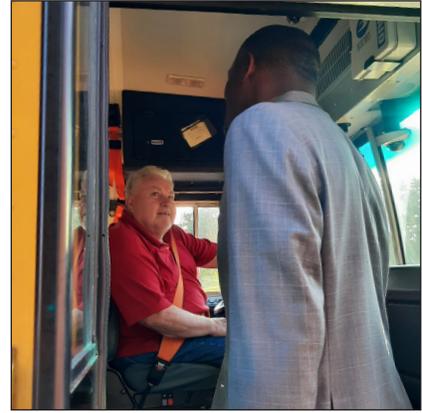


Anne Arundel County Public Schools



Belong.
Grow.
Succeed.

Introduction



This document summarizes what I've learned since embarking on my tenure and begins to chart a clearer, more innovative path forward...

When I arrived in Anne Arundel County Public Schools as Superintendent last summer, I had a bit of an advantage: Not everything was brand new to me. This school district, after all, had been responsible for educating my three children from 2012 to 2016, when I served as an Assistant Superintendent in Baltimore County Public Schools.

Their experiences were marvelous and after six years as Superintendent of Kansas City Public Schools, accepting this position meant a homecoming of sorts. I eagerly enrolled my middle school daughter in AACPS, and I want for every single one of our students exactly what I want for her: a first-class, world-class education where every student can see themselves through a resiliency lens and where everyone — students, families, employees, and community members — feels like they belong.

I believe with all my heart what I said in my budget address in December: We stand on a rock-solid foundation left by those who came before us. This is a really good school district. That's a fact! What is equally true is that it can be great. It can unquestionably be the best school district in Maryland and one of the best in the nation.

We have a lot of hard work to do to get there. We are only just beginning that climb and we must agree to relentlessly confront the challenges with the same vigor that

we celebrate the successes. We also must do that together because if we do education right, it does not matter how you show up and where you come from—you can overcome. We have a responsibility as a school district and, just as importantly, as a community to make sure that every single one of our kids grows socially, emotionally, and academically. Education is truly the pathway to economic prosperity.

From my first day, I have promised to be authentic, transparent, forthright, and factual. I also promised that we would act quickly when an issue with a readily apparent solution is presented. There is evidence in this document that we have done that, and we will continue to do so.

We have not been afraid to put our data out to the public because we gain nothing without open and honest conversations. We must, however, have those conversations in appropriate tones, with reasonable expectations, and with a true understanding that differing opinions don't have to make for enemies. They can make for reasonable discussions that may broaden lenses and increase understanding. Screaming at and belittling Board members, administrators, teachers, school staff, bus drivers, and others achieves no positive outcome. Worse, it sets the exact wrong example for our students. Make no mistake: They are watching.



Upon my arrival, I set forth an entry plan (www.aacps.org/entryplan) that has been posted online and was updated regularly over my first 100 days. That framework chronicles the hundreds of meetings where I've had thousands of conversations aimed at moving us forward in five key areas:

- *Developing unified school district governance*
- *Ensuring an intentional focus on instructional programming*
- *Increasing organizational effectiveness and efficiency*
- *Creating a culture of trust through action*
- *Establishing trust and confidence from the community at large*

AACPS is filled with awesome people who do amazing things for students every day. Many of those things go unseen and are, unfortunately, taken for granted. Take, as an easy example, the hundreds of employees who assumed key roles in collecting input at 16 *Listening and Learning Tour* sessions across the county earlier this year. That work was in addition to their daily tasks and done with the goal of gathering information that will make our work — and our school district — better. I thank every single one of them. We are, indeed, going to be better because of their efforts.

Throughout our school district, we need to show our employees they are valued not just by what we are able to do for them, but

by what we are able to unburden from them and how we are able to harness their strengths. That has been the sentiment behind the two \$1,000 bonuses we have provided to employees this year and the virtual work day we implemented in November, just prior to the Thanksgiving break. It is also the reason we recently amended the school calendar to provide 12-month employees with full Christmas/Winter and Easter/Spring breaks beginning next year. Our Board of Education has been tremendously supportive of these initiatives and we are continuing to examine other ways to show appreciation for our awesome employees.

