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Hanover County School Board Meeting, Tuesday, February 3, 2026

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[00:00:01] good evening welcome to our budget hearing for fiscal year 2627 so we are going to go ahead and get started thank you all for being here and thank you for not bringing daggers and and and hating us for our school cancellations we hope to be back soon so not guaranteeing any days but we hope to be back soon so it

[00:00:34] is six o'clock and we will get we will call this meeting to order so first up we're gonna have a review of the superintendent's proposed budget thank you mrs. stone is gonna come up and share that with us thank you there we go good evening madam chair school board members and dr. penny cuff we are here tonight for the budget public hearing for fiscal year 2027. And first, I'd like to go over a few of the budget highlights. As shared two weeks ago by Dr. Pennycoff, some included within this

[00:01:14] proposed budget is a 3% salary increase for all eligible employees as of July 1. There is \$2.65 million to offset the ever-increasing health care costs that continue to go up as we speak.

[00:01:29] There's also job family adjustments for several positions there. We shared that we look at one-third of our positions every three years and compare the pay ranges with that of the region and then make recommendations from that review, and you see the positions listed there that are included in this budget.

[00:01:52] Also included in the budget are two additional elementary math coaches and two additional elementary literacy coaches and two elementary sped education special education senior teachers moving

along with the budget highlights there's the continuation of the math reading interpret math and reading intervention tutoring for elementary and middle that was previously funded with all in funding that that has now expired continuation of some software programs that was also previously funded with all-in funds.

[00:02:29] So we're backfilling for some of that. There's the addition of the middle school cross-country teams and related coaching stipends, increased cost for our Google software that's used by both students and staff, and then covering the tuition increases associated with the regional schools.

[00:02:52] As we know, our enrollment is down this year, over 250 students. And for the current year, that means a revenue deficit of over \$2.5 million. We had to roll that forward in developing this new budget.

[00:03:09] And in addition to recognizing the loss of revenue from the state, also proposed is the reduction of instructional positions by 10 FTEs. That will not result in any job loss.

[00:03:25] that will be done through natural attrition or retirement. We see at least that number, usually more, much more, every year of vacated instructional positions. There's also proposed a reduction in contractual services in the amount of \$500,000.

[00:03:44] These reductions and adjustments helped us to balance the overall budget. CIP highlights, we are proposing to increase the cost associated with the new construction of the campus-style elementary schools to \$50 million to bring it in line with bids that we are seeing currently.

[00:04:06] There's the continuation of the trade school expansion with an additional \$1.5 million associated with the instructional programs and additional parking. Also in the CIP for the first year, you see some field upgrades and HVAC funding for replacement of new HVAC units within our schools.

[00:04:32] When we look at the five year for the CIP highlights, there are track upgrades and gym upgrades that are listed throughout that five years. Also a multipurpose field for middle school, elementary school, playground upgrades.

[00:04:48] So there's a variety of projects that are included within that five years. Here's our summary of all funds. You see that the operating fund is growing by 6.3 million or 2.4%. If you looked at that last year, that's close to 8%.

[00:05:07] And we know that that's primarily impacted by a couple of things. The enrollment decrease, as I mentioned earlier, that in this year was the 2.5 million. then also the adjustment to the local composite index. When we look at that change in the LCI in the current year, it would result in a reduction of revenue over \$3 million, and we project that forward with the changing formulas and cost that can go up to \$5 million.

[00:05:34] It's not an exact science, but I am providing you with a range of that estimated impact. Our school nutrition fund is increasing by 2.9% or \$300,000. That's primarily related to this 3% salary increase.

[00:05:50] And then you see for the capital improvement funds, there's an increase of \$1.6 million or 11%. Overall, all funds are increasing by just 2.8%. That's a very modest increase as compared to this year or even the year before.

[00:06:08] So it is, again, we're here tonight for a public hearing related to the superintendent's proposed budget. Before I sit down, I will share the next steps. Next week will be an opportunity for the school board to consider that budget and vote on an adopted budget.

[00:06:27] It is then sent to the Board of Supervisors for consideration. Dr. Penny Cuff is scheduled to present her budget, or at that time it will be the school board approved budget, your budget, on February 18th. The county is slated to have their public hearing on April 1st with an adoption by the county on April 8th.

[00:06:47] And then we come back to the school board for an adopted budget consideration on May 12th. At that time, we have the final county budget and also any changes to the state budget should it be approved by that time. So that is all that I have tonight, and I'd be happy to take any questions.

