

“Community Involvement - the Foundation to Accountability in school”

Remarks to the Fairfax Coalition of Advocates for Public Schools annual meeting

By Steve Hunt

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I appreciate this opportunity to talk to you tonight and really commend you for your efforts to hold the school system accountable. It is a role played by patriots from the founding of our nation.

Thomas Jefferson said, “The price of freedom is eternal vigilance.” Nothing has changed even at the local school level. Our government was founded on a distinct distrust of government. It was a necessary evil. The majority of history had seen a pendulum swing between periods of dictatorial control that provided security with limited to no freedom and outright anarchy with full freedom and no security. The founders were looking for a balance that provided the security without the loss of liberty and freedom. They set up a government of checks and balances with three branches, each to keep the other two branches within their constitutional roles. The voter was to be the final check. If those elected to run the government were not functioning in accordance with the constitutional roles, if they were abusing their powers, incompetent or not properly performing their duties, it was the role and responsibility of the electorate to remove that person from office. The access to any non-elected government body was through the elected official that was responsible for that body. The peaceful transition of power through the election process has been an amazing part of our nation and is an historic anomaly.

This is the reason the Founders believed so strongly that the voting populace needed to be informed in order to be able to fulfill its responsibility as the final check in our government. If the people did not know what was going on in the government, how would they know whether those in power were fulfilling their responsibilities? If they did not know what was in the Constitution, how would they know if their elected officials were following it or abusing their power?

This is why public access to education has always been important in this nation and why it is critical to the survival of our nation. Every voter needs some foundational knowledge to be able to effectively fulfill his role and responsibility as the final check in our government. Voters need to be able to read so that they can educate themselves on issues and events. They need to know the form of government that we have and how their role fits in to it. They need to know the history of how our government was formed and what the Founders intended as they crafted it. This includes the idea behind Jefferson’s quote that government is not to be trusted; it is to be watched constantly, continually.

However, there is an inherent conflict of interest in the public school system. It is a government bureaucratic system whose responsibility is to teach children that they are supposed to be wary of the growing power of government taking away their rights and liberties while, as a bureaucracy, it is continually trying to grow.

That is the nature of bureaucracies – to grow themselves. Not too surprising the growth is usually in areas that make the leadership of the bureaucracy’s job easier instead of in the service area. I think we see that even in this year’s down budget in Fairfax County. While some admin

positions have been removed, there are increases in administrative positions as teachers are being laid off.

Businesses that survive in a competitive market do just the opposite. Since their income is associated directly with their service, that is the part of their infrastructure that is protected the most. If they were to operate the way a government bureaucracy did, they would fail and go away. Many government bureaucracies fail, but they rarely go away.

What is missing is the competitive environment that forces the focus to be on the service and on minimizing the overhead. We see an attempt to create that environment in the Virginia Standards of Learning and the No Child Left Behind legislation. However, these are focused on the bare minimum levels of achievement and will not necessarily push school systems toward excellence and do not provide any direct focus on the effectiveness of the infrastructure or administration.

That leaves the customer of the bureaucracy to impact it through their elected officials. In other words, that leaves it to you. Back to the foundational last line of defense against a constantly growing unresponsive bureaucracy – the community.

And it has to be a community as opposed to an individual (unless your name is George Soros). Many of you may have experienced this. You have a concern or an issue with the school or the school system. You may even have a good idea on how to address it. The response that you get from the school system is that you are the first person to ever bring that up; no one else seems to believe that there is a problem and you cannot expect them to change an entire program if you are the only one with a concern about it. The other common tactic is to delay, because usually within a few months your child will be in a different grade or have a different teacher and the issue will be gone. If they can delay until the summer, hopefully you will not bring it up in the fall. Worse case is to wait you out a few years and your child will change schools. Before FAIRFAXCAPS, perhaps the most influential locations were the soccer fields or poolside as parents talked while they watched their children. Here they may find that they are not the only ones who have that concern. If they became motivated enough, they might organize a group of parents, perhaps even parents from other schools and take their issue to the principal or the school board. As a group, suddenly there is much more of a response than to an individual parent. There is a greater likelihood of access to the principal or school board member and the issue will often be taken more seriously. That does not mean anything will happen, just that you have been heard. But that is the first step. You might even get a blue ribbon commission or a taskforce, sadly, hoping that will appease the community without actually having to address the issue. Success comes with perseverance.

Two recent examples of this level of effort and perseverance are the FAIRGRADE and SLEEP organizations. Both have organized across the county so that they could bring a large voice to bear. Both have been working the issues for some time. I know that FAIRGRADE may have just organized as a group recently, but the issue has been floating around for some time. Observing their efforts serves as a good indicator of what you have in store.

