



# Fairfax Alliance of Black School Educators' Position on the Admissions Process for Thomas Jefferson High School for Science and Technology

## ***Introduction***

The purpose of this position paper is to communicate the advocacy of the Fairfax Alliance of Black School Educators (FABSE) regarding the admissions process for Thomas Jefferson High School for Science and Technology (TJHSST), a Virginia Governor's School. FABSE has reviewed the proposed changes to the process and followed public discourse around the subject. FABSE affirms and fully supports making major changes to the current admissions criteria and process which has historically and currently disproportionately impacted the equitable representation of Black students and other traditionally underrepresented student groups.

## ***TJHSST Admissions Proposed Changes***

At a school board meeting in October, Fairfax County Public Schools proposed two pathways to change the admissions process for TJHSST to, hopefully, increase the potential academic opportunities, for Black students and other traditionally underrepresented student groups in FCPS and the other jurisdictions that are afforded entry into the prestigious school.

### **1. Merit Based Lottery Proposal**

- Eliminate entrance exam
- Eliminate application fee
- Eliminate teacher recommendation letters
- Increase GPA from 3.0 to 3.5
- Residency requirements
- Student Portrait Sheet
- Problem solving demonstration
- Experience Factors considered
  - Special Education, English Language Learners, Economically disadvantaged, Under-represented FCPS school

### **2. Revised Proposal**

- Merit Based Lottery Proposal Application process
- Highest evaluated students ("**top students/performers**") will be offered 20% of available seats (100)- Based Holistic Review
- Experience Factors considered
  - Special Education, English Language Learners, Economically disadvantaged, Under-represented FCPS school

## ***FABSE Proposed Changes/Supports***

FABSE supports the FCPS proposed changes of the Merit Based Lottery Proposal as outlined above. The Revised Proposal will result in a tiered system of admissions for TJHSST with the possibility of having a mentality of "those that belong/deserve to be at TJ vs. those that do not". In addition, the revised proposal does not represent the requisite change needed and the focus on equity FCPS professes to embrace.

FABSE also proposes the following resources/strategies to increase the applicant pool for TJHSST:

- Review and/or eliminate the current practice of identifying students for the Advanced Academic Program in the 2<sup>nd</sup> grade thus providing more students with rigorous academic experiences at an earlier age

- Hiring an Equity Specialist for STEM for each Region
- Hiring more Advanced Academics Resource Teachers for the pyramids (clusters of elementary schools) of middle schools with underrepresentation at TJ and providing them with intense culturally responsive training
- Increase the percentage of students accessing Algebra and Geometry in middle schools with underrepresentation at TJ
- Identifying and providing supports for more students to participate in Young Scholars program at the elementary and middle school level
- Accountability measures and progress monitoring for intervention strategies/proposals listed above

### **The Reality**

FABSE supports the mission statement of the TJHSST which states:

*“The mission of Thomas Jefferson High School for Science and Technology is to provide students with a challenging learning environment focused on math, science, and technology, to inspire joy at the prospect of discovery, and to foster a culture of innovation based on ethical behavior and the shared interests of humanity.”*

At the school board meeting in October the revised proposal introduced the concept of a “top student/performer”. TJHSST’s mission clearly states that “TJHSST provides **students** with an opportunity.....” There is no mention of separating them out as “top” or “low” performers” and it is unclear as to why this distinction is being made. It’s seems likely the decision to identify “top performers” is in response to the perception that some students belong at TJHSST, while others do not. That indeed, something will be “taken away” from those students who “deserve” admittance in to TJHSST if a more equitable approach is implemented. The implications of using such traditional binary language and measurements could potentially uphold the very practices that have made this process lack diversity, equity, and inclusivity.

What does a top student in FCPS look like? How is this defined? What conditions has FCPS created that maintain and support some groups as the majority of those labeled as “top performers” and what role has it taken in not providing all students the prerequisite skills and experiences they might need in order to meet this distinction?” Would this entail simply receiving check marks on a student portrait sheet? This thought process is precisely why we have the continued disparity in the diversity of both applicants and students ultimately accepted into TJHSST. Without the division asking itself these or similar questions and coming up with definitive answers to guide its decision making, the result will continue to be disjointed from equity and justice.

As we see it, the result will be the applicant and offer pool continuing to have a dearth of Black students and other students traditionally underrepresented in one of the country’s most prestigious high schools. As a matter of fact, the number of Black students offered and accepting admissions into TJ has been “too small to report” for several years. What does this communicate to our Black students, our families, staff, and the community at large? What does it communicate to those students whose presence at TJHSST is under constant threat of erasure because of the policies and protocols that we have put in place?

FABSE knows there are more Black and Brown students who could not only survive, but thrive, at TJ given academic supports available to all students at the high school, the support of caring and expert teachers, and opportunity to demonstrate learning and achievement at high levels.

It is the belief of our FABSE membership that the current admissions process of TJHSST is not acceptable and must be changed without further delay. Fairfax County Public Schools has continually stated, “Equity is at the center of everything we do.” To achieve equity, bold changes and a greater sense of urgency are needed.

### **Conclusion**

Who deserves to be a TJHSST student? Those that “work hard”? Those that get good grades? There is a fundamental flaw with the thought process of who “deserves” to get in. Indeed, using this logic, those students who don’t gain admission because of supply and demand (limited number of seats) will have contention with the current process. Do these students deserve to be admitted?

We believe that those “deserving” of an education at TJHSST shouldn’t be based on zip code, societal advantages, or arbitrary measures, such as admissions test scores, that have changed multiple times over the years. We believe those deserving should be students representing the joy and curiosity they have for science and technology as the mission of the school states. Those deserving of this world class education should simply have the desire, will, and support that any student should be afforded whilst trying to achieve their goals and dreams.

We believe that ALL students of merit can succeed at TJHSST once barriers are removed, their academic curiosity is sparked, when they are exposed to the Portrait of a Graduate attributes and are surrounded with likeminded individuals and teachers who care about them! Think of the possibilities!

Fear of leaving some out while Black and traditionally underrepresented students have historically experienced years of disenfranchisement should not drive the decision-making process. Righting a wrong does not choose between winners and losers. It helps us all win.

Respectfully,

Anthony Harris  
FABSE President