

Date: November 13, 2017

For ACTION

For INFORMATION

Board Agenda: Yes
No

FROM: Janet Eissenstat, Chair, Special Education Advisory Committee
Ellen Taverna, Co-Chair, Special Education Advisory Committee

THROUGH: Lois Berlin, Acting Superintendent of Schools

CC: Terri Mozingo, Ed.D., Chief Academic Officer
Theresa Werner, JD., Executive Director of Specialized Instruction

TO: The Honorable Reme Gentry, Chair, and Members of the Alexandria City
School Board

TOPIC: 2016 -17 SEAC End of Year Report

This year SEAC worked extensively with Theresa Werner, M.Ed., J.D., Executive Director of Specialized Instruction, and our School Board Liaison, Margaret Lorber to assess the current state of special education within ACPS.

BACKGROUND: At the January 23, 2017 SEAC Meeting, the membership approved a scope of work which tied SEAC initiatives and interest areas to the six area goals of the existing ACPS strategic plan. The school board approved the scope of work on date? The SEAC's scope of work was ambitious. The challenges facing students with disabilities are many and the committee views its work as only just beginning.

The SEAC role, as mandated by the Commonwealth of Virginia, is to:

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.

The following end of year reports summarizes our work under each goal area and provides the school board with the status of specific action items.

Goal #1

Academic Excellence and Educational Equity:

Every student will be academically successful and prepared for life, work and college.

The Special Education Advisory Committee members were briefed by Dr. Theresa Werner regarding the Office of Specialized Instruction's plan on October 24, 2016. SEAC members also reviewed SOL data for special education. Throughout the year, the committee returned to the topic of low performance and lack of growth in key performance areas many times. The committee also worked extensively with Dr. Werner on the status of the Special Education Program Evaluation commissioned by the School Board for the Fall of 2017. We thank the school board for its commitment to determine the root causes of slow or stagnant performance growth for students with disabilities by providing for an independent evaluation. The committee greatly appreciates the additional funds provided by Dr. Werner from her department's budget to expand the scope to include more schools. However, the committee remains deeply concerned that not all schools in the district will be independently evaluated by an onsite research team. The SEAC will be monitoring the project closely in 2017-2018 and look forward to a full report in the Spring/Summer of 2018.

SEAC committed to work with staff to ensure that ACPS Special Education data, especially reading and math scores, were available on the ACPS dashboard. In February 2017, the SEAC members met with Marya Runkle, Director of Education and Business Applications. She discussed the current state of the dashboard and addressed committee member concerns for more specific data related to individual schools. In the Spring of 2017, staff provided a list of data that could be used in connection with the dashboard. The committee will review that data in 2017-2018 and work with staff to ensure that it is available on the website in an appropriate way. The committee remains committed to the goal of a meaningful dashboard to aid parents and the public in understanding the true state of special education services within ACPS.

In March of 2017, Dr. Werner and the SEAC chair, Janet Eissenstat, addressed the school board on the issues of Special Education 101. Through those remarks and in the question and answer session that followed, board members were advised on the issues of disproportionality and educational equity within the district. The School Board was urged to use the upcoming Evaluation of Services for Students with Disabilities to identify the root causes of over-identification of minorities for special education services, the inappropriate lowering of standards

for and expectations of students with disabilities, the quality of instructional services, to what extent ACPS fosters a culture that supports the unique educational needs of students with disabilities and other SEAC priorities.

Given the complex dynamics of the 2017-2018 budget cycle, The SEAC took a step back from aggressively advocating for much needed additional resources for special education in favor of advocating for no cuts to special education. We anticipate advocating strongly for expansion of the special education evaluation to include site visits to all ACPS schools and for full implementation of the recommendations from Public Consulting Group.

Goal #2

Family and Community Engagement:

ACPS will partner with families and the community in the education of Alexandria's youth.

The SEAC Outreach Subcommittee worked to increase ACPS disability awareness of students with disabilities and promote inclusion in the schools. After meeting with the Parent Resource Center staff and conducting a review of past ACPS disability awareness efforts, on March 13, 2017, the subcommittee recommended to the Office of Specialized Instruction the implementation of a district-wide disability awareness program called the Inclusion Project. The Inclusion Project is a Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) led initiative developed in conjunction with the Partnership for People with Disabilities at Virginia Commonwealth University. The VDOE initiative created a Guide for schools to follow and implement, which includes sample disability history & awareness activities for different types of curriculum.

