

April 17, 2020

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

RE: FY 21 FCPS Budget

Dear Chairwoman Corbett Sanders and Honorable Members of the Board,

On behalf of our thousands of members that work as professional educators in Fairfax County Public Schools, we would like to thank you for your support and commitment to FCPS students, staff and families during this unprecedented time. We sincerely appreciate your dedication to serving our community and working to mitigate the immediate and long-term social, emotional and economic impacts. We also highly value your continued commitment to providing strong oversight of FCPS administration during this period and striving to ensure our school administration is effectively meeting the needs of our staff, students and families. We look forward to working with the School Board to adopt a budget that will achieve strong quality public education in Fairfax County to help our community recover from this pandemic.

The school closures have had a significant impact on our communities, but our members are working tirelessly to provide quality education virtually and are proudly serving our community during this crisis. Unfortunately, even before this pandemic, FCPS schools lacked the resources and critical personnel necessary to fully meet the needs of our most vulnerable populations. Our county has struggled to provide equitable education for all our children, especially those with special needs, physical or intellectual disabilities, students that speak English as a second language and children that come from disadvantaged communities. We have significant concerns that the school closures will deepen inequities that already existed in our community. We appreciate the Board's acknowledgement of this situation and urge the Board to prioritize increasing support for our most vulnerable populations as it finalizes the FY 21 budget.

To rebound from this pandemic, we urge the School Board to work with the Board of Supervisors, state legislators and our federal delegation to aggressively apply and seek federal aid to recover from this crisis. We were pleased to hear this week that Virginia will be receiving nearly \$70 million in aid for public education and that Fairfax County will be receiving over \$20 million of this aid. As our federal and state lawmakers continue to pursue aid packages to help the country recover from this crisis, we urge the School Board to partner with them to secure aid to support public education in Fairfax County. In addition, we urge the School Board to encourage the Board of Supervisors to utilize its reserve funds to guarantee our public schools have the resources they need. We recognize that utilizing our reserve funds requires that Fairfax County Board of Supervisors meet several requirements including moving forward with spending cuts. However, the Board of Supervisors is currently proposing that it contribute \$22,865,239 to the Fairfax County reserve fund. The Board last used reserve funds in FY 2009 to help the county rebound from the recession. While COVID-19 is different from the 2008 financial crisis, this global pandemic will have long lasting economic and societal impacts on our community, and we believe we should utilize all of the tools at our disposal to help our community weather this storm, including these funds.

As the School Board reviews and finalizes the FY 21 budget, we urge the School Board to prioritize increasing social-emotional support for our students and staff, retaining all county staff and supporting them to ensure they are economically whole. Specifically, we urge the School Board to prioritize the following and make the following changes to Dr. Brabrand's proposed FY 21 budget:

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- **Keep all public-school staff employed for the 2020-2021 school year with healthcare benefits.** It is critical that all school employees, regardless of classification or category, are guaranteed full pay and benefits for the 2020-2021 academic year. This includes all exempt, non-exempt, contracted hourly, non-contracted hourly employees and long-term substitutes. We appreciate that the School Board has worked with FCPS to keep all staff employed for the current academic year and we urge you to maintain this priority for the coming academic year. We are concerned that the proposed cut of principal carry-over from 25 percent to 10 percent, may unintentionally cut staffing positions. Many principals use this funding for important staffing positions in their schools including counselors, social workers, and teachers of English Learners. We want to ensure that any cuts to this money does not result in the loss of any staff. By decreasing this fund, the Board may decrease the number of these crucial positions rather than keep staffing stable. *In addition, we urge the School Board to adopt a budget that commits to the following:*
 - **No layoffs/furloughs/reductions in workforce** for any employees for the 2020-2021 academic year. Our schools are already understaffed in many critical areas including special education and mental health. Additionally, in diverse, transient and impoverished communities, where there are the biggest achievement gaps and lower graduation rates, there is a lack of funding for English Learner teacher positions. Our school system can't withstand any further reductions in personnel in order to deliver quality public education to our community. In addition complying with the Family First Coronavirus Response Act, please provide protections for all FCPS employees from being fired for taking any additional time off due to COVID-19.
 - **Ensure all school employees for the 2020-2021 school year are provided health benefits** to keep our school community safe. This includes making sure all employees are provided with health insurance that covers COVID-19, that the district continues to waive any co-pay/deductible for COVID-19 testing and that employees are provided free mental health services and other resources for the academic year. In addition, grant all employees sick leave or other applicable leave if they feel ill, are experiencing any COVID-19 related symptoms or are in COVID-19 quarantine. In addition, ensure that all school district employees who have a long-term illness due to COVID-19 or are caring for someone that has a long-term illness due to COVID-19 have access to paid family and medical leave.
 - **Retirement:** Ensure that all school employees planning to retire after the 2020-2021 school year receive their full retirement benefits and compensation as if the school closures had not occurred.
- **Increase support for our most vulnerable student population.** During a typical school year, many students experience “summer brain drain”, where they lose an average of two to three months of learning proficiency in math and reading. Unfortunately, this will be intensified due to COVID-19. This is particularly concerning for students with special healthcare needs, those with physical or intellectual disabilities, autoimmune diseases, asthma, and/or trauma (associated with grief, domestic violence, abuse, etc.).The period of school closures amplifies stress to our students due to lack of understanding the academic instruction, difficulties with technology access, and the social and financial tensions felt within a family unit. Our students are experiencing fear, confusion, anxiety, social isolation and/or depression during this time. For this reason, we must increase social-emotional support, mental health support structures and resources as COVID-19 continues to be an adverse reality of our lives. Furthermore, students that receive IEP/504 accommodations or EL services that are lacking these supports and resources, will widen the disparities in achievement

