



## Transforming Public Education & Strengthening Our Schools

### **Challenges**

#### *Role of the Mayor*

The next Mayor needs to communicate and collaborate with Richmond Public Schools and the School Board – in setting and achieving goals as well as in holding each other accountable.

It must be acknowledged that the Mayor of Richmond does not control school policy, and that many of the critical decisions impacting children are a responsibility of the School Board and Superintendent of Richmond Public Schools. But the Mayor can still play a critical role in championing and supporting the success of Richmond Public Schools—not only by funding the system, but by filling critical gaps in support services and addressing deep-seated community factors that impact school success.

#### *Poverty*

Poverty is the root cause of many of RPS’ problems. The level of poverty in a school, along with a child’s own socio-economic background, are by far the best predictors of student performance.<sup>1</sup> All too often in our city and across the country, concentrations of poverty overlap with racial segregation. It follows then that there must be a long term, thoughtful, and comprehensive plan set in motion to tackle concentrated, systemic poverty in the city, and the devastating effects it has on our children, particularly those in the African American community. This involves investments in employment and workforce development, early childhood education and affordable child care, affordable housing, and transportation—as well as in K-12 education.

#### *Principals and Teachers*

Once in the classroom, teacher quality is the factor that impacts a child’s educational outcomes the most. Principals, in turn, have a critical role to play in supporting positive teacher development and establishing a positive school climate so teachers can focus on teaching. In part due to the concentration of poverty and its impact on Richmond Public Schools, we struggle to attract, retain and professionally develop top tier educators. The Mayor should, in collaboration with RPS and community leaders, support a major effort to recruit and keep outstanding school leaders with both a background in urban education and a commitment to Richmond’s success.

---

<sup>1</sup> Geoffrey Borman and Maritza Dowling, “Schools and Inequality: A Multilevel Analysis of Coleman’s Equality of Educational Opportunity Data,” *Teachers College Record* 112 (2010): 1201–46.

In addition, we have a public relations problem – we need a leader inside of City Hall championing all of the good work that teachers and students are doing and encourage more of it. Until successes are celebrated and progress recognized, and the relentless narrative of school failure disrupted, teachers will continue to flee to Henrico and Chesterfield. Until we make talent recruitment and professional development an administration priority, we will keep seeing high rates of teacher turnover. And until we relieve the burden of child poverty from our educators by wrapping full support services around our children before they walk into the classroom as well as providing needed in-school support services, teachers will continue to be forced to double as social workers.

### *Facilities*

By allowing our children’s school buildings to physically crumble, we send the message to children from a young age that we do not value their education. Every child deserves a safe, clean, and quality 21st century learning environment. The taxpayers in Richmond deserve a Mayor who will partner with the Superintendent and the School Board to ensure that dollars are being spent efficiently in the operation, maintenance and building of school facilities.

### *Funding*

It is no secret that Richmond Public Schools has a funding problem, in part due to the flight of residents from the city to the surrounding counties when their children reach middle school age. The perception of inadequate public schools helps create the reality of a weakened tax base to support the schools. This is an unsustainable model, which essentially takes tax dollars away from the city – not to mention tax dollars and students away from the schools – whenever a family decides to leave. We also suffer from the poorly constructed Local Composite Index (LCI) funding formula, which rewards localities with significant enrollment growth and fails to factor in the poverty of the students. This means that counties like Henrico and Chesterfield are receiving more money from the state than Richmond, which has substantially more students living under the poverty line and a far greater need for state funding.<sup>2</sup> Beyond that, we are still recovering from cuts made in the immediate aftermath of the recession, which would account for an additional \$25.5 million<sup>3</sup> annually for Richmond schools. That would have been more than enough to account for the Superintendent’s request this past budget season for an additional \$18 million for schools.

### **Solutions**

As the first in his family to graduate high school or college, Levar is the education candidate and will be the education Mayor. For Levar, this is personal.

The Mayor of Richmond does not have executive control over the school district, but Levar believes that the Mayor can change the trajectory of our schools and the students within them by working to *improve the overall quality of the child’s life*. Critically, the Mayor can also prove

---

<sup>2</sup> Virginia Department of Education. “2016-2018 Composite Index of Local Ability-To-Pay – Revised December 2015.”

[http://www.doe.virginia.gov/school\\_finance/budget/compositeindex\\_local\\_abilitypay/2016-2018/composite\\_index.pdf](http://www.doe.virginia.gov/school_finance/budget/compositeindex_local_abilitypay/2016-2018/composite_index.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Aaron Williams, The Half Sheet . “Local School Funding Headaches Started with the State.” <http://thehalfsheet.org/post/142801946088/local-school-funding-headaches-started-with-the>

that education is the number one priority by securing additional funding from the state and federal governments, as well as taking advantage of every non profit, private sector and philanthropic option available to give children in Richmond the education they deserve.

