



## Statewide Winner

# Serene Colden

Lindsay Middle School – City of Hampton  
Teacher: Stacey-Ann Facey

IMAGINE WAKING UP after a heavy rain and seeing your street covered in water. Cars cannot pass, students are late for school, and families are worried about damage to their homes. If I were Mayor of Hampton, the most important problem I would focus on is flooding.

Hampton is a coastal city, which means flooding happens more often than people may think. Even short storms can cause water to collect on roads and in neighborhoods. Some streets flood almost every time there is a hard rain. I spoke with a family member and a neighbor, and they both said certain low areas are always a problem. This shows that flooding is not just a rare event – it is an ongoing issue that affects many people.

Flooding is serious because it affects safety and daily life. When roads are underwater, emergency vehicles can be delayed. People may miss work or school. Water can also damage homes, cars, and businesses. Families should not have to feel stressed every time it rains.

If I were mayor, I would start by improving Hampton's stormwater drainage system. First, I would work with city engineers to find the areas that flood the most. These places would become top priorities. The city would clear clogged drains and fix or upgrade old pipes so water could flow away faster during storms. Next, I would support natural solutions. Planting more trees, building rain gardens, and protecting wetlands would help soak up extra rainwater. These actions will not only reduce flooding but will also make neighborhoods greener and more beautiful.

Another important part of my plan would be better communication. I would create an easy online system where residents can report flooding and get updates during storms. When leaders listen and respond, people feel safer and more supported.

If I were mayor, I would work hard to protect Hampton from flooding now and in the future. By fixing drainage systems, using natural solutions, and listening to residents, we can make our city safer and stronger. Preparing today will help keep Hampton safe for years to come.





## Region 1 Winner

# Kenzley Frye

Northwood Middle School – Town of Saltville  
Teacher: Amy Dunn

SIMPLE ISSUES LIKE patching potholes and repairing buildings are straightforward problems that first come to mind when discussing improvements our town needs. But our small town of Saltville has many other underlying issues that you may not even consider at first. Promoting tourism that highlights our town's history, improving accessibility for people with minor and major disabilities, as well as building a more diverse and welcoming community are all equally significant issues our town faces.

Tourism is one of the biggest missed opportunities for small towns like ours. Saltville lies in the heart of Appalachia and has plenty of historic value, natural scenery, and family owned businesses that larger cities cannot offer. These features that our small town presents often go unnoticed by travelers simply because of lack of marketing. Creating a town website, social media page, or hosting our own unique, seasonal festivals are small but impactful ways to increase visitor interest and give outsiders a reason to stop by. Tourism does not just bring visitors, it brings income for local businesses and workers that continue to help keep our town alive.

Accessibility should be a priority, not just something you acknowledge and never take action to improve on. It isn't something that just benefits individuals with physical disabilities, it's a factor that helps assist elderly residents, parents with strollers, and even just injured citizens. Towns much like ours were built decades ago when disabilities were rarely taken into account. Steep curbs, narrow entrance ways to town buildings, and lack of ramps make everyday life challenging for mobility impaired individuals. Certain accommodations must be met in order to help make our town easier to navigate and become more welcoming to everyone.

Our town could benefit tremendously by taking steps towards becoming more diverse and inclusive. People in our community are very foreign to other cultures and ways of life. Promoting diversity can introduce new perspectives, foods, and ideas that help shine light on the other cultures our town isn't familiar with. Encouraging the people within our area to welcome these ways of life will in turn create an overall more together community.

Improving our town doesn't mean we have to change it, it means helping it grow and flourish. By taking small steps to provide a welcoming and accessible town, we can bring new life to our streets and create a place that ensures everyone can fully participate in community life while also creating a place where everyone feels they belong. Through these minor improvements, our small town can preserve its charm while building a strong future for generations to come.



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## Region 2 Winner

# Hailey Coleman

Martinsville Middle School – City of Martinsville  
Teacher: Robin Fletcher

IF I WERE MAYOR, I would help people with mental health problems. Mental health is commonly overlooked but it is a serious problem. Nearly one billion people worldwide struggle with mental health, but it's still not taken seriously.

