

Open Work Session
Board of Education Quarterly Work Session
January 18, 2022

Dr. Donna Hanlin, Superintendent; Michael Murray, Vice Chair of the Board; Liesel Ashby, Director of Planning and Construction; and Micah Stauffer, Chief Finance and Operations Officer, came before Council. Dr. Hanlin introduced Board members in the audience, Tonya Lewis and John Palmer, and said other Board members were unable to be with them. She said Mr. Malone is recovering and is doing better than he had been, but is unable to be with them today.

Capital Improvement Program

Mrs. Ashby said, on behalf of Superintendent Dr. Hanlin, Dr. Stauffer, and Board Chair Malone, they are here to discuss the Board's FY23 Capital Improvement Plan (CIP) and Budget. She said there are two integral components of the Board's CIP; Part 1 is the Educational Facilities Masterplan (EFMP), which is submitted and reviewed by County Planning and Zoning, and Part 2 is the CIP, which is submitted to the County Executive and County Council.

Mrs. Ashby explained, the EFMP studies the issues affecting school facilities in detail. She said data is gathered, analyzed, and used to make prioritized decisions regarding facility improvements. She said key components of the EFMP include special initiatives, projected enrollments, facility needs indexes, and facility needs.

Mrs. Ashby said last year they provided Council with a detailed breakdown of how the Board's facility assessments and subsequent data indicators are utilized to assist in prioritizing competing facility needs, and they also noted where capital investments assisted in making significant improvements to the facility condition index at several schools. Referring to her slide, she said the facilities need index for major capital improvement shown on the left is comprised of three weighted categories – facility quality index (FQI), utilization, and fulltime equivalent enrollment. She said FQI is weighted the highest as it combines the facility condition index and the program index. She said the facilities need index for systemics is comprised of two weighted categories shown on the right – facility condition index (FCI) and utilization. She said FCI is weighted the highest as it measures the key systemic components of each school. She said both are prioritized to ensure funds are directed towards schools where the highest number of students can be impacted. She said the major capital improvement list correlates to the systemic list with many of the same projects identified as top priorities.

Mrs. Ashby said Part 2 of the CIP is the capital budget, and they will quickly look at what was approved in FY2022, discuss recent developments with the Interagency Commission on School Construction, highlight the top FY2023 project priorities, and recap projects accomplished within the past year.

Mrs. Ashby said last year for FY2022 approvals it included final construction funding by the IAC and the County for the replacement of Beaver Run, initial construction funding by the County for the Mandela renovation and addition project, and full funding by the County for the Westside Intermediate roof replacement. She said, for reference, there were two commissions established back in 2016 that have majorly changed or influenced how schools are funded, and in some situations can be connected. She said the Kirwan Commission was tasked with school performance and funding formulas for instruction, which ultimately resulted in the Blueprint for Maryland, but Dr. Stauffer is the expert on that.

Ms. Ashby said the Knott Commission was tasked with several school construction related items, which ultimately resulted in Built to Learn (BTL) and the IAC becoming a completely independent agency. She said, in addition to BTL, there was the formation of an assessment and funding workgroup, which met over the past few months, and was unable to complete their tasks. She said, also, during 2021, the IAC conducted their own set of school facility assessments through consulting services, which was supposed to assist the funding workgroup in making recommendations, and ultimately the group recommended the IAC not use the data to determine funding decisions until 2026 due to inconsistencies in the initial data presented by the IAC.

Mrs. Ashby said, although the funding workgroup was unable to complete their work, the IAC continues to adjust their approach to funding recommendations. She said gone are the days of projects being funded based on individual merit; they are working towards a flat funding strategy. She explained, during the FY2022 CIP process, which was just this past spring 2021, they were utilizing a ten-year average approach. She said they have now shifted to what they call a target allocation, which involves several poorly defined variables.

Mrs. Ashby said they updated what they provided to Council last year to show the shift from the ten-year average to a target allocation. She said, what is shown as actual on the left reflects the past two funding allocation years and the current proposed IAC allocation at 90 percent of the total capital budget defined by the Governor at \$208 million dollars. She said it is important to note that the IAC approves funding in rounds, specifically 75 percent, which occurs in December, 90 percent approximately in March, and 100 percent in May or June. She said the projected IAC funding for FY2023 is approximately \$10 million; however, they are also looking into freezing the current and next two fiscal capital funding allocations, which could range for Wicomico from \$6.8 to \$8.3 million.

