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President Silkworth, Vice President Frank, Members of the Board... Elected Officials, Community Members, Family Members, and, most of all, students:

A year ago, as I presented my first budget recommendation to you as your Superintendent, I talked about the potential for greatness I saw in our school system after just four months on the job. I spoke of what I believed it would take to truly make us great: helping all our students to see themselves through a resiliency lens, showing our employees they are valued in terms of compensation and working conditions, and increasing innovative approaches.

One year later, my belief in our ability to be truly great is even stronger. In the last 12 months, we have accomplished things that some thought were unattainable. We have refused to be deterred by artificial limits and constraints. We have been transparent about where we have been, where we are, and where we need to go. And we have not been afraid to make tough – and sometimes unpopular – decisions as we strive to create an environment where every student feels like they can belong, grow, and succeed.

We are better today than we were a year ago because of our people. I have visited approximately 100 of our schools and seen firsthand the remarkable work that goes on. I've watched students from ages 3 to 18 be challenged, inspired, and encouraged. Our school-based staff and all of those who support them are second to none. That's just a fact.

We started our work last year by trying to address the most glaring issue I saw: the compensation deficit for our employees compared to other jurisdictions. I was clear then and remain steadfast now that if we don't show our employees that we appreciate them, they will take their immense talents somewhere else. We can't afford to have that happen. Our work should be about retention and recruitment, not replacement of great people who feel more valued outside of our school system than in it.

So, we were bold about the need for compensation enhancements, and this Board backed us. We talked about it in every public venue we could, garnering support not just from our own employees, but from families, students, and the community. County Executive Steuart Pittman made compensation an integral part of his proposed budget and the County Council provided equal support.

The result was more than \$79.5 million in salary and other enhancements in our current budget. They include a step increase plus a 6 percent cost-of-living adjustment for employees and an \$8,000 raise in the starting salary for first-year teachers that moved us from 19th out of the state's 24 jurisdictions to fourth in a single year. The \$2,000 bonus we included for special education teachers makes our first-year special education teachers the highest paid in the state.

Our current budget also includes a 30-minute increase in the work day for teaching assistants and the second straight year of a 10 percent increase for contracted bus drivers. That's the kind of partnership and progress we need to be great, and I am thankful to all involved in those and other efforts.

A year ago, we were also able to provide two bonuses of up to \$1,000 for our employees, using savings from a high number of vacancies some of those same employees were asked to cover. And in each of the last two years, we have provided a virtual work day for employees on the Tuesday before Thanksgiving, allowing them more time with family without losing work productivity.

I also promised that we would be innovative, and we have been. The 68 bus driver vacancies we had at the outset of the last school year were simply unacceptable. Students can't have a sense of belonging, can't grow, and can't succeed if we can't even get them to school.

I challenged our Transportation Division to be creative in finding a solution and to remove some of the transportation inequities that had been built into the system. Using a new law that allows certain passenger vehicles to be used in lieu of school buses, we launched our Alternative Vehicle Program last December. We opened this school year with 40 such vehicles that we now use to transport homeless

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students and those enrolled in nonpublic settings, freeing up those buses and their CDL-licensed drivers to provide service to more students at more schools in our county.

When our students attended their first classes this year, we had zero bus driver vacancies and 62 additional drivers in training. We still have no bus driver vacancies today, and we are continuing to build the driver bench we desperately need to help ensure that every route runs every day. We have more work to do, but I want to thank our Transportation team for moving us significantly forward.

In sports terms, I felt like we were playing three-on-five full-court basketball last year. We made progress because of our amazing teams in Human Resources, Facilities, Food and Nutrition Services, Transportation, and beyond. We refused to accept the deficits, even when the odds appeared long. We evaluated, innovated, and adapted instead of falling back on the mindset that we've always done it that way. As a result, we opened this school year in far better shape than a year ago.

Classroom vacancies were reduced from 300 last year to 168 at the start of this school year and they fell to 98 earlier this month. Operations vacancies went from 90 to 30. Openings in Food and Nutrition Services dropped from 264 to 98.

We're playing five-on-five this year. That's better for our students, better for our staff, and better for our entire county.

