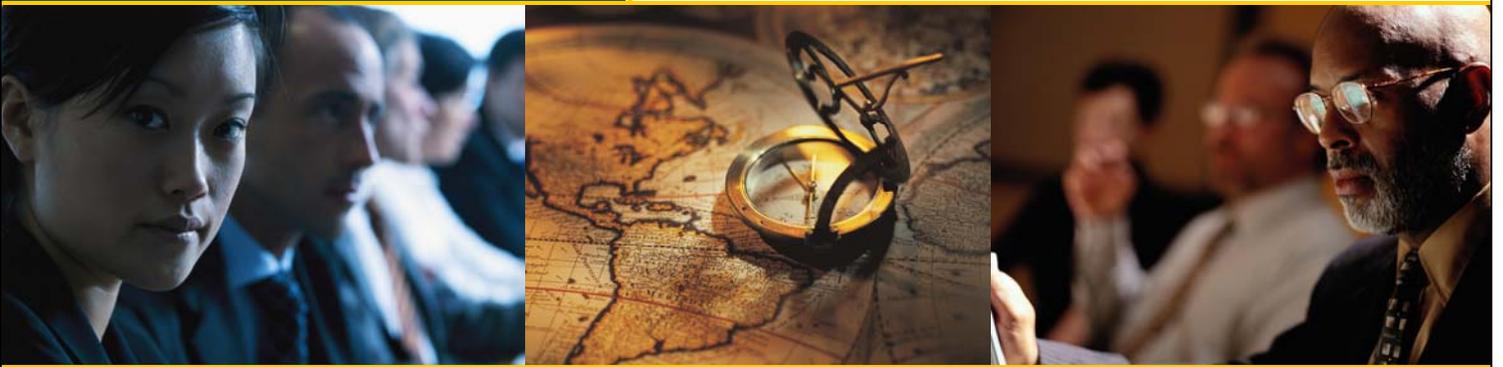


Special Education Review in Virginia Beach City Public Schools

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



Evergreen Solutions, LLC

July 1, 2016

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In March 2016, Virginia Beach City Public Schools (VBCPS) contracted with Evergreen Solutions, LLC to conduct a Special Education Review, specifically with regard to services provided to students with disabilities. The review included an analysis of the characteristics of the special education student population in addition to determinations on special education program effectiveness in supporting positive outcomes for students receiving special education services. The program review identified areas of strength and areas for improvement in the organization and delivery of services.

VBCPS is the 50th largest school division/district in the United States and the fourth largest in the Commonwealth of Virginia. VBCPS has 55 elementary schools, 15 middle schools, 12 high schools and a number of secondary/postsecondary specialty centers. The Division serves over 69,750 students and employs approximately 9,680 employees. VBCPS has over 7,840 students with disabilities, and more than 1,175 special education teachers.

Overview

The review of special education services included an analysis of the following eight specific task areas as presented in the Division's Request for Proposals (RFP):

- Staffing and Organization of Special Education
- Quality and Effectiveness of Special Education Teacher Pedagogy
- Outcomes for Students with Disabilities
- Provision of FAPE in the Special Education Program
- Cost Analysis of Provision of Comprehensive Special Education Program
- Record Keeping System
- Comparative Analysis with Similar School Divisions
- Development and Functionality of the Special Education Advisory Committee (SEAC)

To ensure that each item in the Scope of Work was appropriately addressed, Evergreen developed a comprehensive work plan and methodology for the review.

Work Plan and Methodology

Evergreen's evaluation work plan was developed to address specific areas of the VBCPS Special Education Program. The evaluation work plan is structured into four phases and 14 work tasks.

- Phase I – Project Initiation (Tasks 1 and 2)
- Phase II – Diagnostic Review (Tasks 3-5)
- Phase III – Comprehensive Audit of VBCPS Special Education Program (Tasks 6-13)
- Phase IV – Project Reporting (Task 14)



Phase I, Project Initiation, included such activities as reviewing and finalizing the project work plan, schedule, and deliverables, as well as identifying potential stakeholders whose input would be solicited throughout the study. Additionally, preliminary data collection activities took place during this phase.

Phase II, Diagnostic Review, was conducted during the week of April 18, 2016. Evergreen consultants interviewed central office administrators and staff, school administrators, and teachers concerning the management and operations of Special Education operations in the Division. The diagnostic review allowed Evergreen's Team to assess Special Education operations, further develop possible information and data needs for the study, capture perceptions and input from key staff, and evaluate current operations to identify preliminary areas for potential improvements in efficiency or effectiveness.

