



## LIBERTY JUSTICE CENTER

November 4, 2025

*Via mail & e-mail*

Portsmouth Commonwealth's Attorney Stephanie N. Morales  
Office of the Commonwealth's Attorney  
Portsmouth Judicial Center  
1345 Court Street, Suite 105  
Portsmouth, VA 23704  
[REDACTED]

### **RE: Portsmouth Public School Division Demand for Investigation**

Commonwealth's Attorney Morales:

On behalf of several Portsmouth, Virginia taxpayers<sup>1</sup>, the Liberty Justice Center<sup>2</sup> writes to seek an investigation into potential criminal misuse of public assets by Portsmouth Public School Division ("PPS") personnel. PPS personnel coordinated with the Spanberger for Governor campaign to host a *free* campaign rally at a public high school. Enclosed with this letter is evidence of these alleged violations of Va. Code Ann. § 18.2-112.1(B). We are requesting written confirmation that your office has initiated, or will initiate, an investigation by November 7, 2025.

#### BACKGROUND

On Friday, August 8, 2025, the Spanberger for Governor campaign hosted a campaign event inside I.C. Norcom High School, a public high school in PPS. The campaign event took place during school hours on the first day teachers returned to work for the school year. The campaign also filmed content subsequently posted on

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<sup>1</sup> LJC represents Portsmouth, Virginia residents Christopher Craig, Christine Henderson, Melissa Middleton, James Middleton, and Janice Branch.

<sup>2</sup> LJC is a nonpartisan, nonprofit public-interest law firm dedicated to promoting government accountability and educational freedom. You can learn more about our mission at [libertyjusticecenter.org](http://libertyjusticecenter.org).

campaign social media accounts.<sup>3</sup> School maintenance and operations staff were instructed to assist in setting up for the event and to manicure the I.C. Norcom grounds for this campaign event.<sup>4</sup> The use of I.C. Norcom facilities was memorialized in a rental agreement between PPS and the campaign.<sup>5</sup> The cost for the campaign to use a public high school? Free.

Gubernatorial candidate Abigail Spanberger held this political rally at I.C. Norcom High School to announce her education platform. Over 60 people attended the political rally, including PPS teachers and administrators who were working that day. Other candidates for political office attended as well, including Lieutenant Governor candidate Ghazala Hashmi, Attorney General candidate Jay Jones, House District 90 candidate Rodney Nickens, Jr., and Chesapeake Sheriff candidate Dave Rosado.<sup>6</sup>

The school's principal, Teesha Sanders, encouraged teachers to attend the event.<sup>7</sup> Principal Sanders communicated the number of teachers expected to attend directly to Annabelle Trowbridge, an Operations Associate for the Spanberger for Governor campaign.<sup>8</sup> Principal Sanders also inquired as to how many teachers Ms. Trowbridge would like at the campaign event.<sup>9</sup> Along with Ms. Trowbridge, Sophia Shapiro, the campaign's deputy director for advance operations, coordinated with PPS personnel to secure use of I.C. Norcom facilities.<sup>10</sup> PPS's Chief Operations Officer, Dr. Jerry Simmons, directed I.C. Norcom service crew to arrive early and

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<sup>3</sup> Attachment 1 – Screen shots of multiple social media accounts from the Spanberger for Governor campaign and others who attended the campaign event.

<sup>4</sup> Attachment 2 – July 22, 2025 email from Dr. Jerry Simmons to Mr. Ronald Hill.

<sup>5</sup> Attachment 2 – PPS Agreement for Rental of School Facility.

<sup>6</sup> Based on social medial accounts, a full list of political candidates believed in attendance at the I.C. Norcom event are: Lieutenant Governor candidate Ghazala Hashmi, Attorney General candidate Jay Jones, House District 84 candidate Nadarius Clark, House District 90 candidate Rodney Nickens, Jr., House District 92 candidate Bonita Anthony, and Chesapeake Sheriff candidate Dave Rosado. LaKeesha Atkinson, Vice-Chair of the Portsmouth Public School Board, also attended.

<sup>7</sup> Attachment 3 – August 6, 2025 email from Principal Teesha Sanders to Spanberger campaign operatives.

<sup>8</sup> *Id.*

<sup>9</sup> *Id.*

<sup>10</sup> Attachment 4 – PPS Response to October 17, 2025 Request for Information.

“assist the team from Senator Lucas’ office with setup for the event.”<sup>11</sup> Dr. Lewis also directed maintenance staff to “ensure the grounds were manicured for the day.”<sup>12</sup> PPS’s human resources team had reserved Classroom 217 for a back-to-school two day training program, and another PPS entity also requested use of Classroom 217. But Classroom 217 was subsequently reserved by the Spanberger campaign, so both PPS groups were “bumped out” to make room for the Spanberger campaign with knowledge of PPS leaders.<sup>13</sup>

PPS provided the use of the I.C. Norcom library, classrooms, other spaces, and maintenance support free of charge.<sup>14</sup> Ms. Trowbridge signed a zero dollar “rental” agreement on behalf of the Spanberger campaign. PPS also violated its own policies in planning this event, including failing to secure event insurance from the Spanberger campaign for its political rally.<sup>15</sup> The Spanberger for Governor campaign failed to disclose an in-kind contribution from PPS on its campaign finance report that covers the period from July 1, 2025, through August 31, 2025.<sup>16</sup>

#### DEMAND FOR INVESTIGATION – MISUSE OF PUBLIC ASSETS

On the first day of the school year when I.C. Norcom teachers were preparing for a new year, PPS personnel handed over public school facilities and personnel to a political campaign. Yet, the campaign did not pay one cent to PPS and Portsmouth’s taxpayers. This is a clear misuse of public assets, a crime under the laws of Virginia that occurred in your jurisdiction and at your alma mater.

