

As the excitement of a new school year approaches, school divisions across Hampton Roads are grappling with three major challenges: persistent learning loss, a critical shortage of teachers, and the impending expiration of pandemic related Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund (ESSER) funding. It is imperative that we, as educators, parents and leaders, find creative and sustainable solutions to address these issues.

Challenge No. 1: Pandemic learning loss

A recent national study by academic assessment company NWEA revealed that growth during the 2023–2024 school year lagged behind pre-pandemic trends in nearly all grades. This underscores the stalled progress previously observed by the NWEA, indicating that pandemic recovery remains elusive. The gap between pre-COVID and COVID-era test score averages widened in 2023–2024 in nearly all K-12 grades by an average of 36% in reading and 18% in math. On average, students will require an additional 4.8 months of schooling in reading and 4.3 months in math to catch up. On top of this, chronic-absenteeism is exacerbating learning-loss, especially in Portsmouth where it hovers around 23%.

Challenge No. 2: Teacher shortage in Virginia

The Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) provides an annual report on the state’s most needed teaching positions to the Virginia General Assembly. The Staffing and Vacancy Report highlights “critical staffing shortages,” defined as either a shortage in specific subjects identified in an annual survey of school divisions or a job vacancy for which a school division receives three or fewer qualified applicants.

For the upcoming 2024-2025 school year, Virginia has identified 10 critical shortage teaching endorsement areas, including elementary education pre-K-6, special education pre-K-12, middle education grades 6-8, English (secondary), science (secondary),

The VDOE is partnering with the National Center for Grow-Your-Own to develop registered apprenticeship programs that help schools recruit teacher candidates from their local communities. and mathematics grades 6-12 (Algebra 1).

Aspiring teachers can include paraprofessionals and other school

staff, high school seniors who are dual-enrolled, and career switchers interested in teaching. Earlier this year, VDOE awarded \$1.52 million in grants to 24 school divisions to create these apprenticeship programs. During the 2023-2024 academic year, 28 divisions in Virginia launched grow-your-own programs, supporting 165 teacher apprentices.

Challenge No. 3: The ESSER cliff

ESSER represents both a challenge and a potential solution. According to the VDOE, as of August, school divisions across Hampton Roads have between as low as 15% and as high as 72% in ESSER III funds that need to be allocated before the end of September. This presents a critical opportunity for school divisions to enhance student support through high-impact tutoring programs. School divisions can implement these programs, ensuring that no funding is left unused, but after the September funding deadline, ESSER funds can no longer be used to pay school employees, including for tutoring services.

A comprehensive solution: GYO + high-impact tutoring

A grow-your-own program can help build a strong teacher pipeline by empowering trained tutors to work within their communities while earning their bachelor’s degrees. These future educators can successfully transition to full-time teachers within the schools and divisions they already serve. Divisions also benefit from teacher resources to start, scale and sustain a high-impact tutoring program. A grow-your-own tutoring program is a cost-effective, sustainable way to support students while growing a teacher pipeline. The return on this investment includes both helping to build a teacher pipeline and mitigating learning loss, which we can all support.

Education is paramount to securing our future. With ESSER money expiring, the General Assembly should provide additional state appropriations earmarked for evidence-based grow-your-own tutoring that adheres to the National Student Support Accelerators standards which defines effective, high-impact tutoring. Until the data shows we have closed the gaps, we still have work to do.

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