The Project begins with organizing a diverse Planning Committee of building administrators, educators, staff, parents and most importantly the students with and without disabilities working together to create a plan. The goal is to demonstrate to students, teachers, administrators and parents a better understanding of what it is like to have a disability, establish a greater appreciation of the importance of empathy and foster a culture of inclusion and acceptance of peers of all abilities. If done right, it will also decrease incidents of bullying and harassment. These disability awareness and education activities established by the Inclusion Project will not just be in October for Virginia Disability History & Awareness Month (DHAM) but throughout the year.

The subcommittee made recommendations to ACPS staff and offered assistance to begin the Inclusion Project in two pilot schools, however, there was no outreach to schools during this time. Meetings with the principals of George Washington Middle School and Mount Vernon Community School to discuss the Inclusion Project were scheduled for September 21, 2017. The subcommittee will work this year to formalize and present a project plan to ensure the program's successful launch in additional schools.

The subcommittee began discussions with ACPS public relations/communications staff about the need to highlight the many contributions of students with disabilities for DHAM in October and with greater frequency throughout the year. This objective will be prioritized in 2017 -2018.

SEAC reviewed the Parent Resource Center contact data each month and made recommendations, when appropriate, to improve the reach and efficacy of the Parent Resource Center.

Goal #3

An Exemplary Staff:

ACPS will recruit, develop, support, and retain a staff that meets the needs of every student.

In April 2017, the SEAC met with James Loomis, Director of Employment Services, and reviewed data related to recruitment and retention rates of special education teachers, paraprofessionals, therapists and other support personnel who work directly with students with disabilities. The SEAC examined the pay scales of these professionals relative to surrounding districts. The data indicated that ACPS remains competitive with surrounding districts, on paper. However, SEAC members continue to receive anecdotal information that ACPS caseloads are higher than surrounding districts and that the special education professional environment within ACPS can be unnecessarily challenging. Last year, SEAC recommended that the Special Education Evaluation also examine the work place dynamics affecting our teachers and paraprofessional staff and how and when services are provided to students. It is our hope that the Special Education evaluation will be comprehensive enough to fully examine long term morale and retention trends and issues among special education professionals and paraprofessionals.

The SEAC is committed to highlighting and celebrating instructional excellence and inclusive practices. In 2016 – 2017 we suspended the Harry Burke and Anne Lipnick Education Awards program for one year, pending a restructuring of the awards. In place of individual awards, SEAC honored the entire specialized instruction staff for their dedication and commitment in a ceremony on the plaza in May of 2017.

In June of 2017, the SEAC met with newly appointed TC Williams' principal, Peter Balas. He answered questions about his approach to inclusionary practices and discussed his experience as a principal in an elementary school. In 2017-2018, we will continue to meet with more ACPS principals and teachers to learn about the sharing of best practices.

Goal #4

Facilities and Learning Environment:

ACPS will provide optimal and equitable learning environments

In an effort to understand the current state of special education learning environments, SEAC members met with the Clarence Stukes, Chief Operating Officer and members of the facilities staff. They provided a presentation of the current infrastructure and budget challenges and answered questions about how decisions that impact students with disabilities are made. Committee members provided comments on the capital improvement plan and emphasized the need for facilities staff to seek input from the SEAC when making design decisions. In 2017-2018, SEAC members have committed to conducting site tours to learn more about the different special education services at various schools.

The SEAC members emphasized that safe and accessible spaces is not just about compliance, it is also about student self-esteem and basic human dignity.

Goal #5

Health and Wellness:

ACPS will promote efforts to enable students to be healthy and ready to learn.

In March of 2017, the SEAC members heard from Michael Humphreys, on the status of the Family Life Curriculum. The committee advocated strongly for this curriculum to be adapted for all students, including those with severe disabilities, in all schools. This year the SEAC will follow the progress closely and will provide comment and make additional recommendations on the Family Life Curriculum.

Goal #6

Effective and Efficient Operations:

ACPS will be efficient, effective and transparent in its business operations.

SEAC supports all efforts to make delivery of services more efficient and effective. The committee monitored and made recommendations to staff, as needed, on all Special Education plans, programs and the implementation of those plans and programs.

The SEAC started the year with a briefing from the Clerk of the School Board on all of the policies related to good governance of the committee. In addition, the chair and vice chair attended a workshop for advisory committees in the Fall of 2016.

The SEAC will also updated the committee bylaws and brought them into alignment with current operating procedures.

The SEAC made recommendations to the ACPS staff related to improving communication with all parents of children with special needs and students who are identified as possibly qualifying for an IEP.

RECOMMENDATION: Approval

IMPACT: Proposed objectives for the 2017-18 year.

