

Councilmember Questions for RPS – Thu, 4/17/2025

Operating Budget Questions

1. The budget summary on page 21 of the RPS budget (attached here) identifies \$8,641,500 for the 3% raise in Collective Bargaining, however I am unable to confirm this amount in the budget detail within the document. The budget detail for instructional classroom staff only shows a net increase of \$5,562,101 which falls short of the \$8.6M. Moreso, the combined total for elementary and secondary instructional classroom staff who make up the majority of licensed personnel, accounts for less than \$500k. The budget detail shows a net decrease in spending for secondary classroom instruction by \$42,185 and a modest increase of \$529,538 for elementary teachers (which appears driven by additional headcount). Most of the \$5.5M appears to be primarily reflected in academic office classroom staff where there is an additional 67 FTEs. I do not see the \$8.6M identified for raises.

It appears Council is comparing the 3% increase for licensed personnel on page 21, and the line on p. 28 that refers to the “instructional class.” Our licensed personnel unit includes all staff members on the teacher salary scale, which includes counselors, social workers, psychologists, literacy coaches, and more — in addition to classroom teachers. The number on p. 21 includes all of those staff members; the single line on p. 28 does not (it’s just classroom teachers). The \$8.6M increase is inclusive of benefits.

The \$5.5M referenced above is in the Academic Office, p. 80, because that is where we capture the addition of 55 multilingual learner teachers. State law requires that we add 55 ML teachers to meet new ratios (passed this legislative session) of the number of teachers to the number of English learner students.

2. The budget detail shows an increase of \$10,332,032 for health insurance, however this is not reflected in the summary of changes on pages 21-24. This is a substantial additional cost in the budget, and as such should be clearly identified in the summary of changes in this budget. It’s possible this has been bundled into the collective bargaining costs, which would make the \$16.5M cost much larger than the true costs.

The \$10.3 million increase (referenced on p. 28) is embedded in the benefits for *any* FTE throughout the budget. Healthcare isn’t pulled out from other benefits, so (as an example), when we say on p. 23 that the cost of maintaining eight family liaisons is \$743,503, that includes their salary and all their benefits (including health care). Those numbers are driven by the employees’ CBAs.

3. Finally, in the FY2025 and proposed FY2026 ordinance, the fund balance transfer is not clearly identified. This is important because Virginia code [§ 22.1-100. \(Unexpended school and educational funds; capital reserve fund permitted\)](#) mandates the use of one-time funds for one-time expenses. In next year’s proposed budget, the fund balance is 1,168,564. In the current year budget, there are \$11,213,816 in fund balance dollars. If the fund balance is not clearly identified in the city ordinance, the use of the funds may not align with the spirit of state law. Relying on prior year unspent funds for recurring expenses would put the district in a financial

position of needing turnover to stay in the black. Turnover and vacancies don't support academic achievement or social and emotional needs of our students.

The FY25 budget submitted to the City included use of \$11.2M in prior year fund balance, which we will spend this year. The school division isn't involved the creation of the ordinance, so cannot speak to its wording or creation.

4. I've heard that RPS may be losing up to 200 Head Start seats – is this correct? If so, why is this happening and what is the plan to meet this need without federal funding? How will this loss in funding impact RPS' ability to offer pre-school now and later?

RPS has not lost Head Start funding. RPS is up for the refunding of its Head Start application, at roughly the same level of support as in years past. However, maintaining the Head Start grant requires us to maintain a high average monthly enrollment (97 percent), as well as a high daily attendance (85 percent). While our RPS sites have been close to these metrics, our community partners in particular have struggled, putting the entire grant in jeopardy. Families and providers both name transportation and the per-pupil funding as challenges to hitting those enrollment and attendance metrics. Therefore, at the recommendation of the regional Office of Head Start, our Head Start Policy Council voted to recommend that we reduce the number of seats by 200. Moving forward, we plan to use those funds to increase the reimbursement rate for community providers, and work to provide families with free transportation. We believe that using funds in this way will maintain access to the program within the City of Richmond (because we might otherwise lose the grant), and also increase the attendance and success of the program. Our reapplication grant will be submitted on April 30.

All of this, of course, was prior to the Trump Administration threatening the existence of the entire program. We, like everyone else, hope that the program is preserved, as it provides tremendous benefits to Richmond children.

5. Can the Superintendent confirm that he will prioritize Collective Bargaining Agreements (CBAs) within the budget appropriated to RPS? Can RPS confirm that CBAs will be prioritized whether the Council adds funding on top of the Mayor's proposal or not?

The Superintendent's first priority is funding Collective Bargaining Agreements.

