

**ALEXANDRIA CITY PUBLIC SCHOOLS
SPECIAL EDUCATION ADVISORY COMMITTEE**

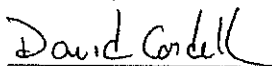
June 19, 2007

Mr. Arthur Peabody
Chair, Alexandria School Board
Alexandria City Public Schools
2000 North Beauregard Street
Suite 200
Alexandria, VA 22311

Dear Mr. Peabody:

Please find attached a copy of the annual report of the ACPS Special Education Advisory Committee for the 2006-2007 School Year. We have appreciated the opportunity to serve the School Board on special education issues over this past school year. Feel free to contact us with any questions you might have about the annual report.

Sincerely,



David Cordell,
SEAC Co-Chair



Jonathan Friedman
SEAC Co-Chair

Alexandria City Public Schools
Special Education Advisory Committee
2006-2007 Annual Report
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Special education in Alexandria has entered a period of transition. As SEAC noted in its report to the School Board last year, there have been many challenges facing special education in ACPS, including poor academic achievement, low test scores, and the absence of a comprehensive plan for addressing these problems. Test scores for special needs students continue to lag behind the rest of the state as well as other school systems in Northern Virginia. While test results do not tell the whole story, persistently low scores do highlight the achievement gap for students with disabilities. (The test results for students with disabilities are detailed in Exhibit A, a presentation made by Monte Dawson, ACPS Executive Director for Monitoring and Evaluation, to SEAC in February 2007.)

To its credit, and after many years of neglect, ACPS is starting to face these challenges in a meaningful, constructive, and serious way. SEAC thanks Superintendent Perry for her invitation for SEAC to be part of the interview process to find a new Director of Student Services and commends her and the School Board on the appointment last summer of Dr. Michael Romanelli for that position. Dr. Romanelli has brought much-needed energy and direction to the job, and has made a significant effort to improve communication with parents of special needs students, SEAC, and other members of the special education community in Alexandria.

SEAC has held a number of meetings this year on the various initiatives Dr. Romanelli has launched to improve special education programs. These initiatives include, among other things, reviewing the curricula for special needs students; training teachers and staff on improving data collection methods used to develop student IEPs and monitor progress on those IEPs; training teachers and staff on writing better IEPs; initiating a pilot program at Jefferson Houston aimed at promoting the use of positive behavior strategies; and beginning to ensure that appropriate interventions are in place before students are referred for special education services. (The agendas and minutes for two of these meetings are attached as Exhibit B.)

SEAC also applauds Dr. Romanelli's willingness to conduct an internal evaluation of special education services as outlined in his presentation to the School Board's Curriculum Committee on January 8, 2007 (see Exhibit C). This marks the first comprehensive internal review of special education in Alexandria in at least a decade. SEAC is hopeful that it will generate useful information on what is working and what is not working in ACPS and what changes need to be made to improve the academic performance of students with disabilities. SEAC also notes that ACPS had commissioned a private consultant over one year ago to review the literacy programs for special needs students in ACPS (in response, in part, to the poor test scores for such students), but the review has yet to be completed. SEAC urges ACPS to finish this audit as promptly as possible and share the findings with SEAC and the public.

SEAC is supportive of the special education reforms now being implemented in ACPS. These reforms are long overdue and provide an important first step in bridging the achievement gap for special needs students. By the same token, SEAC urges the School Board to continue to monitor

progress on these various initiatives and ensure there is the necessary follow-through from Central Office down to individual schools and classrooms. SEAC believes the Board's support and involvement is critical to the success of these efforts.

SEAC has identified a number of other issues, based on the findings of our meetings this school year, that merit further attention by ACPS. Those issues are detailed below:

Principal Accountability. SEAC continues to hear troubling reports from parents about treatment of special needs students in certain schools in ACPS. SEAC believes it is essential that Dr. Romanelli be involved in the evaluation of principals with respect to how they are implementing special needs programs in their schools. Moreover, principal evaluations should include, as a core component, an assessment of how such principals and their teachers implement IEPs. Principals must be held accountable for special education failures and rewarded for special education successes, and the annual evaluation process provides a mechanism for establishing such accountability. (See Exhibit D for agenda and minutes for SEAC meeting on principal accountability with Cathy David, ACPS Deputy Superintendent.)

