

MEMORANDUM

TO: Arlington School Board

FROM: Arlington Special Education Advisory Committee

DATE: October 19, 2017

SUBJECT: Recommending Year Report to the Advisory Council on Instruction (2017-2018)

Introduction

The Arlington Special Education Advisory Committee (ASEAC) is pleased to present two recommendations to the School Board for improving instructional delivery to all Arlington Public Schools (APS) students, including students with disabilities (SWD):

- 1. Improve and increase consistency and uniformity of special education services implementation across the county.**
- 2. Require general education teachers and building level administrators to attain core competencies for the education of students with disabilities.**

Background

Unlike other ACI committees, ASEAC exists pursuant to Virginia law (8 VAC 20-81 230 D), requiring the School Board of each school division to appoint a committee of individuals with disabilities and parents of SWD to advise it on the education of SWD, from preschool to age 21. Under these state regulations, ASEAC is required to periodically provide recommendations to the School Board, and to “review the policies and procedures for the provision of special education and related services.” ASEAC is required by law to “participate in the development of priorities and strategies for meeting the identified needs of students with disabilities,” and to otherwise “advise the local school division of needs in the education of students with disabilities.”

<u>Number of SWDs*:</u>	<u>Number</u>	<u>Percentages</u>
Students with IEPs	3,956	14.7%
Students with 504s	792	2.9%
Totals	4,748	17.6%

*based on Sept 2017 PreK-12 student count of 26,941

The percentage of APS students with disabilities served by an IEP has remained steady at 14-15%, with absolute numbers increasing in proportion with overall student enrollment growth. These students receive special education services, modifications, and accommodations in a variety of settings: general education classrooms in neighborhood or choice schools, segregated special education classrooms in either neighborhood schools or “county-wide” programs, “resource rooms,” homebound instruction, and private placements.

In developing its recommendations for this reporting year, ASEAC considered many factors. Some of the more important considerations are listed below:

1. Parent input over the past two years, provided directly to ASEAC and through input from a number of parent-led special education-focused groups, including the Special Education PTA, the Dyslexia Task Force, and the Arlington Inclusion Task Force.
2. APS School Board Strategic Planning Goals
3. Final Report: Evaluation of APS Services for Students with Special Needs (Public Consulting Group, January 2013)
4. Reviews of the research and best practices in the education of students with disabilities across the United States
5. School Board FY 2017-18 Priorities
6. APS Mission and Vision Statement
7. APS Policies
8. APS Work Group on Inclusive Practices (formed September 2016)
9. US Department of Justice, US Department of Education, and US Department of Health and Human Services policy statements, guidance, and initiatives
10. The Americans with Disabilities Act, Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973
11. Virginia State Special Education Advisory Committee’s Annual Report (July 2014- June 2015)

Throughout the past year ASEAC considered many other topics of concern to parents as well. While all of the topics discussed impact our students, the committee felt that the two recommendations in this report address the needs of the greatest number of APS students.

Recommendation #1: Improve and increase consistency and uniformity of special education services implementation across the county.

1 (a) Develop comprehensive written guidance that provides clear direction on policies, procedures and expected practices. 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). 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.

1 (b) Standardize School Improvement Plans. Using a common template, have schools 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. Establish set protocols for reporting progress based on expected targets and activities for improvement.

1 (c) Personnel Accountability. Hold school level personnel, including building administrators, accountable for expected results through incentives and consequences that encourage the implementation of standards for practice and fidelity. Make clear each principal's role and responsibility for all students in his or her school. Ensure that their evaluations include important areas for the timely and compliant implementation and oversight of differentiated instruction, ATSS, 504 and special education standards.

Rationale	for	Recommendation	#1:
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There is a large and unacceptable degree of variation in special education practices and experiences across the county. There are pockets of excellence just as there are areas of significant unmet need.

Last spring, in our Annual Report to the School Board (June 26, 2017), ASEAC raised our concern with the stark disconnect we are seeing between guidance issued by the Central Office and the actual experiences of families and SWD in the schools. Individual ASEAC members have received reports, or experienced themselves, school-based decisions and actions that are inconsistent with APS special education directives, best practices, and, in some cases, with applicable laws. ASEAC submitted a letter to the School Board and Superintendent on May 4, 2015, regarding expectations for SWD given the disparity between schools. Titled, "Establishing Appropriate Expectations, Curriculum Access and Testing for Special Education Students in Self-Contained "County-Wide Programs," ASEAC requested OSE plans for improving the expectations, curriculum access, testing and ultimately the Diploma Options for SWDs that are currently being served in segregated classrooms. This is just a snapshot of the many concerns that we have regarding consistency across the school division.

