

*Alexandria City Public Schools*  
*Special Education Advisory Committee Report*  
*2009 -2010 Annual Report*  
*September 27, 2010*

This year SEAC welcomed Dr. Peggy McLeod as the new Executive Director of Special Education and Dr. Jane Quenneville as Director of Special Education.

In school year 2008 - 2009 there were a number of milestone events for special education in Alexandria that influenced our scope-of-work for 2009 - 2010. The milestones were: 1) the School Board wrote four goals directed toward addressing long-standing special education issues in ACPS; 2) the July, 2008 letter from VDOE citing ACPS' s non-compliance with State of Virginia regulations; and 3) the May, 2009 Virginia Association of School Superintendents (VASS) report which cited a number of deep systemic issues that need to be addressed.

SEAC submitted its scope-of-work to the ACPS School Board on October 20, 2009. The report was organized around the general categories of: Emerging Student needs, Administrator Accountability, Programs and Communications.

### **Emerging Student Needs**

Inclusion and co-teaching were deliberated many times throughout the 2009 - 2010 year. Most concerns were focused on Student Services submitting a *detailed* plan outlining how they were going to implement a major policy shift such as inclusion so that the students are in a well structured classroom environment with appropriate supports in place. SEAC supports the practice of inclusion but is emphatic in its belief that it must be done in an organized, controlled manner. However, SEAC recognizes that inclusion is not appropriate for every student and firmly believes that the retention of self-contained/resource classroom facilities is needed to support these students. On May 6, 2010 the Office of Student Services submitted an inclusion plan to the School Board. After review, SEAC feels that the plan lacks sufficient detail for such a major policy shift. ***Student Services must develop a detailed, comprehensive plan that outlines all tasks to be completed including: personnel and space allocations, teacher training needs, curriculum and behavioral assistance, budgetary as well as other resource allocations and, what metrics that will be used to determine the success of implementation.*** During the coming school year, SEAC will provide input and feedback to Student Services regarding the implementation of inclusion and the on-going implementation process.

***Recommendations:*** 1) Student Services formally present a revised, detailed inclusion plan to SEAC in the first quarter of the school year. Additionally, SEAC would like a building schematic for each school showing classroom utilization designations. After the presentation, SEAC should be able to make actionable recommendations or resolutions to the School Board. 2) Furthermore, SEAC would

like to have quarterly updates based on the to-be-established metrics of successful implementation. 3) Since inclusion is such a serious policy shift, it is SEAC's recommendation that in January, 2011 the School Board, SEAC and Student Services hold a joint meeting to ascertain the status of inclusion and what remedies might be necessary to fix any issues. SEAC believes that information from this meeting will be extremely helpful for the School Board as they work on the 2011 – 2012 budget.

### **Space Allocation and Class Size**

SEAC also discussed the space needs and class sizes for children with disabilities throughout ACPS, in particular, how it would relate to inclusion. ***Concerns exist regarding class size in general, particularly large class sizes with a high number of students with special needs.*** These circumstances were particularly evident with the restructuring of the middle schools but are an issue for all schools.

***Recommendation:*** Administrators should pay special attention when creating master building schedules and class assignments to the number of students with IEPs assigned to each class, including, the level of services, personnel and accommodations required for those students.

### **Administrator Accountability**

Administrator and staff accountability has been a long-standing issue for SEAC. Year after year SEAC continues to receive complaints from parents regarding the treatment of special needs students in certain schools in ACPS. Student Services has reported that they have provided special education training to building administrators but the exact nature of the training is unknown. SEAC is pleased that Student Services has started this training but more needs to be done given the number of new building administrators.

The VASS report and testimony as well as parental feedback have only reinforced SEAC's desire to see the School Board review and modify the human resources evaluation processes and policies so, that they hold administrators and staff accountable and, are responsive to the needs of the children, parents and system. <sup>1</sup> SEAC's long-time stated goal has been that the Executive Director or Director of Student Services be involved in evaluating Principals on their delivery of special education services at the building level.

***Recommendations:*** 1) That the Superintendent *mandates* special education training for all new building administrators as well as those administrators who missed last year's training. 2) During the 2010 - 2011 school year, the School Board commences a review of all ACPS human resources personnel practices and policies. After the review is complete, the Board needs to make any necessary board-level policy changes before the

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<sup>1</sup> The May, 2009 VASS report cited ACPS's current pervasive culture of low expectations for students with disabilities and the need to move towards an organizational culture of "the education of every child is everyone's responsibility."

end of the school year so, the Superintendent may develop written, standardized human resource personnel procedures and policies.