Mrs. Ashby said her next slide is from a recent presentation by the IAC. She said the before is a list of current funding programs including the traditional CIP, which Wicomico relies on heavily at a 100 percent eligible cost share formula. She said Wicomico's SSGP allocation is stagnant at \$200,000, and Wicomico's Aging School Program (ASP) allocation remains unchanged at \$106,000. She explained, the Enrollment Growth Relocatable Classrooms (EGRC) only applies to LEAs with significant enrollment growth combined with number of relocatable, but Wicomico does not meet that criteria. She said the IAC delayed allocation of the FY2021 Healthy Schools Facilities Funds (HSFF) and combined it with fiscal 2022, and that is a competitive funding source.

Mrs. Ashby said they will get into BTL in more detail in relation to the Mardela project. She said they want to establish a priority fund, which would be tied to the IACs facility assessment, which they pointed out earlier, and, in turn, the traditional CIP would shift to fund only systemic renovations and the ASP and SSGP funding would be absorbed by the proposed priority fund.

Mrs. Ashby said the Board's FY23 number one priority is Mardela Middle and High for both County and IAC construction funding. She said, after review and discussion with the Executive's Office, School Building Commission, senior leadership, and Board, BTL funds are required to ensure the completion of this project. She said the BTL program was officially live back in July; however, it took a while for the Maryland Stadium Authority (MSA) and the IAC to develop and sign a program MOU, but that is now complete. She said the MSA supplies BTL funds to eligible projects on a rolling basis, and their first bond sale was in November 2021. She said a BTL eligible project requires an executed MOU between the

Stadium Authority, the BOE, and the County Government, and they are in receipt of a draft project MOU and will be initiating discussions with the School Building Commission soon.

Mrs. Ashby said, for those who are unfamiliar with the School Building Commission, it is specific to Wicomico and was established by County Government to make recommendations regarding the planning, design and construction projects funded through the County's Capital Program. She said its members include a representative from Council, County Executive, School Superintendent, BOE, and others who typically have a background in facilities and/or design and construction.

Mrs. Ashby said, in September when they met with the Executive and Finance staff to discuss the FY23 CIP, it was determined that the Mardela project would need BTL unless the County would be able to forward fund a majority of the project. She said, in October to November there were various meetings with the Executive and Finance staff, senior leadership team with Wicomico County Public Schools, the School Building Commission, the Department of General Services, the Interagency Commission on School Construction, and the Maryland Stadium Authority. She reported, during that timeframe, the IAC approved Mardela for BTL. She said the Executive staff, SBC Board and senior leadership team requested that Wicomico retain project management control of the project. She said, during December, the Stadium Authority authorized Wicomico to retain project management control, which put them in a situation where the architecture/engineering/construction management team had to develop a revised project strategy, and with an early bid package and potential early construction start, the SBC also approved. She said they have since received the draft MOU as noted, and the Stadium Authority anticipates a first quarter FY22 bond sale, which will be approximately in April. She said, as noted, the IAC is shifting towards a flat funding approval, which will result in a reduction of capital funding for use by Wicomico. She said it is important to the very stakeholders noted that Wicomico retain local control of construction, but, ultimately, the Stadium Authority wants to run all projects similar to what they did with Baltimore. She said, as Council is likely already aware, the construction market is extremely volatile right now and is likely to be exacerbated by inflation; however, BTL funds will be available by April.

Mrs. Ashby said, for a quick reminder on how BTL came about and how funds are being distributed now, a majority of the funds are going to the big six counties, and Wicomico is lumped together with 16 other LEAs, although that group represents 25 percent of the State's student enrollment. She said BTL was originally proposed at a total of \$2.2 billion; however, that has been reduced to \$1.8 billion pending determination of the final amount of available debt service payments needed to support the program. She said they are unable to update the distribution, as they have not published anything, but they know Wicomico is eligible for \$13.8 million as determined by the IAC. She said, for reference purposes, this slide shows where Wicomico falls in relation to Montgomery County and Carroll County as far as BTL allocations are concerned.

