

School Health Advisory Committee (SHAC)
End of Year Report
May 29, 2019

SHAC has been effective and productive over the 2018-2019 school year, covering a wide array of topics which are highly relevant to students, to FCPS, and to the community as a whole. While there is still work to do, our wellness committees in the schools are sprouting, we've received a baseline of reporting for the metrics of the wellness policy, and the committee has delved into a number of notable topics, including AP/IB caps, drowsy driving, recess, publicity for the Wellness Committees, changes to the Wellness Metrics, diversity on SHAC itself, and the usage of screens during school. A summary of our suggested action-steps for the board is attached hereto as **Exhibit A**.

CAPS ON AP AND IB COURSES

This committee made a passionate appeal to the Board this time last year that FCPS take action to address the overwhelming levels of stress felt by too many of our students. The adverse effects of unhealthy stress are well-known by the Board, especially as pertains to the mental health and even safety of our students.

There may never be perfect agreement on the best method of reducing unhealthy stress, but one strong option is a cap on AP and IB courses, which would set the tone to reflect the importance of wellness as opposed to the constant drumbeat of pressure to excel, and which would be eminently possible to implement.

SHAC reached out to a number of student groups this year, and the overwhelming feedback we received was that a cap on AP and IB courses would be welcome as it would reduce the urgency of what has essentially become an arms race to get into the "right" colleges. Clearly other solutions would be welcome also – for instance, it would be fantastic if there were a societal change whereby students prioritized other aspects of their lives aside from strenuous academic pursuits. However, we don't have the luxury of the time it would take to effect a societal change. **FCPS SHOULD BE THE CATALYST FOR POSITIVE CHANGE, NOT THE BYSTANDER.** Our students deserve better, and SHAC feels that urgency is needed in order to address this problem effectively.

We are told that there is a School Board Forum Topic on an AP / IB Cap coming up on September 16. When the Board addresses the issue of AP/IB caps, SHAC suggests (see **Exhibit A # 1**) the Board consider the language of last year's SHAC Final Report on the issue, which is attached hereto as **Exhibit B**.

Also, SHAC would like to formally recognize the students from Madison HS's "Our Minds Matter" organization and Groveton's "CALM" (Children and Communities Achieving Lifelong Mindfulness) for speaking to the committee and sharing their insights and experiences. This committee's recommendations are informed through

conversation with these outstanding young people, and they should be commended for their reasoned and positive contributions.

DROWSY DRIVING

SHAC consistently analyzes and discusses the impact of inadequate sleep on our students. The causes are numerous – early start times, expansive homework requirements, overloading of AP/IB classes, athletics and other activities which don't always adhere to the appropriate time limits, extracurricular and service activities, peer and parent pressure, internal biological clocks, are just a few.

Mountains of evidence exist which show linkages between inadequate sleep and physical/mental health concerns, non-preferred educational outcomes, and even overall personal safety. One such safety concern is the effects of drowsy driving. We, as representatives of the community, wish to take a moment and flag for the school board the issue of drowsy driving. SHAC has a policy recommendation (see **Exhibit A #2**) on the subject, and wishes to submit a letter to the School Board and to Dr. Dede Bailer, Coordinator in the Office of Psychology Services, attached hereto (we attached the letter, not Dr. Bailer!!) as **Exhibit C**.

OVERALL PERFORMANCE METRICS

This is the first year that SHAC has had the opportunity to review the wellness reporting-metrics required under our comprehensive wellness policy. Those results, taken in conjunction with the reporting from the Youth Survey, provide powerful tools through which FCPS and SHAC can evaluate the overall wellness of our students, staff, and families. **This combination of tools will benefit our students for generations to come, improving and even saving lives.**

The first year of metrics-results provide a snapshot of schools which are taking steps to form and mobilize wellness committees, steps to install or identify already-existing safeguards for overall wellness, and to publicize these concepts to the community as a whole. In time, as we gain the ability to compare the metrics year-over-year, we will be able to identify trends where things are working, or trends where they are not.