[00:07:06] Thank you, Ms. Stone. Does anybody have any questions for Ms. Stone or Dr. Penico? Yes, Ms. Martin. Just a comment. Could you quickly, for those here and maybe watching online, just go through the process of how we got here so people understand the collaboration that's involved and the different, it's not just a small group of people that say, here's a budget school board and approve it.

[00:07:26] Sure. So we start in September with principals and directors submitting their requests. In early November, and we give them several weeks to get that in, we compile all of those requests. In early November, we sit down, go through the process of all stakeholders having the opportunity to rank that, starting with the principals, the directors, the assistant superintendents.

[00:07:50] We have a budget advisory focus group that has representatives from PTA, from businesses. They go through the ranking exercise, our classified advisory committee, our teacher advisory committee, and then finally the school board does a ranking.

[00:08:07] We send to the school board all of the ranking to date by groups and then the final ranking once that's done. At the same time, we're sitting down and meeting with the county to understand what are their revenues looking like, what is their budget process looking like.

[00:08:23] We go back and look at the county's five-year plan to take a look at what are they expecting to fund us. So for next year initially, they expected to fund an additional \$4.6 million. We share with them all of our requests.

[00:08:40] We go through that long laundry list of requests with the county administration. And then based upon that, we share with them our non-negotiables, our requests, and the position that we're in. And those meetings occur over a two-month period, really going back and forth with them.

[00:08:58] Based upon those meetings this year, they were able to allocate an additional \$1 million over and beyond their plan. even though they shared with us that they generally are tracking on plan not much higher than that in regards to revenue after that as we begin to develop this budget we had a meeting with the Joint Education Committee which included board of supervisor members school board members and we'd also prior to that had a work session with their school board and then we developed the final proposed budget we sit down with our board members individually or

[00:09:35] two-by-two to answer any questions that they may have and go into greater detail. And then Dr. Benikoff presents the budget. Did I leave anything out? Well, if I could, I'll just add. This year, the state proposed a 2% increase for SOQ-funded staff, and that's about two-thirds of our staff.

[00:09:53] So additionally, the accreditation and accountability information has changed, and we are now in a five-year plan to have increased rigor and expectations related to what it takes to pass an SOL test. And so our instruction team met, and they considered everything that we had, everything they needed, where

our schools were in terms of instruction and needs, and they came out with, here are all the things they need to meet these higher expectations.

[00:10:22] And when we saw the list, we decided to do what we do with the capital improvement plan, and we made it into a three- to five-year plan. because it is too big to be able to get in one year. So we then went back to our principals, and we said, you know, we want to talk to you about do we go with a 2% increase and get more of the instructional supports that you've told us that we need, or do we go with a 3% increase?

[00:10:49] And each percent costs \$2 million. So a 3% increase is \$6 million. And as Mrs. Stone shared, we lost about \$2.5 million in enrollment. We lost about \$3.1 million due to the recalculation of the LCI, the Local Composite Index, which in this year is \$3.1.

[00:11:11] It equates to about \$5 million for next year. So you can see that we were not in a good place coming in. And then when we got the health insurance information, we covered about \$2.65 million of that to stop those costs to go in directly to staff.

[00:11:28] So those were tough decisions that had to be made. And so when we got to the place where the principal said, we think that our staff is going to be better served if you provide a 3% increase and it takes us a little longer to get the other supports.

[00:11:46] And so that's why you see that. But all along the way, we have collaborated and we have talked with the teams about what is most needed to serve the students based on the new expectations and the teacher shortage and being able to retain staff.

[00:12:06] So that's why you see the budget before you that we have presented. Thank you. Do we have any other questions? No? Okay. Thank you, Ms. Stone. Thank you, Dr. Pennycuff. So next we are going to go into the public comment portion, and before we start that, I do have a statement.

[00:12:32] So before we begin tonight's public comment, we recognize that several individuals are here to speak regarding the proposed reduction in contractual counseling services. On behalf of the school board, welcome and thank you for your advocacy.

[00:12:48] As we discussed at last month's budget presentation, this is a very challenging budget year that has required many difficult decisions. Both the school board and school division administration recognize that there are many important items and initiatives that would benefit our students and staff.

[00:13:12] We also recognize that we must balance these competing priorities with the financial realities we face. This informed the development of the proposed budget, and we are grateful for all the hard work that took place in its preparation.

[00:13:31] With specific regard to the reduction in contractual counseling services, it is important to note that the program is an extension of the Community Services Board, which is a Hanover government agency. These services have been and would remain available to our students through the Community Services Board.

[00:13:51] The school-based program was originally funded through a state grant that is no longer available, meaning local funding would be needed to fund the program. Since the introduction of the proposed budget, we have continued to work closely with our county funding partners to explore other possibilities that may exist in this regard.

