



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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CONTACT:

Michele Menapace

FZTRMichele@aol.com

703-329-8236

Fairfax Zero Tolerance Reform Endorses Sheila Ratnam in Sully District School Board Race

The leadership of Fairfax Zero Tolerance Reform (FZTR) today endorsed Sheila Ratnam for the Sully District representative to the Fairfax County School Board. The endorsement follows Q & A sessions with Ratnam and her opponent, incumbent Kathy Smith.

In its interviews with the two Sully candidates, FZTR leadership sought views on a number of the organization’s priorities—the role of the school board in establishing a restorative and respectful culture in FCPS discipline efforts while maintaining school safety; requiring school personnel to contact parents prior to questioning; disparities among high school suspension rates; due process issues related to hearings; the installation of video surveillance inside county high schools; and the involuntary reassignment of students.

FZTR leadership is confident Ms. Ratnam will bring both passion and a fresh look at school policy decisions to oversight of the school system. Ratnam is critical of decisions by school board members like her opponent, incumbent Kathy Smith, who voted against notifying parents prior to staff questioning of students. Ratnam opposes the installation of video surveillance in favor of preventive counseling and positive behavior supports, while Smith did not offer a specific position. FZTR is also encouraged by Ratnam’s priority to protect children before attempting to discipline them and her desire to promote a greater understanding of adolescent behavior among school leaders.

By contrast, Smith acknowledged almost no responsibility for the school board in establishing a school culture that respects student and parent rights. Smith told FZTR that “life altering” circumstances—such as an involuntary transfer or lengthy suspension—“can be good” for a student. She expressed few comments on, or desire, for discipline prevention efforts. Smith did not appear curious about the reasons for dramatic differences among high school suspension rates. She reminded FZTR leaders that “respect goes both ways” and the community “doesn’t hear about the ones [students] returned to school,” despite data from the hearings office showing no students were exonerated in hearings over a two-year period.

Michael Deale, FZTR webmaster, said “Sheila Ratnam’s youth and energy will bring an exuberance and concern for student rights that can alter the group’s dynamic. She is the parent of young children and offers an important perspective to the leadership of a school system that includes tens of thousands of children between the ages of five and 12.”

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 candidate endorsements and discipline reform efforts is available at www.FairfaxZeroToleranceReform.org.

Fairfax County residents will elect 12 members of the School Board, one in each magisterial district and three at-large, on Tuesday, November 8.

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