For the present, however, FCPS compares favorably with other school systems nationwide in a broad array of wellness metrics – our students have better nutrition than many of their peers nationwide, rates of drug-usage in the county rank favorably relative to other jurisdictions, etc. However slide 31 of the presentation found here: <https://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/health-humanservices/fairfax-county-youth-survey> shows that FCPS adolescents are receiving LESS physical activity than the national average in the United States. This, along with other community-feedback and internal analysis, leads SHAC to the topic of recess, addressed immediately below.

RECESS

The good news is that this committee has heard less anecdotal evidence of recess being withheld from FCPS students as a disciplinary measure, or in favor of homework- or schoolwork-completion. The message appears to be making its way through the county, and that is a very positive development.

Opinions on the increased recess times are mixed, however. This committee is hearing a number of complaints of elementary recess being broken into two 15-minute chunks rather than one 30-minute chunk. This piecemeal approach obviously doubles the time required to get to and from, which doubles the loss of meaningful recess opportunity for students. In addition, this committee is hearing many reports of snack time being merged into a 15-minute recess chunk, forcing students to choose between hunger or inactivity. We can do better.

In addition, SHAC has again heard from the parents of 6th grade children at Glasgow, Poe, and Holmes Middle Schools, and they have made persuasive cases for the importance of recess opportunities for those 6th grade children who are still elementary students, but who happen to be housed in Middle Schools due to logistical factors in their district.

There may, in fact, be a legal requirement that these students be afforded unstructured recess – SHAC has not researched the legality of their situation, but we would encourage FCPS to review this issue. Legal issue or no, this committee feels that the options currently available to these students are insufficient.

Part of the value of recess is the concept of unstructured time, through which students can explore their own thoughts, pursuits, and social interactions, without the pressure of a clock bearing down on them. The several-minute breaks between classes, where students are rushing from one room to the other, are not an opportunity for meaningful recess.

Nor is a physical-education class an opportunity for meaningful recess, for while there is undoubtedly state-mandated quantities of physical activity in these classes, the spectre of structure remains, forestalling an opportunity for a real break from the rigors of the school day.

And while FCPS Middle Schools do tend to have QST (which goes by different names in different schools), this is not recess either – instead it's an opportunity for intervention which protects at-risk students from falling behind in their coursework.

The position of this committee is that 6th graders, no matter which school they attend, are elementary students, and thus need more unstructured recess opportunities. While this issue only affects students at three schools, its relative rarity by no means

diminishes its importance to the families connected with those schools. Please see **Exhibit A #4** below for our recommendation on the matter.

Notably, research indicates better educational outcomes when students are afforded unstructured time during their days. Please see the following:

<https://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/131/1/183>

<https://www.kqed.org/mindshift/47909/how-kids-learn-better-by-taking-frequent-breaks-throughout-the-day>

<https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2019/05/13/how-schools-can-spend-time-more-wisely.html>

http://www.scholarpedia.org/article/The_Benefits_of_Recess_in_Primary_School

<http://www.playfiteducation.com/trouble-free-playground/7-the-trouble-free-playground-program-supporting-evidence-data-and-information>

PUBLICITY FOR WELLNESS COMMITTEES

While FCPS Wellness Committees seem to have cropped up in every school, many families are not yet aware of their existence, purpose, or operation. This is to be expected, as the committees are still emerging. However, SHAC has identified two actions which we feel will help. First, SHAC recommends that a paper flyer be distributed to FCPS students & families in their back-to-school-night materials in the 2019-2020 school year. This flyer would highlight the existence, purpose, and goals of the committees, as well as offer invitations for contributions from families. Second, SHAC recommends that school board members highlight these committees further in those members' newsletters or other communications with constituents. Please see **Exhibit A #5**.

CHANGES TO THE WELLNESS SURVEY AND REPORTING METRICS

This committee has worked hard over several years to generate probative yet practical phrasing for both the questions and the answer-selections in our survey. It is with some significant disappointment that this committee notes its phrasing was modified by the Office of Research and Strategic Improvement, without such modifications ever being brought back to the committee for review.

