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September 19, 2024

Dr. Reid and Members of the School Board:

We write to you following the release of this year's National Merit semifinalist list, the latest evidence of a decline in performance at the Thomas Jefferson High School for Science & Technology (TJ). **We urge FCPS to open an inquiry into whether the 2020 changes to the admissions process and/or current operations at TJ are failing to properly serve the purpose for which TJ was established.**

This year's PSAT scores reflect the first TJ class admitted under the "new" admissions process established in 2020. Last year, TJ produced 165 National Merit semifinalists from a class of approximately 450 students (or 37%); over the past nine years TJ averaged a proportion of 32%. However, this year TJ produced just 81 semifinalists, from a class of approximately 550 students (or 14.7%). TJ's 81 semifinalists represent the lowest number from that school in at least 10 years, despite the increased class size. This drop in performance is both notable and unacceptable to organizations such as the Federation which share a stake in FCPS' continued excellence.

The likely implications from these figures are troubling. The current crop of TJ students are not able to take advantage of the school's resources to achieve at the same high level as prior classes. We suspect that the 1.5% admissions requirement from each FCPS middle school is obfuscating the inequitable distribution of programs to serve our most talented students. We therefore **further call on FCPS to study differences in how advanced learners are served throughout the County.**

We also observe the year-over-year decrease of 84 semifinalists was not significantly offset by gains in other FCPS high schools; instead, FCPS' total number of semifinalists decreased from 264 to 191. This fact points to a likely mismatch in "fit" between FCPS students and the programming at both TJ and other secondary schools, which has resulted in a net loss of talent development for FCPS overall.

As a Governor's School, TJ is charged with serving the "small population of students whose learning levels are remarkably different from their age-level peers."¹ We are proud that FCPS provides a distinctively supportive environment designed to nurture gifted students. We also share the belief that FCPS programming must properly develop academically talented students wherever they are found in Fairfax County. TJ's admissions policy, its operation, and the Advanced Academic Program in general must maintain the integrity of their shared mission to nurture excellence in our public schools.

Sincerely,

The President and Education Chairs of the Fairfax County Federation of Citizens' Associations

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Tim Thompson".

Tim Thompson
President

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Annmarie Swope".

Annmarie Swope
Co-Chair
Education Committee

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Nancy Trainer".

Nancy Trainer
Co-Chair
Education Committee

¹ Virginia Department of Education. <https://www.doe.virginia.gov/teaching-learning-assessment/specialized-instruction/governor-s-schools>