This document summarizes what I've learned since embarking on my tenure and begins to chart a clearer, more innovative path forward to a place where every student is embraced, where opportunities are created and expanded, and where we focus on bringing to reality five key ideals for everyone involved in our school district: kindness, acceptance, access, equity, and inclusion.

There will be missteps along the way, and there will be initiatives that simply don't work. To get to where we want to go, however, we must have the grace to fail because it is that failure that often leads to the innovation required to achieve success.

I was principal of a prominent engineering program in the Houston Independent School

District as we embarked on a journey to turn cafeteria scraps into usable fuel. Throughout the process, we discovered many, many ways that would not work. Some would say we failed. I would say we learned, we changed course, and we bettered our process. In the end, and in collaboration with Texas A&M University, we succeeded and became the first high school in our state to accomplish that feat.

The fuel of our journey forward must be created together. Everyone has a role in this mission and every person has equal value. I ask for your partnership and perseverance as we set out to become truly great.

Yours in Education,

Mark T. Bedell
Mark T. Bedell, Ed.D.
Superintendent of Schools

**...if we do education
right, it does not
matter how you
show up and where
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you can overcome.**

Goal 1

Developing a Unified School District

– August 24, 2022 –



To develop unified school district governance by creating a transparent, trusting, and collaborative working relationship with the Board of Education

The transition from a fully appointed nine-member Board of Education to a fully elected eight-member Board, accomplished from 2018 to 2020, has not been without its hurdles. I, however, encountered a Board intent – and unanimous – in its desire to move the school district forward and to work with a new Superintendent as quickly as possible to accomplish that.

My earliest conversations with those who hold a key interest in our school district made clear that this was a Board whose prior actions – perhaps more the manner in which they were arrived at than the decisions themselves – had diminished its public credibility.

When members of the Board and I held our first retreat on August 21, 2022, less than two weeks after I arrived in AACPS from Kansas City, I emphasized the need for us to collectively set the example not just for our students, but for our employees and public as well.

Importantly, our conversations from the outset were frank and unreserved. Though there is, as there should be, a diversity of opinions among the members of our Board, there is a commonality in the belief that nothing is impossible if we dedicate ourselves to and focus on the outcome even if we do not agree on every step of the path we travel to get from one point to the other.

I meet with each of our Board members quarterly, with the

Board President bi-weekly, and with the Board's officers just prior to each Board meeting. These conversations, in addition to those conducted less formally, not only enhance the relationship between Board members and the Superintendent but provide opportunities for better understanding both of where we are and where we want to go.

Measuring Success

That process has led directly to the development of an evaluation matrix the Board and I have collaboratively developed and on which my work – our work – will be judged. I have been open with members of our Executive Team about that matrix so that we are all working toward the same goals. The Board's success, my success, and our school district's success are – and should be – aligned.

I have also been pleased to have been joined by Board members at many events around our county. It is important that, as often as possible and practical, they see what I see. Our visits to schools have allowed us to view, from our individual perspectives, instruction in action and to develop common assessments – even if our thoughts on approaches may differ – based on what we see rather than just what we are told.

Engaging the Community

Likewise, the input we have received from the nearly 1,000 people who attended one of our *Listening and Learning Tour* sessions has proved invaluable. Those sessions were proof that complex, well-thought-out feedback can be gained from just three simple questions:

- *What would you say that AACPS does well, and what would you like to see us continue to do?*
- *What would you like to see AACPS do better or eliminate all together?*
- *What new things would you like to see in AACPS?*

Those sessions will be covered in more detail in later goals in this document.

