

ALBEMARLE COUNTY SPECIAL EDUCATION ADVISORY COMMITTEE
2006-2007 REPORT TO THE SCHOOL BOARD
April 26, 2007

Chairperson Friedman, Members of the Board, and Dr. Moran,

My name is Mark McLane, and I represent Greer Elementary School on the Albemarle County Special Education Advisory Committee (SEAC) and serve as Chair. We would like to express our appreciation to the School Board for your support of special education. Board members are always welcome to attend our meetings.

We also want to take this opportunity to express our thanks to Kevin Kirst, Director of Special Education and Student Services, to the special education coordinators, Deborah Morris, Patrick Farrell, and Phyllis Kasonik, and to the entire special education staff throughout the Division. Mr. Kirst and the coordinators attend our meetings unless arrangements have been made for a parent only meeting. Mr. Kirst has been responsive to our requests for information, generally by giving presentations at our next meeting.

Formal Staff Presentations 2006-2007

- Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act – 2004 and Albemarle County Public Schools
- Review of Special Education Exit Data – Graduation Rates, Diploma Type
- Review of Statewide Assessment Data – Participation Rates
- Review of Disability Categories
- School Based Intervention Teams
- IDEIA and 2006 Regulations (Descriptions and Implementation Commentary)
 - Consent
 - Developmental Delay
 - Learning Disabilities
 - IEP Related Changes
 - Due Process
 - Discipline

SEAC objectives, as described by the Virginia Department of Education, include identifying unmet needs in the education of children with disabilities and assisting in the development of priorities and strategies for meeting the identified needs. As critical stakeholders, the SEAC can play a positive role in assisting the Division in shaping services for students with disabilities. When the SEAC operates well, it can be an important and useful tool for both the families and school divisions in improving services and outcomes.

The Division benefits from the involvement and input of family and community. This committee enjoys a collaborative working relationship with the County Special Education staff. We aim to help them stay abreast of the needs and expectations of the students, families and communities they serve. We evaluate the services offered in order to offer insight and candid recommendations on what works and what does not—our sole intention being to further improve the overall high quality of Albemarle County special education programs.

SEAC Recommendations from the 2005-2006 Report

1. The Director of Special Education and Student Services should assess social skill instruction in all modalities, structured and unstructured, in all schools. The results of the assessment should be evaluated and shared. A plan for consistent availability of social skill instruction and support (similar to the standardized program availability in each middle and high school) should be developed and implemented in all county schools.
2. A SEAC brochure should be produced and distributed to schools and the PREP/Parent Resource Center.
3. The Office of Community Engagement should pursue electronic communication with all parents, with promotion of SEAC as one goal.
4. Principals of all schools should contact the families involved with special education services to secure a representative to the SEAC.
5. The Superintendent should communicate with the Director of Special Education and Student Services as to which of the SEAC recommendations should be implemented and continue to monitor action on the recommendations.

The following section reviews these previous recommendations and includes new recommendations made this year.

1. *Implement a formal and consistent social skills program available to all schools*

As part of the 2005-2006 Report to the School Board, the SEAC recommended that the Director of Special Education and Student Services should assess social skill instruction in all modalities, structured and unstructured, in all schools. To this end, the Director created a 9-question survey that was distributed to special education teachers and staff throughout the County school system. A copy of the survey results accompanies this report.

The SEAC believes that the survey responses support the concerns heard through public feedback, namely that a plan for formal and consistent availability of social skill instruction and support should be developed and implemented in all county schools. The plan should incorporate proven research-based methods and demonstrated Best Practices.

78% of the survey respondents indicated that at least some of their students with special needs require social skills training. 8% indicated that they used purely formal intervention methods, and 5% indicated that the Speech and Language Pathologist was the person most responsible for delivering social skills training/interventions. 55% indicated the need for staff development in the area of social skills training, and 45% indicated the need for materials in order to deliver social skills training.

As one special education teacher responded, "Our school desperately needs school-wide, consistent social skills training".

Or as another respondent put it, "As the speech person, I am expected to run social skills groups but have had absolutely zero training in this area and feel highly unqualified to do so. I think most of us speech people just 'wing it' with these groups/kids".

