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Andrew Twigg

April 6, 2021

Dr. Scott Brabrand, Ed.D  
Superintendent, Fairfax County Public Schools  
8115 Gatehouse Road  
Falls Church, VA 22042

Dear Dr. Brabrand,

Literacy is a human right, without which there is no freedom, and there is no justice. The 2020-2021 school year has brought unprecedented challenges. The loss of life, health, and economic security has been devastating and the crushing toll on student learning will be felt for years. The painful consequences of COVID-19, though felt by all demographics, have hit Black and Hispanic communities the very hardest<sup>1</sup>. In a year where all students have suffered, the learning loss for Black and Hispanic children<sup>2</sup> has been catastrophic. These losses are particularly concerning when viewed through the lens of the long-standing minority student achievement gap. This disparity in learning begins the moment children enter school<sup>3</sup> and are not taught effectively to read. Sadly, the methodology currently used in Fairfax County Public Schools (FCPS) to teach reading has failed over many decades.

**In light of the specific learning losses of this last year and the urgency to move quickly and decisively to correct the course, the Fairfax County NAACP demands that FCPS switch to an evidence-based structured literacy<sup>4</sup> methodology. This must be implemented with fidelity, division wide, in the general education classroom starting in Kindergarten and continuing through 3rd grade.** Though we are writing as an individual organization, we stand united with PTA groups, reading groups, disability groups, and other community advocates to demand that all our children receive effective literacy instruction grounded in decades of robust cognitive research.

Literacy is a human right. Without it, we are condemned to a life of greater struggle and fewer opportunities. We have waited long enough, and we refuse to wait even one more day.

**Impact of Inequitable Outcomes of Reading Instruction**

Strong reading skills are the keystone to success in life. For over 40 years scientists have studied how the brain learns to read. In those same 40 years, school divisions have recognized the disparity in reading outcomes between Black and Hispanic Students and their White and Asian counterparts. Despite the fact that rates of dyslexia are nearly even across racial groups, Black and Hispanic students are less likely to be identified with a specific learning disability<sup>5</sup> and more likely to be identified as having behavioral

issues<sup>6</sup>. These students suffer disproportionately when not taught to read using evidence-based practices grounded in the science of reading. One in six children who does not read proficiently in third grade does not graduate from high school on time<sup>7</sup>. Alarming, graduation rates for Black and Hispanic students who were not proficient readers in the third grade are far lower than that of White students with the same reading skills<sup>8</sup>, indicating a specific harm that must be addressed.

Even more shocking are the statistics related to illiteracy in prison<sup>9</sup>. Of juveniles that come before our courts, 85% are functionally illiterate. According to the National Adult Literacy Survey, 70% of the prison population cannot read above a 4th grade level. Records from penal institutions show that inmates who receive literacy instruction have a 16% rate of recidivism while prisoners receiving no help have a 70% chance of returning to prison. The US Department of Justice states “The link between academic failure and delinquency, violence, and crime is welded to reading failure.<sup>10</sup>”

### Long History of Failure in FCPS

In the fall of 1990, FCPS contracted with an outside educational consulting firm to assess minority achievement in the division. The resulting 185-page report, *An Assessment of Minority Student Achievement in Fairfax County Public Schools* (May 1991)<sup>11</sup>, states on page one that the FCPS school board first made minority achievement a priority in 1984. The report goes on to state, “By its own admission, the school system is not getting the results it wants for its students. Each year school leaders have reported their efforts and annual results, always adding, ‘We have to do better than this.’”

The most recent Virginia Standards of Learning (SOL) reading pass rates for FCPS<sup>12</sup>, show that 45 years later, the gap between White and Asian student achievement compared to Black and Hispanic student achievement persists, at a nearly 20 point discrepancy. FCPS has not improved since 1984.

### Minority Student Achievement Oversight Committee

One of the positive results of the 1991 report was the creation within FCPS of the Minority Student Achievement Oversight Committee (MSAOC) in 1992. The purpose of the committee is to “advocate for minority student achievement by identifying, reviewing, and assessing issues affecting minority student academic achievement within the policies, curriculum, practices, and procedures of FCPS.” Every year the MSAOC provides an annual report<sup>13</sup> to Division leadership and FCPS replies in a Staff Response. In the more than 25 years since the establishment of the MSAOC, there has been a lot of good information shared and decisions made. And yet, the gap persists.

In 2006, the achievement gap in reading between Black and White students in FCPS was 20%.  
In 2007, the achievement gap in reading between Black and White students in FCPS was 19%.  
In 2008, the achievement gap in reading between Black and White students in FCPS was 16%.  
In 2009, the achievement gap in reading between Black and White students in FCPS was 14%.  
In 2010, the achievement gap in reading between Black and White students in FCPS was 12%.  
In 2011, the achievement gap in reading between Black and White students in FCPS was 11%.  
In 2012, the achievement gap in reading between Black and White students in FCPS was 10%.  
In 2013, the achievement gap in reading between Black and White students in FCPS was 22%.  
In 2014, the achievement gap in reading between Black and White students in FCPS was 21%.  
In 2015, the achievement gap in reading between Black and White students in FCPS was 18%.  
In 2016, the achievement gap in reading between Black and White students in FCPS was 19%.  
In 2017, the achievement gap in reading between Black and White students in FCPS was 19%.  
In 2018, the achievement gap in reading between Black and White students in FCPS was 19%.

