect the image many have of our city. She said that to solve this problem, we need to bring more business to the city and all citizens need to take a more active role in the governing of the city. My Uncle Raymond feels that a lack of strong leadership has had a negative impact and that to solve the problem, we need to have officials that have the best interest of all of the residents of Petersburg in charge and running the city. He also believed that poverty is a big problem for the city and to fix this, we have

to improve education and jobs in the city. I also had the opportunity to ask our current mayor: The Honorable Samuel Parham his thoughts on the question and he said: Poverty is the biggest problem in the city of Petersburg. The city’s current poverty rate is 28%. He said that this problem is very complicated to solve, and it will take a mix of workforce development, gentrification and new industry with huge support from state and federal government.

These were just a few of the responses I gathered but I believe that they all are linked. Petersburg, like other cities in the great Commonwealth of Virginia, has problems big and small. My city has some very serious issues but there is also hope – there are young people just like myself that want the city we live in to be better for all of its citizens. I do not think, though, that there is just one solution that can fix all the problems the city faces. I believe that it will take time, a lot of work from individuals that have the city’s best interest in mind and new fresh ideas.



## Region 8 Winner

**David Davenport**  
John Yeates Middle School  
Suffolk, VA



IF I WERE MAYOR, I would make sure that everyone in my community has a fun activity to participate in. My hometown, Suffolk, VA is a nice suburban area with great people, schools and jobs, but one common problem that Suffolk faces is no fun activities for kids and adults to participate in their spare time. The city of Suffolk has the largest land mass in the state of Virginia so that means all the fun things are very spread out across the city, and they are too far away for most people to drive to in their free time. For example, the closest YMCA near most people is far away from everyone and plus it’s an older facility. Also, children do not have many things to do so they do not get in trouble in the city.

I have asked around and most people agree that we don’t have many fun or enjoyable activities to participate in. In fact, the only main source of entertainment that we have in the area is our libraries, parks, and a movie theater located in the northern part of town that is about thirty minutes away from the southern part of town.

When I asked my friends for ideas they unanimously agreed on a local arcade that all kids could go to that would be closer to home. The adults I spoke to all agreed on a mall for shopping since it would have the biggest benefit on their lives.

My plan as the mayor would be to provide a convenient source of entertainment for everyone. I would begin with an arcade of some kind for the children. Then proceed to build a mall for parents so they could go shopping closer to home; instead of having to travel to Chesapeake Mall, we would have a Suffolk Mall. By making these changes to the Suffolk community we would have a somewhat more balanced place to live. I believe that both ideas would benefit the lives of everyone in Suffolk even if it’s just an activity.

# EDUCATING DURING A PANDEMIC

## Thoughts from Virginia's teachers and youth workers

**Thomas R. Smigiel Jr., Principal**  
Academy for Discovery at Lakewood, City of Norfolk

*I remembered three important keys to success during a crisis – communication, continuity, and compassion.*



SECONDS AFTER I HEARD Governor Northam make the announcement that schools would be closed for the remainder of the school year, I started thinking of all the events and ceremonies that would not be held. Many of the activities are things that students and staff look forward to every spring to close out a busy school year: music concerts, SOL testing, field day, 8th grade formal and promotion ceremonies. With all the work to do following the Governor's announcement, there

was little time to be stressed. While I could sense the emotion of my students and teachers, I had to transition quickly and find a way to lead them through something none of us had experienced before.

As a principal of a school of 750 students, plus 90 staff members, my mind shifted from all those events that were no longer possible, to planning for stability so we could accomplish what was still possible. I hoped that important events like promotion ceremonies could be salvaged after reopening but I knew that the world of education was about to change as it never had before.

The biggest immediate difficulty was planning amid so many “unknowns”. How would grading work? What would happen with SOL testing? How would students continue learning? What are the best virtual approaches to teaching? What about technology for students who did not have it? Grappling with these questions, I remembered three important keys to success during a crisis – communication, continuity, and compassion. Developing strategies for each of these would keep my school operating and functioning as close to normal as possible.

**Communication.** From the start, we worked to create consistent messages to our school families and teachers. This helped to ease concerns quickly and build trust. Even when some things could not be answered right away, letting them know I would find an answer reassured them and reduced stress. We received feedback from parents that showed an appreciation for making sure facts were communicated clearly and not just through phone calls, but through email, apps, and social media as well.

**Continuity.** Keeping learning continuous has helped to ensure as many students are engaged at the highest levels of learning as possible. Teachers have gone above and beyond to create Zoom lessons that maintain, as much as possible, the personal attention students need to thrive. By working to keep things as normal as possible, we are doing what we can to provide some emotional stability for these kids in an unstable time.

**Compassion.** Through everything, we've kept in mind that each student is unique, and their situation may bring about issues that require different solutions. We've learned that a one-sized-fits-all approach does not work in a virtual environment. In the past, we could at least count on having all the students under the same roof for the school day. But now, the school day occurs under many different roofs. Some students are “in school” in a home in which both parents have lost their jobs and basic necessities take precedence over learning. Other students lack a computer or internet. Compassion is needed for our teachers as well since some are not only teaching 150 students virtually, but their own children at home as well.

One of the eye-opening parts of virtual learning is how easily parents become frustrated with monitoring their own child's learning. For some, it has been a huge eye-opener as they observe for the first time their child's behavior in a learning setting. I have received many emails from parents expressing their frustrations. I hope that one positive out of this whole pandemic is that the teaching profession will earn more of the respect it has always deserved. Hopefully, this appreciation for the role of teachers and administrators will lead to more funding for schools.

A common phrase used during the pandemic is “We are in this together.” Educators get this. The unknowns will continue to be sources of anxiety for those in my profession, but I know that this experience has made us stronger and better prepared if we need to do this again. Our job is to make sure these lessons in resiliency are ingrained in this generation forever so that anxiety it replaced by confidence in their ability to overcome this and any obstacle.

**Editor's note:** Thomas Smigiel is also a council member for the City of Norfolk and current president of the Virginia Municipal League.

**Jocelyn Nicole Johnson, Art Teacher**  
Johnson Elementary School, City of Charlottesville

*When Virginia shuttered its schools against the pandemic, I experienced waves of grief, but also an unexpected lightening, like grace.*



As a public-school teacher, the grief came in the wake of that sudden breach of all those precious relationships built with my students – connections maintained with hugs and sidelong looks, with praise and redirection. Teaching visual art at a public elementary school means managing hundreds of young people every week. It means remembering how to pronounce a kid's name and also knowing that she loves basketball, or that he speaks Spanish at home. Those personal points of con-



nection are essential in order to reach students who may be distracted, or anxious, or traumatized. So, on the morning of Friday, March 13th – back when we understood that schools would probably close, but before any official word on when, or for how long – I saw teachers scrambling to shore up those relationships, stuffing backpacks with books, tucking in extra snacks for kids who might need them. We corralled kids out to the buses, offering waves and elbow-knocks, since we were beginning to understand how fraught touch would become. We sent them home just before the governor made his announcement, without a proper goodbye.

For me, the grieving came in the aftermath of those losses of contact and community. Right away I realized how hard it would be to take care of my students while teaching remotely in a time of pandemic. I understood that while some students would likely continue to learn, relatively content and supported, others would have spotty reception or spotty attendance. Others would lack the materials and structure routinely provided in the classroom. Others would go hungry or ache for the safe space school provided, eerily missing from the grid of virtual class meetings.

I've also experienced an unexpected feeling of grace in the oddly shaped hole school-closings made. Like so many educators, I spend an inordinate amount of time and energy on school. Time tending to those precious relationships, but also on preparing lessons and perfecting routines. Time in meetings, mandated books studies, or hanging artwork at city hall. During the school year, my inbox fills and my mind fills, trying to keep on top of fire drills, and lock down drills, and artwork without a name written on it. It was a near constant juggling act, meaningful, rewarding, but sometimes it feels overwhelming too. So that, in those first days when we were forced to halt and wait for new instructions, I let out a long breath held. In those weeks when we were not even allowed in the building, I gathered my groceries and stayed home with my family. I worked online with others in our division to design virtual lessons. During 'spring break', I walked my neighborhood, and weeded my front beds. I took stock of that earlier frenetic pace and regarded it with a kind of wonder. Then I looked in the other direction, toward all that matters most to me, including the many hundreds of public-school students I've had the privilege to teach, in Virginia, over twenty years: All those gap-toothed smiles, those unruly limbs, the flush proud faces.