While we are certain that the members of ORSI are knowledgeable when it comes to research and surveys, it should not go unsaid that members of this committee are experts in the areas of health and wellness, including the reporting of data pertaining to those topics. We had good reasons for choosing the language we chose, and as the members of SHAC are appointed by the members of the School Board in

order to lend our expertise while representing constituent-voters, SHAC should have a more-direct contribution to the phrasing on a SHAC-generated survey.

And if, for whatever reason, there is some need to make changes after the fact, it is simply unacceptable that those changes were installed without this issue being raised with SHAC.

SHAC therefore makes the recommendation below in **Exhibit A #6**.

Further, this committee recommends that FCPS format the data from the wellness metrics into a format more like the results of the Youth Survey, where the results can be examined and compared in numerous ways. This may take some time, but ultimately that should be our goal. Please see the recommendation in **Exhibit A #7**.

EFFECTS OF SCREEN TIME IN SCHOOL

SHAC dove deeply into the issue of screen-time in school, both educational and otherwise. This is an increasingly important issue as more and more textbooks are replaced by electronic versions, and adaptive software consumes an ever-increasing portion of students' days. Technology certainly has its advantages, but it comes at a cost.

The effectiveness of electronic learning as opposed to more traditional methods is debatable. Further, the ubiquity of screens may be undermining parental decisions in the community. Many parents limit screen-time at home for any number of very good reasons, but these limitations are undermined if schools authorize the use of devices, even for academic purposes. Screen-time is also suspected of being especially harmful to certain students with some forms of anxiety or other mental-health conditions.

SHAC has engaged in lively conversations with a number of outside experts and believes that FCPS should be cautious with the authorization and usage of screens during the school day. This is an issue which needs more study, and should be in SHAC's charge for next year. And more immediately, this committee recommends that traditional textbooks be made available to students, as listed in in **Exhibit A #8** below, as evidence continues to mount which would indicate that students learn better from books than from screens. This may well become an issue of efficiency versus educational outcome. Parents in the community will prefer educational outcomes any day.

DIVERSITY IN THE COMPOSITION OF SHAC

This committee is of the opinion that racial, gender, and other diversity in the composition of appointees to SHAC would be beneficial to SHAC's ability to address a wide range of issues, and to increase its relevance across the county as a whole. Our recommendation is in **Exhibit A #9** below.

SHAC'S CHARGE FOR THE 2019-2020 SCHOOL YEAR

SHAC recommends that, for the 2019-2020 school year, it be charged with a review of the following:

1. Means by which students can feel and be safe in a climate where gun-violence is reported so frequently across the country, as well as means to address negative emotions brought on by the frequency and substance of preventative measures, including lockdown drills.
2. Means by which the county can relieve unhealthy stress felt by so many of its students, which may include aspects of overall mindfulness, nutrition, exercise, sleep, and other factors.
3. Consideration of the effects (both educational and otherwise) of school-day screen-time on students
4. Middle school start times.
5. Any other issues deemed important by the committee.

