

**SPECIAL EDUCATION ADVISORY COMMITTEE**  
**2020-2021**  
**ANNUAL REPORT**

The demands placed on school systems and their administrators, educators and parents during this year of pandemic have been enormous. The Special Education Advisory Committee (SEAC) intentionally kept its Scope of Work limited, with outreach as an important function. These efforts equipped the SEAC to inform the School Board and Superintendent about the challenges of Students with Disabilities (SWD) and their families, which were often significant. Outreach also introduced the SEAC to school PTAs, alerting families that this advisory committee exists to inform the district about unmet needs in the education and support of SWD and to participate in creating priorities and strategies for addressing identified needs.

Meanwhile, the SEAC continued last year's focus on Communications from the District, which the committee had just begun to address at the time of the shutdown. The SEAC membership identified the need for improved communications in 2019-20, and outreach to families of SWD during the summer of 2020 emphasized the priority of this need.

Additionally, SEAC formed a subcommittee to provide feedback on the K-2 Literacy Initiative, aiming to ensure that the needs of SWD will be addressed as work on that important plan progresses.

As per usual, SEAC also reviewed the district's annual Budget and the Policies and Procedures that affect SWD. The committee was pleased to partner with the Executive Director of Specialized Instruction to administer the Anne R. Lipnick Awards for Specialized Instruction after a hiatus last year due to the state of emergency.

Below is an end-of year summary of the work and recommendations of the SEAC. In addition to the report provided here, the SEAC also shared feedback from families and from our meetings through Public Comment to the School Board and emails to its members as well as through our January SEAC meeting with the Superintendent, Dr. Gregory Hutchings.

We commend the efforts being made by School Board Chair Meagan Alderton to determine effective methods for the Advisory Committees to the School Board to provide feedback. Our committee wants to ensure that the voice of families of SWD is heard and that recommendations of the SEAC are of assistance. We welcome the guidance of the School Board on the best approaches for sharing reports and recommendations in the future.

## Report on SEAC Areas of Focus for 2020-2021

### **Communication with Parents/Guardians of Students with Disabilities (SWD)**

**Background:** The first two core values of Equity for All 2025 are for ACPS to be “welcoming” and “empowering.” For this to happen, strong communication with families is essential. Parents and guardians of SWD need additional information not needed by the average family, especially in time of pandemic. Additionally, the State tasks SEAC with assisting the local school division in interpreting plans to the community for meeting the special needs of children with disabilities for educational services. Family and Community Engagement is one of the five goals of Equity for ALL 2025, and improving communication with families and the community is a necessary step in meeting this goal.

**Priorities and Goals:** Examine current practices regarding communication with parents and guardians in ACPS related to supports and services provided to SWD. Make recommendations to improve communications from the division to families and determine how to best share the ACPS Students with Disabilities Action Plan with the ACPS community.

**Commendations/Strengths:** The Executive Director of Specialized Instruction, Terry Werner, provided a live Q&A for families in November which provided detailed answers to the many questions of parents and guardians. Ms. Werner also provided a lengthy written Q&A about return to in-person instruction for families of SWD this spring and has committed to a quarterly newsletter for families of SWD moving forward.

#### **Recommendations for ACPS:**

In this unusual year of pandemic, the communication needs for families of SWD have been high. While we anticipate a return to normalcy next year, the following communication efforts would benefit families of SWD:

- Use quarterly newsletter from Executive Director of Specialized Instruction to update families of SWD on SPED Action Plan, on SEAC, and on other information pertinent to families of SWD
- Update webpage for the Office of Specialized Instruction, to include the SPED Action Plan checklist with quarterly updates
- Dedicate section in ACPS Express for Families of SWD, if events occur which have an outsized impact on SWD, as did the pandemic
- Inform families of SWD about the Literacy curriculum and interventions in use for their child (please see Literacy memo for further information)
- Provide guidance and tools to families of SWD to empower them to assist with their child’s literacy development (please see Literacy memo for further information)

**Future Considerations:** Many parents/guardians of SWD have little to no knowledge of the work done in school by their child since it is difficult--if not impossible--for many SWD to communicate this information. Consider providing standard formats and/or templates for teachers to inform families of SWD about work done at school.

