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Governor-Elect Glenn Youngkin  
Office of the Governor-Elect  
P.O. Box 3950  
Merrifield, Virginia 22116

Dear Governor-Elect Youngkin,

On behalf of the thousands of families of the Fairfax County Parents Association (“FCPA”), we would like to take this opportunity to share with you key issues and recommendations families in our county have concerning the state of education in Virginia and Fairfax County Public Schools (FCPS).

As you know, our group came together in June 2020 as the #OpenFCPS movement, for the purpose of providing parents with an opportunity to advocate on behalf of their children during the extended closure of in-person education, which has been, and continues to be, harmful to the academic, emotional, and mental health of their kids. Not surprisingly, the opportunity to study FCPS and the state of education in Virginia, as well as the daily experience of parents who spent over an entire school year attempting to get their kids through inadequate virtual school, has provided parents with a crash course in modern educational priorities. Bluntly, many parents who thought they never had reason to question the educational system learned during the pandemic what a mistake that was.

Fairfax County Parents Association evolved from the #OpenFCPS movement as in-person education returned in Fairfax County. The FCPA, like #OpenFCPS, is a bipartisan group, dedicated to ensuring that the publicly-funded school system prioritizes the best interests of our community’s children, and committed to holding our county’s \$3.4 billion school system accountable. All too often in this past year+ parents have been ignored, derided, attacked, and mocked for daring to question the school system bureaucracy. We have repeatedly been told, in effect, to shut up and sit down—as parents we had no business questioning the K-12 ivory tower, because we can’t possibly know what is best for our children’s education, and we can’t possibly identify academic gaps and backsliding. Yet we continued to advocate and hope for a renewal of education policy that prioritizes high-quality academics, supports for students who face challenges and disadvantages, and the retention and recruitment of a world-class team of teachers.

We want to share with you some of the priorities parents in our group identify repeatedly as key to getting education on track in our area of Virginia:

- 1. Stabilize the concept of in-person education for our children.** Parents in Fairfax County worked particularly hard to get [Senate Bill \(SB\) 1303](#) passed through the legislature and signed by Governor Northam. Our goal was to create a backstop against the momentum we were seeing at the time to push students into virtual school for yet another school year. Yet SB 1303 was only ever designed to cover the current 2021-2022 school year. Initially, we thought that surely it wouldn't be necessary beyond that. Yet all over the country, and in our own Commonwealth, we continue to see school systems dropping students in and out of virtual school, continuing to create significant educational disruption and additional and chaotic workloads for teachers. In Fairfax County, where our leadership has authorized the start of the collective bargaining process, we strongly believe that without some state-level legislation that permanently mandates school systems provide in-person education to students equivalent to the mandatory instructional hours each year, our community's children will constantly be pawns in a political war over "virtual" and meaningless "asynchronous" days, at the whim of bargaining entities. We strongly support legislative efforts to ensure that all Virginia school systems provide students in-person education in exchange for the significant funding received from the state.
- 2. A measurable focus on high quality academic instruction and education.** A key concern of parents over the past year+ was the disappointing realization about how little prioritization Virginia and FCPS appear to commit to the pursuit of academic excellence. From the VMPI/VDOE effort to water down advanced [math pathways](#), to the lowering of passing SOL scores (while the school system avoided culpability for student outcomes by getting a "free pass" on accreditation even as students struggled on their SOL exams thanks to decisions made by the school system), to attempts to eliminate advanced academic programs, it seems that the bureaucracy of the state and county has decided that some type of academic equity is only achieved if standards are constantly lowered. Over a decade ago, this type of bureaucratic thought was described as "the soft bigotry of low expectations." On this issue, parents in Fairfax County want to be very clear: we believe that our school system should prioritize providing additional supports and resources for disadvantaged or challenged kids in our community to ensure that all children have access to the tools they need to pursue advanced academics. In a world where competition in STEM fields will define the future success of our Commonwealth and nation, we cannot discourage children from academic excellence in their fields of strength. We strongly support efforts to identify a Virginia Secretary of Education who will work as part of your new administration to push for academic excellence, the development and implementation of high-quality curricula and teaching methods for reading. In addition, we urge your administration and the new Secretary of Education and VDOE to work with school systems to ensure that advanced academic pathways remain available to all students—and that school systems prioritize providing academic instruction, supports, and resources to disadvantaged students so that these students have access to advanced academics and are not shut out because they and their families don't understand the bureaucratic process one must navigate to access these programs.
- 3. Provide resources and demand accountability when it comes to addressing lost learning and emotional challenges of students.** FCPS continues to hold meeting after meeting, yet in almost

