

May 8, 2020

Fairfax County School Board  
8115 Gatehouse Road  
Falls Church, VA 22042

Dear Superintendent Brabrand and Chairwoman Corbett Sanders,

On behalf of our thousands of members who work as professional educators in Fairfax County Public Schools, we are committed to delivering education in a manner that is safe and equitable for our students and staff. Although our school buildings are currently closed, educators in Fairfax County are working harder than ever to ensure education and support services continue. Despite best efforts, distance learning has exacerbated deep inequities that already existed in our public schools. As FCPS begins to discuss and assemble a return-to-school plan, we request that the number one priority continue to be the health and safety of all students and staff. This is a unique opportunity to reimagine how we provide education to our community and meet the needs of everyone. As this plan is developed, we must be creative, inclusive and have a flexible approach to staffing, classroom structure and instruction. We urge you to prioritize providing comprehensive support for our most vulnerable families, and social, emotional and mental health support for our students and staff.

We appreciate the School Board's and administration's commitment to serving our community during this unprecedented time. As a return-to-learn plan is developed, we request that all employees, unions, parents, and communities have a seat at the table and are involved in the decision-making process. Reopening schools will impact all worksites and must address the broad challenges that our community faces.

**Below are recommendations for returning to schools:**

**Reopening schools:**

- Schools should remain closed, and employees and students should not return to school buildings, until health experts deem it safe. Until there is a proven vaccine and all students and staff are immunized, there must be resources and infrastructure in place for screening, testing, contact tracing, and isolating new cases, and there must be significant public health tools to prevent the virus from spreading.
- There should not be a one-size-fits-all approach to reopening schools. We should not necessarily expect every FCPS school to reopen at the same time.
- Protections must be in place for at-risk staff and students because COVID-19 could disproportionately impact them. Staff and students must have the option to teach and learn remotely and there must be a clear and consistent process for identifying and working with these students and staff. For example, currently the Online Campus offers all high school students the option to take two online classes, although the Online Campus offers seven classes to students training for the Olympics or who have other ambitious activities during school hours. High school students with underlying health conditions or students whose family do not consider it safe to return to on site learning should be afforded the opportunity to enroll in the Online Campus full time. Similar accommodations should be made to middle and elementary school students.

- Adopt a plan for blended instruction within a range of learning environments from in person to distance learning and provide students and staff with resources and sufficient planning time for both.
- For students and staff practicing distance learning, high school and middle school periods should be extended an hour and an additional day (i.e. two blue days and two gray days each week) and staff must be given proper planning time for this instruction.
- If summer school is possible, opportunities for academic engagement should be offered this summer. In April, the Online Campus explained that, this summer, they were offering summer school classes for advancement only; no repeat classes would be offered this summer. Unfortunately, due to the circumstances of distance learning and FCPS grading policy, many FCPS students are going to be promoted without having truly passed even three quarters of the curriculum. Now, more than ever, these students need opportunities to practice the skills that are needed to be successful. If summer school is possible, it must be conducted through distance learning until the CDC allows for in person meetings. If summer school is conducted virtually, it should be a self-paced model of pre-recorded instruction with office hours. If in person instruction is possible, class sizes must be no greater than 10 and summer school must be optional for staff. Staff should be paid the same rate as regular summer school/extended school year.
- A reopening plan must include, at a minimum: hand-washing with soap and water or hand sanitizer upon entry at all schools; screening for symptoms everyone who enters; an isolation room; clear protocols for communicating with students, parents, and staff who have come into close/sustained contact with confirmed cases; limiting access to the nurse's office and creating a separate area for other student illnesses and injuries; the ability to transfer healthcare staff to schools with more cases without diminishing support available elsewhere in FCPS; and communicating directly and immediately with parents and our community regarding cases and how the district responded.

#### **Community schools:**

- Community schools in FCPS have been extremely beneficial to the community. To recover from COVID-19, we urge FCPS to expand this model across Fairfax County, so students and families have convenient access to necessary health and community services and support.

#### **Employee pay and benefits:**

- Provide pay and benefits to all employees for any additional hours worked (i.e. returning early, extending day, etc). There should not be any reduction in coverage levels of employees for any changes to work schedule due to COVID-19.
- Grant all employees emergency sick leave if they: test positive for COVID-19; are directed by a medical provider to self-quarantine or remain out of the workplace due to COVID-19; are hospitalized for COVID-19; are caring for a family member who tested positive for COVID-19 or is quarantining due to COVID-19; or are caring for a child whose school or daycare has closed due to COVID-19. This leave should not count against employees' sick days and should not involve any loss of pay.