## **SEAC Outreach to the ACPS Community**

**Background:** Family and community engagement is one of the five goals of Equity for All 2025, and three core values are to be “welcoming,” “empowering,” and “equity-focused.” SEAC is an advisory committee mandated by the State of Virginia to engage and empower families of SWD. Our committee needs input from a diversity of families within ACPS to gain awareness of systemic needs.

Visibility of SEAC among parents and caregivers in our district has long been low. Data from the 2019 VDOE report noted that almost half of elementary parents and 80% of secondary parents were not aware of SEAC and/or meetings. Prior to this year, rarely did a parent, caregiver, teacher, or community member provide public comment at a meeting. Though reports by Public Consulting Group (completed October, 2018) and Virginia Department of Education (completed August, 2019) detail the needs of students with disabilities in ACPS, we must develop on-going means to learn about parent/caregiver (and staff) concerns. Just as ACPS wants to ensure that all students have equitable access to instruction that meets their needs, SEAC wants to ensure that parents and caregivers of SWD in all ACPS communities know they have a place to share their concerns.

**Priorities and Goals:** Increase public comment and create a diversity of membership that reflects the community. Work in collaboration with school PTAs, the PRC, and ACPS leaders to raise the awareness of SEAC among parents and caregivers of SWD and of staff serving this population. Implement practices that develop a sense of community and empower families and staff to share questions and concerns. Build a culture of cross-collaboration and trust that will help SEAC fulfill its roll of advising ACPS of needs in the education and support of children with disabilities.

**Commendations/Strengths:** The Coordinator of the Parent Resource Center, Courtney Davis, Ph. D, has been instrumental in connecting SEAC with non-English speaking communities and in connecting SEAC with the Family and Community Engagement Center. Along with Parent Support Specialist Janet Reese, she has guided and collaborated with SEAC in creation of print materials to publicize the SEAC to families of SWD.

### **Key Activities and Accomplishments of SEAC**

- Created a SEAC flyer for distribution at all IEP meetings
- Identified SEAC members to serve as liaisons to each ACPS school
- Provided liaisons with questions for parents/guardians of SWD (including translations) for distribution in school newsletters and via PTA social media
- Met with groups of non-English speaking communities within ACPS to share an overview of SEAC
- Collaborated with PRC and FACE to create an infographic highlighting the role of SEAC for families of SWD
- Created a SEAC Facebook page; roll-out still needs to occur

- Increased Public Comment; five parents of SWD gave Public Comment this year compared with none from ACPS families last year. Many parents also used the SEAC email address to share their experiences with the SEAC Chair.

#### **Recommendations for ACPS:**

- Update ACPS SEAC webpage, in coordination with SEAC leadership
- Provide SEAC flyer and PRC/SEAC/FACE infographic at all IEP meetings
- Continue the partnership between SEAC, PRC, and FACE to publicize SEAC and to facilitate connection with under-represented communities, encouraging their input on unmet needs in the education and support of SWD

#### **Future Issues**

- SEAC must continue outreach efforts to ensure awareness of needs throughout ACPS and to encourage a diversity of membership. Surveys or parent focus groups may assist in this effort.

#### **Literacy**

**Background:** Instructional Excellence is one of the five goals of the ACPS 2025 Strategic Plan. Within this goal, Equity for All 2025 identifies “implementing a consistent, high-impact approach to teaching literacy in all K-2 classrooms across the Division” as a Highlighted Action and gives several strategies for improving K-5 literacy. SEAC wants to ensure that consistent, high-impact approaches for literacy instruction are available to SWD. Data from VDOE shows that the SWD proficiency rate in ACPS for English/reading was 35.99% in 2018-19, which falls below the State target of 48%.

**Goal:** Review ACPS plan for K-2 literacy and MTSS implementation and make recommendations accordingly.

**Commendations/Strengths:** The SEAC would like to thank the K-2 Literacy team--Elementary Literacy Instructional Specialist Dr. Carolyn Wooster, Elementary Literacy Coordinator Kimberly Schell, and Inclusion Instructional Specialist Nicole Barrion--for welcoming the input of the SEAC and for meeting with our Literacy Subcommittee, for presenting the Literacy Initiative to the full committee, and for providing a survey regarding literacy priorities to our membership. We would also like to thank Dr. Erin Stone for her presentation to SEAC on the city-wide classrooms in ACPS, which included an overview of literacy for those students.

#### **Recommendations for ACPS:**

Please see the attached memo for a full description of the SEAC K-2 Literacy Recommendations.