Mrs. Ashby said Mardela construction documents are being finalized, there are FY23 funding requests into both the County and the IAC, BTL funds are now available, and once an MOU can be executed in conjunction with the Stadium Authority, BOE, and County Government, they can be distributed. She said, in addition, Wicomico retains local control and can potentially get an earlier construction start to get ahead of inflation. She said the Stadium Authority has requested that the business terms of the MOU be finalized first, which they will take back to the School Building Commission and the Stadium Authority, and will then bring it back to the Executive and Council for further review.

Mrs. Ashby said, as far as the remaining priorities in the Board's FY23 capital budget, according to their roof asset management plan, which is a component of the masterplan, next up for replacement are Wicomico High and Parkside for roofs. She said they are in the process of finalizing a feasibility study with senior leadership regarding Fruitland Primary as it is the next school on the Major Capital Facility Needs Index that they showed Council previously; however, they have concerns regarding Wicomico's ability to execute major capital school projects due to the shifting funding strategies with the IAC, which is why BTL is so important to the Mardela project. She reported, since the CIP was submitted, MSDE approved elementary and secondary school emergency relief (ESSER) funds for project priorities numbers five through eight. She said eligibility established by MSDE aims at reducing the risk of virus transmission. She said the ESSER II Salisbury Middle School gym HVAC project was completed this past summer. She explained, the projects highlighted in yellow are being funded through ESSER and are no longer needed as a request to local government.

Mrs. Ashby said her next slide shows some highlights of other projects completed over the course of the last funding cycle. She said they greatly appreciate the County stepping up and basically funding the entire Westside Intermediate roof project. She explained, as they are aware, it took over three years of requests to both State and local to be able to get those funds together, and that project was completed. She said other projects include fire alarm upgrades at Fruitland Intermediate and Glen Avenue, which are being conducted in multiple phases, and thankfully the third and final phase will be completed through the ESSER funds. She said, at Pinehurst Elementary there was a partial roof replacement, east wing restroom renovations, as well as an elevator upgrade. She said they already made note of the Salisbury Middle project, and the bleacher and press box replacement is complete at County Stadium.

Mr. Dodd said he has a question about the fire alarm upgrade. He then asked what was needed because he knows the testing and inspections are supposed to be done periodically. He further asked if a new system was put in, to which Mrs. Ashby responded, she believes they gutted most of the wiring and devices throughout the building. Mr. Dodd said he knows that is a quality of life issue.

Mrs. Ashby reported, Beaver Run is on schedule to welcome the administration team in June, and, in turn, students in September. She clarified, there will be some interim site work phases throughout the fall with priority given to establishing the new bus loop before the start of the school year. She explained, Beaver Run is a campus style school, so they are not sure if they will be able to complete all demolition of existing buildings; however, they are prioritizing the bus loop for ease of access for students when they return in the fall. She said, if they get further ahead, that will be great, and if not, they will have some interim phases, but everything will be complete by the new year.

Mr. Dodd asked what was done to alleviate a lot of the flooding they were seeing at Beaver Run on the land surrounding it, to which Mrs. Ashby responded, unfortunately that site is downstream from a lot of other properties, so they worked with their civil engineer and basically sized everything to be able to hold the water that is there because there is also a downstream issue with the County system across the street. She said, whatever makes its way to the site should be able to be held and then slowly distributed so that does not occur anymore. Mr. Dodd asked if there is a good chance they will not see that flooding again, to which Mrs. Ashby responded, if they have not seen it during these last couple of rains, she would say they are okay. Mr. Dodd said it was significant. Mrs. Ashby said their iffy stage was about eight months ago, and they made it through with temporary measures on the site, so with the permanent measures it should be good.

Mr. Holloway asked if they are going to have a ribbon cutting or grand opening at some point, to which Dr. Hanlin responded, they were talking about that, but there is no firm date yet. She said they want to get students in at the beginning of the year.

Mr. Cannon asked if they anticipate any cost overruns based on inflation or delays based on supply shortages? Mrs. Ashby asked Mr. Cannon to specify which project, to which Mr. Cannon responded, he is thinking ahead towards Mardela. Mrs. Ashby said the School Building Commission does a good job of keeping pace with that type of thing. She said the project budget is overall \$72.1 million with everything, and of that around 11.5 percent is what she would say is protection or hedge against inflation. She said it is either in a contingency, whether it be a design contingency, an owner's contingency, or a construction manager's contingency. She said, in addition, the SBC will be reviewing alternates by the end of this month, which is when they make hard decisions about what is base bid versus what could either be added later or a better life cycle choice in the alternates. She said that level of protection is not even acknowledged in that budget yet, and they have not cut into the FFE portion of it yet. She said it will be a long 18 months probably once they get all of the trade contracts bid to see where it will play out; however, they have some mechanisms in place to protect the budget at this point in time.