gaps and graduation rates. *Specifically, we urge the School Board to make the following changes to the proposed budget:*

- **Mental Health Support:** Reallocate the \$400,000 currently proposed for Executive Principals in Region 2 and 3 and the \$400,000 proposed to increase elementary school principal pay parity and increase investments in mental health support for students. We are deeply concerned that FCPS is considering increasing salaries for elementary principals while it is simultaneously freezing salaries for all other FCPS teachers and support staff. This is troubling and sends the message that FCPS values its administration over its hard-working employees that are on the frontlines of this pandemic every day. Specifically, we would like this \$800,000 and additional funding to be allocated to increase school counselors and mental health support for students. School counselors are accessible resources to every teacher, student and parent. They are a vital part of the school system that help students in crisis.
- **Social Workers and School Counselors:** We were pleased to see the budget include funding for 10 new social workers across the county. We agree that these positions will provide critical support. However, the promise of focusing on mental health in the updated budget rings hollow when the staff who are the first line of defense in student mental health support are left out of the equation. Our members report that school counselors are the staff members with the greatest potential for meeting students' social and emotional needs.
 - **Increase school counselor positions:** We would urge the School Board to increase school counselor positions, specifically for counselors split between two schools. We request that the \$800,000 noted above be utilized to increase school counselor staffing. According to the American School Counselor Association the recommended school counselor ratio is 1:250. It is important to note that Governor Northam signed HB 1508/SB 880, which requires local school boards to employ one full-time equivalent school counselor position per 325 students in grades kindergarten through 12 for the 2021-2022 school year and all subsequent years. The General Assembly passed a state budget, which includes funding to implement the legislation. Governor Northam signed this bill into law but is proposing that the state delay funding to implement the bill when the General Assembly reconvenes to consider the budget on April 22nd. While it appears the state legislature may not be providing funding to Fairfax County to meet the school counselor ratio outlined in HB 1508/SB 880, we urge the School Board strive to meet the ratio outlined in the bill and increase the number of school counselors in the county to address the increasing need of mental health support to students as they return to school.
 - **For schools with a .5 counselor position, we urge the Board to increase that school's staffing to allow for a 1.0 position.** It is critical for school counselors to have a consistent schedule in order to establish and maintain a relationship with the students they work with. Having school counselors split among 2 schools harms their relationship to the students they serve because they are not available when their students need them most. This is difficult during a "normal" school year and will be further exacerbated during this crisis. Students experiencing a mental health crisis need as much consistency in their lives as possible and having full time counselors will help ensure that these students will have a consistent person they can turn to when they are in need.

- **School Nurses:** We are pleased that the Board of Supervisors is allocating money in its budget to increase the number of school nurses in FCPS. We urge the School Board to work with the Board of Supervisors to adopt a Fairfax County budget that increases this number so that all of our public schools are equipped with the health care and nursing staff necessary to meet the health needs of our students and staff when we return to school.
- **Special Education Review:** We were pleased to see Dr. Brabrand's budget included funding to move forward with the Special Education review. We believe this review is critical to improve special education services in Fairfax County in the long-term and would like to see this \$200,000 remain in the budget.
- **English Language Learners:** We were disappointed to see that there wasn't any specific mention of additional resources for English Language Learners in Dr. Brabrand's budget. The number of English Learner students has increased in Virginia and these students will need additional support to rebound from COVID-19. The General Assembly passed HB 975/SB 910 this session, which improves the current English Learner ratio from 17 teachers to every 1,000 students to 18.5:1000 in FY 2020-2021 and 20:1000 in FY 2021-2022 and all following years. We urge the School Board to adopt a budget that funds English Language Learner teachers at this ratio or better.
- **Special Education:** While we were pleased to see the emphasis on additional resources for special education in the proposed budget, we are concerned that allocating \$800,000 for seven new Special Education Resource Teachers is not the most efficient use of these funds. We have concerns that increasing central office staff positions for special education will not address the increased support our students need. Instead, we would like this funding to be allocated towards increasing school-based Lead Special Education Teachers who would also serve as the Local Screening Chair, prioritizing schools with the largest special education populations.
- **Positive Behavior Intervention Training and Support:** We appreciate that Dr. Brabrand's budget addresses the need to allocate \$100,000 towards Behavior Intervention Services and \$100,000 towards creating a position that will serve as a Restraint and Seclusion Compliance Specialist. However, we believe these positions will serve as a band aid to current challenges in our schools and the \$200,000 would be better utilized to train all school staff in de-escalation and positive behavior intervention to improve consistency. We would like this \$200,000 to be reallocated to provide:
 - **Mandatory training on the SRR handbook and discipline procedures for all administrators during the summer.** We believe that the county needs to establish consistency across all schools in the steps schools take in handling discipline referrals. This will begin with providing clear expectations to administrators.
 - **Staff training and school-wide discussion on the SRR handbook and discipline procedures during staff's first week back in August.** We ask that a dedicated portion of the staff training days in the first teacher work week in August be reserved to train staff on the SRR handbook and have a school-wide discussion to establish a consistent set of procedures for responding to discipline referrals. We would also like schools to use this time to discuss what staff are expected to do when the designated person responding to an issue is not available. This will be included in the existing amount of training during the first teacher work week and will not take from teachers' unencumbered time to prepare for the beginning of the school year.

