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September 8, 2022

Dr. Reid and Members of the School Board:

As Fairfax County Public Schools (FCPS) begin another school year, we urge you to continue recalibrating the Board's priorities to center the educational needs of our students and demonstrate an emphasis on community-building. The Federation has long worked as a proud partner with FCPS, knowing that our County's economic vitality depends on the strong reputation and performance of our schools. However, since the early months of the Coronavirus pandemic, we have become concerned that our community's historically strong support of public schools is fraying. FCPS' projected enrollment this year remains more than 6 percent lower than fall 2019, and teacher resignations have increased by 45 percent.¹

We therefore suggest that now is not an optimal time to engage in projects which many will view as political—and not scholastic—in nature. Such work is best accomplished in an atmosphere where the community has large reserves of goodwill toward the organization undertaking it, believing that the organization will lead a frank and honest exchange of ideas, and that no one political faction will either dominate or be unwelcome in that conversation. Given the turmoil of recent public controversies in FCPS, we are uncertain that FCPS broadly enjoys such support.

Some of FCPS' public actions this summer may have caused further ruptures. For example, FCPS was recently in the news for beginning the process of crafting an equity policy.² As we have noted in previous communications with you, the term "equity" is fraught with partisan meaning. Moreover, our county's One Fairfax policy already provides a framework to consider equity in decision-making, with a clear definition of that term. It is therefore unclear why FCPS would place priority on crafting its own equity policy at this time.

Similarly, we are concerned that recent proposals to revise the Family Life Education curriculum represent a policy shift on which there is unlikely to be either broad pedagogical or community agreement. By changing highly-visible policies on which there is no public consensus—and while attention is centered on them as "culture war" issues—we are concerned that FCPS is inviting unnecessary controversy.

In a related matter, the Board recently adopted a policy providing students with the right to determine and enforce the use of their chosen gender identity within the school environment, neither requiring nor encouraging parental consultation. Not only does such policy highlight a contentious issue on which reasonable people may disagree,³ but we are concerned that even as a matter of law it may not rest on solid foundations.⁴

¹ FCPS' *FY2023 Advertised Budget* cites a projected enrollment of 177,570 students. The Virginia Department of Education's fall membership report shows 188,930 students enrolled in FCPS on September 30, 2019. For teacher resignations, see Natanson, Stein, and Asbury, "D.C.-Area Schools See Spike in Teacher Resignations." *The Washington Post*. July 15, 2022.

² Gelman, Scott. "School Zone: What Goes Into Crafting an Equity Policy." *WTOP*. July 22, 2022.

³ St. George, Donna. "Gender Transitions at School Spur Debate Over When, or If, Parents Are Told." *The Washington Post*. July 18, 2022.

⁴ See, for example, *Ricard v. USD 475 Geary County, KS, School Board*, May 9, 2022, in which a federal district court has held that a policy which keeps gender identity secret from parents violates those parents' constitutional right to control the upbringing of their children.

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Please do not misunderstand our advocacy. We are not expressing policy positions on these matters. Rather, we suggest FCPS take advantage of the occasion of a new school year (and a new superintendent) to focus on reparative, collaborative, open and transparent work that delivers excellence in our classrooms. This shows leadership on the topics where you have expertise, while building connections with members of our broader community. To that end, we respectfully offer the following suggested list of priorities:

- **Closing the Gap from Learning Loss**—During the Coronavirus pandemic, significant damage has been done to our children’s development. We understand the rationale that led FCPS to direct individual schools to choose and implement their own solutions. At the same time, we have little sense that FCPS has performed enough systemic analysis to gain a complete understanding of the problems our students face, is seeking out innovative instructional programs both internally and externally, is sharing best practices in real time, and is shifting resources accordingly. Where more action is required, we hope you will consider ideas which you may have previously rejected, such as moving to a 12-month calendar in some schools. Now is the moment to put all options on the table.
- **Innovation in the Classroom**—In January the Federation urged FCPS to formally evaluate the use of technology in the classroom in part to highlight and encourage innovative instructional methods. We also highlighted our support for a Department of Strategic Planning and Innovation. When experts in the field of education are considering pilot programs, we would like FCPS to be the first site they consider. Our community should view FCPS as a frontrunner in education, which requires us to consistently encourage experimentation.
- **Follow Up on TJ Admissions**—FCPS faces its most high-profile legal battle with regard to changes in the admissions policy at Thomas Jefferson High School for Science & Technology (“TJ”). Regardless of the outcome of that case, we urge FCPS to engage in an open, public discussion about how the students admitted under this new policy are faring. We are troubled that this past spring, in a letter sent to students, the TJ Math 4 teachers indicated that they had lowered standards on their final exam, offered “unprecedented supports,” and yet students produced the “lowest scores we’ve ever seen.” If your admissions policy is selecting students who are not prepared for the rigor at TJ, we hope you will adjust the policy accordingly.

In working on these issues we believe FCPS will send our community the message that you are tackling our most important and/or conspicuous problems. We do not underestimate the complexity of the challenges you face, but we believe that an open dialogue and collaborative work in these areas will bring us closer together.

Sincerely,

The President and Education Chairs of the Fairfax County Federation of Citizens Associations



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