Mr. McCain asked how long they will hold bids, or is that dictated by the State because he knows in today's world that is getting shorter and shorter. Mrs. Ashby responded, they put typically a minimum of 60 days, and the reason behind that is it has to go to the School Building Commission, the Board, and the State, and those meetings are not always conducive to construction schedules. She said, as all the business people are aware, there are subcontractors that may not necessarily be able to control that, and they are seeing things as one amount but being told it could be upwards of another amount. She said the construction management team does a good job of vetting all of those when they are looking at the individual trade packages to ensure they are partnering with the correct people to be able to deliver the material and the labor in time.

Mrs. Acle said she was wondering if Mardela qualifies for any of the USDA federal funding for school buildings, to which Mrs. Ashby responded, not that she is aware of.

Mrs. Acle asked, for the House Bill that is proposed for the IAC to cover all systemic renovation projects regardless of cost, is that going to help in the process for the new roof of Parkside, to which Mrs. Ashby responded, potentially. She said, when she showed them the before and after, they are going to rely on the priority fund, which the last number that was announced she wants to say was under \$100 million. She said, if they are looking at the Mardela project at \$72.1 million, \$100 million or under across the State is not going to go very far through that priority fund. She said they want to take the data they gathered through their facility assessments, so basically Wicomico will only be left with systemic funded projects. She said she thinks that Bill is trying to make it easier to keep systemic projects eligible because the IAC used to previously have a calculation where if they were spending over a certain threshold on systemics versus what it would cost to either majorly renovate or replace the school, they would have deemed that systemic ineligible, so it is trying to provide more flexibility between the IAC and the LEAs that they are able to justify their systemics.

Mr. Hastings asked, for the ESSER projects, he is assuming that is COVID related with HVAC, to which Mrs. Ashby responded, correct. Mr. Hastings asked if that is a savings the County will realize, to which Mrs. Ashby responded, yes, a significant savings. She explained, they took four projects off the list because they are no longer needed because ESSER is offsetting that, and it is significant dollars. She said

they are over \$30 million between ESSER 2 and ESSER 3 for all of the projects, so the trouble is having the time and staff to manage and execute them under what are some challenging deadlines.

Enrollment Relief due to COVID Hardships

Mr. Cannon clarified, he believes what precipitated this topic was that some other Counties were asking the State based on COVID if they were planning to make any adjustments on Kirwan to account for that.

Dr. Hanlin clarified, they were not sure exactly what Council was looking for on this agenda item, but she thinks they were referring to letters they may have seen. She said she knows they saw one letter from the Eastern Shore Superintendents Consortium (ESMEC), and there was a very similar letter, but she did not see that in the materials Council forwarded to her, so she wants to make sure they have that letter. She said this is a letter that also went to the State Legislature cosigned by MACo, MABE, and PSSAM. She said both letters ask the State Legislature to hold local school systems harmless again this year in terms of enrollment because of a very challenging situation related to COVID. She said, while their enrollment has bounced back from 2020, it is still not back to the enrollment of 2019, so they have seen a little bit of bounce back, but still have a way to go. She clarified, that is based on September enrollment, and they have continued to see that grow through the year and anticipate, for example, the beginning of next year that they will see another nice bump. She said, as a County, that means that if the State decides to hold them harmless and they are able to use enrollment from 2019, MOE would be flat, so it would be the same for the County as last year, whereas being held harmless would allow them to receive millions of dollars from the State in addition to what they would receive if they were not held harmless. She clarified, if they were not held harmless and they did not receive those millions of dollars, they would probably be coming to the County to help them above maintenance of effort so they could fund salaries and other fixed costs, and that is her assumption why MACo signed onto this letter because it is actually a benefit to Counties to have the State help with funding again this year.

