

**MINUTES OF THE FEBRUARY 3, 2026, CITY COUNCIL AND HCPS
SPECIAL JOINT MEETING**

A SPECIAL joint meeting of the Hopewell Council and the Hopewell City Public Schools was held on Tuesday, February 3, 2026, at 5:30 p.m.

PRESENT:

John B. Partin, Mayor
Rita Joyner, Vice Mayor
Michael Harris, Councilor
Ronnie Ellis, Councilor
Malik Wheat, Councilor
Lovena Rapole, Councilor

SB-1 Assessment of Year-Round Schooling – Joint Business

During the joint meeting, leadership emphasized the importance of holding regular collaborative sessions between the City and the School Division to strengthen partnerships, improve communication, and advance capital projects. It was noted that these ongoing meetings have been instrumental in moving projects forward through funding and execution. The Superintendent expressed appreciation for the City's engagement, stating that this was the first time in over a decade that City Council had asked substantive questions about the overall state of the schools beyond budget matters. The School Division underscored its view that education is a community investment and that the City and School Division function as one team, sharing both challenges and responsibilities. School principals, directors, and administrators were introduced and recognized for their direct impact on students and daily school operations. After introductions and a meal, the Superintendent provided a detailed overview of the division's balanced calendar model, explaining that it redistributes instructional time across the year by shortening summer break and adding intersessions while still meeting the state requirement of 180 instructional days. These intersessions offer both remediation and enrichment opportunities, are largely teacher-designed, and embed academic instruction such as reading, writing, and problem-solving into hands-on, experiential learning.

The Superintendent reported that the balanced calendar has been recognized by the Virginia Department of Education, with the division presenting its work to the state and hosting other divisions interested in learning from Hopewell's model. It was explained that Hopewell is currently the only division in Virginia implementing a system-wide balanced calendar, largely due to its smaller size and ability to avoid complications associated with multiple schedules. Discussion followed regarding participation rates, costs, academic outcomes, and sustainability. Recent intersessions recorded approximately 1,500 student registrations in the fall and over 1,300 for the upcoming session. While participation is voluntary, all courses are academically focused, with remediation embedded alongside life skills and enrichment. Questions were raised about test score impacts and benchmarks for success; administration acknowledged that division-wide test score gains are not yet fully reflected but shared that internal data shows growth among students who participate in intersessions. Challenges cited included voluntary attendance limiting reach to the students most in need, lingering learning loss from COVID-19, and financial constraints that have led other divisions to discontinue balanced calendars. The Superintendent explained that Hopewell proactively planned for sustainability by restructuring teacher contracts to include intersession instruction without requiring additional local funding if state support decreases. Surveys of parents, teachers, and students have shown mixed but balanced feedback, with higher support among those more familiar with the program. Administration noted that the division is approaching the five-year mark of implementation and will begin more formal assessments, surveys, and potential program refinements to determine long-term effectiveness while continuing to prioritize student opportunity, remediation, and equity.

SB-2 Review and Address Concerns Related to Recent Student Test Scores –
Joint Business

During the meeting, discussion continued regarding the balanced calendar and its role in supporting Hopewell's students, particularly given the community's socioeconomic realities. School leadership

emphasized that while it is impossible to definitively compare outcomes between a traditional and balanced calendar, the division is confident that a traditional calendar would reduce instructional time, limit student experiences, and eliminate critical opportunities for supervision, remediation, and enrichment. The balanced calendar was framed as a protective and supportive structure for students who might otherwise lack safe, structured environments during extended breaks. Council members connected this discussion to broader concerns about declining academic preparedness nationwide, citing university-level data showing ongoing declines in math, reading, and writing skills, as well as reduced retention in STEM fields. This prompted calls for clearer articulation of joint initiatives between the City and the School Division to strengthen not only test performance but also students' cognitive, creative, and critical-thinking skills needed for long-term success.

School administration then provided an in-depth presentation on the Commonwealth's new accountability system, explaining that recent changes shift the focus away from a single benchmark score and toward a broader profile that includes achievement, growth, attendance, graduation readiness, and subgroup performance. It was clarified that Hopewell schools are fully accredited, though some are designated as "off track" or "needing intensive support" due primarily to the performance of specific subgroups, particularly students with disabilities. Leaders explained that under the new system, weak subgroup performance can significantly impact a school's rating even when overall scores are close to the "on track" threshold. Historical data was shared to contextualize current performance, noting that Hopewell was trending upward prior to COVID-19 but experienced sharp declines afterward—particularly in math, where pass rates fell dramatically. Administration stressed that data is used as feedback rather than a verdict and that the division now relies on multiple measures throughout the year to identify root causes, guide instruction, and adjust interventions in real time rather than reacting only after end-of-year results.

