

## 2023 - 2024 SEAC ANNUAL REPORT

The goal of the Special Education Advisory Committee (SEAC) for Albemarle County Public School (ACPS) is to provide a collective voice for our disability community. We exist in accordance with the Regulations Governing Special Education Programs for Children with Disabilities in Virginia,[1] with the purpose of advising the Albemarle County School Board on implementation of services for students with disabilities in our district. Our community continues to be encouraged by the opportunity to share our collective concerns and collaborate with leadership to further induce positive change for all students. With respect, please find SEAC's three main concerns during the 2023-2024 school year below:

### 1. Increase Family Engagement and Communication

At the October 1 deadline for membership on the 2023-2024 SEAC, there were 40 dedicated and passionate volunteers serving on our committee. Each Elementary School, Middle School, High School, and Post-High had 1-2 representatives, plus five community members. Schools that had been without a SEAC representative for many years are now filled. This is exceptional, and we would like to extend our thanks to the Office of Community Engagement and ACPS leadership for partnering with us to send district-wide communications regarding recruitment for SEAC this year.

#### A. Survey Methodology and Responses

In response to concerns raised by the 2022-2023 SEAC, we had the opportunity and approval of leadership to develop and distribute a SEAC family survey. This was a collaborative effort with the Offices of Community Engagement, Special Education, Strategic Planning, and the Superintendent. Our goal was two-fold: (1) to collect quantitative data on the experience of families in our community who have children receiving Special Education; and (2) to determine if there are particular demographics or disability groups who are less engaged. While this first survey was designed specifically for families of students with IEPs, it was ultimately distributed to all 2,453 families of students receiving Special Education in ACPS. This is important to note as we have no way to quantify whether the response rate was impacted by questions worded for students with IEPs, but responded to by families who have 504s. Families received the survey via email and text message (if they had one on file with ACPS) in early October. It remained open for completion for three weeks.

272 families responded to the survey (Graph 1), representing 11% of all families who have students in Special Education. Of the 272 families who responded, 217 (84%) identified as White, 4 (2%) identified as Native American/Alaskan Native, 20 (8%) as Hispanic, 25 (10%) as Black/African American, and 9 (3%) as Asian [Q19, Appendix A]. We did not include an option for "multi-race," making it difficult to compare directly to percentages of demographics of all students receiving Special Education services in ACPS. Despite this caveat, the trend of those who responded to the survey is reflective of the demographic makeup of our community (Graph 2: 59% White, 14% Hispanic, 16% Black/African American, 3% Asian). The majority of those who completed the survey identified as female (85%) and spoke primarily English in their home (93%).

Responses were received from every single school in the district. The percentages of responses from each school (Q1, Appendix A) matched the trend of students in Special Education from each of those schools. We did not receive any responses from families of students with Orthopedic Impairment as their primary disability (there are 12 students in ACPS) or Deaf-blindness (too small a number to be reported by ACPS). Every other disability code was represented (Graph 3), with Autism being the highest, 31%. While this was the highest response rate to our survey, Autism (15%) is not the largest percentage of students in Special Education within ACPS. Specific Learning Disability (19%) and Other Health Impairment (18%) are the largest fractions Graph 4). Those were also accurately represented in our survey responses.

In conclusion, although we would like a higher overall response rate (which will be a focus for future surveys), we feel the responses we did receive represent the demographic trends in our disability community and establish a baseline upon which future surveys can build. Importantly, one caveat in surveys is that those that need the support most are also those less likely to respond due to a variety of barriers. SEAC members will work with ACPS's Office of Community Engagement to identify ways that a future iteration of the survey could effectively address some of the barriers to participation, including but not limited to exploring the distribution of a paper copy of the survey and offering opportunities for individual engagement, such as phone calls or virtual meetings with SEAC representatives, for families who don't feel comfortable completing a survey. SEAC also discussed other ideas to increase response rates, such as a longer response window. These steps are essential to reaching those members of our community who haven't been engaged and whose experience and input is equally valued.

