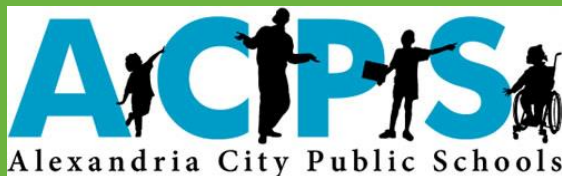




# Comprehensive Review of Special Education, Pre-K through Grade 12: Executive Summary

Alexandria City Public Schools

Executive Summary  
October 2018



PCG | *Education*

# Table of Contents

<b>I. Introduction .....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>II. Summary of Strengths and Opportunities for Improvement.....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>III. Detailed Summary of Recommendations .....</b>	<b>9</b>
1. Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS).....	10
2. Special Education Referral, Assessment, and Eligibility Practices .....	12
3. Academic Optimism, Rigor, and High Expectations.....	14
4. Inclusive Practices .....	15
5. Specially Designed Instruction (SDI) and Targeted Interventions.....	16
6. Leadership and Accountability.....	17
7. Inter-Departmental Collaboration .....	18
8. Staff Recruitment, Retention, and Morale .....	19
9. Fiscal .....	20
10. Culture, Equity, and Parent Engagement.....	22

## I. Introduction

Located in Northern Virginia, Alexandria City Public Schools (ACPS) is the 16<sup>th</sup> largest school division in the state, educating over 15,400 students from kindergarten through age 21 years.<sup>1</sup> It serves students in 16 ACPS schools: 12 elementary schools,<sup>2</sup> 1 pre-K-8 school, 2 middle schools, and 1 high school (2 campuses). ACPS also operates three alternative programs: Chance for Change Academy, the T.C. Williams Satellite Campus, or the Northern Virginia Juvenile Detention Center School. The ACPS school community is diverse, with the following demographic composition: Hispanic/Latino (36.5%), White (27.8%), Black/African American (27.5%), Asian (5.1%), Multi-Racial (2.75%), Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander (0.2%), and Native American (0.2%). ACPS students come from over 118 countries and speak 120 languages. English Learners (EL) represent 30.6% of the population, and 10.6% of students receive special education services. Nearly two thirds (63.2%) of enrolled students are economically disadvantaged.<sup>3</sup>

There is a marked sense of urgency in recent years around providing the supports needed for ACPS's multi-cultural and linguistically diverse population. Despite this, the achievement gap for students with disabilities in ACPS has persisted. In the 2015-16 school year, 42% of students with disabilities (SWD) passed the Standards of Learning (SOL) in reading, compared to the 73% pass rate of their non-disabled peers. Scores decreased in 2016-17, with 71% of the overall population, and 39% of SWDs, passing the reading SOL.<sup>4</sup> Further, of the 42.4% of all students in 2016-17 graduating with an Advanced Studies Diploma, just 3.6% were SWDs. This is a decrease from the 2015-16 rate in which 6.0% of SWDs graduated with an Advanced Studies Diploma.

ACPS operates under a site-based management model, which has a significant impact on the consistency of programming from school to school Division-wide. As the Division begins to enact the recommendations in this report, serious consideration needs to be given to the level of autonomy schools can and should have when supporting programming for students with disabilities and how Division-wide initiatives will be implemented with fidelity. Achieving these goals for all students will require essential changes to the academic and social-emotional services provided.

In an effort to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of the special education program and to develop an improvement plan that focus on improving educational outcomes for students with disabilities, ACPS contracted with Public Consulting Group (PCG) in June 2017 to provide an in-depth analysis of the Division's special education inclusive culture and services, staffing, organizational structure, and processes. Over the course of this engagement, PCG conducted a review of ACPS's special education data, held focus groups and interview sessions with a range of stakeholders, and visited all schools to conduct student shadowing and classroom observations. The full report provides an overview of the findings and details recommendations for programmatic improvements designed to drive programmatic efficiency and lead to better outcomes for students and families.

Although this report documents areas of concern, they are used to formulate recommendations designed to improve the academic performance and social/emotional outcomes of students with disabilities, who as a group have lagged behind their very high performing peers. PCG's goal is to assist the Division in taking a series of actions that are challenging but intended to help produce a world-class education for *all* of ACPS students.

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<sup>1</sup> Fall 2017-18 Membership Data. [http://www.doe.virginia.gov/statistics\\_reports/enrollment/fall\\_membership/report\\_data.shtml](http://www.doe.virginia.gov/statistics_reports/enrollment/fall_membership/report_data.shtml)

<sup>2</sup> One elementary school is in the process of transitioning to a K-8 school.

<sup>3</sup> ACPS Fast Facts. <https://www.acps.k12.va.us/Domain/1030>

<sup>4</sup> ACPS SOL scores obtained through: <https://p1pe.doe.virginia.gov/apex/f?p=152:1:15124976360225>

## Purpose of the Study

This report describes the current state of the special education program in ACPS and is designed to guide the Division toward continuous improvement. It examines the following evaluation questions:

1. *To what extent do the **instructional services** ACPS offers meet the needs of students with disabilities within the Division?*
  - To what extent do the instructional delivery models demonstrate best practices and meet student needs?
  - To what extent does the continuum of services offered by ACPS for students with disabilities address the needs of students? How do these services compare to other divisions?
  - How are inclusionary practices being implemented across schools and educational settings? Are practices aligned to best practices in supporting student academic excellence?
  - To what extent are instructional interventions and strategies meeting the needs of students with disabilities?
  - To what extent are behavioral supports meeting the needs of students with disabilities?
  - To what extent does pre-K-postsecondary transition programming prepare students for life (including life after high school)?
  - To what extent are services for dually identified (EL and SWD) students meeting student needs?
  - To what extent do instructional services for students with disabilities have the capacity to positively impact student outcome data toward meeting performance goals found in the Office of Specialized Instruction Plan (e.g., SOL performance, GPAs, graduation rates, Individual Education Program (IEP) goal progress data, postsecondary outcomes)?
2. *To what extent is ACPS meeting the needs of students with disabilities and their families in the area of **compliance with state and federal regulations**?*
  - How effective is Child Find and Early Childhood Special Education Services at identifying young children suspected of having a developmental delay or disability and providing/getting families access to services?
  - To what extent is the referral and eligibility determination process working in terms of identifying students with disabilities? In identifying dually identified students?
  - To what extent are IEPs being developed in compliance with state and federal regulations (e.g., VDOE special education indicator data)?
  - To what extent are IEPs being implemented as written?
  - To what extent is the IEP reevaluation process being implemented?
3. *To what extent does ACPS utilize its **human capital resources** to provide adequate services for students with disabilities to support student learning outcomes?*
  - How effective is ACPS in recruiting, hiring, and retaining qualified and effective staff servicing students with disabilities including teachers, related service providers and paraprofessionals?
  - How do ACPS's caseloads compare to similarly situated divisions and divisions in nearby proximity to ACPS?
  - How efficiently does ACPS allocate staffing to meet the needs of its population of students with disabilities?
  - To what extent does the professional development ACPS provides adequately prepare and continually support school professionals to provide exceptional services to students with disabilities?
4. *To what extent has ACPS's school and division leadership fostered an instructional program and school/division **culture that supports meeting the unique educational needs of students with disabilities**?*

- To what extent are teachers and leaders held accountable for instructional and procedural practices that effectively support students with disabilities and their learning?
  - To what extent do schools foster a climate where students with disabilities and their families are welcomed, supported, feel safe, and are active partners in student education?
  - To what extent does the organizational structure support a culture conducive to supporting students with disabilities and their families?
  - To what extent does ACPS staff demonstrate a belief system that establishes shared ownership of services and outcomes for students with disabilities?
5. *To what extent do ACPS's **internal and external communication practices** foster collaboration among staff and families in support of students with disabilities?*
- How effective are communication efforts in reaching targeted audiences with pertinent information (e.g. division to school, school to division, division to parent, school to parent, teacher to teacher, case manager to case manager at transition points, etc.)?
  - To what extent are families and community members kept informed about services for students with disabilities (e.g. through the ACPS website, Parent Advisory Committee, Parent Resource, ACPS Express, etc.)?

The report begins with the student-centered focus of teaching/learning, and progresses to examine the ways in which ACPS operates to support this essential function. It is intentionally structured in this manner in order to group interrelated topics together. As such, some answers to research questions are covered across several sections, as noted in the full report.

## Methodology

Over the course of the 2017-18 school year, PCG conducted a mixed-methods study of the special education program in ACPS.<sup>5</sup> The findings and recommendations related to programs, policies, and practices resulted from a comprehensive analysis of several data sources. For each of these areas, we reviewed variations across schools and programs, consistency of services, and documentation. Findings and recommendations related to programs, policies and practices resulted from a comprehensive analysis of six data sources. Components included:

- **Data analysis**, including an analysis of student demographic, programmatic, and outcomes data
- **Organizational interviews and focus groups** with over 200 stakeholders, including central office and school-based leadership, special education teachers, general education teachers, related service providers, paraeducators, parents/families, advocacy organizations, and board members.
- **Surveys** of ACPS school-based special education staff and families. A total of 632 ACPS staff members, out of the 1,770 who received the survey, completed it online, representing a response rate of 36%. A total of 233 parents who received the survey, completed it online, representing a response rate of 16%.
- **Student file review focus groups**, a series of student-centered file review focus groups that allowed for conversation about school-based practices. Student records selected at random included a cross-section of schools, ages, gender, and disability categories and English Learner students with disabilities.
- **School Observations**, in ACPS's 16 schools, spending approximately one day per site.<sup>6</sup> On average 8-10 classrooms were observed during each school visit. Observation focus areas included: 1) Safe

<sup>5</sup> This study did not include an analysis of programming at Chance for Change Academy, the T.C. Williams Satellite Campus, or the Northern Virginia Juvenile Detention Center School.

<sup>6</sup> PCG did not conduct Classroom Observations at Chance for Change Academy, the T.C. Williams Satellite Campus, or the Northern Virginia Juvenile Detention Center School.

and Accessible Environment, 2) Functions and Elements of Explicit Instruction, and 3) Specially Designed Instruction.

- **Student Shadowing Observations**, conducted in ACPS's 16 schools, spending roughly one day per site.<sup>7</sup> Approximately 3-5 students with IEPs per school were shadowed across a range of settings. The areas of focus paralleled those of the school observations.
- **Document review**, including a review of 80+ documents pertinent to the focus of the study.

These components drew from **Research and Practice Literature** to inform the findings and recommendations. PCG reviewed recent special education research to highlight best practices on topics, including:

- **Organizational structures**, such as interdepartmental coordination procedures and staffing structures, that support effectiveness in large special education programs;
- **Special education referral and eligibility practices** that support districts in identifying students in a timely manner through an appropriate assessment process;
- **Instructional practices**, including district policies and results, and the use of technology to facilitate maximum access to the general education curriculum; and
- **Appropriate progress monitoring** to allow districts to identify successes and adjust swiftly when students are not progressing.

