

**For Immediate Release
July 28, 2020**

FCFT Statement for Support Staff Justice, Equity, and Inclusion

President of Fairfax County Federation of Teachers, Tina Williams and Fairfax County Federation of Teachers Support Staff Committee issued the following statement urging FCPS to give all staff a role in a virtual reopening:

Fairfax County Public Schools has committed to serve all students by name and by need—that is, it has committed to provide equitable opportunities to all students. FCPS has also committed to foster a responsive, caring, and inclusive culture more broadly, where all its community members feel valued, supported, and hopeful. Through this equity lens, we urge FCPS to reconsider recent treatment of our support employees. FCPS support staff are not a monolith: they represent a wide variety of skill sets, talents, experience, and ideas. They are unified, however, in feeling less valued and less respected than teachers and administrators. This feeling of being undervalued is stronger than ever as the district plans for a return to school.

We know there is great concern for addressing student needs through Distance Learning, including providing food to those who are food insecure, supporting students' social/emotional needs, and looking out for students who may fall through the cracks. Support staff members are ready to be part of the solution in providing a successful Distance Learning experience to all FCPS students. It falls to FCPS leadership to make this happen through listening to the ideas support staff members have about how they can reimagine their role to support students in a virtual setting. It also falls to FCPS leadership to provide all employees with the tools and training necessary to fulfill these roles, and to create a culture of respect for our support employees to honor the critical role each staff member plays in supporting student success.

Teacher-scale employees have been given information on their options for the coming year, including an opportunity to share their preference for teaching virtually or in person for the year. They also have been given information on how to communicate with HR and building administrators about their options, including requesting ADA accommodations, applying for a leave of absence, or sharing documentation that supports their need to work virtually. These same opportunities and information have not been provided to support staff. Support staff have their own personal and family health conditions and concerns and deserve the chance to express them. Some will be willing to return to buses and school buildings when FCPS reopens for in-person instruction and some will not. Support staff who have health, family, childcare, or personal reasons for not being able to return to the in-person setting deserve the same

consideration as teachers and should be given the same opportunity to request a virtual position for the year. We know it is possible to utilize support staff in a way that makes virtual learning successful and as long as FCPS has a virtual option for students and teachers, there is work that could be done by support employees to support a robust Distance Learning experience.

FCFT is a solution-driven union, and we have been working together with our support staff members to reimagine the role of support staff to contribute to a successful Distance Learning experience for all students. During a recent FCFT sponsored Support Staff Town Hall Meeting and follow up Support Staff Committee Meeting, the members attending both events composed a list of ideas and suggestions, which intentionally capitalize on the strengths and talents of our valuable support staff professionals in order to accommodate the various needs of our FCPS students as we begin 100% virtual learning this coming fall. It is our belief that support staff can provide tremendous assistance in ways that have not yet been considered. Support staff of all job classifications—from custodians, to bus drivers, to cafeteria staff—can help address concerns for students struggling with food insecurity, students needing socialization and positive adult mentors, or students and families having difficulty adjusting to virtual instruction or navigating the different Distance Learning tools. The attached list of ideas is just the beginning of the creative solutions our support staff will generate to achieve our collective goal of supporting students in any way we can.

In order to support a virtual start for FCPS, all employees, including support staff must be given the tools and training to provide the best educational experience possible to our students. The first step is providing computers and internet access to all support staff who engage with students online. While many instructional assistants were issued computers this spring, there are still many instructional assistants and other support staff who still have not yet received a laptop. Equipment is only the first step in preparing support staff to be an integral part of providing quality Distance Learning. Any support staff member who will be supporting students virtually, whether by assisting in an online class session, hosting social interactions such as lunch bunches, or providing mentorship, must have the same training offered to teacher-scale employees so that they can confidently utilize Distance Learning platforms. Support staff are eager to engage in this work, but they must be provided with the tools and training necessary to do it successfully.

Support staff members play a critical role in providing a successful student experience both in-person, and virtually, yet the lack of communication and inclusion from FCPS throughout spring Distance Learning and the plans for the fall have caused support staff to feel undervalued and unheard. FCPS must create a culture of respect for support employees that starts from our top leadership. During spring Distance Learning, support staff roles were largely left up to each school to decide, which resulted in many of our talented support staff employees not being given the opportunity to support students as they typically do. Many support staff were eager to support students in any way possible but received no direction from their supervisors in how they could

contribute. Others were left to figure out ways to support teachers and students on their own. We must not let the skills and talents of our support staff go to waste this fall. FCPS must develop a system-wide approach to fully utilize support staff and ensure that every employee is given the opportunity to contribute to student success in a meaningful way. FCFT is eager to join with FCPS to begin this work.

We are well aware of the criticisms of spring Distance Learning, and we believe that one reason that spring Distance Learning did not work as well as it could have is because our support staff were not fully engaged. Every FCPS staff member wants to contribute to a successful educational experience for students, but it takes clear communication from district-wide leadership to ensure that every school and site is maximizing the potential of all employees to meet students' needs. We have an opportunity to create a successful model for a virtual start to the 2020-2021 school year, but it takes fully utilizing the skills of all of our employees to do so.