

**Special Education Advisory Committee Meeting  
Wednesday, January 27, 2021  
Virtual Meeting via Zoom Webinar  
7:00-9:00 pm**

**Meeting Host: Shanel Hill, Assistant School Board Clerk**

**MINUTES**

The Special Education Advisory Committee (SEAC) was convened for a meeting at 7:03 P.M. on January 27, 2021 by Chair Cindy Hart. Roll call was taken.

	Name	Role	Present	Not Present
SEAC Members				
	Cindy Hart	Chair	X	
	Michael Behrman	Vice-chair	X	
	Coral Childs	Co-secretary	X	
	Abena Durity	Co-secretary		X
	Janet Eissenstat	Member	X	
	Laura Fontaine	Member	X	
	Lauren Golovski	Member	X	
	Deborah Perry	Member	X	
	Sabrina Reilly	Member	X	
	Alexis Stackhouse	Member	X	
	Sandra Strachan-Vieira	Member	X	
	J-Lynn Van Pelt	Member	X	
	Jeffrey Zack	Member		X-excused
Consultants				
	Meagan Alderton	School Board Liaison	X	
	Pree Ann Johnson	Principal Liaison		X
	Theresa Werner	Staff Liaison	X	
Other	Courtney Davis	PRC Liaison	X	
	Janet Reese	PRC Liaison	X	
	Terry Mazingo	Chief of Teaching, Learning, Leadership	X	
	Margaret Lorber	School Board Member	X	
	Shanel Hill	Assistant School Board Clerk	X	

## **Public Comments.**

### **From Dena Penner**

Thank you for the opportunity to submit a public comment today. My name is Dena Penner and I am the mother of two ACPS students with IEPs and the administrator of the Alexandria Special Education Parent Support Group, an independent parent group with over 100 members.

I am here to reiterate something you already know -- virtual school does not work as a long-term option for many students with disabilities. I speak on behalf of the members of our parent group whose ACPS students range from preschool through high school. We have tried to adapt to virtual school, but almost one year later, we are overwhelmed and exhausted, and tired of watching our children struggle and often fail, in a learning environment that is inappropriate. It is difficult if not impossible for IEP supports and accommodations to be provided in a virtual setting. Many of us have repeatedly reached out to Dr. Hutchings and the school board, but there appears to be very little movement toward getting our children back to in-person school or alternately utilizing creative strategies to educate them.

Today's reality is that our children are not learning. Many are regressing, both educationally and behaviorally. ACPS either needs to work to assure a safe in-person environment for our students and teachers, or find creative ways for special education students to receive small group, in-person instruction. I fear that with the current metrics established by ACPS, the return to in-person instruction for students will continue to be delayed.

The challenges that my (child's name removed) has faced with virtual learning reflect what many others are experiencing. (Child's name removed) is in the 6th grade at George Washington Middle School. He is autistic and is a part of the citywide program. He has historically loved school, and is probably the only child I know who actually asks to go to summer school.

But virtual school is not easily accessed by a child with language processing challenges. (Child's name removed) tolerated virtual school through last spring and for a short summer school class in July. When the new school year began in September, it was clear that he was unable to deal with a full day of Zoom classes. Although he is registered for general education PE and electives, he has not attended any of these classes this year. My husband and I did our best to support him in his special education language arts and math classes, plus weekly speech and occupational therapy, while continuing with our work obligations. I am not overstating it when I tell you that we had to struggle and fight with our son every single time he had class. Teachers were wonderful and accommodating and collaboratively we tried many strategies to encourage (child's name removed) to come to class, such as playing his favorite music or promising rewards and movement breaks. But virtual school is not school to him, and is not an easily accessible way for him to learn.

Since the Thanksgiving and winter breaks, my son has refused all classes and school entirely. He hides when it is time for school, or screams and says “no” repeatedly. It is heartbreaking to see our usually sweet-natured son be so upset.

We realize that these are exceptional times, but do we have to sacrifice our children’s education and well-being? School districts across the country are finding ways to safely educate their most at-risk students. I ask that ACPS do the same, and make our special education students a priority.

**From Erika Melman**

Thank you for the opportunity to speak today. I will focus my comments on how virtual learning has impacted my child with complex special needs.

One of my child’s many learning differences is hard of hearing. Virtual learning inhibits his ability to lip read to overcome his hearing loss. The sound from computers is often out of synch with the video, and ambient sounds from other speakers interferes with his hearing aid. During virtual learning, he often puts his head down on the table between his hands and says ‘mommy, my head hurts’ as a reaction to the harsh and discordant mixture of sounds that he is experiencing. At these times, he is not able to access the same school material that students without hearing difficulty are accessing.