In 2019, the achievement gap in reading between Black and White students in FCPS was 18%.

In these years, FCPS purports that “We, as a school division, remain committed to closing the minority student achievement gap.<sup>14</sup>” Yet as the cognitive science on reading acquisition grew irrefutable, FCPS failed to institute a structured reading program to close its achievement gap.

#### Absence of Evidence-based Instruction in FCPS

The FCPS Language Arts webpage states that “FCPS uses a balanced literacy approach at the elementary level that includes a reading workshop, writing workshop, a balance of direct instruction, guided practice, and independent practice, and instruction that meet students' specific learning needs.<sup>15</sup>”

In a narrative comparison<sup>16</sup> of the literacy instruction methodologies known as Balanced Literacy and Structured Literacy, the Iowa Reading Research Center at the University of Iowa finds that:

“Although many young learners would master expressive and receptive language skills from repeated exposure alone as suggested by Balanced Literacy, there is a population of students for whom this is not sufficient (McCardle, Scarborough, & Catts, 2001). Therefore, utilizing a Structured Literacy approach is best because it avoids making potentially erroneous assumptions about what students are naturally capable of implicitly learning. By explicitly teaching all concepts, students who readily internalize the patterns of language will learn quickly and easily, and those who otherwise may struggle will get the instruction they need for success. Moreover, these students are more likely to be identified if specific weaknesses arise in their foundational language skills.”

**Adding a bit of phonics to a balanced literacy lesson is not enough. The literacy instruction in FCPS must be grounded in the five pillars of reading<sup>17</sup>: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension, and should be taught with fidelity in a systematic way that is both explicit and cumulative in nature. In 2000 the National Reading Panel<sup>18</sup> concluded that students need this exact type of structured instruction. Despite this recommendation, FCPS failed to implement the Reading Panel's findings.**

In the 35 years since first recognizing the need to close the achievement gap, FCPS has spent incalculable resources on a myriad of initiatives, working groups, plans, models, oversight, partnerships, goal setting, data collection, parent liaisons, diversity training, professional development, and curricula rooted in the flawed literacy instruction commonly referred to as balanced literacy. One constant in those last 35 years is the absence of systematic, cumulative, phonics-based reading instruction in the early elementary classroom. Yet, **all** the research<sup>19</sup> suggests that this shift would have the most immediate and profound impact on closing the achievement gap.

#### Inconsistent Instructional Approaches in the District

The science is clear that effective K-3 reading instruction requires a strong core curriculum which must include explicit, systematic, core classroom instruction. In addition, we must have instructional materials that are aligned to research; appropriate reading assessments; timely, intensive intervention; and high-quality professional development in each FCPS school.

Unfortunately, FCPS leadership continues to permit grossly inconsistent literacy instruction, resources, interventions, and accommodations among schools, and even within the same school, with variations even among teachers. This pedagogical inconsistency contradicts professional practice, and precludes an

honest assessment of the state of literacy instruction in our schools. **Because specific programs and professional development are not mandated, FCPS leadership is not aware of how literacy is being taught in the 141 elementary schools. Parents are often told that what their child might need is not available in their specific school. This is unacceptable.**

Parents who are able seek outside tutoring or intervention to fill in the gaps<sup>20</sup> where FCPS has failed. The most intensive types of intervention, necessary for some students with learning disabilities such as dyslexia, can cost a family tens of thousands of dollars<sup>21</sup>. The fundamental abilities to read, spell, and write well should not be dependent on parental ability to hire tutors to supplement FCPS instruction, or advocates and/or attorneys to ensure their child receives a free and appropriate public education. Most families do not have the resources to cover gaps in instruction and curriculum. Building a strong foundation in literacy is the fundamental work of early childhood education. To disregard the cognitive science of reading, while proclaiming year after year a dedication to closing the achievement gap, is either disingenuous or uninformed. It is also a violation of a child's civil and human rights.

#### Fairfax County NAACP Position

In a recent Consortium on Reading Excellence (CORE) webinar presented by Kareem Weaver of the Oakland NAACP, the importance of structured literacy in teaching Black children, and mitigating factors that contribute to underperformance was emphasized:

Black students have historically received inaccurate attributions of racial inheritance to explain their academic success and failure. Structured literacy, taught explicitly and systematically by skilled educators, provides the widest pool of students with the opportunity to develop strong foundational reading skills. It also helps lessen the impact of racial attribution by replacing biases and assumptions with objective guidance. This leaves less room for expectancy effects, helps educators identify challenges, and allows them to intervene in a timely manner.

The Fairfax County Branch of the NAACP is committed to equity in education and to ensuring that all children are given an opportunity to excel academically.

We stand ready to support division efforts to institute the foundational components of reading, spelling, and writing instruction for all students, in the K-3 classrooms. Doing so will drastically reduce the money FCPS will inevitably spend on special education and other interventions, discipline, and litigation. As universities update their teacher prep programs<sup>22</sup> and divisions across the country begin to teach literacy with methods grounded in science, FCPS has the chance to stand at the forefront of this charge. Again, literacy is a basic human right<sup>23</sup>, without which there is no freedom, and there is no justice. We ask you to do what is right, and to do it now.



Karen Campblin  
President



Dr. Sujatha Hampton, PhD  
3<sup>rd</sup> Vice President and Education Chair

*“Once you learn to read, you will be forever free.” Frederick Douglass*

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