



# County of Fairfax, Virginia

To protect and enrich the quality of life for the people, neighborhoods and diverse communities of Fairfax County

## BOARD MATTER

### SUPERVISOR CATHERINE M. HUDGINS, HUNTER MILL DISTRICT JOINTLY WITH SUPERVISOR PENNY GROSS, MASON DISTRICT

February 8, 2011

#### FCPS Zero Tolerance Policy

Recently, a sophomore at W.T. Woodson High School was found dead in his home from an apparent suicide. It was noted that the student had gone through Fairfax County Public Schools (FCPS) disciplinary procedures. While it is only speculation that he was distraught over his experience with the FCPS disciplinary process and his subsequent expulsion, we will never know why the young man took his own life. This is not the first time that a FCPS disciplinary action has been associated with the loss of life by a student. In March 2009, a South Lakes High School student chose to end his life while also going through the FCPS disciplinary process.

Suicide is an extreme reaction to a difficulty that a person is unable to see past. We cannot readily explain why a teenager cannot see beyond the disappointment and shame s/he may be feeling or the fear that friends and family will no longer be there for them. Many parents and students are asking whether the Zero Tolerance disciplinary policy of FCPS lacks the ability to recognize the emotional difficulties students experience and intervene with the appropriate support. Are some school personnel missing the very signs that the Fairfax County Human Service System is designed to intervene and support families?

We all recognize that student behavior that violates rules and standards must be met with clear consequences. But this process must include a path that supports students and their families such that they learn from the consequences of their actions, become better decision makers, recognizing that failure must always be recognized and is not the end but the beginning of the process to maturity. Just as we heap praise when we have successes, the process of reaching responsible adulthood includes acknowledging failure and learning the role of failure in the 'growing up' stage of life.

Fairfax County and FCPS are partners in many programs working to support families: the School-Aged Child Care program, the Middle School After-School program, the Fairfax County Youth Survey and many others. Currently, the Department of Families Services and the Fairfax- Falls Church Community Services Board are engaged in working with FCPS on several pilot programs to respond to the needs of at-risk students and families. The responsibilities for our youth and their families are sandwiched between FCPS serving K through 12 and Fairfax County serving birth through pre-K on one side and after school and adult services on the other end. But through the work we do, we have learned that we serve families best when we work together.

I understand that on February 3<sup>rd</sup>, the School Board added an upcoming work session on FCPS disciplinary policy and support services. Fairfax County should not be left out of this discussion if we want to ensure that the outcome is a solution that serves the family holistically. I believe we all want the very best for our youth; however, I have heard that many expulsions in FCPS never include a specific referral to Fairfax County services, services available everyday to others facing similar crisis.

Madam Chairman, I move that the Board of Supervisors direct the Deputy County Executive for Human Services, DFS and CSB to engage FCPS on how best to partner in addressing the disciplinary process. I further move that we invite the Fairfax Partnership for Youth, parent groups, and other community stakeholders to work together on how the student disciplinary system may be improved and report back to the Board of Supervisors its finding of facts, with options and alternatives to the current policy.