



www.FairfaxParents.org
info@FairfaxParents.org

February 3, 2023

Dr. Michelle Reid
Members of the Fairfax County Public Schools Board
8115 Gatehouse Road
Falls Church, Virginia 22042

Re: Concerns Regarding the Proposed School Calendar
VIA: Email

Dear Dr. Reid and Members of the School Board:

The Fairfax County Parents Association (“FCPA”) represents a wide cross-section of Fairfax County families who have a deep interest in the quality of education in Fairfax County Public Schools. As parents, we want to be actively engaged in improving FCPS’s commitment to providing all students from all backgrounds with a high-quality education focused on strong academics that prepares students for success later in life. As adults in the community, our job is to ensure that the best interests of children and students come first.

While we commend FCPS for attempting to set the calendar for three years, we are concerned that all four proposed FCPS calendars will result in compounding the crisis of academic decline. Our concerns are as follows:

- 1. All four calendar proposals aim to meet the absolute bare minimum number of instructional days and hours mandated by law.**

As the schools attempt to resolve devastating learning loss driven by unnecessary decisions to keep schools shuttered for nearly two years,¹ now is the time to maximize instructional time. To our knowledge, there is no law that precludes the school system from adding additional instructional hours above the 990 hours required annually. Given the educational impacts of COVID school closures, as well as declines that were already occurring pre-pandemic, we believe that students can only be helped by having additional time for core academics.

¹ See U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights Resolution of Investigation into FCPS:
<https://www.ed.gov/news/press-releases/us-department-educations-office-civil-rights-announces-resolution-investigation-fairfax-county-public-schools-virginia-related-needs-students-disabilities-during-covid-19-pandemic>

2. All four proposals include far too many disrupted weeks, resulting in a lack of sufficient instructional time and an inability to develop routines.

While we appreciate the effort to identify and balance out the five-day school weeks in each quarter and recognize that this is an improvement over the previous calendar, it is notable that the school system specifically needs to call out the five-day weeks. Disruption of the school week has been so taken for granted that it is worthy of conversation to highlight what should be a normal event, five days of school in a week. Children thrive under predictable routines. Ask any elementary school teacher or parent, and they will confirm that young children have an especially hard time focusing on schoolwork when there are continual disruptions to their routines. Ask any middle school or high school parent or student, and they will confirm that having days off and breaks just before end-of-quarter exams is a hardship. Furthermore, the high volume of days off mid-quarter result in a shortened summer break. Summers give older students opportunities to earn money and explore potential careers through jobs and internships. We strongly suggest looking for ways to further condense professional development days in order to create additional five-day weeks.

3. There continue to be disruptive and confusing “O” days.

We appreciate the changes made in this school year to alter the implementation of “O” days, including allowing teachers to teach new material on these days. Without question, the initial implementation that banned the teaching of new material was incredibly disruptive to learning. While we understand the interest of the school system in recognizing the important cultural and religious days of its students, we suggest continuing to investigate other methods of achieving this goal. For example, could students be given a certain number of “float” excused absence days to use for important personal cultural celebrations and religious holidays? Such a system would ensure that FCPS does not create additional problems for itself because every student could use the days regardless of their personal faith or cultural observances. Coupled with guarantees that students would be permitted to make up exams, quizzes, or adjust schoolwork deadlines by a day to accommodate their excused time off, such a system could be more equitable for all cultures and religions, while still allowing teachers to pace their classes as they need to, with exams, etc., occurring for most students on the timetable that the teacher needs to stay on track.

We also strongly urge FCPS to provide more, and specific, information to all teachers about the “O” day policy and what is, and is not, required. We frequently hear of teachers who are frustrated and uncertain about the requirements—and who have, since the beginning of this policy, implemented it in wildly different ways. Even this year we have heard of teachers who insist no new material can be taught, and who also will not even use those class periods for review or practice of the subject matter under the reasoning that the students who may be celebrating an “O” day should not be disadvantaged by missing a review period. This is extraordinarily disruptive to the pacing of classes. The uniform policy of the school system in this matter should be made clear to both teachers and parents.

4. The process of “Community Engagement” appears insincere, with the goal of arriving at predetermined outcomes.

Neither round of engagement allowed for meaningful suggestions to be offered by parents. Once again, the survey instrument appears to be fundamentally flawed. The questions did not allow for elaboration, instead forcing respondents into tunneled answers that had an underlying assumption that the parent supported the calendar at all. It asks over-generalized questions and once again leads one to question whether the community survey is a simple check-the-box exercise, the only purpose of which is to allow FCPS to say that they asked for community input. Additionally, the process of deploying the survey lacked even simple controls to preclude individuals from giving feedback multiple times. We strongly urge FCPS to provide basic statistics and survey courses to its staff who develop these surveys.

5. The process did not include meaningful coordination with other County and Regional authorities.

For example, the Fairfax County Park Authority’s sign-up day for summer camps was on January 10; yet the school board will not vote on the calendar until February 9. While it will be helpful to have future years set in advance, this error caused needless hardship for families, notably those without the luxury of a stay-at-home parent, trying to organize themselves ahead of the summer break.

As laid out in the below table, none of the calendar options provide a path to academic excellence grounded in routine, regular, uninterrupted weeks of high-quality education.

Color	First Day	Last Day	Total Weeks	Total Days	Total 5-Day Weeks	Total 5-day w/o O	Dist. Of 5-Day Weeks	Winter Break Days	Spring Break Dates
Blue	8/21	6/14	40	180	26	22	6, 5, 8, 7	10	3/25-29
Orange	8/21	6/11	40.5	180	26	21	6, 5, 9, 6	8	3/25-29
Green	8/28	6/29	41	180	25	20	6, 6, 6, 7	8	3/25-29
Purple	8/21	6/13	40	177	25	20	6, 5, 8, 6	10	3/25-29

For many years, FCPS operated on an essentially stable and predictable calendar. Yet for the past number of years, since the Commonwealth changed the laws about the start date, FCPS has seemingly been incapable of maintaining a calendar without constant tinkering. **Notably, the system has never explained what the deficiencies are in the old calendar.** FCPS continually claims that “[it] is committed to keeping equity at the center of all we do to ensure the academic and social emotional success of all students,”² yet these statements will continue to ring hollow under any of the proposed

² FCPS Equity and Cultural Responsiveness Page: <https://www.fcps.edu/equity>

calendars, since there is no way to support student success – except for those with means to fill the gaps – when those students are not in school.

A decade ago, FCPS was one of the best school systems in the nation, boasting the best high school, highest test scores, and rich community engagement. Many families chose to live in Fairfax County, paying the “real estate premium,” because of the nationally acclaimed school system. Yet the system continues to struggle as basic reading skills, math skills, and grades fall. Being better than other counties in the Commonwealth is not what Fairfax County Public Schools should be touting. We need a school system focused on academic excellence, providing opportunities for all of our students to succeed, and providing them the support they need for successful futures. That includes the need to do the smaller things well. A calendar that focuses first on providing the most robust academic year possible should be a key, and easily achievable, priority. We hope FCPS will take time to recognize how all of the pieces of our system need to work together to help ensure our students are successful.

Thank you for considering our views, and please let us know if we can help further in developing practical solutions to this or any other issues.

Sincerely,

Fairfax County Parents Association