

## **Albemarle County Special Education Advisory Committee Annual Report for 2008-2009**

May 2009

The Albemarle County Special Education Advisory Committee (SEAC) is pleased to present to the School Board its Annual Report for the 2008-2009 School Year.

### **1. 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.

#### **1.1. Committee Meetings and Membership**

The Albemarle County Special Education Advisory Committee (SEAC) currently has parent representatives from 22 of the 26 schools and programs in the Albemarle County School (ACS) system. The meeting schedule for 2008-2009 accommodated nine monthly meetings: six with school administrators; two “parent only” meetings with only voting members in attendance; and an unofficial meeting which resulted from multiple weather cancellations. The meeting structure allows an hour presentation by school administration officials, led by ACS Special Education Director Kevin Kirst, on topics of interest to the committee. This is followed by a second hour dedicated to committee business. A period for public comment is also reserved during SEAC meetings.

### **2. Summary of Activities/Accomplishments of 2008-2009 year**

The SEAC enjoyed a highly productive year, with major advances made in the areas of outreach and communication, and identification of unmet needs. Communication with the constituency we serve, the families of children receiving special education services from the ACS, has historically been a challenge for our SEAC. The primary obstacle to an open communication is the undisputed right to confidentiality of the students and their families (e.g. distribution of information to the families through the students would unfairly identify the students). However, distribution of information to the

entire school community is cost-prohibitive and our committee is not funded.

It is apparent that the inability to reach these families presents a tremendous impediment to identifying the unmet needs of our community. Therefore, the SEAC has worked diligently to come up with creative means to reach our families. These efforts are detailed below in the subsections on the Parent Survey, the SEAC Newsletter and the Media Relations Subcommittee. In addition, SEAC members have spearheaded an effort to assist the school division in identifying critical areas of need with regards to ADA compliance of school buildings.

## **2.1. Survey**

In the previous Annual Report for the 2007-2008 school year, the SEAC recommended the creation and distribution of a Parent Survey, to more accurately assess the needs of the community and to prioritize its goals. The SEAC created a Parent Survey to gather feedback on special education services provided and assist the SEAC in identifying areas for focused attention in order to improve services and outcomes. This survey was created in collaboration with the Director of Special Education and distributed to an email list owned by the Department of Special Education, and including ~1400 individuals. A total of nearly 170 responses were received and the results of which are currently being reviewed by our Survey Committee. These responses will help to guide the activities of the SEAC in the coming school year as we assist ACS in responding to unmet needs.

## **2.2. School Building Review**

The SEAC would like to commend the Albemarle County School Division for its participation in a building-site review, the purpose of which was to determine whether its schools meet the requirements of the Americans with Disabilities Act and section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act. Two representatives from the division, two members of the SEAC, as well as Tom Vandever, of the Independent Resource Center, were present at all site reviews. The committee completed a walk-through of four schools: Post High, Albemarle High School, Burley Middle School, and Woodbrook Elementary School. This review is a result of a recommendation by the SEAC in the previous Annual Report for the 2007-2008 school year, and the SEAC acknowledges the support from the School Board for this venture.

The review began at Post High in order to acquaint committee members with a building that is both ADA compliant and also has elements of universal design. We looked specifically at the gradation of ramps, insulation on piping, width and height of doorways, and whether the environment is adaptable.

The committee visited Woodbrook Elementary on Monday, February 16, 2009. The most important finding at Woodbrook was that the ramp directly outside the front door had too steep a grade. It was also felt that fire strobes and water fountains needed further review.

The review of Albemarle High School noted that: several interior hallways need hand railings where there are gradations; the handicap button for the library door needs to be checked; and the parking lot needs to be assessed for compliance with ADA requirements; it was also uncertain whether the locker rooms were handicap accessible.

The review of Burley Middle School highlighted a few issues that should be brought to the attention of the principal: the stage area needs attention and the parking lot should be checked for ADA compliance.

It is also important to highlight that this review highlighted the overall compliance of the ACS with the ADA and the Committee was very pleased with the status of the ACS. That being said, the discrepancies noted above provide a starting point for the Division to work to fully meet the requirements of ADA and to make their schools accessible to all. The current review, along with the review for this coming year, will have a positive effect on disabled students who attend the school as well as disabled members of the community who, on occasion, might visit the schools.

### **2.3. Newsletter**

This year, the SEAC realized the long-standing goal of creating a newsletter targeting the special education community. The mission was to improve communication to special education families by providing information of interest to families, to broadcast the activities of the Committee, and to provide contact information so families can get in touch with the Committee.

The inaugural edition contained articles covering IEP basics, a Parent Resource Center events overview, and summertime activity ideas for special education families. The newsletter was produced using Microsoft Publisher, with content authored primarily by committee members. Input was received from the Special Education Director and was printed by the Special Education office. Copies of the newsletter were distributed to parents at their respective IEP meetings in the spring.