Mrs. Acle asked if that is the letter from Senator Carozza, to which Dr. Hanlin responded, she believes Senator Carozza responded to the letter from ESMEC, but she does not know anything about whether she responded to the letter signed off by MACo, PSSAM and MABE. Mrs. Acle asked if this is something the School Board has a position on, to which Mr. Murray responded, they certainly are aware of it and working with it, yes. Dr. Hanlin said, she does not want to speak for the School Board, but, obviously, to be held harmless and to receive millions of dollars more by the State is something the Board would support. Mr. Palmer said it is a big deal.

Kirwan Update

Dr. Stauffer said he can provide a brief update on where they are with Kirwan. He said there are so many acronyms currently, but Kirwan Commission, Kirwan Blueprint, Commission for Excellence in Education and Innovation, House Bill 1372, and the Blueprint for Maryland's Future are all the same exact thing.

Dr. Stauffer said they currently had four State level Blueprint Coordinator meetings to just go over the details of the Legislation itself and also to provide a background for all the coordinators across the State in terms of the five policy areas, which are early childhood education, high quality teachers and leaders, college and career readiness, necessary resources to help all students be successful, and accountability.

Dr. Stauffer said, in addition, the Accountability and Implementation Board (AIB), which is the Legislative Board in charge of the Blueprint areas for the State, have been meeting bimonthly since November. He

said they also have mostly been really involved at this point with staffing their office and just getting a foundation of knowledge for the Blueprint Legislation itself. He said the issue is that currently they are fast approaching some deadlines for the State and it looks like, through Legislative action at the State level, those timelines may be pushed back, but they have not been officially pushed back as of yet. He said, if they are not pushed back, the AIB has to publish a State implementation plan by February 15. He clarified, again, they have only been meeting bimonthly since November. He said then, at that point, MSDE has to take that State implementation plan and develop local criteria for the local implementation plans, which has to be done by April 1, and then from there each local school district has to develop their own local implementation plan and have that submitted to the State by June 15. He said, at this point, they are waiting to see exactly what their next steps are, but in the meantime, they are providing foundations of knowledge for their school system and Board of Education, and he has been speaking with the County Executive and speaking with all of the Council the last couple times as well.

Mrs. Acle said the letter from ESMEC is requesting a modified timeline to file their Blueprint. She then asked if that is addressing that to push that back, to which Dr. Stauffer responded, yes, and that would be in line with what really needs to happen at this point in time as the Accountability and Implementation Board really has not been underway long enough to do something of that magnitude.

ARPA Funding

Mr. Cannon said the Council would like to get an idea of what has been coming down because they get emails that talk about different funding sources available for education. He said, whether it is specific grants for broadband or for education in general, Council is just trying to get an idea basically of what has been made available and how they are benefiting from that.

Dr. Hanlin said Mrs. Ashby spoke to the ESSER funding, which were the first rounds of the federal funding, and Dr. Stauffer can give an update on the ARPA funding.

Dr. Stauffer said, as it relates to the school system, the American Rescue Plan Act funding (ARPA), what they term ESSER 3, which is the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief funds, are all the same thing as it relates to the school system. He reported, Wicomico County Public Schools received \$47 million in conjunction with the ARPA funds, or ESSER funds. He said all ESSER funds flow through MSDE, so they are accountable through them. He reported, Wicomico County Public Schools has committed all of the funds over the next two and a half years to date, and they have spent about 20 percent of those funds currently. He explained, the funding is eligible from March 13, 2019, so retroactive, all the way through September 30, 2024, so they have to be expended by that time. He said \$30 million, or 62 percent of the funds, are allocated for capital projects that directly impact air quality in schools, so those are the funds that Mrs. Ashby spoke about regarding ESSER 3. He said 20 percent of the overall funding had to be earmarked for learning loss in students due to the pandemic, and currently they are committed to about 22 percent of their overall funding for that purpose. He said, in addition, a little over 6 percent of the ARPA funds are proposed to go towards the refresh of technology. He explained, they have a lease through Dell and other companies when they lease laptops that every four to five years they get refreshed, so they are allocating some of the funds for that purpose. He added, also, obviously, PPE and cleaning supplies and equipment are included in those funds as well.

