

School Health Advisory Committee (SHAC)
End of Year Report
May 30, 2018

2017-18 has been a good year for SHAC, with vibrant discussion and constructive exchanges of viewpoints. We've covered a number of issues, ranging from counseling and emotional support for students, recess in elementary schools, student-hunger, and a potential cap on AP and IB courses. There have been respectful differences of opinion in SHAC this year, but I think that everyone would agree that this committee has been productive, and that our dialogues have been extremely worthwhile.

RECESS

First, as to recess in elementary schools, the committee enacted a policy change to clarify FCPS' position that recess is not to be taken away from students. This has been a challenge, as the committee was called upon to balance language that protects the wellness of students while minimizing legal liability for FCPS. For instance, it is widely understood that recess should NOT be withheld as a disciplinary measure, extra time for schoolwork, or a consequence of in-school delays of one sort or another. However, there may be times when safety requires that a student be excluded from recess. Extraordinary circumstances can and do occur.

SHAC's concern, however, is that while there is general agreement on the point that recess should not be withheld, this agreement is not uniformly applied. We have heard from many, many parents, including appointees on the committee, that recess is periodically, and even routinely withheld as a disciplinary measure. If kids are chatty and slow as they line up after lunch, that delay may cut into their recess time. However, this disciplinary measure is obviously counterproductive – the extra energy needs an opportunity to dissipate, and that opportunity is one which requires the unstructured downtime that recess provides.

There is an entire Facebook group, with a membership of 1,237, devoted to the issue of recess in FCPS. Many of those members identify instances of recess being withheld from elementary students. A recent FCCPTA survey, with over 1,300 participating families, showed that 51% of respondents indicated that recess had been withheld (21% reporting once or twice per year, 26% reporting once or twice a month, and 4% reporting that recess is withheld an average of weekly). Reasons for withholding are weather (59%), **group punishment (24%)**, individual punishment (25%), **and completion of homework or schoolwork (18%)**.

Recess should not be withheld as a disciplinary measure (in the absence of some present physical danger), and it should never be withheld in favor of schoolwork or homework completion. Parents are angry about this issue, and while policy language seems to reinforce SHAC's position, it's not perfectly understood on the ground level in our schools. SHAC requests that the school board help us spread this message. Ms. Teresa Johnson has stated that she intends to include this information in teachers' beginning-of-year packets in 2018-19. SHAC recommends that that dissemination of information be prioritized.

In addition, a public commenter brought to SHAC's attention the fact that three of our middle schools (Poe MS, Holmes MS, and Glasgow MS) host 6th graders and that these 6th graders, while still of an age to be considered elementary students, do not have access to recess at their schools. Physical

education will not do – the unstructured nature of recess, along with the opportunity for physical movement, is necessary for students in the 6th grade. Therefore SHAC recommends the policy modification in Appendix A, number 1.

Finally, SHAC, in communication from members of the community, in addition to a review of publicly-available information, supports the notion of two distinct daily recesses, of at least 20 minutes, for elementary students. SHAC is aware that FCPS is considering other policy adjustments which will call for slightly less time, but it is the opinion of this committee that two recesses of 20 minutes each, should be required, and thus SHAC passed the language in Appendix A, Item 2, and presents it to the school board for consideration.

HUNGER

SHAC is concerned about the issue of student hunger in FCPS, as all challenges of learning are magnified for our students who struggle with food insecurity, with the number of those students exceeding 50,000. SHAC has discussed this issue at length with Rodney Taylor from Food & Nutrition Services and is satisfied that not only is Mr. Taylor keenly aware of the issues, but also he is making tremendous strides in a positive direction. Mr. Taylor and his department has the full confidence of this committee, and while we intend to monitor his continued progress, we have no specific recommendations at this time.

CLEANING CHEMICALS

SHAC is concerned by the incidence of children handling cleaning chemicals in schools. For example, elementary students are routinely expected to wipe down tables which have been sprayed by lunchroom staff. However, the prospect of a first grader handling using cleaning rags on tables that have just been sprayed with quaternary ammonium compounds, which FCPS uses and which constitute a “Category 3” toxin according to the Environmental Protection Agency, is not a reasonable expectation.

SHAC has worked closely with Richard Michelback, from the Office of Safety and Security, and has seen the drafting of fact sheet SEH-18, which states that students should no longer able to use or come into contact with sanitizing chemicals. We appreciate Mr. Michelback’s work, and just as with the recess issue, SHAC requests that the school board help us spread word to the schools.

However, the fact sheets are documents internal to FCPS. Parents do not see them, and do not know that they exist. Therefore, in order to reassure parents that children are not at risk from exposure to these chemicals, SHAC requests that the school board adopt a policy modification as described in Appendix A, Item 3 below.

CAP 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.

METRICS

Part of SHAC's charge for this year was to examine responses to the metrics we proposed last year, as part of FCPS' wellness policy. These metrics have not yet been received, and SHAC has not been presented with any of the partial data. Therefore, this portion of our charge has not yet been possible to undertake.

Further, SHAC is very interested to understand the prevalence of the required "Wellness Committees," whose job it is to respond to our policy metrics. We are concerned that these committees have not yet been prioritized at the ground level in our schools.

CHARGE FOR THE 2018-19 SCHOOL YEAR

SHAC suggests that the following comprise its charge for the 2018-19 school year:

"FCPS hereby charges with the School Health Advisory Committee with:

1. Examining and evaluating incoming wellness metrics, and making necessary recommendations
2. Examining current and proposed practices for student technology use and any associated health effects
3. Examining middle school start times
4. Examining homework as it corresponds with stress and mental health
5. Examining how the threat of violence, and particularly gun violence, impacts students' health and ability to learn.

APPENDIX A

Approved by SHAC:

1. SHAC recommends that FCPS amend policy 2100.2, Section IV, Subsection B, Item 2, to replace the existing item 2, in its entirety, with the following:
 - a. 2. Daily recess is required for grades K-6, and should provide for student-selected structured and unstructured play through a variety of activities.
2. SHAC recommends that FCPS amend policy 2100.2, Section IV, Subsection B, to make the following addition:
 - a. Schools shall make best efforts to provide students two distinct daily recesses, of at least 20 minutes, on full school days for students in grades K-6.
3. SHAC recommends that FCPS amend policy 2100.2, Section IV, Subsection E, to add item 7:
 - a. 7. "FCPS students shall only use water to clean cafeteria tables."
4. 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.