Most mental health problems start at the age of fourteen. As a teenager, I have faced my own mental health problems. I was desperate to communicate about my agony but had no one to lean on. Virginia has over 750,000 people that struggle with mental health issues but currently only has nine mental health institutions. This can be resolved by adding more mental health institutions in Virginia.

When I was struggling with my mental health, I felt like I was drowning. I avoided doing my assignments at school and my grades were slipping. I was so unmotivated that I couldn't even get out of bed. And I was lashing out at my family due to problems they had nothing to do with. I felt like there was a void in my life, something that could never be filled. But the worst part was, no one had noticed, not a family member, not my friends. I had to decide: Do I want to be sad forever, or do I want to do something about it?

I lost my brother to suicide; it shaped my whole life. When you feel like nobody cares about you, trust me, they do. I was missing a piece of my puzzle. But instead of being sad, I smiled because even though he's gone, he's at rest. There are so many reasons to live, you have a future that Jesus is shaping, he purposely intends to hurt you so you can learn and grow from your mistakes. Because after I went through a battle, I got my spark back, so when you think it's over, it's really not.

Mental health should start to get more attention. Because in the blink of an eye someone you loved so dearly can be gone in an instant. Mental health can be invisible, and there's so many different types of struggles, rather than just depression. Some different types of mental health are anxiety, eating disorders, depression, bipolar, substance abuse, and others. So, when you get home hug your loved ones, tell them how much you love and appreciate them, because it can save a life.

*"I've been down for oh so long, seemed like my soul was dead and gone, but its alright, I'm back in the fight."* – from "Cannock Chase" by Labi Siffre.



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## Region 3 Winner

# Kinley Carter

Lylburn Downing Middle School – City of Lexington  
Teacher: Spender Golladay

THERE ARE MORE than 40 hotels and inns in Lexington, but there is only one hospital, Carilion Rockbridge Community Hospital, which has 25 beds. Building a large hospital in Lexington would significantly improve the quality of life and safety for its residents.

Imagine you or a loved one needing medical attention. Would you want to drive an hour away to go to an overcrowded hospital and risk them not surviving? The distance to the hospital could create unnecessary risks, hardships, and delays, especially in urgent situations.

Sure, we have urgent care clinics and doctors, but none of those places have the same equipment as larger hospitals. Think about this: a larger hospital is a good use of money, and it benefits everyone.

Adding a hospital in Lexington can ensure faster access to emergency care in times of need. In medical emergencies such as strokes, heart attacks, or other serious injuries, every second counts. Having someone or an ambulance drive you to the nearest hospital can be risky, even if it's only a few minutes away. In some cases, injuries could be fatal if medical service isn't provided right away, and long travel times have a huge impact on patients. If there is a larger hospital in Lexington, not only will it increase survival rates, but it could also improve recovery outcomes. Immediate access to care can be life-saving.

A hospital in Lexington, VA, would also provide better access to basic healthcare. Many people, specifically the elderly, might have trouble trying to go to routine check-ups or seek treatment for illness if care isn't close. Minor conditions could potentially worsen if the individual has a hard time getting to healthcare facilities. Local resident Lisa Carter states that it is especially hard for pregnant women since there is no birth centre or NICU in Lexington, VA. To have their baby, they would have to travel to Roanoke, Staunton, or even the UVA Hospital. With the help of a larger hospital, mothers and newborns receiving consistent medical attention can be quick and efficient, which would promote community health and reduce long-term healthcare costs.

Not only could adding a hospital help people receive medical attention, but it could also open up more job opportunities. Doctors, nurses, and other positions would be available, leaving a positive effect on the local economy by attracting professionals to Lexington. As a result, encouraging further development, such as clinics, pharmacies, and other related services, would increase employment.

Undoubtedly, adding a hospital in Lexington would bring many benefits to the community. It would provide faster emergency care, improve access to healthcare, and boost the local economy. It would also enhance the safety and well-being of residents. Clearly, investing in a local hospital is a necessary step toward a healthier and more secure future.