## **B. Survey Results**

The survey provided important quantitative data on communication and family experiences. We used a 1 to 5-star rating system for survey responses for ease and accessibility. Of note, respondents were only given the opportunity to provide comments if they rated an area as low, 1 or 2 stars. This will skew the written responses as negative, but this is by design so we can focus on areas of improvement. A summary of these responses can be found in Appendix A.

In terms of communication, 38% of families rated regular communication from their child's Special Education Team as 5 stars. Receiving adequate information and timely feedback about their students' academic progress was given 5 stars by 35% of families. Most families who responded shared they felt comfortable asking questions and expressing concerns about their child's Special Education program and services, with 66% rating this area as 5 stars. There were families who shared they no longer reach out due to previous 'bad experiences.' When asked whether families felt their child's academic needs were being met, the rating was more evenly distributed across the rating scale: 35% as 5 stars, 28% as 4 stars, 18% as 3 stars, 14% as 2 stars and 5% as 1 star. Concerns shared include low expectations for students with disabilities, high student-to-teacher ratios, and parents needing to provide additional supplemental support at home due to unmet needs. Whether parents felt their child's behavioral and/or social-emotional needs are being met in school held the same trend of responses: 39% as 5 stars, 27% as 4 stars, 21% as 3 stars, 8% as 2 stars, 4% as 1 star. Concerns shared include lack of appropriate spaces for students to re-regulate, being "punished" for elements of their disability and sent to the office, in-school suspension, or being sent home. Parents also want more opportunities for their child

to learn to socialize with their peers. One alarming area of concern is the number of families who were not aware of SEAC prior to this survey, 46%.

Families were also asked to share some strengths, and this included praise for staff, naming many teachers as excellent supports and partners in the success of their students. Families noted that students finding their niche enhances their school experience and that when the team works together, it ensures the child's success. When asked to share weaknesses, families shared that staff changes and staff shortages resulted in inadequate services for their child. There was also concern over what "expected" progress for their child could/should be and that this impedes their ability to advocate for their child. It was also noted that while students are included in activities during the school day, other activities, including back-to-school night, field trips, intramural sports, cultural events, and extracurricular activities are not always inclusive.

### **C. Recommendations**

We respectfully request the following three actions to enhance family engagement and communication in our disability community. First, **we recommend an annual continuation of the SEAC Family Survey** to collect quantitative data on families' experiences with Special Education, with emphasis on taking additional measures to reduce barriers to participation to the greatest extent possible. This data is invaluable to help understand the strengths and areas of improvement for ACPS's delivery of special education services. Second, **we recommend a continued focus and concerted effort by ACPS leadership to engage with families of students with a disability.** We have greatly appreciated the efforts this year by the Office of Community Engagement and can already tell we have made progress since last school year. Third, **we recommend dedicated time by the Office of Communications to collaborate with the Offices of Special Education and Community Engagement to help develop and distribute videos and other forms of information sharing to our families.** We have heard both in SEAC meetings and in survey comments that families are frequently confused about whom to contact when they have concerns and best practices for finding information and resources. In response, the Director of Special Education quickly put together a video sharing resources for families of students in Special Education in ACPS, which included detailing staff positions within the Office of Special Education, who specifically to contact with concerns, and also highlighted the work of the Parent Resource Center and SEAC. The video was distributed by case managers to families and to SEAC. We heard numerous positive responses to the video from families. SEAC has also raised additional parent training opportunities we would like to see implemented, but we do not want to take away time that the Office of Special Education could be using to directly serve our students and teachers. Having time from the Office of Communications to aid in this concerted effort would be helpful.

#### **2. Increase Support for Meaningful Inclusion.**

Inclusion is a civil rights issue. The precedent for inclusive education for students with disabilities was originally enacted by Congress in 1975.[2] The most recent version was enacted in 2004 and is known as the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) clause of the Individuals with

Disabilities Act (IDEA).[3] The research is clear: the inclusive learning communities mandated by federal law are beneficial for both neurodivergent and neurotypical students.