6. What is the plan if RPS loses federal funding it had planned to be available?

The school division receives over \$63.3M in federal funding, which includes our Title grants and School Nutrition Services' breakfast and lunch programs. The loss would be devastating to our school system.

7. How will the Governor's proposed changes to school rating systems impact RPS and access to state & federal funding?

The accountability system will not be finalized until the June 2025 State Board meeting, and still seems to be undergoing revisions, so we are answering with the most complete information we have at this time. With the new accountability system, we will not *lose* any funding, but there is an outstanding question of whether or not we will receive improvement funds as a result of the new designations.

The VDOE recently released updated information for the new school ratings system, noting that any school with a federal status of Comprehensive Support and Improvement, or CSI, will *automatically* be designated as Needs Intensive Support under the state's new system — regardless of the actual rating the school receives under that system. Thus, a school could earn enough points for a rating of On Track, but if it is federally designated as CSI, it will have its rating lowered to Needs Intensive Support. We're specifically concerned about this provision because it will increase the number of schools in RPS rated as Needs Intensive Support.

We're very concerned that this designation may not be accompanied with the necessary funding to support. Divisions across the Commonwealth are asking the VDOE if the state allocates more funding to schools labeled as underperforming to help them improve. The VDOE has yet to respond.

8. Dreams4RPS Actions 1.1 and 1.5 both mention increased stipends for teachers. What are the current stipend amounts for teachers in these areas?

Dreams4RPS action 1.1 is a new summer training initiative for elementary teachers, to enhance their practice with a Science of Reading curriculum and approach. It is a new initiative and there is a \$40 hourly stipend for teachers. Dreams4RPS action 1.5 is to continue extended tutoring after ALL-In grant funding expires. The state grant was provided for tutoring/learning acceleration targeting grades 3-8. The current hourly rate for extended teachers is \$30/hr. ALL-In was a yearlong initiative and the state funding for this initiative is ending.

9. Under graduation supports, please detail the "increase in graduation ceremony costs to cover enhanced security."

The increase is to cover the contractual amount required by the Siegel Center to host graduation and provide a safe and secure experience for graduates and their families.

10. Please detail the \$330,000 for "floating" staff used to ensure educators receive duty-free lunch. Which staff is this?

Pre-K floaters are additional aides needed to meet state and federal regulations for staffing ratios, as two adults must be in the room with students at all times. The floaters allow us to maintain our CBA commitments by relieving teachers for their duty-free lunch.

11. Under student mental health, what is the history of paying for these health partners? How were they funded before one-time ARPA dollars?

Prior to receiving federal stimulus funding, CIS was our only SEL partner. In FY20, they received \$383K. Since ARP funding, we have added Child Savers and Richmond Behavioral Health Authority. Last year, we moved those from our ARP budget to our operating budget.

12. How were 30 safety and security assistants (SSAs) paid for before current grant funding? What is the grant they're funded under now?

The 30 SSAs were funded using the Title IV Part A Stronger Connections grant (Bipartisan Safer Communities Act of 2022) awarded in SY2022-23. The position of SSA was created in SY2023-24 and have only been funded using this grant.

13. How were the 8 family liaisons paid for before current grant funding? What is the grant they're funded under now?

The 8 family liaisons were paid through ALL-In funding provided by the state to address student attendance and chronic absenteeism. ALL-In was a one-year initiative and is sunsetting; we're therefore moving the team members to our operating funds.

14. What is the current student information system? Is the \$455,900 for a new SIS an upgrade?

RPS currently utilizes ASPEN for our student information system and is upgrading to PowerSchool, a more robust program, which better serves our needs as a school division. RPS is one of only two school divisions in Virginia still using ASPEN, which is widely considered an outdated and difficult system to manage.

15. Please detail "transfers for various grants" under Priority 5 – Operations.

A recap of all transfers, including the Operations transfers, is on p. 127 in the School Board Approved budget document.

Capital Budget Questions

- 16. What is the construction schedule for RSP' plan to build new schools?**

RPS has applied for both the EPA's Environmental and Climate Justice Community Change Grant and the VDOE's School Construction Assistance Program Grant. The outcome of the award for these two grants greatly impacts the supplemental budgetary needs for upcoming projects and contributes to the order of building schedules.

The current status of each upcoming new school project is as follows:

- CTE School - Feasibility study to be conducted in summer 2025

- Woodville Elementary - Final project plans and specifications to be completed summer of 2025. The project will need to be solicited for bids via an IFB by the summer of 2025 (pending full project funding allocation) to keep on schedule for an opening of fall 2027.

A Master Plan is being developed to identify the next round of new schools and/or major renovations/additions for FY 2029 in anticipation of the next \$200 million CIP budget.