Introduction

Although Virginia is generally considered a conservative state, we Virginians take great pride in the free flow of ideas—even those that are controversial and challenge the status quo. With forefathers such as Washington, Jefferson, Madison, and Monroe, revolutionary ideas are part of our culture.

Contrary to a line of thinking that claims that teachers’ unions are responsible for the failure of public schools, many local teachers’ unions have partnered with their districts to revolutionize our public schools by improving teaching practice and thus student learning.

Nationally, the American Federation of Teachers and the National Education Association have played a part in education reform. Among other things, both national unions involved themselves in and supported the creation of the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, which has a rigorous credentialing process designed to improve teaching practice. Currently, both organizations actively participate in the Partnership for 21st Century Skills—a coalition of business and education organizations seeking to further reform education. This partnering to create educational reform must be thoughtfully approached and thoroughly contemplated to uncover the ramifications of change. Education reform is best accomplished when teacher organizations are equal partners in the endeavor.

Rick Baumgartner concluded his term as President of the Fairfax Education Association in July 2007 and has returned to teaching.
The Fairfax Education Association (FEA) has a long history of innovative partnering with Fairfax County Public Schools (FCPS). In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the FEA worked extensively with the school district to create one of the first comprehensive merit-pay programs for teachers in the country (a program that ended in the mid-1990s). In 2000 FEA partnered with the district to create the first school in the country whose mission was to improve student achievement by encouraging teachers to engage in the National Board Certification process. In addition to these landmark endeavors, the FEA has conducted numerous workshops, conferences, and seminars in partnership with FCPS to improve the teaching practice.

As we discuss the innovative Teacher Leadership Development Grants (TLDG) program in Fairfax, the question becomes: Why is a progressive union with a long history of collaboration and sponsorship of new ideas in education reform concerned about an idea that puts more money in the hands of teachers for doing work that is both professional and necessary?

**Areas of Agreement**

*The FEA agrees that there are more demands on teachers than ever before.* The impact of high-stakes testing has brought major changes in instructional delivery as well as the time required for instructional planning, preparing, assessing, and reporting. Additional grade level or department meetings have become necessary to coordinate curriculum content and to develop expected pacing for completing instructional units. The number of before- and after-school remediation programs has expanded. The inclusion of special education and ESOL students in mainstream classes has increased the planning and coordination demands of both the specialist and the general-education teacher. The use of technology in the classroom has further increased the demands on teachers. With all of these demands, the teacher workday has expanded because the teacher workload has expanded.

*The FEA agrees that FCPS must provide extra compensation for the extra time that is being required of teachers.* The FEA entered into discussions with the superintendent focusing on providing extra compensation for extra work that teachers were already doing, such as before- and after-school student remediation, supervision of students after school, and additional required meetings.

*The FEA agrees that teachers should be provided with sufficient compensation within the profession so that they can focus on their professional work.*
General Concerns

The FEA’s general concerns regarding the Teacher Leadership Development Grants program are that it

- has moved from its original intention by creating new programs while failing to adequately address the issue of compensating teachers for extra time and extra work that they are currently undertaking;
- embodies significant weaknesses in program evaluation;
- creates a potential morale problem by creating haves and have-nots;
- lacks a dedicated and sustainable means of funding over the long term.

For purposes of discussion, issues regarding Teacher Leadership Development Grants have been divided into two areas: process and funding.

Process Issues

Definition of “Normal Workday”/Self-Direction of Time at the End of the Student Day. It is important to note in this part of the discussion that Virginia is a right-to-work state in which collective bargaining is illegal. However, this lack of collective bargaining should not mean that meaningful discussions between representatives of teachers and school administration should not take place.

Teachers expect to work a professional day. They recognize the importance of such things as collaborative work, parent conferences, and student remediation. They also recognize that these professional activities sometimes require them to work beyond the regular student day. As the Fairfax Education Association and school leaders discussed compensating teachers for extra time and extra work, the association sought to identify, in clear language, what constituted a “normal workday” for teachers. It also sought to develop language allowing teachers to self-direct their time at the end of that normal workday.