## **Policies and Procedures**

**Background:** The State of Virginia tasks SEAC with reviewing the policies and procedures for the provision of special education and related services prior to their submission to the local school board.

**Goal:** Evaluate ACPS policies and procedures that relate to SWD.

### **Key Activities and Accomplishments of SEAC:**

- The SEAC reviewed the draft ACPS Policy on MANAGEMENT OF STUDENT BEHAVIORS IN EMERGENCY SITUATIONS. One change was proposed and accepted. The SEAC then provided a statement of support for the draft Policy at the February 18, 2021, School Board meeting.
- As described in the Introduction, the SEAC worked to encourage input from parents and guardians of SWD regarding virtual instruction and return to in-person learning. Public Comments to the School Board alerted members and the Superintendent to the significant challenges facing many families. The SEAC made a statement to the School Board on April 8<sup>th</sup>, 2021, urging an increase to four days of in-person learning per week for students in city-wide classrooms and for four days per week of in-person instruction for special education students this summer.

**Commendations/Strengths:** Regarding the ACPS Policies and Procedures on Seclusion and Restraint, SEAC appreciates that this Policy ensures that ALL school personnel and School Resource Officers (SROs) receive initial, evidenced-based training which includes skills related to positive behavior support, conflict prevention, and de-escalation, as well as use of effective alternatives to physical restraint and seclusion.

## **Budget**

**Background:** Each year SEAC reviews the proposed budget and if warranted provides input to the School Board regarding impacts on SWD.

**Goal:** Review the budget and provide recommendations on its impact for SWD.

**Key Activities and Accomplishments of SEAC:** SEAC did not form a Budget Subcommittee this year, however, Terry Werner, the Executive Director of Specialized Instruction made a presentation on the budget to the membership at the December, 2020, SEAC meeting. The SEAC membership voted to approve two recommendations, both of which were approved by the School Board:

- The SEAC proposed that ACPS fully fund the Special Education Operating Budget.
- The SEAC advised increasing the special education teacher reserve positions from four (4) to six (6).

**Commendations/Strengths:** The SEAC appreciates the continued support of SWD by fulling funding all requested special education positions.

**Recommendations for ACPS:** Collaboration between the new SEAC leadership team and the Executive Director of Specialized Instruction regarding budget priorities is encouraged as soon as both are available. Collaboration with the Special Education Representative for the ACPS PTAC may also prove valuable in this process.

### **Anne R. Lipnick Awards**

**Background:** ACPS instituted the Anne Lipnick Inclusion for All Award in 2010 to honor Mrs. Lipnick and her work. In 2018, the Harry Burke Award and the Anne Lipnick Inclusion for All Award were merged and renamed in honor of Mrs. Lipnick as the Anne R. Lipnick Awards for Specialized Instruction. The awards program could not be conducted last year due to the shutdown caused by the pandemic. The SEAC was delighted to partner with the Executive Director of Specialized Instruction this spring to once again administer the Anne R. Lipnick Awards for Specialized Instruction.

**Priorities and Goals:** The purpose of these awards is to engage families and staff in recognizing and honoring excellence in the education and inclusion of SWD. Additionally, this year, the SEAC decided to honor ALL special education staff in the district for their tremendous efforts and dedication with a letter of gratitude from the SEAC.

**Commendations/Strengths:** The special education staff is a strength for ACPS. Many parents commented on the dedication and effort made by their child's special education teachers in their communications to SEAC about the challenges of this school year. Additionally, the SEAC is appreciative that many administrators worked very long hours to support SWD and others.

The leadership of Terry Werner, the Executive Director of Specialized Instruction, made the Anne R. Lipnick Awards possible, and the contribution of Parent Support Specialist Janet Reese of the Parent Resource Center was instrumental in reviewing nominations.

### **Key Activities and Accomplishments of SEAC:**

- The SEAC requested nominations for and honored winners in the three categories that have long been part of the awards--Special Education Teacher, Paraprofessional, and General Education Inclusion Teacher--and added a new category this year for Related Services Provider.
- SEAC Chair Cindy Hart composed a letter that was sent to all of the district's special education staff on behalf of the SEAC in recognition of the extra dedication and effort provided by so many ACPS special education professionals throughout this school year.

**Future Considerations:** The SEAC should consider whether to add "Instructional Specialist" as a new award category.