



Oct. 3, 2020

Coalition for TJ Gives “Revised Merit Lottery Proposal” Failing Grade

This proposal is a misguided effort by Fairfax County Public Schools to claim victory while continuing to ignore fundamental and complex problems underlying K-8 education in underrepresented communities.

Contact: CoalitionForTJ@gmail.com

FAIRFAX COUNTY, Va., -- The Coalition for TJ **rejects** a new “Revised Merit Lottery Proposal” to the admissions process at Thomas Jefferson High School for Science and Technology and gives Fairfax County Public Schools Superintendent Scott Brabrand and the lottery plan a failing grade.

The new proposal, or Plan B, retains the flawed lottery component of an earlier proposal, dismantles TJ’s race-blind, merit-based admissions process, targets Asian-American students and remains the end result of a closed process that has lacked transparency and community engagement. The Coalition for TJ represents more than 5,000 parents, students, alumni and community members.

By the school system’s own admission, Superintendent Brabrand’s revised proposal will be even worse than the earlier proposal at ensuring that a sufficient number of disadvantaged minorities will be admitted to TJHSST, offering only “some increase” to these numbers.

The Fairfax County School Board should reject this Plan B proposal, abandon its rush to overhaul the TJ admissions process this year, send Virginia Education Secretary the very clear [“Academic Year Governor’s School Diversity Goals and Report,”](#) created by the Virginia Department of Education for an October deadline, and put in place a coalition with community stakeholders to develop a serious and effective plan to increase the enrollment of underrepresented minorities at TJ while maintaining the school’s merit standards for admission.

Plan B: “Revised Merit Lottery”

Here are the summarized details of the new proposal by FCPS:

- The Plan B “Revised Merit Lottery” creates a two-tiered admissions system at TJHSST. All applicants will be required to (i) have a minimum 3.5 GPA, (ii) be in Algebra 1 or a higher math class, (iii) take a problem solving essay, and (iv) participate in the creation of a “Student Portrait Sheet” which evaluates and ranks students “holistically” based upon multiple criteria, including among other things “Experience Factors,” such as whether the student suffers from socioeconomic disadvantage and is enrolled at schools traditionally underrepresented at TJHSST.
- The top 20 percent of students, or 100 students, based upon this holistic review will be granted admission to TJHSST. The remaining 80 percent of students, or 400 students, will be entered into a lottery and chosen by random chance.

Fairfax County Public Schools has tacitly acknowledged that the original so-called “merit” lottery proposal (the “Original Proposal”) was fundamentally flawed in failing to include any mechanism to ensure that the best STEM students will gain admission to TJ. The Coalition for TJ is opposed to the new Revised Proposal because it continues to retain the flawed idea of lottery.

Plan B Failures

Here are some serious issues with the new Plan B proposal:

- The combination of a vague and non-transparent holistic review and lottery will create a “two-tiered” class at TJHSST, by Fairfax County Public School’s own admission, with 20 percent of students chosen by merit and 80 percent chosen by luck.

- As a result, 20 percent of the class of TJHSST will be top STEM students, and the other 80 percent of the class at TJHSST will *not* be the top county STEM students.
- Fairfax County Public Schools has added a “Holistic Review” for students accepted into the lottery, including a qualitative “Student Portrait Sheet” with new jargon “designed to draw out qualities in areas aligned to Portrait of a Graduate and 21st Century Skills.” These “qualities” include being a “Creative & Critical Thinker,” an “Ethical/Global Citizen” and a “Goal-Directed & Resilient Individual” — all elements that have been used in application processes as proxies for race. That process is ripe for bias. Moreover, the Portrait of a Graduate was designed to describe goals for *all* graduates of FCPS, and has *nothing to do* with STEM.
- At issue is the fact that school staff members are not diverse, and their view of students has so far failed to identify and vet qualified minorities for more than two decades. The Plan B selection process -- when combined with the messaging of Superintendent Brabrand and other School Board members -- will be prone to bias against Asian-American students.
- The underrepresentation of Blacks and Hispanics at TJHSST is unacceptable, but changing the admission requirements in this haphazard manner is a stop-gap “fix”, and does nothing to address the underlying crisis in K-8 education in these communities, as identified by the FCPS Minority Student Achievement Oversight Committee. This misguided effort instead serves as a distraction and a convenient excuse for FCPS to claim victory while at the same time continuing to ignore these fundamental and complex problems.

Now that FCPS has admitted that the Original Proposal was flawed, it should abandon the Original Proposal entirely. By combining a holistic admissions system with an admittedly flawed lottery approach, the revised Plan B proposal has three fundamental flaws:

1. First – Fairfax County Public School’s stubborn insistence on maintaining a lottery component fails to eliminate the discriminatory and unconstitutional race-leveling component of the Original Proposal, which is designed to suppress the number of Asians at TJHSST. Plan B is therefore **still unconstitutional**, as stated clearly by the Pacific Legal Foundation [in an October 1 letter to the Fairfax County School Board](#).
2. Second – Plan B creates a two-tiered class of “meritorious students” and “lottery students,” which FCPS admits in its own slide-presentation could create dissension at TJHSST and continues to deny top STEM students

admission to TJHSST. FCPS offers no justification as to why the top 100 STEM students in FCPS deserve admission to TJHSST but not the 101 to 500 best STEM students;

3. Third – Plan B admits that it will be even worse than the Original Proposal at ensuring that a sufficient number of disadvantaged minorities will be admitted to TJHSST. Plan B actually REDUCED the number of disadvantaged students when compared to the Original Proposal.

While the Coalition for TJ believes that a holistic basis is fraught with subjective bias, it is a better process than a lottery, which has no place in admissions. As we have said repeatedly: **No lottery.**

The Coalition for TJ continues to believe that the **best approach** is the “Second-Look Semifinalist” program proposed by the Coalition for TJ, which could be designed to ensure that middle schools that are historically underrepresented at TJHSST are more represented, promoting greater socioeconomic diversity at TJHSST.

The Coalition for TJ supports Fairfax County Public Schools adopting recommendations from the Coalition for TJ to increase community outreach to improve the pipeline of students from underrepresented groups applying to TJHSST. The Original Proposal lacked any such emphasis.

Next Steps

In summary, in its next steps, the Fairfax County School Board should:

- Immediately halt this rushed approach to overhaul TJ admissions policy.
- Send Virginia Education Secretary the very clear, straightforward and limited “Academic Year Governor’s School Diversity Goals and Report, created in accordance with FY2021 Budget Item 145,C-27 by the Virginia Department of Education, and acknowledged by the TJ Admissions Director Jeremy Shughart. It is [visible at this link](#). This report does *not* require the dramatic overhaul to TJ admissions that Superintendent Brabrand is proposing.
- Create a committee that includes all stakeholders impacted by the TJ admissions issue to develop a fair merit-based approach to admissions to TJ.

#SaveTJ