Two key factors seem to contribute to this problem: accountability and standards that are not clearly communicated. When standards are not clearly communicated in writing, schools are operating in a complex area without appropriate direction. Without publicly-available written standards that parents can access themselves, schools are not accountable to parents. The average parent would not know when a school-based action does not comply with OSE standards. Without a system of accountability holding schools responsible for following consistent standards, building level administrators are not incentivized to follow the course charted by OSE with regard to the education of SWD. When schools do not take appropriate actions, students suffer and family-school partnerships are damaged. In fact, in 2015-16, APS

did not meet the Virginia Department of Education performance benchmark in a key measure of family-school relations.¹

The development and use of a public manual would also create efficiencies within APS. When schools have a set, clear written process to follow, fewer compliance issues should arise, allowing OSE to focus its resources in other productive areas. This is even more important as our school division continues to grow.

This recommendation is supported by the Final Report: Evaluation of APS Services for Students with Special Needs, a comprehensive assessment of the district's services to students with special needs, which was performed by the Public Consulting Group in 2013. The assessment examined the efficacy of APS policies, procedures and practices concerning the use of Intervention Assistance Teams (IATs), special education services provided under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), and supplementary aids and services provided under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act (Section 504). The PCG report made six overall recommendations (see Attachment A), two of which bear directly on the problems with lack of consistency and uniformity of special education services across our schools:

Operating Standards. Produce electronic Standard Operating Procedure Manuals (SOPM) to post policies, procedures and expected practices for MTSS, Section 504 and special education/related services with links to additional information and resources.

Accountability. Establish a system of accountability that reflects APS' vision of high expectations for all learners and a service delivery model that is proactive rather than reactive – and inclusive in nature.

While APS has implemented some of PCG's other recommendations, very little progress has been made in these two critical areas of need. Of note, APS did develop and implement a public Section 504 Procedural Manual, and parents report a positive impact on the 504 process. However, APS has not yet done the same for special education and related services, or for ATSS. While a special education operating manual exists, it was written for and is accessible only to school personnel, not to parents. As currently drafted, it only provides an overview of special education but does not proscribe a process to follow in developing IEPs. Extensive revisions would need to be made (or it should be rewritten altogether) in order for it to fulfill the unmet needs in this area. The 504 manual would be an excellent model to follow. APS has taken no action to establish a system of accountability for schools.

¹ The Virginia Department of Education measures school division performance each year for special education. Indicator 8 measures parents' reports of whether schools facilitate parent involvement to improve services and results for SWD. Only 60.95% of APS parents reported a positive experience in this area in 2015-16, falling short of both the state target of 70% and the state average of 79.33%. See VDOE Special Education Performance Report, http://www.doe.virginia.gov/special_ed/reports_plans_stats/special_ed_performance/index.shtml

Publicly available special education and ATSS manuals would also increase parent awareness and understanding of ATSS, and inclusive education/special education processes, which was another area of need identified in the PCG report.

Moreover, the two areas that have not been addressed continue to be areas of concern, and we expect that the continued growth of our school division, with the addition of more schools and larger programs, will continue to add more pressures. The PCG 2013 report not only highlighted these areas of concern, it made specific recommendations on how to improve. We are echoing those recommendations here, based upon the five years that have lapsed without action, and the continued and repeated concerns raised by parents in these areas. Students with disabilities must be able to have their needs met in every school in Arlington.

Budgetary Implications for Recommendation #1:

Recommendation #1(a) may involve a one-time commitment of staffing funds for APS to develop effective SOPMs for special education and ATSS, depending on whether APS chooses to develop these manuals internally or not. Notably, countless manuals exist in other school districts that could presumably be used for reference. Recommendation #1(b) does not have a significant staff funding implication; once a common template is developed, the individual schools would simply need to include it in their school improvement plans. Holding personnel accountable [Recommendation #1(c)] has no budgetary implications.

Alignment with Department of Instruction and Advisory Council on Instruction Areas of Focus (2017-18): This recommendation aligns with every area of focus, ensuring that the needs of all students are met, no matter which school they attend: Areas of Focus: #1 Inclusion, #2 Literacy, #3 Opportunity Gaps, #4 Pre-K-12 Instructional Vision, #5 Whole Child.

Alignment with Department of Teaching and Learning Mission and Vision: This recommendation helps to ensure that the Department's mission and vision are realized across every school in Arlington: Mission: To ignite a passion for learning with equitable access and multiple pathways where learners connect, create, and innovate; Vision: All individuals strive for their best as learners and global citizens.

