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October 13, 2011

Via U.S. Mail & Email

Dr. Jack Dale, Superintendent
Fairfax County Public Schools
8115 Gatehouse Road
Falls Church, Virginia 22042

Re: Proposed Surveillance Cameras in Fairfax County Public Schools

Dear Dr. Dale:

The Rutherford Institute¹ is greatly concerned that Fairfax County Public Schools (FCPS) is making a grave error in judgment with regard to the installation of surveillance cameras inside public high schools. While the proposal may appeal to those who seek a concrete solution to complex, intangible discipline problems, it will undoubtedly cause serious long-term harms that are much more significant than those they are meant to address. We hereby request that you oppose the proposed surveillance cameras and stand in defense of a common-sense, positive approach to discipline reform.

This recent security camera proposal is an overreaction to a few food fight incidents that occurred during the 2010-2011 academic year. While such incidents are surely frustrating to administrators, they are also a reminder that high school students are inherently immature and not yet possessed of sound judgment. It is critical, then, for school officials' response to include a measure of restraint, and to advance, first and foremost, the long-term best interests of the students as developing citizens.

¹ The Rutherford Institute is a civil liberties organization that provides legal representation without charge to those whose civil rights are threatened or infringed.

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The use of surveillance cameras inside schools sends a message of distrust to all students. Given that FCPS has very recently attracted scrutiny for the harsh, punitive nature of its discipline procedures², it is surprising that your administration would consider such an adversarial approach to maintaining order. Indeed, this ill-conceived method of monitoring student compliance with school rules is in direct opposition to FCPS's own statement of beliefs, which calls for a "respectful environment" for both adults and children.³ The pervasive presence of surveillance cameras demeans students by indicating that they are not trusted, and that they are all suspects in a school surveillance state. Just like zero tolerance and other inflexible school policies, surveillance cameras dehumanize students. This type of surveillance will do little more than create an "us vs. them" mentality that will pit school officials and staff against students.

A multitude of studies has shown that surveillance cameras do not substantially reduce crime.⁴ Moreover, they are not effective at identifying culprits after a crime is committed.⁵ Surveillance cameras also have a tremendous effect on chilling free expression and infringing privacy rights.

These intangible costs—in addition to the \$3 million-plus of taxpayer monies for this scheme—are too high a price to pay for the mere possibility that a few students may be deterred from openly violating school rules. We submit that the sounder approach, which offers a more fundamental and lasting benefit, is to create an atmosphere of mutual trust and respect in the schools, where students are entrusted with appropriate levels of freedom and responsibility and expected to behave as contributing, cooperative members of the school community.

Similarly, while visible, concrete "solutions" to school discipline problems may appeal to those who seek a "quick fix," there are serious, long-term consequences when young citizens perceive that they are subject to constant surveillance by an all-powerful government authority. Such a school environment is bound to produce young citizens who either loathe or fear their government. Put simply, we believe that surveillance cameras are an overly simplistic, expensive, and undemocratic measure that will yield harmful effects on our children and the future of American society.

² Donna St. George, "Student Death Stirs up Fairfax", *The Washington Post*, January 23, 2011 (available at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2011/01/22/AR2011012203873.html>).

³ FCPS Beliefs, Vision, Mission, <http://www.fcps.edu/schlbd/sg/bmv.htm#>.

⁴ Bruce Schneier, "Spy Cameras Won't Make Us Safer", *CNN*, February 25, 2010, http://articles.cnn.com/2010-02-25/opinion/schneier.security.cameras_1_cameras-cctv-footage-police-officer?_s=PM:OPINION; Michael Hoffman, "Study: Surveillance Cameras Don't Reduce Crime", *DailyTech*, September 24, 2007, http://articles.cnn.com/2010-02-25/opinion/schneier.security.cameras_1_cameras-cctv-footage-police-officer?_s=PM:OPINION.

⁵ *Ibid.*

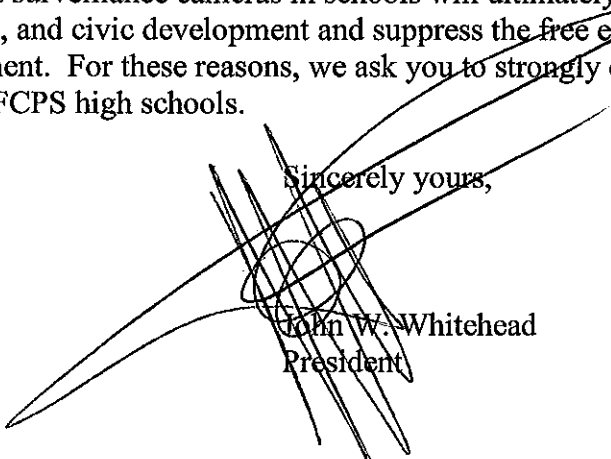
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We hope that you will also consider the “well-established psychological consequences to being watched.”⁶ People who are watched will either tailor their behavior to fit what they believe the observer wants or they will openly rebel against it.⁷ Moreover, one study clearly shows that children who are constantly watched tend to be “indecisive, dependent on others, have little ‘ethical competence’, and often live suppressed and unhappy lives.”⁸ These are all qualities that a proper educational system should avoid instilling in students, as they virtually ensure that our nation’s future will rest in the hands of people who are ill-prepared to guide it.

Fundamental tenets of due process require that those punished for bad behavior are those who have actually taken part in rule violations. However, every student is punished when their privacy is eviscerated by omnipresent surveillance cameras. Most student interactions are undoubtedly benign and even beneficial to student social development. When students are afraid that they are being watched, their interactions will be guarded or inhibited, and this stifling effect is clearly unhealthy for the school community. In fact, it erects a police state environment and defies the very concept of the marketplace of ideas that is the bedrock of the First Amendment.

It is our firm belief that surveillance cameras in schools will ultimately endanger students’ psychological, social, and civic development and suppress the free exchange of ideas that is crucial to that development. For these reasons, we ask you to strongly oppose the current proposal to install cameras in FCPS high schools.

Sincerely yours,



John W. Whitehead
President

cc: Fairfax County Public Schools School Board

⁶ John Borland, “Maybe Surveillance is Bad, After All”, *Wired.com* (August 8, 2007), <http://www.wired.com/threatlevel/2007/08/maybe-surveilla/>.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.