**...nothing is impossible
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agree on every step...**



Feedback from all 16 sessions of Superintendent Dr. Mark Bedell's *Listening and Learning Tour* (www.aacps.org/listeninglearning)

SUPERINTENDENT MARK BEDELL'S LISTENING AND LEARNING TOUR

Superintendent of Schools Dr. Mark Bedell hosted a series of Listening and Learning Tour sessions across the county at 16 schools. Residents from around Anne Arundel County - whether they have a student in Anne Arundel County Public Schools or not - were invited to attend any session and provide their thoughts on a variety of topics related to the school system. County citizens, including parents, students, AACPS employees, business partners, and interested stakeholders who attended contributed their voices which have been included in the responses gathered and the data presented on this website.

Community members provided their responses to 3 focus questions:

1. **What would you say that AACPS does well, and what would you like to see us continue to do?**
2. **What would you like to see AACPS do better or eliminate all together?**
3. **What new things would you like to see in AACPS?**

A graphic illustration summarizing all responses to each question can be found below.

Also below are sample videos from two of the sessions (Southern High School and Tyler Heights Elementary School). Results from individual sessions, by school cluster, can be viewed by clicking on the links on the left of this page.

DATES AND LOCATIONS

Expand All

QUESTION 1 PIE CHART: WHAT WOULD YOU SAY THAT +

Goal 2 Ensuring an Intentional Focus on Instruction



To ensure an intentional focus on instructional programming is conducted to close resource gaps of the lowest performing student groups while determining social and emotional needs for students

One of the data points of which everyone involved in our school district should be most proud is graduation rate. In 2021, AACPS' graduation rate surpassed 90 percent for the first time, with six student groups posting their highest rates ever. More importantly, the rate for every student group increased over a 10-year period, with gaps being narrowed in almost every category. That is the progress we need across the school district in every assessment.

While 33 percent of those who commented at our *Listening and Learning Tour* sessions cited some aspect of our academic structure as a positive in our district, more than 35 percent cited the same topic as something they would like to see improved. (Feedback data at www.aacsp.org/listeninglearning)

That input ranged from a variety of content areas in our curriculum, to the limitations on offerings because of staffing issues, to the need for more diverse avenues of opportunity for students of all abilities in cutting-edge coursework, and more. It also covered the need for more career-oriented course offerings and for fewer constraints like excessive planning time that curtail style, creativity, and flexibility for teachers and prevent them from doing what they do best.

Innovative Approaches

In short, people want innovative and not cookie-cutter approaches. That's a big reason we recommended a change in state law that would eliminate the 180-school-day requirement and leave solely the seat hours requirement as the primary focus in our 2023 Legislative Program. We need to eradicate artificial constraints that keep us from innovating in our schools.

There is, to be clear, near universal acclaim for the amazing job our teachers and school-based personnel do every day for students. There is also appreciation for the many, many central and satellite office employees who have taken positions in classrooms — even temporarily — to help ensure as many certified educators can be in front of our students as possible.

No matter who is in front of our students, we can't know where we need to go without knowing where we are. In my first meetings with members of our Executive Team, I emphasized the need to make deep data dives a staple of our team meetings. We have done so throughout this year to gain a better understanding not just of the data, but of specific student groups within the data as we examine at a granular level some of the reasons for student performance.

We are stymied, to be honest, by the timeline in which we receive results of state assessments. I have asked State Superintendent of Schools Mohammed Choudhury to look into this issue and help school districts like ours receive results far more quickly than is currently the case so that we can act on them and help our students in a more meaningful and timely manner.

Brightspace

Much of the feedback we received — in *Listening and Learning Tour* sessions and elsewhere — revolved around our *Brightspace* Learning Management System. It was immediately apparent to me that significant concerns existed among families, students, and staff.

I asked those with whom I spoke to allow me to evaluate the system over a four-week period and then make some decisions. I did that, and in late September, after conversations with teachers, parents, administrators, and others, including the president of our Teachers Association, we eliminated the requirement for daily posting to *Brightspace* by teachers and eased other requirements. We are still determining whether *Brightspace* is the long-term solution for AACPS.

