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October 3, 2025

Dr. Reid and Members of the FCPS School Board:

We write you today with deep concern that the Board has directed Dr. Reid to create a plan to implement Advanced Academic Program (AAP) Centers in every FCPS middle school. We have substantive concerns with the idea itself. But we are doubly concerned that the Board's discussion relied on an incorrect characterization of recent history on this subject, specifically:

- Some Board members suggested that FCPS' 2020 study of the AAP recommended that AAP Centers be placed in every FCPS middle school. This is false. Rather, that study recommended FCPS "expand Local Level IV services into every elementary and middle school with accompanying review and support for high level implementation"<sup>1</sup> (emphasis is from the authors). Please note that Local Full-Time programs are not the same as a Center.
- Some Board members suggested that a past Board already planned to implement this study's recommendation to establish Centers at each middle school. Again, we must point out that the study made no such recommendation. In any event, past Boards did not substantially study or discuss the question. On October 20, 2020, a prior Board discussed the issue of middle school AAP Centers during an electronic work session, as a forum topic. No formal actions are taken during a forum discussion, and though this issue was referred to a work session no such work session was held.

The education of advanced learners within public schools remains a national priority to ensure that children might develop their talents and become tomorrow's leaders regardless of the circumstances of their birth. FCPS' AAP Centers gather together students from various base schools in order to ensure that these students can access an academic and socio-emotional cohort not typically available in their base schools.

By definition, such Centers cannot operate in the same manner and with the same rigor as Local Full-Time programs. FCPS has long recognized the importance of a "critical mass" of peers of similar academic ability.<sup>2</sup> FCPS' own 2020 study concluded that "the students identified as Level IV eligible do not constitute a homogenous group of learners,"<sup>3</sup> and suggested that there may be significant differences between Centers and Local Full-Time programs. That study also found no

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<sup>1</sup> Plucker, Jonathan, et. al. *Good Progress but Challenges Remain: Achieving Equity in Fairfax County Public Schools Advanced Academic Programs*, May 5, 2020. p. 43.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, the 2014-2015 AAPAC Annual Report to the School Board, which defined "critical mass" at 100-150 AAP students per grade in middle school on p. 17.

<sup>3</sup> See Plucker et. al., p. 38.

support for the proposition that students from traditionally disadvantaged groups do not access and/or leave Centers because they might prefer their base school.<sup>4</sup>

One of the strengths of FCPS as a school system is that it provides essential services to families through a variety of programs, based on which program is right for each individual child, rather than a “one size fits all” approach to education. The needs of advanced learners—including their social and emotional needs—are unique. We do not believe it is appropriate to dismantle the Center model by keeping students at their base school and, without evidence, assume that an appropriately large cohort for the AAP exists at every middle school in the County. We further suggest you review the findings of the AAPAC’s report on middle schools, from 2022-23. This report affirms the central importance of cluster grouping in delivering an appropriate education for advanced learners.

We recognize and appreciate that the expansion of the AAP over the past decades has helped FCPS serve a much larger group of students than it did in the past, and that many of the techniques from our AAP are useful for an even larger group of students. At the same time, we insist that our Centers continue to address the special educational and socio-emotional needs of our most advanced learners, which requires a “critical mass” of their peers.

Sincerely,

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

[president@fairfaxfederation.org](mailto:president@fairfaxfederation.org), [education@fairfaxfederation.org](mailto:education@fairfaxfederation.org)



Morgan Jameson  
President



Annmarie Swope  
Co-Chair  
Education Committee



Nancy Trainer  
Co-Chair  
Education Committee

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<sup>4</sup> See *ibid.* pp. 35-36.