Jonathan Young, School Board Member (4th District) Proposed **Safe and Loving School Cultures Plan**

to **address the systemic violence, behavior problems, and safety and welfare deficit** in our schools.

Summary:

**A.** Adopted in September 2018, The Richmond Public Schools’ **Dreams 4RPS Strategic Plan** constituted a five year plan to expire in 2023.

**B.** What is enclosed herein constitutes a comprehensive proposal to **update, refine, and augment Safe and Loving School Cultures priority.**

**C.** This proposal aims to **address the systemic violence, behavior problems, and safety and welfare deficit** in our schools.

**D.** Any effort to improve safety and welfare must begin with an acknowledgment that **what RPS is doing now is not working**.

**E.** Safe and loving cultures should be reordered to constitute priority 1 in recognition that **none of the other RPS priorities are possible absent safety and welfare**.

**F.** Addressing the safety and welfare deficit in our schools **must treat every child in RPS with love and respect**.

Safety and Welfare Initiatives:

I. Prohibit student access to personal cellular phone devices

All middle and high schools shall prohibit student access to personal cellular phone devices while inside a school building between the first and last bell of the day. School(s) shall either adopt a requirement that students lock their personal cell phones in a portable device that is retained on the student for the duration of the day OR adopt a requirement that students lock said devices in a stationary fixed asset like e.g. new safes or lockers. Alternatively, should a school identify a preferred third option relevant to prohibiting student access to cell phones, said school may adopt so long as the condition included in the initial sentence herein is met. All requisite funds shall be allocated to any school in accordance with the option selected by the school to include fully paying for either portable or fixed means to preclude student access to cell phones. Students shall have access to personal cell phones up to the first bell and subsequent to the last bell while in buildings. Nothing herein should be construed to preclude student access to cell phones when not inside a school building nor shall students be prohibited from requesting access to school phones in administrative offices.

**Cell phones constitute a principal threat to student’s safety and welfare.**  Teachers, parents, building administrators, and even students regularly cite cell phones relevant to threats. In fact, one secondary principal identified that 80 percent of all behavior and discipline problems originated from the cell phone.

Cell phones are **regularly used to cyber bully, incite riots, share inappropriate photos of students engaged in lewd acts,** etc. It should be noted that because RPS seemingly is unable to adequately address bullying, the preceding often materializes in assaults on students. Also of note, cellphones often preclude any learning in the classroom because of constant disruption. Additionally, recurring studies have cited cell phones as a threat to students’ welfare because of what said studies cite pertinent to addiction. In fact, numerous school districts are litigating relevant to this concern.

II. Scale partnership(s) with social-emotional support providers

Already RPS invests in partners relevant to mental health and trauma informed practices including e.g. Child Savers, Richmond Behavioral Health Authority, Communities in Schools and Stop Child Abuse Now (SCAN). Reporting relevant to the 2022 budget cited for example that …. *“During the pandemic, ChildSavers has held over 1,100 therapy sessions for close to 100 RPS students across these ten schools. ……. Currently, RBHA serves 490 students and 136 parents/guardians across all RPS schools. …… CIS has added four new school sites (bringing the total to 36 schools) and doubled capacity at some (for example, Wythe HS and River City MS now have two CIS coordinators). …… SCAN has increased its support to all schools in RPS.”*

This proposal aims to scale the RPS partnership with the four aforementioned providers. The objective regards outsourcing additional trauma informed care to organizations that unlike RPS have demonstrated a track record of success and include in their principal mission social-emotional supports. Specifically, this plan proposes an **annual recurring budget transfer to these four organizations of an additional $1 million** in aggregate to be divided between the four groups as allocated by the School Board. To pay for the increased budget outlay of $1 million a year to these organizations, RPS will correspondingly reduce reliance on RPS staff by $1 million a year.

A disproportionate percentage of RPS students arrive to school having experienced circumstances that no one would wish on anyone and surely not on a child. What is more, RPS too often compounds the problem by not meeting the child where they are at and because of it failing to adequately provide a safe and loving culture within the school, and often only “warehousing” children seemingly unable to treat persons like individuals with individual needs and wants.

 III. Prioritize Threat Assessment Team and evaluate every threat

State statute obligates RPS to adopt policies relevant to Threat Assessment Teams; RPS Policy 6-2.11 provides for a Team for “each” school. In reporting to the School Board on February 6, 2023 it was cited that a “significant” threat to students or staff would constitute the impetus for a Threat Assessment Team review. This proposal would **change Policy 6-2.11 to require a Threat Assessment Team review of “all” threats** to students or staff. Also of note, the Threat Assessment Team classifies threats as “low risk, moderate, high risk, or imminent.” This plan would require that all moderate, high risk, or imminent threats be immediately shared with the School Board. Additionally, **any moderate, high risk, or imminent threats would require immediate notification to parents and teachers** that a Threat Assessment Team at a specific school had identified a threat and the classification but because disclosing additional information would violate students’ rights, disclosure would be limited to an alert that a threat had been identified along with the classification.

It is unconscionable that parents, students, and teachers are not alerted that a Threat Assessment Team at a specific school has identified a threat. This proposal aims to balance the need to protect students’ rights with the need to keep students and teachers safe.

