

Public Comments—Ellen Taverna
School Board Meeting on 10/12/2017

My name is Ellen Taverna. I'm Vice-Chair of the ACPS Special Education Advisory Committee and I have a Kindergartener at Lyles-Crouch Traditional Academy. I'm here tonight to ask for the School Board's support in initiating a district-wide approach for Alexandria City Public Schools to better address disability awareness and celebrate the many ways in which students with disabilities enrich our schools and community.

As you know, in 2009, the Virginia General Assembly and this School Board passed resolutions designating October as Disability History & Awareness Month. The resolutions encourage Alexandria public schools – through education and other activities, programs, and events – to promote and highlight Disability History and Awareness.

However, whether a school decides to promote disability awareness is up to each school. Some schools don't do anything and often we don't hear about the school activities because it's not highlighted in a way that prioritizes its importance. In the past, many of the activities around disability awareness have been organized by parents of students with disabilities at their own individual schools. Once those parents and students leave, many of the programs fade away. We have over 1750 students with disabilities receiving special education services at ACPS and we can do better.

This year, SEAC decided we wanted to change our approach to Disability History and Awareness Month. With ACPS's support, we've gone out into the community and participated in Del Ray's Art on the Avenue to promote disability awareness. We've worked with ACPS Communications staff to highlight disability awareness in the ACPS newsletter and the social media pages.

And we've recommended the implementation of a district-wide disability awareness program that follows the inclusion philosophy of ACPS.

This Inclusion Project will be piloted at George Washington Middle School this year but we hope to see it expand to other schools within the next few years.

It's a Virginia Department of Education led initiative developed by 8 youth leaders and 3 educators in conjunction with the Partnership for People with Disabilities at Virginia Commonwealth University.

It begins with a diverse Planning Committee of building administrators, educators, staff, students with and without disabilities, and parents.

The goal of the project is to demonstrate to students, teachers, administrators and parents a better understanding of what it's like to have a disability. And to establish a greater appreciation of the importance of empathy and how to include and accept 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 but throughout the year.

We hope that the School Board takes an active role in promoting disability awareness and education in our schools and supports the implementation of this Inclusion Project throughout the district.

Thank you.