

SPECIAL EDUCATION ADVISORY COMMITTEE
2021–2022
ANNUAL REPORT

First and foremost, the Special Education Advisory Committee (SEAC) would like to thank the administrators, educators, parents, staff, students, and School Board for navigating yet another challenging year of living during a pandemic and returning to in-person learning.

SEAC remained meeting virtually this school year, which allowed for more accessibility for members and families to participate in the virtual meetings held quarterly. In addition, we had the honor of inviting many professional staff, such as Dr. Wooster and the Literacy team, back to continue to collaborate and support the Literacy Initiatives within the school division. As the focus shifts and expands, SEAC remains committed to ensuring that the needs of Students With Disabilities (SWD) will be addressed as work on that critical plan progresses.

Additionally, SEAC invited Ms. Margaret Browne, Recruitment & Retention Director, and Dr. Melanie Kay-Wyatt to learn more about Special Education Recruitment and Staffing, and SEAC commended ACPS's 40% recruitment increase from last year as the nation continues to grapple with staffing shortages across school systems.

As usual, SEAC also reviewed the district's annual budget and the policies and procedures that affect SWD. In addition, the committee was pleased to partner with the Executive Director of Specialized Instruction to administer the Anne R. Lipnick Awards for Specialized Instruction.

SEAC also formed new subcommittees focusing on Equity and Inclusion, focusing on ACPS's current definitions and providing recommendations for equity and inclusion for SWD. Another committee formed in response to ACPS's new transition coordinator was the Transition and Graduation subcommittee to continue to support the services and needs of parents of SWD and family communication.

Also, SEAC was honored to have a student representative, Kate Radt, serve on SEAC for part of this school year. Serving as a key stakeholder, Ms. Radt advocated for herself and her peers with disabilities on several topics, including curricula, accessibility, and more, through her student reports, feedback, and collaboration with SEAC, which only enhanced the work of SEAC.

Below is an end-of-year summary of the work and recommendations of SEAC. In addition to the report provided here, SEAC also shared feedback from families and our meetings through public comments to the School Board and emails to its members.

Our committee wants to ensure that the voices of families of SWD are heard and that SEAC is of assistance. We welcome the guidance of the School Board on the best approaches for sharing reports and recommendations in the future.

Report on SEAC Areas of Focus for 2021–2022

I. Literacy

ACPS Strategic Goal Alignment:

- Instructional Excellence

Background: Within the Instruction Excellence goal, *2025: Equity for All* identifies “implementing a consistent, high-impact approach to teaching literacy in all K–2 classrooms across the Division” as a Highlighted Action. It gives several strategies for improving K–5 literacy. SEAC wants to ensure that consistent, high-impact approaches for literacy instruction are available to SWD. Data from the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) shows that the SWD proficiency rate in ACPS for English/reading was 35.99% in 2018–19, which falls below the state target of 48%.

SEAC formed a subcommittee that focused on K–2 literacy in 2021–2022 to address literacy concerns for SWD in the past academic year. As a new ACPS initiative to encompass K–4 literacy, SEAC will continue to have a literacy subcommittee that focuses on ways to expand beyond the K–2 Literacy Initiative.

Goal: Continue to collaborate with the Literacy Team of the Department of Teaching, Learning, and Leadership (TLL) staff; review the ACPS plan for K–4 literacy; and make recommendations accordingly.

Commendations/Strengths: SEAC would like to thank Literacy team members—Elementary Literacy Instructional Specialist Dr. Carolyn Wooster, Elementary Literacy Coordinator Kimberly Schell, and Inclusion Instructional Specialist Nicole Barrion—for their continued collaboration with, and support of, SEAC this 2021–2022 school year. The TLL’s Literacy team provided updates to the SEAC literacy subcommittee on the implementation of the Really Great Reading Program at the K–2 level and plans for literacy at the grades 3–5 level. In addition, the Office of Specialized Instruction detailed efforts to identify and hire additional Orton-Gillingham-trained literacy instructors.

Recommendations for ACPS: As a general matter, ACPS should work to educate the ACPS community on the importance of evidence-based phonics instruction and implementation of the Really Great Reading Program. In addition, efforts should be made to help educate the ACPS community on language-based learning disabilities such as dyslexia and dysgraphia. ACPS should guide teachers in literacy instruction for students with low-incidence disabilities (Down Syndrome, deafness, blindness, etc.) requiring higher levels of support, including those in the general education setting.

