

September 5, 2024

Dr. Reid and Members of the School Board:

We are pleased to begin another school year in partnership with Fairfax County Public Schools. In reviewing the issues which the Federation has brought forward to you over the past few years (and those which require addressing in the near future), we have identified a general theme which we would like to emphasize and which we hope you will note in your work over the coming year.

We continue to support FCPS and its staff who work every day to support our children. However, on a number of high-visibility matters we **lack confidence that FCPS' decisions are evidence-based, clearly stated and/or followed, and that they take the community's concerns into account** even when those concerns are properly raised and rational. We call attention to four elements of this criticism: (1) an ad-hoc decision-making process which sometimes excludes primary stakeholders including principals, teachers, and/or parents; (2) poor communication regarding policy and/or procedural changes; (3) a lack of coordination and compliance either within schools or between central administration and individual schools, and (4) a lack of accountability when things go wrong or when policy is not followed.

Three issues exemplify our concern. First, we suggest that FCPS' approach to **secondary grading and reporting** since the COVID-19 pandemic represents a total system failure, one which has yet to be addressed with the focus and urgency required. During and after the COVID-19 pandemic, FCPS initiated a number of changes in this area and individual schools introduced a variety of changes as well, many of which reflect the philosophy of Standards-Based Grading (SBG). While the School Board has engaged in limited conversations about SBG they have reached no agreement about the philosophy as a whole, or on the individual practices which SBG implies. In the meantime, SBG has been fully implemented school-wide in at least four secondary schools.¹ While new guidelines suggest a pause on new SBG practices, these practices continue where they have been implemented, regardless of community support or objection. In some cases, individual school communities have strongly objected to various practices—both substantively, and to the manner in which practices have been implemented—and FCPS has failed to provide proper oversight or a reasonable response.

Second, we are disappointed that FCPS' pilot program on **cell phones** fails to provide an “away for the day” option for high school students. We understand that the pilot was originally designed just for middle schools, and we applaud Kyle McDaniel's advocacy to include high schools in a pilot program.² Unfortunately the FCPS pilot for high schools requires cell phone storage only during classroom time. Meanwhile a growing number of school districts are enacting or are in the process of enacting bans on cell phones in high schools, including those in Los Angeles and New York City. Governor Glenn Youngkin has issued Executive Order 33 to create guidance for Virginia school systems to create “a cell phone-free education.” Arlington County is launching a pilot program this fall to store cell phones “away for the day” in both middle and high schools. We understand that FCPS was unable to pilot an “away for the day” program in high schools because of language within the Student Rights and Responsibilities (SR&R) document. Given the growing consensus on this issue, the School Board's lack of action—for whatever reason—is notable and regrettable.

¹ FCPS Staff. Secondary Grading and Reporting Work Session Presentation, p.7. August 27, 2024.

² Elwood, Karina. “Fairfax Schools to Lock Cellphones Away in Pouches on Some Campuses,” *The Washington Post*. August 6, 2024.

Fairfax County Federation of Citizens Associations

Third, we continue to be concerned that recent proposals to revise the **Family Life Education (FLE)** curriculum represent a controversial policy shift that is not being thoroughly vetted. In some cases members of the Board have broadly dismissed the community’s strong objections on these sensitive matters by characterizing them as unrepresentative, without any evidence.³ The School Board recently adopted the FLE advisory committee’s recommendation to examine teaching about gender identity in elementary schools. According to the most recent Pew survey, 62% of elementary school teachers say students shouldn’t learn about gender identity in school, and the population surveyed represented a far more liberal population than Americans overall;⁴ in a University of Southern California survey fewer than half of Democrats polled supported teaching about gender identity in elementary school.⁵ During a comment period this spring on these recommendations, community members lodged strong objections from a variety of perspectives. We have not seen FCPS publicly grapple with those objections in a substantive manner. Given that FLE instruction is a vital method of providing important health information to our children, it is essential to provide them with information that is accurate, based on high-quality research, and developmentally appropriate.

We appreciate the difficulty of running a large public school system whose students come from diverse backgrounds and who arrive with a variety of different experiences and/or needs. We ask that you focus your work this year on ensuring that your policy discussions reflect that diversity, and that you work to ensure FCPS is engaged in broader critical thinking about our schools’ policies and practices. Good process makes for good policy. We are hopeful that as FCPS improves its decision-making and implementation processes, you will arrive at the right answers on the most important questions facing us today.

Sincerely,

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



Tim Thompson
President



Annmarie Swope
Co-Chair
Education Committee



Nancy Trainer
Co-Chair
Education Committee

³ See, for example, the Board discussion of Family Life Education Curriculum Advisory Committee (FLECAC) report recommendations, June 27, 2024.

⁴ Pew Research Center. “Race and LGBTQ Issues in K-12 Schools.” February 22, 2024.

⁵ Mervosh, Sarah. “Support for Teaching Gender Identity in School Is Split, Even Among Democrats.” *New York Times*. February 22, 2024.