Significant attention was given to instructional capacity and staffing challenges. Leadership reported that approximately one-third of teachers are not fully licensed or endorsed, a situation attributed to a nationwide teacher shortage rather than local conditions alone. Council members raised concerns about how this affects instructional quality, community perception, and family decisions to leave the division. Administrators acknowledged these challenges while emphasizing ongoing investments in onboarding, professional development, and layered support for teachers and instructional leaders. Comparisons to surrounding jurisdictions were requested to better understand how Hopewell's staffing situation aligns regionally. The division also discussed financial constraints, noting that while incentives such as bonuses for hard-to-staff subject areas were previously offered using federal COVID funds, those options are no longer available. Despite limited resources, the division continues to invest heavily in student support services, including spending over \$500,000 annually to provide licensed clinicians and behavioral support staff in every school to address post-COVID mental health, behavioral, and social-emotional needs.

The conversation broadened to emphasize that many barriers to learning extend beyond the classroom, including housing instability, food insecurity, attendance challenges, and changing family dynamics. Speakers underscored that schools increasingly serve as the safest and most stable environments for many children, providing not only instruction but also meals, clothing, transportation, and emotional support. Balanced calendar programming was again highlighted as especially critical in this context, offering year-round supervision and learning opportunities that many families may not otherwise access. Participants repeatedly stressed that education is a shared responsibility requiring a community-wide approach, with calls for the City and School Division to work together to improve housing, perception, wraparound services, and overall quality of life in Hopewell to attract and retain teachers and inspire students.

The presentation concluded with recognition of measurable successes, particularly at Hopewell High School, where investments in alternative

pathways and student support systems have led to notable improvements in school climate, safety, discipline, and staff morale. Survey data showed double-digit gains in students' sense of safety and confidence in school leadership, along with reductions in disciplinary infractions. Administration emphasized the importance of celebrating these gains to build momentum while continuing to address persistent challenges. In closing, school leaders reaffirmed that Hopewell schools are accredited, acknowledged that significant work remains, and requested continued collaboration and support from the City Council. The overarching message centered on shared accountability, community partnership, and the belief that sustained, collective investment in children—academically, socially, and emotionally—is essential to Hopewell's future success.

SB-3 Financial Plan to Address Capital Expenditure Needs – Joint Business

The discussion focused on the school system's urgent and long-term capital needs, particularly HVAC replacements, and the lack of a clear, sustainable financial plan to address them. City and school leaders acknowledged that while capital needs have been presented multiple times—including an estimated \$11.3 million HVAC need reduced by a \$3.39 million grant, leaving a \$7.9 million gap—there remains uncertainty about how these costs will ultimately be financed if state funding does not materialize. The city emphasized that it cannot assume additional debt due to existing obligations and warned against relying solely on General Assembly appropriations without a backup plan, as this could affect credit ratings and interest rates. Discussion referenced the city's past experience with state-mandated financial oversight and project management, suggesting a similar, more structured financial planning approach for school capital projects, including phased implementation and forecasting.

School leaders expressed frustration, noting that budget shortfalls over many years have already resulted in the loss of more than 200 positions, making further budget reductions to cover debt unrealistic. They stressed that by law, the School Board must identify needs and seek

funding, and that HVAC failures pose a critical health and learning issue for students, with temporary fixes being costly and ineffective. Participants agreed that HVAC remains the most urgent priority, especially with summer approaching, and that delays risk unsafe learning conditions. City representatives affirmed their willingness to collaborate and stated that discussions are already underway with financial advisors and state partners to explore bonding, alternative financing, and holistic funding options that consider the full capital improvement plan rather than isolated projects.

The group agreed that next steps should include coordinated meetings among key city and school officials to align financial planning, debt strategies, and contingency scenarios if state funding falls short. There was also strong encouragement for broad advocacy at the General Assembly, including personal outreach to members of appropriations and finance committees, emphasizing the direct connection between facility conditions and student achievement. Participants highlighted recent research showing that investments in school facilities can equate to six to eight additional months of learning, reinforcing the urgency of action. The meeting closed with consensus that while funding challenges remain significant, opportunities exist if all parties continue working collaboratively and proactively.