The SEAC suggests that a county-wide working committee with representation from each school be established to evaluate available proven methods and to identify "success stories". Diane Cavanaugh, the Autism Specialist with PREP/Parent Resource Center, has assisted middle school students in Fluvanna, Albemarle and Charlottesville with social skills instruction and would be a valuable resource. Teachers and staff who have been identified as demonstrating successful "best practice" techniques could share their methods.

We suggest that each school select a discipline--be it school psychology, speech and language, guidance counseling, special or regular education—that will be charged with choosing and implementing a formal, consistent program for social skills instruction. Part of this implementation should include organizing access to training in the program for teachers and staff. We feel the Teacher Pre-week is an ideal time to provide such sessions.

Although the issue of having friends is not directly related to education, social skills are important for all face-to-face communication and can play a role in accessing the curriculum. They include such simple issues as making eye contact and speaking when spoken to, and deficits can impact learning and interactions in the classroom, laboratories, gymnasiums and hallways of schools. Attention must be given to ensure that students with special needs in particular have social skill support in their schools to prepare them for further education and employment.

2. *SEAC Brochure*

A brochure was produced and has been available since September 2006. Sarah Blech, PREP/Parent Resource Center Coordinator, has made brochures available to parents attending her workshops. Many schools have placed them in prominent places such as outside the main office door. Feedback regarding the brochure has been positive.

3. *The Office of Community Engagement will assist with promotion of SEAC to parents*

At a presentation during the 2005-2006 school year by Chris Dyer, we asked how the Office of Community Engagement could help promote the SEAC. Mr. Dyer mentioned that parents will be asked in August of 2006 to give their email addresses if they wish to receive information via electronic newsletters. Mr. Dyer suggested that it might be possible to add a line that parents could check if they were interested in receiving information on special education issues.

We are not aware of any activity over the past academic year to promote SEAC electronically by the Office of Community Engagement. Mr. Kirst has added a SEAC web page to the county public schools' site. While we appreciate the information being readily available, we believe that many parents are not aware of SEAC and would not be looking for the information. Many parents are unaware of the resources available through PREP/Parent Resource Center. We would welcome any opportunity to work with someone assigned to communications from the office of Community Engagement toward the Strategic Plan vision of empowered parents who function as partners with school staff and administration.

4. *Improve Effectiveness of—and School Representation in—the SEAC*

An ongoing challenge of the SEAC is to achieve representation from *all* schools in the County. This is critical for the SEAC to fulfill its commitment as voices for the special education community in Albemarle County Schools. This year, Pre-School Programs and 5 schools (including 2 high schools) had no representation on the committee. Certain parent representatives volunteered this year to serve as surrogates for these schools lacking representation but we do not feel this is an adequate long-term solution.

We appreciate efforts by the Board and administration to encourage principals to make contact with the families in their schools with children with special needs and to gain representation from each school. To augment these efforts, the committee plans to take a more active role in recruiting new SEAC members. One plan under consideration is to create a SEAC representative job description and cover letter which, along with the SEAC brochure newly published this school year, can be included as part of the information packet given to parents during the annual IEP meetings in the spring. These materials can also be mailed to parents by the lead special education teacher at each school.

The committee recommends that administrators from each school be required to work persistently to get a representative identified for their school for the following school year no later than May 1st. This new list should be made available to the SEAC chairperson by June 1st with contact information for each member. This will give SEAC adequate time to target schools lacking representation by, for example, attending Open House and Back to School Nights to help advertise the committee and recruit new members.

The committee spent time this year reflecting on how to be more effective in advertising the existence and role of SEAC. One recommendation is to initiate SEAC meetings in August instead of September. This will allow more time to organize, orient new members, establish an agenda of concerns targeted for investigation for the calendar year, and to be available for attendance at Open House and Back to School Nights to promote the continued goal of informing parents and school staff of the SEAC existence and role.

