

Albemarle County Special Education Advisory Committee Annual Report for 2011 – 2012

May 2012

The Albemarle County Special Education Advisory Committee (SEAC) is pleased to present the 2011 – 2012 Annual Report to the School Board of Albemarle County Public Schools (ACPS). This report was prepared by SEAC chairperson, Dr. Amy Azano, and was reviewed by membership on May 15, 2012.

OVERVIEW

The functions of the SEAC, as specified by *Regulations Governing Special Education Programs for Children with Disabilities in Virginia [8 VAC 20-81]*, effective January 25, 2010, are listed below.

Excerpted from

http://www.doe.virginia.gov/special_ed/regulations/state/regs_speced_disability_va.pdf:

Local advisory committee. A local advisory committee for special education, appointed by each local school board, shall advise the school board through the division superintendent.

1. Membership.
 - a. A majority of the committee shall be parents of children with disabilities or individuals with disabilities.
 - b. The committee shall include one teacher.
 - c. Additional local school division personnel shall serve only as consultants to the committee.
2. The functions of the local advisory committee shall be as follows:
 - a. Advise the local school division of needs in the education of children with disabilities;
 - b. Participate in the development of priorities and strategies for meeting the identified needs of children with disabilities;
 - c. Submit periodic reports and recommendations regarding the education of children with disabilities to the division superintendent for transmission to the local school board;
 - d. Assist the local school division in interpreting plans to the community for meeting the special needs of children with disabilities for educational services;

- e. Review the policies and procedures for the provision of special education and related services prior to submission to the local school board; and
 - f. Participate in the review of the local school division's annual plan, as outlined in subdivision B.2. of this section.
3. Public notice shall be published annually listing the names of committee members and including a description of ways in which interested parties may express their views to the committee.
 4. Committee meetings shall be held at least four times in a school year and shall be open to the public.

NOTES REGARDING SEAC FUNCTIONS

1. Membership

Membership is always a concern for the SEAC. Without each school having a reliable representative, the SEAC is unable to fulfill its mission to advocate for all children with disabilities in Albemarle County Public Schools.

The SEAC saw an increase in its membership during the 2011-2012 term. We attribute this success to the collaborative and consistent efforts of SEAC representatives, central office and building administrators, and the School Board. To this aim, a group consisting of ACPS School Board member Diantha McKeel, Assistant Superintendent for Student Learning Dr. Billy Haun, Director of Special Education and Student Services Mr. Kevin Kirst, and SEAC Chairperson Dr. Amy Azano met during summer 2011 to strategize recruitment and articulate specific roles in reaching constituencies.

Whereas last year we had 14 representatives, this year we had 24 SEAC members (some representing the same school). While 10 schools remain without representation, the SEAC was encouraged by the increased membership and participation. While it is ideal to have each school represented, SEAC representatives are able to speak to the needs of children at different schools who may encounter similar challenges or have the same disability. However, we recognize that the school experience for children is contextualized by a school, its teachers, leaders, culture, and so on. Additionally, Albemarle County is a large and diverse area; therefore, the SEAC continues to strive for 100% representation from its schools and programs.

2. Functions

In November, the SEAC was invited by Superintendent Pam Moran to provide input on the annual budget. In response to the Superintendent's questions, the SEAC made recommendations for an additional autism specialist in ACPS and additional resources for Response to Intervention (RtI) initiatives.

As a result or perhaps due in part to this advocacy, the county has approved additional FTEs for secondary interventionists and an autism specialist. The SEAC commends the county for

responding to these needs and for extending our advocacy so that it has a direct and positive impact on students with disabilities in Albemarle County.

3. Public notice

The SEAC wishes to acknowledge the inclusion of its meetings on the annual calendar.

COMMITTEE MEETINGS AND MEMBERSHIP

The Albemarle County SEAC increased its membership and currently has representatives in 17 of its 27 schools and programs in the Albemarle County Public School (ACPS) system, along with one teacher representative. The meeting schedule for 2011-2012 accommodated eight monthly meetings, representing an increase from last year by one meeting. The proposed meeting schedule for 2012-2013 will have nine meetings. We believe the SEAC's success is dependent on this consistent interaction among SEAC members and with central office.

SUMMARY OF ACTIVITIES AND NOTES

This year's SEAC was comprised of an involved and concerned group of parents. The SEAC met monthly to discuss the educational needs of children with disabilities in ACPS. These meetings included announcements regarding local activities for parents and children, staff presentations, and SEAC activity updates. Mr. Kirst provided presentations on county initiatives, funding, budgetary concerns, staffing challenges, Response to Intervention (RtI), and other processes for identifying students with disabilities. The SEAC invited an expert in "twice-exceptionality" to speak about the specific needs of gifted children who also have a disability.