Curriculum

In order to put us in a position to make the most prudent curricular alterations, we are in the process of engaging with a consultant who will conduct a thorough audit and identify any areas in which we can improve our offerings for students and ease some of the preparation burden that plagues our teachers. It is my hope that the result will be more focused on instruction so teachers are able to spend more time with students in more meaningful ways.

We want a curriculum that truly speaks to the diversity of our school district. All of our students should see themselves reflected positively in our curriculum. And, as our educators have expressed, we need to focus on depth rather than breadth in the material we teach. Additionally, we need to ensure that our teachers and other staff can easily navigate the curriculum.

Professional Development

Along with the results of the audit will come more discussions about ways to fine-tune the professional growth opportunities for staff so they we can build leadership capacity for those who aspire to pursue those avenues and allow teachers

and other school-based personnel to expand their knowledge base to further aid our students.

Blueprint for Maryland's Future

Finally, our work in this area will be dramatically impacted by the requirements of the Blueprint for Maryland's Future. As the implementation is carried out, we will need to adapt to meeting mandates such as changes in the time teachers are in front of students. This makes the need to make our school district more agile and flexible even more crucial.

There is, to be clear, near universal acclaim for the amazing job our teachers and school-based personnel do every day for students.

Special Education

Among the areas that will receive close scrutiny is special education, which has been a significant topic of discussion in many arenas. I, like families and educators alike, am concerned about issues such as limited opportunities for students identified for special educational services and am eager to explore ways to expand those opportunities. The same concerns exists for students identified as gifted and talented.



Goal 3

Increasing Organizational Effectiveness & Efficiency



To increase organizational effectiveness and efficiency by providing first-class support and service to schools, students, parents, and the AACPS community

The first and most effective way to support our schools — and all of our employees — is to rectify the significant pay gaps that exist across our system. A starting teacher salary that ranks 20th out of 24 Maryland school districts, as was the case last August, is embarrassing. An average salary that ranks 15th out of 24 school districts is equally embarrassing.

Addressing Pay Gaps

We need competitive pay for our teachers. We also need competitive pay for bus drivers, custodians, maintenance employees, secretaries, food service workers, and all of the employees who work in this school system. We have employees trying to make ends meet while earning \$15 an hour — the current minimum wage.

The Board's current budget request echoes my recommendation and contains \$80.8 million to address this issue. I am pleased the County Executive has fully funded that in his proposal now before the County Council. That is sufficient, subject to negotiations with applicable bargaining units, for a step increase or step equivalent for all eligible employees and a 6 percent cost-of-living increase for all employees. It also includes a \$2,000 bonus for special education teachers, funding to cover 30 additional minutes of work per day for eligible Unit 4 employees; fulfillment of costs for Blueprint-mandated

stipends for National Board Certified Teachers; the third straight year of a \$5-per-day increase for substitute teachers; and the second consecutive year of a 10 percent COLA for contracted bus drivers.

Internal Feedback

Outside of the compensation arena and separate from each of the *Listening and Learning Tour* sessions, I met with principals in all 13 of our clusters and asked them the same three questions we asked of the community. The result was a variety of invaluable, honest feedback that came from a school operations lens and helped to provide a more complete picture.

I am a part of each month's principals meetings, and those conversations continue to have significant impact on our decisions. I have also met with directors, coordinators, and content area specialists who spoke from their own vantage point about the vast successes we continue to have and the challenges we continue to confront.

While the curriculum audit will identify avenues of opportunity for us to explore, it will be up to our administrative team at central and satellite offices to work with our school-based personnel and arrive at the best ways to implement any changes as we to continue to support our schools. Moreover, our work with employee bargaining units should be collaborative and not confrontational, as it has been

all too often in the past. That is a responsibility we should share.

Joint initiatives like those we arrived at with our Teachers Association and announced in February to help special education teachers should be the norm and not the exception. Put simply, we need to find ways to take the pressure off our teams in schools and unbind them from the constraints that may limit instruction.

