

FCPA Policy Positions

The Fairfax County Parents Association (“FCPA”) represents a wide cross-section of Fairfax County families who have a deep interest in the quality of education in Fairfax County Public Schools. As parents, we want to be actively engaged in improving FCPS’s commitment to providing all students from all backgrounds with a high-quality education focused on strong academics that prepares students for success later in life. As adults in the community, our job is to ensure that the best interests of children and students come first.

We encourage parents to be advocates for their children. To that end, parents will disagree on some issues as they pertain to their circumstances. However, our bipartisan group can find common ground on many issues that are vital to our children’s education. Among the key issues for FCPA are:

Open Schools: FCPA relies on the evidence that the majority of students learn best when they are in-person with peers, being taught by a teacher in the same room. Our key priority is ensuring that students are never again blocked system-wide from attending school in-person. The shutdown of schools from March 2020 through the Spring of 2021 was extremely harmful to Fairfax County children, and the harms from that shutdown will be felt in our community for years to come. FCPS is a \$3.4 billion school system and must use its resources to provide the in-person education it is paid to provide.

Lost Learning: As parents, we are concerned by the many ways in which the school system seeks to patch over, ignore, or hide its culpability in the lost learning and academic challenges being faced by thousands of FCPS students as a result of the decisions made by the school system in 2020 and 2021. Many of these students were already in need of additional support to help them achieve academic success, and their challenges have been compounded by the school shutdowns undertaken by FCPS. In addition, thousands of other students who were once thriving came out of the 2020-2021 school year feeling that they had learned little if anything. The school system denies the learning loss: “There is no such thing as lost learning!” “It’s not lost learning, it’s ‘unfinished learning!’” “We are not behind!” The reality is that we as a community have a significant problem when it comes to the academic achievement levels of our students, and we owe to these students to do everything we can to put resources toward giving students the opportunity to catch up academically.

School closures, quarantines, and mitigation measures: We recognize that our children cannot live, grow, and thrive in a world where COVID panic is their only operating reality. We must balance the fact that COVID exists and will continue to exist, with the best academic, mental, social, developmental, and emotional interests of children. Mitigation measures and protocols should be based in science, informed by actual real-world experience learned from other school systems, and should always contain an explanation of the “off-ramp” metrics that will determine how these measures will be

lifted. This includes clear off-ramp metrics for both quarantines and masks on children. For quarantine protocols, we strongly support a test-and-stay system, such as the ones adopted by states such as Massachusetts and Colorado. A test-and-stay program would resolve some of the significant learning disruption we are hearing about from parents whose children have been caught in the net of quarantines without ever being declared a close contact, having a positive COVID test, or even exhibiting any symptoms. At a very minimum, FCPS should shorten quarantine periods to match its neighbors, e.g., Arlington, which permits quarantined students to return to class after 5 days with a negative test. It is unacceptable to leave healthy children to languish in a quarantine purgatory for weeks unnecessarily.

Concurrent Learning: FCPS was never designed to operate a concurrent learning program. The curricula used by FCPS were not designed to be offered virtually. Asking teachers to manage both in-person students and online students while teaching and attempting to help every student is an impossible task that introduces constant disruption and stress into the classroom and unfairly pulls teachers in every direction at once. We believe that FCPS should offer families who require virtual learning the assistance and opportunity to enroll in already-existing state-based virtual school programs that were designed for virtual education.

School system spending should prioritize direct student academic supports. School system resources, including ESSER funding, should be prioritized towards direct services (academic and counseling) to students by need with inefficient bureaucracy eliminated. Good teachers and staff should be paid a competitive salary that ensures retention. Resources should be dedicated to meeting federal requirements to ensure special education students receive a Free and Appropriate Public Education. FCPS's wasteful spending should be radically curtailed.

The School Board should separate itself from politics. We believe that the best academic and social/emotional interests of students have absolutely nothing to do with the political party affiliations of the adults who control their education. It is vitally important that the school board take seriously its role as a nonpartisan entity to maintain a balanced school system and an open public discourse about the best ways to educate students. School board members should stay focused on administering a high-quality education to every student in Fairfax County, according to their needs, and leave political posturing at the door. Using the school system to advance political causes or inculcate political viewpoints detracts from this important goal. Political parties should assist this important non-partisan mission by refraining from endorsing the non-partisan school board candidates.

