Five local mayors sign letter urging better state funding for schools

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State funding for Chesapeake schools is down roughly $27 million from seven years ago.

So although school officials are cautiously optimistic they'll receive a big budget boost this season, Chesapeake Mayor Alan Krasnoff wanted to send this reminder to lawmakers in Richmond: You have a responsibility to adequately fund the state's public schools.

Last week, all five South Hampton Roads mayors and more than 100 other officials across Virginia's Urban Crescent – a stretch from the eastern part of the state up to Northern Virginia – sent a letter to Gov. Terry McAuliffe and other state lawmakers, urging more money for Virginia's schools.

Krasnoff noted the Virginia Constitution says the General Assembly will provide a system of free public schooling throughout the state. The Assembly "shall seek to ensure that an educational program of high quality is established and continually maintained," it reads.

"The General Assembly needs to do it," Krasnoff said this week.

Since fiscal year 2009, the commonwealth has cut its funding for public education by more than $1 billion, the letter says. Compared with other states, Virginia is in the top

10 for per capita and median household income, but in the bottom 10 for public education funding.

That has put a strain on schools, said Dan Edwards, Virginia Beach's School Board chairman, who signed the letter. His division has fewer teachers and increased class sizes, he said.

Localities have stepped up, raising taxes at times to provide for schools. But that can't totally supplant state resources, Suffolk Mayor Linda Johnson said.

"You can only go back to your constituents so many times," Johnson said.

McAuliffe's budget proposal would increase state funding for schools. Chesapeake Superintendent James Roberts said earlier this month it could provide his division a boost of more than $14.1 million from the current budget.

General Assembly members on both sides of the political aisle have consistently said this budget season that school funding is a top priority for them as well. State Del. Chris Jones, a Republican who represents parts of Chesapeake and Suffolk, said lawmakers have a commitment to public education. State Sen. Kenny Alexander, a Democrat whose district includes parts of Chesapeake and Norfolk, said an added investment is crucial.

"As we look at growing our economy, an educated, highly trained, highly skilled workforce is going to be essential," said Alexander, who is running for mayor of Norfolk.

Virginia Beach Mayor Will Sessoms is optimistic about what he has heard out of Richmond. He also agrees such an investment is needed.

"We cannot let the quality of our schools go down one bit," Sessoms said. "Because it's our calling card."

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