Members of the Board of Education; City, County, and State Elected Officials; and residents of Anne Arundel County:

This is my eighth and final budget address as your superintendent, and I appreciate the opportunity this evening to discuss the journey our school system has taken over the last 21 months, the path that lies ahead of us, and the course I believe we should chart to get there. Before I say anything else, however, I want to make one thing perfectly clear: Our AACPS employees are awesome. Every single one of them. While our Board has decided that a change in the leadership of our school system is desired and I will not be here next year to see the journey firsthand, I am unrelenting in my belief that our people will make it successful.

From the incredible teachers in our classrooms, to our school-based administrators and staff, to our secretaries, bus drivers, cafeteria workers, facilities staff, support personnel, and those on the business side of our operation, our employees display a heart and resolve that are unparalleled. For all of the politics and the rhetoric that have accompanied our journey to this moment, the unquestionable truth is that the members of our AACPS team have been unwavering in their commitment to excellence despite ongoing circumstances that no one could have predicted.

They have spent countless hours – long after the sun sets and long before it rises – doing work few will ever know about or see, all in the quest to help our students. Over the course of this extended and exhaustive pandemic, they have repeatedly reinvented not just the education being delivered in our classrooms, but their very selves.

In March of 2020, COVID-19 moved all of us from the schoolhouses we knew and with which we were familiar to a fully virtual environment overnight. That environment remained until last February, when we implemented an unprecedented hybrid format. Students whose families elected to do so – first at our special centers and then at elementary, middle, and high schools — returned to our buildings for two days each week. We subsequently expanded that opportunity to four days a week for as many students as we could accommodate.

As part of our county’s collective effort to resume some sense of normalcy, we hosted a series of vaccination clinics in conjunction with the Anne Arundel County Fire Department last winter for employees, fully inoculating more than 7,000 over a nine-week period. By late spring, we were partnering with the Department of Health on student vaccination clinics at high schools, an effort that grew to include middle schools over the summer and is now continuing at elementary schools for students ages 5 to 11.

And we were undeterred by the fact that we couldn’t hold indoor graduations as planned last spring at the Live! Event Center at Arundel Mills. In another show of perseverance and focus on the goal of providing our students with as much as we could despite the circumstances out of our control, hundreds of members of our team volunteered to help stage 12 high school graduations in the stadium at Crofton High School as well as six other ceremonies at smaller venues. The pure joy on the faces of students, families, and staff of our schools at in-person commencement exercises where students could celebrate with all of their classmates was worth every ounce of that effort and more.

I am indebted – we all are indebted – to every single member of our AACPS team. They. Are. Awesome.

We must not forget that our effort to climb out of the COVID-19 pandemic did not end when classes dismissed last year. The declining case rate that began in the spring and continued through most of the summer left us, like all school systems, optimistic that the opening of the current school year would bring as much of a return to normal as we could hope for.
The summer programs we put in place for students across our system to help make up for disrupted instruction were unlike anything we had done before. More than 10,000 students took part in 96 unique programs, and we teamed with external partners to create a multitude of creative community-based camps that were instructional, engaging, and fun. We greatly expanded summer school class offerings for remedial and original credit and hosted enhancement experiences, social-emotional support sessions, and even camps designed to prepare high school students for the next mathematics or English courses in which they would be enrolled beginning in the fall.

Our climb out of the pandemic soon took another turn, however, with the emergence of the Delta variant. Even with the availability of vaccinations for adults, and then for an increasing number of students, that meant ongoing masking in our buildings and heightened anxiety.

If last spring and summer were a roller coaster ride, the time since has been akin to scaling a mountain. At points, the journey has been refreshing and exhilarating. At others, it has been more steep and more treacherous than anyone anticipated. And at still others, it’s been like ascending the mountain in immensely thick cloud cover on a path that we sometimes must navigate without knowing exactly what lies ahead.

The challenges remain many, but I continue to believe what I said during my budget address a year ago: There are opportunities for us in every challenge, and we are up to this task.