Phase III, Comprehensive Audit of VBCPS Special Education Program, included a formal onsite review of VBCPS the week of May 2, 2016 by a team of five consultants. Prior to conducting the onsite review, each team member was provided with an extensive set of information about special education operations, available from the initial data collection and diagnostic review. During the onsite work, team members conducted a detailed review of the structure and operations in their assigned functional areas. In addition to visiting central office locations, Evergreen visited eight schools in VBCPS selected based on size, location, feeder zone, school start and end times, and representation by special education students.

Phase IV, Project Reporting, included submission of the draft and final reports. The Final Report represents Evergreen's comprehensive findings, recommendations, and commendations, and represents a culmination of the efforts completed in all previous phases. This report is divided into nine chapters, including an introductory chapter, a chapter providing peer comparison data, and seven chapters providing findings, recommendations, and commendations for each area of study.

Evergreen's approach and methodology for conducting this study included the following components:

- **Collecting and Reviewing Existing Reports and Data Sources.** Documents included organizational charts, staffing ratios, training modules, board policies and procedures, student achievement data, annual reports, annual budget and expenditure reports, and strategic plans. At the onset of evaluation activities, Evergreen submitted a list to VBCPS of 73 data elements. This list focused on items typically available in a school division's Special Education Program. Over the course of the evaluation, Evergreen consultants also requested additional items as needs arose.
- **Generating Comparisons to and Benchmarking VBCPS against Peer School Divisions.** Six peer school divisions within the Commonwealth of Virginia were selected for comparison purposes. Selected peer school divisions were:
 - Chesapeake City Schools
 - Chesterfield County Schools
 - Fairfax County Schools



- Henrico County Schools
- Loudoun County Schools
- Norfolk City Schools

The comparison data were obtained in April and May 2016. Evergreen developed a database of over 33 comparison charts with various data elements available from the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE). **Chapter 8** of this report provides additional information on peer school divisions, and comparison data can also be found throughout other chapters of the report to support findings and recommendations.

- **Conducting Interviews and Focus Groups with Administrators, Teachers, and Staff.** Evergreen conducted approximately 49 interviews and nine focus groups with Division stakeholders, including central office and school administrators, special education teachers, and other staff.
- **Conducting a Comprehensive VBCPS Special Education Parent and Staff Survey.** A comprehensive online survey was developed to obtain perceptions of internal and external stakeholders regarding special education services in VBCPS. The online survey targeted parents as well as eight different division stakeholder groups to ensure that feedback was diverse and not skewed based on the perceptions of any particular group. The stakeholder groups were parents, division administrators, program specialists and behavior analysts providing direct support to multiple schools, school administrators, non-instructional student support services staff (e.g., counselor, social worker, psychologist), special education teacher, other special education service providers/therapists (e.g., SLP, OT, PT, O&M), general education teachers, and teacher assistants.

The development of the VBCPS Special Education Survey, as well as development of the methodology for survey dissemination, started in early April 2016 and was finalized in late April 2016. Survey questions were pulled from Evergreen's survey database or developed to address specific components of the VBCPS Special Education Program. The draft survey was sent to VBCPS for review and approval as part of the development process. Upon approval, the evaluation survey was finalized and delivered via email to stakeholders on April 26, 2016, with a closure date of May 10, 2016. Thus, stakeholders had a total of 15 days to participate in the survey.

The parent survey included two demographic items—23 survey items rated on a five-point agree/disagree scale, and one item soliciting free response feedback—for a total of 26 survey items. The staff survey included four demographic items, 53 survey items rated on a five-point agree/disagree scale, and one item soliciting free response feedback—for a total of 58 survey items. The parent survey was sent to over 8,891 stakeholders. In total, 987 stakeholders participated in the online survey for a completion rate of 11.1 percent. The staff survey was sent to over 6,216 stakeholders. In total, 2,847 stakeholders participated in the online survey for a completion rate of 45.8 percent. Survey results from both surveys are used throughout various chapters of the report to support findings, and complete survey results are presented in the **Appendix** to the full report.



COMMENDATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Detailed commendations and recommendations developed as a result of Evergreen's Special Education Review in Virginia Beach City Public Schools are provided throughout the full report. In total, 29 commendations and 63 recommendations were made by the Evergreen Evaluation Team. A list of commendations and recommendations, as well as a brief summary of evaluation findings by chapter, are provided in the next section.