## **Programs**

### **Career and Transition**

***The lack of a comprehensive Career and Transition program has been a long-term problem for ACPS as documented by the 2008 VDOE non-compliance letter.*** As an outgrowth of discussions surrounding this issue, the ACPS Student Services Office created the Alexandria Transition Advisory Council (ATAC) in 2009 to address the needs of students requiring access to transition services planned in their IEPs. The committee's purpose is to create a source of comprehensive information for parents and guardians who will be seeking career and transition services for their children. ACPS Special Projects Coordinator Timothy Brown leads the Alexandria Transition Advisory Council and two SEAC members -Nancy McCormick and Crystal Prall — serve as parent representatives. ATAC meetings were held in December 2009, February 2010, and June 2010. At the June meeting, four committees were formed and committee leaders named: Timeline Committee – Merri Jo Pape – ACPS; Job Development Committee — Martha Conner – ACPS; Transition Fair Committee — Amata Shah – ACPS; and Education and Training and Resource Directory Committee — Laura Mondragon — ACPS. On June 22, 2010 ACPS emailed an invitation to all ATAC members, inviting them to choose a committee, contact the leader, and begin work on these committees. The success of the Alexandria Transition Advisory Council is dependent on the active participation of the public and private partners that were brought to work together on these committees. SEAC expresses concern that it took an entire year for the Council to appoint sub-committees. In the coming school year, ATAC needs to quickly move beyond the subcommittees' goals to work with ACPS to facilitate public/private partners to create job sites, provide job coaches, etc.

Consistently throughout the past school year, SEAC has received complaints that students with career and transition services in their IEPs (as young as 14) are not receiving access to T.C.Williams' career and transition related resources. ***All students need access to career and transition services and facilities at T.C. Williams.***

***Recommendations:*** 1) By November 2010, Student Services needs to jointly develop a plan with ACPS Transportation that ensures all students who need access to career and transition resources at T.C.Williams are able to receive appropriate transportation. 2) ATAC meets early in the school year to establish an overall structure for development of committee objectives, timelines, and reporting mechanisms. Also, that ATAC and Student Services establish organizational mechanisms to facilitate the private/ public partnerships to create job sites, provide job coaches, etc. 3) For the 2010 - 2011 school year, ACPS needs to develop a catalog of career and technical courses available at the high school and distribute the catalog to administrators, guidance counselors, parents, and students to facilitate greater accessibility to those courses to students with special needs.

## **Tutoring**

Lack of access to tutoring services was explored at several SEAC meetings. Some schools have improved both their communication with parents regarding tutoring options and access to school-based and SOL tutoring programs for students with special needs. ***However, this is still an issue that needs attention to ensure that all schools communicate to parents and provide equal access to after-school and SOL tutoring.***

***Recommendation:*** Student Services work with appropriate Central Office departments and Principals so that by December 2010 all tutoring programs are standardized and accessible for students with disabilities and the options communicated to their parents.

## **Reading and Literacy**

Reading and Literacy programs have been a long-standing issue for SEAC, particularly given how low Alexandria's scores are in comparison to other jurisdictions. Reading is an essential skill that all students need to be successful academically and we have received numerous complaints that students are routinely denied access to reading programs that they need in order to develop proper skills. SEAC members have expressed their concerns to School Board members over the apparent reduction in standards-based literacy testing throughout the system. Students with disabilities in Alexandria are by far the worst performing group, not just in comparison with their peers but, also to other students with disabilities in the surrounding jurisdictions. Of note, a February, 2010 article in *The Washington Post* pointed out Alexandria was one of the jurisdictions which over utilized the VGLA. ***As a result of the over-use of the VGLA, SEAC parents and others do not have a clear picture of the true state of literacy achievement (or achievement in other subject areas) in ACPS.*** While ACPS's overall literacy figures from 2008 - 2009 appear to have risen, one cannot be sure what the real literacy gains have been for students with disabilities. For the entire February, 2010 Washington Post article please click on the following link: ([http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/02/25/AR2010022502894\\_2.html?sid=ST2010022503069](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/02/25/AR2010022502894_2.html?sid=ST2010022503069)) The chart from 2/26/10 article is below:

**The Washington Post**  
**Northern Virginia special-ed students taking portfolio test in 2008-09**

Friday, February 26, 2010; B05

Percentage of students with disabilities tested with a portfolio in 2008-09 rather than a multiple choice Standards of Learning test.