The committee is also considering ways to more effectively and consistently gather input from parents and staff for the purpose of identifying unmet needs. One plan is to encourage each member to establish a working relationship with the lead special education teacher at his/her school, and to hold regular meetings throughout the school year. The lead teacher provides a valuable conduit through which communication can travel from parents and staff to the SEAC representative and vice versa.

Another plan under consideration for helping to identify unmet needs is to organize open forums at each school at least twice a year in which families can be invited to discuss questions and concerns regarding special education services. The creation of smaller, informal focus groups consisting of families, teachers, administrators and students are also being considered. The support of each school's administration in these endeavors will be critical.

We feel that our participation in the SEAC has educated and empowered us to advocate more effectively for our children. Most of us have had the experience of teachers stating that it is a pleasure to work with informed

parents. We believe that awareness of and participation in the SEAC by more parents will facilitate that collaboration.

5. Implementation of Recommendations

At the May 2006 SEAC meeting, Mr. Kirst reviewed his plan on implementation of SEAC recommendations included in the School Board report. We appreciated his timely response to our recommendations, and he has stated that he intended to make this an on-going practice.

SEAC Recommendations for 2006-2007 Report

We offer the following additional recommendations and suggestions for the 2007 report, and look forward to partnering with the Special Education administration in exploring these areas further:

1. Formalize Parent-Teacher Communication Method as part of IEP

One concern we hear repeatedly is the need for regular communication between school and parents. This is especially an issue when students reach middle and high schools and there are several teachers and subjects. SEAC suggests that a menu of options be developed that parents and teachers (both special and regular) can use for consistent communication. For example:

- Daily or weekly notebooks or envelopes (this seems to work for younger kids, but not older ones)
- Daily or weekly emails
- Weekly phone calls (at a set time)

There can be a check list format, narrative format, or some mix developed from Individualized Education Program (IEP) goals. The selected communication method should be formally included as part of the IEP to ensure consistency, and should be one that is sufficiently efficient for both parent and teachers alike.

We feel that having an agreed-upon method and timetable for teacher/parent communication can best facilitate home and school collaboration and keep parents much more involved in their child's progress and in identifying areas of concern before they become a crisis.

2. Increase Parent Understanding of School Based Intervention Teams (SBIT)

This year Kevin Kirst presented an extensive presentation on School Based Intervention Teams (SBIT) as a new part of the Child Study process. The revamp of Child Study, which includes SBIT, presents itself as an option for students who are challenged, struggling, or possibly not yet identified with special needs to get help through a personal learning plan (PLP) developed by a team of teachers, parents, and administrators who are familiar with the needs of the student referred.

A great number of question and answer sessions have come up in our meetings this year regarding the SBIT process. While recognizing that this is a new process for schools, teachers, administrators, and also parents, the Committee has heard concerns this year regarding lack of understanding of the process, access and availability, development of personal learning plans (PLP), and continuity of how SBIT is being implemented in each of the schools.

SEAC would like to continue to work with the Special Education administration to explore and share information on how this process is meeting the needs of our special population or the needs of those students who have not been identified. Parents are often the first experts regarding their children and often the first to recognize problems that may impede learning.

Our committee further recommends increasing the availability and visibility of information to the school community, parents, and families regarding the SBIT process--what it is, it's purpose, and how referrals can be made. **This information can be effectively communicated via the Albemarle County Public Schools opening newsletter** that is mailed out to all at the start of the coming 2007-08 school year and by the Principal at each school during the Open House event.

3. *Ensure Inclusion of SPED Students in the Implementation of Goals of the Strategic Plan*

Just as schools have a duty to try to include students with disabilities in general education and to provide the least restrictive environment for learning, so too must the Division ensure that the needs of students receiving special services are included alongside those of regular education students as the goals of the Strategic Plan are implemented.

We have heard concerns from parents of students with special needs that this is not always the case. For instance, the Strategic Plan calls for the creation of learning environments that “work”. Ideally, the special education resource rooms should be located physically adjacent to regular education classrooms, and not relegated to a separate area of the school. This will encourage inclusion, allow resource teachers quick and easier access to regular classroom teachers, encourage communication, make students feel more connected to their peers, and avoid the immediate identification by peers as being a student receiving special services.

