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Virginia Municipal League announces winners of 2026 "If I Were Mayor" state essay contest

The Virginia Municipal League (VML) announced today the statewide winner and seven regional winners of the league's "If I Were Mayor" Essay Contest for 7th and 8th graders. As in years past, the students were asked to write a short essay in which they identified an issue in their locality, talked to others about possible solutions, and then presented the solution that they believe will best address the issue.

The 2026 winners are:

- Statewide winner: **Serene Colden** of Lindsay Middle School in the City of Hampton
- Region 1: **Kenzley Frye** of Northwood Middle School in the Town of Saltville
- Region 2: **Hailey Coleman** of Martinsville Middle School in the City of Martinsville
- Region 3: **Kinley Carter** of Lylburn Downing Middle School in the City of Lexington
- Region 4: **Elijah Zug** of Appomattox Middle School in the Town of Appomattox
- Region 5: **Willa Thom** of Mary Ellen Henderson Middle School in the City of Falls Church
- Region 7: **Alexis Hargrove** of Edward W. Wyatt Middle School in the City of Emporia
- Region 8: **Finley O'Shell** of Isle of Wight Academy in the Town of Windsor

**VML did not receive entries from Region 6 this year.*

[Read the winning essays here >](#)

Of this year's winners, VML Executive Director Michelle Gowdy said: "Although they wrote from personal experience and community awareness, this year's winners were focused on issues like mental health, affordable housing, and access to medical care (just to name a few) that concern Virginians of all ages across the Commonwealth. My heartfelt congratulations to the students who won and thanks to everyone who participated."

Of statewide winner Serene Colden, VML President and Mayor of the Town of Amherst Dwayne Tuggle noted: "She addresses an issue that affects many localities throughout the country. Serene's approach to the problem



looks at not just how to solve the problem, but how to engage and inform citizens while doing it. Great job, Mayor! Congratulations Selena and to all this year's winners!"

In addition to a certificate, each regional winner will receive a gift card for \$150. The statewide winner will receive a plaque and a gift card for \$250. Plans for presentation of the plaques and gift cards are forthcoming.

All winning essays will be featured in the May/June issue of VML's magazine *Virginia Town & City*

About VML's "If I Were Mayor" Essay Contest

The annual "If I were Mayor Contest" invites 7th and 8th graders from throughout Virginia to submit essays describing what they would do if they were mayor of their hometown. The essay contest is a key component of VML's civic education programming, which seeks to teach school children and adults how local government works and how they can become involved in making their communities better places to live, work and play.

About VML

The Virginia Municipal League is a statewide, nonprofit, nonpartisan association of local governments established in 1905 to improve and assist local governments through legislative advocacy, research, education, and other services. For more information visit www.vml.org.