	Reading	Math	Science	History	Writing
State average	20.4	19.9	4.7	7	5.8
Alexandria	30.3	23.5	3.3	6.3	8.8
Arlington County	7.8	.1	.2	.1	0
Fairfax County	23.6	21.7	1.4	5.1	2.8
Falls Church	1.4	1.6	1.4	0	0
Loudoun County	9.8	10.3	.6	.8	1.9
Manassas	25.1	20.4	2.2	5.3	0
Manassas Park	45.3	46.9	30.1	27.3	0
Prince William County	27.7	23.1	1.1	2.5	3.7

Source: Virginia Education Department

In addition to the above referenced Post article, ACPS's Department of Accountability produced a report on VGLA usage in February of 2010. In the report it states on p. *iii*, "This past school year [08 -09] saw the largest number of VGLA students (423) and tests (654) ever administered within ACPS. ***This represented a 200% increase of students and a 276% increase in tests when compared to the 2007-2008 school year.***" Table 1 of the report is below and Tables 5 and 6 (results by school) from the report are in Appendix A. SEAC would like to be provided with the VGLA report or data from the ACPS Department of Accountability for 2009 - 2010 use of VGLAs.

**TABLE 1**  
**Alexandria City Public Schools**  
**VGLA Results: 2006-2009**

		2006	2007	2008	2009	Change Over Time			
						One Year 2006 to 2007	One Year 2007 to 2008	One Year 2008 to 2009	Four Years 2006 to 2009
Number of Students Taking VGLA		58	31	141	423	-27	+110	+282	+365
Number of VGLA Tests Taken by Students		110	48	174	654	-62	+126	+480	+544
Passing VGLA Scores	#	17	12	84	578	-5	+72	+494	+561
	%	15%	25%	48%	88%	+10%	+23%	+40%	+73%
Highest VGLA Score of "Pass Advanced"	#	2	0	11	342	-2	+11	+331	+340
	%	2%	0%	6%	52%	-2%	+6%	+46%	+50%

Source: ACPS Department of Accountability report, February, 2010

Recent regulatory changes have mandated the replacement of the portfolio VGLA test for most students with a computer-based test for reading and math. These tests will be phased in starting in 2011 - 2012. There is concern among the parent community that students will not be prepared for the change back to the standard SOLs or the new computerized test.

**Recommendations:** 1) SEAC would like to be provided with the VGLA report or data from the ACPS Department of Accountability for 2009 - 2010 use of VGLAs. 2) Starting in fall 2010 – 2011, ACPS will provide parents with a schedule of *all* literacy testing by grade level. 3) In the coming school year, Student Services, Department of Accountability, Curriculum (and others) all need to work on a plan to ensure that the transition from the portfolio VGLA back to either the SOLs or the computerized alternative SOL/VGLA is successful for all students.

### **Autism**

For many years, parents in ACPS have expressed strong concerns over the school division's lack of a comprehensive autism program and multiple families have taken and continue to take legal action against ACPS as a result. An Autism Working Group established in 2008, led to the purchase of the STAR curriculum, but reports remain mixed over whether or not students' progress improved in the pre-school/lower elementary, self-contained classrooms to which it applied. The Autism Working Group dissipated in 2008 but left a draft autism plan. However, other than this one self-contained program, which serves only a small number of students, there is no comprehensive program for the majority of ACPS students identified as autistic.

In early-fall 2009 Student Services hired an Autism Resource Specialist who served the pre-school/lower elementary students. Due to the demands of the pre-school/lower elementary population, upper elementary and secondary students with autism were left without coverage. In January 2010, a Board Certified Applied Behavior Analyst was hired to serve both students with autism and other children with behavioral issues in need of services. Additionally, for students with varying degrees of an autism spectrum disorder in elementary and secondary general education classes, the use of research-based strategies and interventions has been inconsistent, at best.

***The Autism Comprehensive Plan, due early in the 2009 - 2010, has not yet been presented to SEAC or the parent community.*** It is our understanding that a report will be presented to the School Board at its August 2010 retreat. While it is discouraging that an entire school year has passed, we hope that the presentation of the Comprehensive Autism Plan to the Board, at the retreat, will set the wheels in motion for implementation of a comprehensive autism program across the school system in the coming school year.

**Recommendations:** 1) Hire a second Autism Resource Specialist so that we are restaffed at previous levels. 2) Student Services move with speed to fill the second Board Certified Applied Behavior Analyst position so that all students with behavioral issues can be served in a timely fashion. 3) Student Services presents the

Comprehensive Autism Plan to SEAC at the beginning of the 2010 – 2011 school year. We look forward to working with and providing feedback to the Student Services staff.

