

## MEMORANDUM

TO: Arlington School Board

FROM: Arlington Special Education Advisory Committee

DATE: June 19, 2018

SUBJECT: Annual Year Report 2017-2018

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### **The role of the Arlington Special Education Advisory Committee (ASEAC), as defined by Virginia Department of Education Regulations (8 VAC 20-81 230 D):**

1. Advise the local school division of needs in the education of children with disabilities;
2. Participate in the development of priorities and strategies for meeting the identified needs of children with disabilities;
3. Submit periodic reports and recommendations regarding the education of children with disabilities to the division superintendent for transmission to the local school board;
4. Assist the local school division in interpreting plans to the community for meeting the special needs of children with disabilities for educational services;
5. Review the policies and procedures for the provision of special education and related services prior to submission to the local school board; and
6. Participate in the review of the local school division's annual plan.

Our students represent an extremely diverse set of learners. As such, our parents have very diverse opinions and views on their students and what is best for them. Despite these differences, we all have one thing in common--we want our students to receive the best education possible in a community that welcomes them.

**School Division Commendations:** ASEAC would like to thank the administration and School Board for their continued support of our students with disabilities. We would specifically like to acknowledge the Superintendent, Dr. Murphy, for his attendance at two ASEAC meetings this year, and our liaison Paul Jamelske, for his collaborative work with ASEAC and for his vision for students with disabilities.

**Key Activities and Major Accomplishments:** ASEAC met 10 times this year. A summary of the key activities and accomplishments of these subcommittees is provided below.

#### Meeting topics:

- September 2017 – Superintendent kick-off meeting. Hank Millward - Director of the Office of Specialized Education Facilities and Family Engagement, the role of the Special Education Advisory Committee
- October 2017 – Office of Special Education update

- November 2017 – Strategic plan update, Special Education Program evaluation
- December 2017 – Program Evaluation Discussion, Regina Van Horne
- January 2018 – Seclusion and Restraint in Virginia
- February 2018 – Wilson Building Discussion (Dr. Karen Gerry), Assistive Technology and Augmentative Communication (APS AsTech team)
- March 2018 – Budget Discussion and presentation by OSE
- April 2018 – End of Year recommendation discussion
- May 2018 – Superintendent end of year update on Nottingham
- June 2018 – End of year meeting, new leadership, approval of annual report to the School Board

Accomplishments:

- ASEAC actively participated in, and provided input to, the Strategic Plan Working Group.
- Offered a safe place for parents of Nottingham Elementary School to raise their concerns and elevated parental concerns to APS staff.
- Submitted recommending year report through ACI.
- Worked with APS Staff in planning for the next Special Education Program evaluation.
- Conducted advisory committee training with VDOE representative

**Prioritized Needs and Recommendations:**

- **Communication:** Communication between APS and parents continues to be an area of concern with respect to the SWD community. Communication with community members is vital and in several instances parents have felt that they were not being heard. This was amplified this year by several issues, including the Wilson School design, SWD issues at Nottingham Elementary School, and APS’s communication with Stratford parents regarding the proposed move to Yorktown. Lack of transparency and timely, closed-loop communication with parents creates confusion, misunderstanding and angst among the SWD community. It also erodes trust and leads to negative community impressions of APS, which becomes an additional challenge for school officials to manage -- on top of the underlying problem demanding the system's attention in the first place. We encourage APS to identify better ways to engage with parents including communicating in a timely fashion, truly accepting community input, and communicating how and when concerns will be addressed.
- **Standard Operating Procedural Manual:** Another way in which communication could be improved is with a common understanding of the processes between parents, teachers, and administrators. APS should develop, in consult with parents, Standard Operating Procedural Manuals (SOPM) to include policies, procedures and expected practices for special education/related services and the Arlington Tiered System of Supports (ATSS), including how to appropriately engage and communicate with parents. Manuals should be clearly written, practical and accessible to both school personnel and parents. The APS Section 504 Procedural Manual is an excellent model. Electronic versions should be publicly available. We believe that participation by ASEAC members

and parents in the development of the manual is necessary for a successful outcome, because parents are one of the main user groups for this manual.

- **Consistency and Accountability:**

- As part of our recommending year report through ACI this year, ASEAC recommended that APS improve and increase consistency and uniformity of special education services implementation across the county. The concerns raised by parents at Nottingham amplified the importance of this recommendation as it became clear that special education is implemented in drastically different ways across Arlington. Moreover, ASEAC has received reports from parents about concerning problems at other schools as well, which shows that Nottingham is not an isolated situation. In theory, the school division should have ways to ensure that systemic problems at schools do not occur, but those have not been effective.
- Another example of the inconsistency is the IEP parent feedback survey that OSE implemented based on an ASEAC recommendation. The survey offers parents a means of providing feedback regarding their experiences with the IEP team meeting. ASEAC began working with OSE to implement this survey in 2015. As of last year, the survey was fully functional online. OSE communicated with every school in APS regarding this survey but many schools did not provide it to families. We are encouraged by OSE's recent efforts to distribute this survey to parents electronically instead; however, the need to do this does highlight the problem with inconsistent implementation across schools.
- Additionally, ASEAC has previously recommended the standardization of school improvement plans. Using a common template, schools should include in their school improvement plans goals designed to move aggressively toward the improvement of special education services within an inclusive school model based on district expectations and resources. Further, school level personnel, including building administrators, should be held accountable by their superiors for expected results through incentives and consequences that encourage the implementation of standards for practice and fidelity. Each principal's role and responsibility for all students in his or her school should be clear.
- We believe that if these items were in place, problems such as those encountered at Nottingham could have been avoided. With improved measures for accountability, hopefully situations such as Nottingham can be prevented in the future. Because ASEAC has heard numerous reports of unmet needs across different schools, we encourage APS to make consistency and accountability a high priority. A student's ability to access appropriate supports and services should not be dependent on the school attendance zone in which they reside. Students should receive appropriate services and supports in all APS schools.

- **Core Competencies in Special Education:** In our annual report to ACI, we also recommended that general education teachers and building level administrators be required to attain core competencies for the education of students with disabilities.

Again, the importance of this recommendation was amplified by the litany of problems uncovered at Nottingham. Many of the issues reported by parents indicate a complete lack of understanding of special education. The systemic issues that apparently exist are concerning and in some cases could be in violation of existing laws. While the problems at Nottingham gained much attention this year, they are not confined to that school, and ASEAC has received public comments evidencing problems at other schools as well. APS should ensure that all educators and administrators achieve basic core competencies in special education.

**Committee Members:** Paul Patterson (Chair), Wendy Pizer (Vice Chair), Nadia Facey (Secretary), Alison Acker, John Best (Student Member), Michelle Best, Leila Carney, Keith Chanon, Cloe Chin, Hannah Dannenfelser, Caitlin Davies (APS Staff Member), Alison Dough, Jennifer Johnson, Margaret Johnston, Kay Luzius, Sara Jane Owens (Student Member), Rebecca Patterson, David Rosenblatt, Tauna Szymanski and Nicholas Walkosak

STAFF LIAISON: Paul Jamelske

ASEAC appreciates the opportunity to work with the Board, APS staff, and the community on special education issues. We are also very grateful for the support of the APS staff.