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## Region 4 Winner

# Elijah Zug

Appomattox Middle School – Town of Appomattox  
Teacher: Danielle Ulmer

*“Of all the forms of inequality, injustice in health is the most shocking and the most inhumane.”*

- Martin Luther King Jr.

ONE OF THE LARGEST issues in our community is the lack of health care. Appomattox has about 1,700 emergency calls each year, but without an urgent care facility in town the chance of survival decreases. Currently our closest options for urgent care are Farmville or Lynchburg. When a medical emergency occurs, either of these is a long way to travel to get assistance. As mayor of Appomattox, I would focus on solving this issue of health care and I have several solutions.

My first idea is to use some of the state aid funding for health, which amounts to 22 million dollars, to purchase one of several abandoned buildings in downtown Appomattox. I would look at the vacant Wilbuns and Gordmans buildings. One of these buildings would be converted into an urgent care facility which would also contribute to the rejuvenation of downtown. I would also start a capital campaign to raise funds to build a new facility and hire staff to work at the medical center.

Another option would be to contact the Lynchburg and Farmville urgent care facilities to see if they could alternate staff and provide medical manpower to one of our current doctor offices. We would then have the staff available to provide after-hours medical care.

However, my focus would be on renovating one of the current vacant buildings using state funded money. These available buildings are in great locations and are currently an eyesore. It would be advantageous to renovate one of them into an urgent care facility to provide local after-hours care to Appomattox citizens, while rejuvenating the downtown area. This proposal would add jobs to our community in the areas of construction, medical, administration, and maintenance. This solution – which would be the most effective in cost, resources, and funding – also avoids a lengthy capital campaign which can last 3 years on average. Plus, this proposal does not require any outside coordination with other medical facilities which most likely will become complicated.

Having more medical services available to the citizens of Appomattox would have a huge impact on the residents' quality of life. Currently they must travel at least 30 minutes to acquire after-hours medical care. With more medical aid in the town, we could lessen the impact of seasonal illnesses and reduce the loss of attendance at work and school. With this fully implemented it would help commence the restoration of Appomattox County. This would increase the well-being and economic impact for the citizens. Adequate health care should be available to everyone; it is a fundamental human right.



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## Region 5 Winner

# Willa Thom

Mary Ellen Henderson Middle School – City of Falls Church  
Teacher: Jeff Buck

IF I WERE A MAYOR, my primary focus would be keeping the pedestrians in my city safe. In many cities, especially in Falls Church, there are lots of local attractions and things to do. A unique feature of Falls Church is its amazing walkability, and walking is a primary mode of transportation for lots of residents – especially its youth population.

Walking is a wonderful part of our little city, but it could be improved by implementing features to keep walkers safe. According to the U.S. Department of Transportation, “More than 6,200 pedestrian fatalities and 75,000 pedestrian injuries [occur] in roadway crashes annually.” With this statistic in mind, it is important to make sure Falls Church has adequate safety measures to keep people protected when getting around.

An adult I talked to about this problem said that it would be beneficial to have more road signage, for example, more speed limit, stop, and yield signs. The main benefit of adding these safety measures would be to educate drivers on the traffic laws in an area and make speed limits and safety measures clearer. Although this suggestion would be helpful in theory, in practice it could lead to what the National Institution of Health calls “information overload.” This can cause drivers to not pay as much attention to the road and may increase the number of pedestrian accidents.

When doing my own research into what would be most beneficial for pedestrian safety, I learned about a small thing that helps road safety immensely: sidewalks. Walking on sidewalks is a vast improvement from walking on the road, and can help disabled people, elderly people, and people who just need a space to walk. The statistics shocked me, with sidewalks able to prevent up to 88% of car-pedestrian accidents according to the Department of Transportation.

More sidewalks would improve safety and surely improve resident mobility. The only drawback to this idea is that it would take time to install the sidewalks. Overall, it would take a few weeks to a month to put sidewalks in high walking areas. However, this is not a long time, especially considering how long the sidewalks will last, and how many people they will help.

In conclusion, if I were a mayor I would add sidewalks to my city to improve walkability as well as increase safety by keeping walkers off the road and add foot traffic to businesses.