Other teachers I know have expressed similar feelings of heartache and appreciation too, even as the workload, with its new challenges, shifts and crests. We long to be back in our classroom with our students, but we are grateful to be able to see our own family-members in the light of day. We worry over our mission to meet the needs of all of our students, but we appreciate that we can, for once, stay home sick without worrying about that chronic shortage of subs, or simply attend to our own physical needs in a timely manner. Some of us are thankful to hold new infants we'd left with others after our maternity leave ran out. We revel in the acknowledgement from our highest administrators: This is hard, they say. You are appreciated. Take care of yourselves and your families. We will get through this together. I only hope we can carry those truths with us however teaching looks in the coming months and years.

In the meantime, my husband and I continue to walk our dogs through our neighborhood. We are careful to keep social distance, even when I see students in the cluster of public-assisted housing a few blocks away. Sometimes a child calls out my name, waving across the distance, and my heart lifts. But last evening, a former student leapt stealthily across the street. He crept up behind us, this lank brown-skinned boy, so that I first saw him as a shadow on the sidewalk overtaking mine. I spun around, gasped "hello!", then blurted, "Sweetheart, you know I can't hug you now." But it was too late, he'd

already slipped a side arm around me, a quick squeeze that seemed full of loss and hope. Then he ran back.

**Editor's note:** Jocelyn Nicole Johnson's essays have appeared in the *Guardian*, *Guernica*, *Literary Mama* and elsewhere. Her short story "Control Negro," was featured in *The Best American Short Stories 2018*.

## Barbara Hill, English Teacher

John Yeates Middle School, City of Suffolk

*Yes, education is about academics, but is it also about life skills and relationships. My hope is that this prevails.*



Choosing to be an educator in middle school has meant spending my days trying to brighten the lives and futures of my students. This can be a challenge on a regular given day, but now I find myself in the middle of this pandemic trying to find my way. I love what I do and I am so grateful that I get to spend my day with individuals who appreciate my gifts and return the love. Don't get me wrong, it has its challenges, but when you have been doing it for 29 years, you learn a lot

about what works and what doesn't. Teaching allows you to inspire others while fulfilling creative outlets and constantly learning new things. Whether we are making smores to team build after finishing a novel, painting gourd birdhouses as we learn about purple martins from inspirational articles, or just having a poetry reading cafe' to share our written work, teaching is full of reaching learning styles and inspiring children. Now, how am I going to do that from home?

The joy of teaching for me is the caring relationships you form while watching students learn. Seeing their eyes light up when they understand a concept or being there for a student when they are going through a difficult time, this is what gets me through my day. Now, I have to figure out how to have this without seeing my students sitting in class. No classroom, no smartboards, no materials, no hugs of support – nothing is the same. We were in school on a Friday in March, and suddenly home for the remainder of the year.

I am one of the lucky ones. I work in a school division that is forward-thinking as technology utilization has been a priority for years. This year, we fulfilled an initiative to give all secondary students a take-home device and students without WIFI were also offered a hotspot. Our system supports equity in education with our technology tools. This has been a crucial factor, enabling us to be able to initiate online teaching during this pandemic.

I am also grateful for the support of my school and our staff. We have a motto that we are a family, "Every Charger, Every Day!" and that has been emphasized through this crisis. Our administration video conferences with us to touch base and offer support. Our amazing teachers and staff started asking right away about what they could do to help. They worry about students who need additional support and started to immediately put practices in place to help, including feeding students and offering guidance support. My seventh-grade team immediately started video conferencing and planning lessons for the kiddos. We even made a TikTok, our attempt to speak the middle school language, so that they would know they were missed. We are holding virtual office hours for support.

## Educating during a pandemic

Is this enough? I guess we will figure that out. This is new territory for all of us. What about our learners with needs and our students whose bright spot of the day was coming to school? We worry because we are not just teachers during the day, we are caregivers, love our students, and we want to know they are okay. This is the most challenging part of being quarantined.

We are in uncharted waters with education, but I see change for our futures. Now that this is here, we need a plan. Technology will probably be further integrated to support the classroom and digital learning will probably become more common. My hope is that children never lose their love of school and connections with their teachers. Yes, education is about academics, but is it also about life skills and relationships. My hope is that this prevails.

### **Axelle Amos, Social Studies Teacher** Mary Ellen Henderson Middle School, City of Falls Church

*We are all learning to adjust and adapt, and we will all come out better for it.*



Our school is blessed to have a ‘one-to-one’ program along with an online platform that the students already use and are quite familiar with. While one would think this would make the transition to online learning easy, even with so much preparation, it still has been an uphill climb.

The main struggle is accountability. My students have mentioned that the schoolwork feels optional in their home setting and that it is hard to encourage themselves to be accountable to their daily work. We are expecting them to have skills we only sometimes see in adults well before they are ready to take on such a responsibility – especially if parents aren’t home to help, or if they are juggling jobs and other siblings. In school we give grace to the students who need extra time while pushing others to challenge themselves with further work. It’s difficult to differentiate and make the work both achievable and engaging for all or most students without being able to talk through learning in person. As humans we need that level of interaction to facilitate understanding.

This lack of personal connection also forces the teacher to take pressure off themselves – we have to just trust that students are learning the material. We can’t do informal check-ins with appropriate wait time. Small everyday crucial skill and content building interactions that we’ve learned about as best practices are no longer possible in order to meet the basic and immediate needs of all students. I have spent countless nights worrying if I am grading too much, or not enough. Will the students look at my feedback and make the necessary changes or is my feedback too cumbersome?

As a million questions like this go through my mind, I like to put myself into my student’s shoes. When I was their age, I admired my teachers, craved interaction, and wanted to please everyone to the best of my ability. It’s easy to get caught up in the negatives but it’s time we put our faith behind our hard work and the hard work of the educators our students had before us and trust that they have the foundation to do the work assigned and to believe we have their best interests at heart, interact with them as often as possible, and trust that their intentions are to produce to the best of their ability.

While there seems to be a potential loss of skills and knowledge through daily interactions and the frequent adjustments educators help prompt throughout the day, our students are learning valuable soft skills like accountability, drive, and flexibility. As a paralegal, one may never be asked to name the ancient civilization located in the fertile crescent. But you will be asked to complete assignments in a timely manner, be accountable to your boss, and change course when something isn’t working or new information is given. Students, and educators, may be missing out on a lot – and may be even grieving those losses – however it’s important to see the skills emerging as a result of perseverance throughout this time. Valuable skills that are often overlooked in favor of mastery of state assessments.

As I think about the impact e-learning is having on my classroom, a particular story keeps coming to mind. One windy day at university (too many years ago), the power went out in our windowless classroom – rendering it uninhabitable. My French teacher kept repeating the same mantra, *en français*, that we must “adjust and adapt.” That is precisely what we must be teaching our kids now.

We are all learning to adjust and adapt, and we will all come out better for it.

### **Erica Cavanagh, Associate Professor,** Department of English James Madison University, City of Harrisonburg

*There have been moments when I have channeled Lucy and Ethel, wishing I could hide evidence of my inadequacy by stuffing my face with chocolates.*

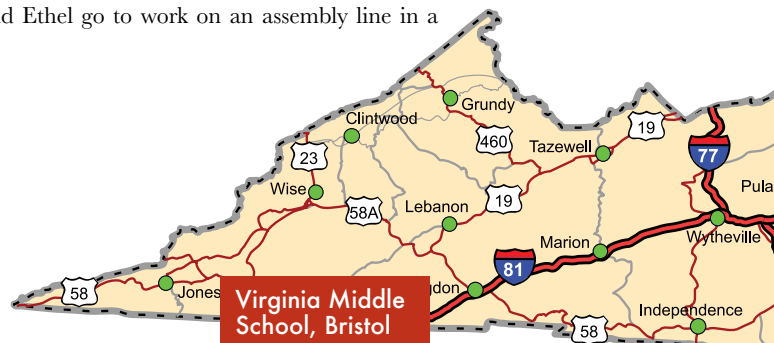


The last time I saw my students was March 5th, right before spring break, when I asked my advanced nonfiction writing workshop to write down news stories from the past or present that were on their minds. Here’s a sample:

*“Fears of recession as corona virus spreads; Dow Jones down in midst of the coronavirus”; “Corona; O.J. Simpson”; “Corona; mother worries her baby will be affected by the sound of jackhammers”; “Biden pros + cons; Mikala vs. Malik [2016 Shotokan Karate Championship]”; “Bloomberg dropped out of race; face masks are still hard to obtain in Asian countries”; “Weinstein trial; Anita Hill”.*

By mid-March, as the virus spread, images of college kids partying on beaches conveyed to the public that American college kids were oblivious or didn’t care. My students tell a different story. Many stayed home.