Alignment with School Board Priorities (2017-18): Improvements in consistencies across the School Division are needed to effectively implement the School Board's priorities for 2017-18, particularly as schools grow and new programs are opened:

School Board Priorities:

- New Policies and Policy Revisions that address the 1:1 technology initiative, inclusion practices, and additional updates on options and transfers;
- Operational Planning to develop the new 2018-24 Strategic Plan; determining the FY 2019-28 Capital Improvement Plan, and building a sustainable budget that supports the whole child and maintains excellence in classroom instruction;

- Preparation for New Schools and Program Moves that will require elementary and middle school boundary adjustments when new schools are opened, and the relocation of the Montessori Program;
- Capital Initiatives to plan for future growth at the Career Center, Education Center, and the Reed Building.

Strategic Plan Alignment (2011 – 2017): This recommendation aligns with every Strategic Plan goal, ensuring that the needs of all students are met, no matter which school they attend: Goal One: Ensure That Every Student is Challenged and Engaged; Goal Two: Eliminate Achievement Gaps; Goal Three: Recruit, Retain and Develop High-Quality Staff; Goal Four: Provide Optimal Learning Environments; Goal Five: Meet the Needs of the Whole Child.

Recommendation #2: Require general education teachers and building level administrators to attain core competencies for the education of students with disabilities.

2(a). Develop a set of core competencies (i.e. knowledge, skills, and attributes) for general education teachers regarding the education of students with disabilities.

2(b). Develop a set of core competencies (i.e. knowledge, skills, and attributes) for building level administrators regarding the education of students with disabilities.

2(c). Implement a framework to ensure that general education teachers and school administrators attain the required competencies.

2(d). Ensure that competencies in differentiated learning and the education of students with disabilities are included in annual teacher and school administrator assessments.

Rationale for Recommendation #2:

There are 4,748 SWD in APS. Currently, 63.36% of SWD in APS are educated in a regular classroom for more than 80 percent of the school day. Thus, it is fair to say that a large proportion of SWD receive instruction, in whole or in part, from a general education teacher.²

General education teachers need to develop the skills necessary to effectively instruct SWD in their classrooms. Currently, to our knowledge, general education teachers are not required to attain any competencies regarding SWD, nor are they required to attend any trainings related to the education of SWD (other than a brief online course in dyslexia required for certification by the State of Virginia.) Trainings related to the education of students with disabilities are optional for general education teachers in APS.

Parents report numerous challenges with the current approach, including general education teachers who do not know how to differentiate work for students with learning differences;

² For students with IEPs, the IEP team determines how many (if any) hours of instruction will be delivered by a special education resource teacher outside of the general education setting. Federal law requires that SWD have the opportunity to be educated with non-disabled peers to the greatest extent possible. Students with 504 plans have all of their instruction delivered by the general education teacher in the general education setting.

general education teachers who do not know how to help students develop strategies for overcoming attention and executive functioning challenges; and students being disciplined or removed from the classroom for disability-related behavior.

The reports we are hearing from parents mirror APS's subpar performance on a key state benchmark set by Virginia Department of Education for school divisions regarding the education of SWD. State Indicator #5 examines the percentage of students with IEPs who were inside a regular classroom more than 80 percent of the school day. APS not only did not meet the state benchmark, APS also fell below the state average.³ We believe that equipping general education teachers with the skills they need to effectively teach SWD is a necessary step to help APS meet this state benchmark. With the move towards greater inclusion, equipping general education teachers to teach all students in their classrooms is imperative.

Moreover, general education teachers are in the best position to identify problems in a student's learning early on, but too many general education teachers do not possess the skills necessary to recognize a potential disability. We have heard numerous sad reports of students with hidden disabilities (such as dyslexia, ADHD, or processing deficits) who go years before they are identified. The delay in identification and receipt of appropriate services can cause not only significant educational lapses, which become harder to overcome as the years go by, but also significant emotional, self-esteem and behavioral problems as well.

When a classroom teacher does not have the skills to effectively differentiate instruction for those who require it, all students in the classroom suffer. Attaining core competencies in differentiated instruction for SWD would be broadly beneficial to all students, as teachers could apply these skills to benefit all of their students. Students without disabilities may struggle and require differentiation at times too.

Building level administrators are responsible for overseeing the process of identifying, evaluating and developing Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) and 504 plans, as well as supervising the instruction of all students within their schools, including SWD. They also supervise both special and general educators within their schools, and develop competencies in their staff. Principals and vice principals need to develop core competencies and have clear understandings of the needs of SWD in order to effectively fulfill these functions.