- **More in-person Academy courses on de-escalation strategies and positive behavior interventions available to all staff.** Many staff members feel that they need more training to appropriately respond to students in crisis. This need cannot be adequately addressed through an ELearnIt video or other online trainings. We believe that all staff who work directly with students, including classroom teachers, specialists, and IAs should have the opportunity to take in-person Academy courses that will train them on research-based positive behavior interventions and de-escalation strategies.
- **Eliminate the digital divide for students and employees.** We appreciate that the School Board is working to ensure students have the technology they need to complete distance learning. Unfortunately, like our students, many of our support staff do not have computers or wifi at home. These employees are eager to serve our communities and help provide distance learning, but it is critical that they are provided with the tools. We urge the School Board to adopt a budget that invests in providing all staff including IA's, PHTA's and other support staff with computers and wifi so these employees can better serve their students during distance learning.
- **Make sure all public employees in Fairfax County stay whole.** We are deeply concerned that educators and other public employees are being asked to pay for this crisis. Many of our educators work multiple jobs to make ends meet and provide for their families. We recognize that our state and localities in Virginia have a decrease in tax revenue and that we are in an economy that is very different from the one we previously knew. However, we ask that the School Board prioritize making our employees whole as quickly as possible.
 - **Continue CIS Scale Enhancement for IA's and PHTA's:** We were pleased that Dr. Brabrand's budget proposed moving forward with the planned CIS Scale Enhancement to bring the salaries of IA's and PHTA's to 50% of teacher salaries in the BA lane. These are some of our lowest paid employees and many must work multiple jobs in order to make ends meet to support their families. Unfortunately, due to COVID-19, many of these employees have lost these other sources of income and it is critical that the CIS Scale Enhancement moves forward to ensure these employees and their families stay whole.
 - **Eliminate pay increases for principals:** We would like to underscore that we are deeply concerned that Dr. Brabrand's budget proposes allocating \$400,000 to increase elementary school principal pay parity while simultaneously freezing the pay of all non-administrative staff including all market scale adjustments and step increases. Our educators are working tirelessly to provide quality education for our students and by taking these steps, FCPS will hinder employee morale and its ability to attract and retain skilled employees long term.
 - **Hazard pay for School Based Technology Specialists:** SBTS positions have always been critical in FCPS, but these positions are even more important with distance learning. They are the backbone of keeping virtual learning up and running. These employees are essential and are working around the clock to ensure our distancing learning systems are working effectively and our educators, students and families have the technology they need. We request that the School Board institute hazard pay to provide additional compensation for these employees to recognize the significant work they are doing during this period to ensure learning continues in Fairfax County.
 - **Regular budget review:** We appreciate that the School Board has previously stated a commitment to improving employee compensation. To meet this commitment moving forward, we urge the School Board to commit to a clear timeline and regular assessment of its budget throughout the FY 2020-2021 academic year. If it is able to provide funding for

the priorities stated above, we urge the School Board to strive to seek additional revenue and invest this money in providing FCPS employees with the MSA and step increases that were planned prior to COVID-19. We would like the School Board to prioritize compensating school employees as soon as possible, with the goal of reinstating MSA and step increases during the FY 2020-2021 school year. Our educators understand the challenging financial situation our county is in, but these cuts will have short-term and long-term consequences, including impacts on their retirement. We ask that the School Board makes a commitment to regularly revisit this issue as we move forward with the budget.

We would like to reiterate our appreciation to the School Board for its commitment to adopting a budget that will help our community rebound from COVID-19. The pandemic underscores the urgency for greater investments in public education and services, especially for vulnerable members of our communities. As we progress through this budget cycle, we look forward to working together to develop a budget that invests in our students, employees and community. We aim to achieve a budget that enables our public schools to be centers of learning and social services, so our community recovers from this crisis. Together, we believe we can achieve strong, quality and equitable public education.

Sincerely,

Tina Williams
President
Fairfax County Federation of Teachers

Cc:

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