SB-4 Operational Review Plan – Joint Business

City Council and the Hopewell City School Board agreed to table this discussion until further research and discussion among the two entities and other relevant parties are completed. The meeting concluded with a brief procedural discussion regarding public participation. Before adjournment, it was noted that several individuals in attendance wished to offer public comments. A request was made to allow each speaker up to three minutes to address the group. The members present agreed with this proposal, and public comment was approved to proceed within the three-minute time limit.

Sha'rah Fuller, Resident

Ms. Fuller, a parent of five children enrolled across Hopewell City Public Schools, provided public comment highlighting both her personal experiences and the strengths of the school system. She noted that her children attend or have attended Hopewell High School, Harry E. James, and Woodlawn, and shared that one of her children was accepted into the Governor's School CodeRVA, which she described as a phenomenal opportunity. Drawing from her background living in multiple districts and states, Ms. Fuller stated that while public education systems are inherently challenging, the level of care and dedication demonstrated by Hopewell educators is exceptional and cannot be replaced through funding alone. She cited specific examples of teachers and administrators going above and beyond for students and families, including educators reading to students virtually in the evenings and staff members who consistently check on students by name and show genuine concern for their well-being.

Ms. Fuller shared that this level of care was especially meaningful during a recent period of personal grief following the loss of her mother, explaining that the support her child received through virtual engagement eased the emotional burden for her family. She strongly advocated for maintaining the balanced calendar, noting that the structure of shorter breaks throughout the year helps families manage both academic continuity and financial strain. She explained that long summer breaks significantly increase household food costs and disproportionately impact families with limited resources, emphasizing that eliminating the balanced calendar would place additional hardship on many parents.

She further addressed student achievement and test scores, asserting that these outcomes are more closely tied to parental involvement than to the performance or commitment of educators. Referencing her involvement on the HRHA board, her role as a parent advisory committee chair at Hopewell High School, and her work with community organizations supporting families, Ms. Fuller stated that many parents do not consistently engage with schools or participate in available support programs. She highlighted numerous examples of

educators and school staff providing direct support to students and families, including distributing food and supplies and attending extracurricular events outside of regular hours. Ms. Fuller concluded by emphasizing that Hopewell City Public Schools are staffed with dedicated educators who deeply care for their students and urged the board not to eliminate the balanced calendar, noting that it makes a meaningful, positive difference for children and families in the community.

Resident, (name unknown)

A second public commenter, an alumnus of Hopewell City Public Schools and a mentor actively involved with Hopewell City government and multiple boards across Central Virginia, spoke in strong support of the school system. The speaker agreed with the prior comments, emphasizing that Hopewell has a unique culture that fosters deep care for students. Drawing from both professional experience and personal observation, the speaker stated that families who consider leaving the district often return because of the intentional support Hopewell provides. Although the speaker's own children currently attend school in Prince George County, they noted that many of the personal touches present in Hopewell—such as staff consistently checking on students and educators reading to children during evening hours—are not offered in neighboring districts.

The speaker stressed the importance of direct advocacy and encouraged parents, staff, and community members to actively lobby elected officials rather than relying solely on emails or online communication. They emphasized that engaging in the political process is essential to securing funding and support for students, regardless of political affiliation, and noted that local delegates and senators have expressed interest in better serving Hopewell but require clear communication from the community about its needs. Acknowledging the demanding workload of school staff, the speaker voiced hope that more parents would work collaboratively with the school system instead of opposing it, and cautioned against the negative impact of misinformation on social media.

The commenter urged the district and community to more openly promote the successes of Hopewell City Public Schools, particularly its accreditation status, noting that many residents mistakenly believe the district is not accredited. They called for a collective effort to publicly recognize the hard work of students, teachers, and staff, and encouraged city council members to continue advocating on behalf of the school system with state officials. The public comment concluded with a message of unity, emphasizing that the schools, city government, and community must operate as one team working toward the success of Hopewell's children. Following the conclusion of public comments, a motion to adjourn the meeting was made.

ADJOURNMENT

Respectfully Submitted,


Bishelya Howard, City Clerk


Johnny Partin, Mayor