[00:14:14] Specifically, we will be working with the county on a revised program over the next 60 days that would include funding to retain a few community services board clinicians who would be able to work with our schools to address our greatest areas of need. Again, these are clinicians who provide intake and mental health treatment.

[00:14:35] At this time, it is important to note that students will continue to have access to the high-quality mental health supports that are provided in our schools. Our school counselors will continue to be able to link students and families to mental health treatment through the community services board if needed. Again, this will remain available in our community. This proposed adjustment is yet another representation of the strong partnership between our school board, board of supervisors, county administration, and school division administration. On behalf of the school board, we are grateful for this continued collaboration

[00:15:14] and shared commitment that allows us to make decisions that are both student-centered and fiscally responsible again thank you for those who are here this evening for your advocacy and to our county funding partners for their strong support in our of our schools thank you and greg you have a statement as well thank you this is an opportunity for the school board to receive public input regarding the superintendent's proposed fiscal year 2026-2027 budget per board

[00:15:51] policy the total time allotted for public comments shall not exceed 60 minutes speakers who wish to address the school board are requested to follow these guidelines as excuse me as each speaker is recognized by the chairperson the speaker is asked to clearly state the speaker's name magisterial district and the subject of the speaker's remarks speakers are asked to address their comments to the board and not to the audience the board requests that the audience refrain from responding to speakers comments with applause or with excuse me or other audible expressions of approval or disapproval speakers are allotted three minutes to address the board

[00:16:28] Each speaker's elapsed time will appear on the screen. Speakers will also receive notification from the chairperson when time has expired. Although the board does not permit the use of slideshows or other projected materials during this segment, speakers are invited to provide printed copies of such materials to the board.

[00:16:47] The board requests any person with a complaint about a school division employee to first address the concern to the division superintendent in accordance with board policy. Comments targeting, criticizing, or attacking individual students are not permitted during this segment, and speakers should refrain from using personally identifiable information in connection with an individual student.

[00:17:09] Speakers should be aware that while the board allows speakers to address any matter within the board's purview, speakers may be held legally responsible if they make statements that violate the rights of others, including threatening or defamatory statements made against staff members, students, or parents.

[00:17:26] The board expresses its appreciation for the public's input and cooperation during this segment of the meeting. First up is Ms. Meredith Holder, followed by Erin Murphy. Meredith Holder? Okay.

[00:17:46] Erin Murphy? Jamie Jackson? Okay. Here we are. Yay. And after Jamie is Laura McGrath. Okay, let's see. Okay, there we go.

[00:18:03] Good evening, board members of the board and superintendent. My name is Jamie Jackson. I'm a Hanover County resident in the South Anna District, a parent of two students, and a school counseling director at Patrick Henry High School. I'm here tonight to speak regarding the proposed fiscal year budget, 2027 budget, and the critical need to restore all seven of the mental health counseling positions.

[00:18:25] While the budget proposal suggests that our priorities lie in supporting students, the plan reduction in contractual counseling services tells a different story. These aren't just contractual services on a spreadsheet. These are seven dedicated clinicians who are providing life-saving bridges to the individual therapy that our students would not get otherwise.

[00:18:48] It has been suggested that our school counselors can absorb this workload, and as a school counseling director, I've got to be clear, these two roles are not interchangeable. School counselors manage caseloads of around 300 students, and we focus on academic planning, college applications, school transitions, and many other things.

[00:19:06] We are not clinical therapists. Our mental health counselors, however, are seeing 35 students per week for intensive one-on-one sessions. So just looking at the numbers, since we're at a numbers meeting, seven clinicians are serving 245 students weekly.

[00:19:25] While I am really grateful that we are considering three positions that may be spared, that still leaves a really big deficit. Reducing seven positions to three means 140 of those vulnerable students are not going to be seen.

[00:19:43] They're going to lose their weekly individual supports. That's a 57% decrease in the direct mental health intervention that's keeping our students safe, alive, and in their classroom, meeting the requirements that we're trying to meet in instructional purposes.