Organization and Staffing of Special Education

The educational service delivery of a school division depends on central office staff to serve as the support system, and provide leadership and coordination for education that is provided in the schools. The effectiveness of instructional delivery depends on factors such as organization, staffing, and procedures that have been created and are monitored in order to assure consistency of instruction and student assessment across the school division. The way in which these central office factors are designed can either support or prevent progress towards high achievement for students.

The **Commendations** in this chapter are:

- The Executive Director of the Office of Programs for Exceptional Children is commended for her systematic approach to management, supervision, and communication.
- VBCPS is commended for its adherence to special education teacher caseload requirements in schools across the Division and for being responsive to school administrator requests for assistance.
- VBCPS is commended for building strong relationships among some high school students, their families, and special education teachers through the practice of assigning a special education case manager to a student when he or she starts high school, and having that person remain with a student through to graduation.
- VBCPS case managers and counselors are commended for their active commitment to ensuring the unique needs of special education students within their schools are not overlooked and consistently expending extra time and effort communicating with students and their families.

The **Recommendations** in this chapter include:

- 2-1: Make minor changes to the organizational structure for the Office of Programs for Exceptional Children.
- 2-2: Instruct the new Financial Analyst to document all processes and procedures and make cross-training and the establishment and maintenance of a comprehensive filing system a primary duty of the position.



- 2-3: Co-locate all OPEC employees into one central location.
- 2-4: Conduct regular meetings of all central office staff involved in providing special education services.
- 2-5: Establish Division guidelines limiting the number of grade levels and content areas where special education teachers can be assigned.
- 2-6: Establish co-teaching teams that consistently work together.
- 2-7: Examine staffing of speech/language pathologists, occupational therapists, and physical therapists with respect to caseload/workload issues.
- 2-8: Curtail the use of paraprofessionals to provide specially-designed instruction in accordance with student IEPs.
- 2-9: Ensure counselors are trained in and knowledgeable about special education processes and procedures, including any intersection or connection to student response teams and the problem-solving process.
- 2-10: Require schools to establish opportunities for collaborative planning for special and general education teachers using common lesson planning tools and templates.
- 2-11: Develop guidelines for delegating responsibility among assistant principals within schools in a manner that supports increased student outcomes as well as equitable distribution of duties.
- 2-12: Establish clear guidelines at the central office level regarding the roles and responsibilities of assistant principals and program compliance support teachers (PCSTs) related to special education.
- 2-13: Establish a special education professional learning communities (PLCs) within each school to conduct self-assessments of IEPs.
- 2-14: Change the method for allocating PCST positions, moving it from school-based to an itinerant division position assigned to one or more schools.
- 2-15: Require at least one year-round staff member at each school to be trained in and knowledgeable about special education processes and procedures, and establish protocols for immediate communication with a coordinator or other central office special education staff member in the central office in the event the school-based designee is not available.

Quality and Effectiveness of Special Education Teacher Pedagogy

Across the country, states and school divisions are in the midst of powerful reform efforts transforming the face of education. In the past five years alone, most states have adopted new performance standards for students, more rigorous assessment programs, and teacher evaluation systems tied to student performance. These changes in educational accountability have come on



the heels of reform efforts designed to ensure high-quality, evidence-based instruction for all students.

The **Commendations** in this chapter are:

- VBCPS is commended for providing a significant amount of formal and informal professional development opportunities, which staff report are consistently of high quality and provide useful information.
- Special education inclusion teachers and self-contained teachers are commended for their strong commitment to their students and to strengthening their pedagogical skills and content knowledge to ensure that students receive high-quality instruction—no matter the setting.

The **Recommendations** in this chapter include:

- 3-1: Convene a workgroup from departments and offices to engage in a strategic planning process related to the next steps in the evolution of the Professional Learning Program to include learning activities that are of longer duration, more collaborative, and focused on implementation and changes in instructional behavior that lead to improved student outcomes.
- 3-2: Establish a system for regular communication between the Professional Growth and Innovation (PGI) Office and OPEC to support collaborative planning, development, and implementation of professional learning opportunities with the potential to influence the special education program and outcomes for students with disabilities.
- 3-3: Include in the division-based professional development requirements at least one mandatory session reflecting general education teacher responsibilities as the primary content area teacher for students with disabilities in their classes.
- 3-4: Provide uniform guidance regarding participation in professional development mandatory sessions when special education teachers are assigned to teach multiple subjects and multiple grade levels.
- 3-5: Assemble a core group of content and subject area specialists involved in developing professional learning content (e.g., elementary and secondary curriculum and instruction, special education, ESL).
- 3-6: Develop and implement a plan for long-range, job-embedded professional learning to support assistant principals and PCSTs—based on a clarification of delegation of duties described in Section 2.2.
- 3-7: Review the process by which school-based administrators determine the mandatory professional learning activities or topics school staff must participate in, and establish a method for aligning those requirements with individual needs of school staff.