The innovation extends to other areas of our system as well. It became clear last spring that the County could not fund our often-asked-for expansion of the Triple E program to the five remaining clusters still without it after nearly nine years. So, we went back to the drawing board. We reallocated central office and school-based positions and changed the staffing model so that the expansion could take place this year without additional positions or county dollars. I am proud that Triple E now exists in every elementary school in our county, providing our youngest learners with an exciting and fun project-based curriculum designed to spark the inquiry we want to see in all students. As importantly, it provides balance to planning time among all elementary teachers.

To help meet the needs of our increasingly diverse school system, we launched the first dual language elementary program at Tyler Heights Elementary School in August. I had a chance to visit those kindergarten and first-grade classrooms recently to see students receiving instruction in both English and Spanish. What is being built there is tremendous, and it will be a model for the rest of our county.

As I have said and will continue to say, we have amazing people in this organization. At least 10 of our educators and administrators are currently recognized as the top in their area of expertise by state, regional, or national organizations. I don't know of any other school system that can say that now and I haven't seen that anywhere in my 24 years in education.

As much as possible, we must also allow our educators the flexibility to use their innovative talents as they try to best meet the needs of students. Nowhere is that better exemplified than at Annapolis High School, where Maryland Teacher of the Year Mary Kay Connerton has pioneered the development of a wellness program for students and staff. That program has led to curricular work that has increased wellness opportunities for students and is a model for Anne Arundel County. Lt. Gov. Aruna Miller recently took part in one of those sessions and commented that she would "love to see this scaled out to the entire state of Maryland." This is just one more area where our school system is leading the way.

Our work over the last year also led to significant improvements in achievement. The proficiency rate on the state assessments administered last spring rose in seven of the eight assessed areas compared to the year before, led by a 10.1 percentage point increase in Algebra I scores. We also saw increases across the board in English Language Arts and in the elementary and middle school math assessments, and in fifth-grade science.

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In all, 89 percent of our schools earned three or more stars on the five-star Maryland Report Card system under new baseline metrics put in place this year. That's nearly 10 percentage points above the state average, and we have more four- and five-star schools than any school system in our region. We are, as I continue to say, a *very good* school system.

As I have also said before, however, I'm not interested in being good. We can be great and that's exactly what I want us to be. Right now, we stand in the middle of the pack among state school systems on most of our key indicators. We have to maximize the resources we have available to us to increase achievement while we enhance opportunities for students at all levels.

I believe we will get even better as we finalize and implement our new Strategic Plan. Dozens of community members, staff, students, and others are busy crafting that plan as we speak, and we will receive more input from focus groups around the county before bringing it to this Board for approval by May. It is important that our community, not me or our team, shape this plan.

Most importantly, that plan *must* be about our students. I meet regularly with student groups and just last week, I sat with our Superintendent's Teen Advisory. One of our members said something that will stay with me forever. She said, and I quote, "We need to reinstate the desire for curiosity rather than just focus on grades." She's right, and doing that can make us truly special. This is where Blueprint comes into play.

The Blueprint will continue to be front and center in our work because it is integral to everything we are doing. Put simply, it will change the face of education not just in Anne Arundel County, but across Maryland. In this regard, I have an ask of everyone: Eliminate from our conversations any discussion of reluctance to align with Blueprint. We must embrace the law as it exists, even as we work to improve it. More than \$27 million in Blueprint mandates are funded in our current budget. That funding has resulted in more resources to Community Schools in areas of our county where poverty is the highest. Strategically braiding Community School funds with Federal Title I funds as well as existing General Funds has resulted in robust instructional and social emotional programming that has created significant growth in student achievement at many of these schools, as reflected in the most recent Maryland Report Card data.

The funding has also provided for a career counseling program beginning with middle school students to be done in collaboration with the Anne Arundel Workforce Development Corporation and expanded dual enrollment opportunities with Anne Arundel Community College.

There are Blueprint constraints that have and will change the way we do things. But Blueprint can be a huge plus to school districts and it will be for us.

I am also proud of the work our school system has done over the last several years to confront the looming end of federal and state grant funding designed to mitigate impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Addressing the ESSER funding cliff in this manner has allowed for the shifts to be less drastic as we have moved funding from the grants into our annual operating budget and maximized the number of worthwhile programs we are able to continue.

Like all school systems in Maryland, the full impact of that ESSER funding cliff that seemed so far off in the distance in the last couple years is staring us directly in the face now. This is the final year of that grant funding. We have had difficult decisions throughout this budget process about what initiatives we can request funding for, what we can modify in some way, and what we simply must eliminate.

