Good evening Chairman, Madame Vice Chairman and members of the Loudoun County School Board,

As an advisory committee to the Loudoun County School Board, it is incumbent upon the Minority Student Achievement Advisory Committee to express our concerns regarding discipline disproportionality and lower achievement scores among minorities in our school system.

At February’s MSAAC general membership meeting, Dr. Williams presented data that reflected the reality that is faced by our minority students. If you are minority or a student with special needs you are more likely to be suspended and have lower SOL scores. Although our suspension rates are lower and our overall SOL scores are higher than other school systems, we are not satisfied with these results. None of us hopefully wants to hold back a student because of their identity, background or learning and development needs. And yet we see it happening in our schools. MSAAC believes one contributing factor is unconscious bias.

Did you know that we give little conscious effort to our daily actions and decisions? We know that the brain brings decisions to the consciousness when we say, "I have decided to...". But what do we mean by that and what is happening in the brain when we say that? What we mean is, "my feeling tells me this". According to Habermacher and other researchers, there is typically not enough time for most decisions to be carefully evaluated. Therefore, the process of making decisions like those related to a student conflict or student potential is not a rational process, but rather involves emotions, memories and habits in the brain. This process is almost completely below our level of consciousness – like when a tennis player hits a ball. This is where unconscious bias is processed. Habermacher and other researchers believe that unbeknownst to us, a whole list of emotions, habits, associations are formed and instantaneously processed giving us answers for or against a person, a gender, and a race. Habermacher, Peters and Ghadiri suggest that unconscious biases are biological pathways that are deeply anchored in the brain. They are built up through our socialization process: our interactions with the world around us. In short: our life and experiences. Once we build a bias we often get drawn back to it and it becomes reinforced (the "Confirming Evidence Trap"). This means we have instinctive unconscious biases built in and they will directly impact our view of diversity – or rather they will draw us along certain pathways when we have to make decisions about how to react to a student’s behavior or determine their potential. For example, we have more male role models of male leaders and hence will unconsciously be drawn to male leaders and not female leaders; we prefer our own race and hence we will unconsciously prefer our own race over others. Case in point – when you need help from a stranger, who do you approach? Someone that looks like you or not? This is not to be confused with racism or sexism, although it can look a lot like it. In other words, the experiences wired in our brains are in the process of drawing quick and efficient decisions (from the brain’s perspective, that is).

How do we reverse the damaging effects of these types of biases in our school community? MSAAC encourages the LCPS School Board to require that all LCPS teachers attend unconscious bias training and that all LCPS procedures and systems be reviewed on a regular basis by a neutral, third party to ensure fairness and equity for all students. Please ensure that the 2018/2019 budget allows for these recommendations.