

# ACPS SEAC Annual Report

## 2021-22

After the exceptionally difficult task of adapting to the challenges of COVID, we wish to again express our gratitude and support for all the teachers, staff, and administrators who have worked so hard to educate, accommodate, and encourage our students. Our students are fortunate to have such dedicated adults as part of their support network.

The Special Education Advisory Committee respectfully requests the ACPS School Board continue to support our students, families, and professionals by considering the following recommendations.

### 1. Increase special education training for all teachers:

We are recommending this support again because studies show “96% of students with disabilities spend at least part of their day in general education classes, and general education teachers serve as the teacher of record on students’ Individualized Education Programs,”<sup>1</sup> and “Less than 1 in 5 general education teachers feel ‘very well prepared’ to teach students with mild to moderate learning disabilities, including ADHD and dyslexia, according to a new survey from two national advocacy groups.”

<sup>2</sup> We request that the training be offered during work hours and not on evenings or weekends.

Albemarle County Public Schools requires, consistent with the Virginia Code,

- Mandatory Dyslexia Awareness Training – Effective July 1, 2017, for every person seeking initial licensure or renewal of a license shall complete awareness training, provided by VDOE, on the indicators of dyslexia, as that term is defined by the board pursuant to regulations, and the evidence-based interventions and accommodations for dyslexia.
  - <https://doe.virginia.gov/teaching/licensure/dyslexia-training/index.shtml>
- All individuals seeking initial licensure – as well as license renewal – to complete a child abuse recognition and intervention course that meets Board of Education approved guidelines.
  - [https://doe.virginia.gov/teaching/licensure/child\\_abuse\\_training.shtml](https://doe.virginia.gov/teaching/licensure/child_abuse_training.shtml)
- All individuals seeking initial licensure - as well as license renewal - complete a series of modules to inform Virginia school personnel on the Regulations Governing the Use of Seclusion and Restraint in Public Elementary and Secondary Schools in Virginia. These free, on demand, online modules focus on developing school personnel skills related to positive behavior support, conflict prevention, de-escalation, and crisis response. There are five modules in the series, which include a General Overview of Restraint and Seclusion, Policies and Procedures, Safe and Supportive School Environments, Conflict Resolution and De-Escalation, Preventing the Use of Restraint and Seclusion, and Returning the Student to the Learning Environment after Restraint or Seclusion. Additionally, Albemarle County Public Schools offers more intensive non-violent crisis intervention training to special education staff and administration who supervise special education programs throughout the year. These events are open to general education teachers, who are encouraged to attend.
  - <https://cieesodu.org/initiatives/restraint-and-seclusion/>
- The Virginia Department of Education has announced an upcoming (new) requirement for all teachers seeking initial licensure as well as those teachers renewing their licensure in curricular / instructional design to promote the increased achievement and inclusion of students with

disabilities. This is expected to be available to teachers at all times through on-line modules. Albemarle County Public Schools intends to promote and include this new requirement as part of its licensure and professional development activities.

- Albemarle County Public Schools will commit within the next 8 months to develop on-line modules that explain the role of the general education teacher's role in the classroom as well as IEP Meetings, and provide resources detailing various disabling conditions. These modules, along with all the others noted above, will be posted for asynchronous access for professional development through the Albemarle County Professional Development Website that are available to staff on evenings, weekends, and during school breaks.

## 2. Improve teacher retention:

While every division employee is valuable, our teachers are our greatest asset. As a division, we spend a substantial sum attracting and training all teachers, especially those in special education. The pandemic, standardized testing, reporting requirements, staffing shortages, and increased mental health challenges have all accelerated teacher burnout. Typical teacher attrition has been about 8%, but recent studies have shown that up to 20% of teachers "have left or are actively considering leaving teaching."<sup>3</sup>

Albemarle County Public Schools is committed to the retention of all staff who deliver services to students with disabilities. Collaboration between departments and schools will continue as we all face the challenges related to the field of teaching and retaining quality instructional, related services and support staff.

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<sup>1</sup> **Preparing General Education Teachers to Improve Outcomes for Students With Disabilities**

<sup>2</sup> Prepared for AACTE and NCLD by Linda P. Blanton, Marleen C. Pugach, and Lani Florian, April 2011

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/most-classroom-teachers-feel-unprepared-to-support-students-with-disabilities/2019/05>

<https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/opinion-will-the-pandemic-drive-teachers-out-of-the-profession-what-one-study-says/2021/08>

### **3. Enhance accessibility:**

Albemarle County schools need more wheelchair ramps, more elevators, and additional accessibility supports. For example, Murray needs a ramp at the front of the building so students with disabilities don't have to enter from a different door than their typically-abled peers. Several schools need additional elevators so students do not have to travel the length of the building to change classes and so there are alternate elevators in case of malfunctions. We ask that an internal accessibility audit be conducted and that accessibility be a top priority for future construction and renovations.