Last year, we shifted \$8.6 million in ESSER-funded programs to our operating budget to ensure their continuation. Those programs included our Virtual Academy, the only one of its kind in Maryland to be a stand-alone school.

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This year, we received requests to continue \$30.9 million in ESSER-funded programs. My recommendation shifts only about \$7.6 million to our operating budget. We will seek alternative funding for some other programs, but some will have to be eliminated and we may need to make requests for additional funding next year. We have said for several years that the intersection of ESSER funding elimination and increased Blueprint mandates in Fiscal Year 2025 would result in painful decisions across the school system. That is our reality now.

The process that has resulted in the operating and capital budgets I will recommend to you tonight has consumed thousands of hours on the part of hundreds of people. As was the case last year, we have emphasized the need to be prudent. Our Cabinet members and budget team did not receive or consider a single request that was not needed. *There were no wish lists from our department heads.* Every single request would have moved our system forward and been better for our students and staff.

However, budgets must be built on reality. ESSER was a vessel to help us cross the pandemic river. We have navigated those waters, but we will encounter more waves as we arrive on a shore where the educational landscape looks far different than ever before.

As I alluded to earlier, the work we have done over the last year and leading up to this moment has focused our mission on three simple words: Belong. Grow. Succeed. Our students and staff must feel like they belong. Only then can we help them grow and only through growth can they succeed.

Our reality *requires* us to continue to reimagine the way we do things as we move forward. That is what will drive us to the results we want within the fiscal limitations that exist.

Like many school systems across the state, our projected student enrollment did not fully materialize this year. That, combined with an estimated \$40.8 million reduction in federal aid due to the expiration of COVID-related grant funding, further tightens our constraints.

The days of school systems being flush with funds are over. We can no longer just think or even work outside the proverbial box. We must build *new* boxes as we innovatively confront the difficult challenges of increasing academic achievement, retaining quality employees, and addressing issues such as rising health-care costs. None of this is easy, and as I have said to our union leadership and others: Everybody can't get everything they want.

That is the approach we took as we examined every line of the hundreds of pages of this budget, considering our priorities along with those put forth by this Board. Our team began the final phase of our budget process by debating and discussing nearly \$126.5 million in proposed departmental requests and programmatic enhancements, considering them along with Blueprint mandates, other required expenditures, and the ongoing need to provide compensation increases to our employees.

My recommendation requests funding for just 14 percent of those programs and enhancements totaling \$18.3 million. This is not because the remainder were unworthy, but because the fiscal reality demands that we simply can't do everything we want. We will fund other programs and initiatives we need to undertake by shifting money from other areas of our budget instead of requesting additional funding.

In all, the operating budget I recommend to you tonight totals \$1.71 billion, a \$61.2 million increase over our current allocation when accounting for funding decreases in the areas I've mentioned. The 3.7 percent increase is the smallest recommended increase in nine years.

Nearly 61.5 percent of the increase is allocated to salaries and benefits, inclusive of health care, for our employees. The compensation request is sufficient to fund a step increase or step equivalent for eligible employees and a 3 percent cost-of-living adjustment for all employees. Between step increases and COLAs, funding these items this year would mean our employees will have received as much as 21

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percent in compensation increases over the last three years. I have also continued funding for the \$2,000 bonus for special educators to help attract top candidates in one of our most critical shortage areas.

This recommendation continues to request funding to meet Blueprint mandates. In addition to increases in the College and Career Readiness and Workforce Development areas that I mentioned earlier, there is \$7.9 million to go toward the provision of resources as the number of Community Schools in our district expands from 23 to an estimated 36. This funding will allow for better relationships between schools and the communities they serve and will also enhance social and emotional supports for students and families.

We have invested \$4.5 million for 35.9 positions over the last three years to provide additional social and emotional support resources for our students. My recommendation contains \$3.2 million for 24.5 more positions to continue this work.

The battle in this area is not waning, and we must continue to provide as much support as possible. There is funding in this recommendation for 8.5 school counselors, 8 school psychologists, 6 social workers, and 2 pupil personnel workers for that purpose.

