

2016-2017 Albemarle County Special Education Advisory Committee Annual Report

Albemarle County has a thriving Special Education community, and the personnel and programs in our public schools have considerable strengths. While our committee celebrates the commitment and dedicated work of our Special Education department, we have identified several areas for improvement in efforts to best serve our students.

1. Expand Professional Development about Special Education

We continue to recommend dedicated professional development time on Special Education topics to Special Education teachers, general education teachers, Specials teachers (PE, art, music, etc.), and after-school supervisors. With the increasing move toward inclusion for Special Education students, there should be emphasis on educating the myriad teachers these students see each day on specific conditions, instructional methods, best practices, etc. Teaching Assistants currently have training requirements (including an extensive series of online training modules) which could serve as a guide for useful topics. This general professional development time should also include contact time with the county's Autism Specialists.

2. Address the Special Education Achievement Gap

The Special Education Performance Report of June 2016 indicates a concerning disparity between reading and math proficiency amongst Special Education students in our county and state targets – 37.66% vs. >54.0% and 41.02% vs. >57.0%, respectively. (See Addendum 1) We advise that an individual or small committee be appointed to study the causes of these discrepancies and to make recommendations on potential remedies. Existing reading and math specialists, instructional coaches, and Special education/General education/Gifted education teachers should be utilized as resources. Our committee would like to be notified of the findings of this research.

3. Extend Social Skills Development Curriculum to all Special Education Students

We continue to advocate for the implementation of the Social Skills curriculum (Skills Streaming) broadly to all Special Education students. This curriculum is currently made available to students with Autism in the B.A.S.E. classrooms. However, as many Special Education students do not access this resource, we recommend working to incorporate it into the General Education environment – including all grade levels, Specials, and after-school programs. Many Special Education students struggle with typical social development, yet these skills are critical for future success academically, in relationships, and in the workplace. Additionally, a study of broad implementation of a social learning curriculum in a different school division yielded benefits such as decreased disciplinary referrals and improved academic achievement, which could serve as rationale for implementation. (See Addendum 2)

4. Expand the Autism B.A.S.E. and Behavioral B.A.S.E. Programs

The B.A.S.E. program has been a success in the years since its inception. It provides a unique, integrated approach to serve the needs of students with Autism and/or behavioral/emotional challenges. In these dedicated classrooms, focus can be given to a child's individual needs – specialized instruction, accommodations, or crisis intervention. Initially, the Autism B.A.S.E. classrooms were created as an experiment in several elementary schools. This year, they have expanded to additional elementary schools, three middle schools, and two high schools. We support the goal of Autism B.A.S.E. and Behavioral B.A.S.E. programs serving all children with need within the timeframe of one calendar year.

5. Improve Continuity of Advocacy/Services When Changing School Setting

Our committee recommends that protocols be developed and implemented to allow easier continuation of services when “moving up” from elementary to middle school and middle to high school. Streamlining this process benefits the administrators and teachers but, more importantly, maintains thoroughness of care and services for our students. Additionally, we advise that funding be allocated to hire a Transition Specialist to provide guidance to our Special Education students as they move from high school to college, trade school, or the workplace.

6. Increase Awareness of Existing Special Education Resources for Parents and Families

The Special Education Advisory Committee sees a need for improved outreach to the general public, our current Special Education families, and those families new to the Special Education process. Navigating the Special Education world is, at best, complicated, and at worst, frightening and potentially adversarial. We feel that these negative experiences are best addressed by readily providing families with the information and tools that they need to feel empowered and to act as equal team members in providing the best care for their children. These resources are already available through the Parent Resource Center, and we continue to support this organization. The improvement to be made is in increasing awareness of the resources and services provided here amongst Special Education teachers, general education teachers, and administrators. We also intend to work with the Parent Resource Center to target non-academic locations where improved visibility would be beneficial (pediatricians' offices, child psychologists, UVA's Sheila Johnson Center, etc.).

The Special Education Advisory Committee appreciates the consideration of these recommendations in discussion of funding priorities and programming for the next academic year.

This report was prepared by SEAC Chairperson Jennifer Schaeffer, DVM, with input from the SEAC membership. A draft of the document was presented to the SEAC membership on December 13, 2016, and finalized following the monthly meeting on January 10, 2017.

The functions of the SEAC, as specified by Regulations Governing Special Education Programs for Children with Disabilities in Virginia [8 VAC 20-81], effective January 25, 2010, are provided in the following link: http://www.doe.virginia.gov/special_ed/regulations/state/regs_speced_disability_va.pdf

Addendum 1:

http://www.doe.virginia.gov/special_ed/reports_plans_stats/special_ed_performance/division/2014-2015/albemarle.pdf

Addendum 2:

<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1467-8624.2010.01564.x/abstract;jsessionid=AA3C8099F15F1603FD804E923145CBBC.f02t03>