

Albemarle County Special Education Advisory

Annual Report

By Mark McLane, Chairperson

April 4, 2008

The Albemarle County Special Education Advisory (SEAC) is pleased to present to the School Board its Annual Report for the 2007-2008 School Year.

I. Overview

The functions of the SEAC, as specified by *Regulations Governing Special Education Programs For Children With Disabilities In Virginia [8 VAC 20-80-90 E.2]*, are to:

- a. Advise the local school division of unmet needs in the education of children with disabilities;
- b. Assist the local school division in the formulation and development of plans for improving performance of children with disabilities specified in subdivision B 1 b of this section;
- c. Participate in the development of priorities and strategies for meeting the identified needs of children with disabilities;
- d. Submit periodic reports and recommendations regarding the education of children with disabilities to the division superintendent for transmission to the local school board;
- e. Assist the local school division in interpreting plans to the community for meeting the special needs of children with disabilities for educational services; and
- f. Review the policies and procedures for the provision of special education and related services prior to submission to the local school board and the Virginia Department of Education.

The Albemarle County SEAC consists primarily of parents of children in the Albemarle County school system receiving special education services. Two members are parents of students in County schools with professional connection to special education. Meetings are held on the 4th Tuesday of each month during the school year at the County Office Building, and are open to the public.

Information is received by the SEAC primarily through contact and interviews with families and Division staff outside of meetings by members, who then present to the SEAC.

Information is also received during SEAC meetings through presentations by and discussions with Special Education Director Kevin Kirst and his staff. Mr. Kirst and staff serve as consultants to the SEAC and attend all meetings which are not designated "Parent-only" meetings.

A period for public comment is also reserved during SEAC meetings.

II. Highlights

The SEAC wishes to highlight and acknowledge the following accomplishments of the special education community:

- The 1st Annual *Live and Learn Parent Conference and Resource Fair* was held on March 8, 2008 at the

Parent Resource Center (PRC) in Ivy Creek Elementary School. This event was a joint effort between Sarah Blech of the PRC and her staff, and representatives from SEACs in the Piedmont region. Particular praise belongs to Ms. Blech for her outstanding work in bringing this event to fruition. It featured workshops with special education professionals and representatives from dozens of special education-oriented organizations. Feedback was universally positive and turn-out strong, and this wonderful event is an example of how the special education families, community and School Division can partner to share information and resources.

- In 2007, Albemarle County Schools began a pilot program at selected elementary schools that unified preschool-aged children from various groups: Bright Stars, Title I Preschool, and the Early Childhood Special Education Programs. Under this new classroom model, with class sizes set at a maximum of 16 students, all at-risk preschoolers are instructed together by a head teacher and a teacher's assistant, and receive needed services during the course of their school day. In prior years, children with special needs would have had to receive preschool education in a separate setting. Response to this program has been positive, and the SEAC is pleased that the program will be expanded and implemented at more elementary schools in the future. The SEAC wishes to praise the efforts of the Special Education department for implementing more inclusive opportunities for our preschool children receiving services.
- During the 2006-2007 School Year, Albemarle County continued to perform above State averages for academic performance for students with disabilities (State Report Card for Albemarle County Public Schools). The SEAC applauds the Special Education departments for this accomplishment.
- The SEAC applauds the Special Education department for increasing its support and expertise in the areas of alternate and alternative assessments for students with disabilities.

III. Recommendations

In a spirit of partnership with the School Board and Division, the SEAC respectfully offers the following recommendations:

1. ***We recommend that the Division allocate \$500.00 to ensure adequate funding for SEAC brochure and incidental materials printing.***

The SEAC advocated strongly in recent years for the development and printing of a brochure that describes what the SEAC is and the role it plays in the lives of special education families. Feedback from the community regarding these brochures has been overwhelmingly positive, and for an organization still battling a general lack of awareness of its purpose and even existence, it has proved an extremely important "advertising" tool.

The SEAC also makes occasional ad-hoc printing requests throughout the school year to support communication to the special education community; for example, flyers for the annual Parent Resource Center Special Education Conference and Resource Fair in March 2008. Mr. Kirst estimates that \$500.00 is an adequate amount to cover the costs of both brochure printing and ad-hoc printing requests.

We are pleased that Mr. Kirst has agreed to work with the SEAC by utilizing existing funds to support communication and SEAC work not to exceed \$500.00 for the 2008-2009 School Year.

2. ***We recommend that the Division work with the SEAC to develop and distribute annual surveys targeting both special education families and staff working regularly with special education students, in order to assess needs.***

A tactical goal of the SEAC is to increase the opportunities for receiving information from the various special education stakeholders, in order to more accurately assess the needs of the community and to prioritize.

The creation of a family survey which is mutually satisfactory to both the Division and the SEAC, and which gathers feedback on special education services provided, would greatly enhance the SEAC's ability to "get a read" on the important issues.

Due to privacy restrictions, the SEAC may not, of course, approach directly the families of children receiving services. However, with the cooperation of the Division, such a survey could be distributed to these families.