Student Wellness and Discipline

We must also more adequately address a growing number of serious offenses committed by students – nearly as many in the first half of this year as in all of last year – that are disrupting our schools and endangering our students. It's no secret that teachers can't teach if they are spending time breaking up confrontations and addressing the rising number of social-emotional issues confronting students.

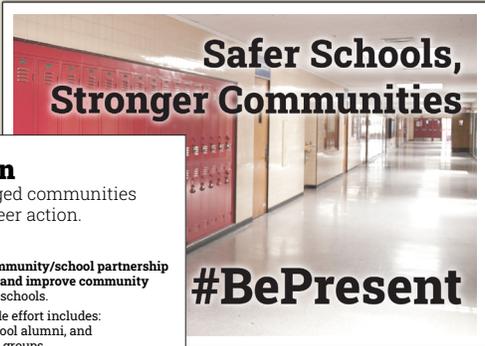
That is why I recommended, and the Board approved in its current budget request, \$2.6 million for 18 social-emotional wellness positions that include four school psychologists, three social workers, three school counselors, two pupil personnel workers, and funding to expand an elementary level alternative education program and create a new alternative site in the Meade cluster.

Departmental budgets were examined in immense detail during the budget request formulation process, with a singular question at the forefront of every discussion: Is this request best for students?

Organizational Structure

To further assist those in our schools on a daily basis, I am changing our organizational structure to bring about better alignment and focus in departments and offices across our system. Those shifts will begin July 1 and will be followed by additional changes once we identify and discuss those impacts.

Bringing the Community Back into Our Schools



Our Vision

To create engaged communities through volunteer action.

Every child you pass in the hall has a story that needs to be heard. Maybe you are the one to hear it.
~Bethany Hill

#BePresent is a community/school partnership designed to increase and improve community relationships within schools.

This community-wide effort includes: business leaders, school alumni, and civic and faith-based groups.



More information

Scan the QR code or contact:
Shawn W. Ashworth, Ed.D., Program Specialist
Safe and Orderly Schools
410.266.3547 | BePresent@aacps.org



#BePresent

The #BePresent initiative...will allow for the re-establishment of connections between school, home and community.

The rise in serious offenses is also why I recently announced the #BePresent initiative through which we are encouraging families, alumni, business and community partners, and members of the public who want to help strengthen bonds with schools to do so by simply showing up in our schools on a scheduled basis. Such a presence will give school administrators more eyes and ears in hallways, etc., and allow students to have a familiar face to which to turn if needed. It also will allow for

re-establishment of connections between school, home and community that have, sadly, eroded in recent years.

This initiative dovetails with student assemblies I've been conducting – and will continue to conduct – in our schools aimed at setting the tone from the top around expectations for learning and school safety. The message needs to be clear and consistent that our focus is on teaching and learning and that we should not allow for distractions from that.

Getting Students to School

Nothing we do in our schools works if we cannot get our students to school. I am immensely proud of the work that our Transportation and Purchasing teams, along with our bus contractors, have done to mitigate the impacts of the bus driver shortage. While we still have much work to do in order to alleviate bus overcrowding and build a driver bench to handle illnesses and the like, the work our teams have done in procuring alternate vehicles and continuing to recruit drivers has been phenomenal. As a result, every one of our routes now has an assigned driver on it.



Goal 4

Creating a Culture of Trust Through Action



To create a culture of trust through action with TEAM AACPS members; to establish positive relationships with students, parents, teachers, principals, staff, and key district leadership, creating a collaborative environment for goal-setting and decision-making to support meeting established expectations for student achievement.

Any sense of trust must be built on the bedrock of value and respect. From my first meetings with our amazing staff, I made clear that my goal was not to simply implement broad-scale change upon my arrival. Rather, it was to take my time, hold conversations with employees in all areas of our organization, evaluate what I saw and heard, and then ascertain what, if any, changes were needed.

The first step is listening

Those conversations have been — and continue to be — critical ones. They are filled not just with rich discussion, but with a broad diversity of opinion in judgment-free settings. They have been held in classrooms, offices, conference rooms, at the bevy of schools I've had the opportunity to visit, and even at athletics and other events I've attended simply as a spectator. I've turned down no chance to receive comment because every piece of it is an ingredient in what I believe will be a masterful recipe for success.

