



## FCFT's Recommendations to Improve ESY Staffing

This year we have seen unprecedented challenges to staffing FCPS' Extended School Year (ESY) program. While the challenges seen this year have been magnified by the increased demand, issues have always existed in the process of staffing ESY that have created a chaotic and frustrating experience for those applying to work in the program. Fairfax County Federation of Teachers is a solution-driven union, and while the majority of our members are currently off-contract and are under no obligation to take on voluntary additional work assignments, we all want what is best for students and want to see the ESY program successful. We firmly believe that FCPS must consider feedback from stakeholders, especially special education staff and those with experience working in ESY when deciding how to move forward. We conducted a survey to gather feedback on possible solutions that FCPS can implement this summer to address ESY staffing shortages as well as ideas for improving the program for the future.

### Identifying the Root of the Current Staffing Shortage

While the increased size and number of FCPS summer programs all competing over the same staffing pool certainly influenced the number of available staff able to work ESY, there are deeper issues that have led staff to make other plans this summer. Some of the most common reasons staff have shared about why they did not choose to work ESY this summer include:

- the lack of respect that has been communicated to staff from FCPS leadership throughout the response to the COVID-19 pandemic including:
  - the frequent pivots
  - the disregard for the health and safety of staff, students, and families
  - another lost pay step
  - the lack of acknowledgement for how hard this year has been on staff and how hard staff have worked to provide the same high-quality service to students
- extreme burnout from the year and the need to rest and reset to be prepared for the fall
- the lack of communication and disorganization of the program
- the inflexibility of the schedule and need for a balance of work and other summer plans, including working in other overlapping FCPS summer programs

Many of these underlying problems will not be able to be fixed in time to staff session II this summer, but they do highlight what needs to happen over the coming year to regain employees' trust and willingness to spend off-contract time taking on additional duties within FCPS.

### Recommendations to Address This Summer's ESY Staffing Shortage

234 instructional staff took the survey and of those, 23 (9.9%) reported they were working ESY this summer as a teacher or teacher scale employee. We asked the remaining instructional employees what changes would allow them to work as a teacher for ESY this summer. The following chart represents the number of instructional employees who responded positively to several provided ideas (participants were allowed to choose multiple responses):

| Solution   | Participants out of 203 total | Percentage |
|--|-------------------------------|------------|
| I would teach ESY if the pay was better (beyond the additional incentives announced on 7/1). | 90                            | 44.3%      |
| I would teach ESY if only a teaching license and not a SPED endorsement was required.        | 46                            | 22.7%      |
| I would teach ESY if it didn't overlap with my other FCPS summer school assignments.         | 34                            | 16.7%      |
| I would teach ESY if childcare was provided.   | 21                            | 10.3%      |

In addition to the provided ideas, participants were also asked to write in their own suggestions for improving the hiring situation for this summer. Here are some of their recommendations:

- **Offer additional days of personal leave for the 2021-2022 school year to staff who work ESY Session II.** ESY Session II is currently scheduled to end the day before teachers return for the fall. Staff working both sessions will have only had 8 days off between the end of the 2020-2021 school year and the start of the 2021-2022 school year. After the most grueling school year many of us have ever experienced, staff need time to recover and reset to be able to be fully present for our next group of students. More staff might choose to work session II if they knew they would have guaranteed time off at another point in the year.
- **Allow teachers without a SPED endorsement to serve as an ESY teacher on a case-by-case basis given experience.** Some teachers who don't have a SPED endorsement still have a great deal of experience working with students with IEPs and could be successful as an ESY teacher. In future years, training could also be provided during the year to support general education teachers in becoming qualified to teach ESY during the summer. Staff currently working on a SPED endorsement could also be considered for teaching positions.
- **Send recruitment emails to all staff.** The initial emails recruiting for ESY and offering incentives only went to current SPED teachers, leaving out other staff who have a SPED endorsement but who don't currently work in SPED. The most recent email recruiting staff for Session II only went to current ESY staff, further limiting the pool of eligible teachers who are being recruited. There are eligible staff who may have been interested to work who didn't apply because they didn't know it was an option. Recruiting emails should go to all staff and include clear information on required qualifications so that anyone who is eligible has access to the information they need to apply.
- **Utilize central office staff such as special education resource teachers to fill in gaps.**
- **Communicate with staff before sending out messages to families and the community.** This has been a persistent problem that has betrayed staff trust throughout this year and it continues to happen now with communication about ESY. The first step to regaining the trust of staff is clear, open, and prompt communication.
- **Follow up with the staff who never heard back on their application or filled out the Google form offering to split positions but never got a response.** Despite the staffing shortages, some staff who applied never received a response. 4.7% of the

instructional staff who took our survey reported that they had applied and never received a response. Additionally, some staff who applied were told that the position they applied for was full, but were never offered an alternative.