[00:20:02] The budget presentation noted that our historical investment in mental health has directly impacted student success. And if you look at our suicide data, you'll also see that it has reduced that extremely important statistic. To cut these very roles after seeing that progress is such a contradiction. To put this in perspective, this board is made up of seven members. If you were forced to reduce your number to three and told to absorb the needs of the other districts, the entire

[00:20:35] county would suffer from lack of representation and oversight over their district. This is exactly what we're doing to our student safety net. We're asking three people to do the work of seven in a field where falling through the cracks has permanent consequences. I recognize that budget decisions are incredibly difficult. However, there is no higher priority than the lives and safety of our children. I urge you to find a way for the funding to keep all seven of these individuals and do not balance the budget on the backs of 140 students who are in crisis. Thank you. Thank you. Laura

[00:21:14] McGrath. Next after that is Courtney Strickland. Good evening. My name is Laura McGrath. I am a school counselor at Patrick Henry High School, so I'm an employee of the Ashland District. I've been a high school counselor for 10 years. I'm very proud to have worked in Hanover County for four of those. Previously, I worked in one of the surrounding counties, and I can tell you firsthand Hanover has by far the best support system for our students anywhere in the Richmond area.

[00:21:49] I brag to others about this all the time, about the amazing wraparound services we have with all of our counseling support for our students. We all play our different roles in supporting our students,

and we do it very well. I truly believe our students are more prepared for life outside of high school because of the team effort all of the counseling roles bring to the table.

[00:22:10] If we take away or even limit the number of school-based therapists we have, it will be a detriment to our students and our county. Hanover will be less great than before because of it. Many of our students will lose access to vital, life-saving therapeutic services. We cannot reduce the number of clinicians we have in our buildings.

[00:22:29] I want to explain to you why we need all seven clinicians exactly where they are. I want you to imagine screening a child for a suicide risk and then picking up the phone to call an unsuspecting parent in the middle of the school day to tell them that their child is thinking about dying.

[00:22:46] I've had to do this countless times, which is sadly not an exaggeration. With each call, I always refer their child to a mental health clinician. I cannot tell you how often I hear the sound of relief in a parent's voice when I tell them. We actually have a therapist right here in our building from the CSB who your child can access.

[00:23:07] I can introduce your child to her today. All you need to do is sign paperwork granting permission. Imagine the panic that then shifts to relieve. Someone qualified to help your child is right here. If we only have Ms. Simmers, our clinician at PH, as part-time in our building, that means we have to limit those who access her. That is a caseload greatly reduced to the neediest of students, but how do we decide who is the neediest? Ms. Simmers is there for everyone, but especially the extremely busy, overwhelmed student who has too many commitments outside of school to find time for

[00:23:46] therapy. She is there for the lost 18-year-old student who can sign up to see her on her own because their parent is too absent to care. She's there for the student whose only parent is dying of cancer at home and they need somewhere to grieve. She is there for the homeless student who cannot access services.

[00:24:03] She's there for the parent who has transportation issues, but therapy in the school for their child is a must. 20 seconds. She is there for the parent who has unique insurance and cannot find available services for their child. She's there for the grieving student who has a need for therapy because their father died unexpectedly.

[00:24:23] These are not made-up scenarios. Every single one of these is one of my students, and that is why we need all seven of our clinicians. Thank you. Thank you. Courtney Strickland, next stop, Amanda Cronenberg.

[00:24:40] Hi, my name is Courtney Strickland. I'm from the South Anna District. I have two children. One is nine in Elmont, and the other is 14 in Liberty. I'm here about the clinicians. My child started middle school as a strong, independent child who stood up for herself and took up for others.

[00:24:58] Sixth grade wore her down. Sixth grade's hard. Seventh grade, she was bullied to the point that she was pulling her hair out and no longer was eating. Then I get the phone call that they were just saying that said my child is suicidal. And I was that parent. Oh my gosh, what do I do? I've lost my child, my once strong independent child. And I went into the meeting and they said, hey, we have Ms. Bowden. And Ms. Bowden has been a godsend to my family. She last year brought my child back to the former child that she was. I don't know where we'd honestly be without her. It had nothing to do with me. I

[00:25:37] found my child therapist. I would have done all that, but my child had the independence of being at school. It had nothing to do with me. She got her own safe place and her own safe person. We saw Ms. Bowdoin through the summer, and when we ended, I was extremely nervous. Where do we, you know, where do we go from here? What happens when we go back to square one? Because we're still at Liberty and it's still horrible. So this year, the first couple months were okay. Well, then I get a phone call. Well, first my child says, I'm moving to my father's house in North Carolina because I cannot go to Patrick Henry next year because people that are mean to me now have

[00:26:14] siblings and they're going to be even worse when we get to Patrick Henry. And I thought, okay, this is not okay. So I texted Ms. Bowden and said, hey, can you check in? And she said, of course. Well, then I get a phone call Friday before the whole snowstorm that my child has been sexually harassed at Liberty Middle School during lunchtime.

[00:26:33] And then I come to find out not even an hour later that the one safe person that my child has at school is now and threatened to be cut. I beg y'all to do something. I cannot lose my child. This legitimately has got to be changed.