Dr. Stauffer said there are a number of stipulations and pretty specific requirements for eligible expenses under the ARPA grants. He explained, these requirements are all posted on their website for

the community to view along with their ESSER 3 or ARPA application they submitted to the State so the public can see exactly what they applied for. He said they also solicited feedback from all of their schools across the district as well as every department for WCPS, and also reached out to a number of community organizations for feedback regarding that application, which is a rolling application. He said it is still currently on their website, so they are still able to receive feedback and make changes as they need to between now and the next two and a half years when those funds have to be spent. He said it was a lot of work in a very short period of time from the time the application was distributed through MSDE, and that had to be turned around in just a matter of a few short weeks to be resubmitted back to MSDE. He concluded, that is currently where they are with ARPA.

Dr. Stauffer said he wanted to clarify that the ARPA funds are separate than the original CARES funding that they received not long after the pandemic started. He said those funds at this point in time have all been spent, and they initially went towards technology so they could go one-to-one with students and laptops, as well as PPE that was needed.

Mr. Cannon asked how they enhanced their infrastructure in the school system to allow technology because he is assuming that type of learning was completely new, and he would almost anticipate they had to create a new department to handle the workload. He then asked what exactly changed in the school system to make that feasible, to which Dr. Stauffer responded, he can talk about it generally, and then he can get the Council more information on that. He said obviously staffing was something that had to be looked at first, and he knows there were some positions that were added and also some areas that were restructured within their technology department. He said, in addition, the infrastructure was key, and they were fortunate that they had a pretty strong infrastructure system. He clarified, there were areas, obviously, that needed to be beefed up to handle the load of the additional laptops, but they were able to do that pretty quickly and turn that around pretty fast once they were able to get students back into the buildings, and they did prepare for that. Dr. Hanlin added, they expanded the use of Google Classroom, which is the platform students use, and they purchased a level of Zoom that would allow them to have more individuals in a virtual meeting at once. She said she will emphasize that they already had a really strong infrastructure in place that, with some shifting of staff, especially when they were deploying all the laptops and hotspots and reconfiguring all of them, was quite challenging initially, and then they beefed up the Help Desk quite a bit. Mr. Cannon asked if the laptops that went out stayed at those homes, to which Dr. Hanlin responded, they turned them back in over the summer to be reconfigured and then were redeployed to students.

Masking and Virtual Learning

Dr. Hanlin passed out a copy of the latest State Emergency Regulation. She said, prior to leaving for the Christmas Holiday, the State Board approved an updated emergency regulation on the use of masks in schools which allowed for what they call offramps allowing the school system or individual schools to be able to stop wearing masks. She said that went through the Legislative process and was approved within the last couple of weeks, and basically the language in there allows for the ability to stop wearing masks under certain conditions that have to do with transmission rate as well as vaccination rate.

Dr. Hanlin explained, the first offramp is, if 80 percent of the County is fully vaccinated as reported by the Maryland Department of Health, a County Board can lift the requirement by passing a motion at a public meeting, but she is sure they are all aware that they are around 51 percent as a community in terms of being fully vaccinated.

Dr. Hanlin said the next offramp is that the local superintendent can lift the face covering requirement for a school facility or facilities after a principal or designated school official verifies that 80 percent of a school staff and students have been fully vaccinated. She clarified, they keep track the best they can of the percentage of staff and students who are vaccinated, but, by law, they can ask, but they cannot require that information to be provided to them because of HIPPA.

Dr. Hanlin said the final offramp has to do with transmission in the community. She explained, the CDC has four levels of transmission - low, moderate, substantial and high, and Wicomico is in the high category. She said, in order to use the offramp they have to be in low or moderate for 14 consecutive days and then they have to keep track of that. She said, if they go back up to substantial or high for 14 consecutive days, they have to reimplement the masking mandate. She said, at this point, they are still masks on in their schools, but, obviously, they hope for better days.

Mrs. Acle asked if they received any of the N95 masks, to which Dr. Hanlin responded, yes. She said some have been ordered, but she thinks more often than not it is the type of mask Mr. Murray has on, but just today she was able to receive the KN95. Mrs. Acle asked if those will be provided to teachers and students, to which Dr. Stauffer responded, they currently have a significant supply of KN95 masks, so at this time they are giving those out as requested. He said they also are reordering additional supplies today as they have been made available. He clarified, at this time, if they are requested, they are able to provide those for staff, but they currently do not have any requirements in place that staff have to wear those types of masks.