EXHIBIT A

SHAC'S Specific Proposals

1. We recommend that the School Board carefully review our report from last year on a potential Cap on AP and IB courses, as described in Exhibit B below, before the September 16, 2019 Forum Topic on this issue.
2. We recommend that the following question be included in the Fairfax County Youth Survey: "During the past 30 days, have you ever nodded off or fallen asleep, even just for a brief moment, while driving?"
3. We recommend that, in the Fairfax County Youth Survey, the word "Sleep" be included in the header along with "nutrition and physical activity," such that it reads, "Physical Activity and Sleep" instead of "Physical Activity and Rest."
4. We recommend that FCPS immediately take action to install meaningful blocks of unstructured recess time for 6th graders at Glasgow, Poe, & Holmes MS.
5. We recommend that FCPS include a paper flyer in back-to-school-night materials for the upcoming school year which highlight the existence of Wellness Committees in every school, and provide contact information as well as an invitation for students and families to get involved. We further recommend that members of the School Board publicize these committees in their communications with constituents.
6. We recommend that FCPS revise the responses on the wellness survey to the language recommended, voted on, and approved by the appointed members of this committee, and not changed after the fact, without our knowledge or assent. The responses of "meets, exceeds, in progress, and not applicable (not applicable occurring when needed)" are clear and useful responses, and are far superior for purposes of plain English and utility to the community than words like "emerging, transitioning, or exploring," none of which are terribly distinguishable or helpful.
7. We recommend that, over time, FCPS format the Wellness Metric results in a fashion similar to the results of the Youth Survey, where the data can be analyzed in different ways and from different directions. The current results are informative, but could be improved. This committee does recognize that this reporting is new, and understands that it could take some time to format the data thusly.
8. We recommend that FCPS make available traditional textbooks for those students who request them, as opposed to a reliance on electronic textbooks. In addition, we recommend that the School Board prohibit the use of devices and the avoidance of real peer-interaction during indoor recess in our classrooms.

9. We recommend that members of the School Board take into account the value of racial, gender, and other diversity in the membership of SHAC when making appointments.

EXHIBIT B

CAPS ON AP AND IB COURSES

AP and IB courses are intended to emulate college-level curriculum and allow high-schoolers a deeper journey through an academic subject. In many ways, that's a good thing. Enterprising students can access more-involved curriculum, with weighting bonuses on their GPAs, which sets them apart at college-admissions time, in addition to giving them an advantage of having already completed certain college coursework upon their arrival.

However, the broad array of AP and IB courses offered in FCPS may be too much of a good thing. We are enabling our students to subject themselves to unreasonable expectations and an unreasonable workload. Consider that college students will generally take 3 to 4 courses at a time, many of which meet only 3 times per week. Why in the world would we allow high school students to take a heavier load than that? Given that AP courses obviously come with a higher homework commitment, we're not allowing our students sufficient hours in the day to stay on top of their classes. These courses, then, necessarily generate unhealthy stress, lack of sleep, and general inattention to wellness.

If one analyzes the FCPS Youth Survey Data at <https://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/health-humanservices/fairfax-county-youth-survey>, by selecting "Explore the Data," and then selecting "Hours of Homework" as the primary question, and then selecting "Mental Health" as the optional question, we can see clear and disturbing correlations between hours of homework outside of school, and feelings of "sad or hopeless," contemplation of suicide, and etc. It's fair to note that this data shows correlation and not causation, but parents in 2018 should be able to speak to the relationship between overwork and unhealthy stress, which stress has been building to unsustainable levels for more than a generation.

FCPS Regulation 3205.1 states that homework, in high school, generally should not exceed 2 hours per night. Our student representative, as well as our knowledge of the members of our community (parents and students alike), tell us that 2 hours is a pipe dream for most students, **and certainly those with heavy loads of AP or IB courses**. Why? Why allow so much pressure on students? Why pretend that this is normal?

Many would answer that the motivator for these courses is college admissions. However, this assumption is likely incorrect because, as per Robin Lady of FCPS staff, admissions officers see through GPA weighting, and more importantly (and also as per Robin Lady of FCPS) because the absolute number of AP or IB courses taken is less relevant to admissions officers than is that number relative to the maximum number offered. Essentially, if it's possible to take 12 AP courses in a high school career, you'd better do it if you want to be competitive at selective colleges. But if the maximum

practicable is lower, then students are not disadvantaged by taking fewer of these courses.

SHAC feels that our students are feeling far too much pressure and unhealthy stress. We feel that the correlation between unhealthy stress and other adverse mental health outcomes is clear enough to require action. A societal change is needed here, and one in which FCPS and the community work together to decrease unhealthy stress for our students. However, a change of this nature takes time – more time than we have when students are at risk as a result.

SHAC could consider more stringent regulations on homework, but the amount of time homework requires varies greatly with course selection and from child to child. AP and IB course loads, however, are consistent in their overloading of student time. They are emblematic of the ubiquitous pressure to be accepted at prestigious colleges. They provide a decisive opportunity for the community to rally in support of our children in saying “too much is too much.”

