

June 15, 2023

To: All Members of the School Board

From: Shelley Arnoldi, Christine Birden, Brooke Corbett, Christopher Demeritt, Nancy Demeritt, Danielle Doane, Jeanette Egerstrom, Marissa Fallon, Steven Fisher, Margaret Fisher, Pamela Fox, Michael Ginn, David Hatcher, Hispanics for STEM, William Krist, Erin Lobato, Stephanie Lundquist-Arora, Michael McCarthy, Elizabeth McCauley, Ronald Marchetti, Kathleen Marchetti, Norma Margulies, Helen Miller, Richard Porter, Arthur Purves, John Rephio, Mary Rephio, Cathy Ruse, Anthony Sabio, Jon Schulstad, Maria Sherwell, Kathryn Shilinsky, Mark Spooner, Valerie Waddelove

Subject: Proposed Equity Policy – Need to Postpone Dates for Work Session and Vote

The long-awaited draft Equity Policy was quietly posted on the FCPS website yesterday afternoon. It is scheduled to be considered at a Board work session on June 20 and then to be voted on at a Board meeting on June 26. These dates are grossly inadequate for a thorough analysis and discussion of such an important policy.

We are citizens of Fairfax County who have been deeply concerned about the development of this policy. Many of us have been asking for weeks to see it, because we wanted to have a meaningful opportunity to study it, exchange comments with others, and provide input to members of the School Board. We have been given no prior information about the draft, and we only discovered it yesterday because a few of us have been checking the FCPS website on a daily basis.

Although we haven't yet had time to study the draft carefully, a preliminary review makes clear that it poses many important issues. For example:

- Is another policy needed at all, given that the new Strategic Plan defines the school system's equity goals for the next several years?
- What is the meaning of "equity" in the proposal, i.e., what does it include, and what does it not include? For example, does "equity" encompass such things as altering grading systems to smooth out actual variances in student test scores, and does it include changing curricula to stress concepts of "systemic racism," "privilege," "identity," etc.?
- Why is "equity" defined differently in this policy than in the new Strategic Plan?
- What does "disproportionate outcomes" mean in the proposal – are all differences in outcomes among identity groups deemed to be "disproportionate," and, if not, what differences will be considered "proportionate"?
- What are the "non-traditional data sources" that the policy is referring to?
- What "bias incident reporting" process is contemplated by this policy, and what issues does that process pose?
- What is the meaning of, and what are the implications of, the statement that "this policy will guide the language and intent of all other policies within FCPS"; for example, does this policy reinterpret or prevail over the Board's long-standing Controversial Issues Policy, which prohibits teaching controversial concepts?

- Who are the “stakeholders” mentioned in the policy -- does the term refer to the special interest groups who promote their notions of “equity,” or does it give equal representation to all citizens?

These are just a few of the questions that jump off the page from a preliminary reading of the proposed policy.

When the Board initiated the development of this policy at its work session on July 12, 2022, two points were emphasized and agreed to by all participants: The definition of “equity” must be clear and avoid divisive concepts, and the process of developing the policy must be inclusive at all stages. Neither of these prescriptions were followed by the staff. The scope of “equity” in this proposal is a muddle that could authorize all sorts of pernicious actions. And as to the latter point, any assertion that the policy’s development was open and collaborative is false. A so-called “equity policy steering committee” was formed, but it wasn’t a true committee, and it wasn’t given the opportunity to do any steering; only two cursory Zoom sessions were held, and no draft of the policy was ever circulated for comment. At the work session last July, Ms. Derenak-Kaufax stated that the policy must be developed with the public fully engaged, and Ms. Pekarsky emphasized the need to include people who have been critical of the Board. Others agreed. If you were serious about this, time must be provided now for public participation.

The FCPS staff has taken a year to prepare its draft. There is no compelling reason to rush to adopt it. Under the current schedule, the Board’s work session to discuss the policy is only five days from now. This does not give citizens a meaningful opportunity to ask questions and provide input.

Consideration of the policy should be postponed until after the summer break, and the Board should set up a process for real public engagement. Anything short of that would be a gross insult to your constituents.