#### **Sick leave for students:**

- Develop a comprehensive non-punitive student sick leave policy specific to the pandemic that would apply to students who are sick themselves or who have sick loved ones.

**Health and safety in school buildings:**

- Adopt a clearly written plan that is public for all employees, students, and families outlining health and safety guidelines upon return. There must be adequate safety and health protections in place upon return, including ensuring all staff have appropriate PPE and training on how to properly use and dispose of it. This plan should make every effort to follow the evidence-based guidance issued by the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH). Additionally, these policies and practices should be communicated to all employees, students, and families prior to returning to their physical work sites.
- Adopt a plan for returning to schools that includes a procedure to ensure regular and rigorous environmental cleaning and decontamination of surfaces and equipment, and there must be protections in place for the individuals providing this service.
- If chemical disinfectants are used for decontamination, there must be Safety Data Sheets available for any disinfectant applied in schools. Staff must receive hazard training for new disinfectants and thorough training on appropriate use.
- Work with the local health department to implement infection-prevention policies and procedures that help limit the spread of infectious disease at schools (e.g., promotion of hand hygiene, cough/sneeze etiquette, etc.)
- Before returning to school buildings, FCPS must secure sufficient and accessible infection-prevention supplies, such as soap, alcohol-based/waterless hand hygiene products containing at least 60 percent alcohol, tissues, and receptacles for their disposal.
- Set-up hand-washing stations upon entry to school buildings. Hand-washing recesses should be integrated into the schedule throughout the day for all students and staff.
- Sanitize school facilities daily.
- Increase the number of custodial staff to meet the increased health and safety needs of school buildings.

**Physical distancing in school buildings:**

- Limit the number of staff and students in buildings and limit visitors to prevent the virus from spreading.
- Reduce class sizes. Current class sizes of 25-45 or more students pose obvious risks to student and staff health and safety. Class sizes should be no more than 12-15 students, in most cases.
- Consider adopting split-scheduling and alternating days of the week or times of the day that students and staff are physically in buildings to help minimize virus spread. If this is adopted, provide proper staffing to ensure that educator workload does not increase from working a split schedule.
- Modify transportation schedules so there are staggered arrival and departure times to limit gatherings of students and staff.
- Stagger mealtimes and have students eat in classrooms and adopt protocols to keep the classrooms clean. If students eat in classrooms, coverage must be provided to ensure educators receive their 30 minute duty-free lunch. If educators who do not normally cover lunches are assigned lunch duty, they must be compensated for the additional time.
- The number of students and staff at each school at any one time must be COVID-19 safe for the space available (including temporary classrooms). Set-up portable classrooms or additional

classrooms if schools are overcrowded. Wherever safety for staff and students is not possible, students and staff should not be in the buildings.

- Identify staff duties that require close contact with others (i.e. toileting) and develop clear procedures and accommodations for staff, students and families.

#### **Mental health and social-emotional support:**

- Provide training and resources for all school employees, students and families on: COVID-19 risk factors and preventative behaviors; how to proactively talk with students about COVID-19; how to keep fears realistic and manageable and practices that provide students with some sense of control in this crisis. Provide training for all staff on: how to identify and treat students struggling with COVID-19 related trauma; how to talk with students about domestic abuse and trauma and how to refer students to appropriate resources and mental health professionals for additional support. This is important for maintaining consistency between employees and schools across the county.
- Utilize federal funding through the CARES Act to hire additional school counselors and provide greater access to school counselors, psychologists, social workers, and social-emotional support.
- Provide employees with professional development and all the other social-emotional and academic programmatic support necessary during this transition, prioritizing live training with trained professionals.
- Provide self-care training, the ComPsych Program, therapy and mental health support to all FCPS employees.
- Adopt a plan for FCPS to work with the local health department to address provisions for psychological support services for staff, students, and their families as everyone returns to buildings.

#### **Teacher planning time:**

- Dedicate ample planning time at the beginning of the year for teaching teams to meet to discuss and plan for students returning to school and incorporate trauma-informed social and emotional support and lessons.
- Grant additional planning time to educators and reduce the number of weekly meetings they must attend (i.e. CLT's) to meet the additional needs of students when they return to physical buildings and to account for the extra workload on educators for configurations such as teaching a split schedule or teaching a hybrid model of in person and virtual lessons. Additional planning time will need to be provided to allow educators to take on this additional workload. This includes special education teachers, who will need time to plan and complete workload. Educators feel overwhelmed during “normal” circumstances and this workload will only increase as schools reopen.

