



Fairfax Zero Tolerance Reform

Mission: Transform the Fairfax County Public School discipline system from a criminal and punitive approach to a restorative, educational, and therapeutic process by working with families, FCPS, county staff, civil rights and child development specialists, and legal representatives.

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FCPS & HIGH SCHOOL PRINCIPALS SEEK TO PERPETUATE A CULTURE OF “GOTCHA”

Leadership of Fairfax Zero Tolerance Reform today issued a stinging rebuke of a recommendation by Fairfax County Public Schools (FCPS) staff that seeks School Board approval for the installation of video surveillance cameras in all high school cafeterias and interior common areas. The group was seriously troubled by the proposal coming so closely on the heels of a summer decision by the school board intended to recognize the significance of student rights.

FZTR co-founder Caroline Hemenway strongly condemned FCPS actions during the Monday school board work sessions as an “over-reactive measure that perpetuates a ‘gotcha’ atmosphere” in our schools. “This is a stark betrayal of good-faith reform efforts during the discipline review process this spring,” Hemenway said.

Review of the documents supporting the request for video surveillance claims “enthusiastic and unanimous” support by the Fairfax High School Principals Association (HSPA) for cameras in cafeterias and throughout the school buildings. If fully implemented, the surveillance equipment will cost \$3.24 million to install in all high schools; this does not include costs for hiring new personnel, training, and ongoing maintenance of equipment.

Materials supporting the staff request to the school board’s Facilities Committee provided conflicting rationale. The HSPA document asserts the surveillance would free staff to “interact with students to improve learning” and perform other instruction-related tasks such as student assessment reviews, preparing observations or collaborating with instructional teams. At the same time, it alludes to the dominant purpose of video surveillance—for students to be “held accountable for their actions;” to collect “actionable information” while reducing “the investigation time for the incidents that may occur;” to “objectively observe and act upon what happened quickly and accurately;” to eliminate during lunch periods “ample opportunities for students to act in violation of SR&R unnoticed;” to provide “post incident review for disciplinary or administrative purposes;” to discourage “improper conduct” and permit administrators to “objectively view, if needed, a violation of SR&R;” and more. FCPS central office staff assert “the cameras will enable administrators to more precisely identify the participants in future incidents both in a more timely and less disruptive manner.”

The staff request admits there are no unbiased studies of the benefits and drawback of use of video surveillance cameras in schools. Camera shots cannot be considered objective, in part because they leave out other angles and audio. These recordings could be used by law enforcement, including School Resource Officers (SROs), in ways that violate due process. “The sends a clear message to students that they cannot be trusted, and that school officials are not capable of both respecting students and maintaining control,” Hemenway said.

“Video surveillance is in direct conflict with the spirit and purpose of Positive Behavior Instruction and Support (PBIS) programs, said Janet Otersen, FZTR co-founder and parent at Lee High School. Otersen cited this

spring's food fight at West Springfield High School to demonstrate what she called the "hypocrisy" of this proposal vs. the need for true positive behavior enforcement. "It is widely known that WSHS leaders had advance knowledge of the planned food fight, she reported. "Rather than intervening to prevent the fight and teach a valuable lesson, staff were sent to the cafeteria with instructions to record the activities on their cell phones to ensure the perpetrators would be caught and punished. That doesn't sound like a responsible, educational approach or positive behavior support to me. Cameras provided no deterrence at all, so why should we spend millions on more of them instead of on more pressing academic needs?"

FZTR contrasted this proposal with recent comments by Superintendent Jack D. Dale, made in a Fairfax Times interview with Holly Hobbs. In that exchange, Dale lamented the time spent on the discipline program review as a distraction from instruction and learning for efforts that impacted so few students. FZTR questioned why FCPS and its high school principals seek to spend millions of dollars on a system that has no chance of preventing only 259 documented incidents in the county's 194 schools over multiple years. The group already has received questions from parents wondering if students could have access to recordings to support claims of improper staff actions such as hitting a student, screaming, or confiscating property without cause.

Fairfax Zero Tolerance Reform calls upon the community, elected officials and school board to immediately reject this reactionary and ill-conceived proposal and condemn such "big brother" tactics as offenses against our community values. We demand that FCPS leaders commit to creating a culture that clearly values and respects students' rights. One that teaches children the right actions by modeling those behaviors and not by rolling the video to play "gotcha." One that seeks to understand and remedy the underlying cause of adolescent misbehavior, be it hunger, poverty, bullying, sleep deprivation, abuse, or the normal development of youth brain function.

Fairfax Zero Tolerance Reform was formed in 2005 by parents concerned over mandatory, inflexible student discipline practices in Fairfax County Public Schools. Its mission is to transform the FCPS discipline system from a criminal and punitive approach to a restorative, educational, and therapeutic process by working with families, FCPS, county staff, civil rights and child development specialists, and legal representatives. More information about FZTR's discipline reform efforts is available at www.FairfaxZeroToleranceReform.org.

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