He used to be confident in the general education setting despite his extreme learning differences because of the nuanced way that special education teachers push in to the general education classroom. However, the electronic methods of information sharing that support virtual learning have amplified for him just how different he is from his neurotypical peers. Previously confident in his abilities to learn, he now calls himself ‘stupid’ and says ‘I hate myself’ and ‘I will never learn to read or write or do math’.

He has also developed extreme and dangerous behaviors to avoid virtual learning. I have had to install extra locks to minimize his attempts to escape out of the room or out of the house during virtual school. He has narrowly avoided being hit by a car when attempting to escape our home. When he experiences frustrations with virtual school, he calls himself useless and has said that he should kill himself, going so far as to retrieve a knife from the kitchen and attempting to harm himself with it. This behavior from a previously bubbly and confident child is scary. I shared this same information at a school board meeting and only individual from the meeting reached out to me to see if I needed help. That individual was not Dr. Hutchings.

Because of his disabilities, the only way for my child to participate in virtual school is for me to act as a 1:1 instructional aide. As an essential worker in healthcare operations, I am eligible to enroll him at one of the Virtual + partners for child care. However, staffing at those centers does not support his need for 1:1 supervision. The tension between needing to be available to him while also maintaining full-time employment as a single parent has negatively affected his

attendance and my work performance. When I can't flex my work responsibilities, he misses school sessions because he is unable to independently use a computer.

I have heard anecdotally that the school system is not hearing much from parents about resuming in-person school. I can't speak for all parents, but one reason that you may not hear much from me is that I am overwhelmed and exhausted every minute of every day as I try to meet ACPS requirements and my own professional requirements without anything falling through the cracks, and I don't know how much longer I can keep it up.

### **Additional Written Public Comments submitted that were read aloud**

#### **From Amy Nagahashi**

Overall, this year has gone as well as it could, given the unprecedented circumstances.

MVCS special education staff continue to be outstanding. They are both adaptive and responsive to addressing student needs in the virtual environment.

Additionally, the Parent Resource Center has been responsive to questions. We are very grateful for the PRC staff and their resources, they are amazing!

We were disappointed to learn that IEPs could not be specifically modified to account for learning in the virtual environment. For example, if a student's IEP directs preferential seating in the classroom, what does that translate to in the virtual learning environment? And shouldn't that translation be documented in the IEP? If a teacher change occurs for some reason mid-year, how is the virtual version of the accommodation documented to ensure the student is properly and continually accommodated? Is the decision not to update IEPs specifically for virtual learning a Virginia DOE mandate, or an ACPS-specific decision? Parents, students and educators need more IEP flexibility during the pandemic, particularly for students that have goals and accommodations that require or offer alternative learning methods impacted by virtual learning.

Virtual learning has the side effect of changing the way we think of the "general education setting". We commend ACPS for the active use of breakout rooms in Zoom to better facilitate tailored student education. That said, students with disabilities and/or accommodations may find themselves more isolated in this format, because it does reduce their overall time with different peers in a larger class setting.

It is all the more clear during virtual learning just how critical our special education teachers, staff and administrators are to our students. Even as parents who understand our child and their individual needs, adapting to those needs to create successful learning strategies at home is very, very hard. We felt woefully unprepared and often worry we are letting our child down, while trying to balance support for our other child, and doing our own jobs.

## Ideas for change

ACPS could improve communication about reopening plans to families of students with disabilities. Many families have students with 504 plans or IEPs, but are not aware of what a "city wide program" even is, and/or whether their student is even in it. Our family also received no direct ACPS communication as to whether our child was part of any of the listed special education groups targeted for the initial reopening phases. When we asked our school about this, they too told us they were waiting on additional clarifying information from ACPS central.

Along these lines, ACPS could offer specific communications to parents of students with 504 plans or IEPs regarding reopening plans. Taking into account individual students needs, while lacking the knowledge of which teachers will return to in-person instruction, many parents have struggled with their decision regarding return to school because they cannot assess the potential benefits for the student under the hybrid learning constraints. For example, will my child be that much better off attending school in the hybrid model if their special education teacher is still 100% virtual? How do we weigh the increased exposure risk to our family against potential academic and social benefits?

Not related to the pandemic, but as parents of a fifth grader, we felt extremely uninformed (and frankly, isolated) about IEPs and special education supports in ACPS middle schools. When we asked the elementary school, they were unable to provide much assistance. We leveraged the PRC, who then connected us with a special education leader at one of the middle schools. She answered our many questions and provided valuable insights into the support structure in middle school, and we felt so relieved after that discussion. But we also wondered how we would ever have learned this information had we not persisted in trying to get it ourselves. For parents like us, the unknown of middle school IEP process, combined with the large increase in number of teachers with whom our child will interact, was a great source of anxiety for our family. We strongly recommend ACPS standardize the practice of engaging with 504/IEP families early during the school-level transition years of 5th, 8th and 9th grades and provide resources to explain the process and supports in the next school, and to create a forum for Q&A with administrators/support staff. Enabling this knowledge sharing earlier in the academic year allows parents and educators the necessary time to adequately prepare students for a successful transition.

