

Albemarle County Special Education Advisory Committee Annual Report for 2010 – 2011

May 2011

The Albemarle County Special Education Advisory Committee (SEAC) is pleased to present the 2010 – 2011 Annual Report to the School Board.

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. (Of note, the regulations listed on the county's website do not represent the current regulations which represent minor but important changes in the responsibilities of the SEAC. We ask that the county update their site to reflect these changes.)

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.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR COMPLIANCE WITH REGULATIONS

1. Membership

Concerns about declining membership persist. The SEAC recommends reforms that will empower and rejuvenate the committee. To that end, we request that conversations continue through the summer months to address concerns regarding membership. In doing so, we hope to promote the importance of the SEAC to building administrators and request that the School Board encourage principals to tap parents for membership. We recommend setting plans in motion for publicizing SEAC meetings through the school communications office (e.g., This Week in ACPS, website updates, Twitter etc.). Additionally, we recommend that division personnel serve only as “consultants to the committee,” as outlined in the regulations.

2. Functions

During the 2010-2011 school year, the SEAC was not invited to participate in the development of priorities and strategies for meeting the identified needs of children with disabilities. This was most evident in recent changes proposed to the preschool program in Albemarle County. Support from the SEAC was sought by community members who learned of proposed changes. However, the SEAC had not been informed of any such changes, nor had the SEAC been asked to participate in the development of these plans. The SEAC is unable to advise the local school division of needs in the education of children with disabilities if the committee is not made aware of changes that will affect children and their families.

3. Public notice

Previous SEAC reports have recommended that meeting dates and times be listed on the annual calendar. While the meeting dates are listed on the county’s SEAC website, the schedule of meetings still remains omitted from the county calendar for the previous two school years. The SEAC feels that this is negligent on the part of Albemarle County and that this must be addressed in the upcoming calendar. Further, recommendations were made in the past that the county establish an email address for the SEAC; however, an email address for the SEAC has either not been provided and/or not publicized to the community. If parents do find the SEAC page, the only means of contact is via Kevin Kirst. The SEAC recommends that this be changed so that interested parties may express their views directly to the committee and not through the channel of the division consultant. The ACPS Parent Council site could serve as a model, which has its own webpage, postings, and access to a listserv for each of the schools. The SEAC also recommends that parent conferences, such as the Live and Learn and Transition conferences, be included on the school calendar as well.

COMMITTEE MEETINGS AND MEMBERSHIP

The Albemarle County SEAC currently has parent representatives from 14 of the 26 schools and programs in the Albemarle County Public School (ACPS) system, along with one teacher representative. The meeting schedule for 2010-2011 accommodated seven monthly meetings: four with school administrators and three “parent only” meetings. There are two changes of

note: 1) the elected chairperson, Dale Castle, resigned in March, and the vice-chairperson, Amy Azano, assumed the role of chair at that time; 2) the SEAC is meeting fewer times with less representation than in recent years. Both are addressed in the recommendations section below.

SUMMARY OF ACTIVITIES / ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Communication with the constituency we serve, the families of children receiving special education services in ACPS, remains a challenge for the SEAC. While we embrace the undisputed right to confidentiality, we also make recommendations (below) regarding innovative ways of communication. Without overcoming this challenge, the SEAC is unable to meet its primary function of advising the school division on the needs of children with disabilities.

Despite this challenge, 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 Curriculum Based Measures, Standards Based IEPs, staffing challenges, success rates of students with IEPs in recent years, Response to Intervention (RtI), and other processes for identifying students with disabilities. Mr. Kirst and Deb Morris presented information on the preschool program and proposed changes. Guest speakers included a doctoral candidate in special education at UVa's Curry School of Education who presented on special education law; Renee Blount on the Keswick Tennis Foundation serving children with disabilities; Andy Wojcik on the Community Based Instruction Program at Albemarle High School; and a young woman with Asperger's Syndrome who shared her personal challenges and triumphs of accessing education and employment with the disability.

OUTREACH

For the third year, membership of the SEAC declined.

PREP/Parent Recourse Center: The SEAC assisted in promoting and participating in several Parent Resource Center events this year, including Disabilities Awareness Month activities (Oct. 2010), the Live and Learn Parent Conference (Nov. 2010), and the Transition Conference (Feb. 2011).

RECOMMENDATIONS

The current SEAC carefully reviewed the last five SEAC reports (2006 – 2010) and found that many of the current recommendations are the same from each of the five previous years.

After five years of making the same recommendations, the committee feels that this report may be no more than an exercise or a checklist for the county's special education department. It is disheartening to make the same annual requests to find that they still represent the unmet needs of our special education children and their families in Albemarle County.

