

August 16, 2021

FCFT Feedback to FCPS Upon the Start of the 2021-2022 School Year

FCFT members are looking forward to being back with our students soon in our classrooms, buses, and cafeterias. Our members are concerned, however, about what precautions will be taken to ensure the safety of FCPS employees and the students in our care, many of whom are not yet eligible for the vaccine. Our members also ask for respect from our employer as we enter our third school year affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, a time that has been incredibly challenging for all educators. We believe the following feedback will support creating the best conditions possible so that we can consistently provide five days of strong in-person learning for FCPS students throughout the 2021-2022 school year.

FCFT supports FCPS requiring all staff members to provide proof of vaccination and requiring all those who do not provide proof of vaccination to participate in weekly COVID testing. Feedback from our members shows that there is strong support for a vaccine mandate among our membership. As we see the Delta variant spreading across the US and the growing case numbers among children, and knowing that our students under 12 are not eligible to be vaccinated until at least winter, we support all measures we can take to reduce the spread and protect these students. The vaccine has been shown to reduce the spread of COVID and tends to result in less severe symptoms, fewer hospitalizations, and fewer deaths in the rare cases of breakthrough infections.

FCFT asks that FCPS partner with the Fairfax County Health Department to make COVID testing and vaccinations easily accessible to students and staff. FCFT would like to see FCPS continue to be a leader in student vaccinations by continuing to provide vaccination clinics at schools. FCPS should also continue to provide opportunities for new staff to be vaccinated if they were hired after the first round of staff vaccinations. On-site rapid testing in FCPS schools and offices should be considered. We would also like to see FCPS partner with the Fairfax County Health Department to provide testing and vaccine clinics in locations that are accessible to communities with the lowest rates of vaccination.

FCFT members strongly support FCPS' current mask mandate, both for when students are present and at all times in school buildings and facilities, except when alone in a bus, classroom, office, or other work space. Our members have expressed serious concerns that all other mitigation strategies we used in the past, such as smaller class sizes, 3 feet of social distancing in classrooms and hallways, and 6 feet of social distancing while eating, will rarely be possible with the vast majority of students returning in-person. Given the limited mitigation strategies that we will be able to use, it will be crucial that we fully exercise the mitigation strategies available to us including consistent masking for all, required vaccination/testing of staff, and making the vaccine as available as possible for eligible students. This will help create the best possible conditions to maintain 5 days of in-person learning and avoid a return to virtual instruction.

Our members are committed to creating the best possible conditions for a safe in-person start to the school year. This includes taking all possible precautions to reduce the spread of COVID within our school buildings and community. **In order to reduce the number of large in-person gatherings and minimize the spread of COVID, FCFT asks that synchronous PD and staff meetings be offered either fully virtually or hybrid to allow staff to participate virtually by choice. We ask that in-person gatherings outside of the worksite (e.g. welcome walks and social events) be optional, considering the substantial rate of COVID spread in Fairfax County. We also ask for Open House and Back to School Night events to be virtual or for schools to stagger schedules to reduce the number of people entering school buildings.** We believe these precautions will help prevent COVID spread among staff and families so that we can have a strong in-person start to the school year.

While the CDC is no longer requiring those who are vaccinated to quarantine when exposed to COVID as long as they are asymptomatic, we anticipate there will be times when FCPS staff members will be asked to quarantine. Our members are concerned that they will be forced to use their bank of personal sick leave when asked by the health department to quarantine. **FCFT asks that admin leave be provided for any staff member asked by the health department to quarantine due to an exposure at work.**

In the event that a class, school, or the district must temporarily transition to virtual instruction, **FCFT asks that at least one asynchronous day be provided to give staff time to prepare for the transition to virtual instruction.** While our members have become skilled at teaching virtually, a full day of in-person plans cannot be instantly flipped to virtual. Educators must be provided with time to plan for a transition, communicate with families, and ensure that staff and students have the equipment they need for successful virtual instruction.

Finally, we ask for open and clear communication and respect for our professionalism. Last year's many pivots were a large part of why 2020-2021 was the hardest year many of us have ever experienced in our careers. While ever-changing COVID conditions contributed to the upheaval of last year, there are many places where strong leadership and clear communication could have reduced staff workload and stress, rather than add to it. It is imperative that FCPS leadership seek out feedback from staff members who work directly with students to utilize the expertise of those with firsthand experience on how policies and procedures work in classrooms, hallways, cafeterias, and buses. Clear, consistent, and timely communication is also necessary to create as smooth a year as possible and reduce the inconsistencies that exist from school to school.

FCFT looks forward to partnering with FCPS leadership this year to create the best conditions possible for strong in-person learning for our students.

Sincerely,



Fairfax County Federation of Teachers

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affiliated with the American Federation of Teachers/AFL-CIO

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