In Fairfax, the teacher workday is defined in a regulation that calls for a 7.5 hour workday; however, the regulation also states, “responsibilities involving time in excess of 7.5 hours per day may be scheduled by the principal or program manager.” In essence, teachers may be and often are compelled to work an extended and uncompensated day at the will of the principal. These extensions—whether for elongated faculty meetings, additional student contact, or other school matters—often cause the important work of reflecting on individual student needs and planning for instruction to be postponed until times when teachers are exhausted from the demands of their students and the school day.
Teachers are already held accountable to high standards. Student learning can be documented, and questionable teaching practices can be addressed. In Fairfax, the school system has developed a rigorous evaluation process, which has an “instant start” clause. This clause allows a principal to bring any teacher into the evaluation cycle that she or he feels is not meeting professional standards.

Just as other professionals are allowed to self-direct their time and are held accountable for the results of their work, so should professional teachers be allowed to self-direct their time at the end of the regular student day. Given our discussions so far, Fairfax County Public Schools has a tension between the concept of teacher as professional and the concept of teacher as hourly employee. It appears that many districts across the nation embrace the term “professional” as they discuss their teaching corps, but professional collegiality seems to be abandoned when discussions arise as to how long teachers should remain at the schoolhouse.

Undefined/Redefined Program. It is difficult, if not impossible, for an organization such as the Fairfax Education Association to fulfill its mission of advocating for educators by endorsing a loosely defined concept. Such is the case regarding Teacher Leadership Development Grants. As the concept of teacher leadership was discussed, ideas continually came forward and the nature of the program continued to change. Even the report generated by the Fairfax County Public Schools Department of Accountability, titled Good to Great Opportunities for Teacher Leaders (2006b), reflects a similar sentiment when it states, “The request for proposals lacked cohesiveness and guiding principles to ensure that grantees adhered to common components tied to teacher leadership.”

Program Evaluation. In discussions with Fairfax County Public Schools, the Fairfax Education Association consistently raised the issue of creating a systemwide evaluation to address the effectiveness of this new program. Without a systemwide evaluation of the grants established at the onset of the program, each school is free to determine its own success. At the time the grants were awarded, no systemwide evaluation existed for this program.

These concerns again appear to be corroborated by the FCPS Department of Accountability report (2006b), which calls for “a review of grantee plans to identify common elements across sites…and to provide opportunities for division-wide accountability.” The report also addressed a lack of clearly defined outcomes at schools selected to receive grants: “Schools selected to receive Teacher Leadership Grants should revisit their proposals in consultation with cluster and/or central office staff and identify specific goals for their projects, activities
implemented to meet the specific goals, benchmarks from which to measure implementation, and expected outcomes.” It also states, “Most proposals did not describe how anticipated or expected outcomes reflected initiative activities.” In education today, the only true measurement of success is in terms of student outcomes. Any program must be measured in those terms.

**Morale Issues.** While a positive intention of the Teacher Leadership Development Grants program is that “new talent can be brought into leadership areas” (Fairfax County Public Schools 2005), the process for identifying talent is largely determined by the individual school principal. How one is selected to receive additional compensation is neither transparent nor clearly defined in the grants process. Because this process is so arbitrary, the potential for a negative impact on individual faculty members as well as on systemwide morale is significant. Many individuals who are not receiving additional compensation are as equally dedicated to the profession and their work as those on extended contracts.

It appears incongruous that a program designed to foster teacher leadership doesn’t require teacher input in the selection of teacher leaders. The process of selecting teacher leaders must be clearly stated, transparent, and fairly administered.

An outgrowth of the teacher leadership initiative is that administrators at some work sites that applied for and were denied leadership grants proceeded with implementing the new programs without providing additional compensation to the teachers doing this additional work. This is directly in opposition to the original intention of providing extra compensation for extra work and negatively impacts morale at the affected schools.

**Funding Issues**

*Local Political Climate.* The funding climate for schools in Fairfax County can be characterized as one of fiscal conservatism, and 2007 is an election year. Most of our school funding comes from our local government, the amount of which is established by our board of supervisors. While the board of supervisors has provided millions of additional dollars each year to its schools, it has increasingly called for the school system to establish priorities regarding its budget.

Last year the board of supervisors set an artificial limit on additional school funding. The supervisors justify limiting school funding in part because of a leveling or slightly declining student population. In recent years, the board has significantly reduced the property-tax rate, as the housing market was growing and tax revenue continued to increase. Presently, the local economy has slowed, the housing market has flattened, and the board of supervisors is recalculating the
percent of additional funding it will allow the schools for growth. There will be no increase in the tax rate. The increase in funding that we expect is so low that it is doubtful that the necessary increases will be forthcoming to have FCPS remain competitive in a very competitive marketplace.