Four of these recommendations include:

1. A SEAC newsletter and parent information system, made possible with full cooperation from ACPS Communication Department, site based staff, and administration.
2. Full participation / representation of all schools in the SEAC
3. Employing a systematic way of contacting families independent of school personnel

4. Commitment by the administration to provide current and timely information on policy and or program changes.

ADDITIONAL RECOMMENDATIONS

In addition to the aforementioned recommendations for compliance, the SEAC also recommends the following:

1. Greater transparency on decision-making, procedural, or programmatic changes to special education in Albemarle County
One suggestion for achieving this would be to schedule an annual meeting between the School Board and the SEAC, with an agenda to be prepared by the SEAC to discuss the needs in an open forum.
2. The SEAC recommends that the special education department review RtI and SBIT procedures in Albemarle County and that this review elicit parent feedback with consideration given to the following:
 - a. Increased parent and community understanding of these procedures
 - b. Process for eligibility referral

Additionally, we recommend the following questions be considered:

1. Do RtI services delay a child's eventual diagnosis/eligibility for special education services?
 2. Have the number of 504 plans increased as the number of students found eligible for services decreased?
 3. How many students have been denied *referrals* as well as eligibility?
 4. How long is too long for a student to receive tier 2 or 3 RtI services?
3. The SEAC strongly recommends that research-based practices, specifically Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA), be considered for students with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD). Mr. Kirst has emphasized throughout the year that special education interventions in Albemarle County be evidence-based practices. ABA is the *only* empirically investigated intervention with proven results for students with ASD. In an era of higher accountability, increased prevalence of ASD diagnoses, and a county initiative toward research-based strategies, it is only fitting that ABA be considered as a viable option for students in Albemarle County.
 4. Inclusion of SEAC at division meetings with the aim of increasing communication between the division and families, facilitating greater communication and cooperation between SEAC and ACPS.
 5. The SEAC recommends that applications for SEAC representation / membership be viewed jointly by the SEAC chairperson and division consultant. Additionally, we recommend an increase in the number of SEAC meetings from seven to nine, as in years past.

6. Last year’s SEAC annual report made recommendations to facilitate positive cultural changes with regard to perceptions of students with disabilities in Albemarle County. This remains our recommendation. SEAC members have witnessed the division consultant referring to children in special education as having few or severely limited opportunities in life. We fear this sends a disheartened message to parents and may adversely affect how faculty and staff treat students with disabilities.
7. Our recommendations for proposed changes to the preschool program include the following:
 - a. A full and half-day program option for 2 year olds
 - b. An inclusive environment for all 4 year olds with supports to enhance success in the general education classroom.

Additionally, the SEAC requests that they be included in further discussions regarding the preschool program.

8. The SEAC continues to recommend increased communication with families in Albemarle County. The SEAC requests permission to provide an information handout for building level administrators to distribute to parents who attend SBIT, 504, or referral/ eligibility meetings.

STRUCTURE

Special Education Parent Advisory Committee Representatives
2010-2011

School	Parent Representative
Pre-School Program	Amy Azano, Chairperson
Elementary Schools	
Agnor-Hurt	VACANT
Baker-Butler	Kathy Rush
Broadus Wood	VACANT
Brownsville	Dale Castle
Cale	Amy Lankford
Crozet	VACANT
Greer	Lisa N. Brown
Hollymead	VACANT
Meriwether Lewis	Maureen Strazzullo
Murray Elementary	Amy Azano
Red Hill	VACANT
Scottsville	Jennifer Carter
Stone-Robinson	Robyn Longtain

Stony Point	Marian Ledford
Woodbrook	VACANT
Yancey	VACANT
Middle Schools	
Burley	VACANT
Henley	VACANT
Jouett	VACANT
Sutherland	Christy Youngkin
Walton	Diane H. John
High Schools	
Albemarle	Mary Taylor
Monticello	VACANT
Murray High	VACANT
Western Albemarle	Regina Craig
Teacher Representative	
	Patti Lee Flynn

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The SEAC remains concerned about its declining membership. The resignation of this year's chairperson also signals that members may feel marginalized or powerless, despite their efforts with the committee. This is most significantly reflected in the unanswered recommendations made in annual reports from years past. The SEAC continues to make these recommendations repeatedly because we feel these are important to the success of this committee and that they speak directly to the needs of Albemarle County students receiving special education services. In some respects, the SEAC seems to exist as a mandatory, but largely ineffective committee. Parents of special needs children are often more burdened than their peers and no one has the time or energy to be part of an "exercise." We strongly encourage the School Board to elicit the advocacy and voice of the SEAC. We are grateful for the dedicated and committed special education administrators, teachers, and assistants at all levels in ACPS; however, parents must have equal voice in the education of their children. The SEAC endeavors to serve as a legitimate voice in the advocacy of students with disabilities in Albemarle County Public Schools.

We thank the county's special education department for their commitment to students with disabilities and their families. Specifically, the SEAC wishes to recognize Mr. Kirst's dedication to our committee and for his prompt response to our many questions and requests.

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