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Fairfax County Parents Association (FCPA)

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## Schools Must Remain Open for In Person Learning

(Fairfax, VA) – As students in Fairfax County head back to school on January 3, the FCPA emphasizes the importance of in-person education. We are grateful to the FCPS School Board for holding strong to their commitment to in-person learning, and grateful to the bipartisan efforts of Virginia Senators Chap Petersen and Siobhan Dunnavant and thousands of Fairfax County parents, for advocating and ensuring passage of SB 1303, which requires that Virginia school systems offer the choice of in-person education to all students.

“Zero COVID” is unattainable, regardless of variant. Those who continue to drive panic about COVID and the omicron variant do so in flagrant disregard for the science surrounding cases and outcomes. Fairfax County parents have said for almost two years that we need to be grateful for the minimal impacts of COVID on our children. We are grateful for the availability of vaccinations, and now boosters, for our teachers and families. COVID is not going away. We must learn to live in a world where COVID exists, and where children are still receiving access to a robust, in-person education.

We know COVID and the omicron variant's health impacts on children are minimal and that the level of mitigations in school make them safer than the surrounding communities. What we also know – and knew even in the summer of 2020 – that the astounding and harmful impacts on children resulting from shuttering in-person education are devastating. From severe academic backsliding, to dangerous mental health challenges for children, to the dramatic underreporting of potential abuse and the harmful impacts of too much screen time. Many children rely on school as a vital safe harbor, while essential workers depend on schools to enable them to continue serving the community. These harmful impacts will be with our children for years and will impact our community for decades. The media, and the local labor unions, love to encourage panic over case numbers resulting from a mild variant where vaccinations and boosters exist, schools have in place high levels of mitigations, and therapeutics and medical knowledge of treatments has greatly advanced. We cannot let this hysteria lead us to more disruptions, where students in Fairfax County are on their third school year of educational disruption. Exacerbating that disruption only adds to the damage already done to students.

As people in our community attend parties, sporting events, the theater, and happy hours, we must not fall into the trap of holding children hostage to COVID panic by denying them access to in-person education. We urge members of the community, including teachers' union and political party officials, to support our community's children and the effort of FCPS to keep schools open. Students all over the United States and throughout other nations have been prioritized by their governments and communities for years. Schools should be the very last institutions to close. We all need to be grateful for medical science and a mild variant and step up efforts to be part of the solution to the many challenges created for children in this local community over these past years.

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*Fairfax County Parents Association (FCPA) is a volunteer-led, non-partisan, grassroots coalition of over 2,400 parents who came together as #OpenFCPS starting in June 2020 to advocate for a choice to return to in-person education in Fairfax County Public Schools. The group's participants include parents from all areas of Fairfax County who come from across the political spectrum, cultural backgrounds, and economic strata. The group advocates for student-focused, student-prioritized implementation of education and education policies in Fairfax County, VA.*