Autism. ACPS is woefully unprepared for the numbers of students being diagnosed with autism. The prevalence of autism has increased in the U.S., and today an estimated 1 in every 150 children has autism. SEAC appreciates the efforts of our autism resource specialists. The presentation they gave to SEAC in March 2007 (attached as Exhibit E) indicates that ACPS is finally starting to plan a more comprehensive program for students with autism, including, for example, the creation of a year-round pre-school program in two schools for children with autism. However, SEAC is concerned about the length of time it will take to implement a comprehensive autism program (particularly given the growing number of students with autism); the need to implement proven research-based instructional practices in educating students with autism; and the need for specialized services for students with autism (as opposed to attempting to educate these students as part of a heterogeneous group of students with various, unrelated disabilities). Also, ACPS needs to continue to pursue policies aimed at ensuring that students with Asperger's Syndrome and other forms of high functioning autism are educated in the least restrictive classroom environment and that the behavioral and social support systems are in place to allow such students to succeed.

Teacher Recruitment and Retention. Teacher recruiting and retention are essential components of any effective special education program. There are many wonderful special education teachers in ACPS. SEAC hosted the 21st Harry Burke Awards for outstanding achievement in special education, one of the few area SEAC's to host such awards. (See Exhibit F for a copy of the program for the ceremony.) This year we had a record 19 nominees and we honored a winner in both the elementary and the secondary divisions. We also instituted a new award to honor a general education teacher who embraces inclusion in the classroom. To honor the work of our tireless parent resource coordinator, we named the award the Anne Lipnick Inclusion for All Award. However, SEAC continues to have concerns about teacher turnover. ACPS needs to do more to keep experienced special education teachers and focus on teacher training efforts of general education teachers, which is critical for inclusion to work.

Life Skills. SEAC remains concerned that the Life Skills classes in ACPS are inadequate. SEAC held a meeting on the Life Skills program in June 2007. A key finding from that meeting is that much more effort needs to be placed on preparing students in the Life Skills program for the workplace and ensuring that many more appropriate job opportunities exist for these students. Among other things, ACPS should explore the possibility of establishing a career center for students in the Life Skills program (similar to those in Arlington and Fairfax), as well as identifying more job sites for such students. Another finding from that meeting is that there are significant programmatic and instructional deficiencies in the current Life Skills program. For example, students with widely varying cognitive capabilities are typically taught together with generally low expectations for student achievement. Dr. Romanelli noted that differentiated curricula currently exist that are research-based and proven to be effective in teaching math and reading skills to students with mild and moderate mental retardation, and that he is starting to implement such differentiated curricula in the classroom. SEAC strongly supports these changes, but urges that further steps are taken to ensure that such differentiated curricula are actually being used -- and used appropriately -- in the classrooms. (See Exhibit G for agenda for meeting on Life Skills program.)

Student Services Web Site. SEAC notes that the information on the Student Services website regarding programs and services for special needs students and their families is out of date and not user friendly. SEAC urges that the website undergo a major overhaul in the next year to make more information available in a format that is easy to understand.

SEAC's membership has more than doubled in the last two years to 17 members. SEAC has reached out to widen its membership base to include parents of students with varying disabilities, from different ethnic backgrounds, and of different ages. SEAC is poised to continue to make a difference for students with disabilities and to be a voice for this oft-neglected group.

SEAC is also working collaboratively with other ACPS advisory groups to expand awareness of special education issues in the Alexandria community. For example, in May 2007, SEAC co-hosted a workshop with the TAG Advisory Committee on "twice exceptional students" -- *i.e.*, those students who may qualify for both gifted and special education services. The workshop featured a presentation by a nationally known expert on the education of such students, as well as a parent-student discussion panel. Over 70 people attended the event (including attendees from Fairfax and Arlington), and SEAC plans to do a followup regional event on this issue next school year. (The agenda for the workshop is attached at Exhibit H.)

This report concludes the co-chairmanship of David Cordell and Jonathan Friedman. We would like to thank the School Board and Superintendent Perry, as well as Anne Lipnick, Michael Romanelli, Jay Grymes, and other ACPS professional staff for their help and assistance during our term as co-chairs. We welcome Sandra Strachan-Vieira and Vickie Cattaneo as our co-chairs for the coming school year, and look forward to another productive year working with the School Board and ACPS under their leadership.

SEAC 2006-2007

David Cordell & Jonathan Friedman, SEAC Co-Chairs
Fiona McMahon & Sandra Strachan-Vieira, SEAC Secretaries

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Beatrice Berman
Michael Carrasco
Vickie Cattaneo
Joy Finnegan
Margaret Hagood
Laura Lantzy
Nancy A. McCormick
Deophia Newman
Crystal Prall
Peter Roff
Claritza Santiago
Arlyn Schlosberg
Lisa Ward