

**ALBEMARLE COUNTY SPECIAL EDUCATION ADVISORY COMMITTEE
2005-2006 REPORT TO THE SCHOOL BOARD**

April 20, 2006

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

My name is Mary Huff. I represent Albemarle High School on the 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 and to the special education coordinators, Deborah Morris, Patrick Farrell, and Phyllis Kasonik. 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 a presentation at our next meeting.

On a personal note, I want to thank Dr. Moran and the Board again for inviting me to participate in the Strategic Planning Committee last year. Although it involved a considerable time commitment, it was an interesting and educational experience for me. Unfortunately, I have not had the time to attend the Steering Committee meetings this year and no other SEAC member was able to attend the meetings during daytime business hours in my stead.

Formal Staff Presentations 2005-2006

- ❖ Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act
- ❖ Parent Resource Center
- ❖ Virginia Alternate Assessment Program
- ❖ Virginia Substitute Evaluation Program
- ❖ School Based Intervention Team
- ❖ IEP Accommodations
- ❖ Assistive Technology
- ❖ Strategic Plan
- ❖ Guidance Programs
- ❖ Special Education Annual Plan
- ❖ Special Education Eligibility Criteria/ Gifted Programs

Action Items

- **Consistency in Social Skill Instruction as an unmet need**
- **SEAC brochure**
- **Full participation of all schools in SEAC**
- **Identification of individual to follow through on recommendations**

Consistent Social Skill Instruction as an Unmet Need

SEAC objectives, as described by the Virginia Department of Education, include providing advice concerning unmet needs in the education of children with disabilities and assisting in the development of priorities and strategies for meeting the identified needs. This year the committee again discussed Social Skills Instruction as an unmet need.

As you may recall, two years ago we investigated how social skills are addressed in the schools. This year a new member requested information about what could be done to assist her child to "fit in" at his elementary school. We had a presentation by Sue Sheffield about the guidance department. Our impression from the presentation is that guidance counselors' priority is to help students explore future educational opportunities and vocational interests, at least at the middle and high school level.

There does not seem to be any one person or program to help students fit into their peer groups when they do not have appropriate social skills. Members cited examples of individual teachers, speech therapists and teaching assistants who implemented informal programs with their children. All the schools use some variation of character building, such as Character Counts or Pillars of Learning, for the entire student body. Some representatives stated their schools do offer social skills in a variety of modalities. Mr. Kirst mentioned some programs in unrepresented schools.

Although the issue of having friends is not directly related to education, social skills are important for all face-to-face communication. 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. Physical education, small group activities and laboratory curricula may not be fully accessed if peer relations do not exist to support the activity.

Last year at Albemarle High School, a structured social skills class was combined with a resource class. It was felt to be helpful to all the students, but was not continued this school year because the teacher retired. Members of SEAC feel that resource classes at the high school level that give credit for a structured social skills class would be beneficial for students who demonstrate difficulties in social interactions. In the workplace, communication and social skills are valuable assets. Individuals with academic achievement who have deficits in communication and social skills are frequently unemployed or underemployed.

The SEAC discussed the inconsistent availability, the informality of the approaches, and the need for central staff to assess whether all students with special needs have social skill support in their schools to prepare them for further education and employment.

SEAC Brochure

For several years, the members of the SEAC have felt a need for increased awareness of SEAC and the PREP/Parent Resource Center. This year there are fifteen representatives on

the committee; ten schools and the preschool program are not represented, which is approximately 40%.

Members of the committee identify themselves and convey information to their school community through school newsletter articles and appearances at PTO meetings. In addition to SEAC meetings, parents also volunteer to attend the School Board meetings and report back to the SEAC. Interested parents and teachers are always welcome to attend SEAC meetings. SEAC meeting dates are included on the calendar the county distributes to all students. We appreciate this support; our concern is that parents do not know who we are and what we do.

We feel our participation 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.

The Strategic Planning Committee identified parents as partners and employers in the community as customers of the school system. Informed, proactive parents can work collaboratively with school staff to prepare students with special needs for further education and employment. We believe awareness of and participation in the SEAC and PREP/Parent Resource Center events by more parents will facilitate that collaboration.

We would like the opportunity to make all families involved in special education aware of the SEAC. Text for a brochure was submitted last year. At this time, there is no brochure for SEAC. Attached is a draft of revised text for a brochure that we hope could be available in school offices, given to the PREP/Parent Resource Center for distribution at events and to special education teachers to give to parents.

Participation of All Schools on SEAC

Fifteen schools have active representation on the SEAC. One school named a paid school employee as representative, but that individual did not attend any meetings and would not have voting rights if she had attended, as stated in SEAC By Laws.

At a presentation by Chris Dyer on the Strategic Plan, 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. We hope this will be an opportunity to communicate with families involved in special education. We would also welcome any opportunity to work with Mr. Dyer or 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.

We appreciate efforts by the Board and administration encouraging principals to make contact with the families in their schools with children with special needs. Again, we believe that participation on the SEAC can strengthen relationships in school communities as information is shared. Our hope is that communication with these families will inform them

of the SEAC and spark their curiosity. A letter from the principal mailed to families involved in special education including the SEAC brochure, if/when available, is one suggestion. Follow up phone calls from lead special education teachers is another idea.

Designation of School Staff for Follow-Through on SEAC Recommendations

After last year's SEAC report to the School Board, I recall Dr. Castner stating that he had not in the past designated staff to follow through on recommendations from the various advisory committees. The SEAC would greatly appreciate designation of an "owner" by the Superintendent to address recommendations. We feel this would establish a clear line of communication and accountability for follow up of specific projects such as the brochure.

SEAC Recommendations

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.

We enjoy a collaborative working relationship with the county special education staff and remain grateful to the School Board for your support of special education.