PCG used publicly available achievement and financial information to compare key ACPS statistics against local division, state, and national data and also drew upon our own knowledge of other districts' policies and procedures when making recommendations for best practice. Details of each data source are included in the full report.

## Members of the PCG Team

PCG's team members include:

- **Dr. Jennifer Meller**, Project Director. Former Director in Specialized Services for the School District of Philadelphia.
- **Will Gordillo**, Subject Matter Expert. Former Executive Director of Exceptional Student Services in Miami-Dade and Palm Beach County School Districts.
- **Anna D'Entremont**, Subject Matter Expert. Former COO of a Boston, MA charter school and program officer for an organization supporting 85 new small high schools across New York City.
- **Dr. Christine Donis-Keller**, Research and Evaluation Specialist.
- **Matthew Scott**, Project/research support.

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<sup>7</sup> PCG did not conduct Student Shadowing Observations at Chance for Change Academy, the T.C. Williams Satellite Campus, or the Northern Virginia Juvenile Detention Center School.

## II. Summary of Strengths and Opportunities for Improvement

The chart below summarizes the identified areas of strength and opportunities for improvement, which are further detailed in the report.

Section	Strengths	Opportunities for Improvement
<b>II. Characteristics of Students with Disabilities</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Inclusive Settings.</b> ACPS students with disabilities are educated more frequently in an inclusive general education setting and less frequently in a separate setting.</li> <li>• <b>Separate Settings.</b> ACPS consistently was below the state target for students educated less than 40% in the general education setting.</li> <li>• <b>Dropout and Graduation Rates.</b> ACPS had a lower dropout rate than other comparable divisions and the state average. In 2017, ACPS graduated a slightly higher percentage of students with an IEP than the state average.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Annual Determination.</b> ACPS received an overall “Needs Assistance” determination from VDOE for both 2014-15 and 2015-16.</li> <li>• <b>Significant Disproportionality.</b> VDOE determined that ACPS has significant disproportionality in the area of African American students with an emotional disability.</li> <li>• <b>Achievement Gaps.</b> There are significant achievement gaps between students with disabilities and their non-disabled peers in reading/ELA and math.</li> </ul>
<b>III. Multi-Tiered System of Supports</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>ACPS MTSS 2015 framework.</b> The Division created an intervention framework that it has been implementing in schools for several years.</li> <li>• <b>Cross-Departmental Leadership.</b> The initiative is currently co-owned by the Curriculum and Instruction and Student Services Departments.</li> <li>• <b>Staff Survey.</b> 74% of staff agree that their schools use the MTSS framework with fidelity.</li> <li>• <b>Technology Use.</b> UDL principles are embedded in technology tools and available to all students; assistive technology is widely used for SWDs.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>School Variances.</b> MTSS implementation varies greatly between schools. Some schools are farther along with it, depending on if they took part in trainings or used Response to Intervention (RTI) in the past.</li> <li>• <b>Universal Design for Learning (UDL).</b> UDL does not appear to be a widely understood or implemented concept in ACPS, though OSI, in conjunction with other offices, has conducted trainings on the topic in the past.</li> </ul>
<b>IV. Referral and Eligibility</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Staff Survey.</b> 87% of staff agree that prior to a referral for special</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Early Intervention/Child Find Outreach.</b> These activities are</li> </ul>

Section	Strengths	Opportunities for Improvement
	<p>education, the impact of a child’s native language is considered.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Parent Survey.</b> 89% of parents overall responded that ACPS explained to them why their children need special education services in a way that they understood.</li> <li>• <b>English Learner (EL) Guidance.</b> ACPS developed guidance to help school teams appropriately assess and support EL students with disabilities.</li> </ul>	<p>difficult in ACPS’s multicultural community where families speak many languages and may not know how to access available child find, referrals, screenings, evaluations, or parent services.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Cultural Diversity Support.</b> Focus groups expressed concern about the number of children of color or culturally and linguistically diverse that are referred to the CST and determined eligible for services.</li> </ul>
<p><b>V. Teaching, Learning, and Social Emotional Support for Students with Disabilities</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Co-Teaching.</b> ACPS has made significant investments in, and has prioritized, co-teaching.</li> <li>• <b>Staff Survey.</b> 92% of all staff agree that their schools provide an inclusive environment for SWDs, and 95% agree that instructional staff at their schools treat students with disabilities with respect.</li> <li>• <b>Interventions.</b> There is clear guidance as to how each intervention should be used to support SWDs in Tiers II and III.</li> <li>• <b>Citywide Classes.</b> They are well resourced and supported from OSI.</li> <li>• <b>Assistive Technology.</b> Low and high-tech devices are available and well-utilized to support students.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Academic Optimism and High Expectations.</b> ACPS needs to further cultivate the idea that all students can achieve at high levels, regardless of their disability or other factors.</li> <li>• <b>Co-Teaching.</b> Site-based management has had a significant effect on special education management, programming, performance, accountability, and co-teaching outcomes.</li> <li>• <b>Specially Designed Instruction.</b> Though a great emphasis has been placed on providing guidance, resources, and training to build capacity for the implementation of SDI, it is still an emerging practice.</li> </ul>
<p><b>VI. Support for Teaching and Learning</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Governance Meetings.</b> The Executive Directors of the Offices of Elementary and Secondary School Instruction facilitate monthly cross-departmental governance meetings at five schools with school-based administrators and their leadership teams.</li> <li>• <b>Professional Development.</b> OSI offers an extensive amount of</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Site-based Management.</b> There is confusion around, and inconsistency of, service delivery and no clear guidance about the role of OSI and schools in managing special education.</li> <li>• <b>Cross-departmental Collaboration.</b> OSI would benefit from strengthened partnerships with the offices of Student Services, Elementary and</li> </ul>