When the shift to online teaching began, I couldn’t help but think of that iconic episode of *I Love Lucy* in which Lucy and Ethel go to work on an assembly line in a





chocolate factory. As the procession of mini chocolates keeps coming down the line, Lucy and Ethel can't get them boxed fast enough, so they start stuffing their faces.

For me, the shift has been like that: an endless stream of particles coming at me for repackaging. Those particles used to be the coherent components of my in-person classes that I held while my toddler was at daycare. Now my funny, hungry, sensitive daughter is home with me all day, and somehow, for eight weeks and counting, I've had to reassemble the particles of my two classes while also caring for her and keeping up with a steady stream of emails from students, advisees, and colleagues.

I love teaching, and I love reading what my students write, but I can't teach by the same standards as I would normally. There have been moments when I have channeled Lucy and Ethel, wishing I could hide evidence of my inadequacy by stuffing my face with chocolates.

I am not alone. My colleagues are feeling the Lucy-and-Ethel scramble too, and we know, amid soaring jobless rates, that we are lucky we still have ours.

In my nonfiction workshops, students often write about deeply personal experiences. "This isn't my first quarantine rodeo," said a student in her recently submitted video essay. "I was a high school senior when my mom decided that the cure for being gay was to keep me in the house for 6 months."

I consider this window into my students' lives an enormous privilege. Telling true, personal stories demands courage. To help bring those stories out, I teach writing skills and try to foster an environment of trust. Care for one another's stories, I tell them. Most are pretty good at that.

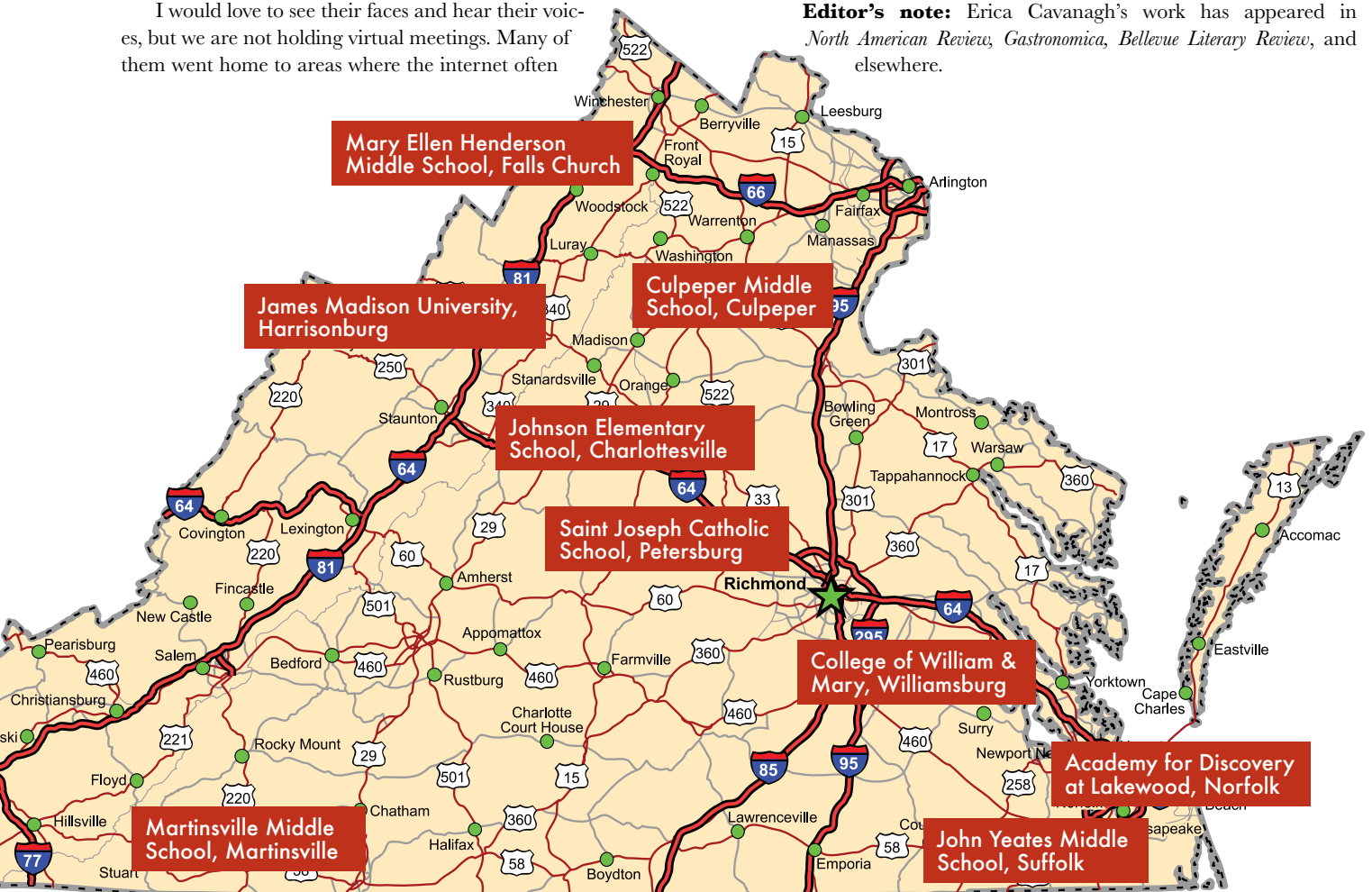
I would love to see their faces and hear their voices, but we are not holding virtual meetings. Many of them went home to areas where the internet often

can't support video conferencing. Instead, everyone reviews each other's stories through letters posted to an online platform. To keep them connected, I asked my students to post an informal "hello" each week. The "hello" can include a photo that illustrates what they've been up to and how they are feeling. One student's family started painting rocks and leaving them by the roadside for passersby. Another student is caring for new succulents but confesses she has only ever been able to keep one plant alive. Another said that although last year an elderly friend told him he was "ready to go," he was having trouble when that friend died recently from complications related to COVID-19.

Through these posts I have gotten to know my students better than I would in a classroom where they're often performing or quiet. These informal posts have created the grounded intimacy that is only possible through knowing someone in the daily-ness of their life. I read them with wonder.

"We are living through extraordinary times. Write it down," said journalism professor Ari Goldman in a recent *Washington Post* op-ed. Keep a journal – it's something I tell my students every semester. "So much gets lost in the erosion of time, you'll be glad you have the details to draw from later," I say. About half follow my advice. Even if they feel that "the days are blurring together; nothing has really happened," I tell them just to notice things, like the browning Lily of the Valley or the orange plastic fencing around the playgrounds. Without your record of what you saw and heard and what you thought and felt about it all, the days really will blur, forever, and you might mistake the media story about who American college students were during this time as the only story. I tell them to write it down, so that later when they ask themselves, "What happened? Who was I? How did we get here?" they will have the details to tell their own stories.

**Editor's note:** Erica Cavanagh's work has appeared in *North American Review*, *Gastronomica*, *Bellevue Literary Review*, and elsewhere.



**Rhonda F. Bolum, Gifted Specialist**  
Culpeper Middle School, Town of Culpeper

*There is not a day that goes by that I don't wonder how my students are doing whether it be emotionally, socially or physically.*



How life changes in a blink of an eye, as the saying goes. My life as well as my students' lives have changed dramatically over the last few months. There is not a day that goes by that I don't wonder how my students are doing whether it be emotionally, socially or physically.

Originally, we thought this would be temporary, and that we would be back in school in a short period of time. At the time of the first reports, the governor made the decision for everyone to stay

at home. My students were working in groups, coding and building robots. This wonderful activity encourages teamwork, higher order thinking, coding and problem solving. I was hoping we could return to the classroom and continue this project after a brief intermission. However, the pandemic had another chapter and to my dismay, this would not be accomplished this school year.

Presently, technology has played the most important role in our lessons for teachers as well as students and their families. However, to my disappointment, many of my students are not able to do lessons on the computer. They either lack proper software or the capability of logging into a computer system. This is a great struggle for my students, as they went from participating in a hands-on structured project-based learning activity with other classmates to doing individual work from their homes.

My hope and prayer is that in the next academic school year, students will return to the classroom, have the opportunity to collaborate with other students and have a better understanding of why COVID-19 happened to our society and its impact on their education.