## Region 7 Winner

# Alexis Hargrove

Edward W. Wyatt Middle School – City of Emporia  
Teacher: Sutania McBean

IMAGINE NOT KNOWING if you can afford to stay in your house or apartment. Many families in Emporia face this problem every day. Everyone deserves a safe, affordable place to call home. If I were mayor of Emporia, my top priority would be increasing affordable housing. A strong Emporia begins with making sure every family has a safe place they can afford. Housing is important because people need a stable home to feel secure and improve their lives.

City Manager William Johnson III says that “Affordable housing remains a significant need in our community. As the City of Emporia continues to grow and develop, expanding housing options will help us attract new residents while ensuring those who already live and work here have access to safe, quality, and energy-efficient housing they can afford.”

This shows that affordable housing matters not just for families, but for the future of the whole city.

Census.gov states that over 50% of residents in Emporia rent their homes, which is higher than the national average. I talked to several renters about how important affordable housing is in the city. They said it’s a big need because waiting lists are long, and families often struggle to find a good place to live. Because of this, some end up in homes that are too expensive or not in good condition.

Renters are also more affected when prices go up. If rent becomes too expensive, families may have to move, which can interrupt children’s education and make it harder to stay connected to their community. Owning a home helps people save money and create a better future for themselves.

The median household income in Emporia is about \$51,899 based on 2020–2024 U.S. Census Bureau data. Even though housing prices may be lower than in other places, many people still struggle because they do not earn enough. This means families may spend too much of their income on housing and not have enough left for needs like food, healthcare, or transportation.

If I were mayor, my plan would focus on four ideas: building more affordable homes, fixing older homes, helping more people become homeowners, and improving empty properties. Building more homes would give families more options. Fixing older homes would make sure they are safe. Helping people buy homes would allow them to build wealth. Improving empty properties would make neighborhoods look better and safer.

The result would be stronger neighborhoods, more growth, and a better quality of life. When people have stable housing, they can focus on other needs. Overall, affordable housing helps people feel secure and gives them a better chance to reach their goals.



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## Region 8 Winner

# Finley O'Shell

Isle of Wright Academy - Town of Windsor  
Teacher: Amanda Keith

IF I WERE MAYOR of Windsor, I would focus on the wellness, happiness, and safety of my community. There are numerous ways I could do this, but the most effective by far would be to stop problems at their root. Barriers to wellness, happiness, and safety stem from systemic issues, typically financial or economic stress. Despite my town's moderate income, we face a higher rate of poverty compared to the average town in Virginia. While governments can't hand out money, they can combat indigence at its source.

I spoke to my sister, who is currently a resident of Windsor and an undergraduate in college. She explained that even with parental support, she struggles to prepare for everyday life as an adult. This lack of preparation predisposes young people like her to financial stress.

"I think it can be easy to fall behind if you're not looking into or are unaware of certain aspects of adulthood," she conveyed. "I think classes or resources devoted to introducing these topics in school can help teach children about basic life responsibilities."

I agree with this idea as a solution. Not only would life skills classes benefit our community, but also the individuals taking them. In a study by Education Week, over 70% of graduates felt unprepared for life after high school. On top of the mental strain, this neglect can and will cause more trouble. With mandatory life skills courses, we can teach students how to avoid financial stressors.

While life skills classes are a strong start, there are also other ways to increase my town's welfare. Fortunately, Windsor's crime rate is lower than the national average, but crime is not our biggest threat to safety and happiness; the environment is. Our community faces threats from contamination, pollution, and natural disasters. By partnering with the Virginia Department of Health and Department of Environmental Quality, I would work to eliminate all pollutants in our food and water. Additionally, I would ensure safe conditions during hurricane season through repairs and construction. And because flooding is the biggest natural hazard in Windsor, I would expand the budget for structural solutions such as drainage, green infrastructure, and other water management practices.

My plan for Windsor is demanding but useful. With educated youth, stronger buildings, and safer environments, our community can flourish. As mayor of Windsor, I would guarantee a safe and sound community for citizens and visitors alike.



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