### ***Collaborative and Constructive Leadership for Better Results***

#### **1. Creating a compact with City Council, School Board and Superintendent**

The Mayor's primary function as regards education is to provide RPS with the money to maintain the Superintendent's proposed budget. But what if we had a Mayor who was determined to partner with Richmond Public Schools and the School Board to agree upon a shared set of goals for improving public education, from raising graduation rates to reducing truancy rates and encouraging enrollment beyond elementary school? As Mayor, Levar will seek to create a compact between City Hall and the school district. This compact will outline the long and short term vision for RPS, from facility needs to principal recruitment to in-school support services to offset the impact of poverty. Goals will be tangible and aggressive, but achievable through collaboration within City government and in the wider community, lead by a strong Mayor with a track record of building relationships, coalitions, and a willingness to fight for every additional dollar needed to achieve results (see points 3 and 4). The Compact will be published to promote transparency and progress to goals will be available online to ensure accountability.

#### **2. Leadership style – accountable, hands-on, visible and transparent**

The compact will create a mutual accountability between City Hall and RPS, and provide transparency by being available to the public at large. To further promote the Mayor's relationship with the schools, Levar will invite the Superintendent (or his or her representative) to participate in all of his senior-level cabinet meetings, and designate a senior staff member to be a liaison to RPS. We need a leader who is not afraid to name public education as his number one priority, and understands the importance of the schools having representation across all departments of City Hall. The full performance review and audit that Levar has committed to conducting within the first 100 days of his administration will encourage a sense of transparency and a devotion to transforming the way city government operates. The performance review is something Levar will strongly encourage RPS to conduct internally, too, and he is prepared to assist RPS in finding the funding to do so if necessary. Levar has also pledged to be a *visible* Mayor – each year that he is in office, he will visit every public school in the city, and not just for staged photo opportunities, but to see how the schools are operating on an average day. This, in addition to his commitment to quarterly office hours in each council district, is intended to fully involve the community in the conversation about strengthening our schools – whether that means parents, teachers, students, principals or administrators, everyone should have a say.

#### **3. Advocating for our fair share of funding from the Commonwealth**

RPS is receiving less funding than it was 7 years ago and yet the need is as great as ever. Levar will leverage his relationships on both sides of the aisle in the General Assembly from his years as Secretary of the Commonwealth and a prominent figure in Virginia politics to get more than our fair share of funding from the Commonwealth. Building a coalition of Virginia mayors and members of county boards of supervisors to reform the LCI funding formula with one that provides urban and poor school districts with the funding they need and deserve. The earliest the General Assembly would consider such an adjustment would be 2018, but in the meantime,

Levar will work to get additional funding to help educate low-income students through an expansion of the At-Risk Add-On program, which provides additional funding to school districts for instructing low-income students.

#### **4. Champion for schools**

A critical challenge facing RPS (and the city as a whole) is that families have been fleeing to the surrounding counties to avoid sending their children to crumbling public schools – a trend that exacerbates the pattern of schools segregated by income and race. However, there are schools, principals, teachers, and students doing stellar work in spite of all the obstacles – but no one hears about them. Levar will celebrate every success of our city schools and students, while working to make them more common. As Mayor, Levar will be seen promoting the benefits of Richmond schools, and advocating tirelessly for parents of all backgrounds to send their children to RPS. But being a champion for schools is also about challenging the business community, nonprofit sector and the innovation community to come together to help strengthen RPS. This means including more significant support for RPS in every economic development deal the city makes with a private company, it means challenging companies to achieve goals like getting broadband internet into every school, it means challenging the employees at City Hall to aggressively pursue every possible grant dollar that Richmond can qualify for. It takes a village to raise a child, and it takes everyone with a stake in Richmond’s future to improve that child’s educational opportunities.

#### **5. Refining the plan for facilities**

Crumbling schools and subpar facilities are sending the message to our children that their education does not matter, and that therefore they do not matter. It also presents a real and immediate safety threat, as well as creating financial challenges for the City. While the decision to consolidate schools is in the hands of the School Board, if the issue were raised, Levar would only favor a facilities plan that is as cost-effective and undistruptive to students as possible, and that reflects a thoughtful, transparent and long range planning process. This means that the financial benefit of closing a school MUST be proven and substantial, and RPS must commit to reinvesting savings into instruction. It means that wherever possible, children being moved out of their current school building are moved into *new or better* quality buildings, and that the process is inclusive of the wider community with recommendations finalized at least six months before they would come into effect. As Mayor, Levar will seek to provide RPS with sufficient funding to meet the most urgent facility needs that directly impact the safety and viability of a child’s learning environment. Beyond that, Levar will provide political, financial and community support for the School Board so they can make the best decisions possible.

### ***Meeting Schools’ Specific Needs and Offsetting the Impact of Poverty***

#### **6. Teacher and principal attraction, retention, accountability and development**

Although the hiring and firing of educators is within RPS’ purview, not the Mayor’s, the Mayor can provide strategic and budgetary support for attracting the top tier talent our children deserve. As Mayor, Levar will use the compact writing process to encourage RPS to create a dedicated talent office – recruitment specialists to attract, hire, manage and professionally develop our teachers, principals and administrators. Instead of having a teacher shortage of 300 at the beginning of each school year, we should have healthy competition for every vacancy at RPS. Levar will champion and expand programs like the Richmond Teacher Residency Program at

VCU, celebrating the great work teachers are already doing, and providing additional cause for them to remain in RPS. Levar will engage the business community and private sector to explore teacher incentives like discounted housing for educators, comparable to programs in other districts that have struggled to retain teachers. Levar will also work alongside the Superintendent to address salary decompression, especially for teachers in the first decade of their careers. However, until we address the poverty problem, teachers will still be overburdened by having to double as social workers.

