

March 9, 2017
Remarks to the Alexandria City Public Schools Board
By SEAC Chair Janet Eissenstat

Madame Chair, Madame Vice Chair, Members of the School Board and Dr. Crawley. Thank you for your attention this evening.

My name is Janet Eissenstat.

I will start by saying it feels presumptuous to speak on behalf of all families of students with special needs whose experiences and opinions are as diverse and numerous as there are stars in the sky. Nevertheless, I shall try tonight as I stand before you as the Chair of your Special Education Advisory Committee and as the parent of two elementary children, one of whom has multiple disabilities.

Thank you to Dr. Werner, who has preceded my remarks by briefing you on Special Education law. Ten minutes is a painfully short period for such a complex subject. Most parents must invest significant hours and expense attending seminars, researching laws and regulations, and participating in support groups just to become even mildly proficient in the topic of Special Education 101. With me is a representative stack of books a foot high to show you what is considered light reading for the more than 1700 parents of children with disabilities in our school district. My hope is to convey to you a little bit of what people with disabilities and their families would want you to have foremost in your minds as conscientious members of the School Board.

First we want you to know that the most important letter in IDEA and IEP is the "I." The Individuals with Disabilities Act, which established the process for development and implementation of Individualized Education Plans, is driven completely by the unique needs of the individual student. Too often, the prevailing educational culture in this country attempts to force Special Education students into pre-existing and ill-fitting solutions both in terms of placement and curriculum content. Boilerplate IEP goals, administrative assumptions, presumptive placements, and perfunctory therapy sessions are the quickest way for a school district to demonstrate to families that they don't understand the true significance of the "I" in IDEA. Time and again, the courts have ruled in favor of the "I" and the individual's needs. The Individual is at the heart of everything. We must never lose sight of that. The "I" is about diversity and what makes us unique. The "I" is what puts the "special" in Special Education. It is not the students who are special, it is the instruction that is special. Therefore it is the teacher, the supporting staff, the administrator's job to be special too and build a culture that reaches all students. The best school districts in the country readily embrace the "I" in IDEA and IEP and build a culture to support it.

Parents working with district officials to develop their child's IEP, desire above all a partnership with the educational team. They desire a partnership that emphasizes personal outcomes – driven by the family's goals for the student and the student's own goals. In this we are no different than any other parent. Yet things are different because of where we must place our energy. Many of us resent that we must continually work to ensure that school districts operate in minimal compliance with the law. For us, compliance matters very much. It is the very foundation of an equitable system. Students with disabilities never had anything even remotely approaching equity until the IDEA came into existence. That is why we expect and even demand high levels of compliance with the rules and regulations of notice, due process, and IEP implementation. Without these minimum standards, positive educational outcomes and real student growth will always prove elusive. However, even while demanding the

compliance, which parents recognize is seen as burdensome by some educators, what parents really care most about is the outcomes and the growth. After all, what good is by the book compliance with the law if students don't receive the services and tools they need to be successful in life, work and as members of the community. We ask that you, as Board Members, recognize that you must walk the tight rope of favoring an outcome based system while using your compliance mentality to create a system built on true equity for all.

As you walk this tight rope, please recognize that a system which is preoccupied with compliance in order to avoid litigation undermines trust at precisely the moment when families need it most. A parent's first IEP meeting is a bewildering and intimidating experience fraught with questions. Is the proposed IEP appropriate for the child? Is the proposed IEP driven by budget constraints or staff convenience rather than out of concern for the child's needs? Will signing a document have unintended long-term consequences for the child's future? The only way to counter this is through effective communication. It is not enough to communicate only as mandated by the law. Parents need and want the district employees, and especially the teachers to be leaders in this realm. The more you recognize that communication is a continuum, a constant give and take between everyone on the team, and the more you communicate across all channels the more we will come together to create a culture of inclusion built on mutual trust. Parents, as protectors of their children, will always believe that the school district holds all the cards. No matter how many books we read, or seminars we attend, we are at your mercy. It is an unequal power relationship. You, starting at the very top, must lead the district and the entire team and recognize that the burden of effective and meaningful communication, communication that goes beyond compliance, is on you. That burden is entirely on the district and it must start at the top and flow to the principals of each school all the way to the educational team. Only through concerted effort will ACPS build an inclusive culture of transparency and trust where a student at one school have substantially the same experience as a student at another school.

Our strategic plan ACPS 2020 proclaims "Every Student Succeeds." At SEAC we took this at face value and tied our Scope of Work to the six goals of the plan. Please read it carefully for it captures some important issues related to what success means for students with disabilities and their families. Like all families, we want our children to have the tools they need to be prepared for life, work and lifelong learning. Success for some students focuses more on life skills, work readiness and social skills. For others, success is more academic. Regardless, success depends on the "I" – the individual's needs and this is true for all students. We must never lose sight of that. Success is a product of a culture that presumes competence and recognizes that students with disabilities are not problems to be managed. Success is a product of great teachers, therapists and para professionals, and very powerful administrative support. Success is a product of a system that views Special Education as a service and not a place. Success is a product of learning environments universally designed so that all students can access the curriculum without barriers in a seamless way. Success is a product of consistent, system wide leadership that makes inclusion a natural and seamless part of the educational process. Success is a product of a system that values and measures student growth and progress. SEAC's primary goal is to support the School Board to ensure that it has the information it needs to ensure that every student does indeed succeed.

With the leadership of the previous and current School Board, Dr. Crawley's guidance and the work and support of Dr. Mozingo and Dr. Werner's team, we have made significant progress in creating a culture that move beyond compliance and acceptance and its taking us ever so very slowly into a true culture of inclusion. It is my dream and the dream of many parents and students with disabilities that one day soon the discussion is no longer about building a culture of acceptance and inclusion but rather on

about building a culture of dignity and respect based on the presumption of competence for all individuals with disabilities.

The members of the Special Education Advisory Committee encourage you to learn more by sitting down with families in the district to hear their personal stories, attending SEAC meetings, visiting the Parent Resource Center, or asking a parent if you can attend an IEP meeting with them. Also, carefully review SEAC's Scope of Work for it underscores some of the hard work that needs to be done to bring about long-term positive changes that will benefit all ACPS's students.

Finally, I like to invite you to come celebrate and acknowledge what is best about ACPS's Special Education programs at the SEAC awards ceremony in May with more details to be forthcoming.

On behalf of Vice-Chair Crystal Prall, and all the members of SEAC, thank you for your time tonight and thank you to Margaret Lorber for her service as our SEAC representative. I am happy to answer any questions.

Respectfully submitted,
Janet Slaughter Eissenstat
Chair, ACPS Special Education Advisory Committee