

Alexandria City Public Schools
Special Education Advisory Committee Report
2008 – 2009 Annual Report
June 29, 2009

Alexandria Special Education is in the third year of a transition period that began in school year 2006 – 2007 with the hiring of Dr. Michael Romanelli. SEAC is saddened by the departure of Dr. Michael Romanelli, who has been a positive force for change, but also welcomes Dr. Morton Sherman as the new ACPS Superintendent.

In school year 2008 – 2009 there were a number of milestone events for special education in Alexandria:

1) SEAC would like to commend the ACPS School Board for writing and approving four goals directed towards rectifying special education issues in ACPS. The goals addressed completing a comprehensive audit of special education services, addressing non-compliance issues, developing a monitoring system to verify implementation of IEPs and developing a plan to address the space needs of children who have been transported elsewhere. Also, SEAC thanks the School Board for including us as part of the Strategic Planning committee.

2) ACPS in July 2008 received a letter from the Virginia Department of Education stating ACPS was out of State and Federal legal compliance in their delivery of special education services. The receipt of this letter is indeed significant and areas of serious deficiencies that were identified include, but are not limited to: Least Restrictive Environment (LRE), lack of access to Career and Training opportunities, discipline procedures, appropriate identification, training, etc. In October 2008 ACPS submitted its Corrective Action Plan to VDOE and is working toward rectifying these issues. SEAC recognizes that these identified issues are in the process of being rectified but are concerned this effort does not have the full support of senior and mid-level central office staff as well as building administrators within ACPS.

3) In May 2009 the results of an audit conducted by the Virginia Association of School Superintendents (VASS) were made public. The report was commissioned to fulfill one of the aforementioned School Board goals. VASS cited several areas necessitating immediate improvement: accountability, lack of rigorous instruction, culture of low expectations for students with disabilities, continuum of services and professional development. ***However, on a multitude of levels, the VASS report was not comprehensive as the School Board goal required.*** In addition to not comprehensively evaluating special education programs, the parent group participants felt their input was not reflected in the report. ***Therefore, it is the opinion of SEAC that this goal, has not been met and requires additional work before it can be considered completed. Further, SEAC encourages the School Board to forward this goal to the next school year so that it may be fully completed.***

Despite the above milestones, SEAC meetings, reports and testimonies over the past years, many areas urgently need the long-term attention, planning and monetary resources from ACPS necessary to rectify previous inattention and low expectations for success. SEAC hopes all of the above milestones will serve as a springboard for the Superintendent, School Board and Central Office to improve not just the short and long-term outcomes for students with disabilities but all ACPS students. As ACPS's test scores, State Performance Plan indicators, VDOE Compliance Letter and VASS report all clearly indicate, ACPS still has a long way to go toward closing the achievement gap for students with disabilities.

SEAC held nine meetings this school year on a variety of topics we consider important to special education in Alexandria. Some topics are of long standing interest and others are newly identified. Topics SEAC covered this year are: ACPS School Budget, Virginia State Performance Plan, ACPS Corrective Action Plan, access to SOL and tutoring services for students with disabilities, Literacy, Math scores, Principal Accountability and the Annual State Plan. An additional, unplanned topic was ACPS utilization of the newly available Federal ARRA-Part B stimulus funds. SEAC continues to have concerns over the allocations of the stimulus funds. *Dr. Sherman has set aside a "pool" of \$600,000 – \$700,000 of stimulus funds to be allocated once the VASS report was concluded. SEAC awaits the School Board discussion of how to allocate those "pool" funds. The March 19, 2009 letter SEAC submitted to the School Board and its "wish list" contents are still applicable to the discussion.*

Based on the findings of these meetings and the aforementioned milestone events, SEAC has identified a number of issues that merit further attention by ACPS. They are as follows:

Principal Accountability

Year after year SEAC continues to receive complaints from parents regarding the treatment of special needs students in certain schools in ACPS. SEAC has been repeatedly advised that the ultimate IEP implementation responsibility for special needs students lies with the principal of each school. However, principals are still not directly evaluated on their performance where IEP implementation is concerned SEAC urges the School Board to take direct policy action by the start of this upcoming school year so that this long-standing issue may finally be resolved. Last school year 2008 – 2009, SEAC composed and voted on a principal accountability resolution and submitted it to the School Board. The resolution outlines the steps SEAC feels are necessary for principals to be held accountable for delivery of special education services within their building. Principals must be held accountable for special education failures as well as receive credit for the successes and the mechanism for establishing that accountability is their annual evaluation. *SEAC also believes that the Executive Director of Special Education needs to be involved in the annual evaluation of principals with respect to how they implement special education services within their school. Additionally, due to the pervasive, habituated and extensive compliance and instructional special education issues in Alexandria, SEAC believes the Executive Director of Special Education needs*

to report directly the Superintendent. Additionally, for the first time, ACPS has a Special Education Monitoring and Compliance Director. SEAC feels that as with corporate compliance positions, this position needs supervisory powers in order to be its most effective in achieving principal and administrator accountability.