Outcomes for Students with Disabilities

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) mandates that special education services be provided to students with disabilities (SWD) in the general education setting to the greatest extent possible. No Child Left Behind reinforces that goal with its express expectation of proficiency for all students. Section 504 of the Federal Rehabilitation Act of 1973 extended opportunity and access to all people with disabilities, including those not in special education programs. Furthering equitable treatment for all people, the 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) extended the goal of eliminating discrimination against individuals with disabilities even more. Those laws, along with advances in medical technology, have opened opportunities for more students than ever to receive their education in the public schools of the nation.

The **Commendations** in this chapter are:

- The Preschool Assessment Center is commended for its attention to individual children's developmental readiness as one aspect of placement recommendations.
- The Department of Teaching and Learning is commended for development of video assessments tailored to the needs of special education students with particular accommodations.
- Virginia Beach City Public Schools is commended for proactively beginning to develop plans to improve student achievement. A comprehensive plan should effectively close the achievement gap between student subgroups within the Division.
- Employees in OPEC and the Department of Teaching and Learning are commended for recognizing the gap between the two offices and beginning to develop processes to bridge the gap.
- VBCPS Speech Language Pathologists are commended for creating a classroom-embedded initiative that meets student speech and academic needs.
- The Technology and Career Education Center, its Director and staff are commended for the exceptional job they are doing addressing the achievement of all students and demonstrating increased improvement even as numbers of special education students increase.
- The administration and teachers of Princess Anne High School are commended for their thoughtful, comprehensive inclusion of special education students into all aspects of school life.
- Educators who have recognized the need for systematic transition planning are commended for developing tools and procedures on their own.
- VBCPS is commended for using available resources for provide job-related, experiential opportunities for its students with disabilities.



- Virginia Beach City Public Schools is commended for its collaboration with neighboring school divisions in creating PowerTrain to assist parents as their children transition through grades levels with considerations and resources.

The **Recommendations** in this chapter include:

- 4-1: Develop a comprehensive action plan addressing recommendations made in this study with respect to the achievement of special education students with timelines and accountability.
- 4-2: Involve OPEC representation purposefully as integral team members in learning walks for Tier Schools.
- 4-3: Establish a clear systemic research-based vision for the instruction of VBCPS special education students, with accountability measures, that guides all departments, staff, and schools to explicitly identify and monitor the instructional support they provide for the academic achievement of these students.
- 4-4: Collaboratively develop and implement a rigorous division-wide, research-based instructional plan that specifically and purposefully assimilates the needs of special education students and their teachers into a plan for all students.
- 4-5: Re-examine staffing positions, numbers, and responsibilities through the lens of instructional support.
- 4-6: Identify and disseminate information about exemplary practices that are tied to improved student learning.
- 4-7: Continue moving towards identifying key professional learning experiences critical for the achievement of special education students and embed special education strategies into core content and instructional offerings.
- 4-8: Develop parameters for the purchase of instructional materials intended for use with special education students.
- 4-9: Use current VBCPS proven practices and those of neighboring divisions to create division-wide mechanisms that force planning and communication to facilitate student transitions from grade to grade, from one school level to the next, and to postsecondary endeavors.
- 4-10: Re-create the position of Transition Coordinator for Special Education as a first step towards strengthening transitional processes in VBCPS.

Provision of FAPE in the Special Education Program

The foundational belief of special education under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is that all students with disabilities have the right to a free appropriate public education (FAPE) provided in the least restrictive environment (LRE) in which their needs can be met. Decisions regarding what constitutes FAPE in the LRE are made individually for each student by a team composed of professionals who teach or otherwise have knowledge of the student and the student's parents.



