

Mark Spooner
8209 Taunton Place
Springfield, Virginia 22152

December 19, 2024

Ms. Carrie Reynolds
Senior Manager
Instructional Services Department
Fairfax County Public Schools
8270 Willow Oaks Corporate Drive, #4002
Fairfax, Virginia 22031

Re: FLECAC

Dear Ms. Reynolds:

I have been attending this year's FLECAC meetings and would like to offer some comments at this stage of the committee's work in the hope that you and others will consider them before finalizing your recommendations to the School Board.

Your committee has been focusing on whether to teach elementary students about transgenderism and, if so, what the content of that instruction should be at various grade levels. It has been clear from the first FLECAC meeting in October that all, or almost all, of your committee members are committed to talking to students about gender identity issues at early ages, and I realize the committee is unlikely to reverse its course entirely. Nevertheless, I hope the committee will recognize that its makeup is not widely representative of the community and that it should moderate its recommendations in order to reduce the likelihood of significant public controversy.

I would appreciate it if you would share these comments with your committee members.

A. Policy Considerations

At your October meeting, you identified FCPS policies and regulations that you deemed relevant to the committee's work. An important regulation was not mentioned – Regulation 3280.4, which applies to instruction about controversial issues. It provides that an issue is controversial “when there are substantial differences of opinion about it on the local, national, or international level and when these differences of opinion are accompanied by intense feelings and strong emotions on the part of individuals or groups.” Teachers must “address controversial topics as impartially and objectively as possible,” and should “offer multiple perspectives of the issue(s) under discussion ... considering implications and consequences of varying viewpoints”

Issues surrounding transgenderism are among the most controversial ones in today's society. As I will touch upon below, these issues will inevitably arise even if the curriculum superficially appears to be "plain vanilla." FLECAC needs to be acutely aware of this in formulating its recommendations, just as the School Board must be in acting on them.

FLECAC's October and November meetings were a cause for concern in this regard. Every speaker supported teaching about gender identity in elementary school, sometimes in extreme terms. For example, when you distributed a document indicating that other Virginia school districts don't delve into this issue at early ages, one committee member asserted this was a reason why FCPS *should* do so, to show "leadership," thereby suggesting that being out of touch with accepted norms is a virtue. Another speaker advocated that gender identity be explicitly included in the curriculum as early as the first and second grades. Another speaker agreed, asserting that gender identity is no different than other distinguishing factors such as race, family, religion or physical disability. Another said that any teaching about gender identity should expansively include "intersex" and other nonconforming sexual relationships. Such statements didn't elicit disagreement from other committee members. Hopefully, however, as your committee goes forward, caution and moderation will prevail, and the committee will insist that classroom instruction comply with Regulation 3280.4

B. Proposal at the December Meeting

At FLECAC's December meeting, you distributed a proposal concerning what should be said about gender and/or gender identity at each elementary grade level. (The proposal is attached to this letter for reference.) My comments and suggestions regarding the draft are these:

1. Ambiguity as to When "Gender Identity" Will First Be Discussed.

The proposal states that kindergarten students will be taught to recognize "that people express themselves in different ways" and that those differences should be respected. The draft says that the differences "include" the toys children use, the colors they like, and what they create with art and writing. "Gender" is not listed here, but to avoid ambiguity, you should state that gender and/or gender identity will **not** be one of the "included" differences in kindergarten classes. The public needs reassurance, and teachers must be clearly instructed, that any discussion about gender identity will only come in later grades.

The same point applies to your proposal for Grade 1. It says that "students will identify ways people are different," "including race, cultures and traditions, religions and dis/ability." Your committee voted at the December meeting to add the word "gender" after the word "race." Is this meant to refer just to differences between boys and girls, or does it include the more expansive concept of "gender identity"? The committee's intent in adding this word should be made clear. Are teachers going to be free to discuss gender identity with first graders?

The proposed curriculum for Grade 3 poses the same need for clarification. It provides that students “will identify gender-role stereotypes” and that “examples of some stereotypes based on gender will be presented.” Can teachers use gender identity as such an example? If so, the document should say so; if not, this should be clear as well.

2. Discussion of Gender Identity in Grades 3 and 4.

A few members of your committee advocated at the December meeting that “gender identity” and “preferred pronouns” should be explicitly included in the curriculum as early as Grade 3. You said you would consider this and would address it further for FLECAC’s January meeting.

