

2021 State of the Schools Address



**Jason Moretz, 2021 Chairman
Roanoke County School Board
Wednesday, November 10, 2021**

Good morning, I'm Jason Moretz, chairman of the Roanoke County School Board.

I'd like to thank Chairman Peters for the opportunity to give this brief update on our schools this morning.

As has been expressed by members of the board of supervisors many times over the years, Roanoke County Public Schools is the crown jewel of Roanoke County. Our reputation for outstanding instruction from outstanding teachers brings families to Roanoke County from across the nation and beyond.

It takes a great deal of work, dedication, and investment to keep this crown jewel polished and shining brightly.

First, I'd like to thank my fellow board members for all their hard work this year. I'd especially like to thank David Wymer, who returned to the board on a temporary basis while the citizens of the Catawba district elected a new representative. Thank you, David

Let me begin by stating that, despite the unprecedented challenges of the past 18 months, and thanks to the resilience and support of students, staff, parents and the community, the state of Roanoke County Public Schools is strong.

School divisions across Virginia have borne much of the brunt of the challenges of the pandemic, as they have attempted to balance the needs of continued learning and safety.

From the beginning, when schools were allowed to reopen in August 2020, our school leadership team, under the direction of our superintendent, Dr. Ken Nicely, were able to provide in-person instruction for students in addition to online options. Roanoke County Public Schools is only one of a handful of districts in Virginia to accomplish this feat while continuously moving forward throughout the school year to include more and more in-person opportunities for students.

This year, under the theme of Shifting Gears, Moving Forward, public schools in Roanoke County are charging full-steam ahead to meet students where they are academically and provide needed support as we continue to implement the vision of our C-Change Framework.

We recognize some students still have unfinished learning to do, particularly some who elected for 100-percent online instruction. We developed the WIN (or What I Need) program to directly meet the remediation needs of students to bring them back up to speed on instruction, while simultaneously keeping all students moving forward.

As articulated by our C-Change Framework, both climate and learning culture play key roles in supporting student learning, and include the values of kindness, respect, and responsibility. Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, or PBIS, is an evidence-based framework that supports the academic, social, emotional and behavioral competence of all students by setting clear expectations.

There are three main keys of the PBIS program – Be Safe, Be Respectful and Be Responsible. We are using this program to focus on social and emotional learning, school safety, trauma, and equity of opportunity. Through PBIS we're also working to prevent substance abuse and bullying by setting and teaching positive expectations and accountability. It's all about creating a great environment for learning for all students – and that leads to academic success.

The proof of this success can be found in the Class of 2021. More than 95-percent of our seniors graduated on time, well above the state average. Roanoke County has one of the highest graduation rates in the state for large school divisions and the highest among large school divisions in the western half of the state.

Also in 2021, Roanoke County Public Schools was among the first school districts in the Commonwealth to earn the distinction as a "School Division of Innovation" by the Virginia Department of Education.

Roanoke County Public Schools is working to prepare our students to be Opportunity Ready – ready to take advantage of the wide array of opportunities that come after our students graduate. We're proud to announce today that we are in the final phases of developing a new Opportunity Ready Certification that students may earn along with their high school diploma. This certification verifies that a student has developed the key skills of citizenship, collaboration, communication, creativity and critical thinking as described in our Profile of a Graduate.

This is where you come in.

We're looking for businesses and higher education institutions to partner with us. When you see a future applicant with the Opportunity Ready certification from Roanoke County Public Schools, you can be assured that this is a graduate that will be a valuable employee or college student and we hope you will give this applicant additional consideration. We're putting our reputation behind this certification, and we hope you'll support this effort.

We also are looking for your help to expand opportunities for our students. In 2017, Roanoke County Public Schools developed a very successful student registered apprenticeship program, and have since expanded this program to include Salem and Roanoke City schools. Registered apprentices work in a paid part-time position at your business, while also working towards an industry-specific certification. The program currently includes 10 partner businesses, but we need more apprenticeship opportunities. Some of our current business partners are represented today and we thank them for being part of our team. We hope you will join us. To learn more, contact the career and technical education department at any of the Roanoke Valley school districts.

Career and technical education is a high priority in Roanoke County Public Schools. Many of the positions your businesses are looking to fill don't require a four-year education. We're working to help our students and parents see the value of all kinds of career pathways. Some pathways begin with a college degree, but many more do not.

In the last decade we've developed many programs in response to the changes in workforce needs including cybersecurity, game design, introduction to nursing and emergency medical technician. And these are just the most recent CTE opportunities – we have all sorts of CTE programs that lead to all sorts of different career pathways.

Just like our student registered apprenticeship program, we need to expand our opportunities in career and technical education. This is no more important than at the Burton Center for Arts and Technology. Next year, the Burton Center will be 60 years old. While we have some schools that are older, they have been significantly renovated. The Burton Center has not. Each year, we turn away hundreds of students because we don't have the space to expand or add classes. These are hundreds of students that don't have the opportunity to work to earn industry certifications, and receive advanced instruction in CTE areas, and the arts.

Students that are admitted into the Burton Center programs need the space to not only learn and develop the skills specific to their program, but also modern space to develop customer-service skills, business skills and artistic skills related to their program.

It's long past time to build a bigger and better Burton.

We are working right now with the Board of Supervisors and a Burton Center Citizens Advisory Committee, appointed by both boards, that is developing and examining new opportunities for Burton. We understand workforce development is something your businesses rely on, and we want to be able to help provide that workforce. This is an ongoing project, and we'll need your support to make this a reality.

In the meantime, we're hard at work on renovations at William Byrd High School. This is an exciting project to expand and finally renovate the home of the Terriers. We look forward to completing this project in summer of 2023.

On behalf of the Roanoke County School Board, I'd like to thank the Board of Supervisors for their continued support of our schools. We're incredibly fortunate in Roanoke County for the strong relationship between the school board and board of supervisors. You don't find that in many other localities and we're proof that working together, we can continue to make Roanoke County the best place in Virginia and in the nation to live, work, learn and play.

Thank you.