Based on the positive response to the newsletter in the special education community, the SEAC recommends that the practice continue, ideally as at least a twice-yearly newsletter. Alternate and cheaper modes of delivery, such as electronic distribution, can be explored with the Office of Special Education, though hard-copies should continue to be printed to ensure inclusion of families without access to computers.

### **2.4. Media Relations**

The SEAC, in collaboration with Sarah Blech from PREP, handled publicity for the *2<sup>nd</sup> Annual Live and Learn Parent Conference and Resource Fair*. It was successful in advertising using the SunTrust sign on Route 29; the Community Calendars for television, radio, and print; as well as Public Service Announcements and Press Releases for radio and television. SEAC also disseminated information about special education-related services through PTO newsletters in the various schools.

The SEAC faced some obstacles with some media outlets in getting the *Live and Learn* conference covered on television news programs, as well as getting stories about special education and/or special education events published in local print media. In the future, SEAC seeks to increase such coverage, and, in particular, to try to get more in-depth media coverage of issues relating to special education in order to improve communication and awareness among parents and the general public.

## 2.5. Additional Accomplishments and Activities

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

- The 2nd Annual *Live and Learn Parent Conference and Resource Fair* was held on March 28, 2009 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. This conference provided a forum for speakers on a broad array of topics of interest to special needs families, including: sensory strategies, Medicaid waivers, and advocacy training. The conference also hosted a resource fair with booths featuring regional businesses and programs specializing in the needs of these families. The success of the *Live and Learn* conference highlights the benefits of cooperative engagement between special education families, the community and School Division.
- During the 2007-2008 School Year, Albemarle County continued to perform above State averages for academic performance for students with disabilities (*see* State Report Card for Albemarle County Public Schools). The SEAC applauds the Special Education Department for this accomplishment.
- The Special Education Department has initiated a program to determine alternate eligibility entitled "Response to Intervention." The SEAC has been apprised of the effort the Special Education Department has devoted to this program to support the education of children within the regular education departments and we look forward to learning more about the impact of the implementation of RTI on all students in the ACS.

## 3. Recommendations for the 2009-2010 school year

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

### 3.1. *The SEAC recommends the Division collaborate, including providing financial support, with the SEAC to provide a means of direct communication with special education families in order to identify unmet needs.*

The first goal of the Special Education Advisory Committee (SEAC) as defined by the Virginia Board of Education is to "provide advice concerning unmet needs in the education of children with disabilities in Albemarle County, Virginia." To meet that goal, the SEAC must be able to ascertain what the unmet needs are through communication with faculty, staff and parents of students receiving services. The SEAC has developed creative ways to communicate with the special needs community, as highlighted above under the sections on the Parent Survey, Newsletter and Media Relations. In addition, the SEAC also provides an independent and public group website that allows for community input by list email to SEAC members on the web.

However, direct communication with those that can attest to the unmet needs remains challenging in part due to privacy laws that protect student information from misuse. The SEAC would like the Board

to consider discussing new ways for the SEAC to communicate to all special education stakeholders that do not violate privacy laws, but allow direct and open communication. One method we advocate is to provide financial support for a direct mailing to special education families in the county once per year with specific information regarding SEAC activities, including meetings.

**3.2. *The SEAC recommends that the Division work with the SEAC to develop and distribute annual surveys targeting school division staff working regularly with special education students, in order to assess unmet needs.***

SEAC seeks to increase its opportunities to receive information from the various special education stakeholders, in order to more accurately assess the needs of the community and to prioritize its goals. The SEAC recommends that a survey similar to the Parent 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 candid 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.

**3.3. *The SEAC recommends that the Division work with the School Building Review Committee to expand the ADA compliance audits to more Albemarle County School buildings.***

As described above, the collaborative effort between the Albemarle County School Special Education Department, SEAC School Building Review Committee and community members to audit Albemarle County School Buildings provided ACS with valuable input regarding facilitating compliance with ADA guidelines. The SEAC recognizes the importance of ensuring that our buildings are ADA compliant. Furthermore, we recognize that the School Building Review identified resources within the community which would facilitate this process.

Therefore, we recommend that the Division continue to inspect schools for compliance with ADA guidelines. The SEAC recommends utilizing the Independent Resource Center in Charlottesville to review three more schools in the 2009/10 school year. The SEAC is happy to again assist in the selection of the schools for review, participate in the school inspections and to facilitate this process in any way.

**3.4. *The SEAC recommends that the Division work with the SEAC to develop ways to improve access to training for special education classroom teaching assistants.***

Classroom teaching assistants are a vital part of the daily activities and provide integral learning supports for children receiving special education services. In many instances, a student spends a majority of the school day with a classroom assistant, making these staff the primary contact for the

student. Whereas classroom teachers are afforded many opportunities for additional training, including paid for time spent at in-service training, classroom assistants are not afforded the same opportunity. Therefore, teaching assistants must gain additional training at their own expense. While some do, many cannot. It is important to note that his situation is in no way unique to the Albemarle County Schools and is a situation that troubles most school divisions across the US. The SEAC is aware that the ACS has considered ways to improve access to in-service training for teaching assistants and we recommend that the Division create a formal committee to expand the process. We also recommend that a SEAC member be appointed to this committee.