Most of your committee members didn’t address this proposal at your last meeting, so please don’t assume there will be a consensus to address gender identity in these early grades. It would be rare for an eight- or nine-year-old to be thinking about the possibility that his or her biological sex might not reflect who he/she really is. Is there a compelling reason to confuse students with such a concept at such early ages? Transgender ideologues favor the idea, but the vast majority of parents would not, because they know their kids and know what is appropriate for them. The school system should listen to the parents, not to a tiny minority of advocates.

Your proposal at the December meeting suggested that gender identity be added to the curriculum in Grades 5 and 6. This, too, is unnecessary and would be highly controversial (see below). At the very least, however, I hope your committee will have the common sense to avoid pushing the envelope even further.

3. Discussion of Gender Identity in Grades 5 and 6.

According to your draft, the current family-life curriculum does not address gender identity in Grades 5 and 6. The instruction in these grades focuses on “the roles, duties and responsibilities of family members and how those roles change throughout life.” Your proposal suggests that this should be radically transformed to stress “sex assigned at birth,” “preferred pronouns,” hiding sensitive questions from parents, etc.

Again, the committee should thoughtfully ask questions such as: Why is this necessary and appropriate? Are there psychological or emotional downsides to forcing pre-adolescents to think that their “true” gender might differ from their biological gender? Should the committee recommend this without knowing how the majority of parents feel about it? For the most part, other school districts have decided against discussing transgender issues in elementary grades, so why should this committee conclude that it is wiser than everyone else?

And even if transgenderism should be discussed, your proposal goes too far. For example, the term “gender assigned at birth” suggests that gender is an artificial concept ... an arbitrary decision made by a nurse at a hospital. This is clearly false; gender is a basic element of biology, rooted in chromosomal differences between males and females. It is one thing to tell students that some people feel that they are or should be of the opposite sex; it is very different, and wrong, to suggest that such feelings are necessarily hard-wired from birth. Preteens must be told that such

feelings may be temporary and might or might not change over time. The committee shouldn't recommend things that contradict basic science.

Your proposal also recommends that fifth and sixth graders should discuss examples of "gender neutral pronouns" and the identity of "trusted adults they may talk to if they have questions" (i.e., persons other than their parents). As you know, these topics pose several controversial issues that need to be treated very carefully, if at all.

4. The Devil Is in the Details

The proposal in your December draft is very brief and, for the most part, is phrased in plain-vanilla language. It avoids the specifics of what should and should not be taught at various grade levels.

Two of your committee members pointed this out during your December meeting. One stated (I am paraphrasing here because there isn't a recording of the meeting): "It's easy to make broad statements. We need to see what actually will be taught. People have different beliefs about these issues, which can be controversial." Another committee member said, "I'd like to see how these concepts will actually be presented."

These comments hit the nail on the head. Simply recommending that "gender identity" be discussed at a particular grade level would be vague to the point of meaninglessness. The committee needs to make clear what it believes to be accurate, appropriate and non-controversial teaching. Consideration needs to be given to the basic presentation that teachers will make in their lectures, and to how sensitive questions from students will be dealt with.

A few examples:

- How should teachers explain what "gender identity" means? Should students be instructed about the gamut of feelings associated with this term, including transgender, bisexual, queer, intersex, asexual, etc.? If so, at what grade level?
- Should students be led to believe that feelings of having a gender different from their biological sex are inherent and immutable, or should they be told that such feelings are sometimes the result of other factors (e.g., sexual trauma), and can be temporary?
- Should students be cautioned against quickly concluding they have a permanent condition if they are experiencing gender dysphoria?
- In teaching students to be tolerant of others who experience gender identity issues, should they be told it is wrong to want to be segregated from members of the opposite biological sex in sports, locker rooms and bathrooms?
- How should teachers respond if a student speaks out and says that his or her parents have taught him/her something different (based on science, moral beliefs or otherwise) than he/she is hearing in the sex-ed class? Will the student be told that his/her parents are wrong?

- What should students be counselled to do if they personally experience gender dysphoria? Should they be strongly encouraged that their primary “trusted adults” should be their own parents/caregivers?

These are just a few of the issues that will be presented by a proposal to include “gender identity” as a subject for teaching in elementary grades. These questions are illustrative of what two of your committee members probably had in mind when they said at the December FLECAC meeting that “we need to see what actually will be taught.”

In sum, I urge the committee to carefully address what the actual content of the instruction should, and should not, include. Will your recommendations be carefully calibrated to be scientific, impartial and age-appropriate, taking into account multiple perspectives so as to avoid controversial issues?

Respectfully,



Mark Spooner
Springfield, Virginia