### **From Jim Bender**

How are things going this year?

Not great, thanks for asking. I have a fourth grader at Maury who has ADHD and is struggling mightily with feeling connected to school and getting motivated to participate.

Some staff have made impressive efforts to engage him in creative ways. And they have become better at it over the months. Much better. Many staff have offered to meet with him one on one outside of class time. That works as long as we can get him to login in and engage.

He is at a Campagna site and we have to coordinate these ad hoc meetings with his teachers and with the adults in the room with him.

My son's chrome book presents infinite opportunities for distraction. We have given up getting him to have only one window up on the screen during class. He simply is not capable of focusing exclusively on the zoom meeting. He is very good at understanding all the features of Zoom and his Chromebook. One time he sabotaged his computer to avoid taking a test— and admitted it. We could not get it back to working without his help.

While many websites are locked down on his computer, he still finds ways to access games and videos on the internet. He also accesses the online Educational materials provided by acps during synchronous classes.

I have no evidence that he has completed any work asynchronously on his own since March. Even with someone working with him on an asynchronous day his productivity is very low. One day he completed 2 slides for a writing assignment with 10 words. For him Monday's are not really a school day. I really don't know what he does Mondays.

He is scared of failing 4th grade at the same time that he cannot bring himself to engage in the work. And before covid, he did like school. We have had numerous discussions, finally we have just decided to abandon our efforts to enforce work rules on him. Before he didn't do the work and we had fights; now he doesn't do the work and we don't have fights. We work through his teachers as well as staff at school and Campagna to keep him on track. Based on his 2nd quarter interim report, they have had only slightly more success than his parents.

It is typical for children his age to complain about school. But he really dreads going to school. I pray when things open up again he may learn to like school again, but I am not sure.

I am troubled at the way my son's IEP is being treated. While he is receiving services, the school is not tracking the objectives laid out last year. In my opinion he is not making sufficient progress on most of the IEP objectives. We put together a new IEP for the coming year, but they made it clear that they will not be implementing it until schools re-open for in-person learning. The message to me is that they recognize this environment cannot be made conducive to my child's educational needs. So why aren't we doing everything we can to get him back in front of a teacher?

What will his school do about him when it comes time to move on to 5th grade and he has not mastered the material? Will he repeat 4th grade? Or will they just pass him on--both choices are bad ones. I wonder how he can be successful in middle school if he learned so little in half of third grade and most of fourth grade.

I am in regular contact with the assistant principal at Maury. She meets with (child's name removed) regularly. She is trying.

For the division staff, I'd say to them please get my son back in a classroom as soon as possible. I see the communication from Dr H and the proposed schedule for opening up in hybrid next month. I also see all the caveats that say we won't open up if the pandemic numbers are not right. I see that the pandemic is not under control and I don't think it will be any better next month.

Are we certain that opening the schools will be worse health-wise than keeping them shut? How many COVID cases have we had at the in-person sites like Campagna and the Rec department? None that I have heard of. We can see the drop in academic performance all over the division, especially in kids like my son.

I lost a lot of confidence in Dr. Hutchings when I heard he put his daughter in a private school. How can I believe the sunny optimism of his statements, when he bailed out on the system he encourages us to support?

Do you have ideas for change?

Get kids in classrooms as soon as possible.

### **From Amy Ford**

Our child is at George Mason, and in first grade.

Our son has a 504 plan in place, due to his diagnosed anxiety and ADHD. The staff have been absolutely wonderful to work with, and they're doing all they possibly can do in a virtual environment. Unfortunately, none of the accommodations that are outlined make much of a difference in a virtual environment. Specifically, the core challenge we deal with, is that what we're asking our youngest learners to do each day is completely developmentally inappropriate. He feels shame and guilt for not being able to keep up and stay organized. All this feeds into worsening anxiety, and persistent sleep issues from stress and too much screen time.

Medication management is a persistent challenge and concern. We pay for private therapy and tutoring to keep him from an extreme outcome- which is NOT an option for hundreds of families with limited means in this city.

This is not sustainable, our child is suffering. Please use new data and learnings coming in now to change the metrics used to open schools. All data points to community spread is not a valid or useful metric and it's holding us back. Our kids deserve courageous leadership who can adjust course when they learn new information.

