

2019-2020 Albemarle County Special Education Advisory Committee Annual Report

Once again, the members of the Albemarle County Special Education Advisory Committee wish to start our report by thanking our special education teachers, aides, staff and administration for all they do to help our students succeed. We recognize that education is a team effort, and that we, as parents and guardians, are an integral part of that team. It is in that spirit of teamwork that we submit the following recommendations for our school system.

1. Implement the Safe Schools Ambassador Program

The Safe Schools Ambassador Program (SSA) is an evidence-based model that works with students to teach them the skills to influence behavior and create positive change. Research shows that other students are present in 85% of bullying incidents making it imperative that students are trained and included in the anti-bullying process.¹

The SSA program is taught by professional trainers from Community Matters, a 501(c) 3 organization that has been addressing bullying issues for more than twenty years and has worked with over two thousand schools. SSA trainers conduct the initial sessions and then Train the Trainer courses are offered to keep the program active. Offering a turn-key program with a documented record of success will simplify the process of rapidly improving the anti-bullying culture in our schools.

2. Include Special Education in the Culturally Responsive Teaching initiative

Albemarle County's focus on Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) is commendable, and we want to be certain special education is included. Our students with learning differences have cultures that should be respected and honored as part of CRT. For example, the Autism Culture Movement, deaf culture, and the ADHD community all have preferences for honoring and respecting our differences. Including our students in special education in the CRT process can help other students accept these and other differences as part of everyday society and not as anomalies to be disparaged.

3. Include Special Education in Planning the Contemporary Schooling Initiative

The current system being used at some schools is to grade tests only, raising the question "What is learning?" The principle of mastery learning can be more effective as it relies on teaching students until they can show understanding or mastery of the concept being presented. This was the teaching strategy in use at Murray High School and the Community

¹ <https://community-matters.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Safe-School-Ambassadors-Research-Base.pdf>

Public Charter School and was very effective for students with learning differences. With the shift to Contemporary Schooling, this approach is being changed to focus on the new International Baccalaureate track. We are concerned our students in special education will not fit into this new paradigm. We request that representatives from special education be included in planning for Contemporary Schooling and the changes to our learning centers.

4. Provide Training for Teachers and Staff on ADHD and Related Challenges

ADHD affects about 11% of school-aged children resulting in developmentally inappropriate levels of inattention, impulsivity and hyperactivity.² Teachers, staff and administration work with these students daily and would benefit from additional training. We are recommending professional development and follow up to help our teachers help students with ADHD and related challenges and to improve classroom management and allow for more instructional time.

5. Information and Care for Families with Students in Special Education

The members of the Special Education Advisory Committee are concerned about the potential loss of the PREP Parent Resource Center (PRC). With the changes put forth by VDOE, remaining in the PREP PRC cohort would become more expensive. If we leave this cohort, we lose the valuable resources provided by this organization. If ACPS were to create a separate PRC, we are concerned the support might not remain as fair, balanced, and unbiased as it is now. Our families need the education, information, and understanding of an experienced PRC. Being the caregiver to a student with special needs and navigating the special education process can be quite challenging. We want to be certain our families have the support they need to become and remain effective members of IEP teams for the benefit of the student, the family and the schools.

The Special Education Advisory Committee appreciates the consideration of these recommendations in discussion of funding priorities and programming for the next academic year. We would like to acknowledge Kevin Kirst and the entire Albemarle County Special Education team for their exceptional support of our students. Thank you also to the school board for allowing us to share this report.

This report was prepared by SEAC Chairperson Stephanie Hicks, with input from the SEAC membership. A draft of the document was sent by electronic mail to the SEAC on February 1, 2020 and finalized following the February monthly meeting.

² <https://chadd.org/about-adhd/overview/>