*Lack of a Dedicated Funding Source.* If and when the Teacher Leadership Development Grant program expands, the FEA is concerned that without a dedicated funding source, the grants program will ultimately pull funds from cost-of-living allowances (COLAs) and salary schedule increases. The merit-pay program that the association helped create with FCPS in the early nineties ultimately had 24 percent of the teaching population earning an additional 4.5 to 9 percent of their salary. An economic downturn caused the demise of the program.

The vision of the Teacher Leadership Development Grant program is for perhaps as many as 75 percent of the teaching population in Fairfax to be on extended-length contracts. These contracts vary in length—adding from nine to twenty-four additional days, with commensurate salary increases falling between 4.6 and 12.3 percent, not including retirement contributions. (In addition, approximately 13 percent of this increase will be spent by FCPS on mandatory retirement contributions.) Because there is no dedicated funding source for this program, it will be funded out of the school operating budget, thus causing it to compete for funds necessary for market-driven salary increases, student programs, and school supplies and infrastructure.

*Use of Extended Contracts Rather Than Stipends.* By using extended contracts rather than stipends to provide extra compensation to teachers, there is an additional cost to both the school system and the teacher. Following is a simplified example of what occurs:

**Stipend Example:**
- Teacher receives $1,000 stipend for coaching
- Cost to system: $1,000
- Net to employee: $1,000

**Extended Contract Example:**
- Teacher receives $1,000 in extended contract for coaching
- Cost to system: $1,000 plus approximately 13 percent paid to state retirement = $1,130
- Net to employee: $1,000 less approximately 5 percent employee contribution to retirement = $950
Potential for “Spiking.” A number of states have enacted legislation to limit the ability of teachers to increase their salaries rapidly near retirement age. This process is known as spiking. Spiking is detrimental to state retirement systems because it increases the retirement benefit without the requisite long-term contributions that are necessary to maintain a stable retirement fund. To combat this in Illinois, the state has enacted a cap of 6 percent per year in teacher salary increases to eliminate spiking and protect its fund.

With a potential increase of 12.3 percent in salaries due to the extended contracts, Fairfax could draw attention to the spiking issue and create a target on the state retirement system.

Employment Patterns

Using extended contracts might be acceptable if there were not limited funding for public schools and if the employment trends of new teachers indicated that they would remain in the profession for the long term and enjoy their enhanced retirement benefits. Current data on the new generation of employees indicates that they plan on having several careers within their lifetimes. In their study of teacher attrition, Ingersoll and Smith (2003) noted that “after just five years, between 40 and 50 percent of beginning teachers have left the profession.” The National Education Association (2002) states on its Web site, “Some 20 percent of all new hires leave the classroom within three years. In urban districts, the numbers are worse—close to 50 percent of newcomers flee the profession during their first five years of teaching.”

There appears to be agreement that the teacher retention issues in FCPS mirror those of the nation. With this degree of teacher turnover, funds might be better spent on stipends that will add to take-home income. The use of contracts rather than stipends causes the school system to spend additional limited resources on enhanced retirement benefits that might be better spent on direct salary to teachers.

The Future of the Program

The following questions remain regarding the future of the FCPS Teacher Leadership Development Grants program:

• How will program success be determined?
• If successful, how will it evolve?
• If unsuccessful, what is the exit strategy?
• Will FCPS develop language defining a “normal workday”?

“All That Glitters Is Not Gold”
• Will FCPS develop language that allows for a “professional day” in which teachers self-direct their time after the regular student day?
• How do we address the demands on time that all teachers are experiencing but for which only some are receiving additional compensation?
• Will extended contracts undermine the current salary structure?
• Will this program be an effective mechanism for retaining teachers into retirement?
• What is the financial impact given competing budgetary needs?

As we examine Teacher Leadership Development Grants in the future, it is the hope of the FEA to be able to engage in continued meaningful dialogue with FCPS to address these questions and bring our issues to resolution. We recognize that both salary and optimal teaching and learning conditions are magnets for attracting and retaining the very finest educators. We also recognize that the foundation of a great school system lies in its teachers.

**References**

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