Section	Strengths	Opportunities for Improvement
<b>VII. Collaboration, Communication, and Parent Engagement</b>	professional development to school staff.	Secondary Instruction, and Human Resources. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Retention.</b> Only half of ACPS staff agree that the Division is effective at retaining staff.</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Staff Survey.</b> 94% of staff agree parents are given a meaningful opportunity to participate in IEP meetings.</li> <li>• <b>Parent Engagement.</b> SEAC and other parent groups are actively engaged in the Division's special education initiatives.</li> <li>• <b>Parent Resource Center.</b> The PRC provides useful trainings and resources for parents of students with disabilities.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Equity.</b> Parents feel that services are not available on an equitable basis. Those who are prepared to advocate and research are believed to have greater access to services for their children.</li> <li>• <b>Staff Survey.</b> Only 54% of staff agree that they feel informed about the Division's special education initiatives.</li> <li>• <b>Progress Updates.</b> Only 65% of parents feel that they are getting adequate information about their child's performance.</li> </ul>

### III. Detailed Summary of Recommendations

PCG saw ample evidence that ACPS has a solid foundation on which to build. As noted throughout this report, the Division has many notable strengths including its significant commitment to inclusive practices, its passionate and knowledgeable staff, and its willingness to undertake this review as part of a continuous improvement cycle. These strengths have grown as a result of ACPS's investments in training and resources and its focus on providing high quality services and support to students with disabilities.

However, without a sense of urgency and an unrelenting commitment to implementing the recommendations in this report with fidelity, the Division will stagnate. Enacting change, the kind of change that will fundamentally improve outcomes of all students, and especially those with disabilities, requires focus, a strong vision from the superintendent and enacted by senior leadership staff, an appropriate allocation of resources, mandated professional development, and clear, non-negotiable, accountability measures. This type of reform requires the involvement and commitment of every staff person and a willingness to establish high expectations for students with disabilities. PCG has every reason to believe that ACPS is fully committed in carrying forward the recommendations in this report, will actively engage a wide range of stakeholders with the planning process, and is positioned for an upward trajectory.

The recommendations and action steps below address each of the components necessary to ensure that special education instruction/services identified for students are appropriate and meaningfully delivered, and that human and physical materials are available to provide identified instruction/services, expectations are clear, training is available, and ACPS/school leaders are accountable for their practices. When these issues are addressed, special education programming will be more appropriate and effective. The action steps listed under each recommendation below are organized in a manner that provides a comprehensive view of the activities required to initiate comprehensive change, and are not listed in priority order. Although components of the action steps can be implemented within a shorter timeframe, full-scale implementation of the recommendations may take three-to-five years.

## 1. Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS)

- *Build on the MTSS process & curricular frameworks to develop/implement a unified and clear structure for **academic achievement, positive behavior, and social/emotional learning** for ALL students that incorporates a **universal design for learning***
- *Continue to invest in **Division-level and school-level training**, and capacity building to scale up and **improve fidelity of implementation***

### Action Steps

- 1) **Strengthen Core Instruction.** Focus on analyzing the expectations, quality and provision of strong and rigorous core instruction to all students first which involves changing the general education teachers' culture and perspectives.
- 2) **Reinstitute the MTSS Multidisciplinary Division Leadership Team.** Reinstitute the Division-level leadership team to review, update, operationalize and monitor the fidelity of implementation of the evidence-based practices delineated in the ACPS MTSS 2015 Framework.
- 3) **Provide Guidance on and Practices Delineated in ACPS MTSS 2015.** Update them so that they reflect that all ACPS schools must provide proactive, preventative services for struggling students of color as well as those that are culturally and linguistically diverse.
- 4) **Develop Training Plans, Course Components and Methods of Delivery.** The MTSS Division-level leadership team must also review and update the training plan, course components and methods for delivery to better support school cadres build internal capacity to implement practices with fidelity.
- 5) **Implement Best Practices for MTSS.** Incorporate best practices by providing cross-disciplinary teaming, access to professional development and including consistent language and practices.
- 6) **Consider Cultural Context of the Progress and Problem-Solving Processes.** Consider the implications of race, class, and culture constructs when developing student intervention plans. Be willing to abandon deficit models that emphasize students and/or families as the sole, inherent source of low student achievement outcomes.
- 7) **Monitor the SST Process.** Develop transparent and widely accessible key performance indicators (KPIs), data collection systems, and analysis to enable Division leadership at the central office and schools to review MTSS implementation and student growth, identify patterns, solve problems, and make informed decisions. Review and expand upon rubrics currently in use to have a universal set of documents that are relevant based on grade levels, and types of schools.
- 8) **Schedule Time to Meet, Problem Solve, Review Progress Monitoring Data and Provide Interventions.** Ensure principals schedule time for SST Teams to implement the problem-solving process, meet and review progress monitoring and intervention data, be empowered and be held accountable on adjusting school schedules to provide the necessary supports for all struggling students.
- 9) **Ensure Accountability.** Include in the Division's system of accountability measurable expectations for implementing the core curriculum and MTSS framework. Establish, communicate, support, and monitor clear expectations and "non-negotiables," establishing clear lines of accountability and responsibility across departments and schools, aligning them with relevant standards and guidance. Incorporate the expectations into administrator, principal,

teacher, paraprofessional aides, and related-service personnel evaluations. Have schools incorporate activities into their school improvement plans that would enable them to meet these expectations.