## **Long-Term Changes to Improve Long-Standing ESY Staffing Issues**

While this year's ESY staffing challenges have been thrown into the spotlight given the promises of a much larger program than ever before and the increased scrutiny over "learning loss", many of the challenges we are seeing today have always existed in the staffing of ESY. The responses to our survey yielded many ideas for long-term changes that may not be able to fix this year's ESY issue, but will ensure that we don't end up in the same position in future years. Participants rated their perception of how effective the following suggestions would be on a 1-5 scale (1 representing "no improvement" and 5 representing a "significant improvement"):

### **Remove the hourly pay cap so that staff can be paid at their per diem rate.**

This was the most popular item on our survey with 83.3% of participants responding that they believed it would have a significant positive impact on ESY hiring. The hourly pay cap is a big deterrent in recruiting experienced teachers to work ESY. We would be able to attract more experienced teachers if they could be paid at their regular hourly rate.

### **Notify all staff who have applied whether they have gotten a position or not by April.**

70.4% of participants responded that this would have a significant positive impact on ESY hiring in the future. Often, ESY hiring decisions do not come out until June and some applicants do not get a response at all. By this time, some applicants have already found other summer jobs or have made other plans. Out of 234 instructional staff who took our survey, 10 (4.3%) reported that they had applied but didn't hear back until they had made other plans, and 11 (4.7%) reported that they applied and never heard back at all. Many respondents shared that they had already made other summer plans including working other summer jobs or planned trips before they knew that ESY was an option or before they heard back on the status of their application.

### **Start the ESY hiring process before hiring for any other summer programs.**

60.5% of participants responded that this would have a significant positive impact on ESY hiring in the future. The ESY application typically opens in March with applicants hearing back in June. Summer camps and other summer programs including the FCPS summer programs of SOAR, IMAGINE, Young Scholars, Bridge, Credit Recovery etc. had already completed their hiring process by that time. Many staff who would have worked in ESY had already accepted positions in these other programs before receiving their ESY offer letter. Since ESY is legally mandated and serves the highest-needs students in our district, hiring for ESY should happen before any of FCPS' other summer programs or offer letters should at least be issued at the same time so that employees can weigh all opportunities. When asking 203 instructional staff who are not teaching ESY what would allow them to work as a teacher this summer, 30 (14.8%) said they would have taught ESY if they had known it was an option before they made other plans and 38 (18.7%) said they would teach ESY if FCPS completed the hiring process earlier. 34 (16.7%) said they would teach ESY if it didn't overlap with their other FCPS summer school assignment.

We understand that a limited number of central office staff is assigned to hiring for ESY, which contributes to the delays in the hiring process. We therefore offer the following solutions:

- Reassign several central office positions to support ESY hiring during February and March.** 43% of participants believe this would have a significant improvement.

- **Hire ESY school administrators in February and contract them to recruit staff at all the schools zoned for their site.** 34.4% of participants believe this would have a significant improvement.
- **Contract the SPED department chair or another staff member from each school to recruit in February.** 30% of participants believe this would have a significant improvement.

An important difference between hiring for the general education summer programs this year and ESY is that the general education programs hired a site director within each school in March and the site directors started recruiting staff within their school in April. Even while HR had delays in processing and sending offer letters, interested staff had a direct connection to a staff member at their school who could answer questions and assure them that their spot was confirmed and that offer letters were on their way. Meanwhile, with only one person in central office assigned to hiring ESY staff, applicants apply in March and typically do not hear anything until June if they get a response to their application at all. FCPS should have a designated person for each school, pyramid, or ESY site who is paid to recruit staff and assist with the hiring process for their site or at least temporarily reassign additional central office staff to expedite ESY hiring. This would support recruitment, keep applicants informed of the status of their application, and reduce delays in sending offer letters and finalizing staff assignments. Recruiting at the school level would also allow for the active recruitment of staff who would be a good fit for the program who may otherwise seek out other opportunities elsewhere.