Albemarle County Public Schools is committed to providing access for individuals with disabilities to all Albemarle County Public Schools facilities and functions. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) has been incorporated into all the new building and construction projects as required by law. Communications with the SEAC, the concern in this issue was described not so much as compliance with ADA as it is with enhancements in order to go beyond compliance to address our commitment to inclusion and creating a welcoming environment to all students, families, staff and members of our community.

Albemarle County Public Schools is committed to identify three sites to "walk through" and review accessibility by July 1, 2023. A team to include a special education administrator, representative from building services and an administrator from the building will make up the core review team. A representative of SEAC will be invited to attend the review.

### **4. Reduce school transitions for special education students:**

Currently, in Albemarle County, some students are being transported to schools outside their neighborhoods when service programs change. Parents have expressed concerns that their children with disabilities are being sent to different schools, sometimes as often as annually, as services shift throughout the county. When possible, we feel students would be better served in the schools attended by their siblings and neighbors. More importantly, we ask that families be included in the discussion of moving a student to a school away from their home. We request a standardized transition process be put in place to ensure consistency and fairness in the procedure when this change is necessary..

Parents are asking SEAC members the following questions:

**Is this the same class and school my child would attend if she or he did not have a disability?**

**How many students without disabilities are sent to another school without parental input?**

**What services would not be provided if my child were to attend our neighborhood school?**

**Why was this decision not discussed with us in advance?**

We are recommending ACPS review its placement policy and consider a more flexible policy on special education placements that prioritizes the child's successes and family relationships with school personnel.

A few students in Albemarle County Public Schools are not educated in their neighborhood schools because the specialized services are not available in their school. In such cases, students are educated in the next closest school that has the resources the student needs in order to receive a free and appropriate public education. There are several reasons this occurs:

- There is not a group of students needing similar services at the neighborhood school to support creating a model program;
- The program at the child's neighborhood school is at capacity and adding the child to the group would set the caseload beyond those prescribed by the Virginia Regulations and local best practices.

Albemarle County Public Schools would like to clarify that such utilization of resources is not a “policy” as much as a practice that is consistent with the Virginia Regulations and the Code of Virginia as well as case law. Additionally, staffing structures, included in the School Board Budget documentation drives the responsible utilization of resources. Additionally, the Regulations Governing Special Education Programs in Virginia also defines staffing allocations to support students with disabilities in neighborhood schools.

Albemarle County Public Schools, particularly the Department of Special Education, only proposes moving students outside of their neighborhood schools as a last resort. For example, caseloads are collected, reviewed and analyzed for a potential to start a program in a neighborhood school where a particular service does not exist. This has been evidenced by the number of A-BASE models that have grown at all levels (i.e. elementary, middle and high) to meet student needs. Only when there is not a group of students at the neighborhood school to support the allocation of a staffing model program are students enrolled and provided special education and related services at another public school building.

Albemarle County Public Schools does not implement this for B-BASE programs, and instead either works with the neighborhood school to develop a B-BASE model at the neighborhood school or develop other support systems to support the child at their neighborhood school.

Similar to A-BASE, the C-BASE model (serves students who require significant curricular adaptations / modifications), has grown at all levels to meet students' needs. Only when there is not a group of students at the neighborhood school to support the allocation of a staffing model program are students enrolled and provided special education and related services at another public school building.

Similarly, students with disabilities served by the generalist special educator are served at their neighborhood schools, as per their Individualized Education Programs.

Albemarle County Public Schools will continue to talk with families earlier when a child may potentially be educated in a program outside of their neighborhood school and promote and offer transition services to children who will not be attending their neighborhood schools in the following year. The Department of Special Education will continue to only enroll and serve students outside of their neighborhood school as a last resort, considering all other alternatives, consistent with practices that has established a relationship of trust with the Superintendent and School Board with regard to the utilization of resources.

The Special Education Advisory Committee appreciates the consideration of these recommendations in discussion of funding priorities and programming for the next academic year and beyond. We would like to thank Kevin Kirst, Katy Compel, and the entire Special Education Department for their continuing commitment to our students. Thank you also to the school board for allowing us to share this report.

This report was prepared by SEAC vice-chairperson Stephanie Hicks, with input from the SEAC membership. A draft of the document was sent by electronic mail to the SEAC on January 8, 2022, and finalized following the monthly meeting on March 8, 2022..