ASEAC members have heard reports of building level administrators not projecting a positive attitude regarding special education in their schools or towards individual identified SWD, especially when behavior reaches a point where staff has exhausted its resources and patience. Maintaining a positive and "can do" attitude filters down through the staff and provides greater opportunities for a successful recovery during behavior events. It also impacts the student's

³ In 2015-2016, the State benchmark was 69%. APS fell short, placing just 59.7% of SWD in a regular classroom for more than 80 percent of the school day. APS also fell short of the state average of 63.36%. Similarly APS fell short of both the state benchmark and the state average in all of the past five reporting years. See VDOE Special Education Performance Report, http://www.doe.virginia.gov/special_ed/reports_plans_stats/special_ed_performance/index.shtml

overall confidence and trust in the staff and school. School-based administrators and staff need to understand how to effect positive behavioral change in SWD without improperly escalating a situation or damaging the student's self-esteem or attitude towards school.

There are a number of potential ways that core competencies for both general educators and building administrators can be developed, including coaching, training, job shadowing, integration of special education and general education topics in professional development, or a combination of approaches.

Budgetary Implications for Recommendation #2: Budgetary impact would vary depending on the method of implementation.

Alignment with Department of Instruction and Advisory Council on Instruction Areas of Focus (2017-18): This recommendation aligns with every area of focus, ensuring that general education teachers and building level administrators are equipped to meet the needs of all learners: Areas of Focus: #1 Inclusion, #2 Literacy, #3 Opportunity Gaps, #4 Pre-K-12 Instructional Vision, #5 Whole Child.

Alignment with Department of Teaching and Learning Mission and Vision: This recommendation helps to ensure that teachers and building level administrators have the tools they need to enact the Department's mission and vision for all of the diverse learners whom they serve: Mission: To ignite a passion for learning with equitable access and multiple pathways where learners connect, create, and innovate; Vision: All individuals strive for their best as learners and global citizens.

Alignment with School Board Priorities (2017-18): Expanding the competencies of teachers and administrators will assist in implementing the School Board's priorities for 2017-18, particularly as programs grow and new schools are opened.

School Board Priorities:

- New Policies and Policy Revisions that address the 1:1 technology initiative, inclusion practices, and additional updates on options and transfers;
- Operational Planning to develop the new 2018-24 Strategic Plan; determining the FY 2019-28 Capital Improvement Plan, and building a sustainable budget that supports the whole child and maintains excellence in classroom instruction;
- Preparation for New Schools and Program Moves that will require elementary and middle school boundary adjustments when new schools are opened, and the relocation of the Montessori Program;
- Capital Initiatives to plan for future growth at the Career Center, Education Center, and the Reed Building.

Strategic Plan Alignment: 2011 – 2017 Strategic Plan Alignment: This goal aligns with every Strategic Plan goal, ensuring that general education teachers and building level administrators are equipped to meet the needs of all students: Goal One: Ensure That Every Student is Challenged and Engaged; Goal Two: Eliminate Achievement Gaps; Goal Three: Recruit, Retain

and Develop High-Quality Staff; Goal Four: Provide Optimal Learning Environments; Goal Five: Meet the Needs of the Whole Child.

ASEAC Leadership:

Paul Patterson (Chair)

Wendy Pizer (Vice-Chair)

Nadia Facey (Secretary)

Committee Members:

Alison Acker, Michelle Best, Leila Carney, Cloe Chin, Caitlin Davies, Hannah Dannenfelser, Alison Dough, Margaret Dunn, Jennifer Johnson, Kay Luzius, Sara Jane Owens, Rebecca Patterson, David Rosenblatt, Tauna Szymanski and Nick 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, especially our Director of Special Education, Paul Jamelske. We recognize the extraordinary work load that staff carried this past year managing departmental changes and the needs of SWD. On behalf of the students and families, we thank you.

Attachment A
Recommendations Made in the
Final Report: Evaluation of APS Services for Students with Special Needs
(Public Consulting Group, January 2013)

- 1. Multi-tiered System of Supports.** Expand on the current IAT process to make it more reflective of a comprehensive and research-based MTSS framework.

- 2. Inclusive Education.** Actualize APS' vision as a diverse and inclusive school community, committed to academic excellence and integrity, by maximizing inclusive and effective instruction, intervention and support for all students, including those with special and dual needs.

- 3. Organization & Collaboration.** Maximize collaboration between personnel in the Department of Instruction and Student Services and within Student Services to facilitate the coordination of all APS resources to support teaching and learning.

- 4. Operating Standards.** Produce electronic Standard Operating Procedure Manuals (SOPM) to post policies, procedures and expected practices for MTSS, Section 504 and special education/related services with links to additional information and resources.

- 5. Accountability.** Establish a system of accountability that reflects APS' vision of high expectations for all learners and a service delivery model that is proactive rather than reactive – and inclusive in nature.

- 6. Parent, Family, & School Partnerships.** Increase parent awareness and understanding of the Parent Resource Center, MTSS, Section 504, and inclusive education/special education processes and increase communication between task forces and stakeholders to enhance their effectiveness.