**Ryan Dondero, MS Social Studies and Language Arts Teacher**  
Saint Joseph Catholic School, City of Petersburg

*Things have been, to put it lightly, weird.*



My students and I returned from the Christmas break rejuvenated and ready for another semester of school. Although the outbreak of the coronavirus in Wuhan was a regular public radio feature of my morning drive to work, it felt very justifiably distant. In Current Events, a weekly feature of my middle school social studies classes, we talked about Australia's wildfires and the worsening tensions between the United States and Iran, not the coronavirus.

As January slipped into February, and coronavirus, now named COVID-19, began to spread to other countries, student interest in the topic began to grow. As a class we read an article from *PBS Newshour*

on Newsela about the spread of the disease and listened to a story on NPR about new cases in the United States. (Editor's note: Newsela is a company that provides content for distance learning.) Students asked lots of questions (many of them came from a place of nervousness and uncertainty) and I tried my best to answer them. Throughout the rest of February, we used our Current Events time to revisit global developments in containing and fighting the virus. Even as the situation grew more serious, and cases in the United States increased, there was a sense that things would even out, be contained, or somehow miss us. I absolutely did not anticipate what the month of March would have in store for my students and our school.

Our last day at Saint Joseph School was March 13th. What was initially a two-week closure, became, after Governor Northam's March 23rd press conference, the rest of the school year. Things have been, to put it lightly, weird. Not being able to see my kids each day has been the most difficult part of transitioning from "real life" teaching to online learning. Teaching is a highly interpersonal profession and it's those day-to-day interactions with students that keeps many of us going. Losing that has been tough for myself and for my colleagues at SJS.

Despite the challenges, the perseverance and grit I've seen from our entire school community has been deeply heartening. As a JK-8 school, I've been fortunate to see all of the different ways my colleagues have made online learning feel warm, welcoming, and engaging. I've seen many students doing excellent work despite the lack of structure that accompanies the traditional school day. And I've felt the support of our administrators, Sarah Owens and Natalie Rota, as they've helped us navigate a truly strange time in American education and history.

Schools in the United States are facing enormous challenges at the moment. Educators around the country are trying their best to serve their students and provide them with as much as they can humanly provide. It's not always perfect and I don't think it has to be. I'm incredibly proud of the work being done by teachers across the country and I'm especially proud of the work being done at Saint Joseph School.

**Susan Scoggin, English Language Arts Teacher**  
Martinsville Middle School, City of Martinsville

*Deciding where and when to work on assignments when they have no clear time is hard for kids. Come to think of it, it's sometimes difficult for adults!*



Changes and adjustments...that is what teachers do best. Sitting here in my yoga pants and sloppy sweatshirt I am contemplating the very different way I am delivering instruction. Talk about changes! This pandemic has made all educators, rethink, rearrange and adjust our plans for formal instruction. It is now being delivered from teachers in yoga pants and received by students in their jammies! A bit informal, I think, but at least we are working together formally and informally, alone, yet together.

Nobody is in this alone. Teachers are using collaboration, creativity and communication in order to make this pandemic work for us instead of against us. On a personal level, I have never felt closer to my co-workers, better still, my school family. What a wonderful group



**John McGlennon, Professor of Government,  
College of William & Mary, City of Williamsburg  
Roberts District Supervisor, James City County Board  
of Supervisors**

of people coming together, working together at this very unusual point in history. We work closely daily, even though we are far apart, through videoconferencing, text messages, and e-mails. It feels as if they are right beside me, tossing about ideas, information and most importantly support to keep each other fresh and focused.

Our students are our heart and soul. They are “middle school kids,” a frightening term for some of our population, but we love them! They have kept our lives hopping and to say the least, interesting, daily, until they left us for quarantine in March. Middle school teachers miss the laughs, the tears, the drama and the hugs, when they just need someone who does not ask a million questions. We miss these hormonal, unpredictable and yes, loving souls. They show they care in the most unusual ways, and in ways we are familiar with and expect. They are what drive us to keep coming back to our classrooms every year. We love them just as they are and, in the end, we feel as if we now have seventy-five to eighty new family members each year.

Now, being asked to reach out to our kids through cold, impersonal technology just does not replace that sleepy, sometimes hesitant “good morning” from each of them. Although, without such technology, we would have minimal to no contact at all; it just falls short of seeing them, talking with them and helping them through a rough patch, personally and educationally one-to-one. Seeing their eyes when they “get it” just makes our day. It is what we work for, that understanding, so they can move forward.

I have made a concerted effort to touch base with my kids in order to know if they need any help with assignments, but more than that I want to know how they are dealing with this new way of life. Although temporary, it places a great deal of responsibility on them. They now have to rethink or even learn time management. Until now, their time was managed for them, before, during and after school hours limiting their downtime. The lack of structure can be overwhelming. Working at home all day, with siblings and their parents present is a completely new experience. Deciding where and when to work on assignments when they have no clear time is hard for kids. Come to think of it, it’s sometimes difficult for adults!

Not only has the lack of a daily schedule challenged the students, it has challenged adults as well. Teachers and parents have had to rearrange when and how we move through the day. Talk about struggles! I will not hesitate to say that we are reimagining, rearranging and rethinking on a minute-by-minute basis. Parents – hang in there; juggling your many roles can be mastered!

After 37 years in education, getting up each morning, dressing to impress and offering my best to young minds was how I thought every teacher should operate. I now know that even though those things are important, the connections you make with these children is what makes the difference. They keep me fresh and youthful in mind, if not in body. I miss that daily energy boost and look forward to seeing them again sooner, rather than later. I will do whatever it takes to make this temporary and casual mode of learning work. Like most of us, I do love my yoga pants, sloppy sweatshirt, jammie-wearing and messy hair days, but I would not trade them for time with my kids once again.



*I quickly came to the conclusion that “less is more” when you are scrambling to adapt on the fly.*



Like millions of others, I was nearly rolling on the floor laughing as “Saturday Night Live” returned in virtual format last month with a skit about a ZOOM meeting gone haywire. Oh, yeah, that was a riot!

But it was not so much of a riot the following week, when I sat before my screen, watching 15 tech-savvy 19-year-olds enjoying my total frustration at getting audio to work for my freshman seminar. I didn’t need a translator to understand the eye-rolls, suppressed giggles and even the occasional sympathetic glance.

Fortunately, a quick rescheduling got the bugs worked out with nothing to go viral. But transitioning from a regular in-classroom, face-to-face mode of instruction to on-line or “virtual” teaching has been a challenging, interesting, and revealing experience.

I’ve been teaching at the College of William & Mary for more than four decades now. Technology has dramatically evolved over this time, mostly for the better, but never without hiccups. I don’t miss the ink stains from mimeograph machines. The ability to pull data, video and illustrations from the web to embed in powerpoint slides adds dynamism and immediacy to lectures.

This experience is different. COVID-19 upended life in so many ways, so drastically for so many, that the total disruption of academia seems minor. But with courses at the half-way point, and students scattered across the globe without books or syllabi, William & Mary announced, like thousands of other institutions, that the remainder of the semester would be conducted remotely. We would have Spring Break and another week to gear up for the change. I was teaching a freshman seminar on Democracy at Home and Abroad and two lecture sections of Political Parties.

What this experience has shown me is that there is an enormous difference between traditional classroom teaching and on-line teaching. Certainly, on-line programs have revolutionized university education, making degree programs more accessible, sometimes much less expensive and more convenient to people with busy schedules. I doubt that it will ever replace the experience of faculty and students together in the same room, allowing for real-time, free flowing interchanges, personal interactions of mentor and student, and the transmission of the joy of learning a particular field of study or just the excitement of learning.

What have been the highlights and the lows of on-line teaching? There are lots of both. The first is that the availability of technology has advanced tremendously, allowing incredible options, remarkable experimental platforms, and nearly unlimited variety.

I quickly came to the conclusion (with the endorsement of our talented “KeepTeaching” team at W&M) that “less is more” when you are scrambling to adapt on the fly. I opted to keep the live meetings to a minimum, knowing my students were in nearly a half dozen time zones, in houses filled with parents, siblings and others all reliant on high speed internet. So, I found other ways. For example, when a student didn’t have their laptop with them, or their phone wouldn’t

## Educating during a pandemic

handle a powerpoint, offering recorded slide shows with narration as their schedule permitted seemed like the best option. Synchronizing different programs became increasingly possible, but not while balancing all the other demands of instant transformation.

On the other hand, a greater reliance on student discussion boards allowed me to appreciate that students who rarely participated in class discussions had some very interesting things on their minds. This will be a larger part of my classes going forward, in addition to the other strategies I use to draw students into participation.