The Plan also demands that schools must ask what can be done to eliminate persistent educational inequality. We are concerned that middle and high school students do not have adequate access to trained specialists in their particular area of weakness. We are concerned that in many cases reading specialists are not available for students to work with in middle school: while there are reading specialists, some parents have been told that they are there to assist other teachers.

The Plan specifies that the County will strategically invest in teaching and learning innovations, and will move the community toward a vision of high quality educational opportunities *for all*. We feel this is especially critical in Special Education, where we must constantly be on the lookout for new ways of doing things, for new best practices and expectations, new avenues by which teachers at schools that are achieving success in a particular area can communicate their methods to their colleagues. A parent of a child with special needs learns quickly that success is often achieved through trial-and-error and that they cannot be afraid to try new things.

4. *Investigate Need For Locating Resource Rooms Near Regular Education Rooms*

Also brought to the attention of SEAC is the request for study skills/resource classes in the high school to be integrated within other educational departments for the following reasons: Segregating students and placing them in classrooms in close proximity to one another and/or solely used for these support services violates a student's confidentiality. For example, at Albemarle High School, one area of the first floor is known as the "SPED wing". Other students know that individuals entering those classrooms are special education students. Integrating study skills/resource classrooms with basic departments such as English, Math, Science, or History would put students and resource teachers closer to the regular education classrooms. Resource and regular education teachers would have better opportunities for collaboration, especially in situations where the student with an IEP is not in a collaborative model classroom for a challenging subject. Resource teachers would have quick and easy access to the materials and books that support students with disabilities. More importantly, not all special education teachers are specially trained in every subject area, yet they are responsible for supporting the students on their caseload so they can be successful in all of their classes. Integrating and placing study skills/resource classrooms within core departments will give these teachers access to the staff and support that can provide these supports.

(Example: A student with a learning disability that significantly impedes their ability to do math is struggling in Algebra and needs support understanding some problems; however, the study skills/resource teacher doesn't understand the problem himself since his forte is English and not Math. This student and teacher could quickly call on the support of other teachers or quickly access the resources if they are in closer proximity of the Math department.)

5. *Match Student Needs With Staff Skills*

This also brings us to the need of carefully placing students based on individual disabilities with those Study Skills/Resource Staff that are most highly qualified to manage those students and the primary area their disability affects. (Example: A student with a disability that primarily affects reading would be better placed with a study skills/resource teacher that is more highly qualified in that discipline. A student with more physical disabilities

may be better placed with a Study Skills/Resource teacher that has a background in physical education, adaptive PE, or Occupational therapy. We recognize that special education staff cannot be highly qualified in every subject area, yet they have the responsibility to support our resource students in every subject. Carefully placing students with specialists based on Present levels of Performance and integrating classrooms so teachers and resources are in close proximity is a solution that puts our schools closer to meeting students individual needs. We hope every effort will be made to support this change expressed by both students and special education teachers.

6. Increase Staffing Levels for Transition Support

Based on a recent interview with high school special education staff, the need to increase transition specialists from part time to full time in each of the high schools has been expressed as a current need. A new requirement, known as Indicator 14, require schools to report "percent of youth who had IEPs, are no longer in secondary school and who have been competitively employed, enrolled in some type of postsecondary school, or both, within one year of leaving high school." Gathering this information will take considerable time in the form of exit interviews and gathering data, all of which are important. None the less, this is increased time away from students who require the time of transition personnel to meet IEP goals.

Currently all students do not have the direction and support of transition personnel. Much of the time of these specialists is spent with a limited number of students because of the time consuming responsibility of arranging appointments and scheduling with the Department of Rehabilitative Services (DRS). Part-time staffing does not allow opportunities for transition specialists to meet with all students preparing for transition and is limited to a small special education population. This support is particularly important for students of all disabilities, including those with goals for secondary education such as college, university, business schools, apprenticeship programs, or job placement and training post high school. Virginia is noted for having the poorest funding of support services beyond high school for individuals with disabilities, which makes this support through the schools that more critical.

In conclusion, I thank once again the Board and Administration for your past support and look forward to cooperative action on our new recommendations.