#### **Student assessment:**

- Eliminate SOL testing in the Fall. Students experience “summer brain drain” during “normal” circumstances and with school closures, achievement gaps will be significantly higher. Putting pressure on students and educators for testing as soon as schools reopen is an unfair expectation and should not happen. Further, the Virginia Superintendent of Instruction has stated that he is

directing all district Superintendents to not conduct SOL tests in the Fall. FCPS should remove this topic from the conversation.

- Only assessments that provide teachers, students and families with critical information should be pursued. Diagnostics should be teacher and student friendly and accompanied by access to relevant instructional resources, as well as supports to fill gaps.

**Educator evaluation:**

- Put formal evaluations on hold during a reopening period. Only informal evaluation focused on helpful feedback should continue.

**Bridging the digital divide:**

- Provide all students and staff with computers and wifi, which is critical for distance learning. Currently, Instructional Assistants and other support staff are not issued computers by FCPS but are expected to support instruction during distance learning. All FCPS staff expected to support instruction should be issued a computer and a wifi device if needed. Also, we must increase access to devices for multi-student families who are currently sharing. This should be done either by donation, loan, or purchasing additional devices with federal CARES Act funding. The distribution of devices and instructional materials should be centralized to prevent inequities between schools.
- Expand interpretation and translation services to all students and educators to ensure they can participate in distance learning.
- Expand training and technical assistance to educators and parents who are not experienced in distance learning.
- Hire additional TSSpec and SBTS positions to meet staff and student technology needs.

**ELL Support:**

- Expand support for teachers and parent liaisons to reach out to families of English Learner students to identify and remove barriers to participation and continue with remote instruction.
- Ensure Asian American students and others are not subjected to bullying and harassment related to fears or misinformation about COVID-19.
- Utilize federal funding through the CARES Act to provide additional support and access to social and emotional learning resources to families in their primary language.

**Special education:**

- Provide additional support for educators who teach and provide services to students with disabilities, underlying health conditions, asthma or respiratory illness, and special education requirements.
- Ensure specialized instruction and related services continue for students with disabilities to the greatest extent possible in whatever manner is most appropriate for the child, while maintaining health and safety standards.
- Provide opportunities to increase collaboration among educators and service providers to evaluate student needs and provide appropriate accommodations and services for students.
- Determine which services cannot be adequately or appropriately provided and plan to provide compensatory services as soon as possible.

- Provide additional supports to help complete the testing and eligibility meetings that will be required to commence as soon as school opens and be completed within 45 days for all students for whom timeline extensions are in place.

**Communicating the plan to students, families and staff:**

- Implement a plan to test platforms to test the return to school plan to discover gaps in its implementation so the plan can be regularly improved.
- Develop a continuity-operations plan for essential central office functions, including payroll and ongoing communications with students and parents. This must be accounted for if school starts early, days are extended, etc.
- Adopt a detailed, clearly written, widely publicized and step-by-step communication plan for disseminating information to staff, students, and families that is consistently followed. The plan must ensure language, culture, and reading-level appropriateness. Communications must be available in the most common languages spoken at home by our non-English-speaking families throughout FCPS. Everyone in Fairfax County must have access to the return to schools plan long before it begins, and there must be enough community meetings before it begins to allow all interested stakeholders to ask questions about the plan and get specific explanations from FCPS. As a professional courtesy, information must be shared with staff before being shared with the community.
- Adopt a plan in place to test platforms (e.g., hotlines, telephone trees, dedicated websites, and local radio or TV stations, etc.) for communicating pandemic status and actions to school staff, students, and families during any summer/extended day programs.
- Schedule an educational session for explaining the pandemic plan to staff and outlining the roles of those responsible for implementing the plan.
- Allow educators to discuss reopening schools via grade level, department level, and school-wide conversations around teaching and learning.
- Communicate often what's available to staff; EAP Express and demonstrate empathy.

We appreciate your commitment to developing a return-to-school plan that prioritizes the health and safety of our students, staff, and community. We stand ready to partner with you to develop this plan in a thoughtful, transparent, and meaningful way that prioritizes healthy, safety, and equity.

Sincerely,

Tina Williams  
President  
Fairfax County Federation of Teachers

Cc:

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