Future Considerations: The newly enacted Virginia Literacy Act, effective beginning in the 2024–2025 school year, creates new requirements for early childhood literacy that should be planned for and addressed in the upcoming year.

II. Transition and Graduation

ACPS Strategic Goals Alignment:

- Student Accessibility and Support
- Systemic Alignment
- Instructional Excellence

Background: ACPS focuses on Student Accessibility and Support as one of five goals of the ACPS 2025 Strategic Plan. According to the VDOE’s FFY 2019 Special Education Performance Report, 52.63% of youth with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) graduate from high school with a regular diploma, under the state target of 61.0%. For the 2021–2022 school year, ACPS hired a Career and Transition Services Coordinator, Amy Creed. Transition services are a coordinated set of activities for SWD that promote movement from school to post-school activities, including post-secondary education, vocational education, integrated employment, continuing and adult education, adult services, independent living, and community participation. SEAC will work with the Career and Transition Services team to address graduation rates concerns and provide recommendations to support SWD.

In addition, SEAC formed a subcommittee that focused on Transition and Graduation in 2021–2022 to address literacy concerns for SWD in the past academic year.

Goal: SEAC will learn about the implementation of Career and Transition Services and serve as a connection to the committee and identify needs in this space.

Commendations/Strengths: SEAC commends the hiring of Amy Creed, Career and Transition Services Coordinator. Additionally, SEAC applauds the Parent Resource Center (PRC) for hosting a Transition Fair event with a variety of presentations to support the transition of all learners, including SWD.

Recommendations for ACPS: The Transition committee met throughout the 2021–2022 school year and provided the following recommendations to ensure students and families receive the best possible transition experience:

- Help parents navigate state systems—SSDI, guardianship, DD/ID Waiver, and educational guardianship.
- Potentially expand on communication goals.
- Provide transparency about transition options—potentially adding options to the ACPS website or expanding upon PRC workshops.

Future Considerations:

- SEAC will invite Ms. Amy Creed, Career and Transition Services Coordinator, to present and update SEAC on behalf of ACPS's transition work and services.
- SEAC will partner with ACPS to develop guidance and assistance with navigating transition programming.

III. Budget & SEAC Bylaws

Background: Each year, SEAC reviews the proposed budget and, if warranted, provides input to the School Board regarding impacts on SWD. SEAC has formed a subcommittee that will assist with the funding from division-wide to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA) budget and work to create surveys and collect data from the committee to help support the budget process regarding SWD. This committee will also analyze, review, edit, and present reviews to SEAC to ensure that the bylaws are updated and agreed upon within the committee.

Goal: Review the budget to provide recommendations on its impact on SWD. Additionally, ensure that the bylaws allow a committee to form effectively and efficiently to support ACPS's division of SWD.

Key Activities and Accomplishments of SEAC:

- The subcommittee reviewed the bylaws in conjunction with the School Board Clerk, and all updates are pending and still need approval.
- The Executive Director of Specialized Instruction presented the SPED Annual Plan to SEAC at a working meeting on April 27, 2022.

Recommendations for ACPS:

- Determine the staff and training needs to support the recommendations of the Equity and Inclusion subcommittee.

IV. Anne R. Lipnick Awards

Background: ACPS instituted the Anne Lipnick Inclusion for All Award in 2010 to honor Mrs. Lipnick and her work. In 2018, the Harry Burke Award and the Anne Lipnick Inclusion for All Award were merged and renamed in honor of Mrs. Lipnick as the Anne R. Lipnick Awards for Specialized Instruction. The awards program could not be conducted last year due to the shutdown caused by the pandemic; however, this spring, SEAC was delighted to partner with the Executive Director of Specialized Instruction to administer the Anne R. Lipnick Awards for Specialized Instruction once again.

Priorities and Goals: The purpose of these awards is to engage families and staff in recognizing and honoring excellence in the education and inclusion of SWD. Additionally,

this year, SEAC decided to honor ALL SPED staff in the district for their tremendous efforts and dedication with a letter of gratitude from SEAC.

Commendations/Strengths: The SPED staff is a strength for ACPS. Many parents commented on the dedication and effort made by their child's SPED teachers in their communications to SEAC about the challenges of this school year. Additionally, SEAC is appreciative that many administrators worked very long hours to support SWD and others.

