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State Board Approves Labor Day Waiver for Petersburg *Decision Allows Year-Round Programs at Peabody Middle & A.P. Hill Elementary*

The Virginia Board of Education voted unanimously Thursday to grant a Labor-Day waiver to Petersburg Public Schools, allowing the division to begin year-round school programs at Peabody Middle School and A.P. Hill Elementary School.

Petersburg is implementing year-round instruction at Peabody Middle and A.P. Hill Elementary as a means of raising student achievement in the two schools to state standards. Peabody Middle has been denied state accreditation for eight consecutive years; A.P. Hill Elementary has been accredited with warning for three consecutive years.

“I feel comfortable that we are ready to go,” Petersburg Superintendent Joseph C. Melvin told the state board. “We have been training the teachers, and we are working on mapping the curriculum so it will be completed two months before testing, to give us additional time for remediation and student growth.”

In recommending approval of the waiver, Superintendent of Public Instruction Patricia I. Wright praised Melvin for presenting a well-thought out and well-researched plan for raising student achievement.

“You are coming to the state board with your proposal — not one that we require — based on your leadership and your work engaging the parents and the community,” Wright said. “I have no doubt, that when the scores come out, you are going to see some significant improvements.”

The state board expedited approval of Petersburg’s waiver application to permit the division to move forward with certainty that it will be allowed to begin instruction at Peabody Middle and A.P. Hill Elementary before Labor Day.

“Petersburg faces great challenges,” said Board President Christian N. Braunlich said. “And when a school division comes to us with a solid pathway to address those challenges and get the job done, this board will do everything it can to help clear the road.”

Braunlich also thanked Petersburg School Board Chairman Kenneth Pritchett for his leadership in building community support for the proposal.

“Without the political capital that the school board is willing to expend and the leadership that they are willing to provide this is not going to happen,” Braunlich said. “We are as appreciative of everything you have done as we are of everything Dr. Melvin has done.”

Under Virginia law, school divisions must have a waiver from the Board of Education to begin instruction before the end-of-summer holiday. The law allows for weather-related waivers and waivers for innovative and experimental programs that require an earlier start.

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The waiver granted yesterday allows Petersburg to begin instruction at the two schools on August 4. Peabody Middle and A.P. Hill Elementary students will be in school for a total of 200 days, 20 more days than required by the state.

The year-round calendar provides instructional days in every month except July and includes intersession periods in October, January and March. Melvin told the state board that the year-round calendar is designed prevent learning loss over the summer and provide more instruction than is possible with a traditional school calendar.

Last year, Petersburg received a \$50,000 grant from the General Assembly to plan the year-round program. The legislature authorized the planning grant following a 2012 Joint Legislative Audit and Review Commission (JLARC) Study on year-round schools. The JLARC report found that year-round instruction can lead to increased achievement among historically low-performing student subgroups.

Petersburg Public Schools has been operating since 2006 under a memorandum of understanding with the state Board of Education. The memorandum spells out the responsibilities of the state and local boards and establishes annual goals for improving instruction and raising student achievement.

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