While some parameters of inclusion are measured at the state level, such as indicator 5A—the percentage of time students with disabilities are included in mainstream classrooms for 80% or more of the day—many important factors are not currently monitored by the federal or state governments. These important factors of an inclusive school include co-teaching, collaboration between General and Special Education Teachers, students receiving services in their neighborhood school, and a shared district-wide vision of meaningful inclusion.

The crux as we move toward a more inclusive school district is how to ensure appropriate accommodations for our students with disabilities are in place and how to provide the protected time for our teaching teams to accomplish that. One important piece we continue to hear is that General Education Teachers are excited to serve more students with disabilities, but do not necessarily feel equipped to do so. Most General Education Teachers do not receive specialized instruction for providing academic accommodations during their educational training, but ACPS is expecting them to find the time and learn the skills to provide high-quality academic accommodations to our Special Education students. To be clear, co-teaching and inclusion is the goal. If done well, this will result in more students with greater needs included in General Education classrooms, as opposed to segregated in corners or separate rooms. We also realize this is very individualized and complicated, and there are both academic portions of the day and students whose IEP teams prefer a quieter and/or separate space to reach their academic goals. Our purpose is not to suggest a one-size fits all approach for inclusion, but to make recommendations that we believe provide the support for both General Education and Special Education Teachers to meet the needs of our families striving for meaningful inclusion.

We respectfully request two initiatives to provide high-quality academic instruction to our students with disabilities while supporting both our General Education and Special Education Teams. First, **we recommend that ACPS add two additional positions: a Learning Specialist and a Behavior Specialist.** These positions would serve as a coach to both General and Special Education Teachers regarding accommodations for academics and behavior. While we are aware that the ACPS Instructional Coaching Model is being reworked in response to the Bellwether audit, we are not clear on the specifics or timeline for these efforts. It is a critical need now for our students with disabilities to have a well-supported co-teaching team. Similarly, it is a critical need for our co-teaching teams to get timely coaching support in how best to provide appropriate learning and behavior accommodations. There is currently one Learning Specialist and one Behavior Specialist on staff in the Office of Special Education, and we have received good feedback from teachers regarding these positions. Simply put, however, this is only two people, and our teachers need more time than they have to give. These positions also hold the unique ability to serve students whether they are in a BASE program or not and whether they have an IEP or a 504. We are hopeful that in adding two positions the need can be better met and both General Education and Special Education Teachers can benefit. Second, **we recommend that ACPS include Special Education Teachers and Special Education Teaching Assistants (TAs) in Professional Learning Community (PLC) time.** Having dedicated time to converse, collaborate, and learn from your colleagues is imperative to serve students in a co-teaching model. If the district does not plan for and allow this protected time, meaningful inclusion is less likely to occur.

### **3. Increase Support and Retention for all Special Education Staff, with a focus on Special Education Teaching Assistants.**

Our Special Education staff work tirelessly each day to support our students with disabilities and help them reach their potential. Special Education is growing both in the number of students in ACPS found eligible for services and the individual needs of each eligible student. The same achievement gap being discussed for Tier 1 instruction is also evident in Tier 2 and Tier 3 instruction. Due to added complications in our students completing and performing well on SOLs, any data on the achievement gap in Tier 3 has the high probability of underrepresenting the issue.

At the beginning of this school year, all Special Education Teacher positions were filled. We would like to extend our thanks to Human Resources, the Office of Special Education and ACPS leadership for these efforts. In all, 44 Special Education Teachers were hired. Of the 44 teachers hired, 25 are provisionally licensed, and 44% are teachers of color. For the first time this year, Special Education Teachers had dedicated time at the New Teacher Academy to learn together. In addition, this group has six additional training days on non-student days to develop their professional skills under the direction of the Office of Special Education. Each of the 25 provisionally licensed teachers have an official mentor and receive support from instructional coaches. It is clear that Human Resources is focused on recruitment and retention of Special Education Teachers and has put programs in place with the University of Virginia (Masters of Teaching in Special Education) to pay for coursework required for the provisionally licensed teachers to reach their 10-year professional license.