Dr. Hanlin said, as far as virtual learning, at the last Board meeting and also in a parent message last week she communicated with staff and parents that they are fully committed to remaining open and the only way they would close as a full school system is if they were mandated to do so. She said, however, she cautioned their school communities that, if they find they have an abundance of spread in a school, and they see reports every day from nursing staff, they would work in conjunction with the Health Department and there is a possibility that a school may have to pivot to virtual learning on a temporary basis. She clarified, again, she is only cautioning because she wants parents, students, and teachers to be prepared in the event that would happen. She said, if she had to say which would be the reason they might have to pivot, of the two it would be because of a lack of staffing because of the number of staff who are ill. She said they are seeing more staff out now than ever based upon COVID and other illnesses, and, again, they keep track of that every day. She said she is hoping no one is going to have to pivot to virtual, but they just reminded students and staff to take their laptops and resources home every night in the event they have to temporarily close a school as they have seen around them.

Mr. Cannon asked if there are any distinctions being made as far as where they are setting the bar between the omicron variant as opposed to COVID because they all know that omicron is very contagious, but they also know it is not as severe. He said, when they say they may have to go to virtual, is that because they have high omicron numbers that are not necessarily as dangerous as COVID, to which Dr. Hanlin responded, she was just having this conversation about whether they know which variant someone has. She clarified, they do not have that information, so they do not know which variant people have. She then asked Ms. Miles to come to talk about this in a little more detail.

Ms. Kim Miles, Assistant Superintendent with Student and Family Services, came before Council. She said Dr. Hanlin is correct that they do not know and they do not get a differentiation in terms of positive

cases. She said, to this point, the CDC has not differentiated the school guidance with regard to delta or omicron, or whatever variant may be prevalent.

Mr. Cannon said he suspects there will not be any differentiation made, but he just thought he would ask, to which Ms. Miles responded, she does not anticipate any differentiation.

COVID-19 Testing

Ms. Miles said they conduct daily diagnostic testing for staff and/or students who present as a close contact to an identified positive case or a suspected positive, or those who present with symptoms. She said they are conducting the testing in their schools, and they also have staff at their central office who are conducting this as well from the time they open extended past the time the day ends. She said that is the diagnostic testing, the rapid tests that are used currently. She said they also have the testing as required by MPSSAA for winter athletics, and another group doing testing is a State approved entity that conducts that testing, which is not the rapid test, but the PCR.

Learning Loss Strategies

Dr. Hanlin said, unfortunately, Dr. Briggs is not able to be with them today, but she will talk in general terms about learning loss strategies. She said they clearly have learning loss from COVID as school systems across the country are experiencing students who have learning loss as a result of the disruption to learning. She said they are very diligent in the assessments both formal and informal that they give to students. She said they did that at the beginning of the year so teachers can use that assessment information to know where students are and where their gaps are, and they have been working with students in the regular classroom, in intervention services they receive, and tutoring services received both during the day and outside of school. She said they are in the midst of doing interim assessments to look at the growth students have made, and of course they will do that at the end of the year as well, and they will have summer learning programs as they typically do.

Financial Literacy

Dr. Hanlin said they are aware there is an individual in the community who has come and spoke with the Council about the need for increasing financial literacy in their schools. She said hopefully the Council is aware that they are required by COMAR to have financial literacy curriculum. She said there are about six or seven Counties in the State that have a graduation requirement for financial literacy, but Wicomico is one that did not determine that was the best way to go about. She clarified, she believes it was in 2008 when that decision was made, so it was awhile ago. She said, since this gentleman came forward with his concerns, Dr. Briggs has been working with his team to look at what they are currently doing or where they could beef it up, and whether or not a graduation requirement is in the best interest of students, and especially with how they work with Junior Achievement because they really work hand-in-hand with the schools on financial literacy initiatives across grade levels, not just in high school. She said that individual will be making a presentation to the Board in February.

Mr. Cannon asked, when they say graduation requirement, does that imply they would have to take one year or twelve years, to which Dr. Hanlin responded, a graduation requirement would typically mean a credit. Mr. Cannon said the push right now as far as financial literacy is some type of a curriculum for the full ten to twelve years, to which Dr. Hanlin responded, they already have that across grade levels. Mr. Cannon asked, in what sense do they have it now, to which Dr. Hanlin responded, they have it across

grade levels, and in some cases it is curriculum they are using with specific courses, but a lot of it is through their partnership with Junior Achievement. She explained, individuals and volunteers come into the classrooms and teach financial literacy curriculum. She said Mr. Malone does it and he often talks about the positive experience he has with that. Mr. McCain added that the Junior Achievement experience is going to expand when they get their new facility.

