

Remarks to ACPS School Board
November 9, 2017

My name is Ellen Taverna. I'm Vice-Chair of the ACPS Special Education Advisory Committee (SEAC) and I have a Kindergartener attending Lyles-Crouch Traditional Academy. I'm also here tonight to request that the School Board approve a proposal to expand the current scope of the Special Education Evaluation and extend the school observations and student shadowing to include the remaining eight Alexandria schools.

SEAC is thrilled to have the Special Education Evaluation underway. In following the ACPS 2020 strategic plan of "Every Student Succeeds," SEAC's primary goal is to support the school board in this endeavor and ensure that it has the information necessary to help all students, with or without disabilities, succeed. We think with this Evaluation we are on the right path to do just that.

However, after several meetings with representatives from the Public Consulting Group (PCG), SEAC members and ACPS staff, I believe we can make the current evaluation process even better by expanding its scope to include all 15 Alexandria schools. I am concerned that by not making the adjustments we seek now; the full value of this review could be compromised.

This is our chance to take a deep dive into what is working and what is not for special education services in Alexandria schools.

As a new parent of a student in the Alexandria Public School system, I have to admit I have at times been overwhelmed at what it takes to navigate special education services for my child. My son Luke has autism spectrum disorder and started in ACPS in the Jefferson-Houston pre-K class. Even with dedicated teachers, it continues to be a constant struggle for my husband and I to make sure Luke is receiving the best services and education possible. From having to seek a private evaluation for my son to be considered for occupational therapy that was much needed, to fighting for him to have more push in time in his general ed class, it's a daily battle. One that I'm committed to do, not just for my son but because I love living in this city and I want to see all our diverse student body thrive. That's why I joined SEAC and what's why I started a Special Education Committee at Lyles-Crouch. And I know so many other parents that feel the same way.

But parent engagement and committed teachers can only go so far and simply isn't enough to ensure our kids' success in school.

There are systemic problems that students with disabilities are facing in Alexandria public schools right now and we must better understand the full scope of these problems to adequately address them. Unlike Fairfax and other neighboring communities, we live in a small school district and only reviewing a small sample of schools may not give us all the information we need.

Each Alexandria school has their own autonomy and independent microcultures, so we need to be looking at how each individual school operates and how this impacts the ways students with disabilities are learning. We should be investigating closely whether each school is responsive to the needs of all their students with disabilities in areas of instructional services, staffing, culture and communications. Do the special education students feel valued, cared for and respected at their school? What types of interventions and supports are available at each school and how are they implemented? We think examining **ALL 15** Alexandria schools in this way will give us a clearer picture and focus on how to best solve our problems and replicate the solutions that are working in our schools.

Ensuring this evaluation is as comprehensive and robust as possible, will put us in a better position to think courageously about how schools should operate for every student that comes through the classroom door and establish the appropriate tools, supports, interventions, and social culture needed for all ACPS students to ultimately achieve social, emotional and academic success.

Thank you.