**3.5. *The SEAC recommends that the Albemarle County School Board assign a member to attend official meetings of the Albemarle County SEAC.***

According to the guidelines for Virginia SEACs as outlined in the *Regulations Governing Special Education Programs for Children with Disabilities in Virginia*, the responsibilities of the School Board include:

- appointing members to serve on the SEAC
- receiving and reviewing SEAC reports and recommendations
- responding to SEAC about recommendations made as appropriate
- appointing a school board representative to act as a liaison to attend SEAC meetings
- and to meet with SEAC representatives as appropriate
- implementing plans that incorporate SEAC recommendations as appropriate

The SEAC recognizes the support the School Board has always extended to the SEAC and also recognizes the contribution of individual School Board members towards the larger special education community of the region. We further recognize the benefit to the SEAC of having a School Board member appointed to the SEAC to improve communication and collaboration. In addition to being supported by the regulations, this has been implemented by many area SEACs, including Charlottesville City Schools, to great benefit to both the Division and its special education students. The meetings provide an opportunity for the SEAC to openly discuss issues relevant to special education students; immediate and open reciprocal communication between the SEAC and the School Board can facilitate the solution to those issues. Approximately 10% of Albemarle County School students currently receive Special Education services.

It is challenging, and somewhat ineffective, to attempt address in an annual report the complicated issues associated with this particular student population. The SEAC believes that the special education student population would benefit greatly from a School Board member appointment to this committee. In turn, the SEAC recognizes the time constraints associated with serving on the Albemarle County School Board and would happily consider minimizing the number of official SEAC meetings to the regulation-specified minimum of four per year, while making the majority of the meetings unofficial and/or parent only.

**3.6. *The SEAC recommends that the Division create in-service professional development training for general education teachers with regard to Special Education.***

A goal of the SEAC is to bring a more diverse and richer knowledge of special education students and their needs to regular education teachers. The regular education teachers should have a knowledge and understanding of all disabilities and the methods used to teach students with disabilities. This helps to create a sense of community, acceptance and real inclusion for special education students. This sense of community is evident in the elementary school experience, but lacking at middle and high schools. Members of the SEAC have attended workshops given by faculty in the ACS (Robin Aldridge) and PREP (Diane Telerico-Cavanaugh) that have been in-depth and hands-on. The SEAC recommends that the Division explore adding be two in-service training opportunities for teachers, one in the summer before school begins, and another mid-year. We recommend focusing first on the middle and high schools.

**4. Structure**

**4.1. Presiding Officers**

Amy Lankford – Chairperson  
 Carrie Shuler – Vice-Chairperson  
 Penny Holmes – Secretary

**4.2. Standing Committee**

Media Relations (Claudia Walpole) - Disseminate monthly SEAC meeting announcements to various media outlets; seek opportunities to increase public awareness of the SEAC and issues pertaining to special education.

**4.3. 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 annual Special Education Conference and Resource Fair.
- ii. Parent Survey (Mary Taylor) - Developed a survey to assist SEAC in collecting data regarding unmet needs and concerns from families of students receiving services.
- iii. Newsletter (Mark McLane) – Produced the first annual SEAC newsletter distributed to families of students receiving special education services in the ACS.

**4.4. Member List**

School	Member
Pre-School Programs	Laura Mayer
Agnor-Hurt Elementary School	Katherine Jenkins
Baker-Butler Elementary School	Claudia Walpole
Broadus Wood Elementary School	Shelley Smith
Brownsville Elementary School	Dale Castle
Cale Elementary School	Joan Mady
Crozet Elementary School	Carrie Shuler
Greer Elementary School	Mark McLane

Hollymead Elementary School	vacant
Meriwether Lewis Elementary School	Erika Nemergut
Red Hill Elementary School	Stephanie Morris
Scottsville Elementary School	Suzanne Hopkins
Stone-Robinson Elementary School	vacant
Stony Point Elementary School	Paige Lindblom
Murray Elementary School	Penny Holmes
Woodbrook Elementary School	Shannon Copeland
Yancey Elementary School	vacant
Burley Middle School	vacant
Henley Middle School	Regina Craig
Jouett Middle School	Julie Moore
Sutherland Middle School	Michelle Sandow-Pajewski
Walton Middle School	Diane John
Albemarle High School	Mary Taylor
Monticello High School	Sally Dyer
Murray High School	Francene Grace
Western Albemarle High School	vacant
At Large Members	Betty Kent
	Amy Lankford

## 5. Summary and Conclusions

SEAC's mission is to help enhance the overall high quality of special education programs in Albemarle County Schools. To fulfill that mission, the SEAC believes in maximizing the involvement of special education families and the special education community. Such involvement benefits not only the family and the community, but also the Division.

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.