When I was on the school board and would receive an answer that was inaccurate if not intentionally misleading, I would think, “I will need to carefully check any information that I received from that person.” The number of people in that group just kept growing. At some point I realized that I needed to check everything from everyone, but it was tough to remember to not trust anyone. I would inevitably find myself listening and believing another staff member

and later find out that I had been misled again. Now, I believe that many if not most were not intentionally attempting to mislead a school board member. Often they have been putting out the same propaganda for so long with no real accountability and no real self analysis, that they believe it. The school board has no independent staff. That is why it is so important for FairfaxCAPS to provide that input.

In a similar manner, the SLEEP and school system interactions are a classic. Whether you agree with their desired goals or not, you have to admire the dogged determination with which they have kept on this issue. Unfortunately, that is often what is required to make a bureaucracy as large as FCPS move in a direction not of their choosing. The school system would respond with data, costs, justifications and the SLEEP group would analyze them only to find that there was not much behind them, that they did not add up or that they were not quite accurate. When they brought it back to the school system, the school system's story changed and the process would repeat. If SLEEP was not careful, after refuting some of the school system's statements, the school system would revert to them and they would have to be refuted all over again. If a member of the Board of Supervisors asks a question, the school system reverts to its previously refuted answers, perhaps hoping the supervisor is not aware that the answers have been refuted. The corporate knowledge that resulted from working this issue year after year enabled SLEEP to spot when new answers contradicted old ones or when old wrong answers resurfaced. While they have not achieved their desired goal, they have forced the school system to acknowledge a great deal about its transportation system and focused the school board on improving it. Of course in a recent response to a supervisor, the school system returned to the same spin that they used before as though nothing had ever been revealed.

The most egregious example may be the paper strips. Despite this being the 21st century, the way in which the bus routings are created is that there are small strips of paper each with one bus route written on it and larger pieces of paper that represent each bus. The bus route strips are arranged on a table and a route is selected for an early school and taped to the larger piece of paper. Another route is selected for a later nearby school and the staff member determines, based on their expertise, if the bus can make it from the first school to the next route in time. If so, then that strip is taped to the larger piece of paper. This continues until all routes have been assigned to busses. When asked about the use of technology, the school system's response is that they *have* the most advanced computer program available, but there is a big difference between *having* the most advanced technology and *using* it.

That is why it is so critical that an organization like FAIRFAXCAPS be around long-term to capture what is going on in the school system and to provide the community with the corporate knowledge of what the school system has said before. I believe that your efforts in tracking the school system's attempt to get Gatehouse II have served the community well, but you see the system does not give up easily.

Even when you as a group do your due "vigilance," the community is critical. They need to know what is going on, they need to support you and they need to speak for you. Once you are marked as the watchdogs, the school system and even some members of the school board get immune to your inputs. It is when there is a large community response that the elected officials feel the heat and begin to see the light. This is another challenge – convincing the community that there is anything significantly wrong with "the greatest school system in the world." As one who ran for the school board from the perspective that Fairfax County Public Schools have been resting on their laurels and relying on highly educated parents teaching their children at home, it

is tough to get that message to penetrate. This will be especially true when you are rewarded for your successes by the school system purposely attempting to discredit you. It will be crucial that you develop a reputation with the community as a group that they can trust, as one that is looking out for the best interests of their children and their community. Relationships with the PTA, the FCCPTA, and teacher organizations are a good start to connect with elements of the community, but I recommend that you consider connecting with other groups that may not be school focused but have people who are interested in having good schools and in the appropriate use of local taxes. Talk to local chambers of commerce, Rotary & Lions clubs, and the local NAACP, for example. As individuals, talk to your friends, neighbors and acquaintances.

If there is a school board majority that agrees with your mission and embraces your support of their stated goal to hold the school system accountable in academics and fiduciary responsibilities, the task will be much easier. When we hired Dr. Dale, there were discussions about not wanting to have an adversarial relationship. After he was hired, I told him that I expected to have an adversarial relationship. Not an angry or nasty relationship, but the way the system was designed, in order for the board to hold the superintendent accountable, there must be an adversarial tension between them. When certain school board members are not truly holding the system accountable, that is certainly a message that you can bring to the community, especially at election time. However, even if you elected 12 friendly school board members, you cannot go away. They still have no independent staff, no time to do analysis and are reliant on the school system for answers. Jefferson did not say that the price of freedom was vigilance until the next election.

Eternal vigilance. Bureaucracies left to themselves will always grow and begin to lose the focus as to why they were created and what is their main mission. The voter is the last line of defense. In the business of northern Virginia, with a reputation for being a great school system, it has been easy to believe that you can trust the school system to do the right thing. Most of you are here because of a personal experience that showed you that trust was misplaced. Not because they do not care about the children, not because they are not doing what they think is the right thing, but because they are doing it in a manner that is not responsive to their primary customer – the community. I applaud you in your efforts to regain the balance that will ensure the Fairfax County Public Schools System returns to building its reputation and not just protecting it from visibility.