IV. Extend the school day by 30 minutes for “play”

Children are not robots and welfare and mental health cannot be adequately achieved if inside all day staring at the same four walls. Recurring studies point to the need to take a break, to get outside, to celebrate the outdoors, and to play! This proposal would l**engthen the school day for all schools by 30 minutes to be used exclusively for play.** At the elementary level recess would be extended and additional time would be allotted for dance, gaming, etc. and at the secondary level students would be afforded 30 minutes of additional time pertinent to outdoors, sports, dance, music, gaming, etc. At the risk of pointing out the obvious, the 30 minutes of additional “play” should not be reserved for the end of the stay at school but instead incorporated within the day. It is also important to note that play should NOT be construed to be anything less than learning. Play and learning are synonymous and irrespective of if recess or if gaming or if dance, etc. play constitutes learning and learning amounts to play. Disciplines like the arts encompassing what can be characterized as play are rigorous studies equivalent with any other study. The focus of this proposal however is to provide 30 minutes of true play absent prioritization of curriculum or assessment, etc.

Related, RPS will commence this initiative with **construction of 5 outdoor classrooms** in 2023-2024 at a cost not to exceed $20,000 per classroom or $100,000 altogether for the next fiscal year. Principals will be encouraged to afford teachers the opportunity to leverage the outdoor classroom along with other outdoor spaces. It is important to note that many campuses already have existing space that amounts to an outdoor classroom and more are being developed.

Extending the day by 30 minutes regards the 2024-2025 school year and would necessitate an increase in compensation for teachers/staff.

V. Increase the percentage of students walking and biking to school

Richmond Public Schools will partner with both local and national safe routes non-profits to increase the percentage of students walking and biking to school. RPS currently buses two in three students to school but the division shall set an objective for a year over year increase of 5% in students walking and/or biking to school with a goal to **increase students walking/biking by 25% within five years.** RPS will outlay no less than $100,000 a year for a period of five years to commence in 2023-2024 to total $500,000. RPS will expend these monies only if it can secure a two for one match from a) public dollars including federal/state/local and b) private dollars including non-profits/corporations/individuals; together this $1.5 million shall be spent on public infrastructure improvements to allow for pedestrian and bicycle traffic to and from school.

Threats to our students’ welfare include poor health. The aim of this initiative is to increase students’ mobility and encourage more outdoor exploration and time outside.

VI. Adopt baby wrap for elementary students in need of extra support

There is currently very little alternative programming for elementary age students that cause recurring “serious” disruptions in school. Too frequently a very small percentage of elementary age students are responsible for an over-sized percentage of disruptions in school including e.g. assaults on teachers, other students, etc. This proposal proposes to pilot an **alternative space reserved for 25 students that constitute recurring “serious” disruptions** in a traditional school and instead provide extra support. Specifically, classrooms shall include a student/teacher ratio of 5 to 1. Students shall be identified by building leadership in consultation with teachers and parents and only subsequent exhausting all other measures within the home school. What has been **affectionately referred to as “baby wrap” by at least one School Board member** would include retaining other supports if and when selected for an alternative education space. The projected cost is $400,000 + ancillary costs including e.g. transportation. It should be noted that the aim of this alternative education space is not punitive but instead intended to provide supports that may be difficult in a traditional school setting.

VII. Double enrollment opportunities in alternative school for grades 6-12

RPS contracts with Camelot to operate the Spartan Academy or alternative education space for grades 6-12 located on Leigh Street. Enrollment is limited to 162 students and incurs a cost slightly under $2 million a year. Capacity contingent on the contract along with space limitations in the building on Leigh Street limit enrollment opportunities for grades 6-12 students that can benefit most from a school that has a track record of reducing behavior problems within school. This proposal increases expenditures to Camelot to the total amount of $4 million **doubling the number of students allowed to attend or the equivalent of 324.** It should be noted that the Leigh Street space currently houses administrative offices that would need to be relocated to another RPS property. The increase in cost is $2 million a year.

VIII. Prioritization of relationships

In an effort to prioritize relationships in acknowledgment that safety and welfare are dependent on it, measures like e.g. looping and bridge classrooms shall be adopted on a wide scale for elementary. At the secondary level, home room teachers will retain their same cohort for the duration of the students’ stay meaning that the teacher loops with the students just for homeroom. All efforts shall be made to **diminish what can perhaps best be described as a Henry Ford assembly line approach** in the school pertinent to students and instead adopt a project manager approach.

IX. Zero excuses for guns and knives

**At the beginning of February of this year already 43 weapons had been confiscated** in RPS schools. This initiative would adopt a new policy that precludes a student from attending in-person instruction if proven to have a gun or knife on campus. Instead, online instruction would be made available to said student contingent on School Board approval.

X. Increase in random drug and weapons sweeps

Already the Superintendent begrudgingly recommended installation of additional metal detectors. This School Board member joins the Superintendent in reluctantly supporting additional metal detectors but because too many weapons are in our schools the devices are warranted. However, an increase in safety measures should not be reserved to metal detectors but should include an increase in random drug and weapons searches both inside and outside of the building but on school property. **Narcotics are nearly ubiquitous on RPS secondary properties** prompting a much more vigorous approach to the problem.

Budget for 2023-2024:

$2.5 million for operations + TBD for capital costs