- 10) **Implement Universal Design for Learning.** Provide clear guidance and mandatory training for all Division teachers on the principles of UDL and how these principles can be applied in the development of curriculum, instruction and assessment. A greater understanding and implementation of UDL can make learning accessible to all students and can help close achievement gaps between students with disabilities and their non-disabled peers.

## 2. Special Education Referral, Assessment, and Eligibility Practices

- Develop a **systematic data analysis process** for analyzing special education referral, assessment, and eligibility practices in order to develop meaningful strategies to affect change
- Monitor **data trends over time** to determine patterns, use these data to: inform improvement strategies and consistency and appropriateness of practices (specifically for students in high-risk areas **to prevent over-identification**)

### Action Steps

#### 1) Early Childhood

- a) Continue to improve public awareness of EI and ECS with a lens of meeting the needs of the underserved in the multicultural and linguistically diverse school community.
- b) Continue to review existing referral, screening, and evaluation practices to determine if these are both effective and efficient to adequately address the needs for culturally and linguistic diverse children for EI and ECSE.
- c) Examine current screening practices including locations where screenings and evaluations are conducted, and the personnel dedicated to support these processes to strengthen equity and access, transition between IDEA Part B and Part C, to link children struggling with needed EI and ECSE services.

#### 2) Special Education

- a) Make sure that general education interventions according to the step-by-step process delineated in the Division's handbooks supporting the implementation of MTSS are being implemented with fidelity throughout the Division.
- b) Make sure school level teams collect information from a wide range of sources so the result of the assessment team's integration and interpretation can be as unbiased as possible. Making sure to consider language, cultural background, and MTSS.
- c) Review referral, eligibility and placement data at the school level to discern patterns of over-representation as well as under-representation. Being aware of these patterns in schools can help administrators, teachers and assessment teams avoid similar pitfalls.

#### 3) English Learners

- a) Constitute a committee comprised of members of the EL and OSI offices, school practitioners and parent representative to review and update the Bilingual Team Handbook "Guidelines for Intervention and Assessment."
- b) Ensure that the guidelines clearly specify the exit criteria for English language support programs for English Learner students in special education.
- c) Disseminate the updated manual to all Division practitioners through a comprehensively planned and supported roll-out.
- d) Provide ongoing professional development to all educators responsible for implementing these guidelines to support the fidelity of Division practices and to all staff engaged in the evaluation process to address ELs' language acquisition and its consideration during special education evaluations.
- e) Implement practices to engage and involve parents of ELs and children with disabilities who are also English Learners (e.g., home language surveys or questionnaires).

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- f) Implement strategies to engage native and non-native English speaking parents of children who are ELs so they can meaningfully participate as referenced in the practices below:
    - i) Post signs in public areas in several languages
    - ii) Employ bilingual staff proficient in the appropriate languages spoken in the community.
    - iii) Translate all related forms, notices, consent documents, and evaluations, including the ISP, IEP 504 Plan or EL Plan, as well as other instructional, informational, or key documents into the native language of the parent and provide oral interpreter assistance with documents for those whose language does not exist in written form.
    - iv) Use web-based IEP management technology to translate all IEP related documents, forms, notices and consents in real-time, providing these crucial educational documents before, during, and after IEP meetings, engaging families meaningfully in the special education process.
- 4) **Section 504**
- a) Continue to refine and update the ACPS 504 Guidance Handbook annually.
  - b) Continue to train and create opportunities for all practitioners to understand and implement these procedures as delineated in the ACPS 504 Guidance Handbook.
  - c) Update the monitoring procedures to ensure that general education teachers are implementing 504 plans with fidelity.
  - d) Continue to review the data of students with IHP to determine if they would benefit from the supports of a 504 Plan.
  - e) Review and analyze the results of the internal 504 audit being implemented and develop a plan to address the findings.
  - f) Consider allocating resources to support professional development that assists staff in making appropriate accommodations that will benefit all students.

### 3. Academic Optimism, Rigor, and High Expectations

- *Build a system-wide culture of **academic optimism and high expectations** for ALL students*
- *Create an **unrelenting expectation regarding instruction** that clearly communicates to schools, and the broader community that a key focus of the Office of Specialized Instruction is to ensure that students with disabilities make significant progress, to the extent possible, in the general education curriculum, receive rigorous standards-aligned instruction, and experience the high quality delivery of interventions, differentiation, accommodations, modifications and specially designed instruction in every class*

#### Action Steps

- 1) **Build Structures and Processes.** Emphasize in the training and support provided to principals the importance of building structures and processes in schools to increase **academic optimism** and nurture **a climate of acceptance, high expectations and achievement for all students.**
- 2) **Set Expectations for Organizing Schools.** Set expectations for principals to organize their schools to increase academic optimism and develop structures and processes that support and enable teaching and learning for all students.
- 3) **Build Master Schedules that Enable Collaboration.** Require schools to prioritize creating master schedules that enable general and special education teacher collaboration, joint planning, and professional development.
- 4) **Elevate Rigor.** Ensure that all professional development designed and delivered elevates rigor for all students and is focused on best practices for implementing strategies to motivate learners, sets high expectations, provide necessary supports, address differentiation and demonstrate mastery of learning.
- 5) **Provide Outcome Driven Professional Development.** Design all professional development so that it is a coherent, relevant and useful professional learning process that is measurable by indicators and provides professional learning and ongoing support to transfer that learning to practice.
- 6) **Implement Evidenced-Based Practices that Enable Student Success.** Implement evidence-based instructional practices that will impact increasing expectations, providing high levels of engagement, and integrating appropriate support and scaffolding to increase students' motivation.
- 7) **Measure Instructional Beliefs and Practices.** Conduct an annual survey to measure teachers' instructional beliefs and practices and analyze by school and role. Develop a plan for each school site to improve its results over time.