Under Va. Code Ann. § 18.2-112.1(B), a public employee commits a Class 4 felony when he permits the use of public assets for purposes unrelated to its normal use or other legitimate government interest. I.C. Norcom High School is a public asset, funded by Portsmouth taxpayers. Holding a partisan campaign rally during school time is not related to the education of the students of PPS. Nor is it a legitimate government interest held by PPS. The enclosed documents are clear. PPS personnel—Principal Teesha Sanders, Dr. Jerry Simmons, and Katrina Downey—

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<sup>11</sup> *Id.* at 99.

<sup>12</sup> *Id.*

<sup>13</sup> *Id.* at 139.

<sup>14</sup> Attachment 2 – at 8–9.

<sup>15</sup> Attachment 5 – PPS Policy for Rental of School Facilities.

<sup>16</sup> Va. Bd. of Elections, *Campaign Finance Reports: Spanberger for Governor (CC-23-02436)*, (Oct. 15, 2025), <https://cfreports.elections.virginia.gov/Report/Index/461117>.

permitted I.C. Norcom high school facilities and support staff to be used for a political campaign rally by the Spanberger campaign during a PPS workday. And they charged the campaign nothing.

Although the School District signed a rental agreement with the Spanberger campaign that charged the campaign zero dollars, the impermissible use of the library, classroom, hallways, and personnel of a public school for a political rally attended by teachers being paid on school time exceeds \$1,000, the threshold for a Class 4 felony under Va. Code Ann. § 18.2-112.1(B).

#### DEMAND FOR INVESTIGATION – ELECTION CRIMES

The Spanberger Campaign also appears to have committed an election crime with a nexus to your jurisdiction. Gratuitous use of I.C. Norcom High School facilities, resources, and teachers are an in-kind campaign contribution from PPS to the Spanberger campaign. The Spanberger campaign failed to report this contribution in violation of the Virginia Election Code.

Va Code Ann. § 42.2-947.4(B)(2) requires that campaign finance reports include itemized contributor information for “each contributor who has contributed an aggregate of more than \$100, including cash and in-kind contributions.” Required reportable information includes the contributor’s identifying information and the contribution date and amount. “In-kind contributions” are “the donation of goods, services, property, or other thing of value, other than money, including an expenditure controlled by, coordinated with, or made upon the authorization of a candidate, his campaign committee, or an agent of the candidate or his campaign committee, that is provided for free.”<sup>17</sup>

The enclosed documents are clear: Annabelle Trowbridge and Sophia Shapiro, agents of the Spanberger campaign, coordinated with PPS personnel—Principal Teesha Sanders, Dr. Jerry Simmons, and Katrina Downey—to use I.C. Norcom High School and personnel for a campaign event for free. And the Spanberger for Governor campaign did not report this campaign donation on its scheduled campaign finance report for July 1, 2025, to August 31, 2025.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> VA. CODE ANN. § 24.2-945.1.

<sup>18</sup> Va. Bd. of Elections, *Campaign Finance Scheduled Reports: Spanberger for Governor (CC-23-02436)*, (Oct. 15, 2025), <https://cfreports.elections.virginia.gov/Report/Index/461117>.

The in-kind contribution of I.C. Norcom school facilities and personnel is clearly reportable under Virginia election law. The Spanberger for Governor Campaign's failure to report this contribution is, at best, subject to civil penalties.<sup>19</sup> However, a willful false material statement on the scheduled report constitutes election fraud and is a Class 5 felony.<sup>20</sup> Failing to report gratuitous use of a public school facility for a political rally demands investigation under Virginia election laws.

#### CONCLUSION

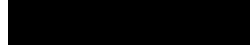
A political rally was held on August 8, 2025, at I.C. Norcom High School. The evidence provided with this letter indicates a strong likelihood that multiple crimes were committed in your jurisdiction. We request that you initiate an investigation into the facts surrounding this incident so Portsmouth residents can be assured their schools are for educating PPS students, not free sites for political campaign rallies. We ask that you please confirm by November 7, 2025, that you have initiated or intend to initiate an investigation into this matter.

Please contact me at the email address below should you wish to further discuss this matter.

Respectfully,



Brendan Philbin, Esq.



Enc. Attachments

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<sup>19</sup> VA. CODE ANN. § 24.2-953.4.

<sup>20</sup> VA. CODE ANN. § 24.2-1016.