Of note, the SEAC vice-chairperson and Mr. Kirst attended a state SEAC training in March 2011. They provided information on the Freedom of Information Act and various issues related to state functions and membership. We believe this training will further strengthen SEAC efforts in Albemarle County.

The SEAC wishes to thank the efforts of Sarah Blech and the PREP/Parent Recourse Center for their outreach commitments in Albemarle County. The SEAC assisted in promoting and participating in several Parent Resource Center events this year, including the Live and Learn Parent Conference (Nov. 2011) and the Transition Conference (Feb. 2012).

The SEAC commends the "Building Capacity" long range planning advisory committee for its methodology / formula for establishing building capacity and its respectful accommodations of students with special needs.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Additional / Ongoing Resources

1. As stated previously, the SEAC advocates for additional autism specialists. We understand plans are currently underway to satisfy this recommendation.

2. The SEAC recommends additional training for classroom aides assisting children with disabilities.
3. The SEAC supports county incentives for regular education teachers to attend training to work with students on the autism spectrum.
4. The SEAC would like to advocate for the ongoing funding and support of Murray High School and its other alternative settings (e.g., Community Public Charter) that provide services to students with and without disabilities.
5. The SEAC supports ACPS's ongoing efforts to bring all buildings into ADA compliance and request that careful consideration be given to make this a top priority.
6. The SEAC supports initiatives to fund and investigate effectiveness of RtI strategies and to provide necessary resources for reading interventionists at the secondary level.
7. The SEAC supports efforts for additional inclusive preschool programs.

Outreach Efforts

8. The SEAC is unable to reach out directly to the constituents it serves. Therefore, we request that special education administrators and leaders continue to educate building administrators and teachers about the role and significance of the SEAC and to encourage parent involvement. To this end, we request that SEAC brochures be distributed regularly to schools and that brochures be provided to parents who attend SBIT, 504, referral, and eligibility meetings.
9. The SEAC has planned its first meeting of the 2012-2013 year in August, 2012. This will give SEAC representatives adequate time to make plans for attendance at back to school nights throughout the county. We request that each principal make it a priority to mention SEAC at those gatherings and to encourage parent participation.

Parent Concerns

10. The SEAC recommends that the special education and gifted education departments collaborate on needs and related services for twice-exceptional learners.
11. The SEAC recommends that ACPS continues its focus on job training and independent life skills at the Post High Program.

12. While we commend the special education teachers and administrators in Albemarle County, the SEAC does recognize and wishes to advocate for parents who desire to have more positive relationships with school officials. IEP meetings are often described to SEAC representatives as “struggles” or “battles.” We support ongoing professional development at the building level to encourage a less hierarchical and more “team friendly” environment at IEP or other meetings where parents, students, and school officials discuss the academic, social, or behavioral needs of students with disabilities.
13. The SEAC respectfully acknowledges a wide range of philosophies on topics related to special education. While many educators and parents feel the need for self-contained classrooms, the SEAC asks that the county maintain its inclusive philosophy especially with regard to Least Restrictive Environments.
14. The SEAC requests that the school board support and assist Mr. Kirst with transitioning students from Hollymead Elementary to Baker Butler Elementary to ensure that there are no lapse of services or accommodations for students with disabilities.
15. The SEAC continues to field concerns about SBIT procedures in Albemarle County. Parents must be informed of their rights. SBIT procedures do not preclude a special education eligibility referral.
16. The SEAC encourages the Special Education department to respond to parent concerns regarding math offerings at the high school level. Currently, secondary math offerings do not further math numeracy skills or concepts for special education students. Parents have expressed concern that secondary math instruction is comprised of worksheet-based instruction rather than mathematical investigations (comparisons, computations, and estimations). The SEAC believes this is an issue of educational equity for special education students who deserve quality math instruction at all levels of education.
17. The SEAC strongly advocates for the county’s use of people-first language when referring to students with disabilities (i.e., a student with autism rather than an autistic student).

MEMBERSHIP

(Please see list below)

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The SEAC enjoyed a productive year with increased membership. We continue to strive for 100% representation of Albemarle County Public Schools. While we have many success stories, we strive to advocate for students and parents who continue to feel marginalized by their experiences in Albemarle County, and we appreciate the careful attention given to the recommendations made in this report.

The SEAC thanks the many hardworking teachers, aides, therapists, school nurses, transportation providers, and others who work with special education students in Albemarle County. We appreciate the school board, superintendent, and special education administrators in their sincere efforts to listen to and respond to the needs of special education students in Albemarle County.

We especially thank Kevin Kirst for his commitment to students with disabilities and their families—and to the SEAC. We value his cooperation and dedication to our committee.

The SEAC thanks the School Board for its continued support of Special Education.

Special Education Parent Advisory Committee

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