Discipline and Behavior Management

SEAC, supported by State Performance data, the State Compliance letter and VASS report has continuously expressed concerns over the high rates of suspensions and expulsions of students with disabilities. These concerns, supported by a variety of data, show it is essential for ACPS to develop proactive, research based behavioral management programs and policies to deal with the interfering behaviors of special needs students and in particular, those whose disabilities have a significant behavioral component. Dr. Romanelli has been able to move forward in some schools with some support of various behavior management programs such as: Positive Behavior Support (PBS), Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) and data collection initiatives. However, more needs to be done and a system wide, long-term strategic plan needs to be developed to deal with these issues and the necessary staffing and funding to implement this plan must be provided.¹

Testing, Reading and Math Scores

For ACPS student's with disabilities, there is a persistent, multi-year achievement gap for SOL passing rates, reading and math scores, in comparison to the State scores and other jurisdictions in Northern Virginia. Programs for helping to close those multi-year achievement gaps for students with disabilities have been inconsistent at best. During the past year, Dr. Romanelli has also worked on other curriculum alternatives to close the achievement gap with some alternatives being implemented this year and some scheduled for next year. Additionally, SEAC has received many parent complaints that students with disabilities are not afforded the same access to SOL student programs and tutoring. Holding building personnel accountable for making sure parents and students have access to general education SOL programs and tutoring is warranted. Perhaps ensuring access to these programs for students with disabilities will help raise test scores. Lastly, SEAC understands that one of the two long awaited special education literacy coaches was hired for fall, 2008. ***Since it took over a year to hire the first literacy coach, SEAC hopes Central Office will put urgency into finding the second literacy coach.***

¹ SEAC's recommendation is that any long-term plan developed to deal with behavior is reviewed by an outside professional that is academically credentialed in behavior due to the broad continuum and serious nature of behavior issues in ACPS. Of recent note is the increase in reports to SEAC and Central Office regarding self-injurious behavior by students with special needs; this development further emphasizes the ***immediate need*** for a long-term plan.

Autism

ACPS remains substantially unprepared for the numbers of students being diagnosed with autism. The current diagnosis rate has increased to an estimated 1 in 150 children.² Both Fairfax County and Alexandria have seen the numbers of students identified with autism double within a five-year period.³ SEAC appreciates the efforts over the past few years by the Autism Resource Specialists and Behavior Specialists. ***However, given the increasing numbers of students identified each year, it is surprising ACPS lacks a comprehensive pre-school to 22 autism program or long-term plan to address this issue. Fairfax has had its Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) based programs and plans in place for over eight years.*** Many other States, Counties and Cities around the United States have had comprehensive ABA-based programs in place for years with good long-term results. SEAC feels that a long-term plan should be developed and the funds to implement it need to be provided by the School Board. In the past school year, the School Board had allocated \$10,000 to hire a national Autism consultant to evaluate and implement an ABA-based program but that has yet to happen.

ACPS Communication Services

The ACPS cable access channel is underutilized and poorly programmed given the many diverse needs of the school system. Alexandria has many children and parents who lack access to the Internet. ACPS's cable access channel could be an alternative and valuable communication tool that, if programmed properly, could connect with this underserved segment. SEAC would like the School Board to consider a complete strategic redesign of the function of the channel which would include: 1) postings of meetings, deadlines, and program information at structured times (e.g., local weather on the 8s, like the Weather Channel); 2) General program information regarding special education, ELL, athletics, etc. again at structured times, 3) programming and announcements in English, Spanish, Arabic, Amharic and any other language deemed necessary by ACPS and; 4) consider allowing other community groups to broadcast their workshops or seminars if deemed appropriate and relevant.

In addition to ACPS's cable channel, the ACPS Student Services web site is not user friendly, the information is badly out of date or critical information is not prominently displayed on the home page but buried in a subsection elsewhere. SEAC asks that a major overhaul of the web site be done over the next school year. A comprehensive, easy to use web site would rebuild and facilitate better communication between Central Office staff, principals, teachers, other service providers and the parents of special needs children. Fairfax County's Student Services web site could serve as an excellent template.

² This rate is based on the Center for Disease Control's Autism and Developmental Disabilities Monitoring Network established figures from 2007.

³ Based on figures available from Dr. Michael Romanelli and Fairfax County's online Elementary Applied Behavioral Analysis program report.

SEAC commends Dr. Sherman on his VASS report cover letter of May 8, 2009 in which he pledges to the School Board and Community to implement necessary changes. Additionally, Dr. Sherman states, “ The report admonished us that it cannot be said enough: The education of every child is everybody’s responsibility Now we must demonstrate - each and every one of us – that we believe it.” ***It is SEAC’s profound hope that this major cultural shift can be accomplished for all ACPS students. SEAC awaits Dr. Sherman’s specific recommendations on how to effectuate system-wide culture change in this upcoming school year. SEAC expectations are that Dr. Sherman will move with the same urgency as he has on other recent projects to fulfill his pledge to the community and the School Board.*** SEAC commits to working with the School Board, Superintendent, Deputy Superintendent and the new Executive Director of Special Education to make sure this major cultural shift happens.

SEAC looks forward to continued dialogue with the Superintendent and School Board on special education matters in the upcoming school year.

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