

Fairfax County School Board weighs changes to discipline policies

By Donna St. George, Published: May 16

Fairfax County school leaders have begun what may be a continuing debate about whether discipline policies should be changed to require officials to notify parents before students give statements about alleged offenses that may mean a child's suspension or expulsion from school.

In a wide-ranging discussion Monday, school board members did not take issue with most of the 10 proposals [put forth by Superintendent Jack D. Dale](#) to revamp the discipline system, which has been under fire recently.

But board member Sandra S. Evans (Mason) said she found it troubling that Dale had not embraced "true parental notification" that would involve parents in the discipline process before students are questioned or write self-incriminating admissions about their misconduct.

As a parent, Evans said, "if my daughter is caught with marijuana . . . I want to be called before she signs a confession."


Dale said that most principals don't have time to stop the investigative process and notify parents. Doing so could impede school investigations, he said, and sometimes there are safety concerns.

"The intention is that the principal will notify parents by the end of the day," he said.


No votes were taken at the meeting, called a "work session." Changes to Fairfax's code of conduct are expected to be officially introduced at a school board meeting late this month and voted on at the June 9 meeting.


As the debate continues in weeks ahead, differences may also arise concerning Fairfax's practice of forced school transfers — an issue that Dale's proposals did not directly address. Few other school systems in Virginia use transfers regularly as a disciplinary consequence, state officials say.


Board member Patricia S. Reed (Providence) said that proposals did not address whether the transfer practice is effective.


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The deliberations come four months after the suicide of 15-year-old [Nick Stuban](#), a football player at W.T. Woodson High School who took his life amid the fallout of a disciplinary infraction.

School board members also asked about Dale's proposal to record disciplinary hearings. Although the recordings appear to be widely supported, his proposal required that parents listen to them at school system offices, rather than be given copies.

School system staff said privacy issues were involved because other students' names come up at hearings. They said names would have to be redacted in order to release the recordings, which would be costly.

The session also included discussion of changes to policies involving [students found with their own prescription drugs](#). No longer would students get a 10-day suspension and an expulsion referral. Instead, principals would apply discretion using new guidelines.

In the audience was eighth-grade student Hayley Russell, 14, who was suspended last year for stowing prescription acne medication in her locker and was out of school for more than seven weeks.

After listening, Hayley said she thinks "it's good they're making a change." If they don't take each case separately, she added, "it's too cookie-cutter."

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