The **Commendations** in this chapter are:

- Virginia Beach City Public Schools is commended for its commitment to fostering inclusive placements for students with disabilities as well as ensuring students with the most significant needs are served on traditional, comprehensive school campuses to the maximum extent.
- VBCPS is commended for the culture of inclusion within the Division as a whole and across schools and grade levels.
- IEP teams in VBCPS are commended for the consideration given to developing clearly defined, individualized accommodations to meet each student's unique needs throughout the school day.
- VBCPS principals, teachers, other faculty, and staff are commended for the rigorous yet supportive and welcoming environments they foster in their schools on a daily basis.
- VBCPS is commended for its ongoing progress in increasing student performance as evidenced by meeting its annual measureable objectives for all students and proficiency gap groups.

The **Recommendations** in this chapter include:

- 5-1: Consider establishing VBCPS-operated specialized programs for students with autism and related disabilities at "cluster sites" located in schools throughout the Division.
- 5-2: Retain the student records (e.g., cumulative folders, IEPs) at the school site rather than at the Laskin Annex, for students enrolled in SECEP programs housed in VBCPS schools.
- 5-3: Develop a strategic plan of action to create formal collaborative agreements with early childhood partners within the community that support inclusive opportunities for preschool children with disabilities.
- 5-4: Improve Collaboration among the Professional Growth and Innovation (PGI) Office, OPEC, and other Division offices to expand and enhance the current training on co-teaching.
- 5-5: Convene a workgroup to investigate alternative service delivery models, including collaborative consultation and dual-certification, to meet the needs of certain students with disabilities.
- 5-6: Decrease reliance on co-teaching and expand the capacity of general education teachers to implement specially-designed instruction, accommodations, and supports in collaboration with the special education teacher.
- 5-7: Review the current IEP team process for identifying the specially-designed instruction each student needs to meet his or her unique needs, and state them in the IEP in a manner that is understandable to teachers and parents.



- 5-8: Establish VBCPS guidelines limiting the number of special education students in general education courses, taking into consideration the type of class, nature and intensity of student needs, and teacher experience.
- 5-9: Establish a list of activities, extracurricular clubs, field trips, and other special activities available at the school level during the school year and analyze participation by student groups, including students with disabilities.
- 5-10: Establish an infrastructure to create and support a seamless multi-tiered system of supports across all VBCPS schools.

Cost Analysis of Provision of Comprehensive Special Education Program

Virginia Beach City Public Schools (VBCPS) provides services to students with special needs under the primary supervision of the Office of Programs for Exceptional Children (OPEC). From a financial perspective, funding flows into the overall program from a number of sources, and funds are expended by various departments and programs that may be outside of the OPEC’s authority and oversight.

The **Commendations** in this chapter are:

- VBCPS is commended for the practice of working collaboratively when preparing the annual application and plan for the use of IDEA funds, which helped OPEC make adjustments that will ultimately improve the effectiveness and efficiency of plan implementation.
- VBCPS and the City of Virginia Beach are commended for effectively and efficiently handling Special Education and 504 legal matters by using in-house legal staff.

The **Recommendations** in this chapter include:

- 6-1: Implement a process for validating all purchases made with designated special education-related funds, to ensure that the resources are being used to benefit the children in this program.
- 6-2: Work with the Department of Technology to create an inventory of electronic devices and computers that will require upgrades or replacements over the coming years, and use this information as the basis for creating a replacement plan.
- 6-3: Plan for and attempt to rebuild the annual carryforward to be approximately five (5) percent of annual IDEA revenues.
- 6-4: Establish a team of OPEC staff, with campus-level and Finance Department representatives, to review the current internal control structure and create a workable system for ensuring adequate budgetary oversight and compliance.



- 6-5: Implement a Letter of Advisement process whereby campus leaders and the employee are formally notified in writing of Special Education or 504 complaints or other legal actions as well as the necessary corrective actions required.
- 6-6: Establish clear and measurable criteria for referring students to SECEP giving careful consideration to the Division's ability to provide appropriate services in-house in a more cost effective manner (also see **Recommendation 5-1**).
- 6-7: Work with legal counsel and obtain a copy of documented policies, board minutes, or other formally-approved documentation to ensure that VBCPS understands, is in agreement with, and complies with the terms and conditions of participation in SECEP.
- 6-8: Further reduce Temporary Educational Assistant (TEA) positions, and ensure that the hours worked by individual TEA do not automatically transform the positions to full-time, benefit-eligible employees.
- 6-9: Establish criteria and guidelines, beyond the division-wide allocation formulas, to ensure that additional special education staffing is based on identified and documented student needs.
- 6-10: Ensure that transportation-related requirements in the student's IEPs reflect actual need, and communicate with the Transportation Department regarding possible alternatives when it becomes known that hazards or travel impediments exist.
- 6-11: Work with VBCPS leaders and principals to establish a more accurate way to plan for special education transportation routing and scheduling at the beginning of each school year.
- 6-12: Obtain a clear understanding of the terms and conditions of the agreement with CPMT and make decisions regarding the continued level of use of the program for transportation services based on those terms and conditions.