The SEAC also recommends that a similar survey be created to gather feedback from staff such as regular and special education teachers, school administrators, speech/language pathologists, school psychologists, occupational therapists, and teachers' assistants. Invaluable information can be gathered from those working directly with the students, and the format of an anonymous survey would provide a means to receive frank feedback.

It should be pointed out that the intention of these surveys would be to assist the SEAC in identifying areas for focused attention in order to improve services and outcomes, and it is hoped they would be viewed in this positive way.

The SEAC suggests that the use of specialized survey-creation and data-collection software already owned by the Division be leveraged for this purpose.

3. ***We recommend that the Division schedule round-table discussions with special education stakeholders to discuss the proposed changes to the Virginia Special Education Regulations.***

The Virginia Department of Education is in the process of updating the *Regulations Governing Special Education Programs For Children With Disabilities In Virginia*, which must be revised to comply with the changes outlined in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEA '04).

As of this writing, the draft is under review by the Governor's Office, to be followed by a 60-day formal period of public comment (though the Department of Education is accepting ongoing public input). Implementation is targeted for end of 2008 or early 2009.

A draft copy of the regulations and related materials can be found at <http://www.doe.virginia.gov/VDOE/dueproc/regulationsCWD.html>.

While many of the proposed changes are applauded, several have caused alarm and confusion in the special education community. One proposed change, for example, removes a safeguard currently enforced in Virginia which is above and beyond that required by federal law. Under the proposed regulations,

"Parental consent is not required before...any partial or complete termination of special education" (8 VAC 20-81-170.E.2)

Individual committee members have expressed the concern that this represents the loss of a precious and unique right for families, and an example of a general trend toward eroding parental rights and protections. Proponents of the change meanwhile point to the increased flexibility this affords the Division to remove the special education label from children when possible; that families would retain full Due Process rights under the new Regulations to appeal any such decision; that because of this right to Due Process, the Division must have complete confidence that the decision to terminate a particular service is legitimate and supportable.

The SEAC has concluded that as a group it cannot take a position on this and other such controversial proposed changes, due to a need for further information and lack of understanding of the rationale behind these proposals.

The SEAC urges that a round-table discussion be organized to include representatives from the

Division, the SEAC, and School Board--and ideally a representative from the Virginia Department of Education--in order to open dialogue regarding these controversial changes.

The SEAC expresses its concern that lack of understanding in the parent community regarding these proposed changes may polarize the parent community and Division.

4. We recommend the Division adopt a recruiting goal of creating diversity in SEAC membership.

In one of the proposed changes to the Special Education Regulations, the Virginia Department of Education has introduced the goal of creating diversity in the SEAC member population:

"The committee shall include representation of gender and the ethnic population of the local school division". [8 VAC 20-80-90 E.2]

The SEAC welcomes this proposed change. If locating representatives of a particular population to serve on the SEAC proves challenging, then formal partnerships with organizations that serve these populations should be a goal.

For example, a representative from the International and ESOL Program might be invited to serve as a consultant to SEAC and attend regular meetings.

The SEAC also suggests that diversity across disability categories be increased. The SEAC lacks representation in such disability categories as Deaf-blindness, Hearing Impairment, Emotional Disturbance and Mental Retardation. Individuals who can represent these populations should be invited to serve on the SEAC.

Diversity of representation by school should continue to be fostered. School representation on the SEAC was increased in the 2007-2008 School Year, due in part to efforts by Mr. Kirst urging principals to identify representatives to serve on the Committee. We thank Mr. Kirst for these efforts.

This year, of the 17 Elementary Schools (including Pre-School Programs), 11 are represented on the SEAC. The following 6 Elementary schools lack representation:

- Broadus Wood
- Scottsville
- Stone-Robinson
- Stony Point
- Woodbrook
- Yancey

2 of the 5 Middle Schools are represented. The following 3 schools lack representation:

- Burley
- Henley
- Walton

2 of the 4 High Schools are represented. The following 2 schools lack representation:

- Western Albemarle
- Murray

We request that the Division supply the SEAC with the Member List of school representatives for the 2008-2009 School Year by August 15, 2008. This will give the SEAC time to focus its own recruitment efforts at events such as Back To School nights for those schools lacking representation.

5. We recommend that the Board study Virginia House Joint Resolution No. 105, which aims to identify and evaluate how best to provide services for diagnosing, treating and managing autism spectrum disorders in Virginia.

Sponsored by Del. Shannon Valentine, D-Lynchburg, and recently agreed to by both the Virginia House and Senate, this resolution instructs the *Joint Legislative Audit and Review Commission (JLARC)* to conduct studies to assess current availability and delivery of services in Virginia and other states; to identify best practices in the diagnosis, treatment and management of autism; and to assess and identify means to educate providers of relevant service areas including education, law enforcement, rehabilitation, mental health, and emergency services.