Equally important to what I've heard is what I've seen. I visited 34 schools in the first seven days of the year and have walked through dozens more since that time. The words from custodians, secretaries, teachers, administrators, and students have been free-flowing and expressed with candor. I have asked for honest and accurate assessments, and received it.

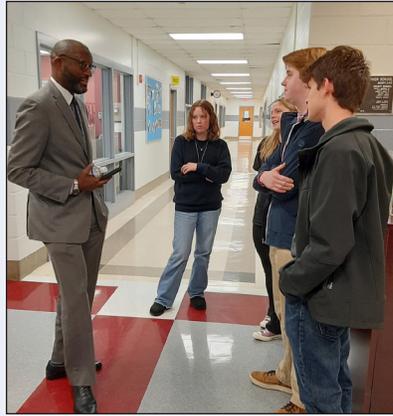
The same holds true for members of the many departments and offices with whom I've met. I've sat with members of our Special Education and Transportation teams, as an example, and asked them to walk me through key issues in their areas. As we seek to innovate, I've sat in classes in our Virtual Academy (the only such institution in the state that acts as its own school). I've attended meetings of our coaches to emphasize the crucial role they play for student-athletes in their care.

Finally, I have asked for earnest two-way conversation and while I have not always agreed with a point of view, I have considered it equally.

Any sense of trust must be built on the bedrock of value and respect.

Student Voice

My meetings with student groups have been particularly impactful. Whether it was at lunch during a school visit, at an assembly to talk about overcoming challenges, or at a meeting of the Superintendent's Teen Advisory, our students have been blunt about their experiences. They like our focus on building community and helping every student feel like they belong. They want us to afford them more flexibility in schedules and more opportunities academically and otherwise. And they want us to do something about discipline so that teachers can do what they signed up to do: *teach*.



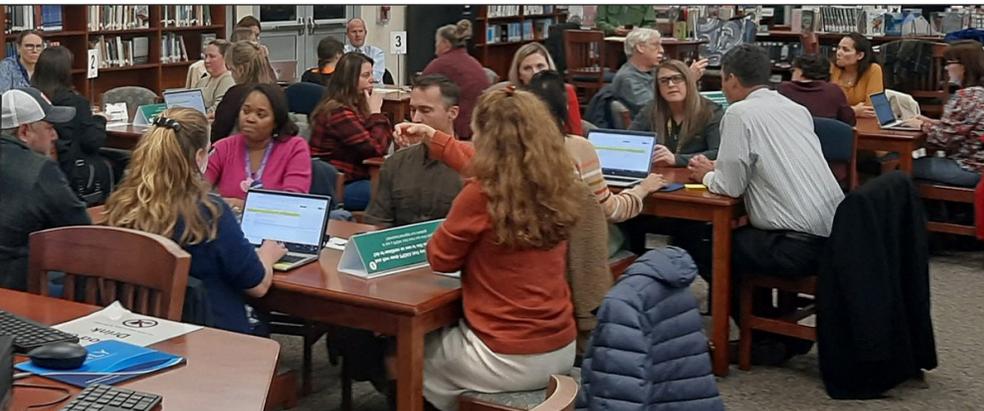
Turning Listening into Action

To listen to our team members is one thing. But listening doesn't build trust. Acting when it is appropriate does. It is for that reason that I proposed — and our Board fully supported — the \$1,000 bonuses we provided to employees in December and again in May. As I said, these are small tokens of appreciation and the first in what I hope and believe are many steps to rectify the many

issues surrounding compensation. We continue to work on that. We also continue work on non-monetary avenues such as the implementation of a virtual work day, which we did in November.

These initiatives and others like them will not change the world overnight, but we must begin to put the oars in the water if we are to turn the tide at all.