## 4. Inclusive Practices

- **Build upon ACPS's commitment to co-teaching** by continuing to provide professional development and coaching to improve collaboration and implement high yield co-teaching models
- **Establish policies and procedures** that clarify school level non-negotiable scheduling strategies, responsibilities for actively supervising and evaluating teaching teams for consistency and high-quality practice, and institutionalizing high yield co-teaching expectations

### Action Steps

- 1) **Implement Written Guidelines with Fidelity.** Refine current written guidelines, and consolidate guidance where appropriate, to provide clear expectations and directions to all and provide an institutionalized record to which all staff, including new teachers, can refer and be held accountable.
- 2) **Develop Scheduling Guidelines.** Develop scheduling guidelines that can be accessed as a resource through Canvas on the Division's website to support inclusive practices in schools. Provide ongoing training and support to schools to use and implement these guidelines. Consider clustering classes according to content area of instruction and assigning special education teachers as co-teachers to support students aligned to their content area of expertise. Provide guidance on when, where, and a minimum length of time co-teaching teams should collaborate.
- 3) **Provide Consistent, On-going, Mandatory Professional Development.** Professional development serves as the basis for creating common understanding and shared experiences among all staff and provides a foundation upon which other systems change supports can be anchored. Build upon the current professional development plan specific to co-teaching and ensure it is embedded in the larger Division-wide training plan. Create multiple avenues for this training, including more traditional workshops, job embedded coaching (i.e., observing and providing feedback to peers as they are conducting co-teaching lessons), in addition to expanding the cohort trainings.
- 4) **Create Effective Co-Teaching Teams.** When co-teaching teams have spent time to develop effective communication, have established a cohesive working partnership, and are seeing positive results in student achievement, administrators must seriously consider the investment in time and effort that it takes to create an effective partnership and seek ways to maintain these teams. Develop a plan to enable successful co-teaching teams, whenever possible, to remain together from year to year. Conduct a review of co-teaching teams annually to ascertain the success of the partnership and make changes to staffing pairs when needed.
- 5) **Create Accountability Structures.** Include in the Division's system of accountability measurable expectations for implementing co-teaching. Establish, communicate, support, and monitor clear expectations and "non-negotiables," establishing clear lines of accountability and responsibility across departments and schools, aligning them with relevant standards and guidance. Incorporate the expectations into administrator, principal, teacher, paraprofessional aides, and related-service personnel evaluations. Have schools incorporate activities into their school improvement plans that would enable them to meet these expectations.
- 6) **Develop Effectiveness Measures.** Develop a process to collect effectiveness measures on co-teaching models of support. Use the OSI co-teaching walkthrough tools to inform practice and crosswalk data to carefully consider how these practices impact to the Division's objectives and address student needs.



## 5. Specially Designed Instruction (SDI) and Targeted Interventions

- Use a variety of **quantitative and qualitative assessment data** to determine if interventions and SDI are being implemented with fidelity and use these data to determine the extent to which students with disabilities division-wide **are increasing** their achievement, social/emotional development, and positive behavior under the current configuration SDI & interventions
- Assess the **fidelity of implementation and effectiveness of SDI and targeted interventions for EACH student with a disability** by analyzing data
- Provide teachers and IEP teams with **ongoing training** so that they have the tools necessary to determine progress on IEP goals
- Review guidance and tools currently in use **to establish expectations** regarding regular data collection, problem-solving, and changes to instruction necessary to support student achievement and social/emotional growth

### Action Steps

- 1) **Enhance SDI Guidance.** Enhance current SDI guidance and resources available through Canvas to help teachers and administrators make stronger connections on where SDI is addressed in the IEP process and how to utilize the information to inform planning and instruction for co-teaching.
- 2) **Seamlessly Integrate High-Yield Co-Teaching Practices and SDI.** Place a stronger emphasis in the training, support and resources guiding the provision of specially designed instruction to support co-teaching.
- 3) **Design SDI with Results in Mind.** Train co-teachers in how to design, plan, implement and assess lessons for the students they are supporting using SDI from IEPs.
- 4) **Develop Effectiveness Measures Using SDI and Co-Teaching Walkthrough Tools.** Develop a process to collect effectiveness measures on the use of SDI during co-teaching. Use the OSI co-teaching and SDI walkthrough tools to develop the measures that inform practice, analyze the trend data to carefully consider how these practices, when paired together, impact the Division's objectives and address student needs, outcomes and results.
- 5) **Elevate Importance of SDI in IEP Training.** Ensure that all IEP training includes a strong component on how to address the students' need for SDI, document it, implement with fidelity, monitor, report on progress and is used to inform planning and instruction.
- 6) **Monitor SDI Effectiveness.** Develop a self-assessment tool to help IEP teams monitor SDI for effectiveness and provide training to strengthen compliance and practices.
- 7) **Communicate SDI Progress to Parents.** Consider developing guidance for IEP teams and case managers on how SDI progress is best communicated to parents. Require IEP teams to conduct progress monitoring.