### **Old Business**

#### **Public Comment Procedures**

After the allotted time for Public Comment had elapsed there was a short discussion on allowing extended Public Comment in the future. Cindy Hart and Mike Behrman are drafting Public Comment guidelines. Shanel Hill will update the School Board website to allow pre-registration for giving public comments. Shanel will also see if advisory committees are required to respond to public comments during the meeting and if anonymous comments are allowed. Committee will discuss draft at next meeting.

### **Special Guest – Dr. Hutchings, ACPS Superintendent**

Cindy Hart began by summarizing parent comments and concerns re: virtual school. Dr. Hutchings responded that he is also a parent and he understands. He reaffirmed ACPS' intention to return to "live" school when COVID rates allow beginning with special education students and English language learners. ACPS recognizes that not all students will be able to return to "live" school and ACPS is looking into additional support for students at home. This was followed by a Question and Answer period.

Questions focused on teacher vaccinations, community transmission rates, staff childcare, other staffing issues, and communication. For the time being, ACPS will not require staff to be vaccinated. The community transmission rate needs to be below 10% for special education students to return to school and below 8% for general education students. ACPS is looking at staffing issues, so are other school districts so there is a lot of competition, especially for trained special education staff. Communication continues to be an issue, but ACPS is working on it.

### **Old Business Continued**

#### **PR Efforts**

Deborah Perry reported that a SEAC flyer has been written and translated into several languages for school and PTA use. Sabrina Reilly reported that a draft Facebook page will be ready by the end of the week. Courtney Davis reported that the PRC was working on communication ideas.

The committee unanimously passed a motion to form a PR committee.

This committee will need a chair and goals to incorporate into the PRC plan. Volunteers should contact Cindy Hart.

### **New Business and Reports**

#### **Executive Director of Specialized Instruction**

Terry Werner spoke on the new draft Seclusion and Restraint Policy ACPS developed in response to the new state policy. The new ACPS policy requires School Board approval. If

approved, there will be mandatory training for all ACPS staff. This will be followed by additional training for select types of staff.

### **Monthly input from Citywide classroom staff**

Laura Fontaine will get feedback from other teachers on the draft Seclusion and Restraint Policy.

### **Reopening Questions from Families of SWD**

This was tabled until next meeting.

### **School Board Liaison**

Meagan Alderton had nothing to report.

### **Parent Resource Center**

Courtney Davis reported that the PRC is holding workshops virtually while still learning to use virtual technology. Programs have been shortened in response to parental stress levels. The PRC has been staffing the Virtual Plus Help Line that supports both students and parents on a variety of topics.

Janet Reese added that the PRC was regularly checking in with parents during the pandemic. They recently started working with an Arabic speaking parent liaison to reach that community. Cindy Hart stated that SEAC would like to award the Anne Lipnick Awards for Specialized Instruction (Specialized Instruction, Inclusion, and Paraprofessional Support) this year, after suspending the awards last year. Volunteers for an Awards Committee should contact Cindy Hart.

### **Subcommittee for Community Awareness of SEAC**

Cindy Hart announced that in addition to a Subcommittee for Community Awareness, SEAC also needed working groups for Communications and Literacy. Volunteers should contact Cindy Hart.

### **Announcements**

Terry Mazingo announced it was School Principal Appreciation Week.

Terry Werner announced a new Lunch and Learn series for teachers. The first session will be on the disproportionate identification of African American students as having emotional issues.

### **Adjourn**

The motion to adjourn passed unanimously. Chair Cindy Hart adjourned the meeting at 9:10 p.m.

### **Meeting Action Items**

- Cindy Hart/Mike Behrman to circulate draft Public Comment guidelines to SEAC before next meeting.
- Sabrina Reilly will complete draft Facebook page by 1/29.
- SEAC to complete a "SEAC in 60 Seconds" document for community distribution.
- Debbie Perry will keep a tracking sheet of activities undertaken by SEAC PTA liaisons.
- Cindy will be sending "return to school questions" related to SPED students to Terry for response.
- Updates on progress made on SPED Action Plan to be incorporated into activities of Communications Subcommittee.
- Laura Fontaine to start regular meetings with other teachers to share SEAC info and get their input.
- Volunteers for Anne Lipnick Awards Committee to contact Cindy Hart. We will need to decide if we want to pursue this at the next meeting.
- Volunteers for Community Awareness Subcommittee, Communications working group, and Literacy working group to contact Cindy Hart. A chair needs to be found for the Community Awareness subcommittee and approved at the next meeting.
- SEAC needs to restart its work on the K-2 Literacy Plan.
- SEAC needs to submit SEAC comments on the ACPS budget at the next School Board meeting.