Record Keeping System

Virginia Beach City Public Schools uses Edupoint Educational System's Synergy Education Platform for its education data management functions. The platform includes Synergy Special Education (Synergy SE) and Synergy Student Information System (Synergy SIS). The two systems and the Division's electronic gradebook are linked, allowing them to communicate with one another. VBCPS began using Synergy in 2011, and has worked closely with Edupoint to customize the product for Virginia users in general and VBCPS in particular. A Virginia user group was established as a stakeholder advisory group. They meet several times a year via conference call or a virtual meeting to discuss new developments and updates to the system. Conflicts among the different divisions within the State that use Synergy arise at times as a result of differences in local policies and procedures, but they have been able to work out their differences through customized development.



The **Commendations** for in this chapter are:

- VBCPS is commended for its use of a centralized web-based special education management system that focuses on quality as well as procedural compliance, and for supporting its implementation through training, technical assistance, and dedicated staff.
- VBCPS is commended for its policy of providing prior written notice concurrent with every IEP to ensure that parents have the information they need to provide informed consent regarding implementation of a new IEP.
- Virginia Beach City Public Schools is commended for its robust parent participation policies and ongoing efforts to encourage parent attendance at IEP team meetings.

The **Recommendations** in this chapter include:

- 7-1: Provide training to IEP teams regarding the roles and responsibilities of each team member.
- 7-2: Enhance the current guidance for conducting IEP team meetings to strengthen the message that all components of the draft IEP will be discussed and are open for revision.
- 7-3: Ensure that ample time is provided during IEP meetings for thorough discussion and vetting of ideas.
- 7-4: Consider implementing facilitated IEP team meetings to provide more focused, positive, and productive IEP team meetings—particularly when experience indicates a team may struggle to achieve consensus.
- 7-5: Establish a workgroup to review current policy and guidance to verify that the message being communicated to IEP teams reflects the intent of standards-based IEPs.

Development and Functionality of the Special Education Advisory Committee (SEAC)

The RFP for this study calls for a “Review of the development and functionality of the Special Education Advisory Committee (SEAC) as outlined by the Virginia Department of Education VAC 20-81-230 D.” The Virginia General Assembly created SEAC under VAC 20-81-230 D. Unlike many other division advisory committees, SEAC’s responsibilities are specified in state law.

The **Commendations** for this chapter are:

- The Special Education Advisory Committee is commended for preparing the prospective/new member orientation packet.
- SEAC is commended for hosting the Community Resource Fair and Disabilities Awareness Month.



- OPEC and SEAC recognize that they need to make concerted efforts to improve their working relationship for the benefit of students with disabilities in the VBCPS community.

The **Recommendations** in this chapter include:

- 9-1: Develop a plan, with annual goals and objectives, as to how SEAC will comply with its roles and responsibilities as specified in law.
- 9-2: Conduct a survey of SEAC members to determine the most effective and preferred time for meetings and abide by Roberts Rules of Order in conducting meetings.
- 9-3: Expand the current membership of the SEAC to include additional parents and community agency representatives.
- 9-4: Conduct an annual self-assessment of the Special Education Advisory Committee.

REPORT ORGANIZATION

The Final Report flows in the same sequence as the RFP requirements. The Final Report consists of the following nine chapters:

- Chapter 1: Introduction
- Chapter 2: Organization and Staffing of Special Education
- Chapter 3: Quality and Effectiveness of Special Education Teacher Pedagogy
- Chapter 4: Outcomes for Students with Disabilities
- Chapter 5: Provision of FAPE in the Special Education Program
- Chapter 6: Cost Analysis of Provision of Comprehensive Special Education Program
- Chapter 7: Record Keeping System
- Chapter 8: Comparative Analysis with Similar School Divisions
- Chapter 9: Development and Functionality of the Special Education Advisory Committee (SEAC)
- Appendices:
 - Appendix A: Staff Survey Results
 - Appendix B: Parent Survey Results