Technology does in fact encourage collaboration, and not just among students in the classroom. Professionals across campus and across the country have stepped up to make the transition to electronic learning achievable. When I learned that students didn't have access to some course books, it took less than 24 hours for our librarians to acquire unlimited access to e-books, often thanks to publishers rushing to offer them for free or at discounted rates.

Over the past several weeks, I have been fused to my computer screens. There hasn't been a time when I could say that there is nothing else to record, to revise, or (most often), to grade. My wife jokes that each day, I disappear into my home office, only to reappear hours later bleary-eyed and ready for a nice long walk or hike. Of course, meanwhile she spends her days and nights ZOOMing with her 4th graders, navigating the balance between "not providing instruction" on top of the school system on-line curriculum and encouraging her kids to remain engaged. Many evenings she answers texts from parents well into the night.

As I move back and forth between my never ending college emails to my growing lists of James City County emails and reports, I look forward to the day when we can begin the new normal, whatever that may be. We will be fine...at least as long as we can once again be face to face.

### **Jeff Buck, Civics and Economics Teacher** Mary Ellen Henderson Middle School, City of Falls Church

*This whole experience has shown that there is a wealth of activities and material online to support students, but it cannot fully replace or replicate the in-person classroom experience.*



When the pandemic hit, it was quite a shock for everyone. I can still remember the day before we shut down, students were all asking what was going to happen as they left for a long weekend and if they should take their computers with them. Friday was a Professional day, and I told most of them I had no idea but was sure we would return on the following Monday. I never thought at that moment that was my last time chance to see them for the rest of the year. When news came of

the Governor's declaration that schools would be closed the rest of the year, I was very saddened and taken aback. As a 7th grade middle school civics teacher, I work very hard to cultivate relationships with my students and creating a welcoming class environment. It almost felt like all of that was now gone so quickly and I did not have a chance to say goodbye to them.

So far the transition to e-learning has been going well overall

with only a few setbacks technology wise. As a school division, we prepared a 20 day plan a couple of weeks in advance for if we closed. The lessons before spring break were mostly review packets of previously taught material. After spring break, we were permitted to create new content and we made more interactive lessons. All of my lessons are built to be asynchronous, but every other day I do teach that same lesson live to about 10-15 students. It is nice to "see" the students and have some interaction, but it still does not replace the actual classroom.

The biggest challenges with e-learning is modifying our project-based assessments for the virtual platform and maintaining engagement with the students. The other Civics teacher and I have tried our best to make the lessons as interactive and engaging as possible. I am grateful that we have iCivics.org as a resource; the games have helped to provide some authentic experiences for our students. My ultimate goal in the classroom is to have the curriculum come alive for the students and I typically do that through project-based assessments. For example, right before we closed, we were in the early stages of planning our mock trials for our judicial branch unit and since we did not get to perform them we had the students play "We the Jury" game on iCivics and debriefed about the experience. Another project the students missed out on is our Business Day project in May. This is our cumulative project for our economics unit and students create and set up storefronts to sell products they create to our 5th graders. This year, we are having the students still design their storefronts through an interactive powerpoint and hopefully they will be able to take part in Business Day next year as 8th graders.

The most difficult challenge I think for myself and the students is the loss of support in the classroom. During middle school, it is a time where students learn to become more independent and some students can handle it better than others. The virtual world depends a lot on independence that many middle schoolers are unable to handle due to a variety of reasons. It is almost like we are taking the floaties off a kid before they are ready to swim in the pool. I try my best by sending positive messages, holding live office hours and setting up one-on-one video conferences, but it is not the same as being in person. This whole experience has shown that there is a wealth of activities and material online to support students, but it cannot fully replace or replicate the in-person classroom experience.

### **Karen Cross, Civics and World History Teacher** Virginia Middle School, City of Bristol

*I think now more than ever we as a society realize the importance and necessity for public education for our children.*



My school district implemented online or distance learning after Governor Northam closed public schools in March. Since that time, I have been furiously incorporating online programs into my lesson plans. In these trying times, I have found technology to be both friend and foe. Let me explain.

Bristol, Virginia Public Schools has an outstanding technology division. I have had the luxury of teaching in a 1:1 classroom for several years, meaning that every student is assigned a laptop which can be taken home to complete assignments. Therefore,




I have had experience with numerous web-based resources and since I have utilized these resources in class, my students are well acquainted with how to navigate them as well. This has made the transition to full online learning much easier for me and for my students. In other words, it has erased, or at least diminished, the learning curve for us all.

An obstacle that I have faced, and I am convinced I am not alone, is the fact there are students who do not have reliable internet access. I am fortunate to work in a smaller school system where it is logistically possible to set up hot spots throughout our city. Even so, many of our students have struggled to access the internet daily in order to complete their assignments. Additionally, we have found ourselves in an educational climate where practically ALL education players across the country, students and teachers alike, are actively trying to use the internet, as well as access several popular education websites. There are times when these websites are slow or even completely unreachable due to high demand. These are the kind of problems that cannot be solved by a school division's technology department, even one as exemplary as in Bristol.

This pandemic has, however, exposed one of public education's greatest strengths – relationships. Although I use technology daily in my class, there is a difference now. The teacher and students do not have that direct contact. Relationship building is imperative in the education process. Teachers inspire motivation! Students who are excited to learn in class often lack that same drive when they are faced with a computer and no human contact. I like to explain it like this – my use of technology in my classes is a tool. It is only one method I use to communicate and instruct when we are in physical session. But,

with the current unfortunate circumstances, it IS the full instruction. In normal circumstances, investing my time and energy during class, I build mutual trust and respect with my students. Often, this is exactly what is needed to motivate my students to work to their highest potential. Unfortunately, this is the special component that is missing with distance learning, or online instruction. The personal connection is lacking, or in the least it is diminished.

Lastly, this pandemic has revealed another important component of public education. Schools are living organisms, full of activity, excitement, and personality! The school experience entails so much more than academics, although that is of utmost importance. Children and young people, as well as their staff/teachers, are social beings who crave interaction with one another. Athletic activities, plays, musicals, concerts, graduations, field trips, dances – these are the threads that stitch the full experiences for students. And, they have all vanished like a vapor, with no warning. This is difficult for students to understand and digest. Online instruction provides none of this important interaction. To be honest, I think many students are mourning and are experiencing the grieving that accompanies these losses.

Although I have heard a few people worry that online or remote instruction may become the new norm, permanently in place long after we have survived this pandemic, I disagree. I think now more than ever we as a society realize the importance and necessity for public education for our children. I know I am definitely looking forward to arriving at my school, hearing those bells and announcements again and starting my day with those eager faces peering at me! 

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# Schools are closed, but VPAP is bringing civics home

**S**OPHIE MCKENNA WAS shocked. The Hanover County third grader was working through a three-lesson, online civics course from home and she had just learned something that bewildered her.

“Oh my gosh! People do not vote!” Sophie exclaimed.

Nolan Neville, a fourth grader from Richmond, came to the same conclusion after completing the lesson. “People do not vote very much,” he said. “They just don’t.”

“Especially on the local level, right?” replied Nolan’s mom, Hallie Neville. “That was the one you were most astounded by.” Hallie then commented on how she used this moment as a learning opportunity for her son. “So, we talked about why people do that.”



The online modules that Sophie and Nolan were completing are part of *Civics Whiz*, a limited effort by the Virginia Public Access Project (VPAP) to supplement civics educational materials provided by schools.

## How VPAP got into the education game

Many city, town and county officials are familiar with VPAP as an aggregator of campaign finance data and a compiler of news headlines about Virginia politics.

But a few years ago, VPAP staff realized that the organization’s resources offered several ways to enhance civics classrooms, so they created a special section of its website for middle- and high-school civics teachers. The goal was to provide a library of data visualizations and videos that teachers could plug into their lesson plans about money in politics, redistricting and voter participation.

However, when Governor Ralph Northam cancelled the remainder of the in-person school year to prevent the spread of COVID-19 in March, VPAP staff saw an opportunity to shift the focus of its relatively new civics education initiative. The resulting *Civics Whiz* activities and discussion questions combine DIY tutorials with Virginia political data that lead to quick lessons covering topics like election turnout and how neighborhoods vote.