The SEAC applauds this resolution, and urges the Board and Division to assist the Commission wherever possible in their studies, and to request that our area legislators support the recommendations of the Commission when it makes its annual reports over the next two years.

A copy of the resolution is attached to this report, and is also available online at <http://leg1.state.va.us/cgi-bin/legp504.exe?081+sum+HJ105>.

6. ***We recommend that the Division support school inspections to assess compliance with ADA guidelines.***

The obstacles that challenge students and staff with disabilities on a day-to-day basis are not always readily apparent to non-disabled people. The Federal government, as part of the Americans With Disabilities Act (ADA), specifies design standards for such practical items as drinking fountains, toilets and elevators.

The SEAC recommends the utilization of an independent organization that specializes in ADA guidelines (such as Independence Resource Center in Charlottesville), to conduct site studies of Albemarle County Schools. Representatives from such an organization could lead a school inspection, with participation by school administration, staff and SEAC members, and then prepare a school-specific report.

The goals of such assessments would be to positively identify ways to improve the day-to-day experience of students and staff with disabilities and to ensure compliance with ADA guidelines.

7. ***We recommend that the Division schedule recurring information meetings to encourage in-depth discussion with the special education community regarding topics of importance.***

A strategic goal of the SEAC is to increase communication between the Division and families. SEAC and Mr. Kirst and staff often identify topics felt to be of great interest to the general special education community, but which beg wider dissemination and discussion.

The SEAC suggests that a recurring meeting time be formally scheduled on the School Calendar for every 2 months during the school year, with rotating topics of importance. The Parent Resource Center would be one potential meeting place, or meeting places could be rotated to encourage wider participation. The use of online meeting tools such as WebX already contracted by the Division could also be explored.

One topic of particular interest regards Response To Intervention (RTI). This new strategy—spurred by changes in federal law—is being implemented by Special Education departments at the local levels, and is designed to reduce the number of children in special education programs. With emphasis on research-based, documented instructional interventions, it aims to bring early help to children struggling in regular education.

8. ***We recommend that the Division support a SEAC-authored web site and email account.***

The SEAC is in the process of developing a family-focused web site that is envisioned to serve as a supplementary (but separate) site to the SEAC page on the School Division web site. The intention is to provide information that is of special interest to families and which is of a more dynamic nature than can

be practically supported by the School Division webmaster.

The content is to be authored and maintained by the SEAC, and shall be clearly labeled as such. It is our hope that the Division will support and help publicize this site by adding a link to the SEAC page on the School Division web site.

The Division can further assist the SEAC in encouraging public comment by placing a link to a SEAC email address on the Division web site. This independent email account can be monitored and maintained by SEAC members and allow direct communication to the Committee.

IV. Structure

a. Presiding Officers

Mark McLane – Chairperson
Mary Taylor – Vice-Chairperson
Carrie Shuler – Secretary

b. Standing Committee(s)

- i. Media Relations (Claudia Walpole) - Disseminates monthly SEAC meeting announcements to various media outlets; seeks opportunities to increase public awareness of the SEAC.

c. Special Committee(s)

- i. Conference and Resource Fair (Amy Lankford) - Assisted Sarah Blech of Parent Resource Center and other local advisory committees in organizing the 1st annual Special Education Conference and Resource Fair, held in March, 2008.
- ii. Parent Survey (Mary Taylor, Michelle Rocker) - Developed a survey to assist SEAC in collecting data regarding unmet needs and concerns from families of students receiving services.

d. Member List

School	Member
Pre-School Programs	Cheairs Graves
Agnor-Hurt Elementary School	Katherine Jenkins
Baker-Butler Elementary School	Claudia Walpole
Broadus Wood Elementary School	
Brownsville Elementary School	Kat Lowe
Cale Elementary School	Joan Mady
Crozet Elementary School	Carrie Shuler (Secretary)
Greer Elementary School	Mark McLane (Chairperson)
Hollymead Elementary School	Michelle Rocker
Meriwether Lewis Elementary School	Elizabeth Cottone
Red Hill Elementary School	Stephanie Morris
Scottsville Elementary School	
Stone-Robinson Elementary School	
Stony Point Elementary School	
Murray Elementary School	Penny Holmes

Woodbrook Elementary School	
Yancey Elementary School	
Burley Middle School	
Henley Middle School	
Jouett Middle School	Julie Moore
Sutherland Middle School	Laura Gilgannon
Walton Middle School	
Albemarle High School	Mary Taylor (Vice-Chairperson)
Monticello High School	Carla Isaacs
Murray High School	
Western Albemarle High School	
At Large Members	Amy Lankford
	Effie Pappas

V. Summary

The SEAC believes that the Division benefits from the involvement and input of family and community, our mission being to help enhance the overall high quality of special education programs in Albemarle County schools.

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 Albemarle County SEAC enjoys a collaborative working relationship with the County Special Education staff, and hopes that the partnership continues with each school year. We wish to recognize the dedication and hard work of Mr. Kirst and his entire special education staff.

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