I want to be clear that this challenge is not one for us to address alone. Our communities and our city and county governments must do their part. But there are places where we can step up, and they don't just exist solely in the classroom.

Using existing resources in the current year's budget, we have created the Office of Mentorship Programs through which we are matching students with mentors. More than 40 Central Office employees are mentoring students and meeting with them regularly. We are working with Annapolis Mayor Gavin Buckley and his team on a plan to provide City employees release time to do the same. We welcome the participation of county government and the private sector in this endeavor.

Our students don't just need people to talk to, however. They need activities in which they can engage. In that regard, this recommendation contains \$682,000 for the first year of a two-year plan to launch a middle school athletics program in our county. This program would ultimately offer sports over three seasons, providing precious access and directly supporting the physical, mental, and social health of students. As is the case with our high school athletics program, to me the best in the state, the middle school program would offer sports free of charge to families and would provide students with meaningful opportunities to build relationships, develop skills, and further that sense of belonging that we talk about often.

There is also a direct community benefit to this program because it will provide students with productive ways to spend their time after school. The sports seasons would also complement those offered by our high schools and the county Department of Recreation and Parks, so this is a win for everyone.

We have a growing number of students who require increasingly diverse specialized instruction, and we must meet those needs. This has been an area of focus for me over the last year and something I discussed with families and employees in almost every venue in which I've spoken.

This is not just a budgetary issue but an organizational one. Two weeks ago, I talked about how we are reimagining the delivery of services at the Phoenix Academy and Mary Moss at J. Albert Adams Academy to better deliver instruction and supports for students. I will be addressing other systemic issues related to special education in the second phase of my reorganization plan that will go into effect this summer.

However, we have a dire need for more resources in this area. My recommendation contains \$4.7 million for 56.4 special education teachers, assistants, and occupational and physical therapists, including

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12.5 positions as part of a new regional program to be located at Old Mill West High School when it opens in the fall.

What I consider to be the premiere Facilities team in the state continues to enhance the educational environment for students across our county. We opened three replacement school buildings last fall and will open three new and one replacement building in August. My recommendation to you contains \$12.5 million for more than 127 positions to staff the new Old Mill West High School and West County Elementary School, as well as \$3 million to open the New Village Academy Public Charter School. We will also be opening a new building for students and staff at Old Mill Middle South as part of the multi-year Old Mill Master Plan.

The \$234.5 million recommended capital budget I am presenting to you tonight contains nearly \$167 million in construction funding for the final three schools in the Old Mill Master Plan: a new Old Mill High School on the same property where the current school is located, a new Center of Applied Technology – North on that same property, and a new Old Mill Middle North where the current CAT-North is located. These are critical pieces to the success of this plan, which this Board, our County Executive, and the County Council have generously supported in prior years.

My capital budget recommendation also includes \$32.3 million for building systems renovations, \$7 million to continue to reduce the maintenance backlog, and \$1.3 million to design a new school bus facility and lot. The bus lot project was recommended by the Prismatic audit commissioned by this Board and is sorely needed to meet our growing transportation needs.

Also included in the capital budget recommendation is \$4 million for roof replacement projects, \$4 million for additions to existing buildings, \$3.5 million for athletic stadium improvements and \$2 million for security-related upgrades.

The days, weeks, and months that lie ahead in this budget process will be filled with discussions about the worthiness of projects both inside our school system and outside of it. My job – and now this Board’s job – is to advocate for what we need as an educational entity, remaining fully aware that we are but one piece in a very large county puzzle. The County Executive and County Council will have many competing needs as this process moves forward.

I simply say to everyone: Be passionate advocates for our school system but recognize the partnership that must exist for us to move forward as an entire county.

I am reminded of a scene I watched play out in October at the county cheerleading championships at Annapolis High School.

In a packed gymnasium full of the state’s best cheerleaders and their supporters, team after team took to the mat to perform. Their routines were amazing.

But what was also notable was the fellowship that existed between teams and their fans. As much as everyone wanted to win and every team had their eye on the top prize, there was an incredible amount of collective support. What those in attendance saw wasn’t just a series of individual teams, but a grand display of the power of relationships. In the end, the entirety of the competition was greater than the sum of its individual parts.

That’s what we need through this process: advocacy for sure, but awareness that there is a greater good to be achieved. That’s how we will move our school system – and, most importantly, our county – forward.

Thank you.