We have returned, however, not just to classrooms that have changed, but to an educational environment that has been drastically altered, perhaps forever. We also must face the fact that our students are different people than those who left us in March 2020 or even last June.

While we anticipated – and built into our schedules – the need for more time to address increased social-emotional needs, for example, we could not and did not anticipate the rise in inappropriate and unacceptable behaviors on the part of students and, more unfortunately, family members. This pandemic has been frustrating for all of us, but the instances of employees and bus drivers being targets on which to take out those frustrations has further exacerbated difficult situations. As I have done before, I again call on all of us to exercise grace, patience, and flexibility in everything we do. Our goals are the same, and we must work together to achieve them even when we disagree.

That work will be more complex in the coming year than perhaps ever before. A series of emergency federal and state grants designed to help school systems endure the pandemic will sunset over the next several years, and we must begin now to shift that grant funding for critical and necessary programs into our permanent operating budget. This is a project in its infancy and there will be more requests in future years. Failing to begin the process in this budget isn’t just a wrong turn on this climb. Rather, it is a fatal error that will lead to a cliff with disastrous consequences if we don’t act appropriately, prudently, and purposefully.

There is another piece to this complex puzzle as well. Even before COVID’s grip fully took hold, state lawmakers were hammering out changes designed to positively alter our educational landscape. The Blueprint for Maryland’s Future is a transformative investment in our schools designed to create more opportunities for students, expand career and technical education programs, and bolster salaries for teachers and other educators. While the multi-billion-dollar plan spans more than a dozen years, it imposes requirements beginning next year.

I want to be clear to this Board, to our County Executive and County Council, and to everyone in our county: We should not fund these Blueprint-focused areas at the expense of other programs. They are critically needed investments designed – COVID or not – to help us reach the summit of this climb.

I will grant you that the numbers may seem daunting. However, as Benjamin Franklin once said, “If you fail to plan, you are planning to fail.” Our work must begin today.

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The $1.6 billion operating budget recommendation that I present to you this evening contains $24.8 million in the first wave of funding dedicated to programs required by the Blueprint. It also contains another $23.8 million in shifts of federal and state grants to our operating budget.

Those funding shifts include 70.4 existing special education positions and another 60 existing positions for our Virtual Academy, a successful endeavor that we launched this year. They also include moving more than $6.2 million for temporary teaching assistants and substitutes, $4.6 million for a portion of the leases for technology equipment acquired throughout the pandemic, and $2.1 million in contracts for enhanced preventative maintenance services for school HVAC systems to our operating budget.

Blueprint-related funding also includes $5 million for mandated compensation increases for National Board Certified Teachers and $3.7 million for 54.5 positions necessary to convert 17 half-day prekindergarten programs to full-day.

My recommendation also contains $55.7 million in compensation increases for our awesome employees, inclusive of the increases for National Board Certified Teachers that I just mentioned. The Blueprint mandates that classroom teachers receive salary increases of at least 10 percent by 2024. We have accounted for 3 percent of that to date, and my recommendation contains $30.9 million for another 4 percent cost-of-living-adjustment for all employees in the coming year. That will leave us an additional 3 percent to fund in Fiscal Year 2024.

I believe it is prudent to take a bigger bite of this apple this year for two reasons: First, we need to provide as much as we can for our employees as soon as we can. Second, we should not push any more of this cost into future years than we absolutely have to. Doing so may imperil needed funding should the fiscal picture become more uncertain.

There will be those who point to the Blueprint’s mandate of this increase just for teachers alone. I, however, will continue to advocate for all of our employees. Every member of our AACPS team has an influence on our students and every member of our team should have equitable access to benefits.

In addition to the COLA in this recommendation, I have included $14.6 million for a step increase or step equivalent for all eligible employees, subject to negotiations with our bargaining units. There is also $3 million to fund the second half of a mid-year compensation increase for all employees provided by the County, and $2.1 million for the last catchup step or step equivalent for eligible employees in Units 2 through 6 who missed those increases in Fiscal Year 2016. The expected ratification of the recent Unit I tentative agreement will resolve the back step issue for those employees.

