

MEMORANDUM

TO: Arlington School Board
FROM: Arlington Special Education Advisory Committee
DATE: November 17, 2022
SUBJECT: Draft Report and Recommendations

COMMITTEE CHAIR/VICE CHAIR/Secretary:

Kathy Pericak, Chair; Rebecca Hunter, Vice-Chair; David Siu, Secretary

COMMITTEE MEMBERS:

David Rosenblatt, Past-Chair; Keith Chanon; Paul Timm; Michelle Best; Ellen Fitzenrider; Kristin Gillig; Matt Leland; Kurt Schuler; Minerva Trudo; Nicholas Walkosak; Jennifer Wheelock; Claudia Ramirez Cuellar; Paige Shevlin; Raquel Cepelak; Laura Bryant Njanga; Emily Remus

STAFF LIAISON(S):

Dr. Kelly Krug, Director of Special Education, Elementary
Heather Rothenbuescher, Director of Special Education, Secondary

1. Background

The Arlington Special Education Advisory Committee (ASEAC) has a State mandate to, among other roles, “advise the local school division of needs in the education of children with disabilities” and “participate in the development of priorities and strategies for meeting the identified needs of children with disabilities.” (8 VAC 20-81-230 D).

In January 2022, ASEAC submitted a report ([at this link](#)) showing that **APS’ current planning factors are designed for segregation, not for inclusion**. In this report, we will be reiterating, and building on, the recommendations from that report. For reference, some key background information follows:

- 1) There is *no* evidence that segregating students with disabilities from their general education peers results in improved outcomes for either students with disabilities or typical peers. Decades of peer-reviewed research has found significant benefits when students with disabilities are fully included and appropriately supported in classrooms alongside their typical peers. Thus, the practice of segregated education for students with disabilities is *not* evidence-based.
- 2) The APS strategic plan has included a clear numeric goal for including 80% of students with disabilities in the general education setting since 2018. APS has made no meaningful progress on this goal, and remains around 65% inclusion of SWD, almost exactly the same level as reported in 2018.

- 3) Inclusive education is a racial justice issue. White students with disabilities are already included at higher rates, while students of color with disabilities are dramatically more likely to experience segregation in APS.

2. Recommendations

RECOMMENDATION: Implement ASEAC's January 2022 Recommendation to Staff for Inclusion by Reforming Budget Planning Factors, Launch a Leadership-Driven Systems Change Initiative to Implement Inclusive Education Throughout APS, and Hire and Retain Staff to Support All Students.

First, ASEAC reiterates its recommendation that the Superintendent and School Board consider two major changes to planning factors affecting students with disabilities:

- 1) Eliminate the understaffing of secondary general education teachers for students with disabilities. No student should be counted as 1/7 of a student. APS should staff with the assumption that all students are general education students.
- 2) Eliminate the inclusion penalty for special education staffing at every school in APS. Staffing levels for students labeled "category 1" or "category 2" should match the staffing levels associated with countywide programs.

It is our understanding that after receiving ASEAC's recommendation, Arlington Public Schools (APS) entered into a short term contract to explore various equity-based budgeting (EBB) models, and to identify equity gaps. We think that this work is critical and overdue. However, given the detailed analysis of the special education planning factors that was undertaken by APS staff and ASEAC last year, we do not believe that further analysis is required before taking action on planning factors directly impacting students with disabilities.

Second, along with this change in how APS allocates resources to support inclusion, ASEAC also recommends that the Superintendent launch an APS-wide multi-year inclusive education systems change initiative. The debunked and disproven segregation model of education for students with disabilities has been the status quo for nearly 50 years, and will not be easy to dismantle without clear, consistent and comprehensive leadership. ASEAC recommends that this initiative include:

- Accountability directly to the Superintendent
- Clear messaging by APS leadership that this is a top strategic priority requiring sustained focus
- Incorporating measures of progress on inclusive education into evaluations for principals and teachers
- Engagement of outside experts with documented track records of supporting school districts to engage in inclusive systems change
- 3-5 year timeline with regular benchmarks for progress
- Support for staff at all levels to shift belief systems, develop skills and receive job-embedded coaching
- Support for parents and students to understand and participate in change efforts

Third, adjusting planning factors will require the recruitment and retention of additional staff. At the same time, APS has already experienced challenges recruiting and retaining special education staff. ASEAC and the Special Education PTA (SEPTA) sent a letter to APS on October 6, 2022 raising concerns about the school system's ability to hire and retain special education staff. Dr. John Mayo responded to our letter in an email on October 7, 2022. We appreciate Dr. Mayo's quick response, but we continue to recommend that APS review its hiring and retention programs to ensure that APS is offering competitive compensation for new and experienced staff and has the staff necessary to meet the needs of students with disabilities.

ASEAC recommends that APS' review include such factors as:

- Determining how the provision of special education and related services at a district level are/should be tracked, which is necessary to ensure that students are receiving the hours of support to which they are entitled. This could also help determine if hiring bonuses or enhanced recruiting might be called for.
- When there are staff vacancies, how are these vacancies and plans for coverage communicated to families, as they impact the families' ability to communicate with their students to prepare for those changes.

Budgetary Implications: ASEAC's understanding is that the planning factor changes we have recommended could cost tens of millions of dollars per year to implement due to the need for increases in instructional staffing. These structural issues have developed over decades, and thus we are not surprised that they are expensive to correct. If there were a 3-5 year plan regarding systems change for inclusive education in place, that plan could also guide a multi-year investment of resources, but ASEAC does not believe that such a plan needs to be in place to make substantial progress on these necessary investments in the FY2024 budget, consistent with the School Board's FY2024 budget direction.

Strategic Plan Alignment: This recommendation directly contributes to realizing Student Success Performance Objective #5: At least 80% of students with disabilities will spend 80% or more of their school day in a general education setting. It also directly contributes to realizing the Engaged Workforce objective to have strong recruitment and hiring as well as strong staff retention, and it impacts all of the Student Success and Student Wellness objectives.

Committee vote: At the November 15, 2022 ASEAC meeting, this recommendation was unanimously approved by the 10 members present, with 0 nays, and 9 members absent.

TOPIC UNDER CONSIDERATION FOR FUTURE RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. Background

In 2019, APS entered into a settlement agreement with the Department of Justice arising from complaints from families and students who speak languages other than English. ASEAC has not reviewed all of the actions that APS has taken in response to that agreement, but we are still hearing

about ongoing issues related to the interpretation of special education meetings, and assisting families and students in understanding the special education process and documents.

2. Topic Area: Interpretation and Translation of Special Education Meetings and Documents, and Providing Information to Families who Speak Languages Other than English

- ASEAC has met with the Language Services and Registration Center (LSRC), the Parent Resource Center (PRC) and the Office of Special Education (OSE). As a result of those meetings, those offices are planning to develop and provide training so translators can better understand the special education process and the terms they are translating. They are also pulling together information in various languages to provide to families earlier in the special education process, so families can understand the terms and process better.
- We appreciate the efforts those offices are taking to help address the ongoing issues, and want to note their work for the School Board.
- If additional resources or actions are needed to address the ongoing issues, ASEAC may make recommendations in this area in the future.

Strategic plan alignment: This focus area directly aligns with the Student Success objective to provide: Access to all curriculum, options schools, and programs without barriers.