none of them does an acknowledgement of what parents see as real lost learning and educational and emotional backsliding lead to any plan for addressing these challenges. Many students struggled through the mandated virtual schooling, and even students who previously were academically strong lost significant ground. Many students never before “on the radar” with school counselors now struggle mentally and emotionally in the aftermath of quarantine and virtual school. FCPS continues to struggle to identify what supports will be provided to students to address these significant, long-lasting concerns. Parents have repeatedly urged FCPS to use COVID funding dollars to establish tutoring programs/grants to get students support they need to catch up to students in school districts nationwide that operated in person throughout most of the pandemic. FCPS not having a plan because it’s just too hard, or the system is just too large, is unacceptable. We urge the Commonwealth to hold school districts like FCPS accountable for providing a clear plan to address the academic and mental health needs coming from lost learning, and two+ harmfully disruptive school years.

4. **‘Hold harmless’ gives school systems an ‘out’.** FCPS is the largest, and most well-funded school system in the Commonwealth of Virginia, with an annual budget currently around \$3.4 billion/year. During the past year+ thousands of FCPS parents have moved their children out of the system, largely as a result of a lack of faith in FCPS. Parents realized early on in their advocacy that FCPS, and school systems in general, do not view students or parents as constituents of the system. They view their funding sources as their constituents. As long as the funding flows unimpeded, the school system has no “skin in the game” to look at itself and make necessary changes to improve. FCPS continues to yearn for “hold harmless” funding—to convince the Commonwealth to fund it for students who no longer exist in the school system. It is the perfect example of what frustrates parents. As parents of children in the public school system, we strongly support providing robust funding for the system, but when school systems get paid with taxpayer dollars for students they no longer have, it encourages them to wallow in their status quo, never recognizing the ramifications of the decisions they make, and never forcing them to adapt and improve. We object to any effort to financially “hold harmless” school systems who have lost students. Many parents consciously voted with their feet by moving their children into other academic arrangements directly as a result of the decisions made by FCPS. Using taxpayer dollars to negate that ‘vote’ by parents is a mistake that we hope does not continue to be made.
5. **Ensure that funds and systems designated for the support of military children are being used appropriately.** In particular, the Commonwealth needs to ensure local school district accountability for the four types of Federal Impact Aid Schools are receiving for military children. These funds are meant to ensure supports for military children so that they can meet state benchmarks because of the challenges of their highly transient lifestyles. However, all too often, funds are diverted to other uses and military families do not see any benefit or supports offered for their kids. Additionally, military children continue to struggle to transfer in and out of Virginia schools due to conflicting and cumbersome regulatory issues. High School military children struggle to graduate on time because credits from classes/courses outside of the state often do not transfer into local Virginia high schools or allow them to graduate and get access to college in Virginia schools. This disconnect impacting our military children cannot be allowed to

continue. We strongly support the appointment of a strong VDOE MIC3 Commissioner who will be willing to work to engage with local school boards to ensure that these issues are addressed.

