

2020-2021 Albemarle County Special Education Advisory Committee Annual Report

We would like to thank our special education teachers, aides, staff, and administration for their tireless support and dedication and for all that they have had to do to go above and beyond for our students during this unprecedented academic year. It truly takes a village to educate a child, and that has never been more evident than this year. We also express gratitude for accepting and carefully reading our annual report, as we know the demands on people's time and emotions are multiplied this year. The members of the Albemarle County Special Education Advisory Committee would like to submit the following recommendations for our upcoming school year:

1. Increase Mental Health Support for Students and Families

As students physically re-integrate back into school, the need to recover peer / social interactions will have never been greater. This applies to all children; however, the gap will be even wider for students with special needs. Children and teens are among the groups the CDC has listed as "People who may respond more strongly to the stress of a crisis."¹ CDC studies indicate the prevalence of mental health conditions has increased from 20% of the population before the pandemic to over 40% as of June 2020.² While this study only included participants over age eighteen, similar rates are anticipated in the juvenile population.

Virtual learning has all but removed the day-to-day social interactions between students and their adult counterparts (teachers, peers, principals, etc). The SEAC strongly encourages the School Board to acknowledge this deficit and act swiftly. We recommend increasing the number of mental health support personnel in every school by an appropriate factor. Currently, all schools have at least one school counselor, but current staffing is not adequate to meet the increased needs we anticipate as students recover from the trauma and isolation imposed by COVID 19. Some schools do not have a full-time psychologist available, and even those that do will likely find the caseload much too heavy for one psychologist. Additionally, we expect that school psychologists will have a workload that is at least equal to, if not dramatically increased, as before the pandemic. We recognize that they have many additional duties beyond mental health support which will require their time and effort, and increases in mental health support for students should account for this. The current counselor-to-student ratio cannot even begin to cover the number of students who will need support upon returning to school. Both special education and general education students will need this additional support.

¹ <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/daily-life-coping/managing-stress-anxiety.html>

² <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/69/wr/mm6932a1.htm>

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2. Continue to Support Collaboration with Special Education in Planning the Contemporary Schooling Initiative, Portrait of a Graduate and Academy Development

We are concerned our students in special education will not fit into these new paradigms and learning centers proposed by the School Board. We have only recently been invited to collaborate with the School Board on these initiatives, and we thank you for this opportunity. However, we wish to reiterate that policies and procedures should be shared with all stakeholders prior to making changes. Often, changes are made without this valuable input from stakeholders. This can lead to division within our community at a time when collaboration is valued over conflict.

3. Address “Recovery Services” for Special Education

Address the Special Education Achievement Gap. The Special Education Performance Report of June 2018 indicates an ongoing discrepancy between English/reading proficiency in Special Education students in our county and state targets, even after the state targets were significantly decreased - 43.68% vs. >46%. It should be noted that our county proficiency rates have again improved compared to the previous year. After delving deeply into some of the complexities of this topic, we also acknowledge that the importance of this statistic is perhaps less about the actual number and more about keeping a spotlight on which populations in our community are at greatest risk and most in need of support. We are grateful for the work of the Equity and Diversity Committee and our Special Education Department in researching and teasing apart the risk factors that feed into these disparities. Reducing disproportionate suspensions for Special Education students, prioritizing early literacy, and ensuring consistency in application of Multi-Tier System of Supports (MTSS) across the county are some meaningful areas of focus.

It is also important to acknowledge that this discrepancy in academic proficiency is likely to be much more pronounced following the return in-person learning.

4. Implement the Safe Schools Ambassador Program

Stress and trauma are known causes of bullying.³ Given the added stress of the pandemic, it is likely we will see increased instances of bullying behavior now and during the return to in-person learning. It is more important than ever that Albemarle County Public Schools have a countywide program in place to address the causes and effects of bullying. We recommend using a proven program so the implementation can be immediate.

³ <https://pieces2prevention.com/2017/08/14/part-2-4-causes-bullying/>

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The Safe Schools Ambassador Program (SSA) is an evidence-based model that works with students to teach them the skills to influence behavior and create positive change. Research shows that other students are present in 85% of bullying incidents making it imperative that students are trained and included in the anti-bullying process.¹ The SSA program is taught by professional trainers from Community Matters, a 501(c) 3 organization that has been addressing bullying issues for more than twenty years and has worked with over two thousand schools. SSA trainers conduct the initial sessions and then Train the Trainer courses are offered to keep the program active. Offering a turn-key program with a documented record of success will simplify the process of rapidly improving the antibullying culture in our schools.

We appreciate your consideration of our concerns. We would be happy to answer any questions you might have. Questions can be sent to spedhelp@k12albemarle.org.

Members of the School Board are always invited to attend SEAC meetings. We hope to see you soon.