The following additional recommendations were suggested by participants in written comments.

- **Hire a core group of special education teachers interested in working ESY on an 11 month contract.** ESY is a yearly program and staff is always needed. Having a consistent set of core staff and then hiring additional staff as needed given the number of students selected for the program will provide consistency for staff and reduce the hiring strain in the spring. SPED Department Chair contracts could also be extended to allow them to complete both their typical summer duties and work ESY without overlap.
- **Allow staff to work with their students from the past school year if they choose and match up staff who work together during the year as much as possible.** Consistency is key to the success of any program, and it is especially important when working with students for whom familiar routines are so important. Allowing staff to work with familiar students if they choose provides consistency for the students and their families. It also reduces the workload of learning new students' IEP goals, and the class time taken to get to know students' personalities and preferences. Building teams of staff who typically work together during the year can also support the efficiency and efficacy of the team. Connecting the hiring process to the individual schools or ESY sites would help with matching up staff to students.
- Improve working conditions for instructional staff in ESY by:
  - **Setting standards for what materials (data sheets, reinforcers, instructional materials, etc.) should be sent from the student's base school** so that teachers have all the materials they need. Many ESY teachers shared that they only receive materials for some of their students and have to create the rest, which adds a great deal of extra work before the program. SPED teachers who send students to ESY should also be given additional planning time at the end of the year to prepare all the materials to send to their students' ESY site.

- **Communicating with IEP teams about what ESY goals should look like.** Many students' ESY goals expect growth or copy the goal from the school year rather than writing goals specifically for ESY to maintain progress from the year.
- **Making class assignments that match students based on their needs** so that students on an SOL track are placed with other students on an SOL track.
- **Maintaining the cap number of students in each class** to keep class sizes manageable.
- **Providing built-in planning time during ESY teachers' contracted hours.**
- Coordinate better between all summer programs:
  - **Stagger the dates for all summer programs to avoid overlap.** Many staff who are working for the general education summer programs have been willing to work for ESY, but the dates overlap and there are not enough staff to work the overlapping part to give them split contracts.
  - **Coordinate the hiring process for all FCPS summer jobs** including ESY, Gen. Ed. summer school, SCD projects, and camps so that applications are due at the same time and offer letters are given within the same window so that staff know all their options before committing to an assignment. It would be especially helpful to have a central summer job portal with information on all the possible jobs and contact information for each and updates on the hiring process for each.
- **Set the ESY dates in the school year calendar.** This will allow staff who might work to plan early to make sure they don't have any scheduling conflicts.
- **Improve working conditions of SPED teachers during the school year.** In a normal year, SPED teachers have a harder workload than their general education colleagues with the number of grade levels they typically have to support, the constant paperwork and IEP meetings, and usually little-to-no built-in planning time. This year was even worse with SPED teachers having to do endless IEP addendum meetings with every pivot. Burnout and turnover among SPED staff is dangerously high. FCPS needs a drastic overhaul of how SPED teachers are treated and the workload they are assigned. We will continue to see a shortage of staff willing to take on extra assignments until staff feel respected, supported, and well-compensated.

## Conclusion

It is apparent from the comments in this survey that the biggest reason for the situation we find ourselves in is the overwhelming feeling among staff, and in particular, special education teachers, of being overworked and undervalued by FCPS. Pay/the lost salary step was the most often-cited reason that staff felt unappreciated and therefore were not willing to take on the voluntary assignment of teaching ESY. FCPS must do everything possible to ensure a step increase in the FY23 budget. An open dialogue is needed between SPED staff and district leaders to address the extreme burnout among SPED staff that has led staff who have always worked ESY to choose not to apply this year. FCFT has a Special Education Task Force that would love the opportunity to talk more with the School Board and other leaders in special education within FCPS to discuss issues and solutions. Our goal is always to provide the best education possible to our students, and so we look forward to collaborating with FCPS leadership on how to make ESY the best program it can be.