FCPS is in or near the top 10 school districts, nationally, in terms of student enrollment. We are, quite frankly, one of the very best public school districts in the country. We are in a near-unique position to be able to move the needle on this issue.

SHAC proposes a cap of 10 AP or IB courses per student, to be spread across grades 9-12 in a 2-2-3-3 pattern, as described in Appendix A, Item 4.

Students would then distinguish themselves in other, healthier ways, such as extracurricular activities and community service, both of which are encouraged by FCPS wellness policies, but neither of which are practicable for many of our students due to excessive course loads. Students could access resources outside the school, develop themselves in ways other than academically, and undertake habits to improve their health and wellness, all things which FCPS encourages in one hand, but discourages in the other with opportunities and pressure for excessive course loads.

Elizabeth Schultz told SHAC, last year, to make a big splash. This would be a big splash. Let’s set a national tone. Let’s prioritize health and wellness. And let’s push back against this ever-increasing tsunami of pressure and expectation on our children.

SHAC does not propose, at this time, limiting post-AP electives, as these classes are conceptually more difficult, but less time-consuming than AP or IB classes. Students in these post-AP classes tend to have more ability and interest in the subjects, and post-AP courses, like honors courses, are not forced to cover as many topics as the typical AP or IB course.

Appendix A, Item 4, as it appeared in last year's report and as referred to above, states as follows:

SHAC recommends that FCPS amend policy 2100.2, Section IV, Subsection F, to make the following addition:

- a. 12. "In the interest of reducing unhealthy stress, students shall be prohibited from taking more than two Advanced Placement ("AP") or International Baccalaureate ("IB") courses in 9th grade, two AP or IB courses in 10th grade, 3 AP or IB courses in 11th grade, and 3 AP or IB courses in 12th grade.

EXHIBIT C

Letter from SHAC to the School Board on the Topic of Drowsy Driving

To the FCPS School Board:

SHAC is writing to recommend that Fairfax County add a question about drowsy driving to the Fairfax County Youth Survey. As required, we have identified a relevant question from a nationally-recognized survey, the Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS) survey. The question is:

“During the past 30 days, have you ever nodded off or fallen asleep, even just for a brief moment, while driving?” Drowsy driving is defined with an affirmative response.

Please add the question to the questionnaire for 12th graders in Fairfax. Since most students don’t obtain their driver’s licenses during earlier points of test administration (6th, 8th, or 10th grade), there is no need to add the question for the younger grade levels.

Rationale for our request:

“According to research by the AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety, one in five fatal crashes involves a drowsy driver, and drivers aged 16 to 24 are at the greatest risk for being involved in a drowsy driving crash” (National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB), February 2017). Further, teens need 8 to 10 hours of sleep per night, yet results from the Fairfax County Youth Survey show that the vast majority of our students are sleep deprived – only 17.4% of 12th graders achieve the minimum 8 hours (2017 Fairfax County Youth Survey). “High school students who reported sleeping 7 or fewer hours per night were more likely to engage in high-risk behaviors such as texting while driving, drinking and driving, and not wearing a seat belt” (NTSB, 2017). To inform our efforts to promote health and safety in Fairfax County Public Schools, we would like to have data about how many of our students are driving while drowsy.

<https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/mm6326a1.htm> <Accessed on January 14, 2019>

National Transportation Safety Board, February 2017 –
https://www.nts.gov/safety/safety-alerts/Documents/SA_061.pdf <Accessed on January 14, 2019>

On a second matter, we would like to see the word “sleep” featured in materials about the Fairfax County Youth Survey. For example, presentations and fact sheets could include “sleep” in the header along with “nutrition and physical activity,” so that stakeholders would more easily be able to find information about this subject matter. The table of contents should read, “Physical Activity and Sleep” instead of “Physical Activity and Rest” or “Sleep” should have its own line in the table of contents.

Sincerely,

David Whiting
SHAC Chair, on behalf of SHAC