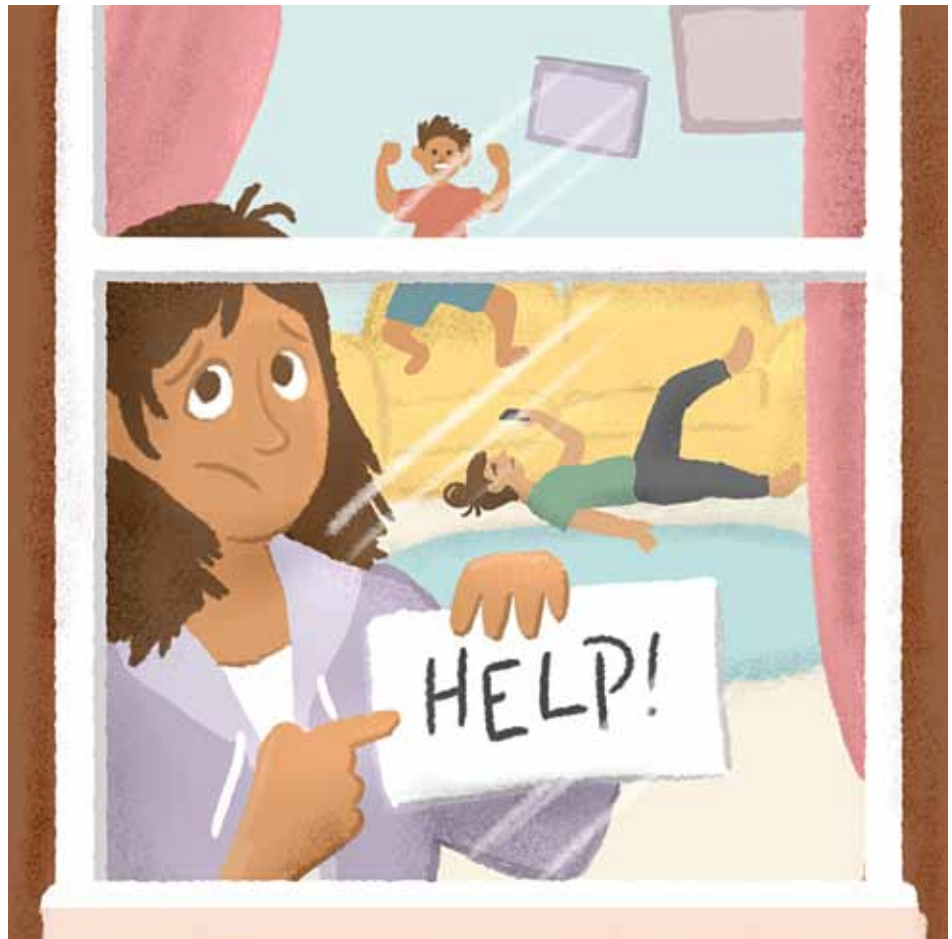
## A boon to working parents educating from home

“We were inspired to use our existing resources to fill a gap for families who may be pulling their hair out trying to keep kids busy – or who are simply in need of an additional resource to bolster virtual lessons,” said Sarah Stack, who oversees VPAP’s civics education initiative.

“There’s a reason our Facebook ads show two kids doing cartwheels in the living room while a mother stands at the window, holding a sign saying ‘Help!’”

By the end of March, VPAP had spun up a new section on its website for parents and came up with the name, *Civics Whiz*. Bright, simple graphs appeal to visual learners. Data visualizations also help develop students’ chart literacy and critical thinking. Interactive web pages illustrate concepts in an engaging way. There are three online lessons – “Voter Participation,” “Interest Groups,” and “Exploring Your Own Voting Precinct.”

Of VPAP’s nine person staff of full- and part-time employees, about six were involved in the *Civics Whiz* project, though none have







an educational background. A team of three selected resources from VPAP's civics education library that they identified as best suited for parents to use with students of all ages. In less than a week, they produced the first three activities.

"These days, parents are far more involved in schoolwork than before," Stack said. "And who can be an expert at every subject, or even one of them? We liked the name *"Civics Whiz"* because it gives parents some structure to introduce their kids to a new topic. And the kids, once they get into it, can feel like a whiz."

## How does it work?

*Civics Whiz* consists of three activities can be combined or separated to fit each child's interest. Though VPAP's data visualizations, students ages nine or older can dive into topics typically covered in middle and high school.

First, a guided scavenger hunt explores VPAP's "All Politics is Local" section. Discussion questions encourage the child to think critically and to locate certain numbers within the results for their community.

Once the student or parent enters their home address, [vpap.org](http://vpap.org) presents their precinct's demographic data, a breakdown of voter participation statistics and top local donors for that ZIP code.

It also shows past candidates' performance, future elections and current representatives.

"I thought it was cool to know how my neighbors voted and who they voted for," said Nolan Neville. "And it's just cool to know my representatives."

"He was excited because [Delegate] Dawn Adams actually lives around the corner from us, so he put that together," Nolan's mom Hallie reported. "He was like, 'wait a minute, that's our representative! She lives right on the other street.'"

"We made it our history and civics lesson for the day," said Hallie. "It sparked some interest that wasn't there before."

*Civics Whiz's* second module features an interactive visualization with shifting icons that represent voter participation in Virginia elections. What starts as a large number – 6 million eligible voters in Virginia – becomes whittled down to the smallest subset of election voters: the 1.5 million who cast ballots in the 2015 General Assembly elections.

After watching the turnout get smaller and smaller, that's when Sophie McKenna's mouth fell open.

"She couldn't believe it," said Sophie's mom, Katie. "So, I said, 'What are you going to do when you turn 18?' And she said, 'I'm voting! I'm not letting anyone else make decisions for me'."

The final activity starts with an animated video introducing the concept of interest groups. These groups are a part of the legislative process and push for legislation on issues that are specific to their shared interest. The activity directs the student to think of an interest group they could be a member of based on their favorite hobby, food or sport. What would they want to accomplish? What type of group might have opposing interests or similar goals?

"Oh, wow! I'm in the dog interest group," Sophie said.

Katie McKenna said a highlight of the activity was that it illustrated how interest groups can be focused on common issues.

"It's not just big things. She found that really interesting."

## Check out 'Civics Whiz' for yourself

Since it launched, the *Civics Whiz* education page has been visited more than 1,000 times. VPAP hopes the *Civics Whiz* series continues to pique curiosity and build a foundation for when students return to schools.

Sophie, the third grader who was inspired to vote when she turns 18, was intrigued by the new information. "She has not learned any of this, so it was very fascinating," said her mom Katie McKenna.

Similarly VPAP's Sarah Stack notes that "for kids who may have visited the voting booth with their parents or seen candidate signs in their neighbor's yards, these activities are a fun, easy way to start building their knowledge of our democratic processes," said Stack. "If they provide a half hour of distraction that happens to be educational, even better!"

Anyone interested in checking out *Civics Whiz* can do so for free at [www.education.vpap.org](http://www.education.vpap.org). 

**About the author:** *Ali Mislowsky is the VaNews Coordinator for the Virginia Public Access Project.*



# Never stop learning: Working Scholars

## How the right education benefits can help local governments develop their workforce

**W**ORKING SCHOLARS is an organization that supports local governments in creating cost-effective education benefits that really help the employer and employee, getting the most results for fewer funds. Although very different in many ways, both private companies and public sector agencies share a similar staffing problem: finding and retaining the best people. In the competition for the best workers, private companies often have the advantage over public sector employers due to the incentives they can offer desirable candidates. So how can governments attract and retain top talent? The answer is a benefit that many local government employers may already be offering, but not in the right way: education benefits.

**“94% of employees would stay at a company longer if it invested in their career.”**

- Source: 2018 *LinkedIn Learning Report*

Based on our experience and data, what follows are some of the key dynamics of education benefits to take into consideration when creating or revising your program.

### The impact of education benefits

One of the best ways a local government can attract candidates and show its employees that they matter is by investing in their education. These benefits send a powerful, positive message. They convey that an employer knows the employees, believes in their potential, and is willing to invest in their future.

Education benefits not only engage and motivate employees, they can also lead to raises and promotions, which in turn can help with retention and recruitment. Employees are likely to stay longer and work more effectively if they envision a future that holds new challenges and opportunities to advance through promotions. And candidates who might not have normally considered public sector employment are more likely to be attracted to government agencies that are investing in the potential of their employees.

### Creating the right education benefit

Many organizations think that a traditional tuition reimbursement/assistance program is all that is needed to meet the needs of their employees. Unfortunately, these programs are rarely enough. According to Lumina Foundation, “on average, only 2 to 5 percent







of eligible employees use tuition assistance programs.” This is partly due to the upfront cost of these programs which creates a barrier for many employees.