We greatly appreciate these efforts and the new pathways developed for recruitment and retention of Special Education Teachers. We respectfully request that the same care and effort now be extended to Special Education Teaching Assistants. There are currently 246 TAs serving our students with disabilities, and 13 vacant positions. Parents who have children served by our dedicated and passionate TAs will tell you how critical they are to the success of our students. Recovering from the loss of a seasoned TA has a huge impact on the student, many of whom thrive on consistency and routine. In many cases, the TA knows the student best. They spend significant time with our students and observe numerous situations each day that other team members may not, such as during lunch time, during recess time, during specials time, during free choice, and during transitions throughout the day. These are part of the TA job description (Appendix B). This provides TAs the unique opportunity to be a critical piece of School Culture as we strive for more inclusive schools. They are present in real time to observe and teach neurotypical students' appropriate ways to engage with our students with disabilities—a piece that may not get discussed if no one is present with the students during lunch conversations or recess incidents. These organic (less structured) situations, daily interactions in passing, and conversations are where we typically learn the most about each other as fellow human beings. If a student is unable to communicate readily with their peers, or is choosing a less desired way to socially engage with peers, the Special Education TA has the opportunity to assist and reframe the narrative around disabilities and inclusion in real time.

During classroom instruction, the TAs job description is: "Carries out instructional plans as designated by special education teacher and the student's IEP". There is no mention of co-teaching, no mention of the TA being an integral part of the academic learning environment, and

no mention of the TA developing academic accommodations for students. We are hearing that TAs are, in fact, developing accommodations in accordance with students' IEP and in concert with Special Education and General Education Teachers. Many times, this appears to be done in real-time during a lesson, presumably because collaborative planning time for such is either severely limited or non-existent. Providing academic accommodations is not an easy task; however, many TAs felt if they were not adapting the lesson in real time then the student would not be engaged, would miss sections of their academics, that the student's frustration over lack of appropriate accommodations may result in unwanted behaviors, and that their IEP goals would be less likely to be met. TAs are certainly a critical component of the Special Education Team.

Special Education TAs are contract positions within ACPS, and they are paid on a 182-day contract (10 months). Given this, as the caseloads fluctuate, many TAs do not know if they will have a position for the following year until May. Additionally, they are only paid for actual hours worked; holidays and non-student days are unpaid. The TA Day is 7.25 hours and amounts to an average actual annual compensation of \$23,975. As a simple comparison on education requirements and minimum pay scales only, both a Special Education TA and bus driver are required to have, "any combination of education and experience equivalent to graduation from high school." The minimum pay scale for a bus driver with zero years' experience for the 2023–2024 school year is \$22.58. In contrast, the minimum pay scale for a Special Education TA is either \$16.66 (classified pay scale 6) or \$16.82 (classified pay scale 7). We are deeply thankful for every ACPS employee. But when one group receives an elevated pay scale due to their dedication, efforts, and filling a critical need for our students to succeed, we should expect other groups of employees with similar qualifications to receive a similar adjustment as a matter of equity. We encourage ACPS to increase pay adjustments for our critical Special Education TA group as well.

In light of the above, we have three requests for your consideration regarding improving Special Education TA positions in ACPS. First, **we recommend the inclusion of TAs in shared planning time with the General Education and/or Special Education Teachers they support.** This would require not only protected time and staff coverage, but also an open dialogue with leadership regarding co-teaching and each individual's role in such. Second, **we recommend an increase the number of paid professional development (PD) days for Special Education TAs.** Currently there are 4 paid PD days, 3 of which occur before the school year begins. This does not allow for growth and additional training of Special Education TAs throughout the school year. Third, **we recommend that ACPS perform a Position Analysis Questionnaire (PAQ) on ACPS Special Education TAs,** as many appear to be performing critical components of co-teaching and school climate that is not currently listed in their job description.

We appreciate the opportunity to advise the Superintendent and the School Board on how to continue improving Special Education services for children with disabilities and their families, and we look forward to continued collaboration.

We are all stronger together.

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[1] 8VAC20-81-230(D)(1).

[2] Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975, Public Law No. 94-142.

[3] Public Law No. 108-446, § 612(a)(5) (codified at 20 U.S.C. § 1412(a)(5))