## 6. Leadership and Accountability

- *Develop a multifaceted set of actions to specify how ACPS will incorporate **measures of accountability for schools and central office leaders** that are designed to ensure the delivery of a world-class education for all students*
- *Develop measures to drive **key strategies** for positive changes in behavior, processes, and culture, while **encouraging continuous improvement and innovation***

### Action Steps

- 1) **Establish Special Education Expectations.** From the Superintendent's and Chief Academic Officer's Offices, empower the Executive Director of Specialized Instruction with the authority to lead the Division's special education programming. Such authority means the Executive Director is in charge of special education for the division; he/she is responsible for implementing equitable and consistent use of resources, overseeing and implementing special education mandates coming from the state, ensuring that the program is adequately and equitably funded, and for supporting schools with sufficient and appropriate staff development. Additionally, the Director should have the license to initiate and lead mandatory site or Division-wide programming and direct special education decisions at the site-level.
- 2) **Develop Guidelines.** Be clear about the role of central office in supporting the learning of students receiving special education: schools must be responsible and accountable for the teaching and learning process while the OSI's role is to provide adequate resources, clear guidance, and professional development, and support schools in the consistent and effective implementation of programs and services.
- 3) **Revise Special Education Manual.** Consolidate existing guidance into an interactive, web-based ACPS special education manual to support user-friendly and transparent access to procedures/practices relevant to the management/operation of special education and to which school staff can be held accountable for implementing.
  - a. **Public Access.** Provide public access to the revised manual by posting the document on the ACPS special education webpage, and provide links to available on-line resources. Train staff on it and regularly update it with current information and resources.
  - b. **Content.** Include criteria, procedures and practices for each area relevant to the implementation of these recommendations, e.g., criteria for child find; referring students for a special education evaluation; inclusive instruction for preschool children; support for on-going needs of preschool children and school-aged students who are referred but are not evaluated or not qualified for services; expectations and tools to facilitate communication to teachers regarding the IEP-specified needs of students in each of their classes; participation of general education teachers in IEP meetings; role of various IEP participants and general/special education personnel in various circumstances, etc.
  - c. **Collaboration with Stakeholders.** Collaborate with preschool personnel, principals, other school-based groups, and SEAC representatives to consider information and resource links that would be useful for each relevant group to include in the manual.
  - d. **Parents/Families.** In collaboration with local parent and advocacy groups, plan face-to-face training and on-line modules to provide parents an understanding of the information in the manual. If feasible, publish a modified document appropriate for parents and supplement it with one-page brochures to further access to this information. Ensure training is accessible to parents with diverse linguistic needs and sensory limitations.

## 7. Inter-Departmental Collaboration

- *To leverage their collective resources and support to schools, **strengthen the collaboration** between OSI and other departments, specifically: 1) Human Resources, 2) Student Services, Alternative Programs, and Equity, 3) Elementary and Secondary Instruction, and 4) English Language Services.*
- **Establish standing cross-functional work groups** to meet on a regular schedule to jointly address Division processes and drive success in practices.

### Action Steps

- 1) **Identify Joint Initiatives.** Identify the areas of work that the Specialized Instruction office has in common with Human Resources, Student Services, Elementary and Secondary Instruction, and English Language Services (and referenced throughout this report), and establish respective responsibilities and collaboration required to leverage their collective resources.
- 2) **Establish Routine Meetings.** Establish a schedule for routine, collaborative meetings between OSI and these other departments, including the individuals necessary to share information, problem-solve, and resolve issues.
- 3) **Communicate and Develop Collaborative Decision Making.** Establish a consistent, collaborative, and integrative approach towards improvement by jointly setting goals for initiatives and creating cross-functional workgroups.
- 4) **Monitor Progress.** Set goals for all cross-departmental initiatives and determine key performance indicators (KPIs) to measure progress made on them.

## 8. Staff Recruitment, Retention, and Morale

— *Improve the Division's human capital system by:*

- **devoting more time and resources to intentional recruitment**, including performance measures in the application and selection processes;
- *providing new teachers, related service providers, and paraprofessionals with opportunities to build their skills and **gradually assume increased responsibility**;*
- *offering **new staff opportunities and time to grow**; and*
- *implementing **professional learning systems** that support continuous growth.*

### Action Steps

- 1) **Improve Retention Rates.** Review the Division's recruitment and hiring processes and develop a plan to improve retention rates for special education teachers, related service providers, and paraprofessionals. Monitor retention/data on a quarterly basis. Conduct staff focus groups of new teachers (1-5 years), senior teachers (6-10 years), and veteran teachers (11+ years) to further understand the challenges they face at their specific stage of teaching and what factors need to be in place for them to stay in their positions.
- 2) **Explore Incentives.** Explore the possibility of creating incentives (e.g., financial, supportive working conditions, induction programs, professional development, mentoring and support) to attract and retain highly effective special education teachers in the neediest schools. Consider providing signing bonuses and stipends to attract and keep special education teachers in the profession (condition based on number of years of employment).
- 3) **Rethink Recruitment.** Consider providing both intrinsic and extrinsic rewards for teachers when designing recruitment programs and policies.
- 4) **Assess Teacher Assignments.** Ensure that teacher recruits hired and placed are the right fit for the school.
- 5) **Create Partnerships with Universities.** Partner with institutions of higher learning to better prepare future and existing special education teachers and paraeducators to become teachers.
- 6) **Develop Alternative Certification Programs.** Continue developing/supporting high-quality in-division alternative certification programs for critical shortage areas. If possible, fund the participants with a condition of X years of employment.
- 7) **Grow Your Own.** Grow your own teachers and paraprofessionals by providing them ongoing job-embedded professional development
- 8) **Create Incentives to Add-on Certification.** Provide incentives for out of field teachers to take the test to add special education certification and/or if already a special education teacher to add content area certification
- 9) **Support High Need Schools.** Consider placing interns for some of their field experiences in high-needs schools to develop confidence in practice in addressing the needs of the struggling learners.

