



April 15, 2021

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Dear Chairperson McKay, Vice Chairperson Gross, and Members of the Board of Supervisors,

The Fairfax County Special Education PTA appreciates this opportunity to address the proposed 2022 Fairfax County Budget. Our community of students, families, and FCPS employees has been struggling profoundly during this difficult pandemic year. Crucially necessary improvements to FCPS will require funding even beyond the level permitted by the advertised budget.

SEPTA has previously testified in front of this Board regarding the more than a decade of chronic underfunding of FCPS. This systemic failure to fully fund the FCPS budget led to high student-teacher ratios, underpaid staff, and overcrowded classrooms, all of which have disproportionately affected our special education population. Persistent achievement gaps, disproportionate disciplinary action, and a shortage of special education staff entering the workforce to fill large numbers of vacancies complicate this chronic underfunding.

Fairfax County special education staff, like their general education counterparts, are incredibly devoted to their students. Unfortunately, there continues to be a dire shortage of special education teachers both in FCPS and throughout the Commonwealth. In FCPS, there are over 120 vacant special education positions, accounting for almost 40% of all instructional job openings. Chronic turnover in these high burnout positions is extremely problematic. Surrounding school systems are offering significant pay raises, unlike FCPS, which also contributes to this turnover and special education staff shortage.

Currently, the BOS has proposed a salary freeze for our teaching staff for the second year in a row, despite the inordinate amount of work and stress our teachers have been navigating during this pandemic. School staff are some of the hardest working members of our community and are considered essential workers and yet they are not feeling valued in our community. This Board is at the top of the county financial power chain and has the power to shift this tone for our community. Surrounding jurisdictions, such as Prince William County have already announced their intent to implement a [5% pay raise](#) for their teachers in the coming year. With teachers in such high demand and over 330 [instructional vacancies](#) currently in FCPS, our community simply can not afford to lose our staff to nearby districts that are signaling a greater respect for their school professionals than we do.

With the input and support of many community stakeholders, including SEPTA, FCPS wrote and passed a policy on Restraint and Seclusion this past December. This new policy was mandated by the Commonwealth, was long overdue, and is critical for ensuring the safety of our special education students and staff. Implementing this change effectively will make FCPS a regional leader in ensuring that student behavior is recognized as communication rather than a cause for disciplinary action. However, the resources for training to make this change a safe reality are



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compromised by the reduced amount of available funding. Without proper implementation of this new policy, we are concerned that the disproportionate disciplinary action taken toward students with disabilities will persist and that police referrals, which contribute to the school-to-prison pipeline, will become a substitute for proactive and preventative measures that ensure student safety and education

Additionally, there is a longstanding achievement gap between students with disabilities and their non-disabled peers. Over the past year, this gap has likely grown even more. With support from the ongoing Special Education Audit, FCPS must be prepared to make significant overhauls to how students with disabilities are educated in our schools, and those needed changes will bring additional expense.

A massive shift in literacy instruction is necessary to address the longstanding achievement gap between students with and without disabilities. Dr. Sloan Presidio, FCPS Chief Academic Officer, has acknowledged that literacy instruction in FCPS has not been overhauled in over 20 years, despite stagnant and poor FCPS literacy rates and high achievement gaps. We understand that it is his intent to begin this process in the upcoming year, which is critical for the success of our FCPS students, particularly for those with disabilities who are not currently getting access to best-practices and, in some cases, any literacy instruction at all. This overhaul is a great opportunity that can not be postponed any longer, but it will be costly. In fact, SEPTA is partnering with the Fairfax NAACP and Decoding Dyslexia of Virginia to call for new literacy instruction based on the Science of Reading.

While there is much to celebrate with the return to our brick and mortar classrooms, many of our students with disabilities are currently unable to do so; [28% of students with disabilities have chronic health conditions](#), many of which place these students at higher risk of severe illness from Covid. Improving support for students who will remain at home until they can safely return to school is both necessary and expensive. The lack of consistency in planning and provision of special education services from school to school also must be addressed given the massive inequities that result from these differences.

FCPS cannot afford to rest on its reputation of being a strong school system; it must actively work to retain and attract high quality employees, implement best practices and close achievement gaps. This will take financial investment in our staff, our students, and our future. We appreciate and thank the Fairfax County School Board for recognizing the need to invest in current personnel with their proposed 2022 Budget and, in closing, we ask that the Board of Supervisors also pass a budget that reflects this investment.

Sincerely,

Michelle Cades, President - Fairfax County SEPTA