[00:26:50] And then I think I have a nine-year-old who's supposed to come through Liberty and I can't put her through that because she's not as strong as her sister was. and they will eat her alive and if they are not somebody there to help her where is she going to go i've cross-country teams and baseball fields and all that is great but i feel like there are bigger things and bigger pictures than a middle school cross-country team and whatnot there needs to be someone in the schools that is there to help them i appreciate y'all's time and consideration

[00:27:19] thank you amanda kronenberg and then audrey haslinga did i say that correctly okay hi my name is Amanda Cronenberg and I live in the Ashland District. I'm the president of the Hanover County Council of PTAs which oversees the 20 PTAs in the county and there are over 5,500 members.

[00:27:50] The Virginia PTA has made mental health support a legislative priority as Virginia ranks 48th nationally in providing access to mental health care for youth and suicide is the second leading cause of death for 10 to 24 year olds. Looking over your budget we saw that the contractual services will be significantly reduced, and those contractual services, which doesn't sound like a whole lot when you put it up on a slideshow, are actually the majority of the mental health clinicians from the community services board that are embedded in the high schools and the middle schools. A budget is essentially a statement of priorities. I was on one of the budget advisory committees. I understand the complexities of putting together a budget for a school system,

[00:28:30] taking into account federal, state, and local funding. The state share of funding for Hanover schools has decreased as Hanover's local composite index has increased over the years, but that decreased share is due to the state's belief in Hanover County's ability to provide more for their funding for their schools. Having mental health clinicians in schools has been a huge step forward in helping remove barriers for students to connect with needed community resources.

[00:28:55] Not even including this program in a budget sends the message that students' mental health is not a priority for Hanover County Public Schools. Now this appears to be directly at odds with the state of legislative priorities of this school board. Included in the legislative agenda presented at your January meeting, the Hanover School Board direct quote urges the Virginia General Assembly to provide increased support for student mental health services end quote. My question then is why is the school board urging

the state to do something for mental health that they are not willing to ask of the Hanover Board of Supervisors. As of this past summer, Hanover County was so

[00:29:34] impressed by this program, they posted an article on the county website about the program's accomplishments entitled, Hanover Schools Lead the Way in Mental Health Support. Yet just half a year later, the school board plans to disband the program rather than ask the Board of Supervisors for funding for this program that the county itself trumpeted as a great success. Coincidentally, or perhaps ironically, this is National School Counselors Week. Currently, HCPS does not meet the nationally recommended ratios of one school counselor for every 250 students. So our counselors are already overworked and eliminating this program will only increase their work. 30 seconds.

[00:30:13] Yep. I urge you to reconsider your budget and fully fund this program as it currently stands so that our school counselors are not overburdened and that even more students can benefit from this program. Thank you. Thank you. Audrey Hislinga. Sorry if I messed up that last name. Right. Savannah

[00:30:35] Lane. Just to clarify, Savannah Lane. Yes. I'm so sorry. Good evening, members of the school board.

[00:30:58] My name is Savannah Lane, and I am here tonight to respectfully ask that you reconsider any decision to cut funding for our school-based mental health clinician. For me, and for many students like me, this position is not optional or expandable. During one of the most difficult periods of my life, our mental health clinician, Mrs. Simmers, was one of the only consistent sources of support I had.

[00:31:20] She listened to me with patience and compassion and never with judgment. She made me feel seen, heard, and understood at a time when I felt alone. Although my family cared greatly about my well-being, our schedules made it difficult to attend therapy appointments outside of school. Meeting with her during the school day was not just convenient, it was essential.

[00:31:42] She became the support system I otherwise would not have had access to, and her guidance helped me cope and grow. Mental health challenges do not pause during the school day, and neither should our support for students who are struggling. When schools invest in mental health resources, they invest in students' safety, academic success, and long-term well-being.

[00:32:01] Removing this position would mean removing a lifeline for students who may have nowhere else to turn. I'm standing here today because someone in the school took the time to care. I ask you to consider the students who are quietly struggling and the impact this decision will have on them Please do not take away a resource that has already made such a profound difference in so many lives Thank you for your time your consideration and for listening. Thank you Bob Flanagan madam chair. We're done there. Okay. Thank you very much

[00:32:33] Well, that is all that we have for this evening's meeting and we do appreciate everybody coming and advocating for their You know for what they believe the strongest to be in our budget. We appreciate that And we hope to be back in school soon Any other comments, I just would ask miss Strickland if you could come up here when we're done, that would be wonderful. Thank you Anybody else no, okay. Well, then we are officially adjourned. Thank you. Oh



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