## 9. Fiscal

- *Analyze allocation of personnel to ensure staff who support students with disabilities are **employed in sufficient numbers** and that **adequate resources are available** to meet student needs*
- *Continue to ensure that special education funding for schools and central office, takes into consideration:*
  - *the severity of student needs and types of support services needed*
  - *implementation of a full continuum of service delivery models*
  - *coaching support needed for school-based staff, and*
  - *compliance with special education legal requirements*

### Action Steps

- 1) **Conduct an In-Depth Analysis of Staffing Allocations.** Create a workgroup with representatives from school and central office leadership (including Special Education and Finance) to evaluate the current special education school-based funding model and assess the extent to which current staffing supports the intended outcomes of effective service delivery and the continued enhancement of co-teaching. If revisions are necessary, engage a broad group of stakeholders to develop and review them. Review personnel ratios and caseload data included in this study, reallocate or add resources to ensure that ACPS expectations regarding the provision of SDI/related services are reasonably capable of being met. Make the revised formula transparent and evaluate needed changes for the short and long term.
  - a. **Related Service Providers.** For speech/language pathologists, occupational therapists and physical therapists, consider how equitable caseloads can be maintained while improving stable school assignments; and establish expectations for collecting data and monitoring/showing student progress.
- 2) **Schedule Efficiently and Monitor Caseloads of School Personnel.** Maximize the use of the personnel resources available in schools to provide instruction and related services to students with disabilities by scheduling, monitoring and adjusting the caseloads to better utilize the existing resources with greater efficiency.
- 3) **Add Instructional Specialist Position.** At minimum, add 1.0 Instructional Specialist position to focus on: best instructional practices in ECSE classrooms, transition from ECSE to kindergarten process and decision making, supporting schools/teachers to ensure successful kindergarten transitions, and supporting needs identified for additional support in all elementary schools.
- 4) **Jointly Establish a CCEIS funding plan.** Determine how funds will be used more effectively to produce improved student outcomes and reduce the over identification of African American students with an emotional disability. Create a monitoring plan to assess, on an ongoing basis, if the funding allocation is having an impact and make adjustments as necessary. Ensure the plan is agreed upon and coordinated between OSI, Student Services, and Finance.
- 5) **Assess Cost Drivers.** Establish standards and protocols to monitor all high cost expenditures and costs that have been trending upward.
  - a. Develop and use standard reports that will help track trends in special education spending (e.g. Membership Enrollment Count, Personnel/Staffing, Allocations, Transportation, Private Placements, Litigation and IDEA Grant Management).
  - b. Eliminate multiple entry points for special education data in technology systems for cleaner data and help minimize errors that could impact special education funding.

- c. Develop internal processes for meeting with OSI Executive Director to review all budgets and expenditures for special education across multiple funding sources, plan for each year's cycle of IDEA entitlement grant submission and develop joint strategies to effectively manage and monitor costs.

## 10. Culture, Equity, and Parent Engagement

- *Identify and provide **systemic supports necessary for all students who are struggling in school***
- *Strengthen links between school and home to help **culturally and linguistically diverse parents** help their children learn and gain equal access to all ACPS educational programs and services*
- *Enhance parent and community engagement by creating **warm, respectful and welcoming environments** and be flexible in accommodating spectrum of family needs*
- *Respond to the **strengths in the diversity** to create a culture that promotes the **successful inclusion and integration of students with disabilities** and other underserved, at-risk and economically disadvantaged students*

### Action Steps

- 1) **Establish a Division Special Education Family Engagement Team.** Establishing a team of division- and school-level educators, staff members, family members, parents of students with disabilities, and community representatives for the planning process enables the Division to benefit from the collective perspectives they bring.
  - a. **Create a Vision Statement for Family Engagement.** Discuss core beliefs about family engagement and create a vision statement that expresses agreed-upon ideals. It can be shared with other stakeholders to build family engagement support across the Division.
  - b. **Develop a Plan to Strengthen Trusting Relationships.** Develop a plan that includes the following objectives (and includes others that ACPS identifies):
    - i. All staff learn about the assets and challenges among families in the school community through home visits.
    - ii. Teachers and staff listen without judgment and establish two-way communication channels with family members.
    - iii. Teachers across the Division greet families and students before school or at beginning of class, in their native languages when possible.
    - iv. Teachers make regular phone calls home with positive messages and ask for feedback from families.
  - c. **Develop Plan for Strengthening Connections to Student Learning.** Develop a plan that includes the following objectives (and includes others that ACPS identifies):
    - i. Division and school staff understand the barriers to their families in getting children to school and they engage in meaningful dialogue with families about community resources and the importance of attendance.
    - ii. Teachers hold class meetings to discuss with families how progress on English language acquisition is monitored and how families can support their English Learner student with a disability.
    - iii. Staff can engage in meaningful dialogue with families about how they can support their English Learner student and/or student with an IEP.

**Evaluate Family Engagement Annually.** Evaluate the implementation and impact of family engagement activities. Review the action plans for strengthening trusting relationships and strengthening connections to student learning with the family engagement committee.



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