### **7. Access to in-school support services and quality after-school programs for all**

Education is part of a constellation of factors that influence a child’s well-being and likelihood to succeed. While educational instruction is not under the direct control of the Mayor, other influencing factors like social services, health services, and quality after-school programming can be placed within schools to allow easier access for children and parents. A critical goal of Levar’s first term as Mayor will be giving every child in Richmond access to quality, affordable and enriching after-school programs. This is not simply childcare – this is educational enhancement and a recreational outlet for kids, whether it is through sports, art or music. Levar believes these programs to be essential to keeping our children safe, relieving the burden on working parents and teachers, and enriching the overall educational experience. For many RPS students, an after-school program is also an opportunity to ensure a healthy evening meal as well. Successful examples include the Next Up programs at Boushall and Henderson Middle Schools, as well as the YMCA's program at Woodville Elementary, where the budget is fully funded by philanthropic dollars, which is vital because even a \$50 per month fee is a barrier to entry for many RPS students.

### **8. Early childhood engagement**

Getting children to Kindergarten prepared to learn can play a major role in offsetting the impact of poverty on learning and is one of the most important strategies for improving outcomes in RPS. Levar will prioritize early childhood education by working alongside the nonprofit and private sectors to ensure that every child in Richmond has access to support services from the day they are born. There are roughly 3,000 children born each year in Richmond<sup>4</sup>—Levar will direct City Hall to wrap every service possible around each one from birth until they graduate high school.

### **9. College and career readiness**

Richmond Public School students have an on-time graduation rate that is roughly 10% below the state average.<sup>5</sup> Students should be put on a path to success, whether that means going on to higher education or entering the workforce. Levar will champion career and vocational training in high schools and collaborate with RPS to make sure that every student not only graduates high school but graduates with a strong plan for the future and the skills to succeed in a 21<sup>st</sup> century economy.

---

<sup>4</sup> Virginia Department of Health. “Total Live Births by Place of Occurrence...”

<https://www.vdh.virginia.gov/HealthStats/documents/2010/pdfs/BirthsByRace14.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> Richmond Times-Dispatch. “Henrico and Richmond schools below state average for on-time graduation.” By Louis Llovio. September 29, 2015.

[http://www.richmond.com/news/article\\_1bca6e05-4e54-5340-a988-f024b9f0c2aa.html](http://www.richmond.com/news/article_1bca6e05-4e54-5340-a988-f024b9f0c2aa.html)

Right now, far too few RPS graduates are going on to a two year or four year school. Of those who completed high school in the 2014-2015 school year, 32% of RPS high school students graduated with an advanced diploma, compared with 55% statewide.<sup>6</sup> We need to build on efforts that have recently started to address this problem, like the RVA Future program. Levar will work with RPS and the philanthropic community, as well as nonprofit organizations like GRASP, whose board Levar currently sits on, to develop and fund scholarship programs to assure all RPS students who would like to seek higher education have the financial support to attend at least a two year college. Levar will also collaborate with groups like CodeVA and our friends in the building trades to encourage students to develop practical skills through workshops and apprenticeships that will make them valuable members of Richmond's workforce.

#### **10. Parent engagement, adult education & workforce development**

Levar's goal will be not just to provide better support for students in poverty, but to help reduce poverty itself. When parents are working and economically thriving, children benefit, and so does the city of Richmond's revenue stream. Levar will support strengthening and making more accessible adult education initiatives as well as the City's workforce development program to help adults access the training they need to get a better paying job. Levar will also promote the use of school buildings as community centers in which parents can access resources provided by City agencies – for example - workforce development, health care, social services and housing assistance.

#### **Conclusion**

A successful City needs a successful school system, just as successful schools need a supportive community. We must work together both to improve student learning and to address the root causes of low educational performance. This means addressing the specific ways poverty harms child development and student learning, and it means reducing poverty itself. This means finding the resources to support the needs of schools and maximize the instructional support and support services invested in our children. And it means making schools community hubs embraced by all Richmonders.

Adversarial relationships won't get us there, and neither will simply writing a bigger check. What we need is a Mayor who will build strong relationships based on mutual accountability with the schools and with community partners, and who will do everything in his or her power to support the needs of children and families in Richmond. Levar Stoney will be that mayor.

---

<sup>6</sup> Virginia Department of Education Superintendent's Report. "Diploma Graduates and Completers Regular Term Plus Summer Term, 2014-2015."  
[http://www.pen.k12.va.us/statistics\\_reports/supts\\_annual\\_report/2014\\_15/table05.pdf](http://www.pen.k12.va.us/statistics_reports/supts_annual_report/2014_15/table05.pdf)