Another potential issue is that traditional education programs that may qualify for reimbursement fail to offer the flexibility that government workers need. The bottom line: full-time employees are unable to fit campus-based classes into a schedule that is already busy with work and family. According to LinkedIn Learning, 58% of employees prefer self-paced learning. With many schools revamping and expanding their online learning opportunities during the COVID-19 pandemic, the preference for self-paced learning is almost certain to increase.

## Elements of a successful education benefit

Several factors are important to keep in mind as you evaluate and update your existing education benefit offerings, with specific focus on the needs and potential of local governments. Better recruitment, retention, and capabilities are likely to follow if your education benefit program can focus on these characteristics:

**Flexibility.** Jobs and family responsibilities take up a lot of time. These commitments can make it nearly impossible to take advantage of traditional education options offered at specific times and places. Today’s workforce values education options that can easily fit into existing schedules. As such, you should ensure that any education benefits you provide offer self-paced, on-demand learning so your employees can progress at a rate and method that works best for them.

**“58% of employees prefer opportunities to learn at their own pace.”**

- Source: 2018 *LinkedIn Learning Report*

**Support.** Returning to school can be intimidating, particularly for those who have been out of the classroom for a significant amount of time. By providing support as part of an education benefit, you can make sure that employees are able to successfully navigate the program and overcome any issues.


**Support doesn’t need to come only from your organization. If you partner with an education provider, they may also provide valuable support to your employees.**

**Mobile Learning.** For many employees, mobile learning is the only way they can take advantage of education benefits. By giving them access to options to learn on the go, you ensure they maximize their time. Employees who think they don’t have time in the evenings to learn may realize they can do so during their commute to work or lunch breaks.

**Learning Styles.** Not everyone learns the same way. In order to make sure each employee can get the most out of an educational experience, provide options that work for multiple learning styles. This will help make sure participants can tailor their experience to what works best for them.

**Program Awareness.** Regularly reminding employees of your education benefit will ensure that it is used by those who will benefit from it most. According to the Lumina Foundation, 43 percent of working adults are unaware if their employer offers a tuition assistance program. Use education partners and your own channels to send program reminders, hold informational sessions and share success stories so that your workforce will not only be aware of your education benefits but will be excited about using them.

## Getting more from less

With the severe financial impact of the COVID-19 only just beginning, localities that are taking a long, hard look at their budgets will undoubtedly find that they need to do more with less. Education benefits are a proven tool for organizations to get the most from their staff while supporting them with cost-effective opportunities. While the future is always uncertain, what remains true now more than ever is that traditional ways of working are being replaced by new methods that will require employees to have new skills, better knowledge and more options to succeed. 

**About the author:** By Herb Miller, Ed.M. is the Director of Partnerships for Working Scholars. He can be reached at [hmiller@workingscholars.com](mailto:hmiller@workingscholars.com).

# A home run for a small city

**A** FLEET OF BACKHOES moving dirt near the Fredericksburg Expo Center on a sweltering July day in 2019 would not have typically drawn much interest. But for the City of Fredericksburg, those backhoes and that dirt represented the culmination of nearly a decade of effort to land a minor league baseball team and stadium. For the Silber family, owners of a baseball franchise previously known as the Potomac Nationals, the field being cleared by those backhoes would be their team's new home after a long journey to find one. And for the Silver Companies, a regional real estate investment and development firm, they were part of a vision to turn the Fredericksburg-based Celebrate Virginia South economic development association corridor into a tourism campus.

Under the surface, deeper than any single locality, sports franchise, or economic development project, the earth being moved also represented something with implications for any locality hoping to invest in sports facilities: How to build a professional sports stadium using innovative and collaborative public-private partnerships.





## Rounding First: How initial attempts failed but city leaders kept going

The pursuit of professional baseball has been a topic of interest among City of Fredericksburg leaders since the early 2010s, when a series of editorials in *The Free Lance-Star* newspaper made the case for minor league baseball as a worthwhile pursuit for the community. The editorials caught the attention of people with Maryland's Hagerstown Suns, whose ownership contacted Fredericksburg officials about moving the Low Single-A affiliate of the Washington Nationals to Fredericksburg.

A years-long negotiation ensued between the Suns and the city. In keeping with most minor league baseball stadium projects, the Suns proposed that the municipality build the stadium and the team pay rent. While city officials were eager to see baseball in Fredericksburg, they made it clear that a publicly financed stadium was not something a small city of 29,000 residents could take on. Conversations then turned to a privately financed stadium, but ultimately the two sides couldn't come to terms.

Undeterred, Fredericksburg's city leaders didn't give up on the possibility of a hometown team. "We knew that minor league baseball would be well-received in Fredericksburg, and that it would add a lot for our community, visitors and residents," said Fredericksburg Mayor Mary Katherine Greenlaw. "We therefore decided to make the recruitment of a team and the development of a privately financed stadium one of our top priorities. But we made clear that it would have to be on financially prudent terms."

## Safe at Second: A necessary pause to gather financial backing

Around the time the Suns were working with the City of Fredericksburg, the Silber family was talking to Prince William County about a new stadium for the High Class-A affiliate of the Washington Nationals. The P-Nats, as they were then known, had long been playing in the outdated Pfitzner Stadium in Woodbridge. For a variety of reasons, those talks broke down as well.

Fredericksburg city officials had developed a relationship with the Silber family during the Suns conversation and decided to reach out to team owner Art Silber.

"At the time we had no idea whether the Silbers would be interested in Fredericksburg or whether we could put together a deal if so," said Fredericksburg City Manager Tim Baroody.



"But our Council had made clear that they wanted us to pursue minor league baseball, so we called Art and his family."

As it turned out, the Silbers were interested in Fredericksburg. A month later, the Silber family made an under-the-radar visit to Fredericksburg to see the city and meet with local officials.

City leaders made clear from the beginning that they did not want to own a stadium. For their part, the Silbers made it clear that they were willing to own and finance the \$35 million, 5,000-seat stadium, but they would need significant help from city: specifically, \$1.05 million a year for 30 years. That would represent about 40 percent of the debt service on a stadium loan, which the Silbers were willing to carry with the city's pledge.

"As a longtime banker, I knew that we couldn't get this financed without the city's support," Art Silber said. "It also couldn't be performance-based, but rather had to be an ironclad annual pledge for 30 years as long as we were playing minor league baseball in the stadium and providing the city with the promised benefits."

Those benefits to the city included use of the stadium for a variety of community events, extensive marketing throughout the facility, a suite, and the intangible benefits that come from having a minor league baseball stadium and team.

City officials were enthusiastic about a privately financed stadium, but the \$1.05 million annual commitment for 30 years was no small matter for a city with a \$90 million-\$100 million annual budget. Further, all the city's private-sector incentives prior to this time had been performance-based – meaning the city returns all or a portion of the tax revenue generated by the business.

City staff were faced with the challenge of crafting a deal that city council could support while adhering to the team's stipulation that it not be performance-based. Their focus turned to ensuring the stadium would generate the \$1.05 million – thereby making the project budget-neutral.

Projections developed by the Silbers and an independent consultant indicated that the stadium would produce about \$700,000-\$750,000 in tax revenue for the city annually – including sales, meals, admissions and real estate taxes. How to bridge the gap?

## Sprinting to Third: Bonds close the finance gap

The solution lay in two additional sources of revenue. First, the Celebrate Virginia South Owners Association pledged \$100,000 a year to the city for the benefits that the stadium would provide to the development. Second, city staff identified the potential to generate \$200,000-\$250,000 by holding events at the stadium, including the summer concert series that had been running nearby.

The city ultimately signed a side agreement with the Silbers that would give the team the right to run all revenue-generating events at the stadium for 10 years. In exchange, the team would pay the city \$100,000 a year, plus up to \$150,000 a year in additional revenue based on the success of paid events.

Those three sources of income – tax revenue, the Celebrate Virginia South pledge, and the paid events agreement – ultimately convinced city council members that \$1.05 million a year was a reasonable amount.

"We felt confident that the stadium would generate enough money to cover the annual commitment, not even factoring in the indirect



Co-owner Seth Silber, Council Member Matt Kelly, Mayor Greenlaw touring bull pen.



## Fred Nats fun facts

**Mascot.** The team’s mascot is Gus, rumored to be George Washington’s boyhood imaginary friend. According to Paige Honaker, the FredNats’ marketing coordinator, Gus has been around Fredericksburg for centuries.

**Logos.** Branding for Fredericksburg Nationals has inspired many interesting logos, including one depicting George Washington swinging at a cherry tree, the Fredericksburg skyline and various versions of the “F” for “FredNats.” A Mary Washington logo was unveiled in November 2019 at an event celebrating her 311th birthday at her former home in downtown Fredericksburg. Mary Washington is the first female logo in baseball history to be a part of a team’s permanent and original branding.



