

Fairfax County Public Schools (VA—suburban Washington, DC)

GPA: 2.50

Rank: 4th place out of 50 (Tied with Dallas)

*Documents Examined: Board policies (Collective bargaining is illegal in Virginia)**

HIGHLY FLEXIBLE
FLEXIBLE
SOMEWHAT FLEXIBLE
SOMEWHAT RESTRICTIVE
RESTRICTIVE
HIGHLY RESTRICTIVE

Introduction

This study of the nation's fifty largest school districts starts from a simple premise: district labor agreements should not make it difficult for schools to be nimble, smart, flexible, high-performing organizations.

In particular, the study focuses on provisions that may limit school leaders' ability to attract and retain excellent teachers, to identify and remove ineffective instructors, to use professional development as a tool of organizational improvement, and to manage school operations in a professional manner—i.e., to run the most effective school possible in terms of core instructional and educational activities, crucial areas where school leaders need enough authority to match their mounting accountability obligations and executive responsibilities in a results-based era.

The Grades

The scale on which districts were graded reflects the approach outlined above. Grades of A or B generally indicate provisions that confer on school leaders the latitude to man-

age their schools in a professional manner. A grade of C generally means the agreement (or, as in this case, district policy) is silent regarding the provision in question—i.e., it neither affirms nor denies a school leader's right to take a specific course of action. Grades of D and F generally indicate provisions that impede or explicitly bar school leaders from exercising discretion in a given area.

Fairfax County's overall grade, therefore, reflects the degree to which district policies constrain school leaders' ability to make decisions on important management issues. It is in no way a holistic assessment of local education policy or school leadership, much less of school effectiveness.

Overall GPA: 2.50 (4th place out of 50—tied with Dallas)

Fairfax County's GPA is the average of its scores in three areas: Compensation, Personnel Policies, and Work Rules.

Fairfax County receives a Flexible rating, the second highest possible, for its 2.50 GPA, ranking fourth among the fifty districts studied. The district scores particularly well in the Personnel Policies category. It did hit two snags, however, receiving Fs for its prohibitions on performance pay and its indulgent teacher leave policies.

Compensation: C+ (65th percentile)

The Compensation grade combines four components: Credit for Previous Experience, Performance Pay, Hardship Pay for High-Needs Schools, and Extra Pay for Shortage Subjects.

Board policy in Fairfax County gets high marks for giving schools the flexibility to raise starting teacher salaries based on previous experience teaching in a private school or college, or working in a subject-related field. It also allows schools to reward teachers who work in high-needs schools and in shortage subjects, though it is silent regarding the subjects for which this applies. Fairfax County garners one F in this category, because its board policy prohibits schools from rewarding teachers on the basis of performance.

Compensation	C+
1. Credit for Previous Experience	B+
2. Performance Pay	F
3. Hardship Pay for High-Needs Schools	A
4. Extra Pay for Shortage Subjects	C
Personnel Policies	B
5. Tenure	N/A
6. Evaluation.	A
7. Layoffs	C
8. Transfers.	B+
Work Rules	C
9. Professional Development.	N/A
10. Subcontracting Operations†	C
11. Faculty Meetings.	A
12. Teacher Leave	F

Personnel Policies: B (94th percentile)

The Personnel Policies grade combines four components: Tenure, Evaluation, Layoffs, and Transfers.

Although Fairfax board policy is silent on whether school leaders may consider student performance when evaluating teachers, the district reported to NCTQ that in practice they may do so, giving the district an A for that indicator. Board policy is silent on whether, during layoffs, school leaders may choose to retain an outstanding young teacher over one with more seniority. The district gets high marks for giving school leaders the flexibility to consider new hires on an equal footing with internal applicants for vacant positions, and for barring transferring teachers from “bumping” less senior teachers from their jobs. Board policy is silent on whether school leaders must select the most junior teacher in a certification area when transfers are necessary. Tenure rules in Fairfax County, as in most places, are set by state law, not local decision; therefore, the district did not receive a grade for that component.

Work Rules: C (82nd percentile)

The Work Rules grade combines four components: Professional Development, Subcontracting Operations, Faculty Meetings, and Teacher Leave.

Fairfax County board policy is all over the map in this category. It is silent on whether school leaders may subcontract school operations to nonunion workers; scores a solid A for giving school leaders discretion to set the length of faculty meetings; and receives an F for requiring schools to grant teachers leave to attend union activities. Available data did not permit an appraisal of the district’s professional development policies.

Conclusion

Relative to other districts in this study, Fairfax County is a principal-friendly environment where school leaders have substantial ability to assemble and lead strong teams. On the other hand, it is disheartening that Fairfax ranks so highly among the fifty districts in this study when it brings home a report card that features five component grades of C or lower; this shows just how unimpressive even the top districts really are when it comes to empowering school leaders in key domains. To better equip its school leaders with the flexibility they need to manage their schools effectively, the Fairfax County School Board should consider explicitly conferring on school leaders the right to:

1. reward teachers on the basis of performance. (Board policy bars this practice.)
2. consider student performance, including test scores, when evaluating teachers. (Board policy is silent on this issue.)
3. base decisions regarding teacher layoffs on individual merit and performance rather than seniority. (Board policy is silent on this issue.)
4. base decisions regarding teacher transfers on individual merit and performance rather than seniority. (Of the three indicators directly addressing teacher transfers, board policy is silent on one and frees school leaders from seniority considerations on two.)
5. subcontract school operations. (Board policy is silent on this issue.)

In addition, the board should amend provisions that:

6. allow classroom teachers to miss instructional time in order to attend union activities.

* The data examined in this report come from the National Council on Teacher Quality (NCTQ) database, “Teacher Roles, Rules and Rights.” All data were culled from the NCTQ database in November 2007. In states that permit collective bargaining, NCTQ examined collective bargaining agreements, with the exception of Jordan School District in Utah, which does not have a bargaining agreement. In states where collective bargaining is either illegal or otherwise not practiced, as in Virginia, NCTQ examined school board policies. Where a provision in state law precludes the possibility of a collective bargaining agreement or school board policy addressing a certain component in our study, we excluded it from our analysis, marking the component “N/A.” Find a more detailed explanation of this report’s methodology starting on page 14.

† This indicator refers to the right of school leaders to outsource school operations to nonunion workers. NCTQ uses the term “subcontracting” in its database, which we retain here in the interest of consistency.