



**McLean Citizens Association Resolution
Proposed Changes to the Admissions System for
Thomas Jefferson High School for Science and Technology
October 5, 2020**

Whereas, Thomas Jefferson High School for Science and Technology (“TJHSST”) is the largest of nineteen academic-year Governor’s Schools in the Commonwealth of Virginia; and

Whereas, TJHSST has been consistently ranked as one of the top public high schools in the United States, and TJHSST is currently ranked #1 nationally in the 2020 *U.S. News and World Report* Best Public U.S. High Schools rankings; and

Whereas, FCPS School Board Policy 3355, which was first adopted in 1986 and last amended in 2013, states that its purpose is to “establish a high school for science and technology where students with exceptional quantitative skills and interest in science, technology, engineering or mathematics can pursue higher levels of academic achievement in those subjects in preparation for the pursuit of a science, technology, engineering or mathematics-focused profession”; and

Whereas, Fairfax County Economic Development Authority touts TJHSST, which is described on their website, as “renowned” in efforts to recruit and attract business that furthers economic development in Fairfax County; and

Whereas, Fairfax County Public School (FCPS) Regulation 3355.13, which was last amended in 2018, interprets School Board Policy 3355 and lists four criteria that FCPS will use to admit students to TJHSST:

- “Aptitude for successful study of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics”;
- “Record of exceptional academic achievement”;
- “Commitment, intellectual curiosity, passion and creativity in the study of science, technology, engineering and mathematics”; and
- “Background, skills, or experiences that promote the School Board’s goal of providing diversity in the student body to enhance a unique learning experience and to develop future leaders”; and

Whereas, since 1998, Virginia’s procedures to initiate a Governor’s School have required the proposed program to be “beyond the scope and sequence of the regular schools’ program for gifted students” and to “provide educational options not available in home schools for students identified as gifted or eligible to be so designated,” and

Whereas, under Virginia regulations, the governance of a multi-jurisdictional Governor’s School such as TJHSST should include a Governing Board drawn from the School Boards of participating jurisdictions, and TJHSST lacks such a Governing Board; and

Whereas, FCPS is required to submit a report to the Virginia Governor by October 1 of each year regarding diversity-related goals for TJHSST’s student body and faculty; and

Whereas, FCPS currently selects middle school students for admission to TJHSST through a rigorous, multi-step race blind admissions process that (a) requires all applicants to take Algebra 1 during or before 8th grade, have a 3.0 or higher GPA and take TJHSST admissions tests; (b) selects 900 to 1,500 semifinalists using a holistic process that takes into account the admissions test results and applicant GPAs; (c) asks semifinalists to submit two teacher recommendations, a Student Information Sheet and a problem-solving essay; and (d) admits roughly 480 semifinalists based on a holistic review; and

Whereas, on September 15, 2020, FCPS Superintendent Brabrand presented recommendations to the FCPS School Board to revise the admissions policy at TJHSST, set forth in a 26-slide PowerPoint presentation, which proposed replacing the current admissions process at TJHSST with a “merit lottery” in which 350 seats allocated to Fairfax County residents would be allocated among five FCPS-defined regions in order to admit more students to TJHSST from statistically under-represented groups; and

Whereas, on October 3, 2020, FCPS posted a revised TJHSST admissions proposal as a 25-slide PowerPoint presentation for an October 6, 2020 School Board work session; and

Whereas, Superintendent Brabrand’s revised proposal would eliminate the use of standardized tests on math, science, and reading and teacher recommendations, would admit 100 students based on a holistic evaluation of their GPA, a “Student Portrait Sheet,” their Problem-Solving Essay, and “Experience Factors” such as whether they attend an under-represented FCPS middle school, and would admit 400 students by lottery within each geographic “pathway” region; and

Whereas, since FCPS has not disclosed -- in either PowerPoint presentation or in responses to School Board member “next step” questions -- the estimated number of 8th Graders who would be eligible to apply to TJHSST under the first or second proposals, the ratio of the number of eligible 8th Graders to the 350 seats allocated to Fairfax County residents remains unknown, and, therefore, it is unknown to readers the extent to which selection would depend on random selection in the lottery; and

Whereas, Superintendent Brabrand held a one-hour video “town hall” on September 23, 2020 to discuss his first proposed changes to the TJHSST admissions system with the public, which did not provide sufficient opportunity for the public to learn about the first proposed “merit lottery” or understand its impact on TJHSST; and

Whereas, Superintendent Brabrand proposed to implement a new TJHSST admissions process prior to filing the annual Governor’s School disclosure on or before October 9th, only three

weeks and two days after presenting his first proposal to the FCPS School Board; and only six days after presenting his revised proposal; and

Whereas, the FCPS website does not list a public hearing on this topic and the MCA considers that a topic of this significance and public interest deserves at least one public hearing; and

Whereas, Superintendent Brabrand has not disclosed to the public any quantitative data and analysis as to the impact to justify the first or second proposals; and

Whereas, the MCA considers Superintendent Brabrand's PowerPoint presentations to be insufficient in quantity and clarity, and the time provided for consideration of the first or revised proposals to be inadequate, so as to enable the public and Fairfax County School Board to reach an informed determination regarding the merits of the proposed new admission system; and

Whereas, the Loudoun County School Board (LCSB) sent a letter on September 26, 2020 to the Fairfax County School Board regarding proposed TJHSST admissions reforms, which: (a) invited a discussion about establishing a regional governing board for TJHSST, with representatives from the school boards of each participating school division; (b) expressed concern about "eliminating any skills testing or cognitive testing whatsoever"; and (c) expressed additional concerns about the lottery proposal in the absence of specific information "regarding the format, rules, and consequences of such a lottery"; and

Whereas, the Virginia Freedom of Information Act provides that "...the affairs of government are not intended to be conducted in an atmosphere of secrecy since at all times the public is to be the beneficiary of any action taken at any level of government;"

NOW THEREFORE, be it resolved that MCA supports efforts to make the student body of TJHSST more ethnically diverse but has considerable concerns with the haste with which this significant revision of the TJHSST admissions process is being considered and the lack of any publicly available data or analysis provided to all School Board members and to the public, other than Superintendent Brabrand's two PowerPoint presentations, to justify any proposed revision; and

Be it further resolved that MCA urges Superintendent Brabrand and the FCPS School Board to provide greater transparency and more opportunities and time for public review, comment and participation in a public hearing or hearings regarding proposed changes to TJHSST admissions policies and procedures; and

Be it further resolved that MCA urges Superintendent Brabrand to prepare a more formal report with a sufficient level of data so that the public and the School Board understand the rationale and merits of Superintendent Brabrand's proposed admissions system, and the potential impact on:

- the academic excellence at TJHSST, including enrollment in TJHSST's post-AP courses and participation and achievements of TJHSST's established academic teams, and

- increased representation (numbers of students, and percentages) from under-represented groups; and

Be it further resolved that MCA urges that Fairfax County and other jurisdictions with students that attend TJHSST establish a multi-jurisdictional Governing Board, in order to bring the governance of TJHSST into conformity with Virginia regulations.

Be it further resolved that MCA urges that the importance of maintaining the academic excellence and reputation of Fairfax County's nationally acclaimed TJHSST always be kept in mind.

Approved by the MCA Executive Committee

October 5, 2020

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Copies to:

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