### **Communications**

SEAC would like to commend Student Services on the updating of their web site. Committee members were happy to provide feedback throughout that effort.

**Recommendation:** Student Services build on the structure this year by adding more information, forms, and links relevant to special education services. In addition, Student Services increase their use of ACPS's cable channel to enhance delivery of pertinent special education programs.

### **Disability Awareness Professional Development Program**

An important component of SEAC's scope of work for 2009–10 was to provide feedback on the ACPS Disability Awareness Professional Development Program. As of the end of the 09 - 10 school year, that program was never presented. However, at many meetings SEAC provided feedback to Student Services regarding areas needing improvement (*e.g.*, behavior training for teachers, etc.) and we know training on other related special education topics have taken place.

**Recommendation:** 1) Student Services and the Alliance for Leading and Learning present the Disability Awareness Professional Development Program to SEAC. SEAC can work with Central Office, Student Services and the Alliance for Leading and Learning to provide input for the development of a Disability Awareness Professional Development Program. 2) Invite the Director of the Alliance for Leading and Learning to a meeting to present what special education training took place over 2009 -2010 as well as what are future training plans for 2010 - 2011.

### **Other Topics of Discussion**

Of concern to SEAC is the apparent dissolution of the VASS committee, whose job was to advise Superintendent Sherman on the best use of the ARRA special education stimulus funds based on the VASS report and committee recommendations. SEAC would like to see a resurrection of that committee or something similar as follow up to the recommendations of the VASS committee. The committee met November 2009 and January 2010 with a scheduled meeting for May 2010. *The May VASS committee meeting never happened, therefore, there is nothing to recommend to Superintendent Sherman or the School Board.* The question remains of exactly how ARRA special education funds were distributed in relation to the VASS report's recommendation.

**Recommendation:** Resurrect the ACPS VASS committee or something similar as follow up to the recommendations of the VASS committee.

SEAC welcomed the presentation by ACPS's new Director of Curriculum, John Brown, Ph.D., on his vision for the realigning of the ACPS curriculum. Members were impressed by Dr. Brown's plans to revamp the Life Skills curriculum at T.C. Williams, and by his sensitivity to the issue of "soft skills" *i.e.* "social skills" and how important it is to incorporate these into the new realigned curriculum. We are happy to see that social skills are part of the curriculum again, and are looking forward to the research-based social skills program(s) that will be utilized. Overall, SEAC is excited to see over the coming years how all of the curriculum changes will benefit students with disabilities.

**Recommendation:** 1) SEAC is provided with the opportunity to comment on the applicability to and potential effect on students with disabilities of all emerging programs and pedagogies. 2) Resurrect the research-based social skills programs that were eliminated in the past school year. These programs are integral to the inclusion of students with autism as well as other students with disabilities. These research-based programs have a proven successful track for *all* students

One of SEAC's major milestones was the completion of its video entitled "Alexandria, Virginia Special Education Parents Challenge School Board" and can be seen on its YouTube link: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jn9y9BfhMbk>. In the video, SEAC challenged the School Board by 2011 to devote resources to ensure all students with disabilities can read on grade level, pass the Math SOLs at 80% rate and increase the graduation rate from 33.6% to over 60%. The Alexandria SEAC video has been featured on Pete Wright's website as the exemplar of parental advocacy but also and importantly, was accepted and presented at the *Society for Disabilities Studies* in Philadelphia on June 2, 2010. The presentation was entitled: *Parents of Students with Disabilities and their Utilization of New Media as an Act of Cultural Resistance and Tool to Redefine the Traditional Advocacy Model*.

SEAC would like to thank the School Board and Superintendent Sherman for their quick approval to rename ACPS's Parent Resource Center after its sorely missed and beloved Parent Resource Director, Anne Lipnick.

SEAC welcomes participation and input from School Board members, Superintendent Sherman and other ACPS staff. As in previous years, SEAC would welcome increased participation by our School Board liaison. It welcomes its new liaison, Mimi Carter. SEAC looks forward to working with the School Board, Superintendent Sherman, Drs. Mcleod and Quenneville in the upcoming 2010 - 2011 school year.

Vickie Cattaneo, Co-Chair, 2009 – 2010  
Sandra Strachan-Vieira, Co-Chair, 2009 – 2010  
Peter Roff                      Deophia Newman  
Paul Wilson                    Laurie Rackas  
Crystal Prall                   Cathy Santiago  
Nan Ryant                      Margaret Hagood  
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