**Beer!** The FredNats already have a signature beer called “Sluggin’ Gus” from Fredericksburg’s 6 Bears and a Goat Brewery. Sluggin’ Gus will be served in the ballpark and is now available for pickup from 6B&G: [www.6bgbrewingco.com](http://www.6bgbrewingco.com).

**Opening Day.** Originally scheduled for April 23, 2020, the coronavirus pandemic didn’t stop the creative marketing team and fans from celebrating the FredNats as they held a virtual opening day, complete with the national anthem, a 7th inning stretch with Mary, George and Gus, nine virtual innings, games, giveaways and virtual stadium tours.

**Team Store.** The FredNats team store, located at 610 Caroline Street, is currently closed to the public. But fans can purchase hats, t-shirts and other novelties from the team’s online store: [www.milb.com/fredericksburg/ballpark/team-store](http://www.milb.com/fredericksburg/ballpark/team-store)

**Trivia.** What Baseball Hall of Famer threw a silver dollar across the Rappahannock River during a George Washington birthday celebration in 1936? Answer: Walter “Big Train” Johnson.



**Stay Connected.** The team’s official website is [www.milb.com/fredericksburg](http://www.milb.com/fredericksburg) where you can view the schedule, find out about planned promotions and giveaways, and purchase tickets.

tax revenue that could be produced from things like additional hotel stays and complementary new development,” Greenlaw said.

“Even if there were a shortfall, we felt it wouldn’t be a particularly large one. That seemed worth the risk, and inflation is also our friend with a 30-year fixed commitment.”

## Heading for Home: Bonds show the way

In the spring of 2019, the city and team finalized the 30-year agreement, and the team turned its attention to getting the stadium planned, permitted and financed.

The Silbers spoke with numerous commercial banks about the loan for the project without success. Further, most commercial loans must be refinanced after 10 years, and the Silbers preferred to have a locked-in interest rate for 30 years. That meant going to Wall Street.

Art Silber had contacts with the large investment banking firm UBS from his banking career. Extensive dialogue occurred between UBS and the team, and the banking giant was selected as the underwriter.

UBS consulted on the bond sale with some of the country’s largest rating agencies as well as its customers. A recommendation was made to split the package into two series of bonds – one whose debt service would be paid by the city’s \$1.05 million commitment (“Series A bonds”) and the other that would be repaid from operating revenue at the stadium (“Series B bonds”). Both bonds would be issued through Fredericksburg’s economic development authority (the EDA).

The Silbers would be solely responsible for the debt service, but the EDA would receive a new income stream for being the issuer – about \$39,000 a year at first and gradually declining over the 30-year term.


After months of work and reams of documentation, UBS called the Silbers on July 11 with the good news – the bonds had been sold! The bond sales closed the following week, and construction began.

City officials were pleased with the bond sale. “The bond sale was very difficult for the team but not impossible,” Baroody said. “We think that shows we negotiated a good deal – not paying so much as to make it easy to finance but paying enough to make it viable and financeable.”

“We think this could be a model for how to get professional sports stadiums financed,” Baroody continued. “And we are so proud that we got this done in Fredericksburg. We look forward to Opening Day.”

## Home Run! (coming soon)

Fredericksburg’s new minor league baseball team is called the Fredericksburg Nationals or “FredNats.”

Due to the COVID-19 outbreak, it remains uncertain when that Opening Day will be. City and team officials are hopeful Opening Day will be this summer. Regardless what happens with the season, the city and team are already planning numerous non-baseball events for the stadium. 

**About the author:** Bill Freehling is the Director of the Fredericksburg Department of Economic Development and Tourism.



# Telemedicine and workers' compensation during COVID-19

**I**N EARLY 2019, VIRGINIA RISK Sharing Association (VRSA) implemented telemedicine as a healthcare option for members injured in the workforce.

Today, this option is proving more essential than ever.

VRSA Director of Workers Compensation Claims Robin Duvall observes that “The number of injured workers utilizing telemedicine has certainly gone up over the past few weeks. Our March telemedicine calls were up 43 percent compared to previous months.”

The company VRSA contracts to provide telemedicine for injured workers, Akos, says they have seen a substantial increase in requests to increase availability of telemedicine from other workers' compensation organizations in the wake of COVID-19.

“We are fortunate to have implemented this option for our members when we did,” concludes Duvall.

## What is telemedicine?

**Roughly 80 percent of all workplace injuries are stable, minor conditions that do not require a procedure or repair.**

Telemedicine is the delivery of healthcare via telecommunications equipment (i.e. a computer or smartphone). The patient can talk to a doctor via video chat while doctor/patient confidentiality is upheld thanks to HIPAA-compliant platforms in which information is highly encrypted for security.

Through telemedicine consults, many injured workers have been able to resolve their injury without visiting an emergency room or urgent care facility. Common workplace injuries treated include:

- Abrasions;
- Back pain;
- Burns and rashes;
- Chemical exposure;
- Contusions; and
- Sprains and strains.

## What are the advantages of telemedicine?

There are three clear advantages of telemedicine over traditional healthcare delivery systems.

First, the injured employee can see a doctor relatively quickly without leaving the worksite. With telemedicine, the injured employee is triaged by a registered nurse from the moment the call is received. If the injury is minor, in the first-aid category, the nurse will handle the call. This prevents time lost due to traveling to an urgent care or ER, waiting to be seen, waiting for tests, waiting for instructions, and driving back to work.

Secondly, if the injury is beyond first-aid standards, a board-certified physician joins the call. The nurse can warm transfer the patient to the doctor to finish the consultation via telemedicine. Occasionally, the injured worker will need additional care such as imaging, labs, or a referral to a specialist. Referrals are made by the telemedicine physician allowing the injured employee to return to



work on an alternate duty. By remaining on the job, employees stay engaged and are more likely to be eager to recover from the injury as quickly as possible. This substantially reduces the downtime for the employee and benefits both employee and employer.

Finally, the costs associated with visiting a doctor's office, an urgent care, or an ER can be significant regardless of the severity of the injury. By using telemedicine, workers compensation costs, premiums, and hidden costs will be minimized.


The cost of a telemedicine visit is lower than a doctor's visit, significantly lower than urgent care, and a fraction of the cost of an ER visit. Taken together the monetary and time savings make for significant benefits.

## COVID-19 limitations reveal telemedicine's strengths

The current COVID-19 pandemic brought telemedicine into the spotlight. With many states enacting a “shelter-in-place” or a “stay at home” mandate, doctors' offices and patients have begun using telemedicine more frequently. As a result, doctors and patients are now realizing that visits do not need to be done in person for minor conditions, follow-up consultations, prescription refills, and stable conditions. For all these, telemedicine is a viable option under any circumstances.

VRSA's telemedicine option is available to all members purchasing workers' compensation coverage. Telemedicine is then automatically added to all panels of physicians made up of members.

Telemedicine services are available 24 hours per day, 365 days per year. The toll-free number to call for selecting telemedicine treatment is the same one used to contact VRSA's CompCare On-Call provider.

For more information on VRSA's telemedicine benefits, visit [www.vrsa.us/coverages/workers-compensation](http://www.vrsa.us/coverages/workers-compensation). 

**About the authors:** *The Virginia Risk Sharing Association (VRSA) is the first and most financially sound self-insurance pool in the Commonwealth of Virginia. VRSA provides auto, property, liability, and workers' compensation coverage to Virginia's local political subdivisions.*

# Do you know a “2020 Local Champion?”

THIS YEAR, VML will be giving “2020 Local Champion” awards to highlight the hard work that our localities are doing to keep their citizens safe and healthy during the COVID-19 outbreak. Examples of “Local Champions” might be an agency that was willing to transition its work to provide more effective help to the community, an economic development department that did something spectacular to help local businesses, a communications director who came up with a creative way to keep residents informed and involved, or a locality’s first responders who were steadfast in their jobs.

We are asking any interested local officials or staff to submit entries in as many of the categories below as they like. However, please submit only one entry per category.

## Categories

- Communication
- Community Health
- Continuity of Operations
- Economic & Business Stability
- Public Safety
- Risk Management
- Education & Youth Initiatives

## How to enter

Use our online Locality Champion 2020 form (currently in development) to submit your entries. For each, please include:

- The person, project, organization or department you want to nominate.
- A description of what they have done and why you feel they merit consideration
- Links to supporting materials

We will announce additional details about the contest and will let you know when the entry form is ready via *eNews*, social media and on our website soon.







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