Key Activities and Accomplishments of SEAC:

- SEAC requested nominations for and honored winners in the three categories that have long been part of the awards—Special Education Teacher; Instructional Assistant Support; and General Education Inclusion Teacher, Related Services Provider.
- SEAC Chair Lauren Golubski composed a letter that was sent to all of the district's SPED staff on behalf of SEAC in recognition of the extra dedication and effort provided by so many ACPS SPED professionals throughout this school year.
- After reviewing nominations from previous years, SEAC added a rubric to assist in the reviewing process by providing unbiased nominations, clear expectations of submissions, and further transparency for all parties to ensure a smooth voting and nomination process.

V. Pandemic Recovery

ACPS Strategic Goals Alignment:

- Community and Family Involvement
- Student Accessibility and Support

Background: Since March 2020, ACPS students have experienced unprecedented change and disruption to their educational experience due to the COVID-19 pandemic. These changes and disruptions likely had disproportional effects on SWD at ACPS.

ACPS students received partial or full-day virtual instruction for school-day instruction for up to five quarters. Likewise, ACPS provided related services to SWD virtually for some or all of that period. The ACPS Office of Specialized Instruction had announced and begun to institute plans for COVID-19 recovery for the 2021–2022 school year. The plan stated that COVID-19 recovery services would be unique, individualized to the student, and determined by the IEP team.

The Pandemic Remediation and Recovery Subcommittee will gather information and support these COVID-19 recovery efforts. In particular, the subcommittee will collect data on adverse academic and social-emotional effects attributable to the pandemic on SWD, support efforts to remediate those adverse effects, and identify areas of additional

need for further recovery efforts.

Priorities/Goals: SEAC will examine current practices regarding pandemic recovery efforts in ACPS related to supports and services provided to SWD. SEAC will make recommendations to support pandemic recovery from the division to families and determine how to best share the ACPS pandemic recovery with the ACPS community.

Commendations/Strengths: In SEAC meetings throughout the school year, the Director of Specialized Instruction provided updates on the COVID-19 recovery program implemented this school year and the plans for use of COVID-19 recovery funds.

Recommendations for ACPS: The Pandemic Remediation and Recovery Subcommittee recommends that the Office of Specialized Instruction (1) be mindful of how it communicates COVID-19 recovery opportunities to the ACPS community to ensure maximum participation and (2) continue to communicate to the ACPS community and public how COVID-19 recovery funds are being used.

Future Considerations: The Pandemic Remediation and Recovery Subcommittee suggests that the Office of Specialized Instruction evaluate whether further COVID-19 recovery efforts in the 2022–2023 school year may be warranted in light of the continued effects from the March 2019–June 2021 time frame and the challenges faced from the pandemic during the 2021–2022 school year.

VI. Equity and Inclusion

Background: As ACPS makes its return to five days of in-person instruction and plans for post-pandemic learning, it is opportune to reexamine how equity functions for students with special needs in our district. The SEAC Equity and Inclusion Subcommittee is tasked with understanding equity issues within SPED in ACPS and advising the district accordingly.

Goal: The subcommittee will first examine the definitions of diversity, equity, and inclusion and then will determine its areas of focus for the upcoming school year. The goal is to present to the School Board SEAC definitions of the above terms and to provide related recommendations.

Commendations/Strengths: Strong teachers and support staff are essential for equity and inclusion to occur for SWD. SEAC commends the efforts being made by ACPS to recruit and hire high-quality SPED teachers.

Recommendations for ACPS: SEAC proposes several recommendations to ensure that the equity discussion involves SWD and that general education settings include SWD, to the maximum extent possible. Priorities for the coming year are listed below. Please see

the attached document for further details.

- Update the ACPS definition of “Equity” and “Educational Equity” to include SWD and ensure that the necessary resources are available to remove barriers and achieve positive school outcomes. Include “Ableism” in the ACPS Strategic Plan’s Glossary.
- Add a focus on the hiring and retention of high-quality instructional assistants (AIs), who are an essential part of the equity and inclusion discussion for SWD, by providing evidence-based instructional training and support.
- Create a bank of Inclusion Resources to assist with inclusion of SWD in general education settings.
- Make training available to ensure Health Equity for SWD.

Future Considerations: Again, please see the attached document for SEAC’s suggestions for future considerations.