Mr. Cannon said, as far as this more recent push for financial literacy, he is trying to evaluate how those recommendations differ from what is now already being taught and if there is a need for enhancing the programs they already have. He clarified, they are already reviewing that themselves, to which Dr. Hanlin responded, they are, and it seems to her that the main strategy the citizen of Worcester County wants to see happen is a credit requirement. She said they will make a full presentation at the February Board meeting about what they do and about how they might enhance what they are already doing, and the Council is welcome to come to that.

Mr. Holloway asked if there is anything in there that teaches them how to make change, to which Dr. Hanlin responded, she thinks they get that in math class. Mr. Holloway said they are not getting it.

Ms. Tonya Lewis came to the podium and said she and Mr. John Palmer were talking, and they are on the same page with many things. She said, number one, they wanted to give a huge shout out to Mrs. Ashby and her group because it was not mentioned that her team is working ahead of schedule and under budget, so they are working really, really hard on that. She said Mrs. Ashby did not say it today because she does not like to toot her own horn, but she wants Council to be aware that she and her group are diligently working on meeting the timelines. She said it is a very stressful situation, and Mrs. Ashby's to-do list is long, her calendar is going off, and her timers are going off for her to have all of these things done on very stringent timeframes.

Mr. John Palmer came to the podium and said about a month ago they had two high school teams come before Council that were given proclamations for winning state championships. He said this is really a tremendous and good recruiting thing, not only for the schools, but for the Councilmembers to mention when they talk to other Counties to get people down here. He said the rings they talked about are kind of expensive, and he really does not know how these students are going to be able to afford all of the expenses, but Dr. Hanlin has come up with a way where they could possibly provide part of the money. He said he was just wondering if there is any way the County Finance Director could get together with the Board's Finance Director and perhaps work a little something out for these two teams and do a big presentation thing. He said he thinks it would really be good for the County. He said it might set a precedence, but if they are going to set a precedence, why not do it with the kids because that is what they are here for.

Mr. Palmer said, regarding infrastructure and virtual learning, he knows every few years they go for a contract with the IT companies and when they renew these contracts, he asks that they look at them a little more closely. He said some people who they might deal with may already have some services in place that could be used but because there are not enough people in that area and they cannot recoup their costs in four to five years, they will not hook up the lateral connections to those areas. He then asked if the Council could pay a little more attention to that detail, and perhaps their attorneys could write something legally in there that in order for them to get this contract, they might want to extend some of those lateral extensions out so that the school is not expending all that money. He said he thinks they put out over 400 hotspots just to reach a lot of the kids.

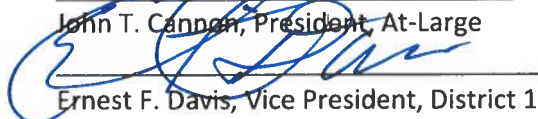
Mr. Palmer said they are all coming up for reelection, not only the School Board, but the County Council, and they are all coming up for election at the same time. He said, to him, that is not a very good way of doing things. He said he was looking around and sees that Cecil County has a staggered School Board, and they are similar to Wicomico in numbers. He said he was just wondering if there was a way that the attorneys can get together and come up with something about staggering these terms so that there would not be the possibility that they are going to come in with a whole new group of Board members, a new Superintendent, and a new Councilmembers and new County Executive because there is no telling what could happen. He said he thinks a little preparation might be good in those areas.

Mrs. Acle said she agrees with Mr. Palmer, and Cecil County actually has staggered terms for their County Councilmembers. Mr. Holloway said it would take a Charter change to do that. Mr. Hastings added, Cecil County is the only County in the State, by the way, with staggered elections.

There was no further discussion.



John T. Cannon, President, At-Large



Ernest F. Davis, Vice President, District 1

William R. McCain, At-Large



Nicole Acle, District 2



Larry Dodd, District 3

Josh Hastings, District 4



Joe Holloway, District 5



Laura Hurley, Council Administrator