There has been vast discussion since the outset of the school year about ways to address the ongoing bus driver shortage that has plagued not just our county, but school systems across the nation. While I am deeply appreciative of the County Executive’s funding of recruitment and retention bonuses for contracted drivers, that one-time money will not be available next year. My recommendation includes $3.4 million to provide approximately a 10 percent COLA for contracted bus drivers and aides to help address this critical issue.

Our transportation needs do not stop there, however. Prismatic Services, with whom this Board contracted to develop routes related to the shift in school start and dismissal times next fall, made clear that we need 32 buses to address existing bus overcrowding issues that are unrelated to the start time shift. There is $2.3 million in this recommendation for those buses, which can also be used to fill any route shortages that may come about as the start time shift is finalized.

This recommendation also includes $575,000 for drivers, aides, and vans to transport students to nonpublic settings as allowable under state regulations that are now under review.
Once we get our students to schools, we need to continue to care for their social and emotional needs as well as their academic requirements. This was the top budget priority identified by this Board in October. To help in that regard, this plan includes $4.4 million for 36 positions, including 11 assistant principals, 6.6 teachers and aides for an alternative education elementary program, seven school counselors, 4.4 school psychologists, three social workers, and two Pupil Personnel Workers.

I have also included $28.5 million for other essential staffing needs across the system, including:

- 122 teachers for class size reduction in the first phase of a three-year plan, addressing the Board’s No. 2 priority;
- 93.6 positions in special education to address the increased complexity of student needs;
- 30.3 positions to address needs of English Language Learners, including 20 technicians, 6.3 English Language Development teachers, and three additional bilingual facilitators;
- 30 teaching assistants and permanent substitutes to ease the workload on our classroom teachers;
- 19 positions to finally complete the staffing at Crofton High School;
- 17 classroom teachers for enrollment growth;
- 17 classroom positions to provide tutoring support and allow classroom teachers to spend more time working with individual students most impacted by opportunity gaps; and
- 7.5 positions to expand the elementary Triple-E program to Ruth Parker Eason School and all elementary schools in the Old Mill cluster except Rippling Woods and Southgate, which will start the program once construction on their buildings is complete.

In total, this recommendation contains 634.4 new positions. Of those 586 – 92.4 percent – interact with our students and directly impact their lives on a daily basis. Every position recommended in this budget has been identified with a strategic and equitable lens to have the most positive impact on student achievement and support.

We also must support our students with state-of-the-art facilities. My $193 million FY2023 capital budget recommendation to which this Board gave initial approval in September contains $122.9 million in construction funding for six major school projects: Quarterfield Elementary, Hillsmere Elementary, Rippling Woods Elementary, Old Mill West High School, West County Elementary, and Old Mill Middle School South.

It also includes $5.3 million for design of a new Center of Applied Technology – North, which will be built on the current Old Mill High School campus.

I have also included $30 million for building systems renovations, $10 million for classroom additions at Southgate Elementary School and Crofton Middle School, and $3.5 million for athletic stadium improvements.

As I said at the outset and in my recent letter announcing my departure at the end of this school year, Team AACPS is extraordinary! I have had the pleasure and privilege to work alongside talented, dedicated, and caring educators, administrators, and staff throughout my time here. From the incredible teachers in our classrooms, to our school-based administrators and staff, to our secretaries, facilities staff, support personnel, bus drivers, and those on the food services and business side of our operation, our employees have always displayed professionalism, determination, compassion, and kindness.

They are on the front lines every day in the battle for educational excellence for every single student we serve. I am immensely proud of the work we have done together.
This budget recommendation is designed to give them more tools to use in this battle and I urge this Board, our County Executive, and our County Council to provide them for our children. They are worth every single penny.

Thank you.