FCPS: Too Big to Succeed? Throughout the pandemic, and even before, parents were repeatedly told that issues like reopening schools, managing buses, handling weather delays and closures are too challenging for the system because “the system is just so large.” The system has about 170,000 students in it, thousands of whom appear every year to slip through the cracks of academic achievement and still get pushed through the system. If the system repeatedly tells us that important things are too hard to do because the system is too large, why are we not asking the question of why FCPS isn’t broken into smaller school systems? Why are we not investigating how to break FCPS into more manageable school systems, capable of handling big problems, and addressing local needs among students in the community? The FCPS bureaucracy dwarfs that of many major corporations. Perhaps it is time to figure out a better way to deliver education in Fairfax County.

Staggered terms for school board members. FCPA strongly supports changing the current school board election system to stagger the terms for school board members to ensure that some school board members always have an electoral incentive to be responsive, responsible, thoughtful leaders of the school system. FCPA believes that School Board positions should be divided into three tranches, with four of the twelve positions up for election every two years. The best way to ensure continuity of knowledge, experience, and for accountability, is to have a portion of the school board up for election every cycle. Too many times during the last year, parents were told their concerns would not be addressed because a school board member was not up for reelection until 2023.

Parents are indispensable stakeholders. FCPA strongly opposes the recent limiting of citizen participation at school board meetings. Speakers went from having 3 minutes to speak to only 2, resulting in a 28% reduction of total speaking time. These changes sent a clear signal that the school board was indifferent to the views of its constituents, and, indeed, wished to hear even less from them. FCPA views these changes as antithetical to the mission of a well-functioning school board, which should actively listen to the concerns of parents and engage with those parents in constructive discourse for the betterment of all children.

The FCPS community is more than the staff, unions, management associations, and PTA organizations. FCPS is blessed to be located in an area of the United States where there are many active, engaged, educated, committed, and resourceful families. Yet FCPS has repeatedly fallen into the trap of staring into its own darkened silo when it comes to creative thinking and problem solving. They routinely ignore the network of parents who could be helpful to providing support during challenges. Instead, school officials and some school board members routinely deride parents for daring to imply that they, as parents, might know their children and what they need better than the school system. FCPA is committed to putting parents onto the

radar screen when it comes to staying actively engaged in FCPS's management of the school system.

Supporting Military Families. Fairfax County has over 15,000 military students. They are an important part of our community and have unique needs. It is estimated the average military family moves three times more than their civilian counterparts. Frequent moves cause these students to miss out on extracurricular activities and educational success. The Commonwealth of Virginia is a signatory to the Interstate Compact on Educational Opportunity for Military Children but there is a lack of clarity on how the Virginia Department of Education and local school districts are instituting these protocols to serve military families. To that end, we believe this program needs to be more than a check-the-box program but something that is measurable and instituted across school districts. Additionally, military families often are not voters in Fairfax County and are at risk for being ignored by the school board. To that end, the FCPS calls on the school board to prioritize hearing from those parents that are serving our country.

Ensure FOIA requests are responded to appropriately. The VFOIA process is integral to providing transparency to families about how the \$3.4 billion public school system operates. As parents do not have a seat at the table outside of system-controlled organizations, the ability to utilize the VFOIA system to understand school system processes and decision-making is vitally important to helping the community understand whether decisions are being made with the best interests of students in mind. We strongly support an efficient system for responding to VFOIA requests and urge the state to support the strengthening of the VFOIA process to ensure that deadlines are met and information promptly shared.

Literacy. Accurate reading requires both word recognition, coming from the ability to decode phonemes and recognize familiar words, and language comprehension. The structured literacy approach has been proved by years of research. We believe that Virginia needs to ensure that all teachers licensed in the state have training in structured literacy. To that end we believe the Reading for Virginia Educators test should be revised to test these concepts.