Goal 5 Establishing Community Trust & Confidence



To establish trust and confidence from the community at-large by creating opportunities to listen and learn from a multitude of stakeholders who have a vested interest in the school district while engaging stakeholders who aren't currently involved or may have become disengaged from the school system.

Those who are invested in our school system should be valued just as much as the members of our team. As such, I have tried as hard as I could not to turn away any chance to have a conversation with any stakeholder, be they an elected official or simply the parent of a student looking for some answers to questions.

One of my most meaningful interactions came just three days after I set foot in my office for the first time on a visit to two mobile meals sites in the southern portion of our county. I had the chance to just stand and engage with those picking up meals, and I saw the amazing outside-the-classroom impact our school system can have. Families eagerly spoke of the ways such outreach enriched their lives, and of the opportunities that they saw as possible but not yet reality. It has been interactions like those that have stuck with me the most through these first few months because they have produced raw, unrehearsed answers to simple questions about how we can improve outcomes — and lives — for our children.

Acceptance and Inclusion

If we're going to become the great school system I believe we can be, we have to create a true sense of community where students see themselves as belonging in the space they occupy, not needing to adapt to someone else's space. To do that, we simply need to be more accepting and that starts with the ability and willingness to hold simple conversations.

The aspect of applying equal value to those with differing opinions has been hard for some to adjust to, but it is necessary for progress. We can't talk about *everyone* belonging if we don't really mean *everyone*.

So I've met with groups that some have urged me to avoid because avoidance just eradicates any sense of value. More importantly, I want to hear what they have to say. But I've been candid with those in our meetings: Everyone can't get everything they want. That's impossible because the thoughts are sometimes oppositional.

What is possible, though, is for everyone to get *something* they want. There are wins for all of us if we work hard enough to achieve them and if we're willing to find compromise and realize a sparkling truth in what may seem to be a muddy issue: Everyone wants what's best for children. How we go about getting to that point may be different, but the diversity



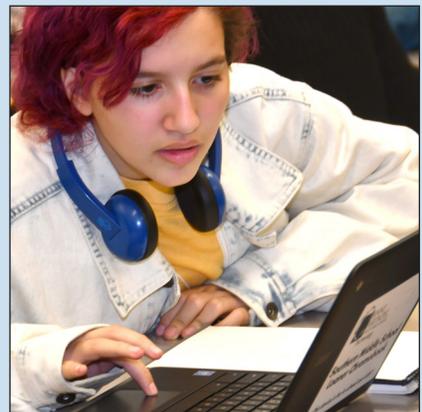
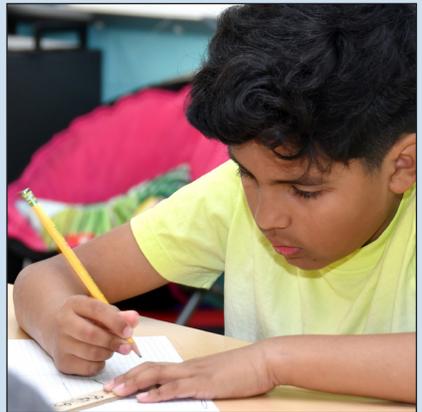
of thought should always be championed just as the diversity of our communities should be.

I've worked hard to relay what I've learned in those conversations as I've met and begun to build relationships with our city, county, and state leaders. It is they who must lead the work in our communities as that piece of the bridge that will bind us together is made stronger. That strength comes from value and a belief that people aren't just heard but listened to.

Overcoming Challenges

There are no challenges that can't be overcome if we're willing to fight hard enough to accomplish that task. We can build together something so much stronger than we can construct individually. Our communities play a large role and have a huge responsibility in the success of our children. We must continue the conversation with that in mind.

There are wins for all of us if we work hard enough to achieve them and if we're willing to find compromise...





We have a responsibility as a school district and, just as importantly, as a community, to make sure that every single one of our kids grows socially, emotionally, and academically.





**I want for every single one of our
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ANNE ARUNDEL
COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Mark T. Bedell, Ed.D., Superintendent of Schools

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