6. **Staggering school board terms of office and elections.** Virginia law requires that school board terms of office match the terms of office of their governing bodies. In the case of Fairfax County, this means that all twelve members of the FCPS School Board are elected every four years. This immediately became an issue in 2020 when parents attempted to advocate for their children. They were frequently brushed off by school board members who, because they were all elected in November 2019, had zero incentive to be responsive to their constituencies. To quote one FCPS school board member commenting on Twitter in mid-2020 while mocking parents advocating for their kids, “I hope [they] know [they] will have to carry that anger all the way to the end of 2023.” In a nation where we are accustomed to commonsense checks and balances, the lack of staggered terms on a twelve-member school board encourages board members feel no pressure to show accountability to the electorate unless they are up against their election date. We strongly support changing the law in Virginia to allow for staggered terms for school board members, to ensure that in any future crisis at least a few school board members would have standard electoral pressure to be responsive to constituents and voters. While our group does not focus on the broader governing of Fairfax County via our Board of Supervisors, we would also support staggering the terms of the Board of Supervisors, so as not to disadvantage school board members attempting to run for election/re-election in on-cycle vs. off-cycle elections.
7. **Common sense off-ramps for COVID-19.** Since June 2020, parents have repeatedly made the point that COVID-19 is not going away. We all have to learn how to live in a world where COVID-19 exists, and where children attend school in-person with limited disruption. FCPS has repeatedly shown consistent paralysis when it comes to handling COVID-19 protocols inside the school system. While vaccination rates are high in the county, and inside our school system—especially at the high school level—FCPS has repeatedly been incapable of identifying off-ramps for protocols such as masking. Students and teachers continue to be treated like social pariahs, even while fully vaccinated, while the rest of society in Virginia moves along in a much more normal way. With extremely low COVID-19 rates in schools—something not unexpected given the over a year’s worth of world-wide and national data on schools—high vaccination rates among older students and teachers, and now full access to vaccination for younger students, we urge the Commonwealth to identify the metrics that will move school COVID-19 protocols like masking to optional. We have to stop treating children like they are nothing more than disease vectors. We need to recognize the other problems and challenges created by protocols like masking, and making children eat lunch outside in the winter cold and start identifying the off-ramps.
8. **Budgeting that reflects priorities and ensuring financial accountability.** Parents in every modern generation of America have trusted schoolteachers to be key influencers and academic supporters of their children’s future. We believe Virginia and Fairfax County should be home to world-class, dedicated teachers, and that the Commonwealth budget should reflect support for salary increases for teachers. At the same time, FCPS as an entity continues to see its budget increase exponentially, even as student enrollment stagnates or falls. Recent information made

available to parents via the VFOIA process shows a bloated bureaucracy spending huge sums of money in a theatrically bureaucratic way, even as teachers struggle and burn out. We strongly support pay raises for teachers, and we also strongly recommend that salary caps on teachers with seniority be lifted. We also encourage the Commonwealth to demand a full detailed audit and accounting of how FCPS uses its taxpayer dollars.

9. **Children are the most important stakeholder in education.** Governor-Elect, parents appreciated your constant support during the campaign for including parents and families in the conversation about the direction of education in the Commonwealth. We urge you to continue to look to parents for input as you work to address some of the significant challenges faced by our students in the current educational environment. We have learned through our efforts, starting with #OpenFCPS and now in the FCPA, that even in our very political area of the Commonwealth—where people often look to the political parties to inform their position on an issue—our kids and their education rises above party politics. We don't always agree on every issue in education, but we do always prioritize our kids' academic, mental, and emotional health.

These issues, while not an exhaustive list of our concerns, represent consensus expressed by our parents. As you plan for your upcoming administration's education priorities, we hope you will continue to view the parents in the Fairfax County Parents Association as a resource. We wish you much success in addressing the education system challenges in the Commonwealth because we know that your success in addressing these concerns will ultimately help drive the success of our Commonwealth's students.

Again, on behalf of the thousands of families in Fairfax County who put our children first, thank you for giving consideration to our views.

All the best for a happy holiday season,

***Fairfax County Parents Association***

***Board of Directors and Policy Committee***

cc: Governor-Elect Youngkin Transition Team